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From Fashion, To Violence, To a Forgotten Era: The Zoot Suit and Mexican-American Youth Culture in 1940's America

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From Fashion, To Violence, To a Forgotten Era:
The Zoot Suit and Mexican-American Youth Culture in 1940's America

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Social Studies
of Bard College

by
Adelaide Iris Ord Treadwell

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York
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Dedication

To my grandparents, Sandy and Libby Treadwell, whom without your unconditional love and your continued support throughout my academic life this senior project would not exist.

To my parents, Langka Domberger and Zach Treadwell, who instilled values of hard work in me and continuously advocated for my academic success. Even when I didn't believe in myself, you were always there encouraging - reminding me of my capabilities.

To my siblings Mirabella, Hudson, Giselle, Millie-Magnolia, Valentine, Guinevere, Sachiko, Bohème, and Peach, the cutest people on the planet. I love you all and each of you inspires me single everyday.

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Third, I would like to acknowledge Jane Smith, Billey, and the rest of the library staff for their continued dedication to the success of my senior project and the hundreds of others that will be submitted by the class of 2023. Your support in both my research and writing has been immensely appreciated and this project would not have been possible without our librarians.

And lastly, to Marika Brungs, Pamela Jaramillo, and Julia Spenser - my fellow senior late night Manor girlies. I am so thankful for the hundreds of hours we spent together in that dining room working on our respective projects. Witnessing all of your hard work and constant dedication inspired me to work even harder and this project would not have been possible without your support.

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Preface

After doing countless hours of research on the role of fashion in correlation with human rights, social justice movements, and self identity, I came across the story of the zoot suit in Los Angeles in the 1940's. I grew up in LA and throughout the duration of my education I never got the chance to learn thoroughly about Mexican-American history. As I have researched for this project it has become clear to me why that is. The racial stereotypes, generalizations, and political views targeting the Mexican-American population, I argue, are just as prevalent now as they were in the 1940's.

In 80 years the U.S. has not drastically changed their ways of thinking, though the systems of education and the greater public often try to pretend they have. In a place like Los Angeles with such a diverse population, it is important to know the histories of the communities that make up the beautiful city. I have taken this opportunity to fully immerse myself into the study of the zoot suit and the Mexican-American community. Several of the primary sources I came across during my research use derogatory terms that are not acceptable in our colloquial language. I have chosen to remove specific racist terminology where it does not interfere with the clarity of my argument.

Introduction

It was January 17th, 1944 when Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer released their technicolor short animation “The Zoot Cat”- the 13th episode of the new television series, *Tom and Jerry*. Just a few months earlier in June of 1943, the streets of Los Angeles had erupted into chaos for five days as young Mexican-American men were beaten and stripped of the very same suit style worn by Tom in the TV series. As the mid 20th century roared on and the war came to an end, American youth were redefining what self-identity meant in a country consumed by traditional racist ideals. There is a certain expectation that comes with conservative values in which members of society must act, dress, and behave in a particular manner that follow similar belief systems; but that expectation is almost impossible in a space that is home to people of all different races, ethnicities, and religions. Teenagers and young adults were desperately trying to find a space within a society that looked down upon their subcultures and identities. Fashion, style, and the media play a pivotal role in understanding American youth culture and its relationship to the fight for individual and human rights.

The exact origin of the zoot suit is unknown, however fashion historian Darnell-Jamal Lisby¹ believes that the suit was influenced by the London “drape” suit which was designed by Frederick Shotle², a Dutch tailor in the 1930’s. Edward VII, the Duke of Windsor, often fashioned a drape cut suit which made the style extremely popular. This suit got its name after the French word for fabric, *drap*, for the distinct use of excess fabric which gives it a somewhat

¹ Lisby, Darnell-Jamal. "How the Zoot Suit Got So Much Swag." *PBS*, WGBH Educational Foundation, 2 Mar. 2022, www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/zoot-suit-riot-how-zoot-suit-got-so-much-swag/. Text by Darnell-Jamal Lisby published by PBS discussing the origin of the zoot suit.

² Mogg, Maximillian. "The Mad Tailor: What Is Drape?" *MaximillianMogg*, 24 Apr. 2019, maximilianmogg.de/en/the-mad-tailor-what-is-drape/. The “drape” cut explained by Maximillian Mogg for the The Mad Tailor series on fashion.

full and puffed up look. This *excessive* fabric is a key feature and the most defining visual characteristic of the zoot suit which gained popularity in America starting in the 1930's.

On May 5, 1948, Frank Colby published an article to *The Los Angeles Times* titled "Take My Word For it! What's the Origin"³. In this piece, he contended that the first zoot suit was most likely custom-made, presumably by a Jewish tailor in Harlem, New York. As for the origin of the fashion term "zoot suit" he stated the name came from the tailors of the suits in New York. Colby writes,

"Since it is well know that persons who speak with either the German or Yiddish accent customarily pronounce an an initial like 's' like 'z,' the suit with the reet pleats probably got its name from the pronunciation 'zoot' for 'suit,' 'zoot' being misunderstood as an adjective describing the suit, rather than a mispronunciation of the word suit itself; hence a zoot suit" (Colby, 20).

Harlem, New York in the 1930's was in its renaissance; dance halls were full, new ideas were in the air, and jazz flowed out onto the streets as this cultural and artistic revolution rapidly spread and influenced others around the country. Although the Great Depression from 1929-1939 had immense economic effects on the entire world, the Harlem Renaissance⁴ was



³ Colby, Frank. "Take My Word for It!: What;s The Origin?" *Los Angeles Times* (1923-1995), 1948, p. 20. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Los Angeles Times*, [ezproxy.lapl.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/take-my-word/docview/165827197/se-2?accountid=6749](https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/take-my-word/docview/165827197/se-2?accountid=6749) .

⁴ "New York City: The Harlem Renaissance and Beyond." *Smithsonian American Art Museum*, Smithsonian, americanexperience.si.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/New-York-City_The-Harlem-Renaissance-and-Beyond.pdf. New York City: The Harlem Renaissance and Beyond published by The Smithsonian American Art Museum gives context for the Harlem Renaissance and provides vital information for understanding the cultural and artistic movement.

“a place of self-discovery, cultural awareness, and political activism for African Americans”. By this time, the zoot suit was widely fashioned by jazz musicians and mainly men of color; men like Cab Calloway, an American singer-songwriter. Calloway played himself in the 1943 musical/comedy, “Stormy Weather”, starring Lena Horne and Bill Robinson, widely known as *Bojangles*. In the film, as pictured above, Calloway is fashioned in his full zoot suit⁵ with its defining thigh length coat, big bow, and pocket chain. The zoot suit is characterized by several key visual elements which Luis Alvarez outlines in his book titled *The Power of the Zoot Suit: Youth Culture and Resistance During WWII*, published in 2008,

“In virtually every city from coast to coast, young men ‘dressed to the nines’ in a full zoot suit with its signature broad-brimmed hat, drape pants that ballooned out at the knee and were closely tapered at the ankle, oversized jacket, and on occasion, gold or silver watch chain hanging from the pocket” (Luis Alvarez, pg. 2).

Post WWII culture saw men and women alike exploring new forms of self expression through their dress, but this revolution of style and its relation to identity did not occur overnight. Starting in the 1930’s, predominantly men of color were fashioning the zoot suit as an entire subculture of music, style, and art was slowly coming together to define what would soon be remembered as the Harlem Renaissance. However, the story of the zoot suit on the west coast consisted of a different minority group. Zoot suiters in Los Angeles during the 1940’s were predominantly first generation Mexican-American men and the suit was quickly associated with juvenile delinquency by the media. Racial stereotypes further outcasted these young men from a society that already did not grant them the same rights as others. They faced discrimination, racism, and

⁵ Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Photographs and Prints Division, The New York Public Library. "Cab Calloway Wearing Zoot Suit in a Musical Performance from the 1943 Motion Picture "Stormy Weather"" *The New York Public Library Digital Collections*. 1943. <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/8952f5d4-ca91-7aa8-e040-e00a1806131e> Photo of Cab Calloway wearing a zoot suit provided by the New York Public Library.

police brutality while also balancing assimilating into a culture that so obviously wanted to reject them.

September 1st, 1939 marks the beginning of WWII. The war plays a vital role in this story as millions of US troops were deployed globally. With a large number of mainly white men off at war, the country started looking inwards to place blame. Prior to the media being flooded with racist rhetoric surrounding Mexican-Americans, the media was filled with stories of the Japanese “threat”. From February 19th, 1942 until March 20th, 1946 around 120,000 Japanese-Americans were forcibly relocated into internment camps in the American governments attempt to gain control and make an example out of an entire group for the attack on Pearl Harbor. As Japanese-Americans were cut off from the rest of the world, the media had to find a new subsection of the population to exploit. Racist war time hysteria inflated resentment towards people of color as the world faced an extreme crisis. Luis Alvarez writes,

“The rising tide of wartime xenophobia among Americans, which grew as a response to overseas battles against fascism; increased migration of African Americans, Mexican immigrants, and poor whites to big cities; and related feelings of being left out of the wartime economic boom, helped lead many to conflate the zoot suit with juvenile delinquency and home front instability ” (Luis Alvarez, 2)

Not only was xenophobia and racism in full force, but it was reinforced by news outlets. The zoot suit was highly criticized for its excessive use of fabric during the war when many believed resources should be saved for the war efforts - thus deeming anyone who wore the zoot suit to be unpatriotic. Regardless of these stereotypes the zoot suit became a sort of uniform, a signifier to their identity, for many men of color in both their personal and public relations.

In 1930, Austrian writer Hermann Broch published his philosophical novel *Die Schlafwandler (The Sleepwalkers)*⁶, which follows the lives of three psychologically unbalanced people before and during WWI. The first protagonist, Joachim von Pasenow, questions the functions of uniforms when he says,

“It is the uniform’s true function to manifest and ordain order in the world, to arrest the confusion and flux of life, just as it conceals whatever in the human body is soft and flowing, covering up the soldier’s underclothes and skin...closed up his hard casing, braced in with straps and belts, he begins to forget his own undergarments, an the uncertainty of life” (Broch).

In this novel, Pasenow is pointing to how a uniform can conceal the true self in exchange for protection and order. Carrie Hertz, the Curator of Textiles and Dress at the Museum of International Folk Art located in New Mexico published her paper titled “The Uniform: As Material, As Symbol, As Negotiated Object”⁷ in 2007. In her article she defines the *uniform* as, not just as a symbol of the military and masculinity but also,

“overtly regulated through precisely outlined and disseminated visual (and often written) codes. These codes dictate an ‘official’ symbolic reading for individual elements of dress (and often appearance) and are made available to all members of a recognized and self-proclaimed group...adherence to the code is theoretically regulated and constructed by an identifiable hierarchy. Sometimes the uniform is only part of an entirely regulated environment (for example, prison, boarding school, or the military) in which appearance, language, behavior, and gesture are also subject to a high level of hierarchical control...A uniform, simply, is a type of standardized clothing that is overtly and officially within the control of a group hierarchy. Uniform codes differ from less structured dress codes in that uniform codes dictate a narrow parameter of what *must* be worn, whereas dress codes specify what may *not* be worn” (Hertz, 44).

⁶ Hermann Broch, *The Sleepwalkers*, 1986 (first pub 1932), London: Pantheon Books.

⁷ Hertz, Carrie. “The Uniform: As Material, As Symbol, As Negotiated Object.” *Midwestern Folklore* (2007): n. pag. Print.

Uniforms are visually powerful because they display a sense of unity no matter the circumstance in which they are being worn. Although the zoot suit does not fully fulfill Hertz's definition of a *uniform*, as there wasn't a defined hierarchy within the style movement, it was still viewed as a sort of uniform, especially in opposition to those worn by police officers and servicemen in Los Angeles. The juxtaposition of the two styles of dress, one to identify a job and one used to identify a "type" of person shows how uniforms and uniformed styles hold different meanings and values. Hertz goes on to state the different functions a uniform can have, including:

"To distinguish insiders from outsiders, reinforce the presence or absence of certain hierarchies, encourage particular types of behavior or feelings, encourage or discourage recruitment, impress en mass (as in military parades or marching bands), stand out in a crowd (such as service personnel), disappear (as in camouflage), facilitate the carrying out of necessary duties by authorities (such as police officers, clergy, or flight attendants), encourage cooperative behavior within groups (as in the military, schools, or Boy/Girl Scouts), fulfill practical physical needs (for example, temperature control or protection from chemicals), punish or demean (as in mental institutions, addiction rehabilitation centers, or prisons), and so forth." (pg. 44)

In the early 1940's many news outlets were publishing articles updating the public on different aspects of World War II while also writing extensively on issues happening around the country. Not only was the mainstream media filled with fear pertaining to the war, but the news was flooded with articles about the violent, destructive, and unpatriotic ways of the zoot suiter. Many of these articles were published by *Los Angeles Times* and their headlines read:

1. Nazis Like It!⁸
2. 5 Zoot Suiters Stab Two Victims⁹

⁸ Post, Emily. "Nazis Like It!" *Los Angeles Times (1923-1995)*, 1944, p. 1. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Los Angeles Times*, [ezproxy.lapl.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/nazis-like/docview/165528723/se-2?accountid=6749](https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/nazis-like/docview/165528723/se-2?accountid=6749). Article written by Emily Post and published by the Los Angeles Times on July 23, 1944

⁹ "Ordinance for Rest Homes and Sanitariums Approved." *Los Angeles Times (1923-1995)*, 1943, p. 1. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Los Angeles Times*, [ezproxy.lapl.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/ordinance-rest-homes-sanitariu](https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/ordinance-rest-homes-sanitariu)

3. Zoot-Suit Gang Beats up Man: Invited for Lift, Victim is Later Hurlled from Auto¹⁰
4. One Slain and Anther Knifed in 'Zoot' Fracas¹¹
5. Gang Kidnap Victim of Beatings: Three others Seriously Injured in New Outbreak by Zoot Suit Youths¹²
6. Officer Stabbed in Zoot Gang Affray: Youth, 19, Arrested¹³
7. Zoot Cyclist Snatches Purse¹⁴
8. Hospital Patient Held in Car Theft¹⁵
9. Zoot Suit Pair Held in Attack: One Man Stabbed and Another Severely Beaten and Robbed of \$50¹⁶
10. Ten Seized in Drive on Zoot Suit Gangsters: Six Held on Suspicion of Assault With



ms-approved/docview/165452930/se-2?accountid=6749. Article published by the Los Angeles Times on July 12, 1943

- ¹⁰ "Zoot-Suit Gang Beats up Man: Invited for Lift, Victim Is Later Hurlled from Auto." *Los Angeles Times (1923-1995)*, 1942, p. 1. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Los Angeles Times*, ezproxy.lapl.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/zoot-suit-gang-beats-up-man/docview/165385227/se-2?accountid=6749.
- ¹¹ "One Slain and Another Knifed in 'Zoot' Fracas." *Los Angeles Times (1923-1995)*, 1943, p. 1. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Los Angeles Times*, ezproxy.lapl.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/one-slain-another-knifed-zoot-fracas/docview/165393684/se-2?accountid=6749. Article published by the Los Angeles Times on February 23, 1943
- ¹² "Gang Kidnaps Victim of Beating: Three Others Seriously Injured in New Outbreak by Zoot Suit Youths." *Los Angeles Times (1923-1995)*, 1943, p. 1. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Los Angeles Times*, ezproxy.lapl.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/gang-kidnaps-victim-beating/docview/165412368/se-2?accountid=6749. Article published by the Los Angeles Times on March 8, 1943
- ¹³ "Officer Stabbed in Zoot Gang Affray: Youth, 19, Arrested; Seven Flee Sheriff Aides." *Los Angeles Times (1923-1995)*, 1942, p. 1. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Los Angeles Times*, ezproxy.lapl.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/officer-stabbed-zoot-gang-affray/docview/165386138/se-2?accountid=6749. Article published by the Los Angeles Times on December 26, 1942
- ¹⁴
- "Zoot Cyclist Snatches Purse" *Los Angeles Times (1923-1995)*, 1943, p. 1. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Los Angeles Times*, ezproxy.lapl.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/o-p-grossly-inefficient-says-mc-nary/docview/165446536/se-2?accountid=6749. Article published by the Los Angeles Times on June 16, 1943
- ¹⁵ "Hospital Patient Held in Car Theft" *Los Angeles Times (1923-1995)*, 1943, p. 1. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Los Angeles Times*, ezproxy.lapl.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/article-3-no-title/docview/165429580/se-2?accountid=6749. Article published by the Los Angeles Times on April 11, 1943
- ¹⁶ "Zoot Suit Pair Held in Attack: One Man Stabbed and Another Severely Beaten and Robbed of \$50." *Los Angeles Times (1923-1995)*, 1943, p. 1. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Los Angeles Times*, ezproxy.lapl.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/zoot-suit-pair-held-attack/docview/165390885/se-2?accountid=6749. Article published by the Los Angeles Times on January 27, 1943

Deadly Weapon, Three for Vagrancy and One in Theft¹⁷

11. New Zoot Gangster Attacks Result in Arrest of 100: Complaints Against 43 Issued, Accusing Them of Unlawful Assemblage in Week-end Outbreaks¹⁸

12. Death Penalty to Be Asked for Jitterbug Killers of Teacher¹⁹

This constant stream of negativity and blame on youth culture conflated homefront instability with juvenile delinquency and painted these men out to be hoodlums, gang members, and rapists.

Luiz Alvarez writes in his book,

“the conflation of African American and Mexican American youth with zoot suits and crime quickly became a national pattern as non white you were increasingly portrayed as a drain on the war effort” (pg. 56).

Not only did their dress offend the greater American public and war efforts, but also,

“Nonwhite youth were linked to rumors of an extensive drug culture and presented to a court of public opinion that equated the smoking of marijuana with the wasting of time, effort, and money that might otherwise be funneled into war production” (pg. 53).

The string of xenophobic and unpatriotic rhetoric spewed by the media solidified America's views on Mexican-Americans and the *pachuco* subculture as unlawful and immoral. American

¹⁷ "Ten Seized in Drive on Zoot Suit Gangsters: Six Held on Suspicion of Assault with Deadly Weapon, Three for Vagrancy and One in Theft." *Los Angeles Times (1923-1995)*, 1942, p. 1. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Los Angeles Times*, [ezproxy.lapl.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/ten-seized-drive-on-zoot-suit-gangsters/docview/165371610/se-2?accountid=6749](https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/ten-seized-drive-on-zoot-suit-gangsters/docview/165371610/se-2?accountid=6749). Article published by the Los Angeles Times on November 2, 1942

¹⁸

"New Zoot Gangster Attacks Result in Arrest of 100: Complaints against 43 Issued, Accusing Them of Unlawful Assemblage in Week-end Outbreaks." *Los Angeles Times (1923-1995)*, 1942, p. 1. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Los Angeles Times*, [ezproxy.lapl.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/new-zoot-gangster-attacks-result-arrest-100/docview/165357215/se-2?accountid=6749](https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/new-zoot-gangster-attacks-result-arrest-100/docview/165357215/se-2?accountid=6749). Article published by the Los Angeles Times on October 27, 1942

¹⁹"Death Penalty to Be Asked for Jitterbug Killers of Teacher." *Los Angeles Times (1923-1995)*, 1942, p. 12. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Los Angeles Times*, [ezproxy.lapl.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/death-penalty-be-asked-jitterbug-killers-teacher/docview/165382882/se-2?accountid=6749](https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/death-penalty-be-asked-jitterbug-killers-teacher/docview/165382882/se-2?accountid=6749). Article published by the Los Angeles Times on October 4, 1942

author and lawyer, Carey McWilliams, wrote extensively on California politics and culture in his book titled *North From Mexico: The Spanish Speaking People of the United States*²⁰. In his book he defines the *pachuco* as easily stereotyped due to these several signifiers,

“Their skin was enough darker to set them apart from the average *Angeleno*. Basically bilingual, they spoke both Spanish and English with an accent that could be mimicked by either or both groups. Also there was an age-old heritage of ill-will to be exploited and a social atmosphere in which Mexicans, as Mexicans, had long been stereotyped”
(Williams, pg. 242)

Furthermore, McWilliams argues that news outlets are single handedly responsible for the rise in popularity of the terms like *zoot-suiter* and *pachuco*, after a representative from the Coordinator’s Office attempted to cease the use of the term “Mexican” when publishing about crimes.

“The press agreed, but, true to form, quickly devised a still better technique for baiting Mexicans. ‘Zoot-suit’ and ‘Pachuco’ began to appear in the newspapers with such regularity that, within a few months, they had completely replaced the word ‘Mexican’. Every Mexican youngster arrested, no matter how trivial the offense and regardless of his ultimate guilt or innocence, was photographed with some such caption as ‘Pachuco Gangster’ or ‘Zoot-suit Hoodlum’” (pg. 238).

Carey McWilliams tells how in a matter of months the media had conflated the term “Mexican” with *zoot-suiter* and *pachuco* - thus generalizing and stereotyping an entire population of California residents. By the time Jose Diaz’s body was found in Commerce, California near the

²⁰ McWilliams, Carey. *North from Mexico: The Spanish-Speaking People of the United States*. Greenwood Press, 1968. *Bard Stevenson Library*, Greenwood Press, eds.s.ebscohost.com/eds/detail/detail?vid=2&sid=05bb8c2d-2604-4557-92ef-f2d7df274252%40redis&bdatt a=JnNpdGU9ZWRzLWxpdmUmc2NvcGU9c2l0ZQ%3d%3d#AN=bard.b2005625&db=cat03691a.

Sleepy Lagoon reservoir, the media had already paved the path for a perfect storm for arguably one of the most unjust court cases²¹ in U.S. history.

²¹ "Sleepy Lagoon Case - Chronology." *Online Archive of California*, UC Libraries, https://oac.cdlib.org/view?docId=hb5c6011c8&brand=oac4&doc.view=entire_text. Accessed 22 Apr. 2023. The chronology of the Sleepy Lagoon Murder trial Courtesy of Dept of Special Collections/UCLA Library provided by The Online Archive of California

Chapter 1. The Sleepy Lagoon Murder Trial

José Gallardo Díaz's body was found on the morning of August 2nd, 1942 near Sleepy Lagoon "barely breathing, bleeding heavily, and his pockets were turned inside out" (Pagán, pg. 1)²². He was transported to the Los Angeles County General Hospital where he was pronounced dead shortly after arriving. Díaz was a known zoot suiter in his community and was preparing to leave East Los Angeles to serve in WWII. The weekend before he was set to depart, he attended a party near Sleepy Lagoon, a popular spot all of the local kids went to in the summer because public pools²³ were still segregated at the time. At some point on the evening of the altercation "a group of kids from the 38th Street neighborhood arrived at the party, seeking revenge for an earlier beating of some of their friends." Whether members of the Varrío South Side 38th Street gang, Tres Ocho²⁴, were actually responsible for the death of José Gallardo Díaz is still officially unresolved today. However, upon learning of their presence at the party, the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) started their manhunt against the residents and juvenile delinquents of East Los Angeles. By August 10th, 1942 the LAPD²⁵ rounded up more than 600 predominantly Mexican-American men and women for questioning, threatening, and beating and indicted "24 boys on charges of conspiracy to commit murder and two charges of assault with a deadly

²² Pagán, Eduardo Obregón. "José Gallardo Díaz (1919-1942)." *American Experience*, PBS, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/zoot-jose-gallardo-diaz/>. Accessed 30 Apr. 2023. Biographical article on José Gallardo Díaz written by Eduardo Obregón Pagán published by PBS.

²³ *The Sleepy Lagoon Case*, prepared by the Citizens' Committee for the Defense of Mexican-American Youth, Los Angeles, 1942. https://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/disp_textbook.cfm?smtID=3&psid=605 Annotation and documentation on the Sleepy Lagoon Murder Trial written by Citizens' Committee for the Defense of Mexican-American Youth in 1942

²⁴ "Varrío 38th Street in South Los Angeles." *Streetgangs*, <https://www.streetgangs.com/hispanic/cityofla/eastside/38thstreet/>. Accessed 30 Apr. 2023. The history of the Varrío South Side 38th street, residing in south Los Angeles provided by streetgangs.com

²⁵ "1942: People v. Zamora (sic) 1943: Zoot Suit Riots." *A Latinx Resource Guide: Civil Rights Cases and Events in the United States*. Library of Congress, <https://guides.loc.gov/latinx-civil-rights/people-v-zamorra>.

weapon”(OAC)²⁶. The People vs. Zammora saw 22 boys tried *en masse* by Judge Charles W. Fickle on October 13th, 1942 which resulted in 12 convictions. The case was named after the defendant Gus Zamora²⁷, whose name was misspelled after he was chosen at random to be the court case name. Several months later the trial ended and on January 13th, 1942; the verdict was “three convicted of 1st degree murder and 2 assaults (sentenced to life imprisonment); nine convicted of 2nd degree murder and 2 assaults (sentenced to 5 years to life); five convicted of assault; five acquitted”. By October of 1944, the Sleepy Lagoon Defense Committee (SLDC), headed by Defense Attorney Ben Margolis and Carey McWilliams, had successfully appealed all 12 convictions by a unanimous decision and all of the defendants were released. Another important member of this committee was Harry Braverman who was one of the “members of the Grand Jury who had opposed returning the indictment in the Sleepy Lagoon Case”(Mc Williams, pg. 237). Although José Gallardo Díaz’s murder remains officially unsolved, one source from the Los Angeles Law Library²⁸ reported what they believe to be the true story behind the Sleepy Lagoon murder case.

“Before her death in 1991, Lorena Encinas confided to her children that her late brother Louie was the one who beat and killed Jose Diaz that night during a party near the Sleepy Lagoon. She chose to serve time in jail herself rather than have her brother sent to San Quentin.” (pg. 3)

Lorena and Louie Encinas were two of the 600 Mexican-American youths rounded up in August of 1942. While Louie was questioned and quickly released, Lorena was uncooperative and found

²⁶ The Online Archive of California

²⁷ Library of Congress, 1942: People v. Zamora <https://guides.loc.gov/latinx-civil-rights/people-v-zamorra>

²⁸ "Sleepy Lagoon Murder and the Zoot Suit Riots." *N/A. LALawLibrary*, https://www.lalawlibrary.org/pdfs/grants/Sleepy_Lagoon_Murder.pdf. Accessed 30 Apr. 2023. "Sleepy Lagoon Murder and the Zoot Suit Riots" article provided by the Los Angeles Law Library

herself arrested and jailed with several other young women who were perceived as accomplices to the boys. After testifying and refusing to cooperate, Lorena was relocated to the “Ventura School for Girls, a draconian reformatory, without benefit of jury or trial” (Pagán, pg.1). She knew her brother was responsible for Diaz’s death and made the decision to protect him over herself. Her relationship with Louie remained close until his suicide in 1972, and her secret stayed with her until shortly before her death in 1991.

José Gallardo Díaz was in the wrong place at the wrong time. Louie Encinas and his friends crashed the Williams ranch party that night, and upon being kicked out, the group ran into a random partygoer leaving as well and jumped him. Encinas and his crew got away, while countless others were subjected to an extremely unjust trial.

Among the convicted “murderers” was Enrique “Henry” “Hank” Reyes Leyvas²⁹, a nineteen year old zoot suiter who resided in the 38th Street neighborhood. With an already long history with the LAPD for numerous crimes, he was quickly picked up and assumed the leader of the gang responsible for José Díaz’s death. Similarly to Díaz, Leyvas had enlisted in the Merchant Marines - because of his record he could not join the Navy or Army - but his service was halted due to this court case. Leyvas was present at the Williams ranch the night of the attack but was dealing with his own personal relations that night. At one point in the evening, he and his girlfriend Dora were in his car at the lagoon when “a group of boys from the Downey neighborhood pulled alongside Leyvas’ car, and a shouting match ensued” (Pagán, pg. 1) before the pair were beaten. The couple returned to 38th Street for “reinforcements” but by the time

²⁹ Pagán, Eduardo Obregón. "Enrique 'Henry' Reyes Leyvas (1923-1971)." *American Experience*, PBS, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/zoot-enrique-henry-reyes-leyvas/>. Accessed 30 Apr. 2023.

they came back everyone had scattered. They heard noise coming from a different party up the street and followed to try and find the Downey boys.

“The 38th Street group arrived at the Degadillo’s ready for a confrontation and a fight quickly broke out. It was around one o’clock in the morning. The fight lasted for ten minutes and ended when someone yelled out that the police had been called. Several young men and women were seriously injured, including a partygoer named Jose Díaz " (Pagan).

With physical signs of a beating from his own altercation earlier that evening, the LAPD was quick to point to Leyvas as the perpetrator of the second fight. Leyvas and his fellow accused were subjected to unfair conditions following their arrest; under Judge Charles Fickle’s ruling³⁰, the defendants were not allowed to change their clothes, shower, or cut their hair in addition to being prevented from consulting their collective lawyers. For this group of 22 young men being tried *en masse*, they were represented by just five people.

“The accused were not permitted to sit with their lawyers, but were massed together, seated alphabetically facing the jury. Defense counsel were not allowed to confer with their clients during recess, by order of the court... The trial judge was consistently rude and sarcastic to defense counsel. He rebuked them inappropriately. He disparaged their legal ability, ethics and understanding. He consistently overruled motions by the defense and consistently ruled favorably on like motions by the prosecution. He was unfailingly courteous and helpful to the prosecution.” (Dept. of Special Collections/ UCLA library)

By presenting these young men in such a disorderly way, Judge Fickle practically guaranteed jurors would take certain biases against the defendants simply based on appearance. The Jury was composed of zero Latino members, in addition



³⁰ The Online Archive of California

to none of them having children in the same age range of the defendants. Additionally, these men were perpetually reminded by the media of the conflation of zoot suiters and gangsters. Once convicted for the murder of José Díaz, these young men remained imprisoned until 1944. After a period of time in which these men were imprisoned for a crime they did not commit, the California Court of Appeals reversed the original court decision and erased the murder from their records. These actions alone could not begin to reverse the psychological, physical, and societal damage the Sleepy Lagoon Murder case had upon the Mexican-American community and zoot suiters at large.

Without the support of the Sleepy Lagoon Defense Committee (SLDC), also known as The Citizens' Committee for the Defense of Mexican-American Youth, these twelve convicted men would not have been released. Additionally the SLDC reached out to figures such as Orson Welles and Elenor Roosevelt for further support in this case. On March 1st, 1944, American actor and director Orson Welles sent a letter³¹ to the San Quentin Parole board which reads as follows:

“After a very careful examination of the records and facts of the trial, I am convinced that the boys in the Sleepy Lagoon case were not given a fair trial, and that their conviction could only have been influenced by anti- Mexican prejudice. I am convinced, also, that the causes leading up to this case, as well as its outcome, are of great importance to the Mexican minority in this community. That is to say, the case has importance aside from the boys incriminated — the whole community is undermined. Any attempt at good relations is impaired — as is the importance of unity in the furtherance of the war effort. To allow an injustice like this to stand is to impede the progress of unity. I have heard of the splendid record the boys have made in San Quentin — each having made a fine showing for himself in behavior, cooperation, etc.

³¹ The Online Archive of California

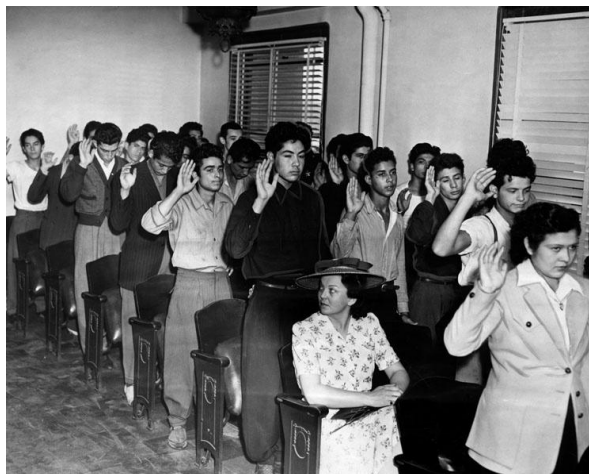
Because this case is a very special one for the above reasons, I am of the opinion that it merits special attention on the part of the Board Members. Many people in the film colony have expressed great interest in it, and I feel I am speaking for them, too, in making this plea.”

With support like Welles’ these men were able to reverse their convictions and clear their records. After compiling recorded testimony from the previous trial, Ben Margolis³² stated,

“In the Sleepy Lagoon case, the prosecution can proudly claim that it secured the conviction of more defendants for a single death than has ever been obtained in the history of California. To this claim can be added the facts: first, that 12 boys so convicted averaged about 17 or 18 years of age; second, that the boys, with one exception, were all of Mexican origin; third, that there is no direct proof that any one of boys ever touched the boy whom they were charged with murdering; and fourth, it is clear that most of the boys were not at or near the spot where the killing allegedly occurred. ”

He later went on to comment on how this event has not only affected those convicted and their families, but also the greater community at large.

“It was not just these boys who were on trial. The Mexican people were being tried. And the trial took place not only in the courtroom but in the press with its barrage of lies against the ‘Mexican pachucos’ and ‘zoot suiters’, and before the Grand Jury where a sheriff’s report characterizing the Mexican people as bloodthirsty wildcats was



submitted... The boys were arrested as a result of a most vicious drag-net; statements were obtained from them through brutal third degree methods; a trial was had in which they were denied the right to sit with their own counsel; and prejudicial eros too numerous even to mention were committed during the course of the trial” (Margolis)

³²Sleepy Lagoon Defense Committee. "News Release: Reasons for the Convictions in the Sleepy Lagoon Case." *Online Archive of California*, UC Libraries, 1944, <https://oac.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/hb6t1nb7s5/?brand=oac4>. Accessed 22 Apr. 2023. Sleepy Lagoon Defense Committee and Ben Margolis preparing for the appeal of the Sleepy Lagoon Murder convictions provided by the Online Archive of California

The media greatly affected the outcome of this trial by fueling the press with dehumanizing articles on Mexican-American youth. The continued degradation of these young people and the culture they were creating for themselves only further isolated them from mainstream society.

After the verdict of the Sleepy Lagoon murder trial was decided on January 14th, 1943 there was a resurgence in news articles pertaining to Mexican-American youth activity and the zoot suiters of East Los Angeles. The day after the trial ended, Timothy G. Turner published an article titled “The Significance of Zoot-Suit Gangsters”³³ in which he criticized the mistakes made during the six month ordeal on part of the city and as a greater society. First he criticized the police force,

“The police have committed the stupidity, common to police in all cities, of making wholesale arrests when anything gets out of hand. To throw probably innocent youths in jail makes more criminals than it cures, and is likely to arouse sympathy which is applied to the guilty as well as the innocent” (Turner, A4)

He went on to write about the complexities of “gangsterism” in America. He believed that delinquent behavior often stem from a loss of culture, “the social problem of first generation Americans” (A4), and economic barriers. Turner stated the social problem,

“is due to a feeling of separation from the rest of society due to prejudices against the recent immigrants and their children. The youth feels he is no part of the community and starts war on it. He is the academic phrase socially maladjusted” (A4).

Although Turner did not have a full solution to the issue, he reminded readers that young “gangsters” are a very small part of the overall “lawful Mexican population” and that “we should not be hypocrites and protest against minority problems abroad when we cannot solve our own at

³³ Turner, T. G. (1943, Jan 14). Significance of Zoot-suit Gangsters. *Los Angeles Times (1923-1995)* Retrieved from <http://ezproxy.lapl.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/significance-zoot-suit-gangsters/docview/165405655/se-2>

home”. There were a plethora of issues at home especially in regards to race and relations between civilians and servicemen in Los Angeles.

Chapter 2. The Zoot Suit Riots of 1943

In the summer of 1943, racial tensions were running high between Mexican-American youth and U.S. Navy servicemen. In early May a headline read “Police Nab 13 in ‘Zoot’ Clash With Servicemen”³⁴. Three weeks later, on May 31st, there was an altercation between the two groups and one sailor was beaten badly. On June 3rd, fifty U.S. sailors from the United States Naval Reserve Armory took to the streets of downtown Los Angeles presumably in retaliation. The Zoot Suit Riot - or “Zoot Suit War” as it was often called- lasted nearly a week and greatly affected the entire city. Carey McWilliams³⁵, who witnessed the eruption of violence, stated,

“On Monday evening, June seventh, thousands of Angelenos ... turned out for a mass lynching. 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. Street cars were halted while Mexicans, and (others), were jerked out of their seats, pushed into the streets, and beaten with sadistic frenzy.”

On June 8th, 1943 the front page of *The LA Times* read “Riot Alarm Sent Out in Zoot War: Servicemen Strip and Beat 50; 5 Youths Treated at Hospital”³⁶.

This report told of the horrors that occurred over the course of the week. Thousands of service men and civilians took to the streets seeking zoot suiters and



³⁴ Police Nab 13 in 'Zoot' Clash With Servicemen. (1943, May 10). *Los Angeles Times (1923-1995)* Retrieved from <http://ezproxy.lapl.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/police-nab-13-zoot-clash-with-servicemen/docview/165427141/se-2>

³⁵ History.com Editors. "Zoot Suit Riots." *HISTORY*, A&E Television Networks, 27 Apr. 2017, <https://www.history.com/topics/world-war-ii/zoot-suit-riots#the-zoot-suit-riots-begin>. Accessed 30 Sept. 2023.

³⁶ "Riot Alarm Sent out in Zoot War: Servicemen Strip and Beat 50; Five Youths Treated at Hospital." *Los Angeles Times (1923-1995)*, 1943, p. 1. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Los Angeles Times*, ezproxy.lapl.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/riot-alarm-sent-out-zoot-war/docview/165420514/se-2?accountid=6749.

“more than 50 zoot-suiters had their clothing torn from their bodies”. These young boys were exposed to extremely humiliating and dehumanizing tactics deployed after the Chief of Police, C.B. Horrall, sounded the alarm and sent the entire force out to the streets. That evening, “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” (pg.1) according to one source³⁷. This article was featured on the front page of *The Los Angeles Times* and was accompanied by a photo of an attacked sailor.



SLASHED—Donald J. Jackson, 20, sailor, who was attacked by zoot-suit gang.

According to Carey McWilliams, on June 5th, 1943,

“Squads of servicemen, arms linked, paraded through downtown Los Angeles...stopping anyone wearing zoot suits and ordering these individuals to put away their drapes by the following night or suffer the consequences” (pg. 247).

And on that same night,

“Two zoot-suit customers, drinking beer at a table, were peremptorily ordered to remove their clothes. One of them was beaten and his clothes were torn from his back when he refused to comply with the order. The other - they were both Mexicans - doffed his ‘drapes’ which were promptly ripped to shreds...All that the police officials did, however, was to call up some additional reserves and announce that any Mexicans involved in the rioting would be promptly arrested” (pg. 247).



These young men, despite their status of guilt or involvement, were repeatedly assaulted, degraded,

³⁷ City, Navy Clamp Lid on Zoot-suit Warfare: Sporadic Clashes Follow Rioting; Police Patrols Tour Battlegrounds. (1943, Jun 09). *Los Angeles Times (1923-1995)* Retrieved from <http://ezproxy.lapl.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/city-navy-clamp-lid-on-zoot-suit-warfare/docview/165449791/se-2>

and humiliated by servicemen and police. The week following the Zoot Suit riots, a special citizen's committee of investigators recommended³⁸ that all involved who committed crimes during that five day long period be punished, backed by the governor, they demanded "that crimes of violence be brought to justice and the guilty must be punished regardless of what clothes they wear- whether they be zoot suits, police, Army or Navy uniforms"(pg. A1).

However this did not stop the association between the zoot suit and youth behavior, and a proposal³⁹ was made to ban the zoot suit to the Los Angeles City Council but never fully went through. The War Production Board (WPD)⁴⁰ was able to bar the sale of zoot suits for a period of time under the guise of reserving cloth for the war efforts. On August 17th, 1943 a dry cleaners business was robbed of eighteen zoot suits. The reporter writes in the short blurb⁴¹,

"Since zoot suits were rationed more or less, by court orders to offenders to cease wearing them and by police and military action, there has been a shortage of the pyramided panties worn by certain members of the younger generation. This shortage was relieved in a small way early yesterday, according to a report made to police by Aurthor Ortiz, proprietor of a cleaning and dyeing plant at 3016 E. Fourth St., when burglars broke into his establishment and stole 18 zoot suits valued at \$500" (pg. A3).

³⁸ Punishment of All Urged to Break Up Zoot Suit War: Calm Rules; Warren Acts to End Strife. (1943, Jun 13). *Los Angeles Times (1923-1995)* Retrieved from <http://ezproxy.lapl.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/punishment-all-urged-break-up-zoot-suit-war/docview/165444547/se-2> Article published to the Los Angeles Times outlining demands for all who committed criminal acts during the Zoot Suit riots to be punished.

³⁹ Ban on Freak Suits Studied by Councilmen. (1943, Jun 10). *Los Angeles Times (1923-1995)* Retrieved from <http://ezproxy.lapl.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/ban-on-freak-suits-studied-councilmen/docview/165441851/se-2>

⁴⁰ Clothier's Sale of Zoot Suits Barred by Federal Court. (1943, Jul 06). *Los Angeles Times (1923-1995)* Retrieved from <http://ezproxy.lapl.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/studio-officer-accidentally-shoots-himself/docview/165451647/se-2> Article published to the Los Angeles Times, reporting one zoot suit seller was unable to continue his business after a ban from the Federal Court.

⁴¹ Cleaners Robbed of 18 Zoot Suits. (1943, Aug 17). *Los Angeles Times (1923-1995)* Retrieved from <http://ezproxy.lapl.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/cleaners-robbed-18-zoot-suits/docview/165469228/se-2> Article published to the Los Angeles Times, reporting the theft of 18 zoot suits.

Following the zoot suit riots, many people reflected on delinquency reform and various methods of controlling the youth problem. Young men were urged to go to trade school⁴², work on farms⁴³, and even join baseball teams. In an article titled “Games Turn Zoot-Suit Boys into Ballplayers”⁴⁴ published on August 9th, 1943 tells the story of a group of zoot suiters becoming “sweater boys in Belvedere”(pg. 15). The Co-ordinating Council had these boys trade in their zoot suits for a different uniform, one which encouraged and perpetuated a more patriotic system of beliefs. In addition to the incentive of owning their own baseball sweaters, other tactics were also used to encourage young men to join these teams.

“They play ball so they can wear the sweaters. And if they play all season they can own the sweaters, which are distinctive. Also, if they play they can use the showers at the schools and that in itself is incentive” (pg. 15).

After this program started, they

“Checked with the sheriff’s office and found that since the leagues were started there hasn’t been one case of purse-snatching or skylight robbery in this section. Those were the worst and most frequent crimes before” (pg. 15).

Delinquency reform is one way to address these issues - but many argue that the youth problems stem from society and a greater struggle for a sense of belonging. Rather than blaming these young men and their families for their circumstances, the country should be looking inward to

⁴² "Trade Schools Advocated for Mexican Youths." *Los Angeles Times (1923-1995)*, 1943, p. 1. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Los Angeles Times*; *ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Los Angeles Times*, ezproxy.lapl.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/trade-schools-advocated-mexican-youths/docview/165415518/se-2?accountid=6749.

⁴³ Work on Farms Urged for Zoot Suit Youths. (1943, Jun 25). *Los Angeles Times (1923-1995)* Retrieved from <http://ezproxy.lapl.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/work-on-farms-urged-zoot-suit-youths/docview/165448694/se-2>

⁴⁴ Games Turn Zoot-Suit Boys into Ballplayers. (1943, Aug 09). *Los Angeles Times (1923-1995)* Retrieved from <http://ezproxy.lapl.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/benefit-planned-needy-pets/docview/165452648/se-2>

find the real problems; the racist and colonialist ideology which the country is built on along with the shared traditional conservative values.

One writer who simply went by JP wrote an article to *The Los Angeles Times* titled “Specific Remedies Urged for Hoodlumism”⁴⁵ on June 21st, 1943 in which he outlined some of the social issues faced by certain communities and how they lead to instability. He suggests five extreme actions to be taken,

1. “Set up a detention camp at some place where there is tillable land with irrigation to permit growing of the garden truck for those confined there and provide work to discipline them and teach them the value of honest labor. This camp to be under supervision of competent instructors with Army experience and strict discipline be exacted and the officials backed up in administering it. Instructions to be given in citizenship and respect for the public and individuals.”
2. “The courts to sentence any such delinquents to this camp for at least six months and provide that after a period of correction and upon recommendation of the officials in charge of the camp trainees be paroled to suitable jobs, preferably on farms away from the neighborhoods where they lived, and kept under strict control, but paid for their work.”
3. “Establish night schools to which the parents of these delinquents can be compelled to attend under court order to be taught with proper training and control of children and teach them to read and write if illiterate or unable to read English. This is as important or more so than the training of the young delinquents.”
4. “Set up a committee to cooperate with the motion-picture concerns to stop showing of gangster and all such films and those showing wanton destruction and vandalism.”
5. “Stop handling the young hoodlums with kid gloves and make them understand that if they commit crime and injure others they will surely be made to suffer also.” (JP, pg. 4A)

⁴⁵ J, P. (1943, Jun 21). Specific Remedies Urged for Hoodlumism. *Los Angeles Times (1923-1995)* Retrieved from <http://ezproxy.lapl.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/specific-remedies-urged-hoodlumism/docview/165434864/se-2> Published by the Los Angeles Times written by JP

This article was truly horrific to read and the fact that it was published for the greater public displays extreme hypocrisies in American values. The United States of America was fighting in WWII against fascist regimes who were sending millions of Jewish peoples into camps while simultaneously camping hundreds of thousands of people with Japanese heritage. The actions JP wanted to deploy against the Mexican-American community parallel some of the atrocities faced by the victims of the Holocaust and Japanese internment camps.

District Attorney Frederick N. Howser commented on juvenile delinquency and suggested a much more inclusive approach to reform. While meeting with the Co-operative Club he stated⁴⁶ that the riots happening in Los Angeles and across the country were

“indicative of a maladjustment that will be translated, when these youths grow up, in crackpot movements in the post war period. We must absorb these young people of minority groups and make them citizens in the full sense of the word. Young people are more sensitive than ever before and war conditions are making them restless.” (pg. A3)

District Attorney Howser’s approach drastically differs from JP’s, instead of further outcasting people who already feel rejected by society, Howser believed that these groups must be fully embraced. On July 10th, 1943, an article titled “Racial Peace Here Pledged: Warren Declares All of State’s People Will be Protected”⁴⁷, the governor of California, Earl Warren, declared the state would protect all when he said “The State means to protect the lives and property of all people, regardless of race or creed” (pg. A1). Almost a year later an article titled “Warren Urges Racial

⁴⁶ Howser Talks About Challenge of Delinquency. (1943, Jul 07). *Los Angeles Times (1923-1995)* Retrieved from <http://ezproxy.lapl.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/howser-talks-about-challenge-delinquency/docview/165449358/se-2>

⁴⁷ Racial Peace Here Pledged: Warren Declares All of State's People Will Be Protected. (1943, Jul 10). *Los Angeles Times (1923-1995)* Retrieved from <http://ezproxy.lapl.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/racial-peace-here-pledge/docview/165441776/se-2>

Tolerance”⁴⁸ was published in which the governor commented on the zoot suit “disturbances” and advocated for racial tolerance in his radio broadcast.

“The Los Angeles Youth Project emphasizes that a total program of delinquency prevention must include adequate law enforcement; vocational as well as general education; opportunity for employment without discrimination; decent housing; continued and more extensive cooperation between private social agencies and public departments, and redoubled efforts towards greater racial understanding and tolerance” (pg. 5).

This push for broader racial understanding and tolerance backed by members of government displays shifts in politics towards notions of social justice reform. However many news reports coming out of the mid 1940’s blamed the Zoot Suit riots on a plethora of issues and specifically stated they were not due to racial tensions. California Senator Downey⁴⁹ addressed the Senate Military Committee, believing the riots ensued due to a shortage of law enforcement. He stated, “while conditions that caused the zoot suit riots have been ripening over many years, they could have been prevented if the city police force had sufficient men to handle the situation” (pg. A8).

Surprisingly, the inflation of police presence and Mexican-Americans during Zoot Suit Riots, actually saw a police brutality case brought to trial in the 1940’s, which at the time was almost unheard of. In June of 1943, a man named Beebe was arrested for intoxication and was later “kicked to death in the Central Jail by police officers” (McWilliams, pg. 248). The news of this act of police brutality broke out at the same time as the riots - and as the police force was in the limelight of the media, the department had no choice but to bring officer Compton Dixon to

⁴⁸ Warren Urges Racial Tolerance. (1944, May 07). *Los Angeles Times (1923-1995)* Retrieved from <http://ezproxy.lapl.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/warren-urges-racial-tolerance/docview/165515125/se-2>

⁴⁹ Riots Here Laid To Police Shortage. (1943, Jun 25). *Los Angeles Times (1923-1995)* Retrieved from <http://ezproxy.lapl.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/riots-here-laid-police-shortage/docview/165426716/se-2> Article published to the Los Angeles Times reporting Senator Downey's address to the Senate Military Committee on reasons for the riot.

trial. Dixon was accused of the manslaughter of Beebe's death although he didn't quite fit the description of the assailant, which the victim shared with his wife briefly before his death. Dixon's charges were eventually dismissed and he was able to return to the force. Whether or not Dixon was responsible for the death of Beebe is unknown, however there is no doubt that some officers played a role in targeting the Mexican-American community, as Beebe did not kick himself to death.

One well respected pastor from Watts California, Rev. Francisco Quintanilla⁵⁰, believed that the riots were incited by fifth columnists, or infiltrators who use propaganda and other methods to deter certain groups from mainstream society - what some may view as modern day terrorists.

“When boys start attacking servicemen it means that the enemy is right at home. It means they are being fed vicious propaganda by enemy agents who wish to stir up all the racial and class haters they can put their evil fingers on... These propagandists urge our Mexican youth to commit crimes, to build up police records so that they will not be accepted by the armed forces. They are told that they are wanted to fight and die for a country that has done nothing for them... If Mexican and (African-American) minorities want to gain the respect of the community, this rioting is not the way to go about it” (pg. A).

Reverend Quintanilla was not the only one who believed that the riots could have been incited by outside forces. State Senator Jack B. Tenney⁵¹ believes the riots were caused by Nazi's to create disunity within certain communities and ordered an investigation to be made.

⁵⁰ Watts Pastor Blames Riots on Fifth Column. (1943, Jun 11). *Los Angeles Times (1923-1995)* Retrieved from <http://ezproxy.lapl.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/watts-pastor-blames-riot-s-on-fifth-column/docview/165447112/se-2> Article published by the Los Angeles Times after Rev. Quintanilla placed blame on the fifth column for the riots

⁵¹ Tenney Feels Riots Caused by Nazi Move for Disunity. (1943, Jun 10). *Los Angeles Times (1923-1995)* Retrieved from <http://ezproxy.lapl.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/tenney-feels-riots-caused-nazi-move-disunity/docview/165446423/se-2>

First Lady, Elenor Roosevelt⁵², addressed the zoot suit riots in a press conference held on June 16th, 1943 stating that the riots could be traced to racial discrimination and was not merely a youth problem. Her views were quickly contested, as one editorial titled “Mrs. Roosevelt Blindly Stirs Race Discord”⁵³, published in *The LA Times*, believed that her public statement “that zoot suit fights in Los Angeles are due to long-standing discrimination against Mexicans here says something that is as untrue as it is dangerous” (pg. A4). The writer goes on to call her ignorant and aligns her views with “the Communist party line propoganda, which has been desperately devoted to making a racial issue of the juvenile gang trouble” (pg. A4). Instead this reporter believed that

“The zoot suit fights were not based on racial antagonism at all. When servicemen set out to avenge attacks which had been made on them by zooters, they were not looking for Mexicans, (African Americans) or Anglo-Saxons - they were looking for the weird costumes worn by the gangsters, who have included many races” (pg. A4).

But the zoot suit was directly tied to communities of color so the author’s point of view is convoluted and quite frankly false. Because of the heavy association with Mexican American youth and the zoot suit, it is fair to say that these riots were incited by racial tensions as Eleanor Roosevelt did. The reporter above was not the only one to challenge the First Lady as Preston Hotchkis⁵⁴, President of the California Chamber of Commerce , stated

“The statement that the citizens of California have discriminated against persons of Mexican origin is untrue, unjust, and provocative of disunion among people who have

⁵² First Lady Traces Zoot Riots to Discrimination. (1943, Jun 17). *Los Angeles Times (1923-1995)* Retrieved from <http://ezproxy.lapl.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/first-lady-traces-zoot-riots-discrimination/docview/165446538/se-2>

⁵³ Mrs. Roosevelt Blindly Stirs Race Discord. (1943, Jun 18). *Los Angeles Times (1923-1995)* Retrieved from <http://ezproxy.lapl.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/mrs-roosevelt-blindly-stirs-race-discord/docview/165435121/se-2>

⁵⁴ Mrs. Roosevelt Challenged on Zoot Statement. (1943, Jun 18). *Los Angeles Times (1923-1995)* Retrieved from <http://ezproxy.lapl.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/mrs-roosevelt-challenged-on-zoot-statement/docview/165455980/se-2>

lived for years in harmony. Instead of discriminating against Mexicans, California has treated them with the utmost consideration, and many of their number are listed among the most proponent and most useful citizens of the State.” (pg. A)

Having laid out the facts of both the Sleepy Lagoon Murder trial and the Zoot Suit Riots, the association with the zoot suit, Mexican-American youth, and discrimination is clearly evident. The attack against zoot suitors by the service men was racially charged.

Chapter 3. Global Effects and Visual Culture

Now having looked at these historical circumstances it can be seen how certain stereotypes surrounding the Mexican-American population have been perpetuated by the visual media and content that came out during this time period. The well-known style of dress became its own stereotype for Mexican-Americans.

All over the world, young men were urged to stay away from the zoot suit, now that it was intrinsically intertwined with delinquency, violence, and racist stereotypes. At the Warsaw Polytechnical Institute, sixty students were suspended from school after wearing Polish versions of the zoot suit and caught drinking “too much vodka” (pg. 38), which was reported on December 9th, 1951 in an article titled “Frisivolous Youths Face Serious Soviet Frown”⁵⁵. Several articles pertaining to the banning of zoot suits being worn in other countries came out during the 1950’s. These articles titles and countries of concern included:

1. “Airmen Told to Tone Down Flashy Garb”⁵⁶ - London
2. “Gaudy Clothes Taboo for GIs”⁵⁷ - London
3. “Too Daring: Those Alpine Pants Banned by Air Force”⁵⁸ - Wiesbaden, Germany
4. “End Western Fads, but Gently, Russ Youth Told”⁵⁹ - Russia

⁵⁵ Frivolous Youths Face Serious Soviet Frown. (1951, Dec 09). *Los Angeles Times (1923-1995)* Retrieved from <http://ezproxy.lapl.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/frivolous-youths-face-serious-soviet-frown/docview/166285499/se-2>

⁵⁶ Airmen Told To Tone Down Flashy Garb. (1954, Apr 23). *Los Angeles Times (1923-1995)* Retrieved from <http://ezproxy.lapl.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/airmen-told-tone-down-flashy-garb/docview/166618682/se-2>

⁵⁷ Gaudy Clothes Taboo For GIs. (1954, May 17). *Los Angeles Times (1923-1995)* Retrieved from <http://ezproxy.lapl.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/gaudy-clothes-taboo-gis/docview/166614877/se-2>

⁵⁸ Too Daring: Those Alpine Pants Banned By Air Force. (1955, Jul 24). *Los Angeles Times (1923-1995)* Retrieved from <http://ezproxy.lapl.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/too-daring/docview/166805846/se-2>

⁵⁹ End Western Fads, but Gently, Russ Youth Told. (1958, Oct 07). *Los Angeles Times (1923-1995)* Retrieved from <http://ezproxy.lapl.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/end-western-fads-gently-russ-youth-told/docview/167323444/se-2>

According to a research study at the University of Southern California⁶⁰, “‘ducktails’ and other weird haircuts are symbols of rebellion among teenagers and are related to low achievement by students of high mentality” (pg. B28). Researcher and principle of Eagle Rock High School, in the outskirts of Los Angeles, Charles Sutcliffe, stated that

“Combing hair in an extreme style is symptomatic of a rebellion against society and approved norms and conventions. It is also - like the zoot suit and yard-long watch chains - a rebellion against authority, including the authority of the school. For reasons connected either with their homes or society in general, these pupils are caught up in a wash of hopelessness and their weird haircuts are a form of retaliation against their environment”. (pg. B28)

Not only were young men being criticized for their choice of dress but also for their choice of hair style. This is not the first time we have seen hair be used against this population as the indicted young men from the Sleepy Lagoon Murder trial were prohibited from cutting or washing their hair for several months. But these young men were dressing in this style for a reason, it gave them a sense of identity. Carey McWilliams⁶¹ writes,

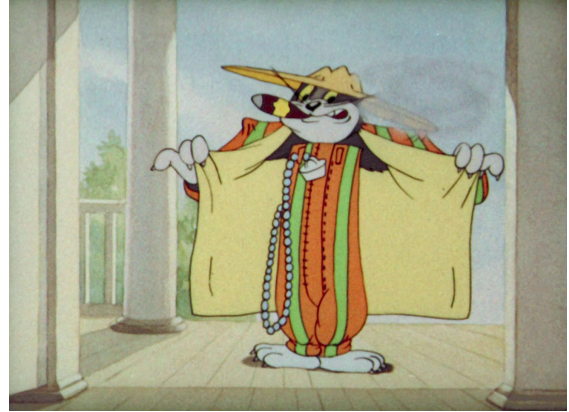
“The *pachuco* gang differs from other city gangs only in the degree to which it constitutes a more tightly knit group. There is more to the *pachuco* gang than just having a good time together. The *pachucos* suffer discrimination together and nothing makes for cohesiveness more effectively than a commonly shared hostility. Knowing that both as individuals and as a group they are not welcome in many parts of the city, they create their own world and try to make it as self-sufficient as possible” (McWilliams, pg. 241)

Everyday there were constant reminders of the conflation of zoot suiters and Mexican-Americans from both newspapers and visual media. Having taken on their own sort of uniform, depictions of those in zoot suits became increasingly prominent.

⁶⁰ Weird Haircuts Called Symbols of Rebellion. (1958, Apr 25). *Los Angeles Times (1923-1995)* Retrieved from <http://ezproxy.lapl.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/weird-haircuts-called-symbols-rebellion/docview/167253124/se-2>

⁶¹ *North From Mexico: The Spanish Speaking People of the United States* by Carey McWilliams

“The Zoot Cat” was released on January 27th, 1944 as the 13th episode of the new hit animation series *Tom and Jerry*. Directed by Williams Hanna and Joseph Barbera, the seven minute short episode follows the iconic cat and mouse duo as Tom attempts to woo his love interest.



After being rejected with his normal appearance and pick-up skills, Tom hears an advertisement on the TV in the background for a new style of suit - the zoot suit. He snags a lampshade to turn into his wide-brimmed hat and quickly makes his way outside assembling his suit out of an orange and green striped hammock. With a new groove in his step and clear confidence, he makes his way back to the front door - this time with a whole new demeanor. Using “jive” talk - the stereotyped colloquial language of the zoot suiter - and quick on his feet he wins his interest over. The episode ends with the suit in a fish bowl causing it to shrink down to Jerry’s size.

Tom using the zoot suit to win over his love interest creates a clear association on the creators’ part of the suit with “coolness” which is drastically different from the associations the style has in the news. Within seven minutes, Metro-Goldwyn Meyer shared with the world a subculture of style. Although the short is somewhat stereotypical, for the time it was produced, this episode was not overtly racist and did not affect the image of the zoot suiter in a damaging manner such as the Sleepy Lagoon Murder trial, the Zoot Suit Riots, and *The Los Angeles Times*.

On May 23rd, 1943, Al Capp published one of his comics for the Li'l Abner⁶² series, which ran for 43 years in newspapers around the country. Al Capp's series has been criticized for its racist and misogynistic stories and depictions. The strip follows the life of Abner Yokum and his fellow "hillbillies" in the fictional town of Dogpatch, U.S.A nestled in the Appalachian Mountains. In this particular comic, Capp tells the story of a Yokum in a zoot suit disturbing their quaint little town. One man blurts out that "Grandpa has fallen down the well", another states "only zoot suit Yokum would have the foolhardy courage to attempt it". Zoot Suit Yokum jumps down the well, but instead of saving the grandfather he "just brought up grandpa's watch and wallet" while holding out a gun. He rides off as the locals yell after him "I hate everything about him - especially the clothes he wears!". Yokum later returns to town briefly before he is harassed and shot at. The silhouette of a man in a zoot suit fleeing while being shot at is truly one of the most disturbing images. The comic ends by revealing a heinous act in which one of the men states "Warden!- As spokesman for the "Associated Conservative Clothing Manufacturers of America" - I want to thank you for releasing 'zoot-suit yokum's' double, Gat Garson, for the day" to which the warden responds "I was glad to do my bit to destroy the zoot suit craze!". Al Capp not only depicts an incredibly racist and stereotypical story but also tells the true story of how racist sentiments surrounding the zoot suit wearers were pushed by outside forces, like the media or in



⁶² Capp, Al. "Li'l Abner." *The Los Angeles Times* [Los Angeles], 23 May 1943, p. 71. Cartoon.

this case the Dogpatch government. Comic strips like these continued racist stereotypes regarding zoot suiters and Mexican-Americans at large.

Al Capp was not the only one depicting zoot suiters in comic strips, as newspapers were filled with derogatory and stereotypical visual stories about zoot suit culture. In the comic depicted below, it seems the officer is protecting the zoot suiters from unnecessary discrimination but does so in a mocking manner as he uses stereotypical zoot suit language.

Additionally, the men depicted are hyper characterizations of the zoot suiters with hyper exaggerated features in both the figures themselves and their dress.



During the war, this piece of propaganda to the right titled “Doesn’t Apply to Him” was published featuring a man in a zoot suit with “unwarranted deferment” on it, despite a sign in the back desperately calling out “The Army Needs Men!”. Deferment is the official postponement of military service, this drawing shows the hypocrisy of asking citizens to join the military while also prohibiting others because society has deemed them “unpatriotic”.



The billowing pants, colorful shirts, thigh-length coats, pointy shoes, bowtie, gold pocket chains, and wide brimmed hats were simply an assortment of random garments, at the end of the day. But when brought together into one style, the zoot suit

has taken on a wide range of meaning whether intentionally or unintentionally, by the wearers themselves and by outside forces.

In 1979, Luiz Valdez debuted his work *Zoot Suit*⁶³, as the first Chicano play on Broadway which explored topics such as the ones discussed in this paper; identity, assimilation, and youth culture. The characters in this play are standing trial for the Sleepy Lagoon Murder case and are members of the 38th Street Gang. A man bursts onto stage, entering through a newspaper and “assumes a *pachuco* stance” to state,

“Ladies and gentlemen,
 the play you are about to see
 is a construct of fact and fantasy.
 The Pachuco Style was an act in Life
 and his language a new creation.
 his will to be was an awesome force,
 eluding all documentation...
 A mythical, quizzical, frightening being,
 precursor of revolution
 Or piteous, hideous heroic joke,
 deserving of absolution?
 The Pachuco was existential,
 for he was an Actor in the streets,
 both profane and reverential.
 It was the secret fantasy of every bato,
 in or out of the Chicanada,
 to put on a zoot suit and play the Myth.
 Más chucote que la chingada.
 ¡Pos órale!” (I, I, 9-28)



⁶³ Valdez, Luiz. *Zoot Suit*. 25 Mar. 1979, Winter Garden Theater, New York.
https://mseffie.com/assignments/zoot_suit/Zoot%20Suit%20Text.pdf

The last line directly translates to “More gangster than a motherfucker. Come on then!”⁶⁴ as Valdez draws us into a world of racial intolerance, manipulation by the media, and an unjust legal system. He explores the character that is the *pachuco* and which he calls an “actor” and a “myth”. Luiz Valdez tells an animated and hyper exaggerated version of the story in an attempt to show how the zoot suiter has simply become another character type in life. He brought the story of the zoot suit and the Sleepy Lagoon Murder trial to life in his work and restarted conversations surrounding racial tolerance in relation to legal battles. The characters in this story, both men and women, are styled in this very specific *pachuco* and *pachuca* style that flooded the media in the 1940’s.

Although women are not as prominent and visible in the zoot suit story, they are very much essential to the overall culture of Mexican-American youth and *pachuquismo*, as they “offered a mode of femininity that challenged notions of race, gender and sexuality” (Pappous, pg.1)⁶⁵. Young Mexican-American women often wore “a cardigan underneath a broad-shouldered jacket, a knee length skirt, and platform sandals or an actual zoot suit, with dark lipstick and her hair styled in a high bouffant” (pg.1). Similar to their male counterparts, these women’s styles consisted of oversized jackets and easily



⁶⁴ "Glossary." *Zoot Suit Dramaturgy*, Regents of the U. of California, <https://zootsuinturgy.sites.ucsc.edu/got/>. Accessed 30 Apr. 2023. Glossary of Spanish and Calo terms used in “Zoot Suit” by Luiz Alvarez, provided by UC Santa Cruz

⁶⁵ Pappous, Christina. "La Pachuca: Women in Zoot Suits." *States of Incarceration*, <https://statesofincarceration.org/story/la-pachuca-women-zoot-suits>. Accessed 30 Apr. 2023.

identifiable stylized hair. Not only were these women sporting a style that was associated with juvenile delinquency and crime, but they were also challenging gendered norms and expectations. “Cross-dressing” was still prohibited by law in the 1940’s but that did not stop them - even if it meant being arrested. The resilience of Mexican-American youth culture is apparent, and the fight for freedom and respect from the greater United States still continues today.

Conclusion

Over the course of this project, it has been shown how the zoot suit has been criticized, banned, and quite literally ripped to shreds off the backs of young Mexican-Americans. It has been demonstrated how the suit has been used against an entire population of citizens by both the media and the United States government in an attempt to control American youth culture in a time of crisis. The story of the zoot suit is one filled with pain, loss, and resilience from the Mexican-American population. Young men, their families, and their communities faced extreme racism and criticism under the guise of fixing the “youth problem”. The presence of WWII and fears of violence pushed the media to hyperinflate Mexican-American youth culture with delinquency and gangsterism. Due to the hysteria pushed by the media, violent acts like the murder at Sleepy Lagoon became a frenzy for racist and derogatory actions which were made hastily. Had the LAPD taken the time to conduct a proper investigation, rather than frantically arresting anyone who matched their preconceived notions of a criminal, the outcome would have been very different. Following the murder trial, the media was quick to share the Zoot Suit Riots with the world and dubbed them “The Zoot Suit War”. By not only calling it a war, but also naming it after the targeted group, the media was quick to confuse who the actual perpetrators of this violent week in Los Angeles were. Why was it not called “The Servicemen Riot” or what it really was - a manhunt against young adults of Mexican descent by members of



the U.S. military? The story of the zoot suit shows just how much power the media has in swaying views and confusing the reader's opinion. Although fact and personal beliefs can be differentiated in these articles now, imagine how hard it would have been in 1940 to sit down and read these articles everyday villainizing the Mexican-American population and not create a biased opinion. The media has the power to influence entire nations' views, which is why it should be their legal obligation to report fact over speculation. But that is not how the world works, and it certainly wasn't the way it functioned 80 years ago. This is why it is important to know our histories, know our biases, and understand racial intolerance so that we do not repeat our past mistakes and ostracize an entire population of people from the rest of society.

The story of the zoot suit is not the first time fashion has been politicized and it certainly won't be the last. As we look back into our history we can see how style and dress have been imposed as an identifier across the globe in religious spaces, academic institutions, and governmental systems. Nuns, school children, members of the military, and prisoners are all expected to put on the same attire with little to no variation as a form of control. In opposition, social justice movements, artists, and subcultures have politicized their dress either intentionally, or have had these politics imposed on them in cases such as the zoot suit.

In the 18th century the sans-culottes were the lower class population of France and were named after their economic status. *Sans-Culotte* quite literally translates to "without knee breeches" because only the upper class could afford a luxury such as funky little silk shorts and wanted to ostracize the lower class for their lack of wealth and style.

In the late 19th and early 20th century is when we start to see different groups of people embrace style and dress as a part of their activism. Since the late 19th century, the women's

rights movement and feminist movements have embraced fashion and garments in a plethora of ways. First wave feminists, who were composed of only white women, fashioned either black or white dresses with purple sashes, pins & buttons, and stylish hats to identify a group cause. Second Wave feminism brought us “bra-burning” as a form of resistance against the patriarchy. On January 21st, 2017 - at the inauguration of ex-president Donald Trump - the iconic pink Pussyhat graced the world as thousands of women took to the streets donning the garment. The hat was designed by Jayna Zweiman who encouraged thousands of people to knit her design as a way to show clear disdain for the new president. The Pussyhat is a direct response to the Access Hollywood recording in which Trump stated “to grab them by the pussy” which was published on October 7th, 2016. Instead of letting the sexist and misogynistic comments slide, this project was born as an estimated 4 billion protested on the day of his inauguration.

The emergence of the Ku Klux Klan in 1866, America’s own home based terrorist organization, saw men cowering behind white robes and triangular headdresses to commit racially charged hate crimes while attempting to remain anonymous. In visual opposition, the Black Panther Party - which was founded in Oakland, California in 1966 - utilized fashion and aesthetics as an identifier to their political beliefs and push for Black nationalism. To this day the militant look that was black leather, french inspired berets, and styled afros remind us of the party’s fight for civil rights - while they embraced their own natural beauty.

Protest fashion in the 21st century comes in many forms, but often utilizes graphic t-shirts with big printed letters to spread their respective messages. Over the past few years, garments reading “proud boys”, “MAGA”, “Black Lives Matter”, “Black Is Beautiful”, “Pride”

with a rainbow, “#MeToo”, and countless other messages have spread globally. Instead of a uniform style, protest fashion often comes in the form of a slogan.

The difference between the case studies of fashion and politics above and the zoot suit story is that the politicization of the choice in style was imposed by an outside force, rather than coming from within the group. Young Mexican-American men didn't have a political agenda or message they wanted to share with the world. Rather they found allyship in members of their community who shared the same struggles and created their own form of identity through the zoot suit. The zoot suit is remembered as a symbol of youth counter-culture and racial inequality in the United States throughout the 20th century.

Although the zoot suit is not widely fashioned today, there are still men in Los Angeles who hold onto their Mexican-American heritage through this style. My mother has eaten at Gardens of Taxco in LA since she was a little girl in the 70's. From when I was first adopted, some of my fondest memories with my family come from eating dinner together at this Mexican restaurant. Not only would I argue they have some of the best Mexican food in the city, but they also have the most stylish delivery drivers. I was around 14 years old when I saw two zoot suiters, and not knowing the history, I thought they were the best fashioned delivery drivers in the world. I was fully captivated by their clothing and their demeanor as they drifted effortlessly in and out of the restaurant. This was my first inspiration into the study of the zoot suit, and this project has taught me more than I ever could have imagined.

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