The Zoot Suit Riots:

Challenging the Mexican-American Identity

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I. Introduction

The Zoot Suit Riots defined the moments that stirred conflicts between zoot suiters and servicemen in Los Angeles, California. It is a rebellion in which Mexican-American youth fought against racialization and criminalization. These themes provide a first-hand interpretation of how deep-rooted hatred affected Mexican-American youth and their heritage during World War II. The label, Zoot Suit, embodies a subculture in which Mexican-Americans, African-Americans, and other minorities gained a notorious reputation for dressing flamboyantly during war shortages.[1] This attire was an action rebelling against the Anglo-American society's injustices. Anglo-Americans viewed these zoot-suiters as delinquents, portraying them as unpatriotic and menacing. In the 1940s, Mexican-American youth adopted this attire and created the Pachuco(a) subculture, emphasizing night life and preservation of their ethnicity.

Undoubtedly, newspapers effectively portrayed varying accounts of violence against zoot suiters. For instance, *Time Magazine* illustrated the soldiers and sailors as armed invaders, traveling through Mexican sections and searching for pachucos in movie theaters. This article mentioned how they had broken a 12-year old boy's jaw, mistaking him for a zoot-suiter. He told *Time Magazine* in the hospital, "So our guys wear tight bottoms on their pants and those bums wear wide bottoms. Who the hell they fighting, Japs or us?"[2] The boy's statement reflects racial and cultural differences among the attackers and Mexican-American youth. On July 8, 1943, the *Los Angeles Times* released an article depicting the violent aftermath of rioting: bruises, bloody

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[1] "WPB Lashes at Jitterbugs," *The San Francisco Examiner*, Sept. 4, 1942.

[2] "California: Zoot-Suit War," *Time Magazine*, Jun. 21, 1943.

noses, and black eyes. In addition, they featured a photo of two beaten zoot suiters hiding their faces from the cameras, knowingly aware their identities had been targeted earlier.[3]

UNCONDITIONAL SURRENDER—Two zoot suiters, beaten and stripped in front of a theater at 8th and Main Sts. in the war declared on them by servicemen. Times photo

Instead of victimizing the zoot suiters, the *Akron Beacon Journal* defended the servicemen's mob-like actions, suggesting that these patriotic men had been resented in the community. More importantly, these men had agency for acting as law enforcement and taking care of gangsters.[4]

Although the Zoot Suit Riots did not occur until 1943, there were certainly issues of heightened tensions experienced among the Mexican-American community. Once the Great Depression affected Southern California in 1929, Anglo-Americans blamed Mexicans for taking their jobs from "Americans."[5] In the 1930s, the Repatriation period involved the U.S.

[3] "Riot Alarm Sent Out in Zoot War," *The Los Angeles Times*, Jun. 8, 1943.

[4] Westbrook Pegler, "Zoot Suit Troubles," *The Akron Beach Journal*, Jun 12. 1943.

[5] Douglas Monroy. *Rebirth: Mexican Los Angeles from the Great Migration to the Great Depression.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999, 147.

government removing Mexican nationals and Mexican-Americans notably in the Southwest region. The Los Angeles community had the largest population of Mexicans outside of Mexico. After Repatriation, Anglo-Americans equated their Mexican counterparts with a labor force, industrious and yet, disposable. In Los Angeles, the second generation of Mexican Americans rose and took pride in their bicultural lifestyle.[6] The Zoot Suit undeniably played a role in the events leading up to the Riots, creating controversy and intrigue to anyone who laid eyes upon it. In 1942, the Sleepy Lagoon Case presented problems with the criminal justice system as it further racialized and criminalized Mexican American youth.

II. Argument

The historiography of the Zoot Suit Riots begins with ideas of victimization, racial discrimination, and agency. In 1984, Chicano history pioneer Mauricio Mazón introduced a psycho-historical approach in examining how the Riots symbolically annihilated the Mexican-American youth. He claims that the Sleepy Lagoon Case framed the zoot-suiters as "bizarre creatures" and "fashioned [them] in accordance with the imagery and symbolization of the American home front."[7] Chicano historian Eduardo Obregón Pagán also utilizes the Sleepy Lagoon Case as the background for his claim that Mexican-American zoot suiters found themselves battling anti-Mexican hysteria. In his social history, his argument depicts this generation of Mexican-Americans actively renegotiating their social position in ways of their design.[8] Chicano academic discourse often acknowledges Mazón and Pagán as the main

[6] David G. Gutiérrez. *Walls and Mirrors: Mexican Americans, Mexican Immigrants, and the Politics of Ethnicity.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995, 117.

[7] Mauricio Mazón. *The Zoot-suit Riots: The Psychology of Symbolic Annihilation*. Mexican American Monographs; No. 8. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1984, 42.

[8] Eduardo Obregón Pagán. *Murder at the Sleepy Lagoon: Zoot Suits, Race, and Riot in Wartime L.A.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003, 14.

historians of the Zoot Suit Riots, however, attorney and ethnic historian Mark A. Weitz describes the Sleepy Lagoon Case as a landmark criminal case, still gaining relevance in present matters and unique given its social and political context.[9] Weitz's argument is deconstructing the American legal system's power under stress and the media's portrayal of the criminalized youth in the case. All in all, these monographs regard the Sleepy Lagoon Case as a major cause, linking its significance to the bias of the criminal justice system.

Equally important, the historiography shifts towards discussing racial discrimination, zoot suit backlash, and gender politics. Twentieth-century historian Kevin Allen Leonard elaborated on racial discrimination leading up to the Zoot Suit Riots. Leonard delineates the Riots' ultimate consequence by how they transformed the debate about race in Los Angeles.[10] Luis Alvarez, whose research interests are ethnicity and pop culture, focuses on the zoot suit itself and explains its significance in acting as a 'dress rehearsal' for later social movements in the Chicano community. On the other hand, he slightly disagrees with Mazón on why the zoot suiters sometimes initiated conflict, implying that intensified race and gender relations victimized them even further.[11] In her chapter, "The Pachuca Panic," gender historian Elizabeth R. Escobedo argues how the Pachuca persona challenged social and familial norms while fashioning a vision of racialized womanhood. She amplifies the sense of agency in this gender history and alludes to

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[9] Mark A. Weitz. *The Sleepy Lagoon Murder Case: Race Discrimination and Mexican American Rights.* Landmark Law Cases & American Society. Lawrence, Kan.: University Press of Kansas, 2010.

[10] Kevin Allen Leonard. *The Battle for Los Angeles: Racial Ideology and World War II.* Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2006, 299.

[11] Luis Alvarez. *The Power of the Zoot: Youth Culture and Resistance during World War II.* American Crossroads; 24. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008, 163.

their pre-Zoot Suit Riot media-based perception as wartime female delinquents.[12] These final contributors support the role of wartime Mexican-American youth and their deteriorating relations with Anglo-American society.

Historians have prominently articulated that Mexican-American youth held agency. For this reason, it is significant to examine the underlying tensions that led to the Zoot Suit Riots. These adolescents were neither Mexican nor American because they experienced a bicultural identity. Even more, the Zoot Suit subculture personified self-direction and pride in one's appearance. However, this attire presented a series of problems for these youth. The Zoot-Suit Riots of 1943 remains one of the most violent clashes between civilians and servicemen in American history. Significantly, there were underlying causes leading up to the Riots that reveal a prejudiced society in Los Angeles. From the Repatriation period to the early 1940s, increasing racial discrimination excluded Mexican nationals and Mexican-Americans from Anglo-American society. During a time of war shortages, the Zoot Suit received negative reactions and challenged the Mexican-American identity. Lastly, the Sleepy Lagoon Case illustrated the biases of the criminal justice system and the unfair treatment of the accused Mexican American youth.

III. Increase in racial discrimination

In the early 1930s, the Great Depression affected Mexican nationals and Mexican-Americans economically and socially. This period of financial strife in the United States left many to question how much longer they would stay. On the topic of deportation policy, Abraham Hoffman, an American historian who specializes in minorities in the West, writes that President Herbert Hoover clearly stated that foreigners were taking jobs rightfully for native-born Anglo-

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[12] Elizabeth R. Escobedo. "The Pachuca Panic" in *From Coveralls to Zoot Suits: The Lives of Mexican American Women on the World War II Home Front*, 17-44. University of North Carolina Press, 2013. Accessed February 20, 2020, 24.

Americans and implemented an effort to solve the nation-wide unemployment problem.[13] Furthermore, the federal government, with the assistance of city and state sanctions, began the Repatriation movement and prominently focused on Los Angeles County. Chicano historians Francisco Balderrama and Raymond Rodriguez add how recruited employees needed to have Spanish fluency, mature judgment, and an understanding of labor and economic situations in California and Mexico.[14] These qualifications characterize the drive to interact with the Mexican-American community on the account of sending them back to the fatherland.

The popular Spanish newspaper, *La Opinión,* published an article of an unexpected immigration raid in La Placita Olvera. On February 27, 1931, federal immigration policemen, dressed up as civilians, assisted the Los Angeles Police Department in questioning several people's immigration status.[15] Many were beaten and they detained eleven Mexicans, quickly causing the newspaper's readers to fear the threat of deportation. *La Opinión* would feature numerous deportation raids in their headlines, informing the frightened Mexican-American community of these scare tactics.[16] Despite the effectiveness, this example of racial discrimination inspired those to protest this anti-immigrant pressure. The following image

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[13] Abraham Hoffman. *Unwanted Mexican Americans in the Great Depression: Repatriation Pressures, 1929-1939.* Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1974. University of Arizona Press, 1974, 39.

[14] Francisco E. Balderrama, and Raymond Rodriguez. *Decade of Betrayal: Mexican Repatriation in the 1930s*. Rev. ed. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2006, 129.

[15] "11 Mexicanos Presos en un Aparatoso Raid a la Placita," *La Opinión,* Feb. 27, 1931.

[16] "Aquí Estamos y No Nos Vamos: Fighting Mexican Removal Since the 1930s." Boyle Heights Museum. https://www.boyleheightsmuseum.org/one

displays a young woman walking with a sign, participating in the resistance against nativist ideology.[17]

Her action alone implies the raids are unjust, creating a massive problem that surpasses the Great Depression's impact on Mexican-Americans. Overall, deportation raids perceived "Mexicans" as a threat to American society and its economy. This treatment did not solely exaggerate racial discrimination as an unpleasant campaign impacted the Mexican-American community.

The Repatriation movement was an action that carried out a specific purpose, pushing out a people during an economic collapse. Douglas Monroy, department chair at Colorado College, emphasizes that although there was voluntary repatriation, other forms included compulsory deportations and arrests.[18] Voluntary repatriation is one's departure to Mexico because they have either land back home, family to see once again, or cannot withstand the Great Depression.

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[17] "Stop Illegal Raids by Immigration Dept.," Photograph. Los Angeles, CA. From "Aquí Estamos y No Nos Vamos: Fighting Mexican Removal Since the 1930s." Boyle Heights Museum https://www.boyleheightsmuseum.org/three

[18] Douglas Monroy. *Rebirth: Mexican Los Angeles from the Great Migration to the Great Depression.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999, 149.

conditions. Yet, compulsory deportations and arrests manifest heightened racial discrimination in places such as Los Angeles. These events are critical in understanding the worsening relationship between primarily Anglo Californians and their Mexican counterparts. In 1933, Carey McWilliams, an American journalist who advocated for minorities, sarcastically writes that white Californians are justified in their efforts to repatriate Mexicans and how these ex-Americans are indifferent to being pushed back and forth across the border.[19] His satirical literature emphasizes the human error that has systematically labeled Mexicans and Mexican Americans as a social burden.

The idea of questioning their citizenship and value to the American economy was sufficient to reprimand the Mexican nationals for wanting a better life for their children. Neil Foley, an American Southwest historian, claims that in the beginning, Mexican nationals came to the United States for labor, having the notion to eventually return to the homeland one day, however, many settled for their children to attain prospective educational and work opportunities.[20] This sentiment echoes Mexican cultural values and validates their ambition. If the United States Federal Government wanted to take advantage of their labor force for future purposes, they dismissed American-born children. Hoffman suggests that at the time, the Los Angeles Bureau of County Welfare, in support of Repatriation, did not consider that Mexican-American children could potentially become industrious American citizens once they reached

[19] Carey McWilliams. "Depression-Era Los Angeles Targets Mexicans for Repatriation," March 1933. From *Zoot Suit Riots. Defining Moments*. 2012, 161-163.

[20] Neil Foley. *Mexicans in the Making of America.* Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014, 52.

adulthood.[21] It is important to acknowledge these children as American-born, yet also culturally Mexican. They adopted a bicultural identity which displayed their allegiance to the United States, an institution that seeks to exclude them.

Emotionally and psychologically, the Mexican-American community struggled with involuntary Repatriation. George J. Sánchez, a twentieth-century ethnic historian, argues that historians have not meticulously looked at Repatriation's impact on shifting Mexican-American communities and their social identity.[22] As a whole, the Mexican family unit experiences the social impact when they find themselves in a new location. For example, the case of Pablo Guerrero demonstrates the desire to return to the land of his children's birth (the United States). In December of 1932, Guerrero and his family had been involuntary repatriated to Mexicali, Baja California where they experienced a change in education and most importantly, lack of assistance from the Mexican government. He wrote a letter, explaining he had worked in the United States since he was nineteen and wanted to return with his family legally.[23] Through analysis, Guerrero shows that in his lifetime, he has contributed to America's economy and his children embraced the culture they grew up with. This tragic story is just one of countless experiences about separation and struggling with one's identity.

Although there was a substantial Mexican immigrant community, it demographically shifted towards a second-generation dominated capacity. Sánchez defines Repatriation's

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[21] Abraham Hoffman. *Unwanted Mexican Americans in the Great Depression: Repatriation Pressures, 1929-1939.* Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1974. University of Arizona Press, 1974, 95.

[22] George J. Sanchez. Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture, and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900-1945. Oxford: Oxford University Press, USA, 1993, 214.

[23] Los Angeles County Decimal File. *Trying to Return*, by Pablo Guerrero. 40.31:340.39. Los Angeles, CA: May 28, 1934. From *Decade of Betrayal: Mexican Repatriation in the 1930s*. Rev. ed. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2006, 262-263.

aftermath as intentionally silencing the Los Angeles based Mexican immigrant generation.[24] Their voices did not matter to officials, however, the second generation felt empowered to reclaim their stolen identity. In the late 1930s, American-born repatriated children yearned to return home. They felt they belonged in the United States, a site of their old memories associated with Anglo-American culture and respective barrios. Balderrama and Rodriguez underscore that once labor demand during World War II called for Mexicans' return, it was the same situation that compelled previous generations to come to the United States.[25] Simply put, it was a great opportunity and many Mexican Americans wanted to restore their ties with the United States. Mexican Americans sought to contribute to the war effort while combating discrimination abroad and at home.

Anti-Mexican sentiment was present in the educational setting, most certainly in elementary schools. Monroy underlines the importance of segregated Mexican schools and how they infuriated Mexican parents. In 1930, in Oxnard, California, Mexican-born children were sent to a special Mexican school, with emphasis on the Spanish language, heroic stories, Mexican music, and national history.[26] According to angry Mexican parents, this schooling branded their children as Indians, unfit to attend a regular American school. Although the Mexican schools meant to preserve the Mexican culture, its segregated nature reminded the Mexican community that they could not handle an American-based education to succeed in the United States. In 1943, George I. Sanchez, a Latin American educator at the University of

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[24] George J. Sanchez. Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture, and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900-1945. Oxford: Oxford University Press, USA, 1993, 225.

[25] Francisco E. Balderrama, and Raymond Rodriguez. *Decade of Betrayal: Mexican Repatriation in the 1930s*. Rev. ed. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2006, 259.

[26] Douglas Monroy. *Rebirth: Mexican Los Angeles from the Great Migration to the Great Depression.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999, 202.

Texas, published an article reflecting on how Mexican Americans experienced racial discrimination in the 1930s. As Los Angeles society feared the criminalized pachuco, Sanchez recalls the moments that enabled pachucos to act out in society, alluding to a greater American problem that is racial discrimination.

He summarizes his observations in the following:

> In many places, these people are denied service in restaurants, barber shops, and stores. Public parks and swimming pools, some of which were built by federal funds, are often closed to them. Some churches, court houses, and public hospitals have been known to segregate them from "whites." Separate, and usually shockingly inferior, segregated "Mexican" schools have been set up for their children. Discriminatory employment practices and wage scales, even in war industries (the President's Executive Order 8802 and his Committee on Fair Employment Practice to the contrary notwithstanding), are still used to "keep the 'Mexican' in his place."[27]

Racial discrimination prevailed in wartime Southern California when Mexican families tried buying homes. In February 1942, Alex Bernal and his family were in the process of searching for a home in Fullerton, California. Three Anglo-American residents enforced a 1923 deed constraint, insisting they were not Caucasian; moreover, plaintiff witnesses declared that Mexicans were "dirty, noisy, and lawless" in a four-day trial.[28] This conflict demonstrated how a group of people upheld an anti-Mexican mentality to prevent ethnically integrated neighborhoods.

Lastly, Mexican American youth adjusted in a world of harassment and first-hand experience with inequality. In 1943, Mexican American teenager Alfred Barela and his friends had been accused of disturbing the peace in Venice, California. Although his case was dismissed

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[27] George. I. Sanchez. "Examples of Anti-Mexican Discrimination in 1930s America," 1943. From *Zoot Suit Riots. Defining Moments*. 2012, 157.

[28] Vargas Zaragosa. *Labor Rights Are Civil Rights: Mexican American Workers in Twentieth-century America.* Politics and Society in Twentieth-century America. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005, 227.

in court, he sent a letter to the Honorable Arthur S. Guerin for characterizing the boys as a "disgrace to the Mexican people."

His personal statement aims to address the problem concerning Mexican-Americans:

> Ever since I can remember I've been pushed around and called names because I'm a Mexican. I was born in this country. Like you said I have the same rights and privileges of other Americans…Pretty soon I guess I'll be in the army and I'll be glad to go. But I want to be treated like everybody else. We're tired of being pushed around…I don't want any more trouble and I don't want anyone saying my people are in disgrace.[29]

In summary, an increase in racial discrimination exposed deteriorating relations between Anglo-Californians and Mexican Americans. There is a sense of nativist ideology behind the Repatriation movement as it sought to preserve jobs for native-born Anglo-Americans during an economic recession. Until the onset of the Bracero Program and World War II, Mexicans and Mexican Americans were no longer needed as laborers. The Repatriation movement invoked feelings of loss, fear, and severed ties with American culture. It is a difficult subject to unwind, nevertheless, it is clear that the results had a profound impact on the Mexican-American community. Significantly, the second generation would confront escalating discriminatory practices, challenging their traumatized identity even more.

IV. Zoot Suit backlash

The Zoot Suit is a cultural symbol of sorts, it is an icon that intrigues the people of today to question its origins. While there is no absolute beginning, there have been speculations associating the Zoot Suit with American popular culture. Ethnic historian Luis Alvarez breaks down the origins into three fascinating theories: Clark Gable's rendition of Rhett Buttler wearing coattails in *Gone with the Wind*, black jazz artists such as Cab Calloway donning the outfit in the

[29] Alfred Barela, "Letter to the Honorable Arthur S. Guerin," 21 May 1943. From *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture, and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900-1945*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, USA, 1993, 253.

1930s and early 1940s, and migrants bringing in elements of pachuco culture from El Paso, Texas.[30] The Zoot Suit was stylish for minorities in the West and East Coasts, however, there were wartime restrictions on clothing that marked it as an extravagant item. Social historian Stuart Cosgrove explains the wartime rationale in underlining the War Production Board's prohibition on suit manufacturing and most tailoring companies abiding this regulation.[31] This outlandish style did not prevent Mexican-American youth from expressing themselves.

Next, the Zoot Suit culture was created for those that did not have the dominant say in society. Borrowed from elements of African-American culture, it appealed to other minorities and especially, lower-class adolescents. Chicano historian Mauricio Mazón writes that the Zoot Suit was provocative and politically influential, while in 1943, child psychologist Fritz Redl argued that zoot suiters anticipated adulthood through pleasure, rejecting adult values, and wandering from adult supervision.[32] This examination of the Zoot Suit culture's purpose allows the youth to have agency. Kathy Peiss, a gender historian, perceives Zoot Suit culture's impact on the Mexican-American youth as they adopted some of its stylistic aspects and retained some of their ethnic practices.[33] The Zoot Suit culture received misconceptions about its intentions concerning adolescents in its prime. When the Zoot Suit Riots occurred, people began to question the Zoot Suit's origin. The *New York Times* traced the Zoot Suit's debut in 1940 to a

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[30] Luis Alvarez. *The Power of the Zoot: Youth Culture and Resistance during World War II.* American Crossroads; 24. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008, 83.

[31] Stuart Cosgrove. "The Zoot-Suit and Style Warfare." *History Workshop*, no. 18 (1984): 80. Accessed February 19, 2020. www.jstor.org/stable/4288588.

[32]Mauricio Mazón. *The Zoot-suit Riots: The Psychology of Symbolic Annihilation*. Mexican American Monographs; No. 8. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1984, 8.

[33] Kathy Peiss. *Zoot Suit: The Enigmatic Career of an Extreme Style.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011. Accessed February 19, 2020. ProQuest Ebook Central, 108.

busboy's first purchase in Gainesville, Georgia.[34] More importantly, his purchase was something out of the ordinary for a man at the time.

The outfit's social meaning attests to the differing attitudes in Los Angeles society. Chicano historian Edward J. Escobar stresses the relations between Mexican-American youth and white Angelinos: the Zoot Suit represented a rebellion against racial discrimination, Mexicans were not supposed to have the same rights as whites, and the police's role was to subordinate them into invisible, timid figures.[35] His argument highlights the Mexican youth's decision to combat social norms through a symbolic performance, wearing the Zoot Suit in the public setting. The *Los Angeles Times* reported delinquency prevention officer Heman G. Stark's view towards the "zoot suits" as gangs popularizing the outfit, but the youth primarily recognizing it for being "different."[36] The American problem once again presents the distorted view of a functioning American society. It is not perfect and rather imposes restrictions on the second generation of Mexican-Americans, who some would serve in World War II and come back as revered patriotic figures.

In contrary to American social expectations, both Mexican-American males and females (pachucos and pachucas) wore the Zoot Suit distinctively. Alvarez addresses that in the West Coast, the pachuco was detail-oriented in making sure his outfit, usually white/dark brown/black materials and double/triple soled Stacy Adams shoes, depicted careful planning and thoughtful

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[34] Berger Meyer, "Zoot Suit Originated in Georgia; Busboy Ordered First One in 1940," *New York Times,* Jun. 11, 1943.

[35] Edward J. Escobar, "Wartime Conflicts Between Sailors, Chicano Youths, and the Police in Los Angeles," *Major Problems in the History of World War II: Documents and Essays*. Major Problems in American History Series. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2003, 242.

[36] Gene Sherman, "Youth Gangs Leading Cause of Delinquencies," *Los Angeles Times,* Jun. 2, 1943.

consideration.[37] Legal attorney and ethnic historian Mark A. Weitz defines the pachuca's style as wearing black clothing, having a high coif, and putting on heavy makeup. [38] These elements often provoked negative connotations, such as pachucas possessing an unpatriotic attitude and sexually promiscuous behavior. On the other hand, Mexican American youth such as the individuals in the following images appreciated zoot suit subculture.[39] Their intended audience included supporters of this fashion who sought to defy traditional roles set within the Mexican American culture. These styles demonstrate a group's effort to voice their opinionated minds and unique cultural attributes amidst the chaotic, wartime background of Los Angeles.

[37]Luis Alvarez. *The Power of the Zoot: Youth Culture and Resistance during World War II.* American Crossroads; 24. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008, 86.

[38] Mark A. Weitz. The Sleepy Lagoon Murder Case: Race Discrimination and Mexican-American Rights. 2010, 17.

[39] "Zoot suit and Pachuca fashions in L.A. in the 1940s," Photograph. Los Angeles Public Library. https://timeline.com/zoot-suit-riots-of-1943-were-a-targeted-attack-on-mexican-youths-8e5b34775cff

The pachuco is a masculine figure of Zoot Suit culture, symbolizing adolescence and defying conformity to traditional styles of male clothing. Mazón compared the pachuco's identity to a servicemen's, analyzing their membership in elite groups that featured distinct lifestyles from the average civilian.[40] Serving in the U.S. military during wartime was a rite of passage, similar to a pachuco gaining awareness of the intense racial discrimination that undermined his worth. Alvarez attributes these identities to expressing masculinity and distinguishes the white serviceman's attire as displaying patriotic ideals, nationalism, and not offending the war production.[41] During the Riots, the *Los Angeles Times* focused how in many cases, an estimated fifty zoot-suit wearing youth had been beaten and stripped of their clothing. Although it does not specify the primary gender, this article insinuates that Mexican-American males had an altercation with white servicemen for various reasons (i.e, talking to pachucas in the streets or insults exchanged).[42] In essence, the pachuco and is a character that sought to take action against his serviceman, who provoked a strong reaction out of him in the events leading up to the Riots.

As Mexican-American women entered the workforce during World War II, they sought to expand their social rules and some even purchased popular items not limited to the Zoot Suit fad. Gender historian Elizabeth R. Escobedo interviewed her relative, Ida Escobedo, discovering that Ida's job, working at a defense factory making incendiary bombs, enabled her to purchase a tailor-made fingertip coat and matching skirt contrary to her mother's expectation of wearing a

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[40]Mauricio Mazón. *The Zoot-suit Riots: The Psychology of Symbolic Annihilation*. Mexican American Monographs; No. 8. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1984, 64.

[41] Luis Alvarez. *The Power of the Zoot: Youth Culture and Resistance during World War II.* American Crossroads; 24. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008, 104.

[42] "City, Navy Clamp Lid on Zoot-Suit Warfare," *Los Angeles Times*, Jun. 9, 1943.

dress at her high school graduation ceremony. In 1942, Ida proudly wore the attire at her ceremony, testing social values at a public event, and recalled her mother's reaction, "my mother just about died…she was ashamed of me."[43] In the same year, Spanish language newspaper *La Opinion* compared the pachucas to "las malinches" for betraying and shaming their people, disregarding the proper behavior deemed fit for a lady.[44] The previous generation saw the Zoot Suit culture as a danger to the traditional Mexican American community. Chicano historian Eduardo Obregón Pagán elaborates on the controversial fashion, referring to how the pompadour was seen as exaggerated and unlike the previous generation's preference for buns in the workforce or modest braids.[45] Evidently, some Mexican American women admired the Zoot Suit style for allowing them to explore themselves in changing wartime society.

Politically, the Zoot Suit represented an attempt to challenge imposed expectations for how Mexican-Americans were expected to act and portray themselves. In April 1942, American journalist Lee Shippey of the *Los Angeles Times* investigated the circumstances surrounding servicemen and zoot suiters. He wrote a column about their relations, highlighting servicemen's feminized comment toward their counterparts, "May I have this dance, Miss?"[46] In their opinion, these servicemen ridiculed a group and targeted their masculinity, undermining their subculture and identity. The *Los Angeles Examiner* featured an ex-zoot suiter, then twenty-seven-year-old

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[43] Escobedo Atterbury, interview, 6 January 1998; Escobedo Atterbury, interview, 30 November 2010, in *From Coveralls to Zoot Suits: The Lives of Mexican American Women on the World War II Home Front*, University of North Carolina Press, 2013, 27.

[44] "Origines de 'Pachucos' y 'Malinches'," *La Opinión,* 26 August 1942, 2.

[45] Eduardo Obregón Pagán. *Murder at the Sleepy Lagoon: Zoot Suits, Race, and Riot in Wartime L.A.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003, 104.

[46] Lee Shippey. "Lee Side O' L.A." *Los Angeles Times (1923-1995),* Apr 02, 1942. http://csulb.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/165337942?accountid=10351.

army paratrooper named Ignazio Martinez. He remembered his old identity as a zoot suiter before he joined the army and claimed that East Side boys were inherently patriotic, but they had suffered enough leading up to the Riots.[47] Martinez, a patriot seen in the eyes of Americans in the home front, articulates that his people deserve respect as they may follow his path or merely contribute to the war effort in the workforce. Twentieth-century historian Kevin Allen Leonard asserts that young zoot suiters faced racial discrimination but did not utilize the Zoot Suit to attack intolerant people.[48] For the youth, the Zoot Suit allowed them to appreciate creative fashion and construct personal connections to a subculture.

All things considered, the Zoot Suit subculture received both positive and negative reinforcement in wartime society. Pachucos and pachucas brought this style into existence, alarming critics and older Mexican Americans. Likewise, these figures demonstrated how an outfit empowered them into embracing consumer culture. Controversially, the Zoot Suit raised questions of true American identity and loyalty to one's country during a period of rationing. The sociopolitical factors dictated whether the Zoot Suit's presence would be welcomed or opposed. To the Mexican American youth, this style presented a social statement and deliberately represented individualism. The previous generation believed that this style worsened perceptions of the Mexican American community altogether.

V. Bias of criminal justice system

A nightmare soon scarred the Mexican-American community of Los Angeles, additional criminalization and racialization of the second generation. In August 1942, twenty-two-year-old

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[47] "Ex-Zoot Suiter Urges Place for East Side Youths to Play," *Los Angeles Examiner,* June 30, 1943, pg. 15.

[48] Kevin Allen Leonard. *The Battle for Los Angeles: Racial Ideology and World War II.* Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2006, 174.

José Diaz spent his final weekend, before inducting into the military, with his family and celebrated Eleanor Delgadillo's birthday party on a Saturday night. Later that night, a group of boys from the town of Downey came over as uninvited guests to the party, asked if the Delgadillos had beer, but they were kicked out.[49] Henry "Hank" Levyas and his girlfriend Dora Baca had been attacked, prompting kids from the Thirty-eighth Street neighborhood to search for the assailants. When Henry arrived at the Delgadillo party, the Thirty-eighth kids engaged in an intense fight. The fight's aftermath included the discovery of José Diaz's beaten and stabbed body, following his death due to a cerebral concussion and most likely his wounds.[50] This horrifying incident would present how one case vilified Mexican-American youth and denied them respect in a court setting backed by racialized views.

Before the Sleepy Lagoon Trial, the Mexican American community was alarmed over the increasing racialization of their youth's involvement in juvenile delinquency. The Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) investigated this case, gathering an estimated amount of six hundred Mexican American adolescents. As a result, the LAPD tried twenty-two adolescents, between the ages of seventeen and twenty-four, of the Thirty-eighth Street group for the murder of José Diaz.[51] In this climate of fear, the defendants looked up to a progressive figure of his time, their defense attorney George Shibley. Although he was not fluent in Spanish, he communicated with the defendants' families and maintained a brazen attitude against the presiding Judge Charles

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[49] Eduardo Obregón Pagán. *Murder at the Sleepy Lagoon: Zoot Suits, Race, and Riot in Wartime L.A.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003, 59-61.

[50] Mark A. Weitz. *The Sleepy Lagoon Murder Case: Race Discrimination and Mexican-American Rights.* 2010, 29.

[51] Luis Alvarez. *The Power of the Zoot: Youth Culture and Resistance during World War II.* American Crossroads; 24. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008, 45.

Ficke in the courtroom.[52] On November 12, 1943, Shibley quarreled with Fricke, condemning him for neglecting the Sleepy Lagoon defendants' civil rights. In this court transcript, Shibley accused Judge Fricke of purposely setting up the jury to view the defendants with prejudice and also refusing the accused to seek counsel during the trial proceedings.[53] More importantly, discrimination would prevail in this trial, fixating on the criminalized defendants.

Racist practices alienated and publicly humiliated the defendants, reminding them they held an inferior position in the criminal justice system. Mazón describes how the prosecution benefited when they insisted that the defendants should accentuate their foreignness in court. He explains that they were not allowed to change their clothing or fix their unkempt appearance for days, underscoring the tactic to equate them with carnival freak show exhibitions.[54] The defense counsel disapproved of the prosecution's suggestion, expressing they wanted to exploit these adolescents and that Judge Fricke sided with them on the grounds of retaining their gang-like characteristics.[55] The hostility towards the defendants included LAPD officers, particularly Lieutenant Edward Duran Ayres. He stated in a formal report that due to a biological tendency, Mexican-American adolescents were more likely to commit crimes than their white counterparts.

Ayres refers to them as a mostly Indian element:

> Whenever this element is shown leniency in our courts, or by our probation officers and other authorities…he becomes a hero among his own gang members and boasts that the law was afraid to do anything to him or else that the authorities were dumb and that he put

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[52] Eduardo Obregón Pagán. *Murder at the Sleepy Lagoon: Zoot Suits, Race, and Riot in Wartime L.A.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003, 86.

[53] "Courtroom Clashes between Fricke and Shibley," 1942. *Zoot Suit Riots: Defining Moments.* 2012, 169.

[54] Mauricio Mazón. *The Zoot-suit Riots: The Psychology of Symbolic Annihilation*. Mexican American Monographs; No. 8. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1984, 28.

[55] "Suspects Must Not Change Haircut, Judge Rules," *The Los Angeles Examiner*, Oct. 27, 1942.

> it over on them. However, whenever this Mexican element receives swift and sure punishment such as proper incarceration, he then, and the only, respects authorities.[56]

Law enforcement officials also interrogated Mexican-American women, indicating they were agents of juvenile delinquency. On August 5, 1942, a few days after the Sleepy Lagoon murder, Dora Barrios, Frances Silva, and Lorena Encinas reported to the *Los Angeles Times* that they did not belong with the Thirty-Eight kids and had no idea how they happened to be in the area.[57] In an attempt to portray menaces, the *Los Angeles Daily News* released a photograph of the women with others. This photograph suggests they are part of a female gang because they have similar physical attitudes and appearances.[58] Therefore, this was a propaganda tactic to highlight female resistance to Anglo-American authority.

[56] Edward Duran Ayeres. "A Los Angeles Police Officer Issues a Racist Report on the Mexican 'Element'," 1942. From *Zoot Suit Riots: Defining Moments.* 2012, 165-166.

[57] "Three Teen-Age Girls Held in Boy-Gang Slaying Inquiry: All Insist they did Not Belong to Group Involved, in Investigation Undertaken by County Grand Jury." *Los Angeles Times (1923-1995),* Aug 05, 1942. http://csulb.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.csulb.idm.oclc.org/docview/165351618?accountid=10351.

[58] "Mexican American Female Gang," Photograph. Los Angeles, 1942. *Los Angeles Daily News* Negatives Collectiion, Department of Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, UCLA.

In connection to the case, the prosecution called upon these women along with others to testify against the defendants. Fighting the prosecution, they all demonstrated resistance but in the eyes of the jury, these women wanted to prove silent loyalty to their gangs.[59] The women found involved in this case were sent to the Ventura School for Girls, a correctional facility designed to house delinquent and sexually promiscuous women for sixteen months.[60] To an extent, the trial revealed law enforcement's perceived notions of supposed female delinquency and drastically changed the image of wartime Mexican American women.

Systematically, the problematic criminal justice system jeopardized the lives of the accused and unanimously altered the public's perception of viewing them as respectable citizens. Mazón distinguishes the Sleepy Lagoon Trial as a civilian hate object in which those on the homefront, occupied with thoughts of Nazi or Japanese invasion, generated public paranoia.[61] In January 1943, it seemed that the grand jury had kept these notions, influencing the final verdict, and resulted in the indictment of seventeen defendants. Pagán adds that merely a few months before the trial, Angelenos commonly supported the internment of Japanese Americans due to concerns of suspected disloyalty.[62] After the verdict, the Citizens' Committee for the Defense of Mexican-American Youth (or the Sleepy Lagoon Defense Committee) sought to challenge the prosecution in their report, *The Sleepy Lagoon Case.* These members included Mexican workers,

[59] Mark A. Weitz. The Sleepy Lagoon Murder Case: Race Discrimination and Mexican-American Rights. 2010, 77.

[60] Elizabeth R. Escobedo. "The Pachuca Panic." In *From Coveralls to Zoot Suits: The Lives of Mexican American Women on the World War II Home Front*, 17-44. University of North Carolina Press, 2013. Accessed February 20, 2020, 23.

[61] Mauricio Mazón. *The Zoot-suit Riots: The Psychology of Symbolic Annihilation*. Mexican American Monographs; No. 8. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1984, 26,

[62] Eduardo Obregón Pagán. *Murder at the Sleepy Lagoon: Zoot Suits, Race, and Riot in Wartime L.A.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003, 97.

community leaders, and Communist party leaders openly speaking about racial and juvenile delinquent issues, contrasting the LAPD officers' statements during the trial.[63] The following passage invokes a powerful message against injustice and supremacy in the Los Angeles criminal justice system.

> We are at war. We are at war not only with the armies of the Axis powers, but with…Hitler and with his theories of race supremacy…
> We are at war with the premise of which seventeen boys were tried and convicted in Los Angeles, sentenced to…prison terms on January 13th…We are at war with Nazi logic…set forth by Mr. Ed Duran Ayres, the logic which guided the judge and jury and dictated the verdict and the sentence.[64]

In continuation, examining the unfair criminal justice system's role in this trial did not suddenly cease. Alice McGrath (also known as Alice Greenfield) worked for the Sleepy Lagoon Defense Committee, felt committed to represent an important issue, and was determined to form friendships with the boys in prison.[65] Before the Zoot Suit Riots erupted, she received letters from Henry Levyas and Manuel Reyes. Through written correspondence, Alice hoped to sustain their morale and understand their complexities.

In Henry's letter, he wrote about his conflicts with the trial's outcome:

> As you know the outcome of my trial, I will not go into the details. I am sorry that things turn out the way they did as I had very rosy expectations for the future. Did you ever make a castle out of sand or mud when you was a very small girl in pigtails and took much pains and trouble to erect it and all of a sudden a bigger kid came over and

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[63] Kevin Allen Leonard. *The Battle for Los Angeles: Racial Ideology and World War II.* Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2006, 102.

[64] "Citizens' Committee for the Defense of Mexican-American Youth, The Sleepy Lagoon Case, 1942," in *Mexican American Voices: A Documentary Reader.* Second ed. Uncovering the past (Malden, Mass.) Chicester, West Sussex; Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009.

[65] Mark A. Weitz. *The Sleepy Lagoon Murder Case: Race Discrimination and Mexican-American Rights.* 2010, 127.

> destroyed it for you? Well my feelings are somewhat similar? It seems like the world just folded up on me, and there is nothing I can do about it.[66]

Manuel's letter signified treatment that impaired his American identity:

> I joining the Navy, in July of last year, they didn't turn me down because I was a Mexican, because we are needed to fight this war. I was told to return back to the Navy Station, to take my pledge, but unfairly I was arrested for this crime, with I didn't have to do anything to do with or know of. When we were arrested we were treated like if we were German spies, of Japs, they didn't figure we are American, just like everybody else that is born in this country. Well anyway, if I didn't get to joining the Navy to do my part in this war, I am still doing my part for my country, behind these walls.[67]

Conclusion

In the early summer of 1943, white servicemen entered the social spaces that encompassed neighborhoods of Mexican-American influence. Away from Mexican residential communities in the Chavez Ravine, the Naval Reserve Armory held stationed Navy servicemen whose intrusive presence bewildered nearby residents.[68] These men had traveled to an ethnic environment, noticing cultural differences that would prolong their fascination with the highly unusual. On the verge of the Riots' outbreak, Arthur Arenas recalled his horrific experience in a movie theater in downtown Los Angeles. The lights turned on in the theater when sailors barged in and started "beatin the heck out of Mexicans" for wearing peculiar clothing.[69] In a state of commotion, the sailors perpetuated the social tension and worsened the cases of violence within the next couple of days.

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[66] Henry Levyas to Alice McGrath. Jan 13, 1943 in *Zoot Suit Discovery Guide,* https://research.pomona.edu/zootsuit/en/resources/letters/letter-from-henry-leyvas-to-alice-mcgrath/

[67] Manuel Reyes to Alice McGrath. April 28, 1943 in *Zoot Suit Discovery Guide,* https://research.pomona.edu/zootsuit/en/resources/letters/manuel-reyes-to-alice-mcgrath-4-28-43/

[68] Eduardo Obregón Pagán. *Murder at the Sleepy Lagoon: Zoot Suits, Race, and Riot in Wartime L.A.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003, 153.

[69] Arthur Arenas, interview in *Zoot Suit Riots*, 2002.

On June 11, in Watts, California, several servicemen had armed themselves with clubs to search for zoot-suiters who had attacked their friends. The photograph’s background regards these individuals as participants in a Zoot Suit War. [70] Drawing upon the evidence, their demeanor is unsettling and ensues anxiety in many who wore distinctive zoot suits.

Above all, individual accounts helped shape the understanding of causes leading up to the Riots’ outbreak. The Sleepy Lagoon Case amplified concerns of racial tension and juvenile delinquency. The Zoot Suit itself presented an opportunity for those to express individuality but at the cost of their safety and social acceptance. Racial discrimination continued throughout Repatriation and into the early 1940s, labeling Mexican Americans as undesirables. These causes

[70] “Servicemen in Zoot Suit Riots,” Photograph. Jun 11. 1943, Watts, California. *Bettmann/Getty Images*. https://www.gettyimages.com/detail/news-photo/watts-california-armed-with-clubs-pipes-and-bottles-this-news-photo/515449432

exposed sociopolitical factors that dominated Los Angeles. The Zoot Suit Riots were violent, emotionally and physically, due to a series of major causes.

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