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Rebecca Grizzle

Western Oregon University, grizzle13@mail.wou.edu

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The Zoot Suit Riots and the Role of the Zoot Suit in Chicano Culture

By
Rebecca Grizzle

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Professor John L. Rector
Western Oregon University
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Readers
Professor John L. Rector
Professor Patricia Goldsworthy-Bishop

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The Zoot Suit Riots

Racial tensions in Los Angeles came to a head when a gang of sailors accosted a group of Mexican-Americans wearing “zoot suits” in June of 1943. This led to the arrest of people wearing the suits. This initial incident was followed by days of violence in which servicemen roamed the Los Angeles area and physically assaulted any Mexican Americans they found in zoot suit apparel. The next two nights the attacks on civilians were even worse and though a few sailors were arrested and the rest were warned not to attack civilians, word of the rioting spread and more military personnel from other areas of the city and as far away as San Diego joined in as well. These events were preceded by increased racial tension between Mexican-Americans and whites, or Anglos. Tensions had been heightened even more right before the riots by convictions against several zoot suiters in a murder case known as the Sleepy Lagoon Case. Continued clashes between Mexican-Americans and military personnel in Los Angeles in the days and weeks to come. The violence ended only after a curfew was placed on the military personnel in Los Angeles. The suits supposedly defied the law. This suit represented more than a mere fashion statement and was a powerful cultural identifier for many Chicanos. The suit was a way for young people to define themselves in an age where they were given little social or political voice. It became an image of power for them as well as a way to express that they were important, despite the dominant society telling them otherwise. Though it was originally more closely identified with jazz and swing culture, as the fashion became more widespread, it also became associated with delinquents and gangsters.

The complicated meaning behind the suits, highlighted by the government ban on excessive use of material in making civilian clothing during World War II and racial tensions in the Los Angeles area meant that these riots were a product of a multitude of forces. This paper

will explore the cultural significance of the zoot suit as well as different factors that contributed to the Zoot Suit Riots. The paper begins with a discussion of how other historians have interpreted the events, and then examines some of the same primary material that they used in their analysis. It continues with a discussion of the events that led up to the riots and influenced the attitudes of white Angelenos followed by a discussion about the importance of the zoot suit in Chicano/Latino culture. The paper then takes a close look at the riots and demonstrates that no one factor was responsible for the outbreak of violence, but that it was a combination of conditions which allowed the riots to break out.

In the aftermath of the riots, news writers focused mainly on how racial tension in Los Angeles had contributed to the riots. Even before the direct investigations into the riots had been completed, they were being written about by outside commentators. As more journalists began to address this subject, a frustrating problem emerged: almost every single story used the same small selection of articles, memoranda, and investigative reports to build their narrative of the events. As historians addressed this event in the 1970's, this trend continued. The thesis of Solomon J. Jones is an excellent example of this type of work. Jones's thesis, "The Government Riots of Los Angeles 1943", looks at the riots through the popular lens of the seventies: race. His work is well sourced and researched, and it utilizes many of the primary sources that were commonly cited in this era. "The Government Riots of Los Angeles 1943" concentrates on the ostracization felt by Mexican-American youths and concludes that this led to the adaptation of the zoot culture in order to create a sense of group feeling among the second generation Mexican-Americans. The reaction of the general public was then to lump all zoot suiters into the category of criminal delinquent, fueled by their media representation as such. Another author even went as far as mentioning that the First Lady, Eleanor Roosevelt, made comments

suggesting that the events of the riots “have roots in things which happened long before.”¹ Jones also, somewhat surprisingly, did not place the blame on the servicemen who were involved in the riots, instead focusing the blame on media, high ranking military personnel, city government, and police.² He believed that they reacted too quickly to blame the Mexican-American population without looking closely at surrounding circumstances and underlying racial tension.

The conclusions that Jones draws are sound, but his work tends to gloss over the Sleepy Lagoon murder and its connection to the riots. Considering that the murder trial took place only six months before the riots and was accompanied by large amounts of negative press about both zoot suiters and Mexican-Americans in general, it cannot be ignored as a contributing factor. He also downplays reports of acts of Mexican-Americans’ violence towards servicemen, largely over arguments regarding the affections of young women.³ Jones’s work has undercurrents of leftist thinking in placing the blame for the riots on racial divides, a type of class struggle. Although his research is a step in the right direction, it ignored some of the other factors at play in the lead-up to the riots.

Beyond the racial and classist divides that Jones used to define the riots, another historian chose to examine them from a different perspective. Mauricio Mazón’s 1984 book, *The Zoot-Suit Riots: The Psychology of Symbolic Annihilation*, is especially interesting because it lays out the different generalizations and reductive statements that past historians have made about the zoot suit riots as well as the author’s own refutation or elaboration of those views. Mazón’s main focus is the psychological motivation behind the riots, and he spends his introduction explaining how previous historians tended to reduce the spark of the riots to a simple racial disagreement

¹ Kevin Hillstrom, *The Zoot Suit Riots* (Detroit, MI: Omnigraphics, 2013) 177.

² Solomon J. Jones’s thesis *The Government Riots of Los Angeles, June 1943* (San Francisco: R and E Research Associates, 1973) 8.

³ Hillstrom, 85-6.

that gained momentum. While it is fairly accepted that the riots were in fact racially motivated and that hatred towards Mexican-Americans was the main catalyst, Mazón takes the argument deeper and examines the psychology behind that racism. He explores the different ways in which the Mexican-American population felt ostracized and uses the Sleepy Lagoon trials to highlight changing perceptions of zoot suited youths.⁴ Instead of issuing a blanket statement of “the riots were racist” and then going on to describe the events and the racial motivations of the riots, Mazón believes that to really understand this moment in history we must look back and see why this racism developed in the first place.

Mazón’s unique approach to this subject included another element that had been previously alluded to, but never really explored. He looked in to the psychology of servicemen and the transformations that take place as they make the transition from civilian world to the military. He assesses the need for young GIs to relax in their down time as well as to rebel against the strict rules of military life.⁵ This view is especially interesting in a contemporary sense because historians are just now beginning to explore in depth the psychological effects of military service. Mazón’s book examines the group mentality of servicemen and the indoctrination of brotherhood that imbues military service. He suggests that it offers an explanation of how and why so many service members could have gotten involved in the violence. Mazón’s inclusion of psychology was a new and innovative way of examining the riots.

The riots did not only interest scholars such as Jones and Mazón, they also caught the attention of artists. A popular song called “Zoot Suit Riot” by a swing band called the Cherry Poppin’ Daddies features lyrics such as “Who’s that whisperin’ in the trees/ it’s two sailors and

⁴ Mauricio Mazón, *The Zoot-Suit Riots: The Psychology of Symbolic Annihilation* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1984) 28.

⁵ *Ibid*, 57-8.

they're on leave/ pipes and chains and swingin' hands/ who's your daddy, yes I am.”⁶ The 1997 song clearly references the riots and goes on to suggest that “Now you sailors know/ where your women come for love.”⁷ While the song is undoubtedly catchy, it misrepresents the zoot suiters as happy to fight and handily overcoming the sailors, when in fact the opposite was true of the actual riots. This type of misrepresentation in pop culture can lead to a popular misunderstanding of the riots and their repercussions.

A far more accurate portrayal of the events is *Zoot Suit*, a 1992 play by Luis Valdez. The play concentrates on the Sleepy Lagoon case and the tensions in the community leading up to the riots. One of the most striking scenes involves the defense lawyer in the trials attempted to get permission for his clients to have a change of clothing and a haircut. The judge refuses based on the idea that the haircuts are necessary for identification purposes.⁸ The play brings to life the facts of the trial and also is able to point out the absurdity of the situation the in which the defendants found themselves. In the next breath, the character of the judge states that the jury can't identify the individual defendants because they all look so much alike.⁹ The idea that they had to keep their hair long, but that it just served to lump them all together into a group labeled “criminal,” is an indication that Valdez identified with his subject and sought to portray the Mexican-American youths in a way the elicits sympathy from his audience.

Not all of the more contemporary writings on the riots are completely sympathetic towards the zoot suiters. One author who does not gloss over the existence of violence against servicemen that may have been committed by Mexican-Americans, but includes them as an unknown in the narrative is contemporary historian Kevin Hillstrom. His 2013 book, *Defining*

⁶ Cherry Poppin' Daddies, “Zoot Suit Riot” song, *Zoot Suit Riot* album, 1997.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Luis Valdez, *Zoot Suit* (Houston: Arte Publico Press, 1992) 38.

⁹ Ibid.

Moments: The Zoot Suit Riots, doesn't go so far as to definitively state that either side caused the outbreak of violence. Rather, Hillstrom acknowledges that the initial incident is shrouded in mystery and that it is almost impossible to figure out who swung the first blow.¹⁰ This is a new feature in a much more recent history of the riots. In all of the information available to historians about the events leading to and surrounding the riots, there is not one single definitive piece of evidence that proves the violence was started by either the sailors or the Mexican-Americans. No photographs, sound recordings, or video exists of the incident where violence first erupted, and the conflicting stories told by both sides make it impossible to figure out who was telling the truth. By acknowledging this fact, while at the same time reinforcing previous thought that racial tensions were a major contributing factor in the amount of violence that ensued, Hillstrom makes a big leap forward in the way the riots are perceived.

In order to understand how historians shaped their narratives of the Zoot Suit Riots, it is necessary to explore the source material they had available to them, including newspaper articles, government reports and communications between top officials. The initial reactions of the press to the riots help to illustrate the racist attitudes that were pervasive in Los Angeles at the time. There are a number of reports and newspaper articles that were written during and immediately after the riots that tend to place the blame squarely on the shoulders of the Mexican-American youths who were arrested during the riots. An article by Gene Sherman that appeared in the *Los Angeles Times* on June 2, 1943 was entitled "Youth Gangs Leading Cause of Delinquencies," and stated that "Juvenile files repeatedly show that a language variance in the home - where the parents speak no English and cling to past culture - is a serious factor of

¹⁰ Hillstrom, 78.

delinquency. Parents in such a home lack control over their offspring.”¹¹ This type of rhetoric only served to reinforce ideas about the difference of Mexican-Americans and paint a picture of the entire population as delinquent. This type of media speculation would have influenced the opinions of Anglo readers and could have easily helped to turn popular opinion against Mexican-Americans. It would also make the behavior of the sailors and marines in the riots easier to condone. By portraying Mexican-American youths as criminals, people were more likely to believe that the sailor’s brutality was justified during the riots. By the time the riots broke out, much of the public had already condemned the zoot suiters and thought that the sailors were in the right.

As the initial violence of the riots died down, the city of Los Angeles worked to repair their image. In *The Zoot Suit Riots*, Hillstrom notes that “the press – and its supporters in the business community – belatedly sensed that the racial aspects of the rioting were damaging the city’s reputation. In an effort to repair the damage, several papers hastily printed editorials assuring the world that racial tensions in Los Angeles were exaggerated.”¹² Hillstrom’s statement is backed up by these editorials themselves. In the *Los Angeles Daily News* on June 11, 1943 an editorial claimed that “every true Californian has an affection for his fellow citizen of Mexican culture that influence our way of living, our architecture, our music, our language, and even our food.”¹³ The press was backtracked from its previous vilification of Mexican-Americans in an attempt to gain a more favorable opinion of the city. This type of editorial was commonplace in the days after the riots, and was echoed in public statements by the mayor’s office. While these

¹¹ Gene Sherman, “Youth Gangs Leading Cause of Delinquencies” *Los Angeles Times* (2 June, 1943).

¹² Hillstrom, 85-6.

¹³ *Los Angeles Daily News*, June 11, 1943, as quoted in Solomon J. Jones’s thesis *The Government Riots of Los Angeles, June 1943* (San Francisco: R and E Research Associates, 1973) 37.

saccharine homages to the brotherhood of Los Angelenos seems like a genuine effort to calm tensions, the more voluminous earlier articles that vilified Mexican-Americans demonstrate that this “affection” was not always apparent in the Los Angeles news media. Cries of racism were met with stern opposition from newspapers, while their own print histories belie their true attitudes.

Other than newspaper articles, government bodies commissioned a number of reports to determine the cause of the riots and whether or not correct action had been taken to stop the violence. These reports are especially insightful because they show a divergence in thought as to who was responsible for the riots. For the most part, authorities such as the police and the military felt as though the sailors and soldiers who participated in the riots had only been protecting themselves, but agreed that their involvement was unseemly and disgraceful conduct for any member of the armed services. The final report prepared by the Navy and eventually made available in 1951, took on an incredibly pro-military tone; it stated:

It was on the evening of June 3rd, 1943 that it started. Three young Mexican-Americans met on a dimly lit corner of the shanty area in which they lived and made plans for their evening’s work: Rolling servicemen in the back alleys just off Main Street.¹⁴

The report went on to say that:

And it was on this evening that this particular group of enterprisers picked the wrong job. They tackled three servicemen who weren’t quite drunk and who knew how to handle themselves. This time, it was the Angelenos who lay on the pavement while the others went their way, refreshed by their “exercise.”¹⁵

This report placed the blame solely on the Mexican-Americans and language such as “dimly lit” and “shanty” tend to lend a sinister tone. In contrast the servicemen appear to be congratulated in their report for their quick thinking and self-defense. The phrase “knew how to handle

¹⁴ As quoted in Mauricio Mazón, *The Zoot-Suit Riots: The Psychology of Symbolic Annihilation* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1984) 71.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

themselves” indicates that the sailors knew how to comport themselves as servicemen and that they did so admirably on this occasion. Even the inclusion of “weren’t quite drunk” demonstrates a permissiveness, even expectedness in the higher ranks, of intoxication. Overall it is clear that this report does not explore the causes of the riots deeply enough. The report basically clears servicemen from any wrongdoing except to state that the ongoing violence was mostly due to a chain reaction rather than from the continued need for self-defense. The biases and partial truths contained in this report show that the main concern of the military was to distance itself from culpability in the riots.

Perhaps the most interesting part of the final report commissioned by the Navy is that it was written and released well after another investigation had presented its own, very dissimilar, findings. In an attempt to generate a better image of Californians, the governor Earl Warren, ordered an independent citizens commission to investigate the riots. Far from flattering, the report found that “It is significant that most of the persons mistreated during the recent incidents in Los Angeles were either persons of Mexican descent or Negroes” and that “the existence of race prejudice cannot be ignored.”¹⁶ This report condemned both the press, the administration of the city and the military for their reaction to, and handling of, the riots. The fact that this report contradicts the military findings shows that perhaps both factions had certain biases.

Beyond sensationalist newspaper articles that denounced Mexican-American youths, the citizens of Los Angeles had what they thought was proof of a criminal element in the form of convictions in the Sleepy Lagoon murder trial. On August 1, 1942, an argument broke out at the Sleepy Lagoon, a swimming hole frequented by Hispanic youths because public pools were

¹⁶ Reverend Bishop Joseph T. McGuken, “Investigations of the Los Angeles Committee for American Unity,” commissioned by Earl Warren (Los Angeles, June 11, 1943) as quoted in Solomon J. Jones’s thesis *The Government Riots of Los Angeles, June 1943* (San Francisco: R and E Research Associates, 1973) 37.

segregated, and another fight happened later that day at Delgadillo home in Los Angeles, subsequently the body of Jose Diaz was found outside the home. An autopsy revealed that he died from a massive blow to the head.¹⁷ Police quickly arrested twenty three young men of Chicano heritage along with one Anglo, many of whom wore zoot suits, and charged them with the murder. Two men asked for separate trials and were released, and the rest were tried en masse. The prosecution focused on the appearance of the Chicanos, which had become haggard due to a denial of haircuts and clothing changes, in order to portray them as members of a criminal gang.¹⁸

Many of the men were convicted of murder: three were convicted for first-degree murder, nine for second-degree murder and five for assault,¹⁹ despite the efforts of George Shibley who repeatedly requested fairer treatment. Shibley had a number of heated exchanges with Judge Charles William Fricke as he worked to get his clients a fair trial.²⁰ Fricke repeatedly denied the defendants basic rights that would have helped them at trial. In one exchange, after defense counsel was denied permission to speak to the defendants during court recess or in the courtroom, he eloquently stated:

If your honor please, I still make the request, and I do wish to make a showing in the record here, that it is relatively impossible for me to conduct my defense of my defendants without being able to consult with them and sit with them, and talk with them during the presentation of the prosecution's case. I am also going to say this for the record: That the defendants in the position in which they are seated in a column of seats in very much the fashion as prisoners in a prisoners' box, and the jury are looking at them all the time sitting in that prisoners' box. And I say, for the record, that the seated, as they are, the purpose of it or, at least, the effect

¹⁷ Sarah Elizabeth Howard, "Zoot to Boot: The Zoot Suit as Both Costume and Symbol," *Studies In Latin American Popular Culture* 28, (January 2010), 117.

¹⁸ Edurado Obregon Pagan, *Murder at the Sleepy Lagoon: Zoots Suits, Race, and Riot in Wartime L.A.* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 116.

¹⁹ Five of the young men, including the Anglo, were found not guilty. Matt S. Meier and Feliciano Rivera, *The Chicanos: A History of Mexican Americans* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), 191-2.

²⁰ Hillstrom, 168.

of it is to prejudice these defendants in the eyes of the jury. And I am going to cite your Honor's action in having them seated there and in refusing them the right to consult with counsel during the trial and talk with their attorneys during the trial in the courtroom, as misconduct, and ask the jury be admonished to disregard the fact that they are seated in the place that they are, and ask your Honor to point out to the jury the fact they are seated there does not impute that they are guilty or that there is any suspicion that they are guilty of a crime.²¹

This statement was met with applause from some of the spectators in the courtroom and the only response by the judge was to order the people who applauded to be arrested for contempt of court. It shows that Shibley saw the rights of his clients being violated and tried to get them a fair trial. As the person presiding over the trial, the judge is supposed to remain impartial and help instruct the jury of their responsibilities. Fricke's strong bias against the defendants could have easily influenced the opinion of the jurists. The judge made no attempt to address the concerns and allegations of Mr. Shibley. This sort of outright discrimination created a very prejudicial attitude during the trial.

These convictions served to cement the idea of zoot suit wearing Chicano youths as violent criminals. Racial tensions in Southern California were dramatically heightened and anti-Chicano sentiments were common. Letters sent to friends and family from jail after the trial demonstrate a general lack of education with poor spelling and grammar.²² The defendants probably had little idea how much their rights were violated during the trial. Although these convictions were eventually overturned for lack of evidence in 1944, significant damage was done to race relations between Chicanos and Anglos. This type of railroading undeniably raised tensions in Los Angeles and created the type of atmosphere where violence could erupt.

²¹ Ibid, 169.

²²Henry Leyvas, Alice McGrath, Manuel Reyes and Chepe Ruiz. Letters to and from defendants in the Sleepy Lagoon Trial. 1943-44. http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/zoot/eng_filmmore/ps.html, Web Access.

The zoot suits that many of the defendants were arrested in served to help cement the idea that criminals and delinquents wore the suits. It was not a big leap for people to assume that everyone they saw in a zoot suit was the member of a gang or a criminal element. When a certain appearance becomes associated with a behavior such as criminality that could put people at risk, they feel safer assuming that everyone of that appearance is also a criminal. By avoiding, or eliminating the perceived threat, they can reclaim their control of their safety. It is important to understand the importance of the suit in the Chicano culture, and the controversy that surrounded it when the riots broke out. The culture of the zoot suit has complex roots within the Chicano community. The suit itself has a very distinct appearance: a longer coat, with wide padded shoulders and wide collar, paired with draped pants that ballooned out at the knee and then tapered at the ankle. It was often worn with a broad flat felt hat and sometimes with a long watch chain hanging past the hip. These suits became popular among Chicano youths in the early 1940's, with young women even developing their own style of dress that complemented the "zoot" look of the young men's suits.²³

During the period when the United States was involved in World War II the zoot suit became synonymous with rebellious Chicano youth who were not doing their part to aid in the war effort or display their patriotism. This feeling was especially strong in southern California where there was a substantial Mexican American population. Although many people saw the zoot suits as being a symbol of rebellious youth, they were actually a powerful cultural identifier for Chicano youths in a time where they felt marginalized and separated from the rest of mainstream society.

²³ Luis Alvarez, *The Power of Zoot: Youth Culture and Resistance During World War II* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2008), 5.

The popularity of the zoot suit came about for several reasons. In the 1930's it was primarily worn by African Americans, and was described as a way of "shamelessly celebrating life in spite of the difficulties African Americans faced during the 1930's."²⁴ The suit not only gave them a way of identifying with a group, but also gave African Americans a way of showing that they were not going to be ashamed of their race or culture simply because it was different. The suit stood out, it was a way to say "look at me" to a society that continually refused to do so.

As the popularity of the zoot suit spread, it eventually reached the Chicano population in Los Angeles. In the early 1940's it was not uncommon to see Chicano youths wearing the suits out in groups.²⁵ Zoot suits, by design, use a large amount of fabric in the making of the coats and the heavily pleated pants. During the wartime rationing of the early 1940's there was a legal limit of how much fabric could be used in the making of a suit, and the zoot suit far exceeded this limit. Many members of Anglo-American society saw the suits as an affront to the war effort, which made wearing it unpatriotic in their eyes.²⁶

The zoot suit became a way for Chicanos to identify with a group and to feel as though they were not second-class citizens. The suits were expensive, and purchasing one was a way to demonstrate a type of affluence.²⁷ In a way, Chicano youths were saying that they would form their own "cool" gang of people because they were not welcomed into the spectrum of Anglo-American society. They wanted to show that they did have a distinct culture and independence and that they did not need acceptance from whites in order to be prosperous.²⁸ Chicanos used the

²⁴ Pagan, 116.

²⁵ Howard, 116.

²⁶ Holly Alford, "The Zoot Suit: Its History and Influence," *Fashion Theory: The Journal Of Dress, Body & Culture* 8, no. 2 (June 2004), 230-1.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 233.

²⁸ Howard, 117.

zoot suit to stake their place in society and demonstrate that they did not need Anglo, or even governmental approval to have a good time and a cultural identity of their own.

To deem Chicano youths unpatriotic there would have to be evidence that they actively sought to avoid participating in the war effort or that they demonstrated an indifference towards helping or hurting the war effort. The fact is that many Mexican-Americans and even Mexican citizens living in the United States, served in the military during World War II. "More than 350,000 served in the armed forces during World War II, many of them engaging in combat on the front lines and earning numerous military honors."²⁹ Chicanos also aided in the war effort at home by working in factories and military industrial complexes. For example, in 1941 there were basically no Mexican American workers at the Los Angeles area shipyards, and by 1944 there were nearly 17,000 employed there.³⁰ Despite many people feeling that Chicanos weren't contributing to the war effort because the media promoted the image of the criminal zoot suiter as a typical Mexican-American, the statistics decidedly controvert those feelings.

The point must also be made that neither the zoot suiters nor Mexican-American youths in general were particularly criminal. A report entitled "Delinquency in Wartime" by Karl Holton of the Los Angeles County Probation department cites lower rates of crimes from Mexican-American youths but does note that ostracization from the Anglo community fostered "a specific problem of gang violence that must be, and is being dealt with."³¹ It seems that the idea of gangs and gang violence led all zoot suiters to be associated with membership in those gangs. Their similar style of dress helped the public lump them into a single category: criminal. Public opinion of the zoot suiters trumped the rather mundane truth that just as in every

²⁹ Alvarez, 17.

³⁰ Ibid, 16.

³¹ Karl Holton, as cited in Solomon J. Jones's thesis *The Government Riots of Los Angeles, June 1943* (San Francisco: R and E Research Associates, 1973) 37.

population, some people (usually very few) are criminals and some (usually the majority) are not.

The Chicanos who endeavored to aid the United States in the war effort did so despite Mexican Americans being subjected to mass deportations during the Great Depression in the previous decade. An example of this is Jose "Pepe" Gonzales who was sent to Mexico with his family at age nine in 1933. Pepe and his mother were both born in America and his father had lived there since he was very young, but they were deported anyways. Pepe returned to the United States at the age of 18 with his birth certificate and immediately joined the military. He earned a Purple Heart and a Bronze Star.³² There are countless other stories of the bravery and dedication of Mexican-Americans who served in the Military. Their decorations during the war included seventeen Medals of Honor, the highest award for bravery, and the more than any other ethnic group.³³ The Latinas ad Latinos in World War II Project at the University of Texas has helped to shed light on the service of Mexican-Americans and to record their experiences through interviews.³⁴ It would be unfair to say that Mexican Americans are unpatriotic as a group when such extreme examples of patriotism are known.

For the "unpatriotic" Chicanos who wore zoot suits and flaunted the restrictions imposed by the government, there was something much deeper that drove them to their elaborate style. They were American citizens by birth, yet many felt unaccepted by Anglo-Americans simply because their ancestry was displayed by their darker complexions. Despite efforts they made to participate in the American way of life, they were continually relegated to lower paying jobs and

³² Harold Coy, *Chicano Roots Go Deep* (Binghamton: Vail-Ballou Press, 1975), 32-3.

³³ Richard Griswold de Castillo, *World War II and Mexican-American Civil Rights* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008) 51.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 53.

poorer neighborhoods.³⁵ Even when they were working in jobs that supported the war effort, Mexican Americans (as well as African Americans) were often given the most labor intensive and lowest paying jobs.³⁶ Mexican Americans in Southern California were increasingly seen as a threat to the "American" way of life. The Bracero program, initiated in 1942, was the United States' answer to the loss of agricultural workers to the military and better paying jobs in the defense industry. By bringing in workers from Mexico, the farmers were able to keep producing food using the lower paid labor that they were accustomed to. The influx of Mexican immigrants in response to this meant that some communities saw their Mexican-American populations growing very quickly. This anti-Chicano sentiment was particularly strong in southern California, where recruitment of Chicanos for wartime labor industry jobs brought tension and competition for work to the forefront.³⁷

It was the defiance of governmental regulations that allegedly turned the zoot suit from a cultural identifier into a symbol of a lack of American patriotism. However, the tensions created and inflated by the Sleepy Lagoon murder case were certainly a factor. On June 3, 1943 tensions reached a breaking point. A group of about sixteen sailors reported that they had been verbally accosted by two young men in zoot suits as they were walking near Sunset Boulevard in Los Angeles. Another group reported that they were shouted at by two young men and two young women in zoot suit attire and that the language they used "made even the sailors blush".³⁸ These confrontations were not unheard of, but on this night the sailors decided to take matters into their own hands. About fifty sailors formed a mob and struck out from their quarters with makeshift

³⁵ Matt S. Meier and Feliciano Rivera, *The Chicanos: A History of Mexican Americans* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), 184.

³⁶ Alvarez, 17.

³⁷ Meier and Rivera, 190.

³⁸ Pagan, 169.

weapons such as rocks, dumbbells and broom handles with the intent of seeking out the youths who had insulted them.³⁹

The mob returned to the scene of one incident, and failing to find anyone in a zoot suit, they headed to the Carmen Theater where they proceeded to turn on the lights and search for anyone wearing a "zoot". They found a group of young boys, between 12 and 13 years old, and set about beating them with their weapons, stripping off their suits and burning them in a pile.⁴⁰ The mob continued to roam around that evening, unchecked by police, military Shore Patrol or the Military Police. They were eventually rounded up after their liberty expired at 11pm by police and Shore Patrol. However, their lieutenant discovered them being marched to the police station and arranged to just bring them back to the Armory and avoid reporting the incident.⁴¹

The power of the mob mentality blossomed. The police followed the mob around in patrol cars, and rather than arresting the military members, they arrested the civilian youths allegedly for their own protection.⁴² Almost any young man of Chicano heritage was considered a target, even those not wearing a zoot suit. African American young men were also victims of the violence. On June 7, 1943 thousands of military personnel swarmed Los Angeles. More rioting ensued and it was the worst night yet. Police were arresting the zoot suiters rather than the military men, and it was out of control.⁴³ Only the next day, when all military personnel were banned from Los Angeles in the early morning hours did the violence finally come under control.

This description of the events can help readers get a general sense of what took place during the riots. However all of this research and reporting has failed to yield a conclusive

³⁹ Ibid, 170.

⁴⁰ I bid

⁴¹ Ibid, 172.

⁴² Ibid, 176.

⁴³ Ibid, 179-80.

answer to why the riots began exactly when they did and who it was that swung the first blow. According to most of the reports of the incident, the zoot suiters were the instigators of the altercation, but that information comes from the military and police, who were clearly sided with the troops. Firsthand accounts of the riots are difficult to find, but Beatrice Griffith, a social worker who worked with Mexican-American families wrote a short story about the riots and based her descriptions off of her own observations of the events. She wrote:

Then we heard a roar and somebody yelled, “They got ‘em, the got ‘em. They got those goddamned zoot suiters.” And from the corner in front of the theater a mob of sailors poured out with a couple of kids wearing fingertip coats, pulled along in the middle of them. Those kids were getting it all right, with busted heads and bleeding faces – those kids were getting it. Pretty soon, a black coat was thrown up and got passed around with people catching it and tossing it. Then the pants came and another coat, a tan one. Each time the crowd yelled and packed tighter to the center. The police were standing along the sides holding their night sticks, looking pleased about the whole thing. Or maybe they were gazing at the stars in the sky. They didn’t do nothing to stop that mob...⁴⁴

This description doesn’t seem to present the zoot suiters who got caught in the violence as being particularly threatening in any way. The picture of the events painted by Griffith’s story compared to the Navy report that was cited earlier in this paper certainly shows that people had different impressions of what took place according to where their sympathies lied.

Trying to make sense of the Zoot Suit Riots’ timeline of events and figure out what started the initial violence, then trying to understand why the violence continued, is a difficult task. The very first altercation seems to have happened by chance, with zoot suiters and the sailors meeting at the wrong moment and being in the wrong mood. The Zoot Suit Riots proved that the enigmatic style of the suit was more than a chosen type of clothing. It was a powerful symbol of the difference between Anglo and Chicano communities in the 1940's. Mexican Americans were struggling to find a way to assimilate into American society and to not be

⁴⁴ Beatrice Griffith, “In the Flow of Time,” *Common Ground*, September 1948, 13-4.5m

considered "foreign" while at the same time maintaining a unique cultural identity of their own. The bias shown by the military, police and media in the aftermath of the riots demonstrates just how much antipathy mainstream America had to the plight of Chicanos. Despite the violence and discrimination that they were subjected to because of a simple fashion choice, World War II was also a turning point for Mexican Americans. In the words of Congressman Edward Roybal: "Had World War II not taken place, we wouldn't have the advances we have today. I say that because the man who went from the barrio to the Army and to the Armed Forces as a whole, found that he was equal on the battlefield...When we came back we said 'If we were equal on the battlefield, why can we not be equal here?'"⁴⁵ It was a way to feel that they mattered and that they belonged in a time when they were being pushed to the edges of society and the zoot suit served as an important stepping stone in the timeline of Chicano cultural development in the United States. The Zoot Suit Riots and the zoot suit itself were harbingers of a civil rights movement that would eventually come to encompass all races, and because of this, their historical significance is indisputable.

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⁴⁵ Edward Roybal, Interview by Oscar J. Martinez, "Interview no. 184," October 23, 1975. (Institute of Oral History, University of El Paso: Texas).

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