

COLLECTIONS IN CONTEXT:
THE ZOOT SUIT RIOTS

by teachers, for teachers

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The Zoot Suit Riots of 1943



THE HUNTINGTON
Library, Art Museum, and Botanical Gardens

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Using This Resource

This is a reference resource written about Los Angeles' **Zoot Suit Riots of 1943**. You can read through the resource in its entirety, or you can use the buttons on the left to navigate to specific topics.

This resource can be used independently or in conjunction with The Huntington's lesson plan **The Zoot Suit Riots**.



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Zoot Suits: A Fashion Trend

Zoot suits were a type of fashion created in the 1930s and 1940s. This type of dressing was characterized by broad-shouldered suits, long or draped jackets, wide-legged pants tapered at the bottom, and sometimes long chained watches, two-colored shoes, or wide flamboyant hats.

The suits were first associated with African American communities, but the style was later adopted by other minorities including Filipino Americans and Latino American youth. In Los Angeles, zoot suits were predominantly worn by Mexican and Mexican American youth. Those who wore this type of clothing were called “zoot suiters.”

The zoot suit became a cultural symbol. But for others, including some white Americans, police officers, and U.S. soldiers, the suits became a symbol of excess, anti-patriotism, and anti-American sentiment, as well as gang affiliation.



Photo (cropped) Museum
Associates/LACMA.

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Immigration and Racism

Between 1910 and 1930, the Mexican Revolution and a series of civil wars resulted in hundreds of thousands of Mexicans fleeing their country and moving to the United States. The largest Mexican population in the country settled in Los Angeles.

The large influx of this immigrant working population began to cause racial conflicts.



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Immigration and Racism

Many Mexican immigrants were recruited to work on farms in the United States. They were paid significantly less than their white counterparts. Even so, by the 1920s, at least 150,000 of California's farm workers were Mexican or of Mexican descent.

These racial issues deepened during the Great Depression of the 1930s, when Mexican workers were accused of taking white men's jobs and became targets of racial attacks, discrimination, and forced removal.

Scholars have estimated that between 500,000 and 2 million Mexicans and Mexican Americans were forcefully deported, regardless of age or citizenship status.

The Mexican Repatriation, as the event of mass deportation became known, lasted throughout the first half of the 1930s.

The Mexican and Mexican American people who remained in the United States faced severe racial segregation in housing, employment, education, and legal rights.



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World War II



Following the attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, the United States entered World War II. The United States deployed 16 million Americans during its four-year involvement in the war.

This deployment created a labor shortage. The United States responded by recruiting foreign workers. Under a treaty between Mexico and the United States called the Bracero Program, which began in 1942, approximately 4.6 million Mexican nationals began to immigrate to the United States for temporary work.

At the time, a large number of service members (e.g., soldiers, sailors, and others) were stationed in Los Angeles. The majority of them were white men.

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World War II

Tensions ran high between Mexican American youth and other minorities, especially those who wore zoot suits, and servicemen.

During World War II, the production of clothing was limited and closely regulated, and according to soldiers, the zoot suits used too much cloth. Zoot suits were considered to be both flamboyant and unpatriotic due to the amount of fabric needed to make them. The servicemen and other Americans, including the media, also criticized the zoot suiters for not joining the armed forces and called them draft dodgers.

Some clashes between servicemen and Mexican American youth would devolve into a series of riots that pitted hundreds of men in uniform against Mexican American, African American, and Filipino American zoot suiters. In some cases, the rioters targeted people who were not wearing zoot suits.



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The Sleepy Lagoon Case

Six months before the Zoot Suit Riots, 17 Mexican American teenagers were accused of the assault and murder of Jose Diaz, who had died in August 1942 in a Los Angeles area called the Sleepy Lagoon.

The case was highly reported and took its name from the location of Diaz's death.

The Sleepy Lagoon case is frequently associated with the Zoot Suit Riots.



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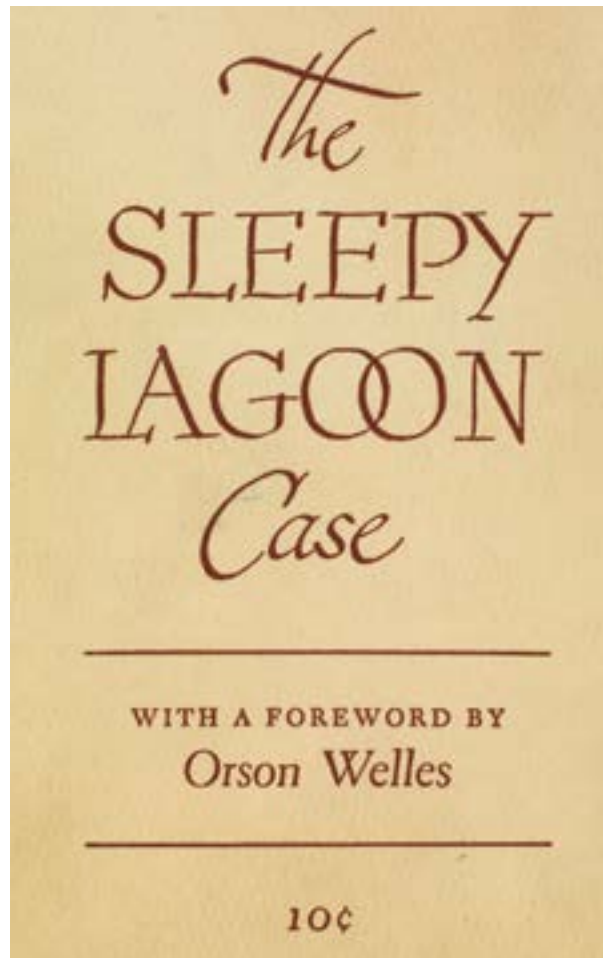
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Twelve of the young men were found guilty of murder, and the other five were convicted of assault charges. Their lawyers contended—and later successfully proved—that the boys were innocent.

Different entities argued that these youth, who were identified as zoot suiters, had not received a fair trial due to such factors as confessions procured with violence, unfair prosecution, unfair ruling, and unfair portrayals by the media. There had been media bias for many months before Diaz's death.

The case was an important precursor to the Zoot Suit Riots because it exacerbated the already high racial tensions of the time and brought them to a boiling point.

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Many Mexicans and Mexican Americans, and their allies, denounced the racist attacks and discrimination of the police department, the prosecutor, the judge, and other important city officials in the Sleepy Lagoon case.

During the trial, the prosecutor and the media constantly pointed out the zoot suit clothing and hair styles of the accused, while others based their verdicts and accusations on the race of the defendants.

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In May and June 1943, people of Mexican descent living in Los Angeles found themselves under the continuous threat of violence. This threat culminated in a series of attacks that became known as the Zoot Suit Riots.

Under police sanction, white Angelenos and large groups of servicemen combed the streets of Los Angeles looking for zoot suiters, who were beaten, attacked with racial insults, and stripped of their clothing. Police frequently failed to intervene, and when they did, they arrested the victims of the beatings instead of the perpetrators.



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The police, government officials, and the media also exalted the attackers by designating their mob groups as “task forces” and by portraying them as responsible American citizens who were helping to alleviate the problem of the “zoot suit hoodlums.”

For almost a week, the attacks continued, occurring in other cities and targeting other groups. Soon the violence also encircled African Americans and Filipino Americans, some of whom were not even part of the zoot suiters. Thousands of white perpetrators arrived from places like San Diego to join in the attacks.

Newspapers hailed the white assailants as “vigilantes” in the fight against the “foreign criminals.”

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On June 8, possibly fearing the escalation of violence, U.S. military officials restricted personnel from traveling to Los Angeles. This measure restored some order. The Los Angeles City Council, fearing the political consequences of the attacks on the Bracero Program, issued a ban on wearing zoot suits.

During the riots, more than 500 Mexican Americans were arrested, while few white people were ever charged.

The riots soon inspired similar violence in other parts of the country, including Detroit and Chicago.

Then-California Governor Earl Warren created a committee to investigate the causes of the riots. Meanwhile, Eleanor Roosevelt, the first lady at the time, spoke against the riots and blamed the violence on discrimination against Mexican Americans.



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Zoot Suit, 1940–1942, wool plain weave and twill a) jacket center back length: 41 in.; b) pants inside seam length: 31 in. Purchased with funds provided by Ellen A. Michelson (M.2011.94a-b), Los Angeles County Museum of Art.



Military map of Mexico with special reference to the situation developed by the Columbus Raid, 1916, Los Angeles Times (Firm), publisher. The Huntington Library, Art Museum, and Botanical Gardens. [Link](#)



Mexican farm workers, Santa Monica, approximately 1926–1940s, Powell Press Service. Ernest Marquez Photograph Collection. The Huntington Library, Art Museum, and Botanical Gardens. [Link](#)



Let's hit 'em with everything we've got! Don't wait—choose the Navy, 1942, Barclay, McClelland, artist. Lutz & Sheinkman, printer. John Haskell Kemble Collection. The Huntington Library, Art Museum, and Botanical Gardens. [Link](#)

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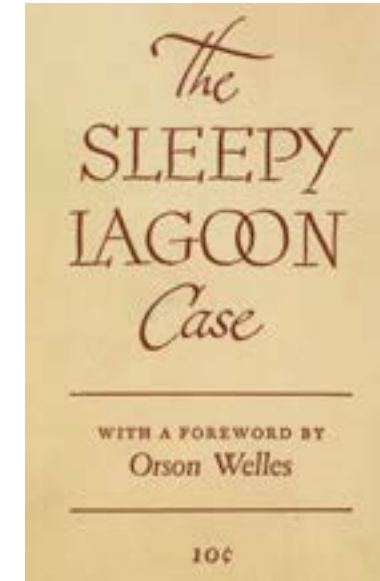
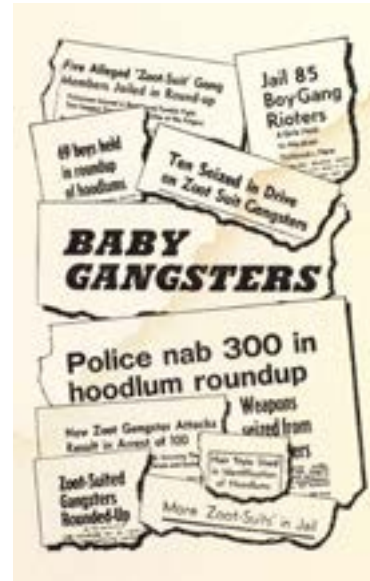
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"The Sleepy Lagoon Case," 1942, Citizens' Committee for the Defense of Mexican-American Youth. Loren Miller Papers. The Huntington Library, Art Museum, and Botanical Gardens.

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Newspaper clippings re: Zoot Suit Riots and LA, 1943, Bowron, Fletcher. Loren Miller Papers. The Huntington Library, Art Museum, and Botanical Gardens.

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