



Diversity of Cultures

Mexican American Youth and Wartime Prejudice: Unpacking the Zoot Suit Riots of 1943

Historical Context

In the summer of 1943, tensions in Los Angeles erupted into violence as hundreds of US servicemen, joined by white civilians, launched a series of attacks on young Mexican American men, many of whom wore flamboyant “zoot suits.” These attacks, known as the Zoot Suit Riots, were not spontaneous outbursts, but rather the result of deep-seated racial prejudice, economic anxiety, and a national climate shaped by wartime fears and xenophobia. The zoot suit, with its wide shoulders, long coat, and baggy trousers, was more than a fashion choice. For many young Mexican Americans, especially in the barrios of Los Angeles, it was a symbol of cultural pride, defiance, and identity during a time when they were often treated as outsiders in their own country. However, to many white Americans, including police and servicemen, the zoot suit was seen as unpatriotic, wasteful during a time of wartime rationing, and associated with delinquency. Underlying the violence was the broader context of discrimination against Mexican Americans in the Southwest. Though many served honorably in the US military during World War II, Mexican Americans at home continued to face segregation in schools, housing, and public accommodations. The media helped fuel anti-Mexican sentiment, portraying the youth as gang members and criminals. When tensions boiled over in June 1943, police often arrested the Mexican American victims of the violence rather than the white attackers. The Zoot Suit Riots revealed the contradictions of wartime America: a nation fighting for democracy abroad while upholding inequality and racial violence at home. They also exposed generational and cultural divides between older Mexican Americans seeking assimilation and youth asserting their place in American society. In the years that followed, the riots would be remembered not only as a moment of racial injustice but also as a flashpoint in the ongoing struggle for civil rights and recognition for Chicano communities across the United States.

Connection to Habit

The Zoot Suit Riots reveal how cultural expression, like the zoot suit itself, can carry deep meaning in different historical contexts. For many Mexican American youth, this style symbolized identity, pride, and resistance in a society that often treated them as outsiders. Recognizing the diversity of cultural experiences in this moment helps us see how identity and appearance shaped how people were treated, while also reminding us of shared human desires for dignity, belonging, and respect. By examining these events, students can deepen their understanding of how culture influences perception and how different communities navigate injustice.

Discussion Questions

- What social and political conditions during World War II contributed to the outbreak of the Zoot Suit Riots?
- Why did the zoot suit become such a powerful symbol of both pride and controversy?
- What did the zoot suit represent for many Mexican American youth, and how did that meaning differ from how white servicemen and the media viewed it?
- In what ways can cultural misunderstanding lead to prejudice or violence?
- Do you think the term “riot” accurately describes what happened in Los Angeles in 1943? Why or why not?
- How did the media and law enforcement shape public perception of the Mexican American community during this time?
- How do the older and younger generations’ reactions reveal the ways that cultural understanding can change, even in a short amount of time?
- What lessons can we take from the Zoot Suit Riots when thinking about how to appreciate and respect cultural diversity in our own communities?

Suggested Activity

Materials Needed:

- Digital or Printed copies of Historical Context
- Computer or Poster Board
- Digital or Printed Sources:
 - Letter/Telegram: [From Latin American Youth Council to President Roosevelt](#)
 - Newspaper Article: [Al Waxman in Eastside Journal](#)
 - Report: [Governor's Citizen's Committee Report on Los Angeles Riots](#)
 - Photo: [Sailors in the armed forces patrol the streets with clubs in Los Angeles, Library of Congress](#)
 - Photo: [Mexican American youth in custody](#)
 - Photo: [Zoot Suiters being taken to jail](#)

Students will curate a digital or physical museum-style exhibit, using primary sources from the 1943 Zoot Suit Riots. They will interpret visuals, documents, and voices to educate others about the historical event, its cultural significance, and its ongoing relevance.

Step 1: Context [10-15 mins]

Begin with a brief teacher-led overview of the Zoot Suit Riots, utilizing the provided Historical Context of the 1943 Zoot Suit Riots, which explains who was involved, the cultural and racial tensions, wartime context and media portrayal. Optional: Use the Expanded Connection to Habit provided on the website for a deeper analysis connected to Diversity of Cultures History Habit of Mind.

Step 2: Gallery Group Work [45-60 mins]

Divide students into small groups (2–3 students). Each group will curate one exhibit panel for a poster museum or digital gallery. Explain that a curator’s role is not to list every detail, but to use intentional words and images to share a certain perspective with the audience.

"Zoot Suit Riots: Culture, Conflict, and Resistance in Wartime Los Angeles"

Each group will:

- Select 3–5 primary sources from the provided sources
- Create an exhibit panel (Google slide/PowerPoint or poster) that includes:
 - Title of their section (i.e. “Press and Prejudice,” “Voices from the Barrio,” or “Resistance and Reframing”)
 - Images and documents with captions (2–3 sentences each) that explain what the viewer is seeing and why it matters
 - Background text (1–2 paragraphs) explaining the context of the riots and how their chosen sources reveal different perspectives
 - A short Curator’s Note (about 5–6 sentences) answering: Why does this event still matter today? What can we learn about race, culture, and power by studying the Zoot Suit Riots?

Suggested Activity cont.

Step 3: Presentation or Gallery Walk [10-15 mins]

Have students present their panels to the class or host a digital gallery walk where peers review each other's panels and leave feedback or questions.

Step 4: Optional: Class Discussion [15 mins]

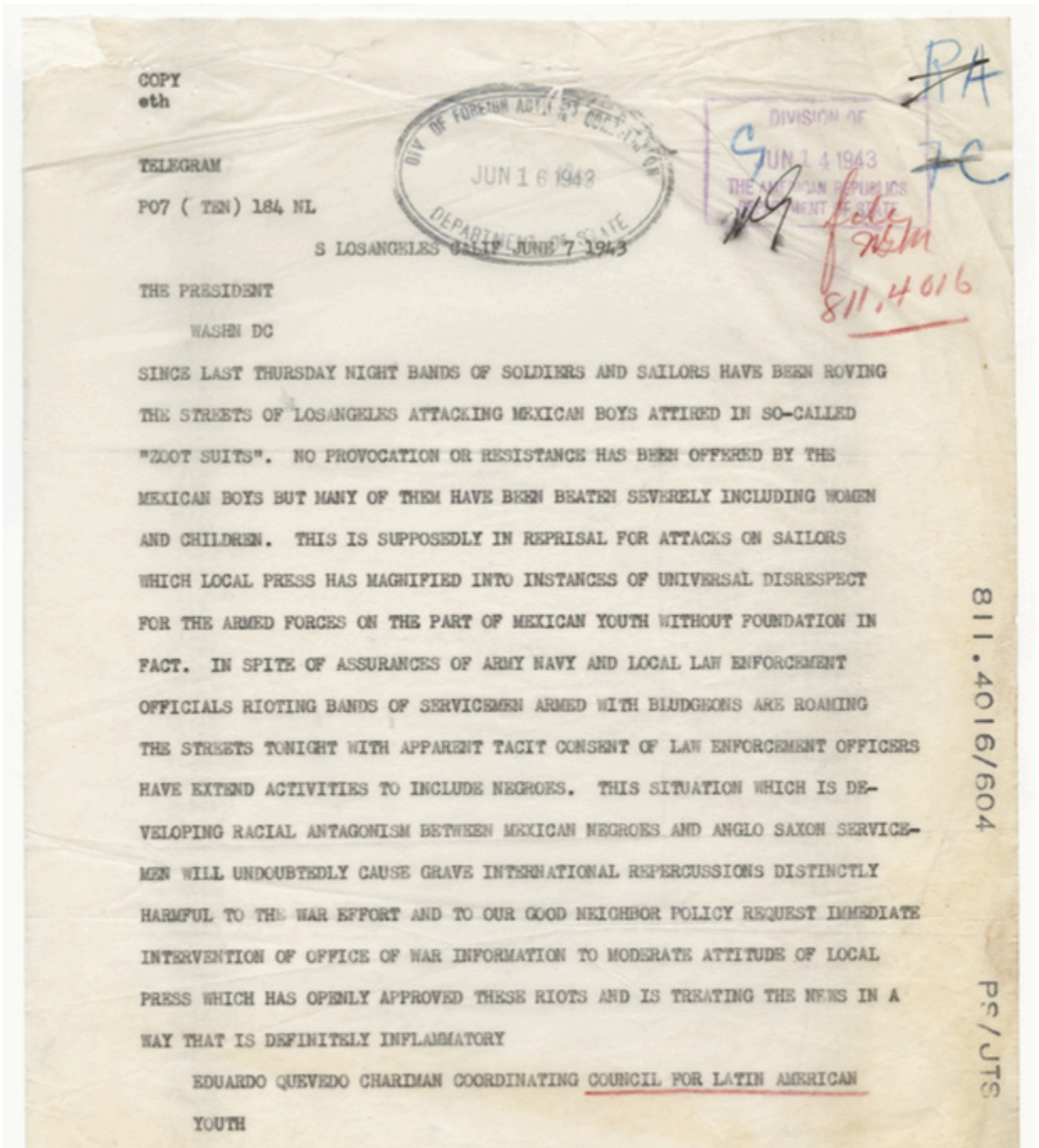
Lead a whole class discussion using questions like:

- What do these sources reveal about how different groups understood the Zoot Suit Riots?
- How did clothing, race, and youth culture contribute to how zoot suiters were perceived?
- Compare the official response (Mayor Bowron) to the statement from the Latin American Youth Council. What differences stand out?
- Why do you think the press, police, and public viewed zoot suiters as a threat?
- In your view, should these events be called a "riot" or something else (i.e. racial violence)? Why does that distinction matter?
- How do cultural styles or symbols (like clothing, language, or music) become sources of conflict in diverse societies?
- What role did racism play in how the violence unfolded and how it was handled by authorities?
- Can you think of modern examples where fashion, language, or cultural identity have been misinterpreted or criminalized?

Primary Source 1

Letter/Telegram:

From Latin American Youth Council to President Roosevelt



Source: [Zoot Suit Riot Telegram \(1943\)](#), From Latin American Youth Council to President Roosevelt, National Archives, [General Records of the Department of State](#)

Primary Source 2

Newspaper Article: Al Waxman in *Eastside Journal*

Context: While the exact origin of the loose-fitting “zoot suit,” worn by Mexican-American and African-American youths in the 1940s, is obscure, its most important roots were among Mexican-American youths, or pachucos. In the context of World War II, this defiant gesture of group identity put the Mexican-American zoot suiters into direct conflict with another youth group—white servicemen stationed on the West Coast. Wartime rationing regulations effectively banned zoot suits because they ostensibly wasted fabric, so a combination of patriotism and racism impelled white soldiers to denounce Mexican-American wearers of the zoot suit as slackers and hoodlums. In June 1943, apparently provoked by stories that Mexican Americans had beaten up a group of Anglo sailors, servicemen on leave began to attack Mexican-American neighborhoods in Los Angeles. These anti-Mexican riots often featured the ritualistic stripping of the zoot suiters. Despite the brutality of these incidents, most press coverage was sympathetic to the servicemen. One exception was this description by Al Waxman, editor of the *Eastside Journal*, an East Los Angeles community newspaper.

At Twelfth and Central I came upon a scene that will long live in my memory. Police were swinging clubs and servicemen were fighting with civilians. Wholesale arrests were being made by the officers. Four boys came out of a pool hall. They were wearing the zoot-suits that have become the symbol of a fighting flag. Police ordered them into arrest cars. One refused. He asked: “Why am I being arrested?” The police officer answered with three swift blows of the night-stick across the boy’s head and he went down. As he sprawled, he was kicked in the face. Police had difficulty loading his body into the vehicle because he was one-legged and wore a wooden limb. Maybe the officer didn’t know he was attacking a cripple.

At the next corner a Mexican mother cried out, “Don’t take my boy, he did nothing. He’s only fifteen years old. Don’t take him.” She was struck across the jaw with a night-stick and almost dropped the two and a half year old baby that was clinging in her arms. . . .

Rushing back to the east side to make sure that things were quiet here, I came upon a band of servicemen making a systematic tour of East First Street. They had just come out of a cocktail bar where four men were nursing bruises. Three autos loaded with Los Angeles policemen were on the scene but the soldiers were not molested. Farther down the street the men stopped a streetcar, forcing the motorman to open the door and proceeded to inspect the clothing of the male passengers. “We’re looking for zoot-suits to burn,” they shouted. Again the police did not interfere. . . . Half a block away . . . I pleaded with the men of the local police substation to put a stop to these activities. “It is a matter for the military police,” they said.

Primary Source 3

Report:

Governor's Citizen's Committee Report on Los Angeles Riots

Context: At the end of the three-month Sleepy Lagoon trial, a public campaign against Mexican American youth intensified. Over a two-week period in May and June 1943, police stood by while several thousand servicemen and civilians beat up Mexican American youth, stripping them of their draped jackets and pegged pants. The Los Angeles City Council banned zoot suits within the city. The "zoot-suit riots" have become a symbol of wartime prejudice and ethnic strife. California's Governor, Earl Warren, formed a committee to investigate the causes of the "Zoot Suit" riots. Excerpts from the report follow.

There are approximately 250,000 persons of Mexican descent in Los Angeles County. Living conditions among the majority of these people are far below the general level of the community. Housing is inadequate; sanitation is bad and is made worse by congestion. Recreational facilities for children are very poor; and there is insufficient supervision of the playgrounds, swimming pools and other youth centers. Such conditions are breeding places for juvenile delinquency....

Mass arrests, dragnet raids, and other wholesale classifications of groups of people are based on false premises and tend merely to aggravate the situation. Any American citizen suspected of crime is entitled to be treated as an individual, to be indicted as such, and to be tried, both at law and in the forum of public opinion, on his merits or errors, regardless of race, color, creed, or the kind of clothes he wears.

Group accusations foster race prejudice, the entire group accused want revenge and vindication. The public is led to believe that every person in the accused group is guilty of crime.

It is significant that most of the persons mistreated during the recent incidents in Los Angeles were either persons of Mexican descent or Negroes. In undertaking to deal with the cause of these outbreaks, the existence of race prejudice cannot be ignored....

On Monday evening, June seventh, thousands of Angelenos, in response to twelve hours' advance notice in the press, turned out for a mass lynching. Marching through the streets of downtown Los Angeles, a mob of several thousand soldiers, sailors, and civilians, proceeded to beat up every zoot-suiter they could find. Pushing its way into the important motion picture theaters, the mob ordered the management to turn on the house lights and then ranged up and down the aisles dragging Mexicans out of their seats.

Primary Source 3 cont.

Report:

Governor's Citizen's Committee Report on Los Angeles Riots

Street cars were halted while Mexicans, and some Filipinos and Negroes, were jerked out of their seats, pushed into the streets, and beaten with sadistic frenzy. If the victims wore zoot-suits, they were stripped of their clothing and left naked or half-naked on the streets, bleeding and bruised. Proceeding down Main Street from First to Twelfth, the mob stopped on the edge of the Negro district. Learning that the Negroes planned a warm reception for them, the mobsters turned back and marched through the Mexican cast side spreading panic and terror.

Throughout the night the Mexican communities were in the wildest possible turmoil. Scores of Mexican mothers were trying to locate their youngsters and several hundred Mexicans milled around each of the police substations and the Central Jail trying to get word of missing members of their families. Boys came into the police stations saying: "Charge me with vagrancy or anything, but don't send me out there!" pointing to the streets where other boys, as young as twelve and thirteen years of age, were being beaten and stripped of their clothes... not more than half of the victims were actually wearing zoot-suits. A Negro defense worker, wearing a defense-plant identification badge on his workclothes, was taken from a street car and one of his eyes was gouged out with a knife. Huge half-page photographs, showing Mexican boys stripped of their clothes, cowering on the pavement, often bleeding profusely, surrounded by jeering mobs of men and women, appeared in all the Los Angeles newspapers....

At midnight on June seventh, the military authorities decided that the local police were completely unable or unwilling to handle the situation, despite the fact that a thousand reserve officers had been called up. The entire downtown area of Los Angeles was then declared "out of bounds" for military personnel. This order immediately slowed down the pace of the rioting. The moment the Military Police and Shore Patrol went into action, the rioting quieted down.

Primary Source 4

Photo:

Sailors in the armed forces patrol the streets with clubs in Los Angeles



Source: Sailors in the armed forces patrol the streets with clubs, ready to fight anyone they see in a zoot suit. Los Angeles (1943).

Primary Source 5

Photo:
Mexican American youth in custody



Source: A crowd of zoot suiters behind bars. Los Angeles. 1943. UCLA Library.

Primary Source 6

Photo:
Zoot Suiters being taken to jail



Source: Zoot suiters lined up outside Los Angeles jail en route to court after feud with sailors. California Los Angeles, 1943. Jun 9. Photograph. <https://www.loc.gov/item/95504788/>.