

Stuart Cosgrove, "The Zoot Suit and Style Warfare"

1. What does Cosgrove mean when he suggests that the zoot suiters were "the stewards of something uncomfortable"?
2. How were pachucos doubly alienated? How did they deal with their alienation? What role did the zoot suit play in this process?
3. Why did wearing a zoot suit open pachucos to attacks by soldiers? Why was wearing a zoot suit a form of opposition?
4. How did press coverage of the zoot suit riots distort or oversimplify the reality of the situation?
5. How did the presence of groups like the "Black Widows" unsettle both whites and Mexican adults?
6. Why were government officials concerned about the zoot suit riots? How did initial official reactions to the riots obscure their true causes and significance?

The Zoot-Suit and Style Warfare

by *Stuart Cosgrove*



Photographs courtesy the author

INTRODUCTION: THE SILENT NOISE OF SINISTER CLOWNS

What about those fellows waiting still and silent there on the platform, so still and silent they clash with the crowd in their very immobility, standing noisy in their very silence; harsh as a cry of terror in their quietness? What about these three boys, coming now along the platform, tall and slender, walking with swinging shoulders in their well-pressed, too-hot-for-summer suits, their collars high and tight about their necks, their identical hats of black cheap felt set upon the crowns of their heads with a severe formality above their conked hair? It was as though I'd never seen their like before: walking slowly, their shoulders swaying, their legs swinging from their hips in trousers that ballooned upward from cuffs fitting snug about their ankles; their coats long and hip-tight with shoulders far too broad to be those of natural western men. These fellows whose bodies seemed – what had one of my teachers said of me? – 'You're like one of those African sculptures, distorted in the interest of design.' Well, what design and whose?¹

The zoot-suit is more than an exaggerated costume, more than a sartorial statement, it is the bearer of a complex and contradictory history. When the nameless narrator of Ellison's *Invisible Man* confronted the subversive sight of three young and extravagantly dressed blacks, his reaction was one of fascination not of fear. These youths were not simply grotesque dandies parading the city's secret underworld, they were 'the stewards of something uncomfort-

Clyde Duncan, a bus-boy from Gainesville, Georgia, appeared on the front page of the *New York Times* at the height of the zoot-suit riots.

able², a spectacular reminder that the social order had failed to contain their energy and difference. The zoot-suit was more than the drape-shape of 1940s fashion, more than a colourful stage-prop hanging from the shoulders of Cab Calloway, it was, in the most direct and obvious ways, an emblem of ethnicity and a way of negotiating an identity. The zoot-suit was a refusal: a subcultural gesture that refused to concede to the manners of subservience. By the late 1930s, the term 'zoot' was in common circulation within urban jazz culture. Zoot meant something worn or performed in an extravagant style, and since many young blacks wore suits with outrageously padded shoulders and trousers that were fiercely tapered at the ankles, the term zoot-suit passed into everyday usage. In the sub-cultural world of Harlem's nightlife, the language of rhyming slang succinctly described the zoot-suit's unmistakable style: 'a killer-diller coat with a drape-shape, reat-pleats and shoulders padded like a lunatic's cell'. The study of the relationships between fashion and social action is notoriously underdeveloped, but there is every indication that the zoot-suit riots that erupted in the United States in the summer of 1943 had a profound effect on a whole generation of socially disadvantaged youths. It was during his period as a young zoot-suiter that the Chicano union activist Cesar Chavez first came into contact with community politics, and it was through the experiences of participating in zoot-suit riots in Harlem that the young pimp 'Detroit Red' began a political education that transformed him into the Black radical leader Malcolm X. Although the zoot-suit occupies an almost mythical place within the history of jazz music, its social and political importance has been virtually ignored. There can be no certainty about when, where or why the zoot-suit came into existence, but what is certain is that during the summer months of 1943 'the killer-diller coat' was the uniform of young rioters and the symbol of a moral panic about juvenile delinquency that was to intensify in the post-war period.

At the height of the Los Angeles riots of June 1943, the *New York Times* carried a front page article which claimed without reservation that the first zoot-suit had been purchased by a black bus worker, Clyde Duncan, from a tailor's shop in Gainesville, Georgia.³ Allegedly, Duncan had been inspired by the film 'Gone with the Wind' and had set out to look like Rhett Butler. This explanation clearly found favour throughout the USA. The national press forwarded countless others. Some reports claimed that the zoot-suit was an invention of Harlem night life, others suggested it grew out of jazz culture and the exhibitionist stage-costumes of the band leaders, and some argued that the zoot-suit was derived from military uniforms and imported from Britain. The alternative and independent press, particularly *Crisis* and *Negro Quarterly*, more convincingly argued that the zoot-suit was the product of a particular social context.⁴ They emphasised the importance of Mexican-American youths, or *pachucos*, in the emergence of zoot-suit style and, in tentative ways, tried to relate their appearance on the streets to the concept of *pachuquismo*.

In his pioneering book, *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, the Mexican poet and social commentator Octavio Paz throws imaginative light on *pachuco* style and indirectly establishes a framework within which the zoot-suit can be understood. Paz's study of the Mexican national consciousness examines the changes brought about by the movement of labour, particularly the generations of Mexicans who migrated northwards to the USA. This movement, and the new economic and

social patterns it implies, has, according to Paz, forced young Mexican-Americans into an ambivalent experience between two cultures.

What distinguishes them, I think, is their furtive, restless air: they act like persons who are wearing disguises, who are afraid of a stranger's look because it could strip them and leave them stark naked. . . . This spiritual condition, or lack of a spirit, has given birth to a type known as the *pachuco*. The *pachucos* are youths, for the most part of Mexican origin, who form gangs in southern cities; they can be identified by their language and behaviour as well as by the clothing they affect. They are instinctive rebels, and North American racism has vented its wrath on them more than once. But the *pachucos* do not attempt to vindicate their race or the nationality of their forebears. Their attitude reveals an obstinate, almost fanatical will-to-be, but this will affirms nothing specific except their determination . . . not to be like those around them.⁵

Pachuco youth embodied all the characteristics of second generation working-class immigrants. In the most obvious ways they had been stripped of their customs, beliefs and language. The *pachucos* were a disinherited generation within a disadvantaged sector of North American society; and predictably their experiences in education, welfare and employment alienated them from the aspirations of their parents and the dominant assumptions of the society in which they lived. The *pachuco* subculture was defined not only by ostentatious fashion, but by petty crime, delinquency and drug-taking. Rather than disguise their alienation or efface their hostility to the dominant society, the *pachucos* adopted an arrogant posture. They flaunted their difference, and the zoot-suit became the means by which that difference was announced. Those 'impassive and sinister clowns' whose purpose was 'to cause terror instead of laughter,'⁶ invited the kind of attention that led to both prestige and persecution. For Octavio Paz the *pachuco's* appropriation of the zoot-suit was an admission of the ambivalent place he occupied. 'It is the only way he can establish a more vital relationship with the society he is antagonising. As a victim he can occupy a place in the world that previously ignored him; as a delinquent, he can become one of its wicked heroes.'⁷ The zoot-suit riots of 1943 encapsulated this paradox. They emerged out of the dialectics of delinquency and persecution, during a period in which American society was undergoing profound structural change.

The major social change brought about by the United States' involvement in the war was the recruitment to the armed forces of over four million civilians and the entrance of over five million women into the war-time labour force. The rapid increase in military recruitment and the radical shift in the composition of the labour force led in turn to changes in family life, particularly the erosion of parental control and authority. The large scale and prolonged separation of millions of families precipitated an unprecedented increase in the rate of juvenile crime and delinquency. By the summer of 1943 it was commonplace for teenagers to be left to their own initiatives whilst their parents were either on active military service or involved in war work. The increase in night work compounded the problem. With their parents or guardians working unsocial hours, it became possible for many more young people to gather late into the night at major urban centres or simply on the street corners.

The rate of social mobility intensified during the period of the zoot-suit riots. With over 15 million civilians and 12 million military personnel on the move throughout the country, there was a corresponding increase in vagrancy. Petty crimes became more difficult to detect and control; itinerants became increasingly common, and social transience put unforeseen pressure on housing and welfare. The new patterns of social mobility also led to congestion in military and industrial areas. Significantly, it was the overcrowded military towns along the Pacific coast and the industrial conurbations of Detroit, Pittsburgh and Los Angeles that witnessed the most violent outbreaks of zoot-suit rioting.⁸

'Delinquency' emerged from the dictionary of new sociology to become an everyday term, as wartime statistics revealed these new patterns of adolescent behaviour. The *pachucos* of the Los Angeles area were particularly vulnerable to the effects of war. Being neither Mexican nor American, the *pachucos*, like the black youths with whom they shared the zoot-suit style, simply did not fit. In their own terms they were '24-hour orphans', having rejected the ideologies of their migrant parents. As the war furthered the dislocation of family relationships, the *pachucos* gravitated away from the home to the only place where their status was visible, the streets and bars of the towns and cities. But if the *pachucos* laid themselves open to a life of delinquency and detention, they also asserted their distinct identity, with their own style of dress, their own way of life and a shared set of experiences.

THE ZOOT-SUIT RIOTS: LIBERTY, DISORDER AND THE FORBIDDEN

The zoot-suit riots sharply revealed a polarization between two youth groups within wartime society: the gangs of predominantly black and Mexican youths who were at the forefront of the zoot-suit subculture, and the predominantly white American servicemen stationed along the Pacific coast. The riots invariably had racial and social resonances but the primary issue seems to have been patriotism and attitudes to the war. With the entry of the United States into the war in December 1941, the nation had to come to terms with the restrictions of rationing and the prospects of conscription. In March 1942, the War Production Board's first rationing act had a direct effect on the manufacture of suits and all clothing containing wool. In an attempt to institute a 26% cut-back in the use of fabrics, the War Production Board drew up regulations for the wartime manufacture of what Esquire magazine called, 'streamlined suits by Uncle Sam.'⁹ The regulations effectively forbade the manufacture of zoot-suits and most legitimate tailoring companies ceased to manufacture or advertise any suits that fell outside the War Production Board's guide lines. However, the demand for zoot-suits did not decline and a network of bootleg tailors based in Los Angeles and New York continued to manufacture the garments. Thus the polarization between servicemen and *pachucos* was immediately visible: the chino shirt and battledress were evidently uniforms of patriotism, whereas wearing a zoot-suit was a deliberate and public way of flouting the regulations of rationing. The zoot-suit was a moral and social scandal in the eyes of the authorities, not simply because it was associated with petty crime and violence, but because it openly snubbed the laws of rationing. In the fragile harmony of wartime society, the zoot-suiters were, according to

Octavio Paz, 'a symbol of love and joy or of horror and loathing, an embodiment of liberty, of disorder, of the forbidden.'¹⁰

The zoot-suit riots, which were initially confined to Los Angeles, began in the first few days of June 1943. During the first weekend of the month, over 60 zoot-suiters were arrested and charged at Los Angeles County jail, after violent and well publicized fights between servicemen on shore leave and gangs of Mexican-American youths. In order to prevent further outbreaks of fighting, the police patrolled the eastern sections of the city, as rumours spread from the military bases that servicemen were intending to form vigilante groups. The *Washington Post's* report of the incidents, on the morning of Wednesday 9 June 1943, clearly saw the events from the point of view of the servicemen.

Disgusted with being robbed and beaten with tire irons, weighted ropes, belts and fists employed by overwhelming numbers of the youthful hoodlums, the uniformed men passed the word quietly among themselves and opened their campaign in force on Friday night.

At central jail, where spectators jammed the sidewalks and police made no efforts to halt auto loads of servicemen openly cruising in search of zoot-suiters, the youths streamed gladly into the sanctity of the cells after being snatched from bar rooms, pool halls and theaters and stripped of their attire.¹¹

During the ensuing weeks of rioting, the ritualistic stripping of zoot-suiters became the major means by which the servicement re-established their status over the *pachucos*. It became commonplace for gangs of marines to ambush zoot-suiters, strip them down to their underwear and leave them helpless in the streets. In one particularly vicious incident, a gang of drunken sailors rampaged through a cinema after discovering two zoot-suiters. They dragged the *pachucos* on to the stage as the film was being screened, stripped them in front of the audience and as a final insult, urinated on the suits.

The press coverage of these incidents ranged from the careful and cautionary liberalism of The *Los Angeles Times* to the more hysterical hate-mongering of William Randolph Hearst's west coast papers. Although the practice of stripping and publicly humiliating the zoot-suiters was not prompted by the press, several reports did little to discourage the attacks:

. . . zoot-suits smouldered in the ashes of street bonfires where they had been tossed by grimly methodical tank forces of service men. . . . The zooters, who earlier in the day had spread boasts that they were organized to 'kill every cop' they could find, showed no inclination to try to make good their boasts. . . . Searching parties of soldiers, sailors and Marines hunted them out and drove them out into the open like bird dogs flushing quail. Procedure was standard: grab a zooter. Take off his pants and frock coat and tear them up or burn them. Trim the 'Argentine Ducktail' haircut that goes with the screwy costume.¹²

The second week of June witnessed the worst incidents of rioting and public disorder. A sailor was slashed and disfigured by a pachuco gang; a policeman was run down when he tried to question a car load of zoot-suiters; a young Mexican was stabbed at a party by drunken Marines; a trainload of sailors were stoned by



A young zoot-suiter is protected from a racist mob during an outbreak of street violence in Detroit.



Two *pachuco* zoot-suiters, one stripped to his underwear, lie beaten and humiliated in a Los Angeles street.

pachucos as their train approached Long Beach; streetfights broke out daily in San Bernardino; over 400 vigilantes toured the streets of San Diego looking for zoot-suiters, and many individuals from both factions were arrested.¹³ On 9 June, The *Los Angeles Times* published the first in a series of editorials designed to reduce the level of violence, but which also tried to allay the growing concern about the racial character of the riots.

To preserve the peace and good name of the Los Angeles area, the strongest measures must be taken jointly by the police, the Sheriff's office and Army and Navy authorities, to prevent any further outbreaks of 'zoot suit' rioting. While members of the armed forces received considerable provocation at the hands of the unidentified miscreants, such a situation cannot be cured by indiscriminate assault on every youth wearing a particular type of costume.

It would not do, for a large number of reasons, to let the impression circulate in South America that persons of Spanish-American ancestry were being singled out for mistreatment in Southern California. And the incidents here were capable of being exaggerated to give that impression.¹⁴

THE CHIEF, THE BLACK WIDOWS AND THE TOMAHAWK KID

The pleas for tolerance from civic authorities and representatives of the church and state had no immediate effect, and the riots became more frequent and more violent. A zoot-suited youth was shot by a special police officer in Azusa, a gang of *pachucos* were arrested for rioting and carrying weapons in the Lincoln Heights area; 25 black zoot-suiters were arrested for wrecking an electric railway train in Watts, and 1000 additional police were drafted into East Los Angeles. The press coverage increasingly focused on the most 'spectacular' incidents and began to identify leaders of zoot-suit style. On the morning of Thursday 10 June 1943, most newspapers carried photographs and reports on three 'notorious' zoot-suit gang leaders. Of the thousands of *pachucos* that allegedly belonged to the hundreds of zoot-suit gangs in Los Angeles, the press singled out the arrests of Lewis D English, a 23-year-old-black, charged with felony and carrying a '16-inch razor sharp butcher knife;' Frank H Tellez, a 22-year-old Mexican held on vagrancy charges, and another Mexican, Luis 'The Chief' Verduco (27 years of age), allegedly the leader of the Los Angeles *pachucos*.¹⁵

The arrests of English, Tellez and Verduco seemed to confirm popular perceptions of the zoot-suiters widely expressed for weeks prior to the riots. Firstly, that the zoot-suit gangs were predominantly, but not exclusively, comprised of black and Mexican youths. Secondly, that many of the zoot-suiters were old enough to be in the armed forces but were either avoiding conscription or had been exempted on medical grounds. Finally, in the case of Frank Tellez, who was photographed wearing a pancake hat with a rear feather, that zoot-suit style was an expensive fashion often funded by theft and petty extortion. Tellez allegedly wore a colourful long drape coat that was 'part of a \$75 suit' and a pair of pegged trousers 'very full at the knees and narrow at the cuffs' which were allegedly part of another suit. The caption of the Associated Press photograph indignantly added that 'Tellez holds a medical discharge from the Army'.¹⁶ What newspaper reports tended to suppress was information on the Marines who were arrested for inciting

riots, the existence of gangs of white American zoot-suiters, and the opinions of Mexican-American servicemen stationed in California, who were part of the war-effort but who refused to take part in vigilante raids on *pachuco* hangouts.

As the zoot-suit riots spread throughout California, to cities in Texas and Arizona, a new dimension began to influence press coverage of the riots in Los Angeles. On a day when 125 zoot-suited youths clashed with Marines in Watts and armed police had to quell riots in Boyle Heights, the Los Angeles press concentrated on a razor attack on a local mother, Betty Morgan. What distinguished this incident from hundreds of comparable attacks was that the assailants were girls. The press related the incident to the arrest of Amelia Venegas, a woman zoot-suiter who was charged with carrying, and threatening to use, a brass knuckleduster. The revelation that girls were active within *pachuco* subculture led to consistent press coverage of the activities of two female gangs: the Slick Chicks and the Black Widows.¹⁷ The latter gang took its name from the members' distinctive dress, black zoot-suit jackets, short black skirts and black fish-net stockings. In retrospect the Black Widows, and their active part in the subcultural violence of the zoot-suit riots, disturb conventional understandings of the concept of *pachuquismo*.

As Joan W Moore implies in *Homeboys*, her definitive study of Los Angeles youth gangs, the concept of *pachuquismo* is too readily and unproblematically equated with the better known concept of *machismo*.¹⁸ Undoubtedly, they share certain ideological traits, not least a swaggering and at times aggressive sense of power and bravado, but the two concepts derive from different sets of social definitions. Whereas *machismo* can be defined in terms of male power and sexuality, *pachuquismo* predominantly derives from ethnic, generational and class-based aspirations, and is less evidently a question of gender. What the zoot-suit riots brought to the surface was the complexity of *pachuco* style. The Black Widows and their aggressive image confounded the *pachuco* stereotype of the lazy male delinquent who avoided conscription for a life of dandyism and petty crime, and reinforced radical readings of *pachuco* subculture. The Black Widows were a reminder that ethnic and generational alienation was a pressing social problem and an indication of the tensions that existed in minority, low-income communities.

Although detailed information on the role of girls within zoot-suit sub-culture is limited to very brief press reports, the appearance of female *pachucos* coincided with a dramatic rise in the delinquency rates amongst girls aged between 12 and 20 years old. The disintegration of traditional family relationships and the entry of young women into the labour force undoubtedly had an effect on the social roles and responsibilities of female adolescents, but it is difficult to be precise about the relationships between changed patterns of social experience and the rise in delinquency. However, war-time society brought about an increase in unprepared and irregular sexual intercourse, which in turn led to significant increases in the rates of abortion, illegitimate births and venereal diseases. Although statistics are difficult to trace, there are many indications that the war years saw a remarkable increase in the numbers of young women who were taken into social care or referred to penal institutions, as a result of the specific social problems they had to encounter.

Later studies provide evidence that young women and girls were also heavily involved in the traffic and transaction of soft drugs. The *pachuco* sub-culture within the Los Angeles metropolitan area was directly associated with a widespread

growth in the use of marijuana. It has been suggested that female zoot-suiters concealed quantities of drugs on their bodies, since they were less likely to be closely searched by male members of the law enforcement agencies. Unfortunately, the absence of consistent or reliable information on the female gangs makes it particularly difficult to be certain about their status within the riots, or their place within traditions of feminine resistance. The Black Widows and Slick Chicks were spectacular in a sub-cultural sense, but their black drape jackets, tight skirts, fish net stockings and heavily emphasised make-up, were ridiculed in the press. The Black Widows clearly existed outside the orthodoxies of war-time society: playing no part in the industrial war effort, and openly challenging conventional notions of feminine beauty and sexuality.

Towards the end of the second week of June, the riots in Los Angeles were dying out. Sporadic incidents broke out in other cities, particularly Detroit, New York and Philadelphia, where two members of Gene Krupa's dance band were beaten up in a station for wearing the band's zoot-suit costumes; but these, like the residual events in Los Angeles, were not taken seriously. The authorities failed to read the inarticulate warning signs proffered in two separate incidents in California: in one a zoot-suiter was arrested for throwing gasoline flares at a theatre; and in the second another was arrested for carrying a silver tomahawk. The zoot-suit riots had become a public and spectacular enactment of social disaffection. The authorities in Detroit chose to dismiss a zoot-suit riot at the city's Cooley High School as an adolescent imitation of the Los Angeles disturbances.¹⁹ Within three weeks Detroit was in the midst of the worst race riot in its history.²⁰ The United States was still involved in the war abroad when violent events on the home front signalled the beginnings of a new era in racial politics.

OFFICIAL FEARS OF FIFTH COLUMN FASHION

Official reactions to the zoot-suit riots varied enormously. The most urgent problem that concerned California's State Senators was the adverse effect that the events might have on the relationship between the United States and Mexico. This concern stemmed partly from the wish to preserve good international relations, but rather more from the significance of relations with Mexico for the economy of Southern California, as an item in the *Los Angeles Times* made clear. 'In San Francisco Senator Downey declared that the riots may have 'extremely grave consequences' in impairing relations between the United States and Mexico, and may endanger the program of importing Mexican labor to aid in harvesting California crops.'²¹ These fears were compounded when the Mexican Embassy formally drew the zoot-suit riots to the attention of the State Department. It was the fear of an 'international incident'²² that could only have an adverse effect on California's economy, rather than any real concern for the social conditions of the Mexican-American community, that motivated Governor Warren of California to order a public investigation into the causes of the riots. In an ambiguous press statement, the Governor hinted that the riots may have been instigated by outside or even foreign agitators:

As we love our country and the boys we are sending overseas to defend it, we are all duty bound to suppress every discordant activity which is designed



The zoot-suit style reaches London. A young couple dance on the floor of a ballroom in Hammersmith circa 1944



A gang of Detroit zoot-suiters line up against the wall of a hotel. As the youths wait to be searched by the police their girlfriends stand in single file along the edge of the sidewalk.

to stir up international strife or adversely affect our relationships with our allies in the United Nations.²³

The zoot-suit riots provoked two related investigations; a fact finding investigative committee headed by Attorney General Robert Kenny and an un-American activities investigation presided over by State Senator Jack B Tenney. The un-American activities investigation was ordered 'to determine whether the present zoot-suit riots were sponsored by Nazi agencies attempting to spread disunity between the United States and Latin-American countries'.²⁴ Senator Tenney, a member of the un-American Activities committee for Los Angeles County, claimed he had evidence that the zoot-suit riots were 'axis-sponsored' but the evidence was never presented.²⁵ However, the notion that the riots might have been initiated by outside agitators persisted throughout the month of June, and was fuelled by Japanese propaganda broadcasts accusing the North American government of ignoring the brutality of US marines. The arguments of the un-American activities investigation were given a certain amount of credibility by a Mexican pastor based in Watts, who according to the press had been 'a pretty rough customer himself, serving as a captain in Pancho Villa's revolutionary army.'²⁶ Reverend Francisco Quintanilla, the pastor of the Mexican Methodist church, was convinced the riots were the result of fifth columnists. 'When boys start attacking servicemen it means the enemy is right at home. It means they are being fed vicious propaganda by enemy agents who wish to stir up all the racial and class hatreds they can put their evil fingers on.'²⁷

The attention given to the dubious claims of nazi-instigation tended to obfuscate other more credible opinions. Examination of the social conditions of *pachuco* youths tended to be marginalized in favour of other more 'newsworthy' angles. At no stage in the press coverage were the opinions of community workers or youth leaders sought, and so, ironically, the most progressive opinion to appear in the major newspapers was offered by the Deputy Chief of Police, EW Lester. In press releases and on radio he provided a short history of gang subcultures in the Los Angeles area and then tried, albeit briefly, to place the riots in a social context.

The Deputy Chief said most of the youths came from overcrowded colorless homes that offered no opportunities for leisure-time activities. He said it is wrong to blame law enforcement agencies for the present situation, but that society as a whole must be charged with mishandling the problems.²⁸

On the morning of Friday, 11 June 1943, The *Los Angeles Times* broke with its regular practices and printed an editorial appeal, 'Time For Sanity' on its front page. The main purpose of the editorial was to dispel suggestions that the riots were racially motivated, and to challenge the growing opinion that white servicemen from the Southern States had actively colluded with the police in their vigilante campaign against the zoot-suiters.

There seems to be no simple or complete explanation for the growth of the grotesque gangs. Many reasons have been offered, some apparently valid, some farfetched. But it does appear to be definitely established that any attempts at curbing the movement have had nothing whatever to do with race

persecution, although some elements have loudly raised the cry of this very thing.²⁹

A month later, the editorial of July's issue of *Crisis* presented a diametrically opposed point of view:

These riots would not occur – no matter what the instant provocation – if the vast majority of the population, including more often than not the law enforcement officers and machinery, did not share in varying degrees the belief that Negroes are and must be kept second-class citizens.³⁰

But this view got short shrift, particularly from the authorities, whose initial response to the riots was largely retributive. Emphasis was placed on arrest and punishment. The Los Angeles City Council considered a proposal from Councillor Norris Nelson, that 'it be made a jail offense to wear zoot-suits with reat pleats within the city limits of LA'³¹, and a discussion ensued for over an hour before it was resolved that the laws pertaining to rioting and disorderly conduct were sufficient to contain the zoot-suit threat. However, the council did encourage the War Production Board (WPB) to reiterate its regulations on the manufacture of suits. The regional office of the WPB based in San Francisco investigated tailors manufacturing in the area of men's fashion and took steps 'to curb illegal production of men's clothing in violation of WPB limitation orders.'³² Only when Governor Warren's fact-finding commission made its public recommendations did the political analysis of the riots go beyond the first principles of punishment and proscription. The recommendations called for a more responsible co-operation from the press; a programme of special training for police officers working in multi-racial communities; additional detention centres; a juvenile forestry camp for youth under the age of 16; an increase in military and shore police; an increase in the youth facilities provided by the church; an increase in neighbourhood recreation facilities and an end to discrimination in the use of public facilities. In addition to these measures, the commission urged that arrests should be made without undue emphasis on members of minority groups and encouraged lawyers to protect the rights of youths arrested for participation in gang activity. The findings were a delicate balance of punishment and palliative; it made no significant mention of the social conditions of Mexican labourers and no recommendations about the kind of public spending that would be needed to alter the social experiences of *pachuco* youth. The outcome of the zoot-suit riots was an inadequate, highly localized and relatively ineffective body of short term public policies that provided no guidelines for the more serious riots in Detroit and Harlem later in the same summer.

THE MYSTERY OF THE SIGNIFYING MONKEY

The *pachuco* is the prey of society, but instead of hiding he adorns himself to attract the hunter's attention. Persecution redeems him and breaks his solitude: his salvation depends on him becoming part of the very society he appears to deny.³³

The zoot-suit was associated with a multiplicity of different traits and conditions. It was simultaneously the garb of the victim and the attacker, the persecutor and the persecuted, the 'sinister clown' and the grotesque dandy. But the central opposition was between the style of the delinquent and that of the disinherited. To wear a zoot-suit was to risk the repressive intolerance of wartime society and to invite the attention of the police, the parent generation and the uniformed members of the armed forces. For many *pachucos* the zoot-suit riots were simply hightimes in Los Angeles when momentarily they had control of the streets; for others it was a realization that they were outcasts in a society that was not of their making. For the black radical writer, Chester Himes, the riots in his neighbourhood were unambiguous: 'Zoot Riots are Race Riots.'³⁴ For other contemporary commentators the wearing of the zoot-suit could be anything from unconscious dandyism to a conscious 'political' engagement. The zoot-suit riots were *not* 'political' riots in the strictest sense, but for many participants they were an entry into the language of politics, an inarticulate rejection of the 'straight world' and its organization.

It is remarkable how many post-war activists were inspired by the zoot-suit disturbances. Luis Valdez of the radical theatre company, El Teatro Campesino, allegedly learned the 'chicano' from his cousin the zoot-suiter Billy Miranda.³⁵ The novelists Ralph Ellison and Richard Wright both conveyed a literary and political fascination with the power and potential of the zoot-suit. One of Ellison's editorials for the journal *Negro Quarterly* expressed his own sense of frustration at the enigmatic attraction of zoot-suit style.

A third major problem, and one that is indispensable to the centralization and direction of power is that of learning the meaning of myths and symbols which abound among the Negro masses. For without this knowledge, leadership, no matter how correct its program, will fail. Much in Negro life remains a mystery; perhaps the zoot-suit conceals profound political meaning; perhaps the symmetrical frenzy of the Lindy-hop conceals clues to great potential powers, if only leaders could solve this riddle.³⁶

Although Ellison's remarks are undoubtedly compromised by their own mysterious idealism, he touches on the zoot-suit's major source of interest. It is in everyday rituals that resistance can find natural and unconscious expression. In retrospect, the zoot-suit's history can be seen as a point of intersection, between the related potential of ethnicity and politics on the one hand, and the pleasures of identity and difference on the other. It is the zoot-suit's political and ethnic associations that have made it such a rich reference point for subsequent generations. From the music of Thelonious Monk and Kid Creole to the jazz-poetry of Larry Neal, the zoot-suit has inherited new meanings and new mysteries. In his book *Hoodoo Hollerin' Bebop Ghosts*, Neal uses the image of the zoot-suit as the symbol of Black America's cultural resistance. For Neal, the zoot-suit ceased to be a costume and became a tapestry of meaning, where music, politics and social action merged. The zoot-suit became a symbol for the enigmas of Black culture and the mystery of the signifying monkey:

*But there is rhythm here
Its own special substance.*

*I hear Billie sing, no Good Man, and dig Prez, wearing the Zoot suit of life, the Porkpie hat tilted at the correct angle; through the Harlem smoke of beer and whisky, I understand the mystery of the Signifying Monkey.*³⁷

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- 1 Ralph Ellison *Invisible Man* New York 1947 p 380
- 2 *Invisible Man* p 381
- 3 'Zoot Suit Originated in Georgia' *New York Times* 11 June 1943 p 21
- 4 For the most extensive sociological study of the zoot-suit riots of 1943 see Ralph H Turner and Samuel J Surace 'Zoot Suiters and Mexicans: Symbols in Crowd Behaviour' *American Journal of Sociology* 62 1956 pp 14–20
- 5 Octavio Paz *The Labyrinth of Solitude* London 1967 pp 5–6
- 6 *Labyrinth of Solitude* p 8
- 7 As note 6
- 8 See KL Nelson (ed) *The Impact of War on American Life* New York 1971
- 9 OE Schoeffler and W Gale *Esquire's Encyclopaedia of Twentieth-Century Men's Fashion* New York 1973 p 24
- 10 As note 6
- 11 'Zoot-Suiters Again on the Prowl as Navy Holds Back Sailors' *Washington Post* 9 June 1943 p 1
- 12 Quoted in S Menefee *Assignment USA* New York 1943 p 189
- 13 Details of the riots are taken from newspaper reports and press releases for the weeks in question, particularly from the *Los Angeles Times*, *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Washington Star* and *Time Magazine*
- 14 'Strong Measures Must be Taken Against Rioting' *Los Angeles Times* 9 June 1943 p 4
- 15 'Zoot-Suit Fighting Spreads On the Coast' *New York Times* 10 June 1943 p 23
- 16 As note 15
- 17 'Zoot-Girls Use Knife in Attack' *Los Angeles Times* 11 June 1943 p 1
- 18 Joan W Moore *Homeboys: Gangs, Drugs and Prison in the Barrios of Los Angeles* Philadelphia 1978
- 19 'Zoot Suit Warfare Spreads to Pupils of Detroit Area' *Washington Star* 11 June 1943 p 1
- 20 Although the Detroit Race Riots of 1943 were not zoot-suit riots, nor evidently about 'youth' or 'delinquency', the social context in which they took place was obviously comparable. For a lengthy study of the Detroit riots see R Shogun and T Craig *The Detroit Race Riot: a study in violence* Philadelphia and New York 1964
- 21 'Zoot Suit War Inquiry Ordered by Governor' *Los Angeles Times* 9 June 1943 p A
- 22 'Warren Orders Zoot Suit Quiz; Quiet Reigns After Rioting' *Los Angeles Times* 10 June 1943 p 1
- 23 As note 22
- 24 'Tenney Feels Riots Caused by Nazi Move for Disunity' *Los Angeles Times* 9 June 1943 p A
- 25 As note 24
- 26 'Watts Pastor Blames Riots on Fifth Column' *Los Angeles Times* 11 June 1943 p A
- 27 As note 26
- 28 'California Governor Appeals for Quelling of Zoot Suit Riots' *Washington Star* 10 June 1943 pA3
- 29 'Time for Sanity' *Los Angeles Times* 11 June 1943 p 1
- 30 'The Riots' *The Crisis* July 1943 p 199
- 31 'Ban on Freak Suits Studied by Councilmen' *Los Angeles Times* 9 June 1943 p A3
- 32 *Labyrinth of Solitude* p 9
- 33 Chester Himes 'Zoot Riots are Race Riots' *The Crisis* July 1943; reprinted in Himes *Black on Black: Baby Sister and Selected Writings* London 1975
- 34 El Teatro Campesino presented the first Chicano play to achieve full commercial Broadway production. The play, written by Luis Valdez and entitled 'Zoot Suit' was a drama

documentary on the Sleepy Lagoon murder and the events leading to the Los Angeles riots. (The Sleepy Lagoon murder of August 1942 resulted in 24 *pachucos* being indicted for conspiracy to murder.)

36 Quoted in Larry Neal 'Ellison's Zoot Suit' in J Hersey (ed) *Ralph Ellison: A Collection of Critical Essays* New Jersey 1974 p 67

37 From Larry Neal's poem 'Malcolm X: an Autobiography' in L Neal *Hoodoo Hollerin' Bebop Ghosts* Washington DC 1974 p 9



A Los Angeles police officer pretends to clip the 'Argentine' hair-style of a young *pachuco* zoot-suitor.