Zoot to Boot: The Zoot Suit as Both Costume and Symbol

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Zoot youths, dressed in exaggerated coats and flamboyant attire, were attacked on a Los Angeles, California street on May 31, 1943. The aggressors, primarily sailors, descended upon the boys out for a night on the town, beat them, stripped them of their suits, and burned the costumes in the streets. The naked and bruised youths were left alone as the mob dissipated until the police began to round the youths up as hoodlums and juvenile deviants.[1]

Over the past several years, historical work has focused on Los Angeles's Hispanic community, especially during the 1940s and the later Chicano movement. The Zoot Suit Riot and the Sleepy Lagoon murder, a lesser-known but equally important event, have received a great deal of attention from a diverse group of interdisciplinary scholars. They have given the suit a preeminent role in analysis of the Chicano movement.[2] Some scholars have studied the event and the signature suit through a psychological lens,[3] while others have approached the events and their symbols using traditional methodologies.[4] In addition, scholars have striven to identify the unique and powerful racial politics that accompanied the suit.[5] Beyond studies of 1940s American society, especially the Mexican-American community, examinations of the zoot suit appear in discussions of jazz and leisure[6] and in cultural studies that explore such concepts as cultural capital, memory, and identity.[7] These latter scholars argue that the suit itself and its use merit attention.

This essay examines the discourses of popular memory, cultural capital, symbol construction, and Chicano community. It explores who determines meaning, and why. It shows how values ascribed to the suit by minority groups as well as those accepted by majority constructed discourses of community. While the former group embraced the unique fashion as a symbol of belonging, the latter attacked it as a mark of difference.

The Birth of the Zoot Suit

Many conflicting stories surround the creation of the first zoot suit, but agreement exists about its importance in the development and self-identification of minority communities within the United States during the

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1940s and after. *Chicago Defender* columnist S. I. Hayakawa, in 1943, declared that the zoot suit expressed the rebellion by young people against drab slum life through the colorful costume that identified them as members of their own society.[8]

The zoot suit, as a distinctive fashion often bright in color, consisted of exaggerated shoulders and extra-long jackets, often reaching the subject's knees, forming a characteristic triangular shape. Equally exaggerated pants joined these unique coats. The pleated slacks billowed from the waist and closed in tight at the ankle. The ankle cuffs were so small the foot could barely pass through.[9] The suits were accessorized with equally distinctive and exaggerated watch chains,[10] some hanging far below the knees (the sexual allusion of the oversized chain often hanging between the legs cannot be dismissed), and real leather-soled shoes. These shoes had varied meanings ascribed to them as the youths saw the soles as a sign of defiance and wealth and a symbol of status. During World War II, leather was rationed and the soles of these shoes were extremely thin. The average American, dedicated to home front activities and rationing, saw the shoes as an ostentatious misallocation of rationed goods. Many youths chose to double sole their shoes to ensure longevity, only further angering the rationing boards. The police viewed the double-soled shoes as a weapon to be used in a fight.[11]

The suit first gained fame in the 1940s as a part of the jazz craze. Connected closely with African-American counterculture, it was easily identified on the street, in the club, or anywhere the wearer chose to strut. The suit soon found a popular niche. Duke Ellington in 1941 recorded a powerful all-black musical revue, titled *Jump for Joy,* which employed satire, jazz music, and popular dance as it covered a wide range of pressing social topics. One of the many skits, "Made to Order," took place in a tailor shop, where a young man orders a zoot suit for Easter, what he calls a five-drape suit with "shoulders 18 inches this-away and 18 inches that-away."[12] Perhaps the two best-known musicians credited with popularizing the suit were Zoot Sims and Cab Calloway. Both routinely wore the fashion and were nationally known for their wild style. Calloway brought the suit to the silver screen in the 1943 production *Stormy Weather,*[13] making a statement dressed in his signature white zoot suit and wide-brimmed hat. One writer said, the " . . . knees of Calloway's super-dooper hep rags measure 32 inches across—the cuffs are a scant 11 inches—the coat has lapels five inches wide—the coat tails come down below his knees and his watch chain is one full yard long."[14] Calloway told the press that his shoes were so thin he could roll them up.[15] The suit was his calling card to membership in the vanguard of hip.

The rebellious cultural nature of jazz music extended to the zoot suit. The popular song "Zoot Suit for My Sunday Gal"[16] made a direct connection between the suit and jazz. L. Wolfe Gilbert and Bob O'Brien's popular lyrics equated the fashion to the 'cool' expressed in the fast pace of jazz.

HIM:
I want a zoot suit with a reet pleat
And a drape shape, and a stuff cuff
To look sharp enough to see my Sunday gal

HER:
You want a reef sleeve with a right stripe
And a rare square, so the gals will stare
When they see you struttin' with your Sunday pal

(HIM: That's me)
You wanta look keen so your dream will say
"You don't look like the same beau"
So keen that she'll scream, "Here comes my walkin' rainbow"[17]

The song fused sex appeal, zoot suits, and bebop as a symbol of potency and power. Soon it was hard to divorce the fashion from a sense of hypermasculinity and potency set to a beat. Black musicians who adopted the outfit soon infused the fashion with cultural value and gave it powerful signifiers of "hipness," power, and community. As musicians adopted the outfit, hordes of youths emulated the fashion trend.[18] Young hipsters put on a beret, grew a goatee, and dressed in the zoot suit as a visual marker of membership in a subculture, a bohemian community in which minority youths belonged while the nation otherwise marginalized them.[19]

Criminalizing the Domestic Foreigner: World War II in the Barrio

Mexican immigrants and Mexican-American youth also donned the suit as their own form of group identification during the 1940s. During World War II, while U.S. military uniforms appeared everywhere and American flags flew from the stores, schools, and offices, exotic countercultural signs emerged, especially among minority, working class, youth.[20] The suit became the symbol for, as Mauricio Mazón explained, " . . . youthful disdain for established mores," and therefore it had iconoclastic implications that taunted dominant society through both group membership and individuality.[21] The suit's symbolic power did not rest on its wide shoulders, but on the cultural capital that came to individuals who wore the distinctive garb. The suit had an element of resistance, and, because the amount of material needed in tailoring was excessive and therefore illegal, was consciously dangerous.

Owning a zoot suit in wartime was not a crime, but it was a crime to manufacture the suit. The War Production Board placed a $10,000 fine on tailors who ignored the restrictions on cloth and material to make them.[22] Thus the suits existed in clear opposition to military uniforms, and they

became an object of hate, a substitute for the distant enemy. They served as a target for civilians under wartime stress.[23] A uniform of cultural resistance served as a reminder to the ubiquitously uniformed military men and women and the nation that was mobilized to fight for a freedom and equality that did not exist for citizens and residents of the United States.

World War II hysteria caused a great deal of ill will toward the Mexican-American community and by the summer of 1943, many saw the zoot suit as a symbol of subversion.[24] The generally white, Protestant society, caught up in wartime anxiety and patriotism, saw the suits as symbols of opposition to the war effort and of waste of scarce, needed raw materials. The youths seized opportunities to demonstrate their opposition to general society by such actions as insulting sailors and using the Nazi salute.[25] The anxiety gripping the majority of the population made the zoot suiters into potentially dangerous subversives.

Sleepy Lagoon Murder Case: A Fashion on Trial

On the night of August 1, 1942, at least two fights took place, the first at the swimming hole called the Sleepy Lagoon and the second at a party at the Delgadillo family home. Shortly afterward the body of José Díaz was found outside the Delgadillo house. He died without regaining consciousness in the hospital. The cause of death was determined to be murder by a massive blow to the head.

The Los Angeles police quickly began to arrest suspects.[26] The crux of the police's evidence, and the prosecution's case, was that the seventeen boys arrested and charged were not merely a group,[27] but were in fact a gang that had conspired to commit a crime.[28] Focusing on their zoot suits, their haircuts, and mangy appearance after months in jail, the prosecution relied largely on popular opinion to generate the impression that the boys were in fact a gang. The zoot suit was introduced through mainstream media as a sign of criminality and aberration. The rights of the youths were violated throughout the trial. The most intriguing of these injustices was the judge's refusal to allow them to change their clothes for months. The prosecution put the suits themselves on trial. As the Sleepy Lagoon Defense Committee (SLDC), a group formed to fight for the persecuted youths, argued, the prosecution made "zoot-suits and pachuco haircuts . . . crimes," and also being born " . . . in the U.S.A.—of a Spanish-speaking father or mother."[29] On January 15, 1943, a jury convinced twenty-two defendants (seventeen tried en masse) of murder.

Not until October 24, 1944, were the injustices of the Sleepy Lagoon case reversed and the boys freed from prison. The SLDC viewed the appeal as a half victory. While the seventeen defendants were freed and the charges dropped, the court refused to acknowledge that racism played any role in the jury decision.[30]

Cartoon Truths: Animated Persecution

One of the newest, and most effective, means of cultural propaganda during World War II was the animated cartoon. Warner Brothers, Disney, Paramount, and many other studios joined forces with the U.S. government to develop inspiring representations of America. The use of this medium affected the values of the majority population about the zoot suit.

In "Spirit of '43" the audience meets an "average" American played by Donald Duck, complete with his sailor's uniform. He has just gotten paid and is contemplating what to do with his newly gained booty. A grandfatherly duck dressed in a kilt and with a Scottish brogue tells Donald to save his money so he can help support the war effort. Within seconds, a devil emerges: another duck, dressed in a zoot suit, snatches Donald away and tells him to spend his money; after all, that is what it is there for. He brings him to "The Idle Hour Club" and tries to convince him that entertainment is worth his pay. As the cartoon progresses, the zoot suit-clad duck becomes more and more fascist in nature, complete with a swastika bow tie, a Hitler mustache, and the club doors become huge swinging swastikas. As can be expected in wartime propaganda, the figure favorable to the Allies wins out and the cartoon becomes an advertisement for paying one's taxes and the power and magnificence of U.S. factories in the war effort.[31]

The association of the zoot suit, subversive waste, and Nazi Germany is deliberate. The contrast between the characters representing devil and angel depends on their costumes and the associations conveyed by them. Fears and un-Americanism are placed on the exaggerated shoulders of the zoot suit.

While the "Spirit of '43" and many similar cartoons employed well-known fears and labels associated with the zoot suit and Chicano youths who wore them to represent villains, another Warner Brothers cartoon presents the zoot suit as representative of the foreign, and salacious immorality that could undermine the war effort. In "Book Revue" a bookstore comes to life at night and the characters of the books begin to talk. The narrator, Daffy Duck, as a jazz artist character dressed in a zoot suit, embodies the "jitterbug" relationship to the suit. Moreover, the character speaks with an accent. Daffy does not sound American, but rather, he is foreign. Warner Brothers made the connection between the suit and the Mexican population in the United States, and the connection between the zoot suit and foreignness. The suit, and by extension those who wore them, were foreign, therefore un-American and suspect.

Fashion in the Streets

Perhaps the most well-known flashpoint associated with the zoot suit came in the Zoot Suit Riot in Los Angeles, California. On May 31, 1943, the streets of East Los Angeles were swarming with activity; suddenly a group of

servicemen began to attack youths wearing zoot suits. They stripped off the suits, burned them in the street, and finally left the youths naked next to piles of ash. Described as " . . . a carnival-like atmosphere in which servicemen and civilians acted out inhibitions about the war in a complex series of symbolic rituals of death, rebirth, initiation, and role reversal,"[32] the riot was an explosion of racialized violence.

The riot was a conflict of identity. In the early 1940s, the U.S. government constructed a Navy training facility in the middle of East Los Angeles, the most important Mexican-American neighborhood of Los Angeles.[33] From that moment, the residents of the community and the sailors were in constant conflict. Both groups had particular understandings of what it meant to wear a zoot suit, what it indicated about themselves as well as their communities. For young Mexicans and Mexican Americans the suit bestowed membership in a hypermasculine and powerful community, even though they were excluded from the mainstream culture. The sailors, on the other hand, saw the suits as unpatriotic and wasteful. Both groups defined themselves by what they wore. The mainstream press, radio and movies, and the L.A. police department perpetuated the negative associations made between the zooters and Mexican Americans as a whole to violence, otherness, and, perhaps, even fascism.[34] Through cultural associations, the suit became for many symbolic shorthand for danger, waste, otherness, and racial inequality.

The zoot suit had acquired symbolic valences in part by the fallout from the riot as a cultural expression of what it meant to be Mexican-American. The servicemen attacked that symbolism, and their goal was not to harm but to humiliate. They stripped the boys as a means of dehumanizing and devaluing their identities, challenging their community. This process echoed the actions of drill sergeants in the military training.[35] Unlike servicemen, the Chicano youths were stripped of their clothing and cultural power and left naked, while military recruits received uniforms with rich cultural meanings to wear while they rebuilt their identities.

For Mexican Americans, the Zoot Suit Riot became shorthand for a cultural assault. During the riots the identity, pride, and power the community associated with the suits was dramatically and violently ripped from the bodies of the youths. This image of unwanted abuse and the memory of the youths who had the courage to resist and wear the suits empowered the community and became a symbol of strength, especially during the later Chicano movement.

El grito del rebelde: A Movement Clad in Polyester

Fear of Nazis and Japanese were soon replaced with the Cold War "Age of Anxiety." McCarthyism, a global communist menace, and the terrors of atomic destruction overshadowed the cultural movement that had emerged in Los Angeles in the inter-war years.[36] Once again seen as un-American by

mainstream America, the zoot suit boys were now labeled communist rather than fascist. Young Mexican Americans and minority peoples became targets of suspicion and even persecution.[37] Instead of desiring a distinct identity apart from their Anglo neighbors, the citizens of East Los Angeles chose to blend in or be deported.

The postwar period also signaled a move back to the status quo for the economic relationship between Mexicans, Mexican Americans, and the rest of America—a relationship of labor and production. It was in this spirit that the Bracero program, a work program between the governments of Mexico and the United States, was further expanded.[38] Within this political and social environment, the emerging Chicano community retracted culturally into a relative forced silence.

The Zoot Suit Riot, the Sleepy Lagoon case, and similar events were not as important as how they were remembered by those present and those too young to be there. From the late 1960s into the 1980s, the Chicano community undertook an active campaign of identity construction. During the years of the Chicano movement, activists embraced the zoot suit as a symbol of active resistance in the history of their ethnicity and chose to engage these memories to unite the community and construct a sense of identity within that community. The zoot suit gained power as a means of protest as well as a means of affiliation. The leaders of the Chicano movement employed the zoot suit as a cultural weapon, a symbol of community through resistance, while the white majority community chose to employ the same symbol as a target.

This sense of *La comunidad* in the Chicano movement existed from its earliest days through to the movement's most active years.[39] It was this sense of community that allowed for the unity of César Chávez's National Farm Workers Association strike in spite of the extreme diversity of supporters.[40] It also facilitated the means of protest and education that the unions and protest groups chose to employ. While segmentation existed within the Chicano movement, certain cultural understandings and a sense of community kept all the differing groups united in contrast to the social movements of the past.

Emerging from the first National Chicano Youth Liberation Conference, held in Denver in 1969, "El plan de Aztlán"[41] served as the guideline for much of the rhetoric of the Chicano movement. It established the idea of nation through ethnic nationalism as an entity that "transcends all religious, political, class, and economic factions or boundaries. Nationalism is the common denominator that all members of La raza can agree upon."[42] The plan calls upon the people to take control of their "UNITY . . . ECONOMY . . . EDUCATION . . . INSTITUTIONS . . . SELF-DEFENSE . . . CULTURE . . . [and] POLITICAL LIBERATION."[43] The authors of this plan contended that only through awareness, empowerment, and nationalism could they achieve the goals of the Chicano movement. Culture had the most universal and long lasting role in the Chicano fight for rights and identity.

As "El plan de Aztlán" clearly laid out, culture played a major role in the development and identity of the entire Chicano movement:

> CULTURAL values of our own people strengthen our identity and the moral background of the movement. Our culture unites and educates the family of La raza towards liberation with one heart and one mind. We must insure that our writers, poets, musicians, and artists produce literature and art that is appealing to our people and relates to our revolutionary culture. Our cultural values of life, family, and home will serve as a powerful weapon to defeat the gringo dollar value system and encourage the process of love and brotherhood.[44]

Culturists have noted the power of a shared culture to unite the hearts and souls of a people; the Chicano movement was no different. The idea was to unite the Chicano community through a sense of shared identity through cultural production and a shared canon of images, symbols, and cultural artifacts.

The engineers of the movement used the production of cultural symbols and works to generate a sense of unity and community within an eclectic group. While a wide range of minorities wore the suit, it was capable of being used as an especially effective Chicano symbol because the Sleepy Lagoon case and the later Zoot Suit Riot served as two unique examples of resistance.

One of the most direct means of cultural exchange within the Chicano movement came with the posters in the hands of the protesters. Shifra M. Goldman argues that posters serve to unite and connect with the people in unique ways.[45] Some reach people through images, while others through words; they all make connections to a shared cultural memory. Many of the posters utilized Mexican symbols because they are a large part of Chicano memory. The image of the zoot suit provided a distinctly Chicano symbol. For example, the poster "Zoot Suit" presents two youths posed powerfully in their signature suits. No words or definitions are provided on the poster but the Chicano community needed no subtitles to relate to their shared history. The Chicano population recognized the strength, power, and unity between the community and the youths. In the upper corners of the image are two small sacred hearts that provided a sort of sanctification of the ideas and ideals the youths represent. The two young men also stand upon and in front of geometric designs reminiscent of Aztec art. Through the incorporation of these native symbols, the power and sacred understandings of Aztec nobility connected to the zoot youth and the ideals of Chicano self-definition.

Protest theater served a particularly powerful and important tool in the construction of Chicano identity. Playwright Luis Valdez made his first forays into theater and protest through the Farmer's Union skits.[46] These were paramount in establishing the crusade to define what it meant to be Mexican-American and a part of the greater Chicano movement. It was on

UFA stages that the play "Zoot Suit" was first shown. "Zoot Suit," arguably Valdez's most well-known skit, focuses on the trial and story of the Sleepy Lagoon court case and was expanded and played on stages throughout Los Angeles.[47]

"Zoot Suit," combining magical realism and historical fact, utilizes the native Aztec roots of Mexicans, the realities of racial injustice in the United States, pride in East Los Angeles, and the power of the zoot suit to define the life of the play's main character, Henry. The play serves as a vehicle to illuminate the development and progression of the community as a whole—the birth of the Chicano. Throughout the play a spirit guide or conscience accompanies Henry. This man, referred to only as "El Pachuco," wears a full zoot suit, complete with the outlandish hat, exaggerated chain, and impressive billowed pants. It is El Pachuco who opens and closes each scene. In fact, it is El Pachuco and not Henry who has the last line of the play, "Henry Reyna . . . El Pachuco . . . the Man . . . the myth . . . still lives."[48] El Pachuco occupies such a prominent role because the play is the story of the Chicano people embracing who they are, where they come from, and what they must do next.

In 1981 Valdez was able to release a direct adaptation of his play "Zoot Suit" as a full-length film.[49] The film provided a way in which to connect with Chicanos nationwide, and through the memory of Henry and his fellow zooters create a national consciousness that supports and furthers the ultimate aims of *El Movimiento*. While the film was modified from its original version and formatted to fit the screen, the play's spirit of resistance remained. The viewer sees only one camera angle and the audience comes in and out of view throughout the movie. The movie was filmed in such a way as to include the viewer as an active participant, as was the case when it was a stage production. Valdez wanted to connect Chicanos to their Mexican and earlier indigenous heritage.[50]

While full-length feature films represent a well-known mode of culture within the United States, the Chicano movement brought with it a myriad of other media of cultural expression. Perhaps one of the most expressive is the mural. The mural has an extremely important role in Mexican popular expression and therefore the medium serves as a unique means of cultural literacy for Chicanos. This memory moved Chicana artist Judith F. Baca when the Army Corps of Engineers contacted her about participating in a beatification project in East Los Angeles in 1974.[51] The project called for painting a representation of the history of California on the Tujunga Wash drainage Canal in the San Fernando Valley (The L.A. River). Baca united with the Social and Public Arts Resource Center of Los Angeles (SPARC) soon after being approached and in 1976 began a mural project of unmatched proportions.[52]

The mural traces the history of the region's many ethnic groups and challenges many white-focused understandings of the city's history. Baca explained that what overwhelmed her was that through what she called the "the Great Wall experience" she learned about the "courage of individuals

in history who endured, spoke out, and overcame seemingly insurmountable obstacles."[53]

The mural tells a story of the numerous ethnic groups in Los Angeles. The segment dedicated to Chicano history includes three main images. The first image is of David Gonzales, a Chicano Medal of Honor recipient, and his mother. The hero is surrounded by family photos and, despite the name under the section, an untrained eye would be unable to distinguish Gonzales from any other American hero. A great number of Mexican and Mexican-American youths enlisted and fought in World War II, but their families and friends were denied respect and honor. Adding further depth to the image, the photographs laid out behind the central image include snapshots of what one can imagine is Gonzalez and his family dressed in zoot suits. Within this frame, Baca introduces the argument that one can be Chicano and American, one can wear a zoot suit and a uniform. The two identities are not inherently incompatible.

The second panel of the 1940s section of the mural protrays the Zoot Suit Riot. The image on the wall presents a pair of police boots standing over the image of a curled up youth stripped of his clothes and a pair of legs climbing out of a taxi stepping on a newspaper reading "Zoot Suiters learn Lesson in Fights with Servicemen." What lesson did they learn? The police boots hovering over the stripped youth and foreboding stance, echoed again in the boots' shadow, are extremely sexualized, masculine, and dominating. The stripped youth, on the other hand, is crouched and submissive. His legs are completely hidden by the rest of his body; so he literally has no legs to stand on. The figure in the position of power is anonymous. The boots and pants do not belong to the Navy personnel who were largely responsible for the riot. Baca made the representation not about Navy violence but rather about community subjugation at the hand of all authorities. The origin of the boots remains purposefully obscure because the larger message remains subjugation. Placing the only image of a zoot suit between the legs of "authority" serves to establish the masculine value placed upon the symbol by both communities. The stripped youth has symbolically been emasculated by the authority figure while simultaneously reaffirming the assertion of masculinity by those in power.

The final image in the series is dedicated to the Bracero program and the struggle to organize farm workers. Central to the image is a portrait of labor organizer Luisa Moreno wrapped in the flag of the Congress of Hispanic Groups. Even wrapped within the flag of the union, Baca presents the image of a woman in a position of power. Moreno is surrounded by flags of the movement and trains, which echo the angles of the officer's dominating pose in the previous image, that transported the Bracero workers to the fields. This seemingly simplistic image makes historic connections to the few rural protests of the late 1940s, presents an image of feminism within the Chicano movement, and alludes to the future of the Chicano movement that would grow from similar rural protest twenty-odd years later.

It's Just a Joke: Meaning Emerges through Comedy

While the zoot suits represented power, pride, and resistance among the Chicano community, the cultural understandings surrounding the suits were not restricted to the activities of Chicano movement activists. In 1979, the Steven Spielberg comedy *1941* attributed un-American values and unpatriotic behavior to the suit.[54] While the comedy places its main focus on the false air raid scare that struck Los Angeles in 1942, it refers to the constant interplay between youths dressed in zoot suits and the military. The two zoot suit clad youths featured in the film are not Mexican Americans; in fact, the racial element is largely missing. Instead the youths are accused of being un-American and unpatriotic throughout the film because they are focused on fashion and the upcoming dance instead of enlisting when their nation needs them. These were common charges against the Mexican-American community during World War II. The fact that the youths contesting the military men within the film are white addresses the contrasting cultural perceptions of the suit.

Likewise, a short scene within the popular show "M*A*S*H," for example, enters into the debate surrounding the zoot suit when the clothing is used within a 1982 episode as a Halloween costume for the cross-dressing Lebanese-American character Klinger.[55] The garb gains its humor through the fact that Klinger is almost always in women's wear and contradicts this image by entering in a full suit. He is also the character that tries repeatedly to get discharged from the Army and is constantly being accused by the hyper-conservative characters as being un-American. Yet, the character wearing the suit is notably racially differentiated and Klinger is a largely feminized character.

Comedy again enters the dialogue of Chicano identity within the 1987 film *Born in East L.A.*[56] Written and directed by Cheech Marin, the film follows Rudy, an East Los Angeles native who finds himself mistakenly picked up in an Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) raid and deported to Mexico without his wallet. Unable to prove his U.S. citizenship, he finds himself trying to cross the border illegally. It seems that he is too American to maneuver in Tijuana, but too Mexican to be allowed back. Marin presents East Los Angeles as its own world. Rudy finds himself unacceptable both as a U.S. and as a Mexican citizen because he is a member of the unique "nation" of East Los Angeles. As a signifier of this distinct East Los Angeles nationality, Marin includes an image of a zoot suit early in the film. Plastered on the side of Rudy's mechanic shop is a poster similar, if not identical to, the image used to publicize Valdez's "Zoot Suit." Once outside the borders of East Los Angeles. Rudy no longer is a productive member of society but an outsider. His struggles to navigate between the United States and Mexico are the same struggles that affect the residents of East Los Angeles. Marin acknowledged the social commentary running through his film in a short interview published in the *Los Angeles Times*. "I just wanna do social comedies. I don't

find anyone out there in comedy doing this sort of social commentary. So I will."[57] When asked if he saw his work on a par with the likes of Valdez he nodded and explained, "I'm coming from the mainstream of filmmaking where I've had great success. Now, I'm going for a more personal, almost social type of film. Valdez started out with a more militant type of filmmaking in 'Zoot Suit' and now he's headed toward the mainstream. It might appear we're going in different directions, but we're on the same road."[58]

Nostalgia and Memory

The Chicano movement neared its end in the final years of the 1980s, but cultural productions dependent on the zoot suit and unique cultural literacy of East Los Angeles did not. Resurgence of attention to the suit appeared in the 1990s. Many possibilities exist for this resurgence; one represents the growing interest in the violent nature of gang culture that had developed in the barrio.[59] Both the gangs and the symbol owe their parentage to the pachuco youths of 1940. The community, the gangs, and the cultural production associated with them have held on to the zoot suit as a symbol of resistance.

Through the use of the Zoot Suit Riots as a metaphor for the "rape" of the Chicano community by the mainstream population, the 1992 movie *American Me* provides insight into the Chicano gang culture of East Los Angeles. The film begins with a Chicana woman boarding a bus to meet up with her boyfriend in downtown East Los Angeles. While meeting him and another couple in a local tattoo parlor, pandemonium erupts on the streets. A handful of sailors dressed in whites push their way into the parlor, drag the two boys onto the street and strip them of their signature zoot suits. The camera then pans back to the woman who is being raped by the sailors. After the violent account of the riot the film accelerates to its main character, Santana, as a teenager. The viewer soon learns that Santana is the product of the rape. The extreme violation and abuse gives birth to the Chicano movement, because, as the film also explains, this injustice left the community with anger and distrust.

The defense of one's *machismo* provides a common theme throughout Chicano cultural production. In part, this need for defense comes from "El plan de Aztlán" that called for the establishment of a nationalistic movement based solely on the culture of Chicanos. This culture was firmly established upon the Chicano family in which the masculinity of the father cannot be challenged.[60]

The rape serves as a metaphor for East Los Angeles and the Chicano movement as a whole while establishing the emotions and realities of the Zoot Suit Riot; important in establishing these truths was the Chicano family.[61] It is this understanding of family that was furthered in the 1995 film *Mi familia*. Beginning with the story of an uncle who was born in East

Los Angeles when it was a part of Mexico, the film follows the history of three generations of the Sánchez family in East Los Angeles. Tackling many Chicano stereotypes, the film includes characters that represent the original Californian, the dutiful worker, the accommodating mother, the married daughter, the nun, the Chicana activist, the prodigious student overcoming his background, the navy private, the pachuco gang member killed before his time, and finally the modern reformed gang member starting anew, all in one family.

Much like the Chicano movement itself, the family welcomes the whole Chicano community under certain cultural truths and understandings of cultural literacy. Like the zoot suit, which incidentally receives a quick reference within the film, the structure of the family is used within the film to explain the development and cultural literacy of East Los Angeles, as well as the larger Chicano community. In the community the zoot suit holds a place of unmatched importance because it is something that can operate within the distinctly Chicano place within the United States. Much like Marin's character Rudy, often the Chicano movement found that the most prevalent cultural identifiers available within the community were distinctly Mexican. The zoot suit, the Sleepy Lagoon murder case, and the Zoot Suit Riot provided a unique opportunity because of their distinctly Chicano grounding. The suit, and more importantly the symbol, encouraged and fostered the coming of age of the Chicano community and its identity within the United States.

The Swing Revival and a New Home for the Zoot Suit

The zoot suit continues to be used as a part of the cultural dialogue within the United States, standing recently as a point of nostalgia. In its most recent incarnations those who wear it signify an even more diverse number of meanings. As time passes those who employ the symbol divorce it more and more from its original associations and ascribe contemporary perceptions and desires upon it while retaining only those original understandings that serve their purpose. Like the SLDC and the Chicano movement, the suit is used in their period as a means to an end. To this day any Swing aficionado or youth who wants to make a statement at his prom can order a zoot suit at the local dress shop. The tailors who sew these suits are not just creating outfits; they are selling a look, 1940s nostalgia. This sense of a constructed past plays a large role in the swing revival of the 1990s. Eddie Nichols leads one of the contemporary swing groups, the Royal Crown Revue, and he recognizes the nostalgia evoked. Asked about it, he replied, "'Guilty as charged . . . Give me a time machine and I'm gone. Everything was beautiful back then—the style, the clothes, the aesthetics."[62] The zoot suit, and its affiliations, has been co-opted as an imagined image of the 1940s. Moreover, the riot provides an unmatched point of cultural literacy, as can be seen in the song by Steve Perry

entitled "Zoot Suit Riot." The song focuses on the events; however, unlike the Chicano movement, its goal is not to perpetuate an understanding of the persecution of *La Raza.*

The song equates the riot with style.[63] But "Zoot Suit Riot" does more than Perry contend. The swing revival may simply recall a style, but that style cannot be divorced from its past. As a deconstruction of the song's lyrics indicate, the memory of the injustice, persecution associated with the riot, and representation of the masculinity and power attached to the fashion survive in the present within the seemingly innocent song.

> Who's that whisperin' in the trees?
> It's two sailors and they're on leave
> Pipes and chains and swingin' hands
> Who's your daddy? Yes I am.[64]

Within the first stanza the song places the sailors in a position of power, in a location of height, "whisperin' in the trees" and placed within their hands are "pipes and chains." The song is sung through the perspective of the zoot suiters and not the sailors, when the zooters reclaim authority with the line "Who's your daddy? Yes I am." This line invokes images of sexual domination, potency, and authority through a banner of superiority, and coolness returns a few lines later:

> You got me in a sway
> And I want to swing your dove
> Now you sailors know
> Where your women come for love.[65]

The lyrics assert that the sailors lose their women to the zoot youths. The youths exercise their power over the sailors through sexual potency. The story has been reappropriated and inverted as a means of empowerment. Even with its serious message, the song retains an extremely upbeat swing tempo throughout and if one does not pay special attention to the words the song can be understood as a celebration of jazz and swing. The song is meant for dancing. The audience joins the resistance of the zooters through dance.

While the message of "Zoot Suit Riot" is largely hidden under swing beats and a fast tempo, not all the representations of the Riot are as opaque. The song "People of the Sun" by Rage Against the Machine was written and performed as a work of active protest in support of Subcomandante Marcos in Chiapas, Mexico. The song traces the exploitation of the Mexicans and uses the Zoot Suit Riot as another example of ethnic cleansing. The graphic lyrics of the song, paired with an equally extreme music video, elevates "People of the Sun" to the level of cultural combat.

The band utilized images of the zoot suit and ancient Mayan, Incan, and other Indian cultures within Mexico, making connections between these

ideals and Chicano realities to develop a distinct definition of what it means to be Chicano and more generally what it means to be exploited and persecuted. As the song goes:

> Troops strippin' zoots, shots of red mist,
> Sailors blood on tha deck, come sista resist
> From tha era of terror check this photo lens,
> Now tha city of angels does the ethnic cleanse
> Uh, heads bobbin' to tha funk out ya speaker, on tha one Maya, Mexica
> That vulture came to try and steal ya name
> But now you found a **gun,** you're history, this is for the people of the sun.[66]

The band invokes popular images of the riot particularly and zoot suits, and calls upon the "city of angels" to resist. The group also engages both the Incan people as well as connections to the proud and strong Mayan people. The band is drawing upon the history of the Mexican peoples to argue the importance and power that history, or in this case cultural memory and pride, can have as a means of uniting and fighting. The distinct and powerful Chicano cultural identity, based on the truths of ancient peoples of Mexico, remained a powerful image well into the late 1990s.

Both these songs may appear as products of their time and not dependent on the memory of the past, but "People of the Sun" considered the situation in Chiapas as much as the exploitation of Chicano youths in the 1940s, and "Zoot Suit Riot" as a product of the revival of swing music made a point of Chicano cultural identity. These songs are not alone; they are a part of a greater narrative of identity construction. They are artifacts of the development and understanding of community.

Conclusion

Tracing the cultural prominence of the zoot suit within popular culture is a project of community definition and identity construction. Within each community, each period, and each use, the zoot suit is employed and understood differently by those who use the symbol. This process is never passive, but rather an active exercise. Each community brings with it a worldview and a historical perception that is used to manipulate the role and understanding of the suit within the particular time and the distinct community. More important than the suits themselves are the ideas and understandings that the people have inscribed on them.

Insulated in isolated minority communities in the 1940s, Mexican Americans generated their own sense of what it meant to belong. Unlike their contemporaries, these groups began to identify with those who found themselves

excluded as well. Belonging to minority groups, especially minority youths shared a sense of suffering, and wearing the zoot suit provided an escape from their circumstances. The act of putting on the suit gave them a sense of power and a way in which to resist the limits placed on them. In contrast, those in control of mainstream culture in the 1940s co-opted a minority symbol of belonging and infused it with feelings of fear and danger because they needed a symbol to contrast themselves with as well as a domestic enemy to engage with during the heightened World War II anxiety. Some Anglo Americans needed a domestic enemy to act against in a symbolic war against an enemy that was not too far away to engage actively on domestic soil.

Repackaging the 1940s values the minorities ascribed to the suits, the Chicano movement transformed the symbol into a tool of active protest. Activists used the cultural literacy and memory of the suit to further their political aims and to unite the community under a shared cultural symbol. Despite the prominence of the suit only among young males in the 1940s and its association with an aggressive *machismo,* the Chicano movement employed the zoot suit to generate a universal image of their community in a way that almost no other symbol could. The suit united the community through a shared sense of history, shared memory of subjugation, and a shared desire to resist.

For each period, the zoot suit has been modified to fit social needs. In the 1990s this process continued with the advent of the swing revival. The nostalgia for the 1940s relied on a diluted and largely inoffensive incarnation of the zoot suit. Through the popular music of the period as well as the costumes worn on the dance floor, the memory of the Sleepy Lagoon murder trial, the Zoot Suit Riots, the Chicano movement, and jazz enjoyed a revival as well.

While the 1940s, the Chicano movement, and the swing revival are undeniably the three periods in which the zoot suit played a prominent role in community, national, and even international culture, the suit has never disappeared completely into the closet of worn-out cultural accoutrements. In the same respect, meanings and feelings associated with the fashion in society at large have remained. No fashion that diverges from the accepted norm as much as the zoot suit can successfully exist below the radar of political correctness. Jane Ulman, a reporter for the *Jewish News of Greater Phoenix,* addressed this reality in her satirical work "The contemporary bar mitzvah, or, 'No you can't wear a red zoot suit.'"[67] Addressing the complicated relationships among custom, dress, free will, and expression, Ulman argues that the confrontational nature and history of the zoot suit, and the values of resistance and rebellion it represents, are too extreme to be ignored within polite society. The bar mitzvah, as a ceremony that marks the transition of a male from child to adult, makes the "cool" outfit inappropriate within the ceremony in the author's opinion. Nevertheless, Ulman's call for political correctness is not universal. The article ends with the youth asking

his mother if he is not allowed to wear the red one, "do you think I could . . . wear a navy blue zoot suit?"[68] The mainstream population, while still associating the zoot suit with the riots or minority groups and as an exotic fashion, increasingly has divorced the suit from the racial politics that surrounded it until it has become little more than a diluted fashion symbol.

Notes

1. "Police Nab 13 in 'Zoot' Clash With Serviceman," *Los Angeles Times,* 10 May 1943, A2.

2. Harry J. Elam Jr,. *Taking It to the Streets: The Social Protest Theater of Luis Valdez and Amiri Baraka* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1997); Michelle Habell-Pallán and Mary Romero, *Latino/a Popular Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2002); Michelle Habell-Pallán, *Loca Motion: The Travels of Chicana and Latina Popular Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2005); and Yolanda Alaniz and Megan Cornish, *Viva La Raza: A History of Chicano Identity & Resistance* (Seattle: Red Letter Press, 2008).

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

4. Eduardo Obregón Pagán, "Los Angeles Geopolitics and the Zoot Suit Riot, 1943," *Social Science History* 24, no. 1 (Spring 2000): 223–56; *Murder at the Sleepy Lagoon: Zoot Suits, Race, & Riot in Wartime LA* (Chapel Hill: University of California Press, 2003); Luis Alvarez, *The Power of the Zoot: Youth Culture and Resistance During World War II* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008); and Kevin Allen Leonard, *The Battle for Los Angeles: Racial Ideology and World War II* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2006).

5. Robin D. G. Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York: The Free Press, 1994); Douglas Henry Daniels, "Los Angeles Zoot: Race 'Riot,' the Pachuco, and Black Music Culture," *Journal of African American History* (1997): 98–118; and Rachel Rubin and Jeffrey Melnick, *Immigration and American Popular Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2007).

6. Clora Bryant, *Central Avenue Sounds: Jazz in Los Angeles* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998); David W. Stowe, *Swing Changes: Big-Band Jazz in New Deal America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994).

7. Rosa Linda Fregoso, "The Representation of Cultural Identity in 'Zoot Suit' (1981)," *Theory and Society* 22, no. 5 (Oct 1993): 659–74; Shifram M. Goldman, "A Public Voice: Fifteen Years of Chicano Posters," *Art Journal* 44, no. 1 (March 1984): 50–8; and "The Iconography of Self-Determination: Race, Ethnicity, and Class," *Art Journal* 49, no. 2(Summer 1990): 167–73.

8. S. I. Hayakawa, "Second Thoughts," *The Chicago Defender,* 19 June 1943, 15.

9. Daniel Yi, "The Region; Zoot Suits Dress Up His Memories of Wartime;" Home Edition, *Los Angeles Times,* 2 June 2003, 4; "Clothes Horse," *The Boston Globe,* 21 August 2002, 2; and Daniel Yi, "Zoot suits cover a lot of history in Southern California, garb was favored by Pachucos," *San Antonio Express,* 19 June 2003, 1.

10. In one interview Fox claimed that he came up with the idea of the exaggerated watch chain on accident. According to Fox the toilet in the back was malfunctioning

and he was fixing it when a client came up to pick up his suit. He had the chain in hand and the pair decided it was just what the suit needed. David Grimes, "The Big Toot of Zoot Suit: Crazy 'hep cat' started the fad that is reflected in today's suits," *San Francisco Chronicle,* 4 October 1988, 4.

11. Mazon, 114–5.

12. Played by James A. Jackson, who performed in the comedy-and-song team Pot, Pan, and Skillet along with Eugene Ware and Ernest Mayhand. Liner notes for Duke Ellington's *Jump for Joy,* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Collection of Recordings, Rc037 DMM 1-0722, 1988).

13. "Stormy Weather," dir. Andrew L. Stone, 1 hr. 18 min., 20th Century Fox, 1943, Film.

14. "Three Suits for Cab: His 'Zoot' Requires Enough Cloth for Two More Garments," *Chicago Defender,* 13 March 1943: 19.

15. Eduardo Obregón Pagán, *Murder at the Sleepy Lagoon: Zoot Suits, Race, & Riot in Wartime L.A.* (Chapel Hill: University of California Press, 2003), 116.

16. The song, written by Gilbert L. Wolf and Bob O'Brian, was sung in 1942 by Kay Kyser & His Orch., The Andrews Sisters, Paul Whiteman & His Orch., Bob Crosby & His Orch., Ray Herbeck & His Orch., and Harry Roy & His Band.

17. Gilbert L. Wolfe and Bob O'Brien, "A Zoot Suit [for my Sunday Gal]," 1942.

18. Imamu Amiri Baraka [LeRoi Jones], *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (New York: William Morrow, 1963), 190–1, 201–2. In Ingrid Monoson, "The Problem with White Hipness: Race, Gender, and Cultural Conceptions in Jazz Historical Discourse," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 48, no. 3 (Autumn 1995): 396–422.

19. Baraka, 181–2, 190–1, and 201–2.

20. Obregón, 125.

21. Mauricio Mazón, *The Zoot Suit Riots: The Psychology of Symbolic Annihilation* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1984), 64.

22. Rachel Rubin and Jeffrey Melnick, *Immigration and American Popular Culture: An Introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 62; Obregón 39; and "Jitterbugs Mad At Axis Now, Cause War Takes Away Their 'Zoot' Suit," *Chicago Defender* 12 (September 1942): 3.

23. Mazón, 26.

24. Obregón, 185.

25. Ibid., 169, 241, and 236.

26. Catharine S. Ramirez, "Saying 'Nothin': Pachucas and the Language of Resistance," *Frontiers* 27, no. 3(2006): 13–4.

27. Eduardo Obregón Pagán, "Los Angeles Geopolitics and the Zoot Suit Riot, 1943," *Social Science History* 24, no. 1(Spring 2000): 223–56.

28. Obregón, 82.

29. SLDC, "The Sleepy Lagoon Case: Forword by Orson Welles," 9.

30. The appellate court overturned the case with its main objection the judge did not allow the boys to sit with their lawyers and that the bickering between attorneys was not kept in check. SLDC, "The Sleepy Lagoon Case: Forword by Orson Welles," "Excerpts from the decision of the Second District Court of Appeal," 4–6. The court stated on record "there is no ground revealed by the record upon which it can be said that this prosecution was concerned in, born, or nurtured by the seeds of racial prejudice." Ibid., 7.

31. *Spirit of '43, The,* 6 min., Walt Disney Productions, 1943, Animated Cartoon Short.

32. Mazón, 85.

33. Obregón, 11.

34. Ayres went as far as to submit a report that referred to Mexican Americans as wild cats with hot Aztec blood that wills them to violence. Edward Duran Ayers, "Statistics: the nature of the Mexican American criminal," (Los Angeles, California), 1942. Available: Dept of Special Collections/UCLA Library, A1713 Charles E. Young Research Library, 405 Hilgard Ave, Box 951575, Los Angeles, CA 90095-1575.

35. Mazón, 87.

36. Kim Geron, *Latino Political Power* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishing, 2005), 35.

37. Geron, 37–8.

38. Geron, 37; and Mae M. Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 139. "From 1948 to 1964, the United States imported, on average, 200,000 braceros a year,"

39. Ngai, 182.

40. Yolanda Alaniz and Megan Cornish, *Viva La Raza: A History of Chicano Identity & Resistance* (Seattle: Red Letter Press, 2008), 150.

41. Alexander Bloom and Wini Breines, *Takin' it to the Streets* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 138–141, and Alaniz, 190.

42. "El Plan de Aztlán" as included in Bloom, 138–41.

43. Ibid.

44. Ibid., 140.

45. Shifram M Goldman, "A Public Voice: Fifteen Years of Chicano Posters," *Art Journal* 44, no. 1(March 1984): 50–8.

46. Luis Valdez, *Zoot Suit and Other Plays* (Houston, TX: Arte Publico Press, 1992), and *Zoot Suit,* written and dir. Luis Valdez, 1 hr. 43 min., Universal Pictures, 1982, DVD.

47. In 1981 the play made its way to Broadway. The play "Zoot Suit" opened with rousing success in Los Angeles, and after moderate success was largely dismissed on Broadway in New York City. The play was eventually moved to a smaller theater and as compared to Los Angeles had a very short run on the stage. The Latino populations were, and continue to be, very different in New York City and Los Angeles. Los Angeles had a large Chicano community whereas the Latino population of New York City was more of a mixture of nationalities, with the largest populations being Puerto Rican and Dominican. For this reason much of the Chicano-specific references within the play, the zoot suit, the Sleepy Lagoon murder case, and the reliance on Aztec imagery, did not translate to the mixed Latino population of New York City. Without the solid base of support the play received in Los Angeles, it is no surprise that the play did not receive the same level of success in New York City. Richard Eder, "Theater: 'Zoot Suit,' Chicano Music-Drama." *New York Times,* Mar 26, 1979; Carol Lawson, "News of the Theater." *New York Times,* Dec 27, 1978; "Stage: Taper Forum Presents 'Zoot Suit.'" *New York Times,* May 4, 1978; "Patricia Birch to Choreograph 'Zoot Suit' at Mark Taper Forum." *Los Angeles Times,* Jul 27, 1978; "Trying Out for Broadway: The New Road to Riches?" *Los Angeles Times,* Dec 10, 1978; "'Zoot Suit' Keeps Chin Up Despite Negative Reviews." *Los Angeles Times,* Apr 8, 1979.

48. Valdez, *Zoot Suit,* 94.

49. Luis Valdez, "Once Again, Meet the Zoot Suiters." *Los Angeles Times,* Aug 13, 1978.

50. Ibid.

51. Social and Public Art Resource Center (SPARC), "Great Wall of East L.A.: Great Wall Mural Project, Los Angeles, California, 1979–2001," (www.sparcmurals .org/).

52. Ibid.

53. Social and Public Art Resource Center (SPARC).

54. *1941,* dir. Steven Spielberg, 1 hr. 58 min., Colombia Pictures/Universal Studios, 1979, DVD.

55. "M*A*S*H," created by Richard H. Hormberger. "Trick or Treatment," Season 11, episode 2, Twentieth-Century Fox Television, 1982.

56. *Born in East L.A.,* written and dir. Cheech Marin, 1 hr. 25 min., Universal Pictures, 1987, DVD.

57. Gregg Barrios, "A Hot Film for Cheech Look What's Happenin' to Cheech His Hit Movie Reaches Both East and West Sides." *Los Angeles Times,* 6 September 1987, 3.

58. Ibid.

59. James Diego Virgil, *The Projects: Gang and Non-Gang Families in East Los Angeles* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007).

60. "El Plan de Aztlán" as included in Bloom, 138–41.

61. Ibid.

62. John Soeder, "Swinging Toward the Past." *Plain Dealer* (Cleveland), October 12, 1998, 8(E), in Charles Sharp, "Where is the riot in "Zoot Suit Riot?" *Pacific Review of Ethnomusicology* 10 (Fall 2001/Spring 2002): 38–51.

63. Sharp, 42.

64. Cherry Poppin' Daddies, *Zoot Suit Riot,* Mojo Records, 1 July 1997.

65. Ibid.

66. Rage Against the Machine, *Evil Empire,* "People of the Sun," Epic Records, 16 April 1996.

67. Ulman, Jane, "The contemporary bar mitzvah, or, 'No you can't wear a red zoot suit.'" *Jewish News of Greater Phoenix,* 21 May 2004, S26.

68. Ibid.

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