Race as a Motivating Factor in the Zoot Suit Riots

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In cities across the United States, the 1940s were a decade of great changes and adjustments. After the country entered into World War II in 1941, major political and economic shifts redefined everyday life. Tensions ran high as Americans worked hard to defend their country and remain patriotic. Often, these tensions manifested into an intense dislike of anyone who appeared to be un-American, whether due to their actions or their ethnic background. In the western United States, this xenophobia was frequently directed at Mexican Americans, who had already been the target of much discrimination in the decades leading up to WWII. This anti-Mexican sentiment was particularly strong in California, where migrant farm workers from Mexico and their children made up an increasingly large part of the population by the 1940s. The racial tension between white and Mexican Americans was the spark that started a firestorm of racial conflicts in California, ultimately culminating in the Zoot Suit Riots of 1943.

For Mexican Americans living in Los Angeles in the 1940s, harassment, discrimination, and segregation were commonplace. Much of this hostile treatment was a product of wartime circumstances, but it had been building for decades prior. Generations of Mexicans migrated to the United States by the 1940s, with the agricultural boom in California requiring farm labor at a scale that demanded migrant help. By the late 1930s, there were three million Mexican Americans living in the United States, and Los Angeles had the highest concentration of Mexicans outside of Mexico. Even though they were U.S. citizens, Latinos in California were often treated as anything but. In Los Angeles, Mexican Americans were segregated into the most dilapidated and run-down area of the city. This was often the only housing they could afford because of job discrimination that forced them to work for below-poverty level wages. Frequently the target of harassment and violence, Latinos in Los Angeles were commonly denied access to white-designated businesses and entertainment venues.

The popular press spurred this discriminatory and violent behavior. Los Angeles newspapers routinely described Latinos using racially inflammatory language, fueling the anti-Mexican sentiment that had been building there since the 1930s. A key example of how the media fanned the fires of racial tension is the Sleepy Lagoon trial of 1942. In the summer of that year, the case made national news when Mexican American teenage members of the 38th Street Gang in Los Angeles were accused of murdering a man in an abandoned quarry pit. Mainstream newspapers such as the Los Angeles Evening Herald and Express latched on to the idea that the accused Latino youth were guilty, adopting such blatantly prejudicial terms as "gangsters," "goons," and "hoodlums" in their reporting on the trial. Newspapers played up the sense of "juvenile delinquency" among Mexican American youths in Los Angeles, with tabloid magazine Sensations reporting in December 1942 on the "reckless madbrained young wolves" running amok in Latino street gangs. In reality, historians have pointed out that crimes committed by minority youths actually declined during this time period. However, propaganda circulated in newspapers around Los Angeles fed into the growing wartime xenophobia, fueling a sentiment that Mexican youth gangs were violent and out of control.
These Mexican American youths were at the center of the Zoot Suit Riots that broke out in the summer months of 1943. The main conflict was between white servicemen stationed in Los Angeles and Latino youths, recognizable by their chosen zoot suit attire. The zoot suit was a prime marker of Latino identity in Los Angeles, and with the help of the popular press, it soon came to signify all the negative characteristics ascribed to Mexican American youth and their so-called delinquent proclivities. Forced to live in slums, denied equal access to public space, and labeled as delinquents, Latinos in Los Angeles were clearly marked as outsiders, and the zoot suit came to signify that outsider status. The signature zoot-suit draped pants, oversized jacket, wide-rimmed hat, and pocket watch chain were taken up as a kind of uniform for Mexican American youths, who used it as a means to take charge of their identity and reclaim the outsider status that society had leveled against them.

However, as World War II raged on, the zoot suit increasingly became associated with all things anti-American. Wartime rations had limited the supply of certain products, including wool—the primary material used to make zoot suits. Already distrustful of Latinos and their place in American society, and fueled by the xenophobia of WWII, many white Americans became suspicious of how apparently poor young Latinos could afford zoot suits. The zoot suit was seen as unpatriotic and wasteful at a time when all Americans were expected to contribute to the war effort. Even though many Mexican American men were actively involved in the military, white servicemen often resented the sight of Latinos socializing in such seemingly unpatriotic clothing as the zoot suit.

Indeed, the zoot suit, the very symbol of Mexican American identity and all that was unpatriotic and subversive about it, became a prime target for the thousands of servicemen who carried out violent acts during the Zoot Suit Riots. The incident historians cite as the start of the riots involved a young man named Vicente Morales who was spotted wearing a zoot suit in a Los Angeles nightclub. Eight white sailors attacked Morales and stripped off his zoot suit, leaving him beaten and humiliated in the street outside the club. As the riots mushroomed across Los Angeles, the racist associations attached to clothing were a central feature of the violence against Latinos, with the ritualistic stripping of the zoot suit and ensuing public shaming a common occurrence.

There were many factors leading up to the Zoot Suit Riots and the resulting violence directed at Mexican Americans. However, racial tensions were the primary spark that ignited the riots. The animosity that had been building for decades in Los Angeles between whites and Mexican Americans was exacerbated by the xenophobia of WWII and the popular propaganda of the 1940s labeling Latino youth as hoodlums and delinquents. It was only a matter of time before these smoldering racial tensions exploded into violence.

Further Reading


About the Author
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Lauren Gallow is an independent scholar working in the fields of art, design, and architecture. She is currently working as a freelance writer, editor, and researcher for various book projects in the areas of art, history, design, and photography. She is also the cofounder and executive editor of the storytelling website Desert Jewels. Lauren graduated summa cum laude from the University of the Pacific in Stockton, California, where she received her BA with dual majors in English and Visual Culture. She completed her MA at the University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB), in the History of Art and Architecture with a thesis entitled "Modernism Remodeled: Branding the Image of Modernism in Dwell Magazine, 2000–2010." Lauren also completed PhD level work at UCSB in this field for several years. Lauren has taught and assisted with a variety of university courses in the field of art and architectural history. Additionally, she has served on design review committees and worked as an archivist on architectural history image cataloging projects. Lauren has presented her research at national and international conferences and has also held internships at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Tucson, Arizona, and at SITE Santa Fe in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

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