

Brown Youth, Black Fashion and a White Riot

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Table of Contents

Preface: The Zoot Suit Riots.....2

I. Introduction: Made in America.....3

II. Sources.....4

III. Background.....7

**IV. “Terrific as the Pacific, Frantic
as the Atlantic”: From hipsters to
pachucos, the zoot-suit from coast to coast.....12**

V. Zoot Suits and Service Stripes.....21

VI. The Riots.....27

VIII. Conclusion: Dismantling the Machine.....34

References.....37

Preface: The Zoot Suit Riots

In the 1940's a large generation of Mexican American¹ youth were coming of age in Los Angeles. Born and raised in the segregated, working class outskirts of urban America, they were captivated by black jazz culture and a number of them, who became known as pachucos, adopted the extravagant zoot-suit style. Importantly, unlike their parents, this generation was not content to adhere to the city's strict racial barriers. To dominant white Los Angeles, unaccustomed to seeing Mexicans –much less Mexicans deliberately dressed to stand-out - in downtown shopping and entertainment districts, pachuco came to mean a Mexican delinquent. The pair of words rapidly became correlated to redundancy. In a self-generating spiral of escalation, the repressive policing of Mexican Americans provided the media fodder for stories about zoot suit crime, which they printed in an exaggerated and salacious manner. The crime wave stories ironically convinced that the public that the police were not in control, thus generating pressure for even heavier handed policing tactics. The hysteria peaked when a young Mexican national was found dead in August at a reservoir the press labelled the Sleepy Lagoon. The county sheriff responded to the young man's death by ordering the formation of a special taskforce to, in his words, "wage all-out warfare on 'chain gang juvenile killers and clubbers.'" In the following week they conducted a three day sweep of Mexican communities, taking over six hundred youth into custody. Two months later twenty two young men were convicted of murder in the only mass trial in Californian history.²

Around the same time, the naval base on the outskirts of the city received an influx of sailors, stopping over for training before being shipped to war. Between the sailors and the city's downtown area lay three primarily Mexican neighborhoods. Tension quickly developed between the sailors who flooded into these communities on the weekends and the young people who lived in them. The white sailors, eager to "let off steam" before being shipped overseas and often fuelled by alcohol invaded Mexican communities with a sense of entitlement that was deeply resented. Local youth, often much younger than the sailors themselves, responded

¹ I use the term Mexican American rather than Chicano as the later only came into popular usage two decades later and has distinct political connotations.

² The convictions were later overturned in appellate court due to the campaigning efforts of the multi-racial community based activist group known as the Sleepy Lagoon Defense Committee. (McWilliams:1948:231)

with defiance, cussing at sailors on the street, throwing rocks and bottles at them and making derisive comments about their masculinity. On June 3 of 1943, the sailors decided to take the “pachuco problem” into their own hands. For the next four nights, they stormed Mexican neighborhoods and downtown Los Angeles looking for zoot-suiters. They pulled Mexicans and occasionally African Americans out of streetcars, cinemas and bars to beat them and, if applicable, strip them of their zoot suits, sometimes finishing the act by urinating on the suits or setting them on fire. They were soon joined by servicemen from all over Southern California so that by June 7th the mob had grown to include more than 1,000 soldiers, sailors and civilians. Their antics were encouraged by the press, who printed pictures of their naked, bloodied victims, and actively supported by the public. When the mobs had trouble finding actual zoot-suiters, they simply attacked whatever Mexicans, African Americans and Filipinos were on hand. The police followed them passively through the city, waiting as they completed their assault, and then arrested the victims. The riots ended when the military authorities declared the city out of bounds to all military personnel. In the following days, the Los Angeles City Council adopted a resolution making it a misdemeanour to wear a zoot suit. (McWilliams:1948:242, 250; 1943:818-9; Escobar:1999:199, 209; Pagán:2003:147, 159-160)

I. Introduction: Made in America

The systematic enslavement of Africans in the United States and the subsequent repression of their descendents has been a definitive force in the construction of the American nation. Not only did the presence of slavery in the heart of a proclaimed democracy necessitate the racialization of those who were enslaved, it correspondingly racialized those who were not. The processes which transformed European immigrants disparate in class, language, religion and culture into “white” Americans was only made possible by the transformation of an equally diverse group of African people into “black” “not-Americans.” (Omi and Winant:1986:64; Morrison:1993:48) Citizenship was conceived as a natural and inherent property of whiteness, while blackness was necessarily conceived as its anti-thesis.

This symbiotic black and white polarity has also shaped America as a multi-racial landscape. Scholars engaging in critical whiteness studies have sought to demonstrate that “race seems to be, to a large extent, relational...One cannot get clear about

whiteness without also gaining a sense of what it is to be non-white – and vice versa.” (Delgado and Stefancic:1997:1) The conflation of “non-white” groups into one neat category tends to obscure the relational operation of race *within* those groups. If, however, as Delgado and Stefancic argue, “whiteness...has been a norm against which other races are judged”, it is just as often the case that blackness has been the “abnorm” against which a group’s perceived ability to succeed within white American society is assessed. Consider, for example, the term “model minority” which was applied to Chinese and Korean immigrants in the 1960s to contract with their perceived hard-work and success with the perceived laziness and immiseration of African Americans (Cho: 1993: 211 n17.) Blackness accents a group’s un/desirability through perceived difference or similarity and provides the yardstick by which to measure its economic and social status. In particular, the country’s turbulent relationship with its black population has been a definitive agent in the racialization of Mexicans in America, just as the Mexican negotiation of a distinct American identity had been informed by black cultural and political resistance. When read within the period’s panorama of racial violence, which erupted in both urban and military riots, the reaction of white Los Angeles to the zoot-suit culture of Mexican American youth provides an opportunity to explore this hypothesis.

II. Sources

The Zoot Suit Riots are usually viewed as a seminal moment in the history of Mexican people in the United States, and a turning point towards the development of a politicized Chicano identity. They are often only casually considered in the broader context of the racial tension and endemic rioting that perforated the summer of 1943. Similarly the obvious appropriation of black fashion by Mexican youth is, with a few important exceptions, often only mentioned as a side note. By focusing only on the bilateral functions of race between the Mexican minority and white majority, such readings unintentionally reinforce the notion that African American history is not integral to the country as a whole or relevant to non-black people. My intention in conducting this analysis of the record, then, has been to enrich the genealogical scope of these events to illustrate the intricate workings of race in a multi-racial context.³

³ It might seem that attempting to research a fairly obscure point of California history from London would be frustrated by a lack of resources. However, the internet and

The archive of this project can be divided roughly into three messy and overlapping categories. The first general category encompasses contemporary media coverage of both the Los Angeles riots and those in Detroit and Harlem. The inflammatory coverage of the riots by the Los Angeles press is now quite notorious and a number of authors and history websites cite many of these articles in their entirety. I also studied contemporaneous articles and opinion pieces from mainstream national magazines, the black press and various academic journals. In addition, in this category I include several contemporaneous books which deal with the riots, the general conditions of Mexican Americans in the United States, and pachuco culture. While some of these materials are more reliable than others in terms of providing factual detail of the events in question, none of them are purely objective texts. I have read them as part of a complex narrative which reveals how race, the war and the zoot-suit were imagined in different sectors of the American public and how these things tapped into the emotional currents just beneath the surface of the nation's social fabric.

Official documents, such as court transcripts and government and military reports and memos, make up the second category. Limits of time and geography were most consequential in finding this type of document and I necessarily resorted to more roundabout means of accessing them, relying on the groundwork of other authors who have included such documents as appendices or extended quotations in their books. Mauricio Mazón, in particular, includes in his work sections of an FBI report and a series of official Navy documents. Though he cites them for different purposes, they have been eminently useful in my project in establishing how race and rioting were conceptualized and responded to institutionally.

I have also considered a number of unofficial and cultural texts. The Los Angeles city archives and the PBS American Experience websites provide access to personal letters, interviews and photographs, which give valuable glimpses into the lives of those who actually experienced the rioting. Literary texts, such as Luis

the British Library's vast collection of books and periodicals go a good way in closing the seemingly insurmountable distances of time and space separating the researcher from her subject.

Valdez's play "Zoot Suit" and Malcolm X's autobiography, provide insight into the ways in which the zoot-suit has been culturally and individually memorialized.

Most bibliographies of the Zoot Suit Riots begin with a number of key ethnographic and historical accounts of Mexican American life in California published in the 1940's by white authors. Carey McWilliams's *North From Mexico: The Spanish Speaking people of the United States*, Ruth Tuck's *Not with the Fist: Mexican Americans in a Southwest City*, and Beatrice Griffith's *American Me* all give valuable contemporary descriptions of the social and economic conditions in Mexican American communities, including commentary on Mexican American youth culture and descriptions of the riots. Each of the authors had firsthand experience within the Mexican American community: McWilliams as an activist (he chaired the Sleepy Lagoon Defense Committee), Tuck as a sociologist and Griffith as a social worker and youth worker. Though at times overly emotional, in the case of McWilliams, or condescending, in Tuck's case, all of the works are well-intentioned and valiantly attempt to catalogue both the discrimination faced by the Mexican American community and the racial nature of the riots - realities that we can take for granted today but that were much contested at the time. In particular, McWilliams's thorough account of the riots has frequently been used as a resource by subsequent scholars, though his assertion that the events were the result of an anti-Mexican conspiracy between the press and the police is often challenged.

More recently, a number of Chicano scholars have re-examined the riots and the emergence of pachuco culture. Reacting to the biases of McWilliams and other earlier writers as well as the cooption of the pachuco by later Chicano nationalists, these scholars tend to emphasize the complexity of socio-historic factors involved while simultaneously subverting the romanticized mythology of the pachuco as the progenitor of cultural and/or political militancy. Mauricio Mazón's 1984 work, *The Zoot Suit Riots and Symbolic Annihilation*, provides a nuanced psycho-historical interpretation of the riots. He argues that the sailors attacked Mexican American youth not primarily because of racial hatred but because of a need to express ambivalent feelings about the war and their own role in it. Mazón does not deny that the riots had definite racial implications but downplays their importance. His work nevertheless can be used to reflect on the ways in which racialized symbolism operates in dominant American culture.

In his book *Murder at the Sleepy Lagoon: Zoot Suits, Race, and Riot in Wartime L.A.*, Eduardo Obregon Pagán similarly rejects more simplistic readings that attribute anti-Mexican prejudice as the sole cause of the riots, instead formulating a “multivalent theory that looks at competing social tensions deriving from demographic pressures, city planning, racism, segregation and an incipient, street-level insurgency against ‘the master narrative of white supremacy.’” (Pagán:2003:10) Unlike the readings of some 1940’s white liberals, Pagán characterizes Mexican American youth as historical agents rather than innocent but inert victims. His interviews with surviving participants and his careful excavation of letters, court transcripts and other materials goes some way in establishing a picture of how these young people viewed themselves. Pagán’s argument that Mexican American working class youth used jazz culture to negotiate life in a segregated society is particularly useful. As with Mazón’s work, I will attempt to draw out the racialized and racializing implications of this argument.

Primary among the texts dealing with African American history and culture that I have drawn on for this project is Robin DG Kelley’s essay “We Are not What We Seem: Rethinking Black Working Class Opposition in the Jim Crow South.” Kelley argues that “clothing, as a badge of oppression or an act of transgression, is crucial to understanding opposition by subordinate groups.” (Kelley:1993:86) Crucially, he applies this statement to both zoot-suits and the uniforms of black soldiers. As Kelley infers, white brutality towards black soldiers during both World Wars is well-documented but seldom referenced in discussions about the zoot-suit, which are most often framed within a white serviceman/ not-white zoot-suiter polarity. In framing them together, Kelley suggests that white resentment of the zoot-suit was not just a matter of its perceived anti-patriotism but also, like the soldier’s military uniform, its embodiment of a black masculinity that threatened the mores of white supremacy. This insight alerted me to the importance of considering how the experiences of black and Mexican American men in uniforms interacted and overlapped with those in zoot-suits.

III. Background - *The Mexican Situation*

The introduction of the Mexican people into the consciousness of the United States was written in the doctrine of Manifest Destiny, a feverishly racialized set of ideologies popular in the mid-nineteenth century which presented the continental,

even global, expansion of the American branch of the Anglo-Saxon race as the will of God and law of nature. (Horsman:1981:1) Mexicans who remained in the land claimed by Americans and those who later emigrated were relegated to a distinctly second class status but one that was not always formally and inflexibly enforced. Chicano historian Ralph Guzman articulates the two key factors that distinguished Mexicans in the American mind. Firstly, unlike other, European, immigrants, Mexicans were not believed to be racially or culturally assimilable. Secondly, they were not black. (Guzman:1976:66) The opening speaker at a 1926 National Conference on Social Work made the following observations about the Mexican's social status:

The Negro-white situation is difficult enough, but it is simple. The Negro has his place in the scheme of things. He is disfranchised and he accepts it—for how long I do not know- but he accepts it. He is limited in his educational opportunities and in his occupational field, and he accepts that also. But the Mexican is theoretically limited neither in his educational opportunities nor in his occupational field. Neither is he disfranchised. (Guzman:1976:67)

This contradiction of the Mexican status – not integrated but not formally excluded, a condition which Ruth Tuck referred to as a “semi-caste” position (Tuck:1946:44), was exemplified by their legal classification for much of the twentieth century as “white.” It is a classification that Mexican-Americans fought to defend. In 1930, when a separate “Mexican” category was created for the Census, Mexican American activists successfully lobbied for a return to the “white category” by 1940. (Pagán:2003:21) The Mexican American political response to racial oppression continued to be organized around the premise of their “whiteness” throughout the war years. The middle-class Mexican leadership in Los Angeles, Edward Escobar writes, “understood that Mexican Americans suffered from discrimination, but they argued that anti-Mexican discrimination had nothing to do with race; rather, they believed that it resulted from ‘Anglo’ Americans not realizing that Mexicans were also ‘white.’” (Escobar:1999:265) Their struggle to establish themselves as ‘white’ sometimes included distancing themselves from the underclass status of blackness. Tuck noted that among her informants, a few advocated minority solidarity and

recognized the need to work with black groups, but others sought to “cling to the advantage of being better than *los tintos* (colored people).” (Tuck:1946:205)

This practice well reflects the simple fact that Mexicans’ legal whiteness often held little social currency. Although, unlike African Americans, Mexicans could legally marry white people, many restaurants, swimming pools and dance halls would not accept Mexicans or only allowed them on the days designated for “Mexicans and Negroes.” In Los Angeles, large parts of the city’s Mexican neighborhoods were technically unincorporated within city boundaries, and therefore did not benefit from the municipal services of paved roads, electricity and running water and Mexican children attended inferior, segregated schools. (Pagan:2003:147) In the 1940’s, McWilliams noted that though “the pattern of discrimination against Mexicans is spotty and less rigid than against Negroes,” according to the conventional indices of status, Mexicans occupied a lower status than blacks in Los Angeles. (McWilliams:1948:272) When their “whiteness” was recognized, to suit the political and economic needs of the dominant society, it often served the dual purpose of reinforcing the subjected caste status of black people. During the war, the government was eager to maintain good relations with Mexico and was dependent on the importation of Mexican workers to relieve labor shortages. The country’s leadership continually sought to parade Roosevelt’s Good Neighbor Policy, which emphasized the friendship and cooperation between the two nations, and to minimize embarrassing incidents of anti-Mexican discrimination in the Southwest which often became well publicized in Mexico. McWilliams notes that the Governor of Texas evoked the Good Neighbor Policy to call upon all Texan citizens “to adopt a non-discriminatory attitude as to ‘all persons of the Caucasian race,’ thereby attempting to deny long-resident Negro citizens a status sought to be conferred on Mexican nationals.” (McWilliams:1948:270)

Another distinction of anti-Mexican prejudice in the 1940’s is that it was largely regional. Due to the concentration of Mexicans in the Southwest, scholars and officials often compared their situation to that of black people in the South. However, such comparisons tend to mask the implications of the regionalism. Outside of the Southwest, white Americans were unfamiliar with Mexicans and did not share the anti-Mexican prejudices so ingrained in the Southwestern states. Ignacio Lopez wrote in 1946 that he was often tempted to tell the returning Mexican American GI’s to settle in another part of the United States. “There are places where there is no

prejudice against the Mexican-American, and where they could keep for the rest of their lives the precious feeling of integration and belonging.” (Lopez:1946:ix) While the truth of this statement might not always bear out, particularly for darker complexioned Mexican Americans, it would clearly not be true for any African Americans in any part of the country. So intractable was anti-black prejudice from the national consciousness that, even if the nature of segregation and discrimination might change from region to region, there was nowhere in the United States that a black person could go where their presence would not be considered a “problem.”

the War for Freedom

“What was distinctive in the New [World] was, first of all, its claim to freedom and, second, the presence of the unfree within the heart of the democratic experiment—the critical absence of democracy, its echo, shadow, and silent force in the political and intellectual activity of some not-Americans.”(Morrison:1992:48-49)

This contradictory condition, which Morrison argues distinguished the American nation at the time of its inception, was again exposed and rubbed raw by the country’s participation in World War II. Racial unrest had been a home front feature of every period of war since the Civil War. Between 1900 and 1975, 202 out of 210 cases of collective racial violence occurred in the armed forces during World War I, World War II and the war in Vietnam. (Schaich:1975:375) If the upheaval of war upset the smooth running of the country’s racial order, the particular philosophical dilemmas and practical challenges of World War II, like no other, forced Americans of all colors to grapple with difficult questions. The government claimed the war was being fought for “Four Freedoms” – of expression, to worship, from want and from fear- and yet as Louis Martin wrote in 1943: “The paradox of the American people fighting racist tyranny abroad while the majority sanction the doctrine of white supremacy and racial discrimination at home has seared the souls of black folk.” (Martin:1943:25) The lofty ideals of the war only served to magnify the dismal realities of black life and unsurprisingly, many black people were distinctly ambivalent towards the “white man’s war.” Black leaders began to issue demands with a militancy that America was not accustomed to. A. Phillip Randolph threatened the government with a 100,000 man march on Washington and stated, unequivocally,

“We want the full works of citizenship with no reservations. We will accept nothing less.” (Randolph:1942) Black people vocalizing dissatisfaction with their condition was read by whites as disloyalty and petulance, strengthening the resolve among many that blacks must be “kept in their place.” The war also internationalized the country’s racial strife, with Axis propaganda continually broadcasting “America’s treatment of its Negroes” to the countries in the global South. (Thompson:1942:105) Black Americans themselves also increasingly came to contextualize their oppression in global terms, identifying with the struggles against colonialism in Africa and Asia. (Cayton:1942:268)

The social and economic demands of war inflamed diametrically opposed and mutually escalating tensions, on the one side, increasingly bitter rejection of the status quo and on the other, an increasingly intractable desire that it must stay the same. The government needed black bodies to sustain the war effort and yet was unwilling to desegregate the military, forcing black soldiers, who were told they were fighting for freedom, into a humiliating and subservient position. (Houston:1943:365) On the home front, the wartime economy produced critical labor shortages, providing African Americans and other minorities with employment in industries previously the enclave of white workers, but their industrial advancement, however small, was often met by protest, walk-outs and/or physical brutality by white workers.

(Sitkoff:1971:672) Furthermore, military and industrial demands resulted in the movement of thousands of workers and soldiers, creating considerable demographic pressures in urban areas and putting people with very different notions of racial boundaries in direct contact with each other. Black soldiers from the North were stationed at bases and training camps in the South. Black and white workers migrated North and West and settled in the same cities. Between 1940 and 1944, there is record of at least 18 major incidents of racial violence in American cities and towns.

(Schaich:1975:379) These riots were only one facet of the violent unrest engulfing American life. In addition to large expressions of collective violence, individual conflicts and confrontations in workplaces and on public transportation between members of racialized groups became increasingly common. Importantly, a rash of confrontations on both domestic and overseas military bases, from minor individual conflicts to full rioting, paralleled the period’s civilian unrest, less publicized but equally and often more violently expressed. (Sitkoff:1971:668)

IV. “Terrific as the Pacific, Frantic as the Atlantic”(Delgado:1943): From hipsters to pachucos, the zoot-suit from coast to coast

A Style of Survival

The character El Pachuco, who functions like something between a master of ceremonies and a Greek chorus in Luis Valdez’s play, *Zoot Suit*, tells us, “[T]he ideal of the original chuco was to look like a diamond, to look sharp, hip, bonaroo, finding a style of urban survival.” (Valdez:1992:80) Everything about the suit, its name and every detail, rhymed. It featured an exaggerated, oversized cut (“the drape shape”), with pleated trousers (“the reet pleat”) pulled up high past the waist line, ballooning out at the knee and tapering sharply at the ankle (“the stuff cuff”). Contemporary observers and later scholars have put forth an extensive range of theories on the suit’s origin, some more credible than others. In order to understand why it resonated so strongly among racialized minorities, however, it is more important to emphasize its place in a cultural genealogy rather than to pinpoint its exact origin. The zoot-suit was part of a long tradition among black Americans of exerting sartorial independence in a context of repression. In their work on African American culture, Shane and Graham White observe:

Far from being divorced from the African American past, the zoot-suit was linked to it by a succession of clothing and movement styles, styles through which, to the extent that their circumstances permitted, black men and women had defiantly announced their presence, giving subtle or even, on occasion, aggressive expression to the aesthetic imperatives that marked them off from the norms of the wider society. (White and White: 262:1998)

In both the urban and rural dimensions of African America, throughout the twentieth century, poor and working class black men and women have subverted the confines of class and race through donning fancy clothing on the evenings and weekends.

Dressing up and socializing in clubs, bars and dances, as Robin Kelley has argued, provided a means for working class black people to construct “a collective identity based on something other than wage work, presenting a public challenge to the dominant stereotypes of the black body, and shoring up a sense of dignity that was perpetually under assault.” (Kelley:1993:86) Such sartorial extravagance particularly

the full-time dandy esthetic adopted by some young men and often maintained through illicit means, irritated white people as well as elements of the black middle classes. Black middle class venom towards the black working classes is exemplified in a 1920 editorial from the black newspaper *Amsterdam News*. The article illustrates the way in which flashy clothing was linked with a whole litany of unacceptable behavior, most often black comportment in public space - talking and giggling in the movies, sprawling out on public transportation, holding conversations across streets, and congregating on corners and front stoops. The author of the piece likens young black men to “so many jungle apes” who board “the [street] car in full monkey regalia and strut as though they were the princes of the jungle.” He berates them for their loud talk, for cursing, for whistling at both white and black women and playing banjos and guitars. “What we need,” he concludes, “is about five million funerals.” (White and White: 1998: 232) The conspicuously well-dressed young black man was often assumed to have a criminal lifestyle, featuring a parasitical relationship with women, if not outright pimping, but at the crux of most of the complaints rendered against him, as this editorial exemplifies, was that, with his loud clothing, his loud voice and swaggering walk, he took up more public space than he was deemed to have a right to.

In the climate of World War II, the zoot-suit became emblematic of black ambivalence towards the war and towards white society in general. The extravagance of the garb in a time of cloth shortages became a particular sore point and evidence, in the eyes of the dominant society, of the zooter’s un-Americaness. Underneath this focus on the cloth was the hipster’s more profound but less easily addressable violation. The opinions of African American scholar Kenneth B. Clark help to illuminate what made the zoot-suit so disturbing. In his 1945 study “The Zoot Effect in Personality: A Race Riot Participant” (tellingly published in the *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*), he observed that the zoot-suiter’s “deliberately ungrammatical” modification of language, his slang, his swaggering exaggerated walk, and his instantly recognizable dress represented “an observable deviation in style of life of many individuals living within, but not part of, the larger cultural and societal context.” (Clark:1945:148) Rather than uphold the “socially desirable values” of the society he was excluded from, the zoot-suiter constructed his own values which gave him security, prestige and status. Clark characterized the zoot suiter’s disregard for the property and authority of the larger society as “a conscious

or unconscious protest against the restrictive and humiliating conditions” it imposed upon him. (ibid) The zoot suiter, then, was considered un-American not because he overused cloth but because he so ostentatiously rejected the dominant white values. The insult of the zoot-suiter’s indifference to white expectations was amplified by its brazen, even flaunting, expression. In particular, he challenged white expectations of black men. Kelley writes:

While the suit itself was not created and worn as a direct political statement, the language and culture of zoot-suiters emphasized ethnic identity and rejected subservience. Young black males created a fast-paced, improvisational language that sharply contrasted with the passive stereotype of the stuttering, tongue-tied Sambo, and whereas whites commonly addressed them as “boy,” zoot suiters made a fetish of calling each other “man.” (Kelley:1993:87)

Whereas Clark read the “zoot effect” as a source of personality “distortion and disintegration” (Clark:1945:147), Kelley suggests that zoot culture offered a valid means of consolidating a sense of identity and, importantly, masculinity in the face of debilitating repression.

Mexicans out of place

In the aftermath of the riots, the FBI conducted a two-year investigation of the Los Angeles Mexican community. Among the issues it sought to clarify were whether there existed subversive fascist or communist activity within the community, the extent of juvenile delinquency and the state of race relations. The Bureau’s final report, which concluded that there was no delinquency crisis nor any subversive activity, reveals the manner in which the status and perceived characteristics of African Americans were used as a barometer with which to measure those of Mexican Americans. As Mazón put it: “racial comparisons were uppermost in the minds of the researchers...with a decided bias towards blacks.” (Mazón:1984:104) For example, Mexicans were deemed to have lower IQ’s than blacks whose IQ’s in turn were lower than that of Anglos. However, despite their supposed more limited intellectual capacity, Mexican students were deemed to be less problematic than black students. States the report: “Despite popular belief [about pachuco delinquency]...the colored race gives the teachers and principles the greatest cause for concern.” (1943 FBI

Report in Mazón:1984:104) The insular character of the city's Mexican community also set it apart from the supposedly more demanding and intrusive character of the black community. "The Mexicans tend naturally toward segregation and do not aspire to invade the social and business circles where they are not constantly seen just to test the various degrees of racial tolerance." (ibid) Finally, the less formal level of exclusion faced by Mexicans was evoked to indicate their greater level of inherent social acceptability than the more provocative black population:

There are no California state laws or legal ordinances which discriminate against the Mexicans or impose upon their liberties. The Mexicans, legally and practically speaking, have all the privileges of the theatres, churches, restaurants, transportation facilities, and public utilities, and have not caused the racial problem headaches as have the Negroes.
(ibid)

In addition to demonstrating the way in which Americans perpetually end up framing questions of race in terms of black and white, the report provides some clue as to why, in particular, young Mexican Americans in zoot suits became so inflammatory to white Angelenos. Those qualities attributed to black people, especially during World War II, which made them more of a "racial problem headache" than Mexicans—aggressiveness, defiance, and disregard for their place in the racial order-- are the same offensive qualities that were magnified, to an intolerable intensity, in young black hipsters. General perceptions of the Mexican might have been that he was stupid but docile, but the pachuco, like the hipster, flaunted an ethnic identity which rejected the mores of a white supremacist society. The city's fascination with the zooted pachuco marked a distinct shift in its appraisal of its Spanish surnamed population.

As noted, for the dominant society in 1940's Los Angeles, the word pachuco came simply to mean a juvenile Mexican gangster, identifiable by his clothing and haircut. However, only a fraction of young Mexican Americans in Los Angeles who wore all or part of the zoot suit - which they themselves more commonly referred to as "drapes" - had a criminal lifestyle. As one young man said to McWilliams, with "infallible logic": "If I were a gangster, would I wear a zoot-suit so everyone would know I was a gangster? No, I'd maybe dress like a priest or like everyone else; but no zoot-suit."(McWilliams:1948:243) Rather, for most young people, frustrated by social

and economic barriers, “[j]azz culture held out the possibilities of celebration and social transformation in the ways that it skirted the edges of social propriety in transgressing the boundaries of gender, class and race.” (Pagan:2003:17) For example, when Duke Ellington’s show, “Jump for Joy,” came to the Los Angeles Orpheum in 1941 it openly ridiculed white racism, featuring zooted performers and such skits as ““I’ve got a passport from Georgia and I’m going to the USA.”(Tyler:1994:23) Such sentiments would have particular relevance for youth who, though American by birth, existed only on the periphery of dominant American society. Black and Mexican youth, often the children of Southern sharecroppers and migrant farm workers respectively, also shared some of the same generational tensions. Bruce Tyler observes:

Zoot suit youth culture was an affirmation of the liberating aspects of urban life and its superiority over the drudgery poverty and degradation of peonage and share-cropping life of many Mexicans and black people- especially their parents.
(ibid)

The Mexican acculturation of the black zoot aesthetic was, as Pagan notes, more than an act of “mere imitation.” (Pagán:2003:11) It was adopted and adapted, mixed with elements of Mexican culture, to suit their own particular sensibilities and social needs. Mexican youth mixed the slang of black hipster English with their dialect of Spanish. Valuing a more reserved masculinity, Mexican American boys wore a more subdued version of the zoot-suit, eschewing the rainbow colors favored by African Americans. They associated the flashy, energetic dance steps of the Lindy Hop with femininity and the Pachuco Hop instead consisted of the males standing aloofly on the dance floor while their partners danced around them. (PBS:2002) Crucially, unlike black zoot-suiters, Mexican American youth, even those who wore drapes, enthusiastically supported the war effort, a fact overlooked by marauding sailors, press and public. (Griffith:1948:194)

The values attributed to racialized groups, commonly expressed in stereotypes, are not static but rather shift to accommodate the political, economic and emotional needs of the dominant society. George Fredrickson writes that in ante-bellum America the Sambo image of the docile, happy black slave both rationalized slavery and helped bury racial fears. The other side of the Sambo image, the black savage,

was an image used to inspire militant reaction to events such as John Brown's uprising or Lincoln's election.

The key to understanding the larger history of white supremacist imagery in the US both during slavery and afterward is this sharp and recurring contrast between "the good Negro" *in his place* and the vicious black *out of it*.

(Fredrickson:1997:43-44)

A 1956 sociological study documented the manner in which the image of the zoot-suiter – the quintessential Mexican out of his place - began to subsume traditional representations of Mexicans in the Los Angeles press. (Surace and Turner:1956:16) Chief among the imagery that the pachuco replaced were romanticized images of California's historic Mexican past. Crucially this imagery often centered on the white consumption of Mexican atmosphere, for example the city's plazas, the Olvera Street tourist attractions, and Mexican food, rather than Mexican people themselves. While some of the unfavourable imagery of previous years included references to Mexican criminality, the zoot-suit imagery which emerged in the early 1940's was unique in that it was intensely and exclusively negative: "The zooter symbol had a crisis character which mere unfavorable versions of the familiar 'Mexican' symbol never approximated." (Surace and Turner:1956: 20) Demonstrating Mathew Jacobson's assertion that "race is a palimpsest, a tablet whose most recent inscriptions only imperfectly cover those that had come before"(Jacobson:1998:142), the zoot-suit imagery incorporated and magnified traditional stereotypes about Mexicans being knife-wielding, lazy, and sexually deviant. (Surace and Turner:1956:19)

The pachuco hysteria was fuelled in large part by the increasing visibility and boldness of Mexican American youth. For most white Angelenos, Mexicans were meant to be largely out of sight, there to work, obey and add to the scenic atmosphere of the city's old Mexico flavor. The generation of American born Mexicans coming of age in the 1940's was distinctly unsatisfied with this arrangement. Escobar writes that the police department's concentration on so called "zoot-suit" crime, which in itself formed the basis of the uproar, was a response to numerous complaints from the city's business owners and civic leaders. "The complaints included specific charges such as graffiti on walls, window breaking and theft, but their general theme was that groups of Mexican American youths now congregated *where they had not been seen in the past*." (my emphasis, Escobar:1999:199) The recollections of a white Angeleno

woman who was sixteen at the time of the riots gives further insight into the nature of pachuco crime.

The Pachucos would intimidate people. They would walk down the street, five abreast and if you walked around them they would laugh or stick their hand out and hit you. After a while you got, so you would go down the side streets instead of confronting them. A lot of them were from Mexico. They didn't speak English. They didn't adhere to our laws. They weren't even geared up for the war effort.
(PBS:2002)

Like with black hipsters, at the heart of complaints against Mexican zoot-suiters was that they were ostentatious and confrontational in public spaces that white Americans felt they had no right to be in. The woman describes behavior that is obnoxious but far from criminal. It is the list of associative characteristics she makes afterwards which establish the pachucos as aliens and forms the true basis of their perceived transgressions. The same woman recalls picking up marines in her mother's car and driving them to the rioting: "The Pachucos had just taken over. I felt that I was doing my share for the war effort." (ibid) As with black zoot-suiters, Mexican youth were understood to be un-American because they would not stay in their given place or given role. This is confirmed in the persistent imagery of cleaning used by the local media and by the sailors themselves to describe their pogrom against the zoot-suiters. A Los Angeles Herald Express article titled, "'Task Force' Hits Los Angeles Zooters," and printed at the height of the rioting quotes one sailor as saying, "We're out to do what the police have failed to do. We're going to clean up this situation to the satisfaction of ourselves and the public." (1943 article in Servín:1974:118) Other articles similarly describe the need to "clean-up" Los Angeles, "mop-up operations," and the "cleansing effect" of the sailors' actions distinctly marking out the presence of zoot-suited Mexican youth as the city's social dirt, its "matter out of place." (1943 articles cited in Jones:1969:32 and36; in PBS:2002)

The reactions of white liberals and Mexicans themselves often reinforced the racializing notions underwriting the pachuco discourse. Representatives of both groups (McWilliams is a notable exception) accepted the fundamental notion of pachuco criminality but characterized the young people as societal victims, echoing Kenneth Clark's reading of the "zoot effect." The youths' status as immigrants was

often focused on, with some attributing the problem to the inability of Mexican parents to adapt to American life as they clung to pleasant but irrelevant customs and traditions. (Tuck:1946:214) Others inversely rooted the pachuco problem in the disintegration of the youths' essential Mexican culture in a foreign, segregated society. (Paz:1961:15) Both leftist groups and Mexican community leaders warned that Fifth Columnist agents, Mexican fascists known as Sinarquistas, could be orchestrating the pachucos' activities and that racist discrimination would only further drive them into the fascists' arms. (Escobar:1999:184) Such claims unintentionally reinforced the perception that the youth were inherently un-American. Just as the zoot-suiters' Americanness was constantly called into question, many Mexican Americans and Mexicans rejected them as "not real Mexicans." Such reactions were often articulated on unambiguously racialized grounds. Mexican American author Manuel Servín inferred that the acculturation of black culture obstructed the dominant society from recognizing the true Mexican character:

Unfortunately a minority of the wartime Mexican American youths, the Pachucos or zoot-suiters, reacted in a most un-Mexican-like manner. Dressed outlandishly, as they followed the styles of *less acceptable minorities*, they quickly undid the hard earned reputation of the pre-war Mexican. (my emphasis in Servín:1974:165)

An article printed in a Mexico City newspaper shortly after the riots was even more explicit. In thinly veiled racist commentary the author referred to pachucos as "tarzanes" (Tarzans), an image reminiscent of the *Amsterdam News* editorial's description of flashy young black men as "princes of the jungle." Demonstrating that it was not just white North Americans who found the integrated nature of jazz culture disturbing, the Mexican journalist also claimed that Los Angeles zoot-suiters were "almost always *mestizos* of Mexican and Negro or Mexican and Chinese or Filipino. The great majority are not Mexican by birth or nationality." (Del Castillo:2000:386) Even those observers who placed the blame for the supposed pachuco problem on American racism spoke about the youth in negative, even animalistic, terms. Mexican American scholar George Sanchez wrote in *Common Ground*: "The pachuco and his feminine counterpart, the 'cholita,' are spawn of a neglectful society—not the products of a humble minority people who are defenceless before their enforced humiliation." (Sanchez:1943)

V. Zoot-Suits and Service Stripes

Both national and local media coverage of the riots in Los Angeles, with varying degrees of subjectivity, portrayed the conflict as a battle between zoot-suiters and servicemen. The two groups were understood, and in large part still are, as perfect polar opposites. The zoot-suit, with its ration defying proportions and air of rebellion, was read as the antithesis of the service uniform, the very emblem of obedience and patriotism. The dichotomy had inherent racial values - the serviceman was white, the zooter was not - but was itself a means of discursive evasion. The following 1943 letter to the editor written by a serviceman and printed in *Time* magazine is a case in point: “To a soldier who has been taken from his home and put in the army, the sight of loafers of any race, color, creed, religion or color of hair loafing around in ridiculous clothes that cost \$75 to \$85 per suit is enough to make them see red.” (Daniels:2002:102) By framing his complaints in terms of soldiers and zooters, and with the rather transparent “of any race, color, creed” qualifier, the writer attempts to distance his anger and resentment from racial prejudice. By focusing on the suit, the public could rant about troublesome young men of color, even attack them physically, without dealing explicitly with the equally troublesome subject of race. The letter writer goes on to insist that zoot-suiters should be forced into uniforms, epitomizing the weakness of the soldier vs. zoot configuration. Hundreds of thousands of black and Mexican men *did* serve in the military. Their experiences, examined alongside that of zoot-suiters, illuminate important aspects of the processes that shaped the summer’s riots. While the zoot-suit reveals commonalities among the racialized groups, the service uniform highlights crucial differences among the two groups that otherwise remain obscured.

“A *balancing of fears*”

In 1943 Warner Brothers released an all-black cartoon version of Snow White titled “Coal Black and the Sebben Dwarves.” The now censored cartoon was, ironically, inspired by Ellington’s “Jump for Joy.” Though well-known black artists supply the voices, it was drawn in grotesque caricature. The representations of blackness presented in the cartoon are interesting to consider. As a medium, cartoons allowed for the exploration of real anxieties by providing the cover of fantastical imagery. For example many cartoons of the period featured inane scenes with Hitler

or the Japanese. In “Coal Black”, the Prince Charming character is a zoot suited hipster, with a conk and dice for teeth. His buffoon-like proportions and large eyed, grinning minstrel face neutralize the potential menace of the zoot esthetic. His sexuality is called into question when his fervent kisses fail to awaken the Snow White character. The seven dwarves are black GI’s. Small and childlike, they march and salute in a manner that is obviously meant to be comical. The smallest, most infantile dwarf eventually wakes the girl with his kiss. (Warner Bros.:1943) The seemingly light-hearted ridicule masks deep unease and serves to neutralize two threatening embodiments of black masculinity. Despite the cries for zooted loafers to join the army, a black man in a military uniform was just as problematic to dominant society as a black man in a zoot suit. The uniform of the black soldier was in many ways a more powerful symbol, for both black and white people, than the zoot-suit.

As noted, the war presented the government with needs that conflicted with the nation’s racial parameters. It needed black men to fight the war and yet it was not ready to accept black men as equal combatants or grant the black population the full rights of citizenship. Charles A Houston described the government’s situation as “a balancing of fears”:

Fear of the inability to continue to subordinate a Negro population containing large numbers of Negro combat veterans set over against fear of defeat by the foreign enemy. Fear of inability to preserve the exclusive caste system of white officers and their families in peace time set over against the need of officer personnel in war time greater than the white population can fill. (Houston:1943:364)

To attempt to maintain some kind of balance the government continued to enforce the segregation and subordination of the black soldier. Military segregation was loosened in comparison to World War I, but black soldiers remained largely relegated to lowly service positions and black combat units rarely saw action. Black women could only serve as nurses in segregated wards and even black people’s blood was separated out from that of white people in the blood banks. (Houston:1943:365) It was a solution that made no one happy. Walter White, the president of the NAACP, stated: “Nothing embitters Blacks more than continued segregation and discrimination in the army.” (Swan:1971:79) Meanwhile, even a subordinated black soldier struck fear and anger into the hearts of many white people. Black men in uniform faced

brutality both within the military and from white civilians and law enforcement, ranging from verbal abuse to murder. In 1942, Judge William H. Hastie and Thurgood Marshall, in conjunction with the National Lawyers Guild, submitted a report to the War and Justice Departments cataloguing civilian violence against black soldiers. (White:1943:221) The situation recalled the racist terrorism of World War I, during which a large proportion of the seventy black men lynched were soldiers, many of them actually in uniform at the time (Schaich:1975:383) Decades later the military did little to protect black soldiers from the outside violence of white civilians, and in fact where applicable ordered them to comply with local customs of segregation, sometimes even refusing them leave to avoid friction with the locals. Within bases, blacks were controlled by white military police. Black soldiers responded with despair and resistance.

As the experiences of war shattered the Negroes' illusions about white sincerity and destroyed their fear of white authority, 'thousands of spontaneous and individual rebellions went unrecorded and unnoticed.' Although the war department systematically suppressed most evidence of black revolt and labeled most of the deaths due to race battles as combat fatalities or 'motor vehicle accidents,' army statisticians, nevertheless, reported an unusually high number of casualties suffered by white officers of Negro troops and at least fifty black soldiers killed in race riots in the United States. (Sitkoff:1971:668)

The black press reported incidents of soldiers battling with white military police, and destroying off and on-base restaurants that refused to serve them. In North Carolina, soldiers engaged in a gun battle with white military police; in Arizona, 43 soldiers went AWOL to escape the racist subordination; in Louisiana, an altercation between a soldier and a white military police officer resulted in a riot in which 28 black soldiers were shot and 3,000 were arrested. (ibid)

Such events permeated the civilian consciousness. In Harlem, it was the rumor that a black soldier had been shot in the back by a white police officer that touched off the rioting. (White:1943:221) Conversely, rumors about insurrection and lawlessness among black soldiers also permeated white society. Howard Odum's catalogue of wartime race rumors describes one theme of rumors which portrayed military officers as paralyzed by black obstinacy: "Negroes were allowed to get away with anything

because the officers were afraid of what they would do if an order was given which they did not like.” While white soldiers would obey orders, “Negroes would resent [them] and ‘answer back.’” (Odum:1943:106) In one tale, a black soldier refused to forego his Saturday night leave to clean guns as he was ordered. “The officer knew that he could not do anything about this because if he did the rest of the Negroes would rise up and do something or other...it could not be helped...the Negroes had to be handled with gloves on.” (Odum:1943:107) The common circulation of such stories among white people illustrates that the soldier’s uniform, like the zoot suit, raised fears about the black defiance of white authority and roused the supposed black tendency towards aggressiveness and disorder.

Malcolm X’s autobiography offers an interesting counterpoint to such stories, demonstrating that black youth were often skillful at using white anxiety to their own advantage. In order to evade the draft, X performed for the white Draft Board officials their own nightmare caricature of feral black masculinity, in which the zoot and the uniform overlapped. “The day I went down there,” he writes, “I costumed like an actor. With my wild zoot-suit I wore the yellow knob-toe shoes, and I frizzed my hair up into a reddish bush of conk.” (X:1965:194) His performance culminates with a psychiatric evaluation, during which he whispers into the psychiatrist’s ear, “I want to get sent down South. Organize them nigger soldiers, you dig? Steal us some guns, and kill up crackers!” (X:1965:196) X’s display struck a chord with the officials, for whom the notion of a rebellious black man in a uniform was even more dangerous than one in a zoot suit, and he was declared unfit for service. In other instances, for at least a few black men, the zoot-suit became a means not to evade service but to navigate life within it. African American sociologist Horace R. Cayton visited military base Fort Huachuca and reported: “I saw some soldiers who looked like they had zoot-suited their GI uniforms.” (Tyler:1994:27) If wearing a zoot suit in civilian life was a means of rejecting the “mores of subservience” (Cosgrove:1984), such a gesture became even more poignant in the particularly fierce and emasculating subservience of the segregated military life.

“Complete Americans”

Mexican Americans’ experience in the armed forces, by contrast, exemplifies the rather contradictory circumstances of their place in American life. Young men of Mexican descent served, died, and were decorated in the war – 17 received the

Congressional Medal of Honor (NCPD (a)) - in considerably higher proportion than the proportion of Mexicans in the general population. (Griffin:1948:264) Though McWilliams attributes this in part to the fact that there were few Mexican Americans serving on the selective draft boards (McWilliams:1949:259), it is no doubt the case that, in general, Mexican American youth were eager to join the war effort. If the Sleepy Lagoon defendants are any indication, to Mexican American youth the zoot-suit and the service uniform were not mutually exclusive. A number of these young men who had become the press's poster boys for pachuco gangsterism had hoped to serve in the military. A letter from one of the defendants, Manuel Reyes is revealing.

[B]eing born a Mexican is something we had no control over, but we are proud no matter what people think, we are proud to be Mexican-American boys. I joining [sic] the Navy, in July of last year, they didn't turn me down because I was a Mexican...but unfairly I was arrested for this crime, with I didn't have anything to do with or know of. When we were arrested we were treated like if we were German spies, or Japs, they didn't figure we are American, just like everybody else that is born in this country. Well, anyway, if I didn't get to joining [sic] the Navy to do my part in this war, I am still doing my part for my country, behind these walls. I am buying Defense stamps, and going to volunteer, to do some war work." (1943 letter in PBS:2002)

Reyes's pride in his Mexican heritage seemingly coexists, even despite his persecution, with American patriotism, in distinct contradiction to many scholars' tendency to read the youth who adopted pachuco style as nihilistically neither Mexican nor American. (Paz:1961:14) His determination to continue to support the war effort contrasts sharply with the indifference and cynicism of many young black zoot-suiters. Cayton notes that the following phrase was popular among potential draftees in the African American community: "Here lies a black man who died fighting a yellow man for the glory of a white man." (Cayton:1942:268)

The difference is unquestionably due in large part to the fact that Mexicans were fully integrated within the armed services. While the concentration of black soldiers in service-related positions marked an attempt to undermine and control black masculinity, for Mexicans military service allowed for participation in national culture and served as a kind of loophole, albeit a temporary one, to transcend the

weight of racial domination. Their participation in combat units established a positive notion of Mexican masculinity within the dominant culture that drew on some of the traditional, romantic images of Mexicans as dashing and brave: “These boys of the soft brown eyes and hard brown fists came by the thousands from America’s great Southwest when war was declared.” (Griffith:1948:257) Importantly, this formation of patriotic Mexican American masculinity was seen to reinforce dominant American society rather than confront it, and allowed the soldiers to interact with their white counterparts as equals. Griffith writes: “The war gave much to the Mexican American soldier. Here he was judged as a man and a fighter. The Mexican soldier and the American of Mexican ancestry earned the respect that all men give to brave fighters.” The comments of General JM Wainwright, who led a large number of Mexican American soldiers in the Philippines, substantiate her claim: “Almost every unit in the United States army included Mexican American soldiers and they served well ... Anyone would be proud to have served in the same army with these men.” (Griffith:1948: 265, 257)

Unsurprisingly, soldiers of Mexican descent had none of the morale problems of black soldiers, as they often found in the service a feeling of belonging and camaraderie that life in the segregated city made impossible. A Mexican GI told Ruth Tuck:

The years I spent on the ship are the best ones I ever spent
When you learn to get on with a thousand men and do your
work and hold your own without ever hearing ‘Mexican,’ you
get on to a lot of things. (Tuck:1946:221)

After the war, such soldiers frequently found the sacrifices they had made often did very little to change their status in society, exemplified by a number of high profile incidents in which Mexican American GI’s, in uniform, were refused service in Southwest cafes, bars and hotels. (Sanchez:1943) The contrast of their life in the military with that of their civilian life both depressed returning GI’s and inspired them to raise the social standing of their communities. “Every Southwest community has in it young men,” Lopez wrote in 1946, “formerly ‘little’ Americans but who were able to act as complete Americans for the three to four years. They know what it is to be released from the minority burden. They find it a heavy one to be asked to pick up again.”(Lopez:1946:ix) Their contribution to the war effort would prove to be an

important organizing point in Mexican American politics in the years to come.

(Guzman:1976:74)

The elation of integration did not just affect the Mexican American soldiers themselves. War correspondent Quentin Reynolds, writing from the battlefield in 1944, interpreted the camaraderie among the soldiers as a manifestation of “true” Americanness:

Kids at home grow up surrounded by barriers...all man made.

Neighborhood barriers, city barriers, state barriers, social barriers, racial barriers, political barriers, barriers of wealth.

You climb over one only to find another ahead of you.

Then you find yourself at the front, thousands of miles from home. And suddenly, perhaps for the first time in your life, you realize that here on foreign soil is an outpost of America where there are no barriers. This was always the dream you had of America, a dream that never before had come quite true.

(Griffith:1948:264-265)

Read in the context of the intense racial discord that permeated the American army during this period, Reynold’s comments, seemingly willfully overlooking the continued degradation of the black soldiers, are revealing. By integrating one racialized group within their armed forces, Americans could pride themselves on realizing the ideals of fairness and equality which the conflicts at home and within the military called into question, without having to dismantle the system of racial domination. If the black soldier filled Americans with uncertainty by stirring up traditional racial fears of black uprisings as well as raising an embarrassing sense of their own hypocrisy, the Mexican soldier, conversely, confirmed American claims of egalitarianism. The stark discrepancy in the treatment of black and Mexican young men in the armed forces, even while their compatriots in zoot-suits were equally reviled, demonstrates the uneven manner in which American racializing technologies are applied. That Mexican Americans, many of whom were first generation or even born in Mexico, were allowed full and equal participation in the war effort while black Americans remained excluded exemplifies the manner in which black people in America, uniquely even among other marginalized minorities, have been conceived as what some scholars have referred to as the “anti-citizen”:

For nearly four centuries, blacks have been consistently constructed symbolically and handled institutionally, not merely as non-citizens laying outside of the inaugural social compact of the republic, but as veritable 'anti-citizens' standing over and against it.

(Waquant:2005:136)

VI. The Riots

“I, the plain citizen, have grown disorder

In my own world. It is not what I meant.

But dreams and images are potent and can murder.

I stand accused of them. I am not innocent.”

From “Who Wakes: Detroit, June, 1943,” May Sarton

Of the all of the larger incidents of collective violence that erupted in the war years, the Zoot Suit riots stand out for the moderate nature of the damage they incurred. A glance at the most deadly riot in the summer of 1943 highlights key differences from the events that took place in Los Angeles. Like the riots in LA, the riots in Detroit also began with conflict between white sailors and civilians of color. However in the latter event, the fight between several hundred white sailors and African Americans exploded into city-wide rioting. Black people burned white property and attacked white people caught out in their neighborhoods.

(Swan:1971:84) However, as journalist Thomas Sancton insisted, they suffered the brunt of the violence: “Every one of the sixteen victims shot down by [the] police...were Negroes. The news photographs of the flaming, exploding automobiles show the destruction of Negro property, not white. There are pictures of Negroes lying dead and wounded on the streets; begging for mercy; running like animals before white mobs armed with pipes and beer bottles.” (Sancton:1943:9) The comments of one white teenager, though probably exaggerated, uphold Sancton’s sentiments: “There were about 200 of us in cars. We killed eight of ‘em... I saw knives being stuck through their throats and heads being shot through... It really was some riot.” (NCPD (b)) Thirty-one people, 25 of them black, were killed in rioting that lasted several days. There were 2 million dollars in property losses.

(Sitkoff:1971:674) In the riots that occurred in Harlem a few weeks later, 5 people were killed and 5 million dollars of property damage sustained. (Swan:1971:88) In

contrast, in Los Angeles, there was little loss of property, no fatalities and few serious injuries, despite the fact that more than 1,000 rioters, most often fully grown military men running in mobs with the consent of the police, hunted out unprotected individuals or small groups, many of whom were adolescents. Mazón describes the peculiar “carnival-like” atmosphere of the riots:

Photographs show servicemen and civilians, men, women and children, cavorting with each other, their faces tamed by the absence of danger, milling around a stripped zoot suiter, whose tattered clothing gave proof of the mob’s limited intentions.

The threats that were leveled against zoot-suiters were sandwiched between self-imposed restrictions that represented the most disciplined of the servicemen’s initiative. There was no looting, burning, raping, or killing. (Mazón:1984:85)

The very different outcomes of these events, where so many of the same elements were in place, reveal important gradations in the nation’s racial fabric.

The limited reaction of the Mexican American community to the sailors’ brutality can partially explain why events in Los Angeles did not escalate and also reflects on the more flexible level of subordination they experienced. While it is clear that Mexican youth defended themselves and their friends, in some instances aggressively so, they did not destroy white-owned property or otherwise attack the signs of white power. Whereas the situation in Detroit wholly engaged white and black communities, the broader Mexican American community did not counter the attack of the white mobs and the confrontation was largely confined to the youth and the rioters. One can extrapolate that had large crowds of Mexicans begun setting fires or counter-attacking the gathered white mobs, the police would have moved from merely arresting beaten pachucos to more lethal repression. Many within the Mexican American community, for example the parents of the boys who were assaulted and arrested, were outraged and sickened by the violence, but large segments condemned the young people themselves. (McWilliams:1943:820; Servin:1974:165) One particularly telling article in *La Opinion*, one of the city’s Spanish language newspapers, warned that the rowdy behavior of the youth would only incur further wrath from the sailors and that the “just would pay for the misdeeds of the guilty.” (1943 article Servín:1974:371) Whereas the mob brutality during the First World War had strengthened the resolve of black communities to resist pogrom

violence, Mexicans had never before been the target of an urban riot. (Del Castillo:2000:371) Manuel Reyes's reaction to the riots indicates the profound shock the violence sent through the community: "I never dream [sic] that things like that would happen in the U.S.A., a land of freedom. I thought it would alone happen in Germany and Japan." (1943 letter in Pagán:2003:192) His sentiments are the inverse of those expressed by a young rioter in Detroit who told a reporter, "I'd rather die fighting for freedom here than in Germany." (Swan:1971:78) His defiant resolve speaks to the profound disillusionment many black people felt for the promises of American democracy, particularly those who had moved to Detroit to escape Jim Crow and only found another version of the same repression. The segregation faced by Mexicans in public places, however painful, was never total and their all-important inclusion in the armed forces instilled Mexican communities with a sense of both connection to and progress within dominant American society.

Clearly however it is the activity of the rioters themselves which distinguish the rioting in Los Angeles. McWilliams description of the attack on Mexican youth as a "mass lynching" is as interesting in what it conceals as it is in what it attempts to reveal. (McWilliams:1948:248) Certainly, the nature of the violence bore some ceremonial similarities with lynching – for example, the stripping of the victim and the presence of the mob. Yet even a brief consideration of the American lynching tradition, which though less common by the 1940's was by no means obsolete, evidenced by the bound, murdered black soldier found at Fort Benning Georgia two years earlier (Sitkoff:1971:668), exposes the starkly incongruent absence of murderous intent among the rioting sailors in Los Angeles. Mauricio Mazón's complex psychological analysis of the rioters and the white public who rallied behind them is helpful to consider here as it stresses the ritual and symbolic nature of the violence, rejecting more simplistic readings which seek to explain the riots merely by placing them within a chronicle of American racism. Mazón argues that Angelenos, a people "in the center of massive psychic and physical upheaval," found in their imagined version of the zoot-suiter a symbol through which to explore a whole range of emotion. "In the absence of an unseen enemy," he writes, "they were invited to indulge their fantasies with a host of surrogate experiences." (Mazón:1984:12-14)

He re-examines 1943 Los Angeles as a space of deep ambivalence, when the euphoria and enthusiasm of the early days of the war were fading, pointing out that there was great tension between civilians in general and servicemen. Zoot-suiters

eventually became the focus of the tension because, due to their foreign appearance and seemingly antithetical relationship to the serviceman, it was easier to malign them than to deal with the disturbing doubts about the course of the war.

((Mazón:1984:69) The obsession with the imagined pachuco criminals and their perverse lifestyle indicated the wartime public's confrontation with "death, annihilation, and the unpredictable" which in turn produced a preoccupation "with rebellion, murderous fantasies, feelings of persecution and forbidden sexual desires." Mazón argues that through discussing the perverse antics of pachuco youth, "allegations about endemic murdering, profligacy, and disloyalty", the public could simultaneously indulge and exorcise their own illicit imaginings. By fashioning the pachuco as an antithetical depository, they could renew their own sense of patriotism and security, and in his "symbolic annihilation" they could register their own misgivings and resentments towards the war. (Mazón:1984:28) Importantly, chasing and stripping zoot-suiters had profound unifying powers:

At a moment when the possibility of violent confrontations between servicemen and workers seemed imminent, the animosities between the two receded, the past was forgiven, and a renewed sense of fraternity among the antagonists emerged ...The 'achievement' of the rioting servicemen and civilians was a renewed sense of camaraderie, solidarity, and national purpose. (Mazón:1984:93)

That white Americans fashioned a sinister "Other" through which to ritualistically externalize their own fantasies and anxieties about the war and their society is not unprecedented. Mazón passes over the coloring of this arrangement as a matter of convenience – the Mexican American was chosen because he looked foreign but not because of racist conspiracy or tradition. Contextualizing Mazón's reading of the surrogacy and symbolism which shaped the riots within Toni Morrison's concept of Africanism allows for a fuller assessment of the racializing work they performed.

In *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Morrison argues that the distinct character of American literature has been defined by its response to what she calls an Africanist presence, a term which describes the "denotative and connotative blackness that African peoples have come to signify, as well as the entire range of views, assumptions, readings and misreadings that accompany Eurocentric learning about these people." (Morrison:1992:7) She claims

that through the use of Africanism - “a fabricated brew of darkness, otherness, alarm, and desire” - white writers could explore the particular American fears of “being outcast, of failing, of powerlessness...boundarylessness.. the absence of so-called civilization.. loneliness, of aggression both external and internal.” (37-38) Early Americans, she argues, used the polarity between free and white and slave and black to project a “not me,” a “surrogate self.” (Morrison:1993:37-38) This racialized and racializing surrogacy performed powerful functions:

As a disabling virus within literary discourse, Africanism has become...both a way of talking about and a way of policing matters of class, sexual license and repression, formations and exercises of power, and meditations on ethics and accountability. Through the simple expedient of demonizing and reifying the range of color on a palette, American Africanism makes it possible to say and not to say, to inscribe and erase, to act out and act on, to historicize and render timeless. (Morrison:1993:7)

Read in the framework of Morrison’s essay, the moment in which zoot-suited Mexican youth became the surrogate enemies of white soldiers and civilians, afraid of and frustrated by the war, is revealed as part of a broader, historically sustained process generated within a “wholly racialized society.” (Morrison:1993:12-13) Just as early Americans used slaves “for meditation on problems of human freedom, its lure and its elusiveness” (Morrison:1993:38), the journalists, citizens and sailors of the early 40’s used the zoot-suiter to manage, explore and perform the impulses of “rebellion, murderous fantasies, feelings of persecution and forbidden sexual desires” that the war evoked. Furthermore, like American Africanism, the racial ingredients of the zoot-suiter symbolism consolidated white American identity, unifying white servicemen and white civilians, by setting it against a dark, “not-American” Other.

Understanding the surrogacy symbolism as a racial technology can account for the social significance of the zoot-suit and the particularities of the rioting in a way that Mazón’s analysis otherwise does not. The intensity of rioting in Detroit reflected the extent to which deep racial animosity had infected every aspect of life in that city. Unlike other urban areas, for example Harlem, blacks and whites were in direct competition for employment and housing, a situation that was inflamed by the influx of both white and black workers. (Swan:1971:80; Sancton:1943:9) The Klu Klux

Klan and other white supremacist groups agitated such tensions, turning the city into what Sancton called a “quagmire of hate.” (Sancton:1943:10) However, the white sailors who were an element in both Detroit and Los Angeles were indigenous to neither area. Presumably the sailors who were setting zoot-suits on fire in Los Angeles would have been setting cars on fire in Detroit had they been stationed there and vice-versa. The relative restraint exercised by sailors in Los Angeles can perhaps be explained in part by the fact that the majority of sailors stationed in California had little previous experience with Mexicans—a point which Mazón made to dispute the racial nature of the riots. (Mazón:1984:85) Their interaction with the Mexican American boys they assaulted was not underwritten by the deeply and historically ingrained prejudice that charted white reactions to blacks.

And yet, as African American author Chester Himes alluded, the sailors brought their anti-black prejudice with them to Los Angeles. Claiming that the majority of white sailors stationed in that city were from the South, after the riots he announced to the black readership of the *Crisis*: “the South has won Los Angeles.” (Himes:1943:225) While his estimation that all of the sailors were Southern may be an exaggeration (Pagán:2003:147), the substance of Himes’s claim is important. The white sailors burgeoning relationship with Mexican Americans was informed by their existing notions of what white privilege should mean in encounters with darker skinned, socially inferior groups. Himes reproduced an incident he witnessed on a street car to dramatize the sense of white entitlement. A white sailor, ogling the female half of a young Mexican American couple, bellowed to his companions: “‘Ah’m telling uh, Ah fought lak a white man! Did Ah fight lak a white man, boy? ...Boy did those native gals go fuh us. Boy, uh white man can git any gal he wants. Can’t he, boy, can’t he git ‘em if he wants ‘em?’” (Himes:1943:222) There is no doubt that the sailors were angered by dark-skinned youth constantly challenging their sense of white superiority with disrespect, ridicule and occasionally physical aggression. Their means of punishing that transgression is critical. Pagán writes:

The energy of the mob was, for the most part, engaged in the work of seeking out and destroying zoot suits...in many cases the wearer seemed rather secondary to the ritual of humiliation and was given the choice to disrobe or suffer the consequences. It was as if destroying the fashion itself has the power to

substantially alter the complicated dynamics between servicemen and civilian youth. (Pagán:2003:185)

That the “symbol of subversion” against which the sailors expressed their wrath at Mexican American impudence was the zoot-suit is at once logical (as the suit clearly marked out its wearer’s defiance) and also revealing of the sailors’ deeper racial consciousness. Echoing Himes, Guzmán comments that in Los Angeles the sailors found “ideal conditions for the displacement of...their own hometown racism.” (Guzman:1976:72) In this sense, the zoot suit was a potent symbol in that it was a recognizably black fashion. It clothed the unacceptable behavior of a suspicious but unknown minority group with the known quantity of menacing black masculinity. In “destroying the fashion itself” they could not only punish the Mexican youth but also exterminate the effigy of that menace.

That white anxiety about black rebellion permeated the Zoot-Suit riots is apparent both in the course of the sailors’ action and the Navy’s official response to the disturbances. Ostensibly, the sailors’ main complaint was with the “goddamn Mexican punks,” as one of them put it in a letter, with whom they clashed territorially. (Pagán:2003:183) Accordingly the majority of individuals targeted by the sailors were Mexican American, but African Americans were also targeted. In fact the most serious injury of the riots was sustained by a black defence worker whose eye was gouged out with a knife by rioters. (McWilliams:1948:250) However, as sailors began heading toward the city’s black neighborhood with their sticks and bricks, according to McWilliams, they “turned around when they learned the Negroes planned a warm reception for them.”(249) Their trepidation suggests that they felt a greater apprehension about invading black neighborhoods than Mexican ones. Perhaps there was some sense, however accurate or inaccurate, that moving into black neighborhoods would interrupt the “carnavalesque” atmosphere pervading the pachuco hunting and become something more like a real battle. This apprehension was echoed in the Navy’s official response to the Los Angeles riots. In the aftermath of the riots, the Navy command in Southern California began work on contingency plans to prevent further disruptions. Despite the fact that the June riots primarily involved white sailors and Mexican youth, the focus of this work was the “Negro Problem.” In two reports issued in July and October, Commander Clarence Fogg, the senior patrol officer in Los Angeles, warned the Navy command of the potential dangers of mutiny among “colored personnel” and rioting among black civilians.

Indicating the severity of the perceived menace, Fogg noted that “disorderly service personnel, inclined to riot, will not have the same respect for a night stick as for a pistol.” (1943 report in Mazón:1984:96) The Navy Command planned “three waves” of attack to suppress the projected black rioters, made up of a joint effort between the Marine Corps, Army and Coast Guard. In October, Fogg wrote:

The existing local racial situation grows more tense. It appears to spring directly from an aggressive campaign sponsored by local, state and national representatives of the negro race. Apparently this campaign is founded upon a planned policy of agitation designed to promote unrest and dis-satisfaction among the local negro population. (ibid)

The campaign’s agitation, Fogg noted, seemed to be inciting “negro hoodlums” to attack servicemen. He warned that if such behavior continued “retaliation [sic] by service personnel will be provoked, with resultant participation in rioting and racial disturbances as per the recent ‘Zoot-Suit’ rioting.” The report also speculated that an epidemic of syphilis among the black population, spread by white and black prostitutes controlled by “Negro panderers,” also contributed to black criminality, revealing the archetypal white American preoccupation with race-mixing and supposedly perverse black sexuality. He concluded his report by stating “that a racial outbreak in Los Angeles could occur at any moment and without fore-warning.” (ibid) Like the white sailors’ turn towards black neighborhoods with seemingly little provocation from those communities, the Navy command’s preparation for the deadly repression of a black uprising reveals the extent to which white reactions to the defiance of Mexican youth was intrinsically linked to deeper fears about black unrest.

VII. Conclusion: Dismantling the Machine

As both activists and scholars have pointed out, the tendency of mainstream America to reduce questions of race to a matter of black and white belies the nation’s multi-racial reality and obscures the needs and experiences of other negatively racialized groups. However, the discursive simplification illustrates more than just ignorance and/or disinterest in minority affairs. The concept of race is so often equated with blackness because, as Wacquant writes, “it is the presence of dishonoured dark-skinned persons brought in chains from Africa that has necessitated the (re)invention and perpetuation of racial vision and division.”(Wacquant:2005:136)

Built to erase the shame of black people's subjugation from the nation's self image as the world's bastion of freedom, America's racial machinery ever upgrades itself to process all manner of new peoples--but its original function always leaves an imprint. Sumi Cho's analysis of the 1992 LA Uprisings is a good example of this. She deftly argues that the media's reaction to beleaguered Korean shop owners, which either cast them sympathetically as "legitimate victims" or critically as oppressive anti-black racists, was informed by white people's own deeper sentiments of animosity, fear and guilt towards African Americans. (Cho:1993:20-204) Other commentators on the uprising have pointed out that while the mainstream media myopically framed the rioters as the quintessential black anti-citizens, "bearers of chaos, or...agents of need and deprivation," the thousands of South Central Latino immigrants who participated in the uprising, constituting one third of the casualties and one third of the arrests, were largely invisible. (Gooding-Williams:1993:169-170; Cho:1993:205) Though very different events, the 1992 unrest and the sailors' riot a half century earlier both reveal the multi-lateral, uneven, and complexly interrelated functioning of racism in American society. Both reveal, rather ironically, that in order to fully recover the racialized American histories of Asians, Latinos and other groups we must be cognizant of the ways in which those histories have been shaped by the black and white polarity which so often obscures them.

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