

### The Result of the Zoot Suit Riots

*My name is Panfilo Ramirez and this makes me an automatic target. It is the end of June 1943 and things are just getting worse. I live in Los Angeles, California in the common neighborhood. When the sun sets I like to get ready to take my ruca out. It's Saturday night and we want to have a good time in the city. We do not have a lot of money but we live well.*

*I begin to get ready. I like to have my pants that are called Drapes nice and ironed. They are long and go above my waist. They are loose at the top and tight at the bottom. These pants are meant for dancing. I told you we like to have a good time. My shirt is called a Lisa. Mine is white and a button up. Believe me you should have that ironed too. Nicely tucked in and buttoned up with the last two top buttons undone. Your pants need a little help staying up, you know, that's why we have suspenders. Now you have your cadena, place one end of the chain hook it to one of the front loops of the pants and place the other end to your wallet and place in in the back pocket. Now I can't say I lost my wallet when we are out. Stacy Adams shoes. Nice and shiny. Keep them that way. Finally the coat, nicely slide it on and let it hang. This coat is long, it's supposed to be. Lastly, you can't forget the hat. I am ready to go out. I hope my ruca is looking as good.*

*I get into my car and drive down the street to pick up my girl. I cannot get over how amazing she always looks. She has her knee high skirt going with the long coat and her black heels. Her hair is perfect and so is she. We walk to my car and I opened the door for her. I had the night all planned out for us. We were going to eat at this nice restaurant that we all hang out around, then take her to the movie; I know she likes that. Things have been going crazy around this time so I carry a bat in my car just in case. I have to take care of my girl, you know?*

*We are cruising, making our way to the downtown area. We see a lot of the vatos on our way there and we wave at them. I am thinking about what I want to eat. This restaurant has so much good food. I am still talking to my ruca, she seems very excited. She hasn't gone out in some time. She asks me what we are doing tonight and well I told her it was a surprise. However, she kept insisting. I could not resist that beautiful face, so I told her. She was happy that we were going to the movies. She heard about one of the movies that her friend went and saw and she wanted to watch it. I was happy she was excited.*

*I looked in the review mirror and I realized that the same car had been following me for some time. I pay more attention to the driver and the passengers. They look like sailors (view Figure 1). Why are they following us? We have done nothing wrong. My girl notices my change in expression. She asks me what's wrong. I told her a group of sailors is following us. We reached our destination and I park. I get out of the car and I told her not to get out of the car. She told me not to fight it. I could see the worried look on her face. We've had friends that have also been stopped and the result is not good. The car from behind pulled up next to me and the guys came out. Some with bats. I asked them what their problem was and why they are following us. They didn't even respond. A couple came towards me and grabbed me.*

*I felt the punches in the head. Kicks at my ribs. Tossed to one side to another. I wished and hope she stayed in the car. I was losing what I was thinking. I could feel every blow. I no longer knew how many were there. My coat came off. They yanked one shoe off followed by my pants. I don't remember when my shirt was pulled off. I felt something warm running down my face and it was not water. I covered my face as much as I could.*

*I heard her screams. Why didn't she grab my bat? I wished they wouldn't harm her. Come on who would hit a girl? I felt cold. Was I naked? Please diosito keep her safe. I see the*

*lights of safety. Red, white and blue. But they weren't. The blows stopped. I was being lifted up and arrested.* Author's note: inspired by the movie *American Me*.

What initiated the Chicano Movement during the 1960's was looking at who were the heroes of "back then" (Licón). When we talk about the heroes of the movement's beginning, one would think of Zapata, Pancho Villa, and the Pachuco. Looking back upon the Pachuco in the 1940's, first known as the zoot suiters, they were Mexican and Mexican American youth and adults. A lot of these youth were first generation immigrant children. Many at this time, the youth, were fighting an issue of culture liminality. To their parents these youth were too Americanized and to the Americans they were too Mexican. Wearing the zoot suit was a way to rebel against society, to show society that they were a different person. However, there was an issue with authorities on a "Mexican crime wave" that was believed and put upon every Mexican American. Sailors, servicemen, and civilians took issues into their own hands to fight against anyone wearing a zoot suit. The attire of the zoot suit was initiated and formed around the Jazz era. The zoot suiters influenced culture identification at the time and later generations with similar style and the transformation to today's *cholo* style. Women also have had an important role: they challenged gender identification and the societal norms through the zoot suit attire. Zoot suiters also influenced media during the era and many musical artists today have co-opted the zoot suit for their publicity.

The zoot suiters were predominantly worn by members of the Mexican and Mexican American communities. They were also worn by working class whites and African Americans. However for the purpose of this research I will be focusing on the Mexicans and Mexican Americans communities that wore the zoot suits. Zoot suiters was a style that Mexican and Mexican American encountered from the African American era during World War II. However,

zoot suiters transformed it to their own style. It was also known as *El tacuche*, (view Figure 2). The suit brought upon a sense of empowerment to oneself against a society that was against them. It was a way that “powerless populations craft their own identities and claim dignity” (Alvarez). They were rebelling against this liminality that was put upon them from both societies. There were some gang that used the zoot suit and after that the others were automatically seen as gang members. However, these people were targeted as unpatriotic and un-American (Alvarez). The Zoot Suit Riots had begun after the many clashes with sailors and servicemen with the zoot suiters.

In the late 1930's and the early 1940's during the wave of first generation Mexican Americans that wore the zoot suits there was a “Mexican crime wave” that was created by the police, according to the discussion with Dr. Licón. People, specifically Mexicans and Mexican Americans would be arrested for having little things such as bats and tire irons in their cars. In 1942, a man, Jose Diaz, was killed in a gang fight in the Sleepy Lagoon area in South Los Angeles: “Hundreds of innocent young men and women from central and eastern Los Angeles were rounded up during this period, fingerprinted, and booked . . . to reassure the white middle class that wartime police force was indeed capable of maintaining law” (Pagán). According to Dr. Licón, about five to six hundred Mexican American youth were arrested to show that the police were cracking down this violence after the murder: “Despite a lack of evidence, twenty-two individuals between ages of seventeen and twenty-four . . . were arrested, charged with murder and assault, and tried” (Alvarez 45). There were also women that were tried. There were “two of the indicated youths [that] asked for a separate trial and were subsequently released” (Meier 191). These two men had used lawyers whereas the other twenty-two men had to use the public offense attorney and were tried. The men weren't allowed to change their clothes or cut

their hair and were not allowed to consult with their attorneys. All this was going against their constitutional rights (Alvarez). When prosecuted the way they were dressed reaffirmed how guilty they were because of how they looked. On the other hand, the women weren't given a trial. Dr. Jimmy Patiño, a historian and an assistant professor at the University of Minnesota in the Department of Chicano and Chicana Studies, talks about these young women, girls that were in there teens were treated unfair. He continues to say that these girls were taken from their parents and became wards of the state. They were placed "in the Ventura School for Girls, a notorious reform school, until they turned twenty-one" (Alvarez 45). For the way that these mostly youths were dressed they were automatically seen as delinquents.

The Zoot Suit Riots began in Los Angeles, 1943 after the Sleepy Lagoon case. There were still constant racial attacks against Mexicans and Mexican Americans. During this time the United States was in World War II. Many Mexicans were still coming to the United States to help with the work force. The year before, 1942, it was the beginning of the relocation of the Japanese, while other German and Italian American people at the time were not relocated themselves (Chacón and Davis). When the violence against the Japanese lowered, "the brunt of wartime racial prejudice and mob or vigilante violence, especially in the Los Angeles area, was directed against Chicanos and African-American youth" (Chacón and Davis). Many that were targeted were those that wore the zoot suit.

The Mexican and Mexican American youth wore zoot suits and the youth were also known as *Pachucos*. This attire "had been conflated with a racialized and almost entirely imaginary menace of teenage gangsters and draft dodgers" (Chacón and Davis). Signifying that the people who wore this attire were seen as troubled and trying to avoid being drafted to the war. In fact, "Mexican Americans [had] joined the armed forces to help defend U.S. democracy

in Europe, the Pacific, and elsewhere . . . more than 350,000 served in the armed forces during World War II” (Alvarez 17). The Zoot Suit Riots began after the navy servicemen had said that they were attacked by the zoot suiters. Many service men and marines went out to look for these Mexican zoot suiters. Every single person that wore one that they found was beaten and stripped down to their underwear (view Figure 3). Many other minorities were also targeted. They were “all violently pulled off trolleys and beaten, some as young as 12” (Reft), (view Figure 4). The police did not do anything but “cleaned-up” after the service men by arresting anyone wearing a zoot suit that they had encountered. There were also many Mexican Americans that not only served in the war but also wore the zoot suit and fought alongside the zoot suiters.

The attire of the zoot suit was worn in favor of what the fashion was: “Mexican-Americans turned towards zoot suit culture as they struggled to define themselves” (Heiler). However, during this wartime era “zoot suiters were usually construed as antiwar, unpatriotic, and even pro-Axis [and] they were regularly being drafted or were voluntarily joining the navy and army” (Alvarez 196). It is said as the Zoot Suit Riots subsided and men were returning home from the war they and the youth started to change the way they began to dress. The youth were still in constant state of culture liminality. They wanted to fit in to this wartime country. They wanted to be seen as more patriotic. Therefore slowly they transformed to wearing ironed khakis pants and a tucked in white tee (Licón). This attire was meant to resemble the way that the servicemen were dressed. One has to remember that these communities were still looked down upon.

Today the culture identification has changed that is now called the *cholo* style, a gangster look, which older generations still wear. This consists of ironed pants, usually khakis or black Dickies, with a white tucked in tee and a flannel shirt button up just at the top or a very loose

button up shirt also button only at the top (view Figure 5). In an interview with ex-gang members from El Paso, Texas I asked what was it like to wear or how it felt to wear the style *cholo* style. They responded, “It was pride, it was representing the neighborhood. You would get respect.” The reasons of wearing this style still resemble the same reasons that the zoot suiter had. They talked about how this style in their neighborhood was a norm everybody dressed the same. For the reason that the outfit was affordable. They would get bullied if they weren’t wearing the style. Later in the interview, they mentioned that wearing the *cholo* style in the 80’s was to just be dressed nicely. It was a way to show that people of color had something even though they came out of poverty.

The women zoot suiters were among dressed similarly as the men. It was seen as the “in-style” at the time. Many Mexican American women youth wanted to wear the style, causing them to save their money in order to purchase the attire. It was “their own style of dress, consisting of a long finger-tip coat or letterman’s sweater, draped slacks or a short, full skirt above or just to their brown knees, high bobby socks and huaraches” (Ramirez 56). They were accused of being masculine because they also wore a zoot suit similar to the men (view Figure 6). However, they wore dark lip-stick and heavy mascara, with a high bouffant. It was said by many Anglo Americans that the women would hide knives in their hair because of how high it was (Ramirez). A woman in the book *The Women in the Zoot Suit* by Catherine Ramirez explained that she didn’t understand how a knife could fit in the hair.

Women zoot suiters’ identity during the 1940’s are described differently, depending on who one asks. First for many Anglo Americans, women zoot suiters were often seen as negatively as the men. During this time period, many people were still accustomed to seeing women look feminine with long skirts and attending the home. However, it changed when

women went into the work force, yet still having a feminine side. While women zoot suiters were also looked as unpatriotic for the unnecessary fabric they were using, they were also targeted for “unbridled female sexuality [and] juvenile delinquency” (Ramirez 69). Women wanted to be viewed as patriotic if they had a feminine charm and having daintiness. On the other hand, women zoot suiters were seen as “wild, dirty, and unkempt in the Anglo press” (Ramirez 71). Thus, expressing that women zoot suiters were no good to society. Not only Anglos targeted women zoot suiters but also the parents. Many of the women zoot suiters were second generation Mexican Americans. The parents thought of the zoot suiter style to be a bad influence on their female children (Ramirez).

Women zoot suiters were seen as too masculine for society. They wore similar clothes as the men did. This was a way that they were going against gender norms during World War II. Women were not supposed to be wearing clothing that looked masculine unless when they were in the work force. In fact, “women who crossed-dressed in public or failed to wear at least three articles of women’s clothing could be arrested for ‘male impersonation’” (Ramirez 79). Women zoot suiters can easily identifiable as women because of their make-up and hair. However, it is argued that just because they were wearing men clothing, they weren’t directly seen as women. Thus, being easily identified as men and seen as unpatriotic because the women “weren’t” helping the Homefront. Going against gender norms for women can also be seen as being rebellion at the time but it was a form of resistance that women had during the 1940’s in the larger American society. Women showed “that masculinity was not the sole property of men” (Alvarez 82). Wearing the zoot suit for women was not something they did because they were in a gang, many did not take part in such thing, but because they were taking part in the style that



was going on. The style was form to identify oneself and a form of resistance against the normal society expectation.

The influence of the women zoot suiters in today's *cholas*, Latina gangster look, has had similar impact of showing resistance. In a discussion session at the National Association for Chicana and Chicano Studies conference (NACCS) three women talked about "The Culture of Resistance." They spoke about the way Pachucas, women zoot suiters dressed and their make-up was a form that is still used in today's *cholas*. They described that the *cholas* of today to also fight against gender norms. They were the same clothes as men and are seen to be as tough as them (view Figure 7). Although the women zoot suiters weren't exactly in gangs, most of the women that wear the *chola* style aren't as well. These women are constantly "looking behind their backs," for trouble that may come. The women continued to talk about the way that their make-up resembles how tough they had to look, whether they were with their "man" or going out with some friends. Society still places an image for what women should look like and as the Pachucas did, the *cholas* are also going against the way that society would want to place them.

People use the zoot suit attire in different forms of media to gain publicity. However, certain people use the style in a form of appreciation it or a form of appropriating it. During the era of the zoot suits, there was an actor German Valdés that was known as Tin Tan (view Figure 8). He became a comedian known for wearing the zoot suit attire. He made his way through Ciudad Juarez, Chihuahua, Mexico and throughout the United States. To "Mexican audiences [they] saw Tin Tan as a victim of Anglo-American assimilation" (Mazón 5). Explained by Dr. Licón, German Valdés was someone who previously wore the zoot suit. Although Valdés was using the zoot suit attire as his stage costume and used it in his comedies: he understood what it

was meant to him and others. Therefore even if he was seen to be assimilated he appreciated the zoot suit.

Now there are many musical artists that are using specifically the women zoot suiters and the current *chola* style to gain some publicity. In the conversation with the three women at NACCS they touched a little on this subject. They gave the musical artist Rihanna that have used the *chola* style for Halloween costume and was a form of appropriating the *chola* look (view Figure 9). For the reason that she doesn't understand where it came from. "[Rihanna] describes herself as a 'chola' . . . [referring] to a Mexican-American subculture with roots in the Pachuco and zoot-suit traditions in California" (Reporter). The three women continue explain why Rihanna and other artists are appropriating the look with a video called, "Cholas Talk. . . Fashion." In this video there are series of *cholas* are examining what these artists are wearing. They describe them to be wearing the whole thing wrong and doesn't give them the "stamp of approval." The women are dressed as *cholas* and understand the meaning of wearing the style.

Wearing a zoot suit was a way for people, especially Mexican Americans, to shape an identity that corresponded to themselves. In many ways the zoot suit was a way these men and women were able to be who they wanted in a society that was racially discriminatory. They would be attack and harassed by those that were serving the country overseas against racism. It is very ironic that servicemen were fighting the opposite issue in the United States. Zoot suiters stood up for themselves and continuing to wear the zoot suit even after they were threatened showed the empowerment that they had. The men and women had saved a lot of their earnings to pay for a zoot suit. They felt proud, respected and powerful when wearing the attire. These feelings are still felt in our culture today. The *cholo* and *chola* style represents a way empowerment in their communities. It is a tough look that gives a sense of power to these

communities that are powerless. The feeling of racism and oppression are still ongoing and gives reasons for these communities to show in material things what they work so hard for to not be looked down upon.

The zoot suit attire has come a long way from the 1940's. Even though it is not a common fashion today as it once was, the transition of the style still remains in Mexican American communities. The attire of the zoot suit is still used today for special occasions in the Latino community. As part of the Latino community, people use it in family reunions, weddings, funerals, *quinceañeras*, sweet 15, or any other party because it is part of their identity from the past. As the transition from the zoot suit to the ironed khakis and white tee's to the *cholo* style and everything in between the style is passed on finding its own cultural identification among youth. Media has always portrayed the young zoot suiters and *cholo* to be associated with violence and gangs. Nonetheless it is just a style that Mexican Americans have used to find a place that they could fit in. Culture liminality in the United States is still common amongst many and through the clothing people wear helps distinguish themselves as different from the dominant culture.

Figures

Figure 1



Servicemen riding around on a car during the Zoot Suit Riots. *American Experience*. June 1943. Web. 03 May 2016.

Figure 2



The Zoot Suit attire and what everything is called. *Zoot Suit Discovery Guide*. 2016. Web. 03 May 2016.

Figure 3



Zoot suiters beaten and stripped of their clothing. Teenage Film. June 1943. Web. 03 May 2016.

Figure 4



Zoot Suit Riots. Sailors, marines, and marines running towards anyone wearing a zoot suit. *The Mercury News*. 07 June 1943. Web. 03 May 2016.

Figure 5



Jose Villezcas dressed for a casual party.  
*Author's photograph.* 05 March 2016.

Figure 6

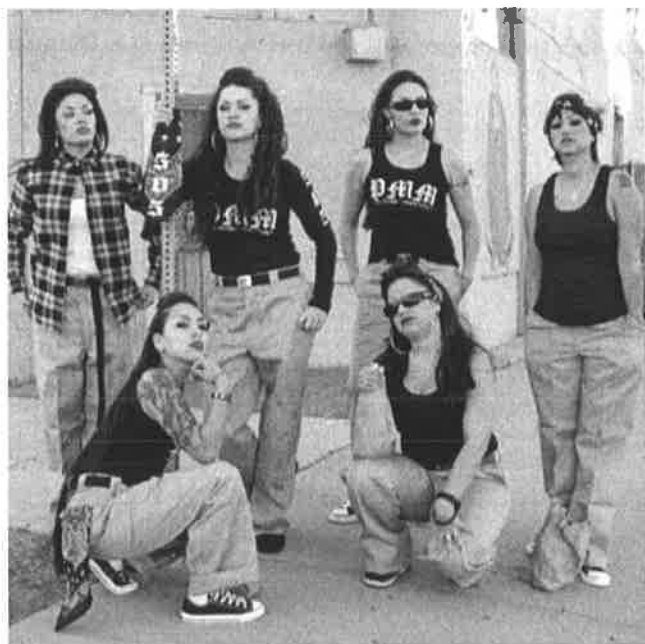


Women zoot suiter dressed to go out.  
*Teenage Film.* 1943. Web. 03 May 2016.



A group of 7 women zoot suiters posing for a photo.  
*The McDonald Sun.* 1943. Web. 03 May 2016.

Figure 7



Women dressed in the variety of the chola style. *Pinterest*. Web. 03 May 2016.

Figure 8



Tin Tan in his comedies. *Mexico Unmasked*. August 2011 Web. 03 May 2016.

Figure 9



Rihanna's posing as a chola. *Daily Mail*, October 2013. Web 03 May 2016.



## Works Cited

- Alvarez, Luis. *The Power of the Zoot: Youth Culture and Resistance during World War II*. Berkeley: U of California, 2008. Print.
- American Me*. Dir. Edward James Olmos. Prod. Edward James Olmos. By Floyd Mutrux and Desmond Nakano. Perf. Edward James Olmos and Pepe Serna. Universal Pictures, 1992.
- Chacón, Justin Akers, and Mike Davis. *No One Is Illegal: Fighting Violence and State Repression on the U.S.-Mexico Border*. Chicago, IL: Haymarket, 2006. Print.
- Hailer, Charles. "Zoot Suit Riot." *Teenage*. 24 Mar. 2014. Web. 25 Apr. 2016.
- Licón, Gerardo. "Mexican American Zoot Suiters in El Paso Texas: Pachucos, Tirilis and Kalifas." *Chicano and Latino Studies*. Scott Hall Room 2, Minneapolis. 25 Mar. 2016. Lecture.
- Mazón, Mauricio. *The Zoot-suit Riots: The Psychology of Symbolic Annihilation*. Austin: U of Texas, 1984. Print.
- Meier, Matt S., and Feliciano Ribera. *The Chicanos: A History of Mexican Americans*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1972. 191-196. Print.
- Meyer, Agnes E. "Zoot-Suiters -- A New Youth Movement." *The Washington Post (1923-1954)*: 2. Jun 13 1943. *ProQuest*. Web. 10 Apr. 2016.
- Pagán, Eduardo Obregón. *Murder at the Sleepy Lagoon: Zoot Suits, Race, and Riot in Wartime L.A.* Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina, 2003. Print.
- Patiño, Jimmy. Personal Interview. 19 Apr. 2016.
- Ramírez, Catherine Sue. *The Woman in the Zoot Suit: Gender, Nationalism, and the Cultural Politics of Memory*. Durham: Duke UP, 2009. 64-82. Print

Reft, Ryan. "Seventy Years Later: The Zoot Suit Riots and the Complexity of Youth Culture."

*KCET*. KCETLink, 30 May 2013. Web. 27 Feb. 2016.

Reporter, Daily Mail. "Copycat! Rihanna Dresses as a Latina Gangster for Halloween Two Days

after Chris Brown's Girlfriend Karreuche Tran Wears Almost Identical Costume." *Mail*

*Online*. Associated Newspapers, 02 Nov. 2013. Web. 20 Apr. 2016.

Soriano, Lucecita, Maria Camacho, and Ana Scarlett Celis. "Pachucas & Cholas: A Culture of

Resistance." National Association for Chicana and Chicano Studies. Denver, Colorado.

07 Apr. 2016. Lecture.

Villezcás, Jose. Darlina Ponce, Rudy Cordova. Personal Interview. 22 Apr. 2016.