

The Change In Chicano Culture

Honors Humanities 11

26 May 2017

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The incident in Williams Ranch, commonly known as the Sleepy Lagoon Murder, occurred during the rise of Latino population in the U.S.. What followed was a trial to solve the murder but instead it increased conflict between the American servicemen and Mexican-American youths in the area. The attack of minority Americans was labeled as the Zoot Suit Riots due to the draped outfits that became popular within minority groups. The outfit consisted of an oversized jackets with padded shoulders, draped, high waisted pants that hugged at the ankles, long chains that hung off the belt, often a pettleten style shirt with a large, patterned tie around the neck, and an exuberant hat usually with a large feather. Because of the hysteria that followed the hispanic culture, the zoot suit tradition became known as a gang affiliated symbol. The Zoot Suit Riot was a result of the racial stereotypes implemented throughout the influx of Mexican laborers, prompting Chicanos to redefine their culture.

The U.S. entered World War II after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941. Along with the war came the draft, which decreased the male labor population and increased the amount of vacant labor occupations. As a result, the government granted women in this society the political ability to fill the career positions previously employed to male citizens. The majority of the country adapted to these changes to support their patriotic tendencies (Ochoa and Ochoa 29).

Although many women contributed to the work force, the country continued to have a shortage of hard laborers. Political officials decided to created the Bracero Program, an agreement with the country of Mexico to recruit people in need of support. The U.S. provided these new laborers with \$0.30 an hour, housing in rural areas, prepaid round trip to and from the U.S, and protection from drastic discrimination. The braceros, by contract, were only

allowed a certain period of time in which they were allowed to remain in the U.S. without being considered immigrants. The agreement stated that after their appointed time periods they would have to travel back to Mexico with their belongings and earnings (Ochoa and Ochoa 29).

However, since many large corporations considered Latino laborers easier to exploit for a profit, they continued to hire braceros well after their visa to work had expired. Braceros experienced segregation, discrimination, unfair wages, harsh treatment and strenuous conditions in their laboring facilities. The negative rumors flowing through the media created an increase in gang activity (Martinez 27-30).

While the speculation of the Zoot Suiters began to increase, an incident known as the Sleepy Lagoon Murder occurred and created more awareness for the “Mexican problem”. The Sleepy Lagoon Murder took place in the Williams Ranch fields where many young *pachucos*, Mexican-American gangsters, would visit frequently. When they experienced discrimination in segregated provinces of the city, pachucos migrated to the Williams Ranch fields as their designated stomping-grounds. After a confrontation between two rival gangs from 38th Street neighborhoods, a gang led by Hank Leyvas returned in search for their opposing gang. Instead they found a local home conveniently hosting a party. Assuming the party was populated with members of the group they were looking for, they ransacked the area. Jose Diaz was later found dead by a nearby neighbor. The People v. Zammora case was opened in hopes of finding the culprit (“Sleepy Lagoon Murder”).

This case gave LAPD a reason to prosecute gang members that they were attempting to prevent from spreading. Out of the 600 possible suspects, the LAPD narrowed it down to twenty-one zoot suiters, including Leyvas. During the trial, guards did not allow the suspects to

cut or style their hair or wear zoot suits. The judge appointed to the case, Charles W. Fricke, over ruled the restrictions of certain liberties because he believed their fashion was “crucial to understanding their character” (“Judge Charles”). Five of the suspected criminals were sent to San Quentin for anywhere between six months to a year; while eleven others were found guilty of murder and sentenced to a lifetime in the same prison, all without substantial evidence. Most evidence was based on the association of their attire to the rumoured gang affiliation of the area they lived in. Due to certain discrepancies during the trial, the verdict was found inaccurate. After eight years the zoot suiters were ultimately found not guilty and released from prison (“Judge Charles”).

As many braceros began to migrate their families over to the U.S., it was assumed that the incoming, young Latinos would become susceptible to the new culture that now surrounded them. Instead, the majority of young Latin Americans grew to resent the American culture due to its discriminative characters. Much of this resentment stemmed from, “the difficulty of entering a new country and culture and adapting to internal and external demands for conformity” (Mazón 62). America’s history of segregation in facilities, labor, and pay was not an exception to the laboring Mexican-Americans. Throughout the agricultural labor facilities the Braceros experienced, “violations of wage agreements, substandard living quarters, exorbitant charges for food and clothing, and racist discrimination” (“Chapter 8”). Furthermore, the braceros were unable to fight for their rightful treatment because if they protested, the employers would merely recruit more braceros as replacements. As brazeros

began to populate much of the popular cities, Californians began to “debate whether Mexican citizens and their American-born children were culturally, politically, intellectually, and biologically capable of living within a white, civilization, democratic society” (Obregón 3). When the rebellious, young Mexican Americans caught wind of the unfair labor and treatment they and/or their family had to endure, they decided it best to empower their race by redefining their culture. In order to create a formidable society, “they crafted an identity that was neither ‘Mexican’ in the manner that their parents; generation would have them nor ‘American’ in the manner that the dominant society would have them.” Chicanos did not want to maintain their “Mexican” culture because they wanted to “gain political leverage denied them as ‘Mexicans’” (Obregón 13). Therefore, when creating their own culture, Chicanos focused on strengthening the positive aspects of the two different societies. However, the new culture did reflect similar features to that of American society at the time.

The Zoot Suiters were able to empower and express themselves in a way that was not yet accepted by American and Mexican culture by following the jazz trend of the Roaring Twenties. Zoot Suiters took a liking to the rebellious reputation that followed the jazz custom. Eduardo Obregón Pagán explains the connection of jazz culture to the zoot suit trend:

Viewed from a larger perspective, working-class Mexican American, African American, Asian American, and Irish American youths in Los Angeles area shared a kind of syncretistic fashion and manner through their music, dance, clothing, and language. Although still inchoate, the evolution of the *tacuche* from zoot suit was but one form of creative responses among the working-class youths caught between the eventuality of the draft and the immediacy of war labor demands. That largely Latino and Asian American

youths chose to adopt and modify the 'expressive style' of the dress and behavior of African American hipsters indicates the degree of cultural creativity and adaptation at work among second- and third- generation youths. (Obregón 116).

Basing their new culture on a recalcitrant style allowed the pachucos to gain control of the way they managed themselves. The Mexican-Americans used jazz in the same way the African American had done it in the 1930's; they used "the creative sounds of jazz [as] ways of shamelessly celebrating life in spite of the difficulties" (Obregón 116). The African Americans utilized jazz because, "The music set them apart from the Mexican society because it was absolutely different from their traditions. Since jazz was not accepted as a positive influence in America, it "created the context for the demonization of the drape" (Obregón 116). As if the indications of jazz influence on the zoot suit were not enough, the actions of the Zoot Suiters began to shift from a sort of Swing-Culture to gang violence due to the hatred brought on by local servicemen.

In an attempt to create unity within the U.S. President Franklin Roosevelt delivered the "*Four Freedoms*", but instead the Latin- Americans used the message as inspiration to empower their own movement. Roosevelt's speech covered the importance of the four pillars of freedom. The pillars consisted of the freedom of fear, freedom of worship, freedom of speech, and freedom of want. Norman Rockwell later illustrated four matching paintings to correspond with the four pillars of Roosevelt's speech. After the speech was delivered, the illustrations were released to the public in a certain order over a three month period, starting on February 20, 1943 and ending on March 13, 1943. Roosevelt created the four pillars of freedom because,

“the need for a war creed became even more necessary as the U.S. built its citizens and inhabitants up to sustain morale and war efforts such as buying war bonds” (Baldwin). The third speech was *Freedom from Want*, accompanied by the Rockwell painting the image displayed, “in it a multi-generational family gathers at the table to partake in the annual holiday meal” (Hay). Ideally the illustration would provoke patriotism for the war but the speech invoked something different in the oppressed minds of those who refused to conform. Speech writer, Carlos Bulosan’s essay mentioned, “It is the dignity of the individual to live in a society of free men, where the perit of understanding and belief exist; of understanding that all men are created equal; that all men, whatever their color, race, religion, or estate, should be given equal opportunity to serve themselves and each other according to their needs and abilities” (Bulosan). The essay goes on to motivate the public to march without any specific indication of what they should be marching for. Some took the information and focused their feeling towards the war. While the Zoot Suiters continued to rebel and used this text to strengthen their own culture and fight for their civil rights.

Once the Anglo servicemen began to perceive the Zoot Suiters as a threat due to their lack of conformity, the Chicano culture began to change. Zoot Suiters began to be labeled as *pachucos* [gangsters] when servicemen, “engaged in fighting, particularly among youths, resort to fistcuffs and may at times kick each other,” because supposedly, “this Mexican element considers all that a sign of weakness, and all he knows and feels is a desire to use a knife or some lethal weapon” (DeMarco 148). These violent occurrences happened often, though the Zoot Suiters maintained their dignity while they defend themselves. When characterizing young Zoot Suiters as the delinquents in the media, “people were more likely to believe that the sailor’s

brutality was justified during the riots. By the time the riots broke out, much of the public had already condemned the zoot suiters and thought that the sailors were in the right” (Grizzle 7).

In one instance of the attacks against Latino Americans, a group of visiting servicemen came across one of the more necessitous parts of town, largely populated by Mexican-Americans. They claimed to have been assaulted by a gang pachucos; yet when the police searched the area, there was not any substantial evidence of a brawl. Later that night, the enraged servicemen, “cruised the Mexican east-side of Los Angeles looking for trouble. They stopped *en masse* to assault lone zoot-suited boys and then moved on” (DeMarco 150). Although the police were aware of the servicemen's plans, they did nothing to protect the oppressed civilians. In fact, when investigating the crime scene, many police officers arrested pachucos on the claim that they were a public disturbance (Griswold 370). Therefore, the Zoot Suiters had to fend for themselves and became notorious as being gang affiliated.

Pachucos were not only wrongfully arrested but also experienced violent and verbal brutality at the hand of police officers. After the false accusations set on the zoot suited boys in the east-side of Los Angeles, many more assaults took place that, “police had not been able to control the violence and that it had spread from attacks against supposed delinquents to Mexicans in general, including women and children” (Griswold 371). However not much was done to help prevent the violence from evolving into gang activity. In fact, much of the police department avoided any personal affiliation with Latin-American activity. Instead, they used certain aspects of Chicano culture, such as, “the Spanish language, a[nd] marked them as a target; Mexican residents kept the police at arms length” (Baldwin). Thus the language, new

fashion, and jazz affiliation, of Chicano culture at the time, were all singled out as a way for the police to identify local gangsters. Furthermore the prejudice expressed within, “the military, police and media in the aftermath of the riots demonstrates just how much antipathy mainstream America had to the plight of Chicanos” (Grizzle 19). In one instance, the head of Foreign Relations Bureau for the Los Angeles Sheriff’s Department, Ed Ayers, explained in a report, “that Chicanos were inherently criminal and violent ... He urged that all gang members be imprisoned ... Chicanos, according to Ayres, could not change their spots; they had an innate desire to use a knife and let blood, and this inborn cruelty was aggravated by liquor and jealousy” (Grant 3). In another occurrence, when a famous novelist and poet, Carlos Bulosan, talks about his experience after asking a bartender why a boy was recently shot by policemen, the bartender replies with, “‘They often shoot Pinoys like that,’ he said. ‘Without provocation. Sometimes when they have been drinking and they just want to have fun, they come to our district and kick or beat the first Filipino they meet’” (Baldwin). After all the racial stereotypes in the police system, the need for empowerment in the Chicano culture became clearly necessary to fight for their equal treatment.

The demand for a change in culture also derived from the need to create unity before fighting American discrimination. After the mass inequities in the labor system, “the ostracization felt by Mexican-American youths and concludes that this led to the adaptation of the zoot culture in order to create a sense of group feeling among the second generation Mexican-Americans” (Grizzle 2). The unity of young Mexican-Americans made it a necessity for the empowerment of Chicano movement. However, after the violence began to occur,

“the reaction of the general public was then to lump all zoot suiters into the category of criminal delinquent, fueled by their media representation as such” (Grizzle 2). Thus the reputation of the new Chicano Culture would now be determined by the influence the media had on the people.

The majority of media was either inaccurately representing the War of Resistance, or completely ignoring the segregated minorities. Contrary to popular belief, history does not show, “one single definitive piece of evidence that proves the violence was started by either the sailors or the Mexican-Americans” (Grizzle 6). Therefore, the cause of the violence cannot place the fault on one particular race as it is usually done in the media. The majority of the stories portrayed the pachuco as an enemy because the setup of the anecdote lacked clear and credible evidence against the pachucos. Instead, the media used its news to induce patriotism by allowing the reader to “appeal on behalf of the servicemen went to the emotions of empathy, compassion and brotherhood, the injunctions against zoot-suiters solicited fantasies of revenge, retribution, and annihilation” (Mazón 59). The press often fabricated stories without substantial evidence that identified Mexican-Americans as violent gangsters. Gordon DeMarco describes the negative undertones of the media after the Sleepy Lagoon Murder:

It was something out of Hell Town or *Day of the Locust*. The press was the lighter fluid that kept the charcoal glowing. Totally fabricated stories were printed. “Zooters Planning to Attack More Servicemen,” roared the *Daily News*. Surprisingly, the resistance of the *pachucos* had been almost non-existent. But that didn’t stop the *Daily News*. It reported that zooters were planning to “jab broken bottlenecks in the faces of their victims.... Beating sailors’ brains out with hammers....” It was one of the first times that a riot was *advertised* in the newspapers. (DeMarco 150).

Therefore, the hatred towards Mexican-Americans may have begun with the violence between the servicemen and the Zoot Suiters, but was strengthened by the media's attempts to provoke nationalism in favor of the servicemen who fought in World War II.

In some instances, the violent aspects were completely overlooked by the media which stripped the history from the story of its significance. Instead of publishing accurate current events, the media "celebrated a kind of patriotism that was layered with troubling assumptions about power, race, and culture. Indeed those who looked too foreign or who failed to conform to the celebrated 'American' ideal often paid the price" (Obregón 7). Therefore, the Zoot Suiters continued to endure the racialized segregation involved in the media and not. In fact, during the Sleepy Lagoon Murder, the death of Jose Diaz "represented a horrible truth that the white reading public would rather not recognize: the sometimes violent and often unforgiving 'City of Angels'" (Obregón 3). Furthermore, the racially segregated media not only told inaccurate stories but also only featured what would be pleasant to the viewers. Censoring the media belittled the importance of the story because it did not address the true issue. Due to the fabricated stories many journalists, "used the same small selection of articles, memoranda, and investigative reports to build their narrative of the events" (Grizzle 2). The media did not dive too deeply into the history before the Zoot Suit Riots because the majority of information released during that time was about World War II.

One of the most publicized forms of propaganda pertaining to the Zoot Suit culture was Al Capp's comic strip, "*Zoot Suit Yokum*". Al Capp was a well known cartoonist who created characters based on some of the most controversial historical topics. Although it was one

of the only forms of propaganda that advertised the Zoot Suiters, “the construction of heroes and villains was a tool used by capitalists to trick the consumer, and in the end, vilifies the zoot-suiter, equating them with stupidity, criminality, and finally describing mob action against them” (“Zoot Suit of Life 7). The racist comments threaded into the comments reflects a sorts of dehumanization when, in one of the comic strips, a zoot suit manufacturer is looking for the person with the lowest I.Q.. While on the search, the man’s assistance says, “I’ve found someone with an even lower I.Q..” The boss replies with, “it certainly can’t be human” (Mazón 42). Another instance of racial occurrences could be tied to a scene in the comic that portrays an Anglo couple next to a few shorter people, dressed in zoot suits. The wife asks her husband, “We’ve been away only a month but the neighbors look different”. Each of the aforementioned quotations could be interpreted as a commentary on race. The “neighbors” who “look different” may refer to the thousands of Mexican Americans in the United States at this time, especially since they are depicted so much shorter than the two people making the comment and Mexicans were stereotyped as being short” (“Zoot Suit of Life 8).

For the majority of the comic Zoot Suit Yokum was performing heroic acts and it made all the readers want to follow zoot suit culture. In an attempt to preclude the effects of the comic from spreading they created an alternate character to Zoot Suit Yokum. This alternate character would act as an imposter in the story and perform mischievous acts. The alternate character, Gat Garson, “manages to falsify the popularity of Zoot-Suit Yokum by redirecting the public’s indignation against anyone and everything associated with a zoot-suit” (Mazón 36). Thus the comic strip was used to create a popular, negative reputation throughout the Zoot Suit community. The business owners also were also abusing and, “conspiring against each other and

the people become a pawn in a quest for more money,” (“Zoot Suit Life”), because in the beginning when Yokum was a hero, they could sell merchandise. In fact, during an excerpt from the Yokum comic strip, the merchant states, ““they’ll all want zoot suits will. Huh!! We’ll add thousands of new workers!! -The seat of the zoot suit industry will spread beyond belief”” (Mazón 36). These comic strips were some of the only information about the Zoot Suit culture at that time which did not leave any space for speculation on whether it was true or fabricated.

The society’s population of racial stereotypes made the shift in Chicano culture a necessity. U.S. citizens expected the incoming bracero families to adapt to the new social norms that thrive in this American environment. However, the young Latin- Americans refused to conform to American ideals or Mexican culture. The Zoot Suiters utilized the jazz trend as a way to rebel and express themselves in a unique way. In an attempt to influence patriotism towards the war, Roosevelt impacted the rebellious manner of young Latin Americans, causing them to have an even greater reason to resist conforming. Servicemen visiting from their missions felt the need to assault zoot suited boys as a way to force them to follow American ideals. They took violent measures to ensure that the pachucos would conform, but, ultimately, failed. The police were also against the pachucos because of the gang affiliated identity implemented by the servicemen. All the violent and verbal brutality caused the Zoot Suiters to unite for the purpose of self defence. Also the media failed to report the stories of the such violence with accurate details. If the information in the stories was not manipulated to appeal to the reader it would be completely ignored. The main source where citizen, at the time, could acquire information about these minority groups was by reading the racially based comic strip, “*Zoot Suit Yokum*”. Within

that comic the common Zoot Suiter went from being labeled as a hero to transforming into a villain.

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