I. What’s Already in Textbooks?

*The American Vision: Modern Times: Ch. 12: America and World War II, Section 3*

The new challenges of World War II brought many changes to the lives of minorities.

**Bracero Program**
- The Bracero Program was introduced to help farmers in the Southwest overcome labor shortages due to the wartime economy.
- Over 200,000 Mexicans came to the U.S. to help harvest fruit and vegetables. Many also helped to build and maintain railroads.

**The Zoot Suit Riots**
- Zoot Suiters angered many Americans, because wearing the zoot suit seemed unpatriotic (due to the disregard for saving fabric for the war).
- In June 1943, after hearing rumors that zoot suiters had attacked several sailors, 500 soldiers and sailors stormed into Mexican American neighborhoods in L.A. and attacked Mexican American teenagers.
- Racial hostility against Mexican Americans did not keep them from joining the war, though. Most soldiers, about 400,000 were Mexican American. Another 65,000 were from Puerto Rico. They fought in Europe, North Africa, and the Pacific, and by the end of the war, 17 Mexican Americans had received the Medal of Honor.

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II. History of the Bracero Program, August 1942-1964

Brief Facts: 22 years, 26 states, 200,000/yr, 4.6 million contracts

The Bracero Program enabled millions of Mexican men to come to the United States to work on short-term labor contracts to alleviate the labor shortage that resulted from individuals going off to fight during World War II. Braceros were employed in the agricultural areas of the United States, including California, Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, Arkansas, and twenty-three other states. Not long after the beginning of the Program, Braceros were portrayed as “job-takers” because Mexican American laborers already living and working in the United States claimed that Bracero presence increased the competition for jobs and lowered wages. Although the Bracero Program is often portrayed as having saved American agriculture, many fail to consider the exploitative nature of the program.

The Bracero program treated Mexican workers as imported goods. In this sense, Mexican laborers are dehumanized and objectified. They are not treated as human beings but as tradable and expendable goods. Moreover, the choice of wording for the name of the program was demeaning in itself. The term “bracero” is derived from the Spanish word brazo, meaning “arm.” Therefore, it is a phrase that is associated with farm hand or labor for hire, and more extensively, it is associated with people of color, with Mexicans in this specific case. The fact that there is an emphasis on the brazos, or arms, of Mexican laborers perpetuates the stereotype that Mexicans must fulfill manual labor because they are biologically built to do so due to their race—when in fact, this statement holds no truth.

Figure 2 Image of Bracero Card taken from www.pbs.org

Upon crossing over the bridge from Mexico, men were shuffled through a makeshift booth and sprayed with DDT. Photo by Leonard Nadel.

Figure 3 Braceros were also marginalized because they experienced body assault as they went through medical inspections before crossing the border.

Theoretically, the Bracero program was not supposed to take advantage of Mexican laborers, but in practice, it affected them as they were turned into a big group of cheap labor for growers. Although the Bracero program guaranteed paid wages, sanitary and free housing, decent meals at reasonable prices, insurance, and free transportation back to Mexico at the end of the contract, there are countless testimonies of legally contracted Braceros who were not provided with

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these promised resources. Also, since the majority
of the labor recruits came from the least
developed regions of Mexico and with very little
knowledge of the English language, farmers and
recruiters were able to manipulate and violate
labor records and contracts. Therefore, due to the
Department of Labor’s lack of enforcement of
program rules, the Bracero Program was not
renewed and it ended on December 31, 1964.

As directly quoted from the National Museum of
American History, the impact of the bracero
program continues today. Many historians have
linked the program to settlement patterns of
Latinos in the United States, and many Latino
families can trace a relative’s involvement in the
bracero program. Although bracero workers were
supposed to return to Mexico at the end of their
contract, (during the duration of the program, the
contracts ranged from four weeks to six months),
some remained in the United States and many of
those who did return to Mexico eventually
immigrated back to the United States.

The Bracero Program was the largest and most
significant contract labor program in the 20th
Century in the United States because it affected
the business of farming, immigration patterns,
organized labor, and both American and Mexican
culture.

Research on your own:
OPERATION WETBACK
(Start with: article by Kelly Lytle-Hernandez)
• 1954: 1 million deportees
• Considered an enforcement success
• Scale: 300,000 deportees last year
  (2008) in addition to 1 million voluntary departures
• Mexicans racially targeted
• “Companion” to Bracero Program:
  Simultaneous with importation of labor
• Construct of legal vs. illegal

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III. From Braceros to Pachucos

After having read the section on the Bracero Program, you are probably wondering what bridges it to the Zoot Suit Riots? The connection between the two lies in the growing anxiety and negative sentiment towards Mexicans. The Bracero Program ignited a fear in Mexican American U.S. Citizens, but especially in white Americans, about their own positions in the racial hierarchy of U.S. society. This fear and anxiety went on to contribute the framework for the category of citizenship vs. non-citizenship, illegal vs. legal, and ultimately American vs. non-American.

These negative sentiments mainly affected second generation Mexican Americans.

IV. Americanization of the Mexican American

Brief facts:

World War II: Many Mexican Americans served because not to serve or to make sacrifices to the war was deemed as unpatriotic
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After the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor, most Americans found themselves in a tense atmosphere of anger and frustration.

The Sleepy Lagoon Trial (1942): 300 arrested, 22 sentenced to trial

Zoot Suit Riots (1943): lasted a couple of weeks; between white sailors and Chicano youth (during WWII); representation of wartime prejudice and ethnic strife

“Pachuquismo”

In the 1940s, most of the Mexican and Mexican American populations lived in barrios located mostly in East Los Angeles, in locations such as Chavez Ravine, Belvedere, and Maravilla.

At this point in time, Mexicans and Mexican-Americans experienced segregation in education, housing, restaurants, public parks, and movie theatres, to name a few. This racial segregation provided the younger generation of Mexican Americans with the obstacle of being “caught between two cultures.”

The so-called “pachuco gangs” came about as Mexican American youth tried to prove that they were “real Americans” by wearing the zoot suit. As explained by Carlos M. Jimenez, the zoot suit consisted of “extra baggy pants that fit tight at the ankles, and a broad-rimmed hat” and sometimes also accessorized with a long key chain. Carlos M. Jimenez also describes that pachucas liked to wear “short and tight black skirts, black sweaters, fishnet hose and tall pompadour hairdos.”

The use of the zoot suits was initially seen as a rebellion and assertion of individuality, but it was not long until it was deemed as criminal and unpatriotic behavior. Racism and violence was reinforced as pachucos were stereotyped as Mexican American juvenile delinquents.

Two events in particular increased the public’s awareness of Mexican American youth.

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Sleepy Lagoon Trial

In August 1942, a young Mexican American male, Jose Diaz, was found dead near Sleepy Lagoon, a large irrigation ditch located in a ravine in a rural area of Montebello near the East Side of Los Angeles.

According to police reports, Diaz was murdered as a result of the confrontation between two Mexican gangs, the 38th Street Gang and the Downey Boys, at a party near Sleepy Lagoon.

Even though there was no eye-witness, murder weapon, or motive—basically, not proof at all—Los Angeles police relied on circumstantial evidence to arrest twenty-two supposed 38th Street Gang Members, including Henry Leyvas, on charges of murder and conspiracy.

In January 1943, after an unjust trial, an all-white jury convicted seventeen of those that had been arrested. On October 4, 1944, after having spent about two years in jail, the district court reversed the guilty verdict on the basis that the judge and jury had been influenced by their prejudices against the Mexican youth.

In this situation, what can be said about the hastily actions of the Los Angeles Police Department? In the face of legalities and racism, how else could the pachucos defend themselves? What statement did wearing a zoot suit make?
Another outbreak of violence occurred between June 3 and June 13, 1943, about five months after the Sleepy Lagoon defendants were convicted, in Downtown and East Los Angeles. The Zoot Suit Riots were comprised of altercations between American servicemen and Mexican American youth.

Although about 200 sailors against Mexican Americans initiated physical attacks, the media widely portrayed this event as “another example of Mexicans’ inherent barbarity, hooliganism, and questionable loyalty,” as presented by David G. Gutierrez.

The servicemen targeted Mexican American youth who were wearing zoot suits. Altercations took place in theaters, streetcars, and in the streets of Los Angeles. Although there were no casualties of the riot, a great number of Mexican American youth were stripped of their clothes, had their hair cut, and were physically beaten. To top it off, they ended up being arrested by Los Angeles police officers for disturbing the peace, while no charges were filed against the American servicemen. Thus, why did the sailors resort to violence and humiliation against the Mexican American pachuco?

It is important to analyze the facts about the zoot suit riots because there is a common misconception that Mexicans are the problem and the enemy, when in fact, in the context of
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World War II, one forgets that Mexican Americans participated in the war, exhibiting their patriotism for American culture.

The American servicemen disagreed with the attitude portrayed by the zoot suit and took violent action without getting punished for it. What threat did pachuquismo present to American society? What role did the media have in perpetuating the anxiety and negativity associated with Mexican Americans? How true is the media’s perspective? Whose perspective is being told?

It is also essential for current Chicano youth to take a moment to consider how far we have come as a people. Have the attitudes that fueled the Zoot Suit Riots against Mexican Americans disappeared? Do we continue to deal with prejudiced attitudes? If so, what can be done to dispel or change those perspectives? Are Chicanos asked to prove their “Americaness” to this day? Why or why not?

Explore on your own:

- Music: “Zoot Suit Riot” by the Cherry Poppin’ Daddies
  
  [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1lqH3ujiwJY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1lqH3ujiwJY)

- Music: “Pachuco: by the Kumbia Kings
  
  [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OuEuysP8B9Q](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OuEuysP8B9Q)

- Music: “Zoot Suit” by The Who
  
  [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qXL47Bz66R4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qXL47Bz66R4)

- Film: “Zoot Suit” by Luis Valdez
  
  [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qn0sPl5KLKE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qn0sPl5KLKE)

- Film: “American Me” Opening Scene
  

- Film: “Mi Familia” minute 6
  
  [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FdZo8-1-a_A](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FdZo8-1-a_A)

Figure 15 Female Zoot Suiters were also arrested. Courtesy of [www.oldmemorieslosangeles.us](http://www.oldmemorieslosangeles.us)

Research on your own: THE ROLE OF Las Pachucas DURING THE RIOTS

Start with: Vicki L Ruiz’s *From Out of the Shadows*, Ch. 4

- Women who rebelled against Mexican American norms
- “Scandalized the adults of the Anglo and Mexican Communities alike with their short, tight skirts, sheer blouses, and built-up hairdos” (Ruiz 83)
- Carmen Lomas Garza’s portrait of “Pachuca With a Razor Blade”
- Often portrayed as delinquents, pot-smoking prostitutes, “las malinches” in newspapers, but they often affirmed their virginity and patriotism
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V. End of War

Despite all the violence in Los Angeles, as said by Carlos M. Jimenez, “at the end of the war, Mexican American soldiers were the most decorated of all American minority groups.”

Real concrete changes occurred when Mexican American veterans came home—they were motivated to be activists for social change. Despite the racism that they experienced at the hands of others, they were not going to return to a state of second-class citizenship—especially when they had returned from a war where they defended the American country.

Along with this call for activism, Mexicans began to demand equal opportunities and resources. For instance, there was a push to end school segregation and to demand for small but important services like public transportation in predominant Mexican communities.

Mexican Americans began to organize and provided the foundation for even more aggressive demands for equal justice and treatment. In a sense, they stopped being passive victims, embraced their identity, and took action to improve their position in American society.

By the 1960s, Mexican American activism was in an ideal position for a civil rights movement to occur. The resurgence of the farmworkers movement in California was the initial driving force that would eventually lead to the birth of the Chicano Movement.

V. Questions to consider

**Bracero Program**
- What consequences have resulted from the “revolving door” effect that policies like the Bracero Program enact? Is it just to blame Mexican laborers for “taking” jobs from others?

**Zoot Suit Riots**
- How has the persistence of racism led to modern acts of violence (like the Zoot Suit riots)? Is there anyway we can decrease or get rid of racism?

**Image Analysis**
- Do you think that the image on the left is in any way offensive to Chicanas/os today? Why or why not? What connotation is hidden behind the word “wetback”? 

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Reference:

Cosgrove, Stuart. 1984. Zoot Suit and Style Warfare

Gutierrez, David, *Walls and Mirrors: Mexican Americans, Mexican Immigrants and the Politics of Ethnicity*


Ruiz, Vicki, *From out of the Shadows: Mexican American Women in the Twentieth Century*.


*The American Vision: Modern Times: Ch. 12: America and World War II, Section 3*

*The Chicano Studies Reader: An Anthology of Aztlan*

UCLA Chicana/o Research Center—various archives on the Bracero Program and the Zoot Suit riots.

[http://latino.si.edu/education/NMAHLatino.htm](http://latino.si.edu/education/NMAHLatino.htm)

[http://www1.american.edu/TED/bracero.htm](http://www1.american.edu/TED/bracero.htm)