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The Legal and Social Repercussions of the Media on the Sleepy Lagoon Trial and the Zoot Suit Riots

by

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The Sleepy Lagoon Murder

People v. Zamora was a case that was decided on January 12, 1943, which led to the conviction and sentencing of five defendants guilty of assault, nine guilty of second degree murder, and three of first degree murder. This equals a total of seventeen convictions for the murder of one man, out of twenty two who were arrested. Along with those convictions, five women were arrested and, due mainly to their refusal to cooperate were sent to a woman's reformatory (Barajas, 36). Yet there emerged many different problems that were relevant in this trial, which were brought about by both legal and social injustices. Even prior to the start of the trial there began to be a growing suspicious sentiment surfacing amongst the American people, due in large part to the yellow journalism that was going on at the moment. There were also many legal injustices that came about due to personal and social prejudice that governed the trial from beginning to end. Through the analysis of this trial, and the ensuing events, I will analyze the trial and focus on how pivotal the Zamora trial was legally. I will also examine the results of the trial and if they had any effect on the severe police brutality and the injustices being faced by the Mexican American people in the following years, specifically focusing on the Zoot Suit Riots. I will in conjunction with that analyze the social and political effects that both of these occurrences had on Chicanos, and their growing awareness of their rights. This case and the

effects of it had long lasting consequences, changing the lives of many people, "this case involves the civil rights of the Mexican people, and, as an attack upon the democratic fabric, it involves all the people" (Cullen, 5).

On August 2nd Jose Diaz was found near what had come to be known as the "Sleepy Lagoon." He was rushed to a hospital where he died from massive head trauma as well as stabbings. After his body was found, there was a huge police sweep over the whole County, in which over 300 male youths were arrested, the majority of them happened to be considered of Mexican origin. Twenty-four youths were indicted on charges of conspiracy to commit murder, as well as assault with a deadly weapon (Barajas, 37). Of the twenty four defendants, only two of them were granted a separate trial, because none of the other defendant's lawyers thought to ask for one. Meanwhile the other twenty-two defendants were prosecuted, in a very public trial that began in October of 1942, and the guilty verdict of the aforementioned trial was handed down in January of 1943. The verdict in this trial was partially indicative of the problems that can be faced when legal counsel provided is inadequate. The prejudicial sentiment rampant throughout the trail was being created even before the murder occurred. Evidence of this is seen in many different articles being released during the time prior to the murder, which exaggerated the instances of

violence occurring amongst the minorities, insisting on a crime wave amid the Mexican American youth.

The newspapers greatly contributed to the preconceptions against the Chicano youth, "The Los Angeles paper started it by building a "crime wave" even before there was a crime. "MEXICAN GOON SQUADS," "ZOOT SUIT GANGS," "PACHUCO KILLERS," "JUVENILE GANG WAR LAID TO YOUTHS' DESIRE TO THRILL" (Welles, 5). In the *Los Angeles Times* there were many such articles that were printed, asserting the rise in crime rates related to juvenile delinquency specifically by the Mexican American youth. Simply in the month of July, there were at least seven articles printed, all of which mentioned 'gangs' in their titles. Some of these were simply reporting on trials that were occurring, but others asserted the rise in "gang terrorism" and "gang warfare." One of the most prejudicial articles was titled, "Juvenile 'Gang' Wars Laid to Youths Desire for Thrill," and was printed on July 21 1942. This article explains how officials are meeting in an attempt to discuss ways in which to help the "undirected youths clashing" and they stress the importance of educating the "youthful offenders". The article's conclusion was that they seemed to "lack proper supervision in their homes... and seek excitement (A8)." This places a huge amount of blame on the home life as well as making sure to emphasize that they have become a "problem", and questions whether the community is

worried enough to get together to try and fix the problem. This was only one example of the many negative portrayals of Hispanics youth which was being spread.

Pretrial prejudice against Hispanic youth was already becoming a dominant opinion, and it seemed like the Zamora trial, which became known as the Sleepy Lagoon Trial, had perfect timing, because this fanned the flames of the growing racial prejudice. The biased information being printed in the newspapers, with many articles naming the boys as hoodlums, and baby-gangsters was adding more problems to an already unstable situation. One article run in the paper the very morning after the murder occurred, made references to the grisly toll, three girl hoodlums, boy gang terrorists, and explained how Diaz was beaten unmercifully. These articles were clearly laying the blame on the youths, all without any kind of evidence. Immediately following was an article about juvenile delinquency, and the problems it had been causing for the community. "The entire case was tried in an atmosphere of anti-Mexican prejudice which could not have helped but influence the jury" (Katz, 1). The problem with many of these articles was not only what they were reporting but the language they were using to report it. "Hoodlums" was a word used as a description for these youths many times within the media, and along with it came all of the negative connotations that are typically attached. The

definition given in the dictionary is a "thug, especially a violent criminal" or "a young street ruffian," and through the labeling in the newspapers as hoodlums, these youths were immediately being compared to gangsters. Another very prejudicial article was written by Ed. Duran Ayres, who was supposed to be the Police Lieutenant, and head of the Foreign Relations Bureau of the Los Angeles Sheriff's Department. His article was titled "Statistics" and ironically featured none. What it did feature was highly uneducated and prejudicial statements regarding certain types of people. It starts off saying: "Let us view it from a biological basis…" and from here he goes on to explain how humans are like animals citing the example that there may be domestic cats, but there are also wild cats of the same family and they cannot be both be treated in the same way, asserting that there was at least that much difference between the different races of men (Ayres 1). The blatant racism demonstrated in this article was reflective of the public sentiment that was predominant at the time. Ayres also went on to assure that "this Mexican element… all he knows and feels is a desire to use knife or some lethal weapon. In other words, his desire is to kill, or at least let blood" (2). Being presented with evidence and publicity such as this had a significant impact on the jurors, and it became obvious during the trial that it was most likely causing them to become biased.

These prejudices being created by the public were supposed to be accounted for in the selection of the jury, yet there was a lack of questioning regarding the amount of knowledge the jurors had. Before a trial actually begins, there is a process known as voir dire, in which the prosecution and the defense is permitted to question the possible jurors, and hopefully eliminate any that they think might pose a significant problem, such as someone who is biased or who has been too exposed to the media regarding the case. The jurors are supposed to be going in with no preconceptions about the case or the defendants. Yet in the voir dire process prior to this case, no effort was made to ensure that the jurors were not being influenced by any of the media that went on during the trial, nor was there any questioning regarding any bias (Weitz, 47). Therefore the resulting jury was not one that was particularly favorable to the defendants. The trial was presided over by Judge Fricke, whose previous decision on a trial regarding a rape by Mexican boys had been overturned, with the appellate court commenting on the judge's prejudice (Greenfield, 2). The attitude of the presiding judge is able to bias the jury's decision, because the jurors see the judge as being in a position of respect and authority, and therefore tend to look for his approval. For this reason, the judge is supposed to be impartial; unfortunately this was not the case. There were many occasions in which the judge granted privileges to the prosecution that he denied the defense. The defendants were not

allowed to sit next to their attorneys nor confer with them at all during the proceedings because the judge claimed that there was insufficient space to allow them all to sit together, (McWilliams, 6). From a legal perspective, this is a blatant violation of a constitutional right, granted by the sixth amendment. Yet at the time, the prejudice of the judge was something that overcame the constitutional rights of these defendants. One of the more problematic issues that the defense attorneys faced was a lack of unity amongst themselves, due to the fact that there were seven lawyers, with many of them working for more than one client. There was an attempt to solve this problem, but it failed (Sleepy Lagoon Defense committee, 1). Along with this blatant bias on behalf of the judge there were other factors in the prejudicial attitude of the jurors towards the defendants. The juror prejudice was highly related to the makeup of the jury, which consisted of no Latinos: "Not only did the jury selection process fail to yield a panel favorable to the defense, but jury selection yielded a panel that had very little in common with the defendants"(Weitz, 50). This lead to a smaller possibility that the jury would have any way of understanding or connecting with the defendants, contributing to the acceptance of the perspective they had of them from the media. They were the kind of people who would have no experience with Latinos which would allow them to contradict what they were reading in the papers or hearing from the "experts" provided by the prosecution.

From here the trial began, and proceeded with a major lack of evidence, and with the prejudices of the people who were making important decisions becoming more blatantly obvious. One of the main issues with the verdict is that a guilty verdict was handed down, although it was never proven that the injuries that Diaz sustained were not instead inflicted in an earlier fight he was in, and then later possibly run over by a car, rather than actually being beaten to death, "according to the doctor, these injuries could be explained as due to repeated falls on the ground… of the type commonly seen in victims of automobile accidents" (Endore, 13). This alone should have left enough reasonable doubt in the minds of the jurors, preventing them from handing down a guilty verdict. There was also a lack of proof as to whether the boys who were being charged had ever been near Jose Diaz. Notwithstanding all of these issues, there was a conviction, and consequently sentencing. Five defendants were found guilty of assault, nine were found guilty of second degree murder, and three were found guilty of first degree murder, with the sentencing ranging from six months to life imprisonment. All of this was based on a trial, which featured a highly prejudicial bias on the side of the judge, as well as a prejudicial society, which permitted the boys to have their constitutional rights violated as well as being unjustly sentenced to prison terms. The media played a big role in the conviction of these boys, because it was through the information being given in the media

that they were being placed in a negative light, permitting the people to allow for many violations of their rights, which otherwise might not have been permitted.

The sheer amount of people on trial for the murder of one man emphasizes the questionable nature of this trial, along with the reasons behind the conviction. The idea of innocent until proven guilty is something that was derived from the Fifth Amendment which guarantees that no one will be deprived of "life, liberty, or property without the due process of law." This should have permitted the young men being tried in this case the right to be tried without prejudice, yet that was definitely not the case. The media prior to the case, as well as covering the murder itself was highly prejudicial, and definitely left an impression on the jury. Judge Fricke's actions should also have been taken into account, yet they were ignored. During the three months, in which the trial took place, there were a lot of negative articles being printed in the newspapers such as: "Investigation to inquiry into the brutal slaying... Diaz was beaten to death and several members of Del Gadillo's house were beaten severely" (LA Times, 7/6/42). This kind of publicity was common during the trial, which was mainly responsible for the stereotyping of the young men. All of these things also had an effect on the society they were living in,

> The Mexican community of Los Angeles as a whole was conservative. They hesitated to advocate on behalf of youth perceived to as pochos (culturally adulterated Mexicans) and pachucos…the local parish priest's denunciation of the work of the committees influenced public opinion. (Barajas, 43)

The people who were reading the newspapers began to condemn and turn against them in the communities, and this created a problem within the Mexican community. Mexicans began to denounce the youth, because they blamed them for ruining the reputation of the Mexican community. Finally, the committees were looked upon by some people as doing something negative, because of the general denunciation by the public. This turned out to be something that worked negatively for the defendants, because there was a predominant view regarding these boys, "marking them as Zoot Suiters and killers" (Barajas, 45). This was an image that the boys were not able to get away from, because they were not even permitted to change their clothes, nor were they allowed to relate their side of the story.

Along with the persecution of the boys during the trial, there was also negative publicity being printed about some of the girls. Many were classified as being part of the gangs as well, "…nine young women connected to the case

were also detained" (Barajas, 38). Although these women were never tried or convicted they were held in almost solitary confinement, and five of them were later sent to the Ventura School for Girls. This happened to them, because they refused to cooperate with the prosecution in the trial. Within the articles being printed in the newspapers, the women were referred to as "armed with clubs, automobile tools, chains and tire irons" as well as being called "girl hoodlums" (LA Times, 7/3/42). In the eyes of the public, as well as in the eyes of the law, they did not need a trial; they were already guilty due to the culpability placed upon them by the media.

This trial was one of the moments when the young Mexican American women were prominently placed in the spotlight. Their association with the pachuco youths led to their eventual persecution: "Three girl hoodlums joined nine youths in breaking up a birthday party and starting a free-for-all fight…" (One, 5). The trial regarding the murder of a young Mexican American, brought into question the level of involvement the women in these 'gangs' actually had, as well as their participation in this specific crime. Along with the twenty four men who were being charged with the death of Jose Diaz, there were also ten young women who were arrested or detained in relation to this murder. Although they were never actually accused of murder, they were held and asked to testify. The problem with this was that many of these boys were their

boyfriends, relatives, or neighbors, and therefore they were in most instances, unwilling to testify against them. While the women were detained, there were also many negative newspaper articles printed about them, and this aided in the condemnation by the public of these women. All of this resulted in negative connotations being linked to the term Pachuca.

When it came time for these women to testify, they blatantly disregarded the court orders: "After more than a week of futility in trying to use six of the girlfriends and women acquaintances of the defendant's to establish part of its case, the prosecution gave up" (Weitz, 76). Though the women had given testimony at the grand jury trial, when the trial came along they were no longer as compliant with the prosecution as they previously had been. This became problematic because the prosecution, after hearing their grand jury testimony, had decided to call them as witnesses. Legally speaking, the prosecution is not allowed to question the validity of their own witnesses' testimony, therefore though they attempted to 'refresh' the girls' memories by reading their grand jury testimony to them; they had to stop because this was legally impermissible (Weitz, 74). The young women's refusal to cooperate had major consequences for the trial, because the prosecution had been relying heavily on the women's testimony to be able to connect the boys to the gang, as well as proving they were at the place where the crime took place. The lack of cooperation by these women

opened a hole in the prosecution's case regarding the suspect's whereabouts at the time the crime occurred. Ironically at the same time it aided the prosecution because many people assumed that this kind of loyalty was something that only made sense within a gang.

After the prosecution's failed attempts at using the women against their friends and family, they were returned to the Ventura School for girls. This was problematic because they were sent there without any kind of trial, yet this was a reformatory school in which they were being held against their will. Even when these young women were allowed to leave they were under probation for a portion of their life, at least until they turned twenty-one (Escobedo, 138). The lack of a trial for the women was something that was overlooked, and they were forced to stay in the reform school much longer than their male counterparts were held in jail. "Supposedly the SLDC could do little for them because they had never been tried or convicted in the first place" (Ramirez, 35). There were also legal proceedings that the SLDC could not get around, such as the consent which in many cases had been given by the parents (36). This consent was reflective of the sentiment that was widespread at the time. There were many parents who were losing control of their children and resorting to the judicial system to attempt to regain control. For example "Aurora Preciado…reported her fourteen year old daughter Cecilia to the Los Angeles juvenile court

authorities…in hopes that court action might 'scare' the girl into submission" (Escobedo, 145). The families of these young women were unsure what to do about their actions, and they were resorting to whatever methods they believed were necessary in order to prevent their daughters from rebelling. Along with worrying about their children being out at all hours of the night, as well as being associated with gangs, the social reaction to the pachucas made many of the families ashamed of their daughter's actions.

One major example of this is seen in the reaction that the media had to the pachucas. A major Mexican American newspaper, *La Opinion*, began publishing articles that placed these young women in the same position as La Malinche. La Malinche was considered a disgrace and a traitor to her people because she served as a translator for Cortes and in doing so, helped him conquer the Mexican Indians. Malinche had a child with Cortes, and consequently was labeled as a whore and rejected by her people. The press decided this was a fitting comparison because they believed that the pachucas were also traitors because they were "publically betraying proper female behavior and brought shame to the Mexican People" (Escobedo, 141). The promiscuity and the lack of femininity that was being demonstrated by these women were considered to be disgraceful by many of the more traditional-minded adults. They believed that in taking on the Pachuca identity, these young women were going against the

traditional Mexican customs and morals that the parents were supposed to have instilled in them. This in itself was disgraceful to their community, but there were other issues that were becoming prominent. Some people even went so far as to blame the parents for these young women's actions and therefore they were bringing into question their ability as parents. Therefore, the parents were willing to resort to the legal system to attempt to force their daughters to behave in a more seemly fashion.

Within the trial, there were many legal injustices. The sixth amendment states,

> "In all criminal prosecutions, the accused shall enjoy the right to a speedy and public trial, by an impartial jury of the State and district wherein the crime have been committed…to have compulsory process for obtaining witnesses in his favor, and to have the assistance of counsel for his defense."

Yet in this case these rights were disregarded due to the prejudice rampant at that time. The fact that the boys were not allowed to sit with their counsel was going against their constitutional rights, yet this appalling injustice was not questioned. Aside from this, the Judge even took measures to ensure that the men were rushed away during the recesses, ensuring that legal counsel would

have no opportunity to discuss anything with their clients. This is generally regarded as part of what is covered under the right to a fair trial, and it was simply ignored. Through the separation of the defendants from their legal counsel, they were denied the right to assist in their own defense, and in many ways that would be considered grounds for a mistrial. Their positioning within the courtroom was also somewhat problematic, due to the fact that they were grouped together seated in a "prisoners-box" and facing their all white jury (LA Times, 5/21/02). This helped to create the idea that they were in fact guilty, because they were kept in chains, bedraggled clothes, and were maintained in an overall unkempt manner. Finally there was the fact that the judge required the defendants to stand up every time their name was mentioned. This could easily be subconsciously interpreted as an admission of guilt by the jury, but the judge claimed it was necessary in order not to get them confused, due to the fact that there was so many.

Another issue presented was the fact that there were many different attorneys, seven in total representing one or more of the defendants, which caused a lack of agreement amongst them on how to proceed. The remedy to this came about when Judge Roth agreed to take over the case as the defense attorney. Yet the presiding judge refused to allow the three day recess that Roth requested to give him time to acquaint himself with the case. This led to Roth not

being able take over. Judge Fricke claimed that the reasoning behind it was that this would rather be creating an unnecessary delay (This, 1). Yet, it was highly possible that there was an ulterior motive behind his refusal. The case which was cited as part of the proof that Fricke was actually biased against Mexicans was eventually overturned. The judge who overturned his ruling was actually Judge Roth, whose reason for overturning the case was because of Fricke's "inconsistent and arbitrary judgment" (Endore, 28). This could have caused there to be some sort of confrontation in the courtroom, due to the fact that Roth was in fact a judge who had many years of experience behind him, which would have made it more difficult for the presiding judge to permit the injustices which occurred. Judge Roth would have been able to stop a lot of the prejudicial comments and biased rulings being made by Fricke.

The second issue with the trial was the attire that the boys were kept in. They were arrested and in many cases brutally assaulted, and then they were forced to come to the trial wearing those same clothes they were arrested in. It went so far that the judge did not allow them to get a haircut nor change clothes over the course of a month, until finally a court order was secured because they were being forced to look unkempt and dirty. The judge's reasoning behind this was that it was helping the jury see the kind of boys they were, yet the main reason behind it seemed to be to ensure that they would be connected with the

pachuchos and gangster which were being reported about in the news. Their clothing was reemphasizing the image that was being created about them in the media, as well as ensuring they looked like the disheveled gangsters they had been labeled as. Finally there was the fact that two defendants, who were originally supposed to be tried for the same crime, asked to be tried in a separate trial. Their request was granted. The outcome of this separate trial was that the prosecution asked for it to be dismissed on the grounds that there was insufficient evidence. This was important because both of the cases were due to be tried on the same evidence, yet in this second, minor case; the prosecution was the one who asked for a dismissal. This is relevant because the second case was going to go to trial with significantly less publicity, therefore it was brushed aside, and much of the public was unaware of this smaller case.

The Sleepy Lagoon Murder was a landmark case for the Latino community, because it wasn't only these kids who were being put on trial, but the community as a whole. The articles being printed along with all the negative media surrounding the trial started painting the community as largely irresponsible, and incapable of controlling their children. Ayres also went so far as to categorize them as similar to animals, as well as claiming that although not all of them were the same, there were some who were descendant from Aztecs, and therefore they were capable of "having a total disregard for human

life"(Ayres, 1). These images being given about the Mexican American community were partially responsible for the initial rejection of the efforts of the committees and the persecution that the boys were facing from within their own communities. The idea of being associated with such negatively portrayed people was enough to make many Mexican Americans condemn the boys for the actions they were accused of. This was enough to make sure that they were convicted in the eyes of the public which eventually led to the conviction in the eyes of the law. Yet this is not the end of this story, this was only the beginning. Different reactions from within the communities led to the beginning of the Zoot Suit Riots. The Riots were a reaction to the ethnic tensions which were being created through the media, through the geographic conflicts which were being inflamed, and which were made more obvious in the conclusion of the trial.

The Zoot Suit Riots

The Zoot Suit Riots were something that began in Los Angeles on June 3, 1943 during the middle of World War II, and lasted more than a week, yet they were not like typical riots. This was a major issue that began between white sailors and Marines, and the young Mexican American youths, who were identifiable through their "Zoot Suits." These riots broke out amongst these youths stemming in part from the racial tensions that were predominant at this time and also based on the fact that there was resentment between the two groups. Public sentiment led to the general inaction of the police, and there were few if any repercussions to the white Americans. The riots were highly symbolic, and had a long-lasting impact on many generations to come.

The Zoot Suit itself widely became known as a symbol, becoming most popular sometime in the 1940's, and it was used by many minorities to express themselves. The Zoot Suit originated within the Jazz community, "music started the craze to wear the elaborate suit" (Alford, 228). It was its own type of fashion in that it was usually brightly colored, with everything exaggerated. The shoulders and the coat were bigger than necessary, and the pants were wide and billowy. They formed a triangular shape which defined the Zoot Suit style. They

were accompanied by oversized chains and real leather soled shoes. This was significant because the United States was in a time of rationing, and leather was one of the things that were being rationed, therefore the use of it for soles was viewed by many as a blatant misuse of already scarce supplies (Howard, 113). In February of that year, leather shoes had been rationed to an average of two pairs per person per year (Lingeman, 1). The riots came about in June of 1943, and this was a time in which the United States was at war, and had been at war for about a year and a half already, and tensions were running high amongst the different groups. The war was in part what was causing tensions because some of the whites were angered by the fact that there were so many Mexican Americans that were lounging around, although the Mexican Americans were actually overrepresented in the service. There were other factors such as the anti-Mexican sentiment that had been spreading throughout the communities, as well as within the media, the tensions that were building between the different groups, and ultimately these factors conflicts arising between Mexican-Americans and the white soldiers who were on leave.

Aside from the suits themselves, the stereotype that went along with the term zoot suiter was negative. Many of the people who were dressed in those outfits were considered to be “pachucos,” “cholos” or “gangsters” and were immediately categorized as gangs when they were seen wandering the streets

with their friends. Though they were creating their own subgroup within their communities, they were not necessarily the "gangs" that others perceived them to be: "By 1942, the zoot suit wearers began to become stereotyped with criminal activity" (Alford, 230). Eduardo Pagán explains the reasoning behind this was that in order to obtain a suit like that, a lot of money was necessary and much of the society did not believe that these young minorities could be acquiring that money in a non-criminal way (Pagán, *Murder*, 121). There was also the issue of some youth who were involved in criminal activities such as gang members or racketeers wearing the suit, leading to the stereotyping of all zoot suiters as criminals (Alford, 230). Many times the youths who fell prey to this criminal activity did so due to their "anti-social behavior brought on by racial discrimination and segregation which restricted his opportunities for employment and social mobility in mainstream American society" (Tyler, 21). Yet many youths simply saw these suits as a way to fit in as well as a manner through which they could assert their independence. The societal norms that were in place at the time served to exclude them in many ways from different activities and places, therefore the suits granted them a certain sense of inclusion. "Knowledge that most 'non zoot-suiters' are against them was a major basis for their unity" (Daniels, 106). Rather than allowing themselves to be grouped into the category of 'other,' they took control of the labels that were placed upon

them and decided what they were going to be. The use of these suits quickly became a way of expression, "These youths had rising expectations of a better life and celebrated their youth culture by dancing and parading in Zoot-Suits as a badge of their new status and aspirations"(Tyler, 23). They were asserting their adulthood and their independence. Yet the term pachuco became the label placed on anyone who wore this attire. As explained in The Sleepy Lagoon Murder Case, the term Pachuco during this time was used to define the Mexican American youth and the style that they had embraced. It ultimately became interchangeable with gangster and gangs, and this ensured that there would be many negative connotations. Yet, there is not much knowledge regarding where the term originated from (Weitz, 17). Embracing the labels placed on them was a way in which they were able to fit in with each other and exclude those who were un-willing to embrace the zoot suit. By coming together in groups dressed in loud clothing, they were acting contrary to what was typically expected of minorities.

There was a way of speaking that was predominant amongst these youths, and it was something known as Caló, and was a divergence from formal Spanish interlaced with slang (Mazón, 3). Using this slang solely within their inner circles permitted them to create a better sense of belonging and it gave them a way to not only fit in, but also to exclude those who otherwise exclude them. By

using this way of speaking, they were able to talk amongst themselves and not allow others to join in their conversations. The creation of their own 'language' was something that helped them reject the traditional Spanish of their more conservative elders, and re-appropriate both English and Spanish into a less formal way of speaking they felt was better suited to them (Daniels, 108). The suit in itself became a way of life for these youths, rather than simply a manner of dress, allowing them to enjoy their early life. They refused to let their youth be tainted by what was going on in the world around them. It also granted them a way to express their discontent, "The act of putting on the suit gave them a sense of power and a way in which to resist the limits placed on them" (Howard, 127). The suit allowed them to feel a part of something, which was especially significant because many of them were the children of working class parents who did not have time to regulate what their children were doing. These youth were just looking for ways to have fun (Alford, 230).

One important factor leading up to the riots was the mass-hysteria that was growing within the Los Angeles communities due in large part to the media. In the years prior to the riots, there were many articles published portraying Mexican- Americans in a negative light, creating escalating tensions. Many of these articles were published in major newspapers, such as the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Chicago Defender*, or the *Los Angeles Examine*r and were therefore widely

distributed, as well as bringing a lot of focus to the perceived problem. In 1943 the *Chicago Defender* even went so far as to mention that the "zoot suit expressed the rebellion by young people against the drab slum life through the colorful costume that identified them as members of their own society" (Howard, 113). This implied that they were attempting to be rebellious in a time of war, a time in which people are expected to pull together. It also emphasized that they were isolating themselves into exclusive groups, which implies that they were attempting to keep others out. It also created correlations with gang culture, in which it was important to be able to be identified as part of your gang. In the years prior to this, there were many instances of yellow journalism spreading through diverse newspapers, with article titles such as the following; "How can we halt rising flood of crime?", "Round-up of Gangsters Begun", and "War Against Gangsters Already Bearing Fruit," (*Los Angeles Times*). These and many more like these were being printed throughout the different papers, and from the mere titles, the prejudicial nature of the articles becomes more than obvious. The result of this was a growing sense of racial tension, with many people becoming appalled at the increasing "gang-warfare" and "violence" that was supposedly spreading throughout the city. This helped to create a highly negative image that was associated with all Mexican Americans, and this prejudicial sentiment was a precursor to the riots that were to come.

The stereotype that was being related to Mexican-American youths in particular was very damaging to the way that society would perceive them in the upcoming events. Therefore there was much blame placed on the press for "whipping up anti-Mexican attitudes before the riot" (Pagan, "Los Angeles" 224). Sentiment that was created by the press along with the wartime problems already present were two very influential factors in the Zoot Suit Riots. By insisting that the youths were becoming a problem within the society, there was the implication that a solution had to be found. Aside from that was all of the publicity surrounding the Sleepy Lagoon Trial. There had been a roundup of a disproportionate number of youths simply because they were Mexican Americans, and this led to there being 22 people placed on trial for the murder of one man. This trial in itself was a reaction to the growing negative publicity given to Mexican American youths, and it ended in a conviction. Throughout the trial, there were many blatantly racist actions and the conviction was considered to be unjust by many people. This gave many Mexican-American youths a reason to start questioning social norms and to adopt a rebellious attitude. The blatant lack of respect in the general populace as well as the mistreatment at the hands of the law was enough to fuel the youths rebellious attitudes, which eventually led to action. The Mexican American youth were being given reasons to be resentful, because although the unjust arrest and convictions of these youths may have

been the most publicized, they were not the only acts of injustice that was occurring at the time.

The actual suits themselves were also a major part of the problem, in that they were not socially acceptable to the majority of the population. They were considered to be highly wasteful, due to the excessive material necessary to create them,

> Sometimes a suit, sometimes a sport coat and slacks, and always loose fitting, except for the pants' cuffs, whose narrow size made the trousers appear even baggier. Coats were fingertip length…had shoulders more like epaulettes. Duck-tail haircuts… long watch chains, wide brimmed hats with narrow crowns, perhaps adorned with a long feather… in Southern California, thick soled shoes accented the suits. (Daniels, 104)

The use of so much material during a time of scarcity was considered to be extravagant, and the suits themselves were generally somewhere between 65 to 85 dollars, which for that time was very expensive (Daniels, 102). It was not considered illegal to wear or own a suit, yet manufacturing one during the wartime was considered a crime, and was punishable with a 10,000 dollar fine (Howard, 114). This was in part because to make a Zoot Suit it would be necessary to ignore the restrictions that had been put in place regarding the

amount of cloth and materials permissible at the time. By wearing the suits in public, these youths were flaunting the fact that they were doing something that was looked down upon in society. They were not taking part in the war, and they were blatantly going against the war efforts. Rather than doing what was expected of them, they chose to go against what society, as well as their elders expected of them. The suit also permitted the youth to go against what were unwritten social norms, in which the minorities were supposed to be unseen and unheard in public spaces and the use of these suits were contrary to all of that due to their loud colors and exaggerated characteristics (American, 1). Therefore, they were not only deliberately going against the restrictions in place, as well as the public sentiment regarding clothes and use of raw materials. They were also using their suits to go against "unwritten rules" regarding the way they were allowed to carry themselves and present themselves in public (American, 1). This was adding fuel to the already negative sentiment that was present at the time. They were challenging the stereotypes of how they were allowed to behave and the ways in which other people were allowed to interact with them.

The early 1940's was a time in which the war was going on; therefore many people were already in military garb, while others were expected to be willing to make sacrifices to support the wartime effort. The refusal of the Mexican-Americans to conform to this was considered problematic, "It was a

time for civic minded responsibility. The Zoot suit and its wearer represented the antithesis of this public, patriotic sentiment" (American, 1). White Americans as well as many older more traditional Mexican Americans perceived the continued use of the Zoot suits as a manner of resisting or undermining the war efforts, and therefore saw them as unpatriotic. This was creating a divide between the newer and the older generations of Mexican Americans, creating tensions within the communities themselves. An example of this was the condemnation of the youths who were being charged in the Sleepy Lagoon Murder from within their own communities. It was also taken into account that no one believed that these boys would be hired wearing their suits, and for that reason it was assumed that they were in fact simply lounging around, and not contributing to the war effort in any way, "You know they are loafers because no business house would allow them to work in such fantastic outfits," (Daniels, 102). Along with being a symbol of non-conformity, the zoot suit was also taken to imply laziness and an unwillingness to work. None of these people took into account the racism that was already abundant at the time In many ways, the racist sentiment prevented these youths from getting a viable job in the first place simply because of the color of their skin. During the time that these young men and women started to wear these outfits, there was in general a segregated society, and in most cases, the suits were being worn as a statement against the mistreatment of minorities

(Alford, 231). White privilege was an unspoken but obvious truth and the white military men made "assumptions that they were entitled to a free and open access to all of Los Angeles by virtue of their citizenship, race, class, gender, and military service… the local youth 'saw the same space differently" (Pagán, "Los Angeles" 234). Public space became a source of conflict, because both groups had different opinions regarding what that meant, and who should be granted access. Therefore, the Mexican American youth were rebelling against the unspoken rules of white privilege and the servicemen were focusing on what they considered to be acts of rebellion. To the servicemen, these acts meant that the youths were being unpatriotic and therefore they needed to be taught a lesson. All of these factors along with the fact that at the time there were many soldiers and military personnel on leave in Los Angeles who were being harassed by some of the youths, led to what is now widely known as the Zoot Suit Riots of 1943.

Leading up to the riots, there had already been many instances of conflict between the sailors and the zoot suitors, many of which revolved around the white sailor's sense of entitlement to whatever they saw, and the zoot suitors' resistance to this. There was an all-white navy school erected in the middle of the Mexican-American neighborhood, and this created more situations in which there were likely to be confrontations (Pagan, "Los Angeles" 224). By building

this academy within the areas nearest to the poorer Mexican American communities, they were forcing the youth to become even more aware of the racial prejudice and class differences that were rampant at the time. They were constantly seeing examples of the privileges granted to the white servicemen that were denied to them. The overcrowding of military men who were on leave in the area led to problems, "in the two weeks preceding the Zoot-Suit Riots, there were eighteen reported incidents involving servicemen in Southern California, seven of which resulted in death"(Mazón, 59). This conflict along with the newspaper articles which were being printed filled with complaints about the unruly zoot suitors were adding fuel to the already problematic relationship between these two separate groups of people. The soldiers were not content with the way that they were being treated or 'disrespected' by the Mexican-American youths, while at the same time, the youths were not happy with the white soldiers actions or their sense of entitlement.

After weeks of these smaller scale conflicts, the one that was the final straw occurred on May 31st and involved a fight that broke out among some zoot suit clad youths and a group of servicemen, which left one of the servicemen with a jaw that was broken in two places (Pagán, "Los Angeles" 243). In the weeks prior to this there had been increasingly more and more heated conflicts between these two groups, yet this incident was one in which the 'white' soldiers

finally decided that they had enough and they wanted revenge. They were getting exaggerated versions of what had actually happened and this was enough to cause them to want to retaliate. The local law enforcement was being depreciatively imagined as ineffectual and cowardly in the face of the "Mexican" uprising therefore, "white military men looked to themselves as the only group capable of restoring order; not only the order of law but the order of white male dominance" (Pagán, "Los Angeles" 245). After this there was another incident, which occurred on the actual day that the riots started, June 3rd 1943, in which a group of sailors were insulted by some youths. This eventually led to them returning to where they were staying and creating a plan with which to get even for all the 'injustices' they had suffered at the hands of the Mexican-Americans (Pagán, "Los Angeles" 246). Both of these confrontations were highly influential in initial stages of the riots, and they are attributed with being the final provocative incidents in the days before the riots, though they were not much worse than the conflicts that had been occurring in the previous weeks.

What is classified as the riots began on June 3rd, when about fifty sailors decided to seek revenge for all of the problems they had encountered while interacting with the Mexican-American youths. They gathered in a group and went along the streets searching for any youths who were in zoot suits, subsequently stripping them of their suits, and burning them, after having

beaten them into submission first (Howard, 117). These actions by the servicemen were brutal, as well as humiliating, because they were leaving the naked youth bleeding on the street. Throughout the subsequent days, there were many more attacks occurring, with many white military personnel hunting for and attacking the Mexican-American youth. While at the beginning they were solely targeting the young men who were dressed in zoot suits, it quickly escalated to simply attacking anyone who appeared to be Mexican-American (Mazón, 74). The youth would be stripped beaten, and left naked on the street. In many cases these beatings were followed by an arrest of the Chicano by a police officer who had been watching, and this arrest was supposedly for their own protection. By arresting the youth, the police were implying that they were at fault, and this permitted anyone who was witnessing these beatings to justify them, because the police seemed to be siding with the servicemen. Like with the Sleepy Lagoon trial, and the pre-riot days, the press was creating more problems than necessary, and they were using the news-papers to incite more people into the riot. There were many highly misleading and prejudicial headlines being printed, labeling the youth as "Zoot Suit Gangsters" and "Youth Gangs Leading Cause of Delinquency" (Alford, 231) . Headlines such as these and other articles being printed at the time were influential in shaping the public opinion about what was actually occurring, leading many people to think that the 'riots' were

simply a conflict between "patriotic fighting men and a 'fringe group of maladjusted youth" (Alford, 231). Through the simplification of the riots into a simple conflict, the press was able to diminish the attention to the actual problem being faced by the Mexican-Americans. This laid the blame at the feet of the youth, minimizing the role the servicemen had in inciting and prolonging the riots. They were also able to limit any immediate scrutiny they would face for permitting this racially motivated riot, while at the same time fighting a war in Germany against Nazi racism (Pagán, "Los Angeles" 246). Since the US was fighting a war in another country against racism, admitting that these were racial riots that were a reaction to the youth not following the "social norms" would make the government seem hypocritical.

This continued until June 9th and there were many conflicts throughout the six days that the riots occurred. It escalated into white military servicemen coming into Los Angles from places such as San Diego, Las Vegas and as far up as Toronto simply to participate in the riots. There was also support from the citizens of Los Angeles who were "encouraging the vigilantes, and punished the Mexican-Americans for…generally being more aggressive then a colored minority had a right to be" (Daniels, 100). The public's general reaction was to blame the victims, which added to the prejudicial sentiment that was already rampant, and at times they went so far as to join in on the attacks. This also

permitted the police force to turn a blind eye without any serious repercussions. In some instances they were in fact perpetuating the prejudicial sentiment, as well as permitting their personal opinions to play a part in their reaction to the conflicts that were arising. "The comment of one of the local police chiefs, 'you say the cops had a hand's off policy during the riots! Well, we represent public opinion. Many of us were in the First World War, and we're not going to pick on kids in the service'" (Mazón, 76). This statement reflected the general reaction to the riots on behalf of the 'white' citizens of Los Angeles, as well as explaining the inaction of the police during the beginning days of the riots. This also related to the inability of the police force to sympathize with the Chicano youths, because in many cases, the police force was not representative of the public. The police force at the time was still segregated, and this allowed them to feel more sympathy and companionship with the white military men, very much like the jury in the Sleepy Lagoon trial.

There was much speculation as to how much involvement the women actually had during the riots. Many sources blame women as part of what was causing tensions amongst the military-men and the young Mexican Americans. The young military men were said to be causing problems, sometimes attempting to get too close to the young pachucas, which the pachucos did not like. One of the events that were most linked to being the cause of the riots was

allegedly started due to the military men harassing some young Mexican American women. Yet this was not the only way in which these young women were involved; at some point of being they were accused violent and there were some reports of the military men raping the women while they beat the men. There was at least one reported incident of an American woman being attacked by what she called "three female zoot suit gangsterettes." (Ramirez, 1) This was a case in which she reported that they "tackled her, slashed her face and arms with a knife or razor, then disappeared into the night."(Ramirez, 1) This event occurred during the week that the Riots were occurring and is one example of alleged female involvement, yet aside from this there were not very many accusations against the women. Despite this, there were still many young women who were taken into custody, and sent to different institutions based on the simple fact that they refused to assimilate and follow the social norms that where put in place for them. These women were beginning to form their own identity, rejecting the traditional Mexican norms as well as rejecting the American ideals that were being introduced to them. By doing this they were able to create their own sense of belonging, creating a group which permitted them to fit in with people while at the same time being able to stand out amongst them. Their involvement within the zoot suit movement was considered by some insignificant, and by others simply a way of rebelling.

When the police finally decided to start doing something about the riots, the majority of the arrested youth ended up being minorities:

> Political and racial studies done during the ten-day rioting concluded that most of the 600 youths who were beaten and arrested were Mexican-American and African-American youths, and that it was a blatant display of racial prejudice among not only the servicemen, but the police and the press as well. (Alford, 233)

The reactions of these different groups of people permit us to see the way in which the prejudicial sentiment that was prevalent at the time was able to affect even the way the law functioned. The law was supposed to protect the victims of abuse, rather than punish them for being victims. Instead, they were unjustly taken into custody, though it was claimed that this was being done for their own protection. (Pagán, "Los Angeles" 224) Yet, had hundreds of 'white' American youth been arrested and taken to jail for their 'protection' there would have been a public outcry. The Fourteenth Amendment clearly states that no one can be deprived of life, liberty or property without due process of law, yet there were hundreds of minority youths being taken into custody with no just legal cause. Therefore, they were subject to wrongful arrest. These youths were being detained without probable cause that they committed a crime, and solely for

their race. Aside from that they were being exposed to racially motivated violence from the public, and nothing was being done about it, therefore the discrimination they were facing was doubled.

After many days of rioting, there was an attempt to put a stop to it through legal methods on June 9th. The Los Angeles City Council attempted to ban the zoot suit by passing a resolution prohibiting the use of zoot suits within the city. (Mazón, 76) Although this was one way to put a stop to the riots, it was also a way of blaming the 'victims,' and asking them to change rather than attempting to put a stop to the 'perpetrators.' The resolution that was being put into effect did not inflict punishment on the citizens who were breaking the law; rather it was interfering with the rights of the victims. By asking the Mexican-American youth to stop wearing the suits, they were being denied the right to express themselves, which is guaranteed under their first amendment rights. The first amendment is one that we have taken to guarantee the freedom of expression, yet there have been instances during which these rights were not taken into account and this was one of those instances. Although the first amendment specifically states that it is defending free speech, it not only covers actual speech, rather it extends to nonverbal expression as well. Therefore the Mexican-Americans right to wear the zoot suits should have been protected under the first amendment. There was no attempt to address the fact that the

military service-men were in fact out of control, "the behavior of the rioting soldiers and sailors indicated a breakdown in military discipline… the military had lost control over enlisted men" (Mazón, 74). Along with this resolution, the military had to step in and ban servicemen from entering Los Angeles, and this was followed with the Shore Patrol being ordered to arrest anyone who was being disorderly, but this was something that came from within the military, therefore excluding them from legal repercussions. The following day, there were still smaller scale confrontations occurring, yet the main conflicts were over (Timeline, 2). Although there was a ban on the military men entering Los Angeles, it was something that was issued from within the military itself, versus the very public resolution regarding the legal ban placed on the suits. Since the military ban was from within, it is possible that it made it more difficult to see that the blame was not solely at the feet of the zoot suitors, because they were the ones who were most publicly reprimanded. By permitting this, the idea that the youths were the only ones to blame for the riots was reinforced in the eyes of the public.

Although this was called the Zoot Suit riot, when the riots were over, there was only moderate property damage and few casualties, with no deaths reported (Pagán, "Los Angeles" 247). This was significant because many previous race riots were in fact centered around a number of lynching's by the

mobs whereas these mobs seemed to have a different purpose. "The behavior of the rioting servicemen suggested that death was not the principle object of riot. Humiliation, and more importantly exercising the power to humiliate, was" (Pagán, "Los Angeles" 250). The mentality behind many of the servicemen's actions appeared to be simply an effort to restore what they believed to be the correct order of things, in that they wanted to make sure that the Mexican-Americans followed the unwritten social norms that perpetuated white privilege. After the conclusion of the riots, there were many repercussions that spread nationwide, including rioting in other major cities, such as Detroit, Harlem, and even in Canada. These riots were more like racial riots that had taken place in the past, and the one in Detroit turned into the worst race riot that had been seen in its history (Alford, 232). The obvious correlations between historical race riots and the riots that spread to the east coast, lends more credibility to the idea that the riots in Los Angles were in fact racially based.

The Zoot Suit Riots and the Sleepy Lagoon Trial went hand in hand with the Zoot Suit Movement, which ultimately labeled the young Mexican-Americans as 'pachucos.' These youths were considered to be disruptive and problematic within the society they were growing up in, and were blamed by the press for the conflicts that were becoming commonplace between American military-men and themselves. Alongside these men, there were also women who

were becoming involved with these groups. The women's refusal to conform was a cause of worry for both the Americans who wanted to assimilate them into their society as well as for the Mexican parents who attempted to make sure that they would be raised with some idea of their traditional customs. The women came to be labeled as 'pachucas' which from the start came along with bad connotations. The labeling of these young women was something that led the Pachuca to become a symbol, as well as a reality.

The zoot-suit clad boys were starting to be grouped and labeled as pachucos, and later were condemned as gangsters who were hoodlums. As time went by there were more and more reports of the juvenile gangs, eventually leading to the involvement of young women. This was somewhat problematic because it led to the condemnation of a style which led to the eventual condemnation of anyone who was associated with this lifestyle. The Pachuca came around after society became aware that it was not only the young men who were participating in this questionable lifestyle, but there were indeed women joining in. These young women were beginning to be seen more often, and they were distinguishable by their "controversial zoot suit or a modification of the drape attire- including the long fingertip coat, short skirts, exaggerated pompadours, and stark make-up…"(Escobedo, 134). This attire was not seen as permissible, nor respectable during this time period according to the social

standards in place. These women were consequently labeled as bad or loose women because they refused to conform. This negative labeling began throughout the time in which the women began associating themselves with the pachuco men and the 'juvenile gangs' that they were a part of. The short skirts, high hair and heavy makeup were considered to be inappropriate, as well as going against conventional ideals of what women should look and act like. This was a time of war in which women were supposed to fall into place and contribute to the war effort, while at the same time maintaining a respectable level of femininity (Ramirez, 67). Unfortunately these young women were unwilling to fit into these molds. "In her short skirt and heavy makeup, la Pachuca appeared to be the antithesis of the practical and self-sacrificing mother: the whore…. Many pachucas appeared feminine, albeit excessively and dangerously so..." (Ramirez, 68). Therefore the lack of an attempt by these women to fulfill the traditional 'American' standard of femininity immediately placed them in the 'other' category, which classified them as bad or loose women. As Ramirez describes, these women were considered to be showing too much skin, and spending too much time outside of their home, not fulfilling the 'sacrificing mother' role that had been assigned to them during the time of war (68).

Both their families, and the communities they lived in worried about these young women and what they saw as their issues with morality. They also faced persecution from the white American people who considered them to be a problem due to their unwillingness to fit into the social norms. They also faced persecution from their traditional Mexican parents and families because they were not attempting to hold on to their cultural norms. At the same time, there was no attempt to fit into the American norms that they were expected to assimilate to: "many second-generation Mexican American women did in fact adopt a new subculture that rejected both traditional Mexican and mainstream American culture" (Escobedo, 134). During this time, there was a war going on, which meant that the women were expected to make sacrifices for their country, and not generate more trouble (Escobedo, 141). The American people expected the women to be willing to accept society the way it was, yet these women were "rejecting the wartime vision of an America in which its inhabitants claimed one common culture or a view of nationhood that touted the importance the unity of all races and creeds" (Escobedo, 135). The United States was the middle of a war in which they were fighting against a 'racist enemy' therefore it was important that they present themselves as a racially united and un-prejudicial nation (Daniels, 102). The pachucas insistence in creating their own identity was something that interfered with the Americans image of a united nation and

therefore their ability to join in the war, without being labeled as hypocrites. "At stake were the reformers' larger project of racial assimilation, and the ability of the Mexican community to find acceptance in the larger U.S. society. Pachucas threatened both visions" (Escobedo, 135). Therefore these women were being criticized by the white American people who wanted to portray a specific image to outside people. They also faced criticism and persecution from within their community.

There were many arguments on behalf of the public regarding the reason behind the riots, some blaming the military-men, some blaming the Mexican American youth and others blaming the media and public sentiment.

> The press with the exception of the Daily News and Hollywood Citizen News, helped whip up the mob spirit. And Los Angeles, apparently unaware that it was spawning the ugliest brand of mob action since the coolie race riots of the 1870's, gave its tacit approval. (Zoot-Suit, 1)

There was attempts made to figure out what was really behind the riots, yet it was eventually decided that, "The Zoot Suit Riot initially broke out as an act of vigilantism in direct response to the confrontations between sailors and local youth" (Pagan, "Los Angeles" 225). This was implying that the youth were the ones who were creating problems, and while they were not completely blameless

in these riots, they were not the ones who initiated them. There were many people who took issue with the blame being placed on the Mexican-American youths. Much of the blame was being placed on the media for the way in which it had handled the situation, and the pre-riot attitude they had been creating publicly. The similarity between the way the media handled this affair, and the way they handled the Sleepy Lagoon case, was seen in the yellow journalism that was present during both events.

The Overturned Conviction

The overturning of the trial was something that came along after the Zoot Suit Riots, which were said to be part of a reaction to the original conviction. Following the riots themselves there was a general sentiment of discomfort, as well as unhappiness amongst many of the people who viewed the riots as racially motivated. There were many repercussions after the Riots themselves. Mauricio Mazón emphasizes the way in which the riots had the effect of confirming the "criminality" of the Mexican American youth of the time which was something that has had long lasting repercussions. In a way, the youth were left branded for generations to come as troublemakers, not only in the minds of the society who had labeled them as 'others' but also in the minds of many Mexican Americans who reemphasized the stereotypical Mexican American youths by using them as characters in their different works (Mazón, 113). The information released during the Riots was highly prejudicial, presenting the conflicts as gangs of Mexican American youths coming down on the city intent on destroying everything in their path. Within the Mexican American communities it was presented instead as groups of servicemen wreaking havoc. Ultimately it was brought to light that the aggressors were in fact the servicemen

(Mazón, 112). The impact of the riots on the Mexican American community went far beyond the physical damage that was left, "never before had the focus of the inequity settled so brutally on youth…the irony was that those who represent hope for the future were also the most vulnerable" (Mazón, 113). As such, this smear campaign aimed at the youth of a community was something that could be interpreted as an attack on the future of a people, condemning their children without sufficient cause.

The SLDC (Sleepy Lagoon Defense Committee) was formed in response to the guilty verdict that was handed down after *People v. Zamora*. The amount of blatant injustice, which was seen throughout the trial, as well as the major lack of evidence persuaded a group of people to come together to voice their issues regarding the injustices that had occurred: "The Sleepy Lagoon Defense Committee originated as an ad hoc committee and evolved to a broad-based movement for legal justice on behalf of 17 youths" (Barajas, 33). This committee was created as a solution to a very specific problem, but it became something larger than had been expected. It grew into a committee that managed to unify different people and diverse groups in order to bring attention to the racist implications behind the conviction, as well as the trial itself. This was no easy task due to the negative images the media had created of the defendants, and the Mexican American youth of the time. The public opinion surrounding these

young men was highly prejudicial, "Many parents of the emerging Mexican American generation viewed the pachucos as trouble making *mechudos vagos* (long-haired bums) who sullied the community's reputation" (Barajas, 44). Therefore it was not easy to convince many people to support them or their cause. The final obstacle came in the form of criticism aimed at the committee. This was in regards to the committee claiming that the police were capable of police brutality. Another major issue that many people had was that by emphasizing the injustices of the trial, the SLDC was in a way criticizing the government of their own country. This was viewed by many people as unpatriotic, because the country was in the middle of what was seen as a 'good war'. By questioning the legal system and therefore, indirectly the government, they were opening the country up to criticism from other nations. The only way they were able to overcome these issues was by making sure that they were informing people of the blatant denial of justice for these Mexican American youths (Barajas, 44).

Following the Sleepy Lagoon Trial and the Zoot Suit riots, there were many people who volunteered as part of the SLDC who were intent on getting the conviction was overturned. Immediately when the guilty verdict was handed down, this group was organized so that there would be a way to get out the word about the injustices that had occurred during the trial as well as attempting

to fundraise so that there would be a chance to appeal the ruling. They eventually managed to bring enough attention to the issue, and therefore they forced the legal system to make a change in the ruling that had been handed down. This was significant in that the people were uniting to fight for their individual rights, as well as to fight against discrimination. The SLDC made sure to focus on the trial as not only an attack on the youth, but also an attack on the Mexican American as a whole, "It was an attack upon your nation. It was a conspiracy against you. It was an attempt to assassinate you and your future" (Endore, 46). Therefore by connecting the trial and the actions that followed it, such as the Zoot Suit Riots, the SLDC was able to emphasize the injustice of the trial, and the events that followed.

Amid all of the rejection and negative media, the SLDC managed to rally together and unite people to support the boys: "With the formation of the SLDC came the support of a national cross-section of American interest groups and organizations…International Workers Order, Lawyers Guild, and the American Newspaper Guild" (Mazón, 24).With the support garnered from these and many other sources, the SLDC was able to bring about the dismissal of the charges against the young men, ultimately leading to their release in October of 1944. They had to use diverse tactics to get to this point. They started by attempting to negate the image that had been created for these youths. Secondly they made

sure to emphasize the injustices that had taken place. And, finally, the SLDC ended by stressing the fact that these were not only actions being taken against these youths, but rather they were actions that affected the population as a whole.

They SLDC began by questioning the classification of the youths as gang members, what had been described as "… an impression of 'gangs' and 'goons' and 'zoot suit hoodlums'-despite absolute lack of proof that these lads had ever participated in any group violence , rioting or criminal conspiracies"(Citizens, 2). This called into question the young men's actual involvement in a gang-related or criminal activity, undermining the prosecutions insistence in relating them to the negative media that had been rampant throughout the trial. Secondly they attempted to bring into question the constitutionality of the trial itself, by discussing the injustices and the obvious bias prompted by the prejudice of the judge. They described the legal issues, such as the lack of evidence, the prejudicial sentiment, the seating arrangement, the lack of access to counsel and the irrational hygiene limitations that were put into effect (Weitz, 158). They also brought to light that the second separate trial based on the same evidence, had been dismissed. "A separate trial was called for the remaining two defendants. The prosecution immediately asked for a dismissal. On what grounds? Insufficient, evidence!"(This, 2). The dismissal of the case on these grounds

undermined the validity of the previous case in which the very same evidence had been deemed to be sufficient for a conviction of murder.

The SLDC's final tactic was to search for a way to unite the people behind these young men,

> "the entire Mexican community will suffer. Thus, in a larger sense, this case involves the civil rights of the Mexican people, and, as an attack upon the democratic fabric, it involves all the people. Thus it grows from the problem of legal defense to one of social destiny." (Cullen, 5).

By tying in the Mexican community, they were able to create a connection that did not exist before the trial. The SLDC spoke to the interests of the Mexican American community, which ensured a higher number of people who were willing to get involved. They managed to bring in the concern of people who, at first may have been unsure about giving their support to these youth because they thought the case was unrelated to them. By bringing to the forefront the criticism directed at the Mexican American community, they were able to bring out the support of the people who wanted to combat the stereotyping of Mexican Americans. This expanded the level of interest coming in from different areas, as well as ensuring that there would be ongoing support from within the communities as well as from other sources. The creation of a pamphlet by Guy

Endore titled *The Sleepy Lagoon Mystery*, was also quite beneficial to the SLDC, because it was one of the few sources of information in support of the defendants. In attempt to get out the truth behind the trial, and the story of what actually happened out to the public, Endore managed to promote interest from people who had no direct ties to the case. (Barajas, 49). Through methods like this, they were able to rally support and raise enough money to appeal the ruling and eventually get it overturned. On October 23 the Sleepy Lagoon case was dismissed in the Superior Court of Los Angeles. All charges against the boys were dropped, their records were cleared. The young men were eventually released, and allowed to go back to their families.

The dismissal of the case was a significant victory for both the SLDC as well as the Mexican American community. Although the women who were placed in the reformatories were not set free, and there was nothing that the SLDC could do for them. This was because officials had managed to gain parental consent to put the girls in these schools in order to prevent them from being exposed to the "influences of the streets" (Barajas, 54). Parental consent placed huge limitations on the actions the SLDC could take, and thwarted the attempts to free these young women from the government's grasp. By overturning the young men's convictions, the legal system was admitting that they had proceeded in an unjust manner in the previous trial, calling into

question the validity of the sentences, as well as questioning the justice system's treatment of minorities in general.

The only negative aspect of the overturning is that the court refused to acknowledge the defense's argument that the prosecution was racially based. The court's refusal was important because there was a general feeling that the court had missed a major part of what had occurred in the previous case. One of the most important aspects of this is that the appeal was not brought forth in the same context that the first trial was held (Weitz, 168). Therefore, it was more difficult to see and understand the racially prejudicial sentiment that was rampant at the time without all of the newspaper articles and the media. This would make it more difficult to understand how much of an impact some of the comments made by the judge had on the jury, as well as minimizing the effect that forcing them to stay in their dirty clothes and unwashed state had. By the time the appeal was brought around, the pachucho crime wave was no longer such a big issue as it had been a couple years prior.

Within the context of these events, there had been an attempt by many Mexican Americans to assimilate to the American culture, because they wanted to feel like they belonged. There was also a general desire to avoid the abuse and prejudice that minorities faced within this society. At the time, this was difficult

because there was racial discrimination that was obvious throughout the nation. With the start of WWII it became even more important for the Mexican American people to assimilate to prevent any criticism or accusations of hypocrisy related to the United States stepping into the war. Edward Ayres "biological basis" argument in article "Statistics" is highly relevant, because it was so similar to the argument that was used by Hitler as the basis for his theories of race supremacy (Citizens, 19). The Citizens Committee for the Defense of Mexican-American Youth pointed this out in their publication titled "The Sleepy Lagoon Case" in 1942. The Sleepy Lagoon Trial was something that came about as an initial response to the media frenzy, which had been created regarding "the Mexican American" problem. Ultimately it became a way to punish these youths for simply being in the wrong place at the wrong time, as well as for failing to conform to the social norms. Throughout the trial the effects that the media had were made obvious because the judge allowed it to bias his opinions in the courtroom. There were serious repercussions for the boys in that they were ultimately found guilty in a court of public opinion, and that led to them being convicted in the judicial system as well.

Court cases do more then reflect on our legal system; they also provide insight into who we are as a people and a nation. The decision in Zamora

> showed a judicial system that was unwilling to ignore the failure of its trial court (Weitz, 185).

This case became an example of the necessity for legal safeguards within the court to ensure that people are granted a fair trail along with everything that encompasses. It showed that although there were many rules in place regarding the way things were supposed to function in the courtroom, they were not sufficient to protect the rights of the youths in question. One of the most obvious legal issues within this case was the blatant denial of access to counsel. The right to counsel is part of the due process clause. "The Constitution gives the government tremendous power-even over the life and death of its people. But the power is limited by the due process clauses" (Feinman, 52). This is supposed to be one of the checks that were put in place to prevent the government, or government officials from abusing their power. Therefore, under the sixth amendment of the constitution, the accused in a criminal prosecution should be granted access to counsel, and allowed to assist in his defense. The fact that the men in this case were not allowed to sit with their counsel was going against the young men's constitutional rights. This becomes even more evident with the judge taking more extreme measures to ensure that the attorneys would not be permitted to talk with their clients during the recesses would also have been considered unconstitutional. Following this, the judge made prejudicial

comments, and required that the defendants be kept in an unkempt state that encouraged prejudice on behalf of the jury. All of these factors contributed greatly to the conviction, as well as the heavy sentencing that went along with it. "Constitutional law not only protects the integrity of the democratic process but it protects minorities, protesters, dissidents, and eccentrics from the democratic process" (Feinman, 17). *People v. Zamora* is the perfect example in which constitutional law was ignored and it led to a gross miscarriage of justice, and ultimately its overturning became a lesson against future attempts to ignore the ethical codes which are supposed to be in place. "Zamora stands as a reminder that the courts must remain…as havens against the winds of prejudice" (Weitz, 185).

The subsequent Riots were brought about by many different factors, but ultimately the youth were tired of following the roles of their traditional parents. The unwillingness to accept a secondary position in society such as the ones many of their parents had, lead to them finding new ways to challenge what was expected of them. The situation of these youth was not one that they were content in because most of them were "socially and culturally disadvantaged" (Alford, 228). They did not want the kind of lives their parents were leading, yet they were unsure of how to step away from those lives, so they decided to have fun: "Many of these young people were children of refugees who struggled to

raise their families in a foreign land according to strict Mexican mores, while their children learned English in school and danced the jitterbug" (Pagán, "Los Angles" 231). The servicemen's reaction to these youths came from what they perceived to be them challenging the social norms, as well as a reaction to the media's image of them. They had come to the conclusion that these young men needed to be put in their place, and due to the media, they believed that this was something that was beyond the capabilities of the local police force. The attacks on the young men were used as a form of humiliation, and therefore they also had lasting effects on the Mexican American community as a whole. Though the media worked hard to make sure that the riots were not interpreted as racially based, the people of the community had a different understanding. They saw that the boys were targeted not only for what they were wearing, but also, simply for being Mexican Americans. Not only were the men targeted, but the young women were targeted as well. There were cases of the servicemen beating up on the men, while raping their girlfriends. Although there were accusations against the women as well as the men, they were less common. The women were also being criticized but in their case, many times it was because they were stepping out of the bounds of what was considered to be proper behavior for minority women at the time.

The eventual overturning of the trial had a significant effect on the social perceptions within the community of Mexican Americans. It gave validity to the notion that there was rampant racial prejudice and also permitted the question of what could be done to eliminate it. Both the trial and the Riots were considered to be influential in the history of Los Angeles and they also had a big impact on the Mexican American community as a whole. Through the analysis of both of these events, it becomes evident that these injustices occurred due in part to the social sentiment of the time. The trial likely would not have taken place, let alone lead to a conviction if the media had not created a mass feeling of Anti-Mexican American sentiment. It is also likely that the riots would not have taken place, nor would there have been such blatant miscarriage of the law without the influence of the media. There were long lasting repercussions because these events "shaped the political identity of Mexican Americans because the riots brought national attention to their situation and meant they could no longer be ignored" (Magaña, 20).

Within the Mexican American community, both of these events were crucial to the rise of the Chicano Movement. These events sparked feelings of unrest among some of the youth, which ultimately led to them questioning their place in society, as well as their necessity to fit into the prejudicial societal norms they were surrounded by. Chicano people attempted to re-appropriate the events

that lead to the persecution of their youth. One example of this is Luis Valdéz's play *Zoot Suit* in which we are presented the sequence of events leading up to the Sleepy Lagoon Trial from the perspective of the Mexican American youth. "Although Valdéz acknowledged the fictionalized nature of his plot and characters, he too attempted to legitimate the historical place of the pachucos zoot-suiter as a political activist" (Mazón, 118). Like many other Chicano authors, he attempted to ensure that they told the 'true' story of the Pachuco's rather than allowing the stereotype perpetrated by the media be the final impression. It also acts as a criticism of the 'official' versions which had been given of the trial and the riots (Denzin, 173). Another example of the use of the Zoot Suit is in the film *American Me* in which the Zoot Suit Riots are used as a "metaphor for the 'rape' of the Chicano community by the mainstream population" (Howard, 123). This film emphasizes how the zoot suit riots were able to bring about the start of the Chicano movement, in that the abuse suffered by the Mexican Americans leaves them struggling with feelings of anger and distrust (123). Finally the poetry that was being produced surrounding the character of the pachucos emphasizes the movement's attempts at rallying around the Pachuco as a symbol. Villanueva addresses the movement in his poem "Pachuco Remembered" explaining the birth of the movement as, "a bitter coming-of-age: a juvenile la causa/ in your wicked stride…"

One major lesson that can be obtained from these events, is that even under extreme conditions such as war, an effort should be made to ensure that the constitutional laws which are in place are upheld. In times of war, the emphasis on protecting human rights, especially those of the minorities, should be a priority. If society begins to ignore these rights, then the democracy which we are all living in becomes a tyranny of the majority.

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