How did Zoot Suit fashion challenge the accepted cultural norms of the 1940s?

Lesson Overview & Directions

Teachers, click here for the step-by-step lesson plan

Lesson Overview:

In this lesson students will examine various primary and secondary sources in order to understand the Zoot Suit fashion culture that emerged during the 1940's. Students will analyze the reasons for the emergence of this fashion culture and how Zoot Suit fashion culture defied the fashion cultural norms of the time.

Lesson Objectives/Goals:

- I will be able to describe the mainstream fashion during the 1940s.
- I will be able to describe Zoot Suit fashion in the 1940s.
- I will analyze how Zoot Suit fashion challenged the cultural norms of the 1940s.
- I will be able to cite textual and other evidence in support of an argument or claim.

Warm Up

Write, Pair, Share



In a few sentences, describe the outfit you see in the photograph. Be prepared to share your response with your elbow partner.

Source: *Zoot Suit, United States, 1940–42, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, purchased with funds provided by Ellen A.*

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Michelson; De Luxe Hollyvogue for Lundahl Clothing Co., Necktie, c. 1945, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, gift of Stephen J. and Sandra Sotnick; The Guarantee (United States, active 20th century), Shoes (Spectators), 1935–42, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, gift of Mrs. Carl W. Barrow

Historical Background
"Fashion and Culture"

"When the fashion industry is concerned, culture is an integral part of it. Fashion and culture goes hand in hand. Our clothes are a source of non-verbal communication which sends messages about who we are, where we come from, what we do, etc. Overall, fashion is a way of expressing ourselves through our clothing and accessories. People try to stay "in fashion" and they are mostly influenced by popular culture which is a reflection of cultural forces as well as social factors."

You will read and look at photographs about 1940's mainstream fashion to gain an understanding of what fashion was like during this time. Use the link below to access the activity:

1940's Mainstream Fashion Graphic Organizer

After completing the graphic organizer we will have a discussion about 1940's mainstream fashion.

Key Information	
Zoot Suit	A men's suit with high-waisted, wide-legged, tight-cuffed, pegged trousers, and a long coat with wide lapels and wide padded shoulders. This style of clothing became popular in African-American, Mexican American, Italian American, Jewish American, and Filipino American communities during the 1940s.

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Pachuco	male members of a counterculture associated with zoot suit fashion, jazz and swing music, and a distinct dialect known as caló, that emerged in Los Angeles in the late 1930s. The pachuco counterculture flourished among Chicano boys and men in the 1940s as a symbol of rebellion
Caló	slang of Mexican Spanish that originated during the first half of the 20th century in the Southwestern United States. It is the product of zoot-suit pachuco culture that developed in the 1930s and '40s in cities along the US/Mexico border. Examples: *Al rato, vato* *Nada Nada, Limonada*
Counterculture	is a culture whose values and norms of behavior differ substantially from those of mainstream society

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Sources

Source A: "The Zoot Suit", Professor George Sanchez, *American Experience: Zoot Suit Culture,* PBS, 2020

I think for the most part, like youth of any generation, the zoot suit was a symbol of one's own generational style. There was a kind of assertiveness in the dress. A sense that this was unique. This was to really assert that, you know, we are here, and we want to make a statement about the fact that we're here. But it was also, I think, a connection with other minority and poor youth in the United States. I mean, a zoot suit was also worn by black youth, certainly worn by Malcolm X in New York. So there was a sense that the zoot suit was not just a Mexican dress, it was also a connection with other minority youth, but in Los Angeles also was representative of the Mexican American population, in a certain way.

Source: *PBS*, Public Broadcasting Service, 2020, www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/zoot-suit-culture/.

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Source B: "Extreme Zoot Suits", Arthur Arenas, *American Experience: Zoot Suit Culture* PBS, 2020.

They went to extreme. They went to extreme, you know? Man, they wore a big hat and a feather and a chain dragging down there, ankle chokers, and a long — they used to call it fingertip, below the fingers, you know, way down, you know? That was it, and you says man, that guy is wearing an expensive, you know. You go to Murray's and you'd buy that outfit, you know? Murray's was on Third and Main. That's the only place you could buy these zoot suit things, you know? What can I tell you? And the shoe store, Price's, on Sixth and Broadway, you'd get lined up just buying shoes there because they would double sole them. They would always double sole their shoes. They never walked out with a regular, you know, they'd walk out with those shoes and right away they would dye them black, and shine them and keep shining them, and then the grain would disappear, and all you'd see is a plain, beautiful shine, and then you'd get your argyle socks there…

Source: *PBS*, Public Broadcasting Service, 2020, www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/zoot-suit-culture/.

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Source C:"Wearing the Zoot Suit", Carlos Espinoza, *American Experience: Zoot Suit Culture* PBS, 2020.

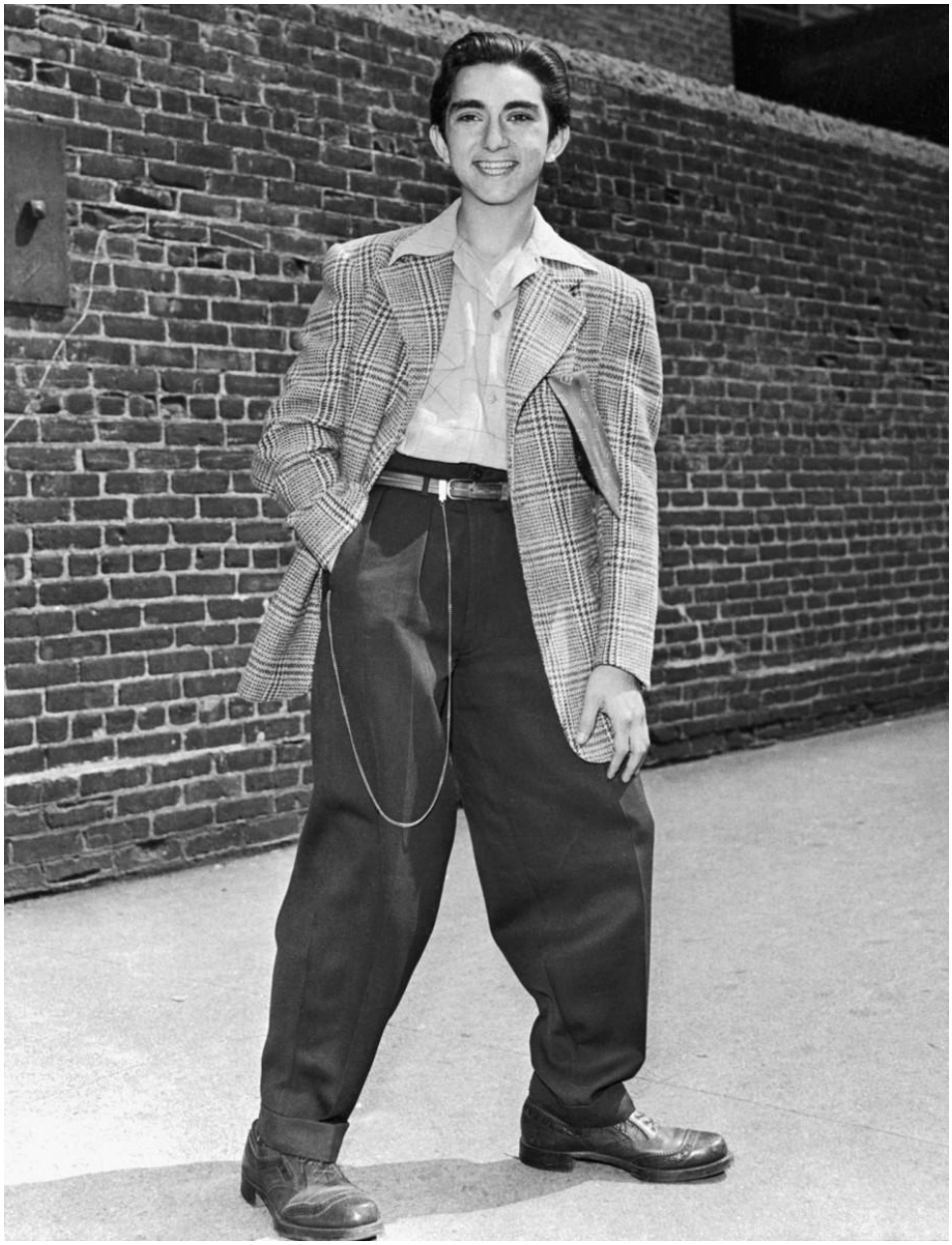
I felt good. I felt good because in the neighborhood you were all right, and then you went to the dance and we were all, there was a lot of guys who didn't wear zoot suits. A lot of guys didn't, no. And a lot of guys would have a zoot suit and somebody else's friend, because their mother wouldn't never, the parents didn't like it. So some of the guys would go down to their neighbor's house and put the zoot suit on, and then go to the dance. And they would come back and take it off, and put their Levi's on and go home when they had trouble with it.

Source: *PBS*, Public Broadcasting Service, 2020, www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/zoot-suit-culture/.

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Source D: *Teenager in a Zoot Suit*, 1943.



Source: https://www.history.com/news/what-were-the-zoot-suit-riots

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Source E: "The Pachuco Hop", Gloria Berlin, *American Experience: Zoot Suit Culture* PBS, 2020.

I remember the "Pachuco Hop". It's just like hip hop. I remember ...because I tried to do it. If I happened to dance with a zoot suiter, I would try to do the Pachuco Hop. And if I was dancing with a serviceman, I'd just do a straight jitterbug. I mean, you have to adjust to your partner, you know, especially when you're at a dance. I had a lot of fun dancing. I did a lot of dancing as a matter of fact. And I even went to see Tommy Dorsey and his orchestra.

The Pachuco Hop was wonderful. It was just another version, it was like a Latin version, there was Latin swing and Latin jitterbugging along with there being the regular music, American music of that time, the popular music that existed in those days.

Source: *PBS*, Public Broadcasting Service, 2020, www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/zoot-suit-culture/
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Source F: Examples of zoot culture fashion. Courtesy of the Shades of L.A. Collection, Los Angeles Public Library.



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Source G: *Pachucos, Hep Cats, and the Politics of Cool: Zoot Style Across America* [excerpt], Luis Alvarez, 2008. Excerpt from *Power of the Zoot: Youth Culture and Resistance during World War II*

Chapter Four

Pachucos, Hep Cats, and the Politics of Cool: Zoot Style Across America

Introduction

As a teenager in the late 1930s, Antonio Alvarez, my Great Uncle Tony, spent his weekends in Los Angeles dressed in a zoot suit hanging out with friends, frequenting local dances and malt shops or clashing with neighborhood groups that rivaled his own Club 21. It's not hard to imagine him "dressed to the nines" in his one and only brown zoot, with baggy pants tapered closely at the ankles, long tails flowing from the coat, broad rimmed hat, and silver chained watch hanging from his pocket, for even now, nearly 70 years later, he is still as sharp and smooth a dresser as ever.

In the years leading up to World War II, that's partly what being a zooter meant, practicing a style that identified one as "cool". While much of the American public, government officials, and older generations of minority communities viewed the zoot as an icon for juvenile delinquency, thousands of young ethnic Mexicans and African Americans wore the zoot because it made them look good. For working-class ethnic Mexican zooters, who came to be known as pachucos, and their African American counterparts, commonly termed hep cats, zoot culture was more than a style. It was also the everyday life context through which they navigated their teen years. In an era when minority youth

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lived in a highly segregated and discriminatory society, zoot suit culture operated as a trans-regional, culturally hybrid, and gendered social movement that challenged wartime notions of American nation, race, and gender as fundamentally white. Black and brown zooters, increasingly joined by white youth, practiced a "politics of cool," that included the material exchange of style, construction of gender identities, and community formation across boundaries of race and region. The "politics of cool" encompassed a youthful attitude and set of beliefs, accompanied by attendant social practices, that prioritized comfort, enjoyment, and the celebration of cultural difference.[169]

Zoot culture was not a highly organized cultural movement, nor was it always a clearly stated mission of resistance by its participants. The wearing of the zoot was instead a youth style that momentarily reshuffled race relations in urban settings. By not submitting their own social world to limits imposed by Jim Crow segregation and discrimination, zooters fashioned what might be considered a broad notion of cultural citizenship. At a time when they were attacked by city

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Exit Ticket
Answer the following question: Who is challenging the fashion norms of our time?

Assessment
Before completing the assessment, review your responses to Sources A-G and focus on the evidence that shows the ways that youth used fashion as a form of resistance. Next, answer the **inquiry question** for this lesson in one paragraph: ***How did Zoot Suit fashion challenge the accepted fashion norms of the 1940s?*** Be sure to cite textual evidence from primary and secondary sources to support your argument.