


The Zoot Suit: Style and Swing in the Wartime Economy



Est. Time: 60-90 minutes

Subjects: History, Social Studies, General Music

Age Range: Elementary School

See the full lesson [here!](#)

★ *TEACHROCK* ★

What was the cultural, social, and historical significance of the zoot suit during the period of World War II?

In this lesson, you will:

- Listen to Swing, a style of music that became popular during the first half of the 20th century
- Examine the components of the zoot suit, and the zoot suit's connection to Swing music
- Explore the state of the U.S. economy and society during World War II
- Investigate the Zoot Suit Riots, and their impact on U.S. history
- Investigate the Sleepy Lagoon murder and trial (extension activity)

Imagine your ideal outfit, and the components that would go into it (shoes, shirt, etc.)

Consider or ask a partner:

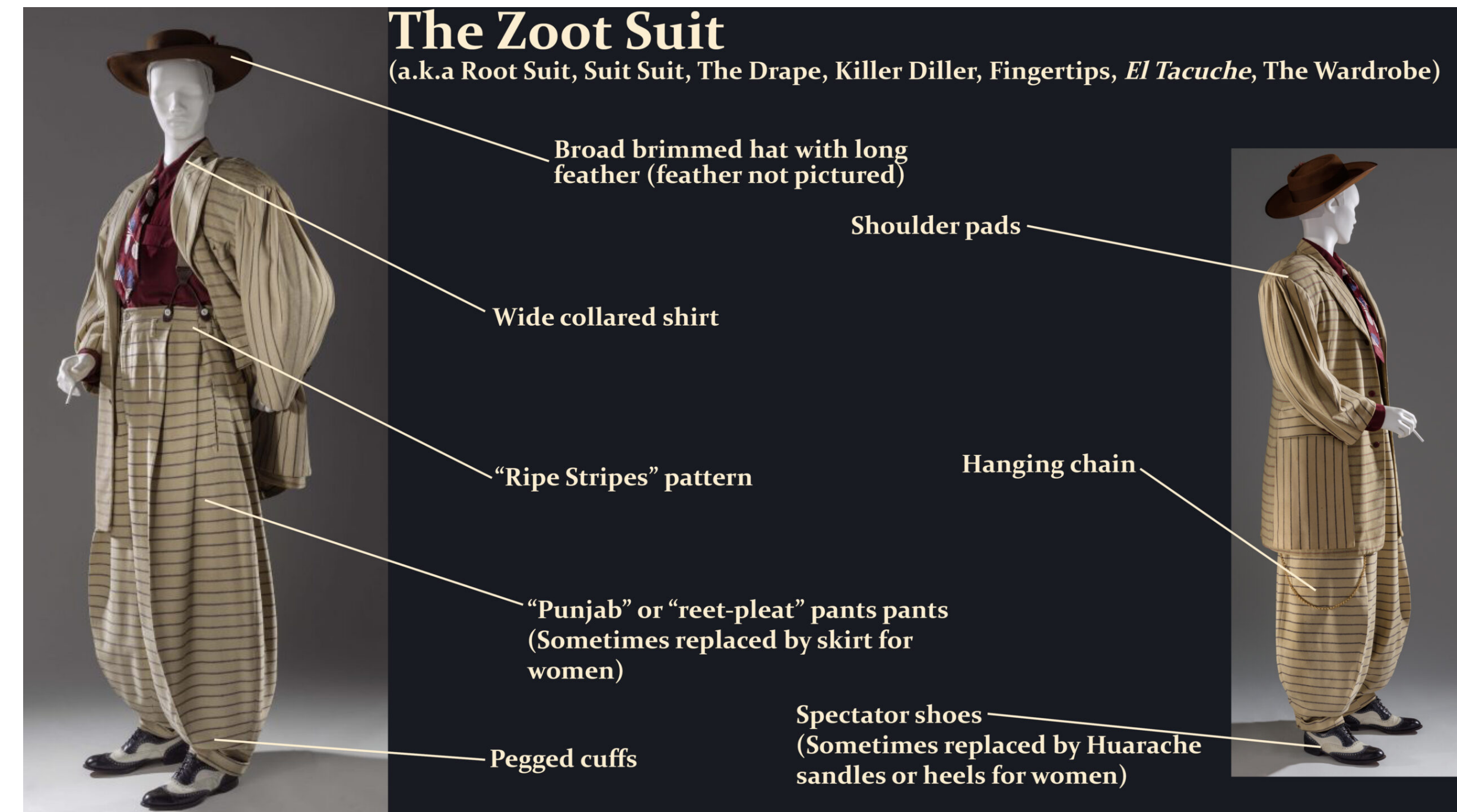
- When and where would you wear the outfit you imagined?
- Does this outfit reflect aspects of your personality? If so, which aspects?
- Would you anticipate any pushback or criticism of your outfit? If so, by whom? Why might they criticize it?

In the 1940s, an emerging fashion was the “zoot suit.”

Investigate the components that made up a zoot suit by examining the illustration.

Consider or ask a partner:

- What is your opinion of the zoot suit? Do you think it is fashionable?
- Does the zoot suit or elements of the zoot suit remind you of any contemporary fashions?



Swing bandleader Cab Calloway helped popularize the zoot suit.

With Calloway's help, the zoot suit became the outfit often associated with dancing to Swing music.

Watch [this video](#) of Cab Calloway performing.

Consider or ask a partner:

- Does the music you heard in the clip remind you of anything? If so, what?



The zoot suit was most popular during the 1940s, a time period when the U.S. became increasingly involved in World War II.

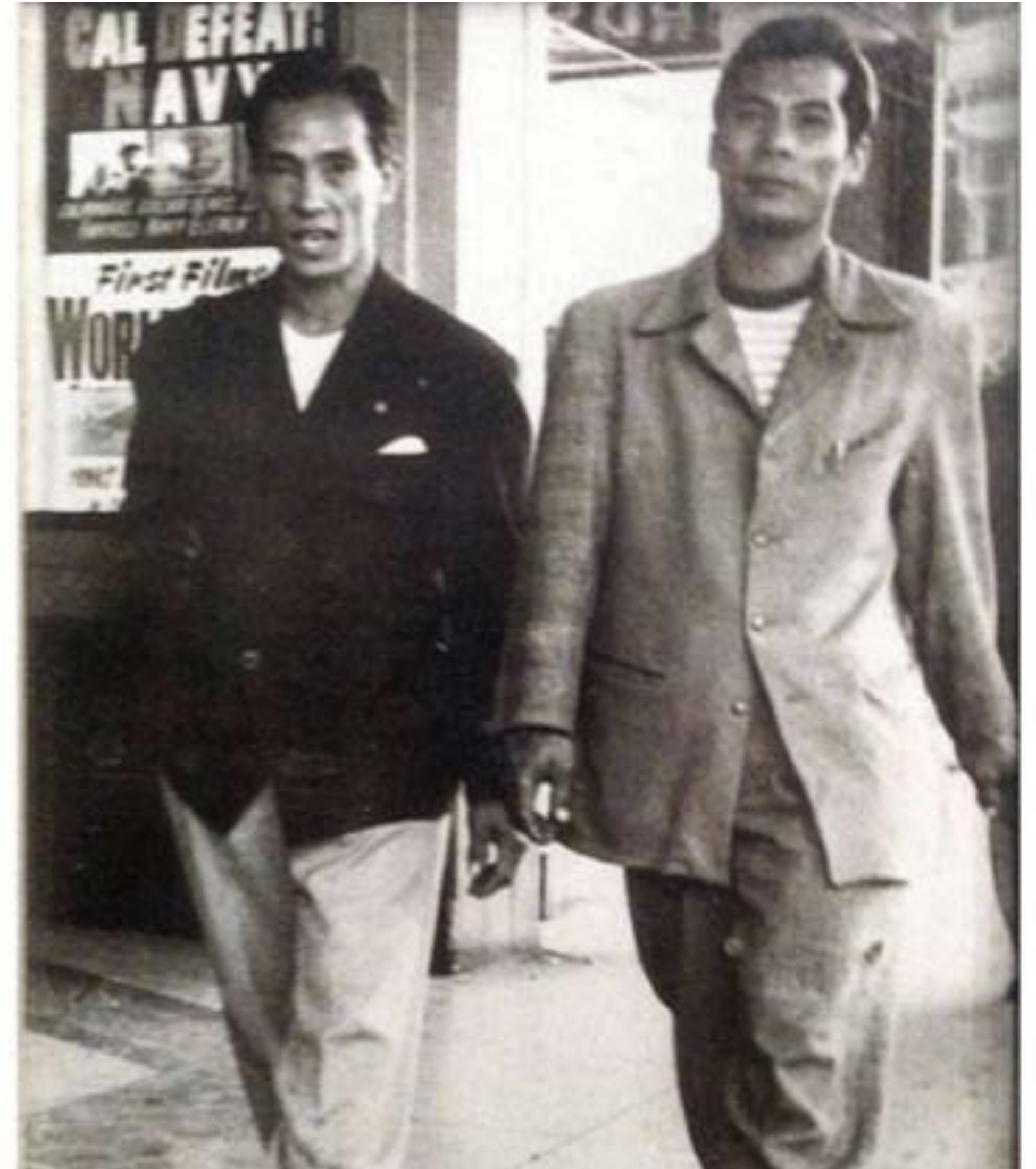
Watch [this video](#) to discover the economy and workplace culture in the United States during the World War II era. Use [this graphic organizer](#) to take notes as you watch.



Look through [this collection of quotes and images](#) related to people's experiences with the zoot suit in the 1940s.

Consider or ask a partner:

- Were there any similarities you noticed about the fashion across the images?
- Did you notice any similarities with the people in the photographs?
- Based on the quotes, what were some of the reasons zoot suits held significance for people?
- Why might zoot suits have been considered “dangerous” or “bad” by some people?



With the zoot suit's popularity came controversy. The controversy over the fashion culminated in the summer of 1943 in Los Angeles, with the so-called "Zoot Suit Riots."

Investigate the causes, progression, and reaction to the riots by examining the collected documents in [this handout](#).

Answer the questions related to each document [here](#).



Task: Based on the primary sources before you, answer the following questions:

- 1) Who perpetrated the “Zoot Suit Riots”?
- 2) What did the riots consist of?
- 3) What were some of the causes of the riots?

After investigating the documents, consider or ask a partner the above questions.

Moral Panic: A mass movement based on the false or exaggerated perception that some cultural behavior or group of people is dangerously deviant and poses a threat to society's values and interests. Moral panics are generally fuelled by media coverage of social issues.

-Oxford Dictionary of Law Enforcement

Read the above definition of a moral panic.

Consider or ask a friend:

- How would you define the concept of a “moral panic” in your own words?
- Do you think the Zoot Suit Riots, and the reaction to zoot suits more generally, can be described as a “moral panic”? Why or why not?
- Can you think of any issue today that can be considered a “moral panic”?

SUMMARY

- Swing music and its accompanying style, the zoot suit, was part of popular culture in the 1940s
- The zoot suit was made up of a large suit, ballooning pants, a wide brimmed hat, and a chain. Women also wore modified zoot suits
- By the mid-1940s, the United States entered a War economy. As a result, the workforce became more diverse both in terms of race and gender. However, prejudice still existed and activists such as A. Philip Randolph continued to fight for equality in the workplace
- While the zoot suit was the pretext for the The Zoot Suit Riots, the causes of the riots had more to do with racial prejudice and resentment towards young Mexican-Americans in Los Angeles

BE CREATIVE

Using [this handout](#), design and draw your ideal outfit that you imagined on the third slide.

Once complete, draw lines from each component of your outfit (the shirt, shoes, accessories, etc.) and explain why it is included in the outfit, and what you like about it.

BE CURIOUS

Now, create and draw your own pedal. It can be:

1. Listen to some of the music zoot suiters likely danced to with [this YouTube playlist](#).
2. One of the events that preceded the Zoot Suit Riots was the Sleepy Lagoon murder and trial. In groups or individually, read through [Handout - The Sleepy Lagoon Murder and Trial Document Set](#), and answer the questions on [Handout - Sleepy Lagoon Murder and Trial Questions](#).

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