



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative
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War on the Home Front: Politics and the Zoot Suit

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by Natalia Baldwin

The zoot suit. It has been associated with masculinity, femininity, juvenile delinquency, affluence, racialization, music, dance, media frenzy, fear-mongering, pride, identity, and a riot. Since its emergence in the 1930s, the origin and intention of the suit has been vague, yet somehow people have been consistently obsessed with it. The suit itself was even banned by the United States government in 1943. One has to ask, "What is the big deal?"

Historians have come to see the World War II home front as an important chapter in the Civil Rights Movement and the zoot suit – and the 1943 Zoot Suit Riots – as critical symbolic moments in that struggle. While they were not organized with a singular leader, the Mexican American, African American, and Filipino zooters of the 1940s symbolized everything the institutionalized structure of the 1940s U.S. abhorred: class mobility, racial mixing, and most of all, an assertive presence. After all, who can ignore a group of men in brightly colored, ballooning suits or young women uniquely dressed in short skirts and tight sweaters? Zooters *owned* their identity. The question is, was that their motive? In this unit, students will decide whether the wearing of the zoot suit was, in fact, a political act.

(Developed for U. S. History, grade 11; recommended for U. S. History, High School grade 11)

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