

Document A: Chester Himes (Excerpt)

Chester Himes was an African American writer who lived and worked in Los Angeles and witnessed the Zoot Suit Riots. Racism was a central subject in his writing. This article appeared in The Crisis, a magazine published by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the nation's leading civil rights organization.

ZOOT RIOTS ARE RACE RIOTS

When the sailors departed in their cars, trucks, and taxicabs (furnished to them no doubt by the Nazi-minded citizenry), the police appeared as if they had been waiting around the corner and arrested the Mexican youths who had been knocked out, stunned, or too frightened to run. We know that gangs of servicemen boarded streetcars and glared at women and insulted men at will, with no police **in evidence**. In fact, during the first three nights, by which time all manner of servicemen had joined the **storm troopers**, it seemed as if there were no civil officers at all in Los Angeles.

As long as the servicemen were getting the best of the fight, attacking and stripping, beating and molesting, all dark-skinned people who wore zoot suits ... regardless of whether they were **pachucos**, war workers, juveniles, or **invalids**, everyone seemed happy. The papers of Los Angeles ... rooted and cheered. What could make the white people more happy than to see their uniformed sons **sapping up** some dark-skinned people? It proved beyond all doubt the bravery of white servicemen. ... Los Angeles was at last being made safe for white people—to do as they ... pleased. ... The outcome is simply that the South has won Los Angeles.

Source: Chester B. Himes, *The Crisis*, July 1943.

Vocabulary

in evidence: to be seen

invalids: term used at the time to refer to people with disabilities

storm troopers: Nazi soldiers

sap up: beat up

pachucos: Mexican American zoot suiters

Document B: Carey McWilliams (Excerpt)

Carey McWilliams was a prominent Anglo lawyer who wrote about politics and supported left-wing causes. He served on the Sleepy Lagoon Defense Committee.

Immediate responsibility for the outbreak of the riots must be placed upon the Los Angeles press and the Los Angeles police. For more than a year now the press ... has been building up anti-Mexican **sentiment** in Los Angeles. ... The press has headlined every case in which a Mexican has been arrested, featured photographs of Mexicans dressed in “zoot suits,” checked back over criminal records to “prove” that there has been an increase in Mexican “crime” and constantly **needed** the police to make arrests. This campaign reached such a pitch during the Sleepy Lagoon case in August 1942, that the **Office of War Information** sent a representative to Los Angeles to reason with the publishers. The press was most obliging; it dropped the word “Mexican” and began to feature “zoot suit.” The constant repetition of the phrase “zoot suit,” coupled with Mexican names and pictures of Mexicans, had the effect of convincing the public that all Mexicans were zoot suiters and all zoot suiters were criminals; **ergo**, all Mexicans were criminals.

Source: Carey McWilliams, “The Zoot-Suit Riots,” published by *The New Republic*, a weekly political magazine, on June 21, 1943.

Vocabulary

sentiment: attitude, opinion, or feeling

needed: pressured

Office of War Information: a U.S. government agency in operation during World War II that published propaganda in support of the war effort and censored information that portrayed the U.S. in a negative light

ergo: therefore

Document C: Committee on Un-American Activities in California (Excerpt)

*The California legislature convened the Joint Fact-Finding Committee on Un-American Activities in the 1940s to investigate **subversive** activities. In public hearings, the committee investigated various groups it suspected of being disloyal, including Japanese Americans, suspected communists, and a small number of suspected fascists. Historians have argued that the committee devastated the lives of innocent Californians.*

Committee chairman Senator Tenney: Do you believe racial prejudice and discrimination was the basic cause for this disturbance?

C. B. Horrall, Chief of the Police Department of the City of Los Angeles: I do not. ... These disturbances, of course, started with the Latin-American gang situation. ... There were fights between different gangs ... [which] were confined almost entirely to themselves. However, about a year ago, we had a little difficulty down at [the port], wherein they got mixed up with the sailors down there. ...

This latest [disturbance] ... [was] apparently, the result of some of the sailors **making advances** to some Mexican girls or talking to them. I don't know whether it went any farther than that, and it started the difficulties, and then there was retaliation back and forth between this particular group up there and the sailors until it reached the place where it got some publicity in the papers. ... Some people have chosen to call it riots; I don't think it should be classified as that. And the feeling in general among them was one of fun and sport rather than malice. Quite a few of the boys had their clothes torn off, but the crowds weren't particularly hard to handle. ... There were no attacks made on policemen. ...

The Committee finds that Communist publications ... played an important part in agitation of the Mexican **pachucos**, both in preparing for the riots and in keeping the issue alive when the violence had ceased.

Source: Report of the Joint Fact-Finding Committee on Un-American Activities in California, 1945; C.B. Horrall testified to the committee on June 23, 1943.

Vocabulary

subversive: attempting to weaken or destroy a government secretly

make advances: attempt to start a romantic or sexual relationship with someone

pachucos: Mexican American zoot suiters

Document D: *El Sol* (Translated excerpt)

The following article was published in *El Sol*, a Spanish-language, Mexican American newspaper that advocated for unity between the United States and Mexico and celebrated the countries' military alliance during World War II.

A group of about 30 **pachucos** attacked and gravely injured a marine. After, a number of marines and soldiers took justice into their hands, exasperated as they were from the constant attacks and having their fellow soldiers, and occasionally their wives, become victims. The marines and soldiers organized themselves in patrols and took taxis across the poor neighborhoods of the **metropolis** in search of "**kalifas**," who they would pull out of diners and theaters to remove their outlandish pants and leave them in their underwear.

Finally, Tuesday the 8th, a marine commander's order cleaned the streets of Los Angeles of their ... marines and coast guards, in order to give the civil authorities the freedom to face the problem created by the groups of **PACHUCOS** that during the past five weeks had started various conflicts with the marines. ...

We always condemn the attire, the **effeminacy**, the cowardice of the gangs, the misfortune that weighs on **la raza** to see our young people with zoot suit pants that go up almost to the neck, jackets that graze the knees, hats that look like umbrellas. ...

We presume that this is the work of a **FIFTH COLUMN**, a result of **Axis** agents maneuvering, who go about sowing this carnival of inferiority within our **RAZA**, just as they sow bad feelings among American sentiment with only one goal: Destroy the foreign policy of President Roosevelt, destroy his Good Neighbor Policy, create a conflict with MEXICO.

Source: *El Sol*, June 11, 1943, Phoenix, Arizona.

Vocabulary

pachucos: Mexican American zoot suiters

la raza: literally, "the race"; here it refers to Mexicans and those of Mexican descent

metropolis: a large city

fifth column: a group of enemy spies

kalifas: California pachucos

Axis: Germany, Italy, and Japan; the military enemies of the Allies in World War II

effeminacy: femininity