High School Lesson
Zoot Suiters Behind Barbed Wire: Civil Liberties, Identity, and Incarceration in WWII
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Georgia Performance Standards (GSE) for Social Studies:

- SSUSH19: Examine the origins, major developments, and the domestic impact of World War II, including the growth of the federal government.
- SSCG7: Demonstrate knowledge of civil liberties and civil rights.
- SSCG16: Analyze the difference between involuntary and voluntary participation in civic life.

Teacher Background Information

Standard lessons on WWII domestic history usually categorize Japanese Americans purely as passive victims of incarceration, or as hyper-patriotic soldiers (the 442nd Regimental Combat Team) serving to prove their loyalty. This lesson challenges that simplified binary. It introduces a vibrant, rebellious subculture of young Japanese Americans who used style, slang, and counterculture to navigate the trauma of losing their civil liberties.

What was Zoot Suit Culture?



The "Zoot Suit" was a distinct youth subculture that peaked during World War II, primarily among working class Black, Chicano, and Filipino youth in urban areas like Los Angeles, Chicago, and New York. The style featured "drapes": long, loose jackets with heavily padded shoulders, high-waisted, ballooned "pegged" pants tapered tightly at the ankles, wide-brimmed hats, and long watch chains.

Beyond fashion, it was an attitude of "cool," rebellion, and irreverence. Zoot suiters listened to jazz, danced the jitterbug or lindy hop, hung out in pool halls, and rejected the polite standards of dominant white society. During the war, the War Production Board actually restricted fabric usage, making the voluminous zoot suit technically illegal and framing the wearers as "unpatriotic." This culminated in racial violence, most notably the Los Angeles Zoot Suit Riots of 1943, where white servicemen attacked youth of color wearing the suits.

Japanese American Zoot Suit Culture

Japanese American zoot suiters were heavily influenced by their peers. In Los Angeles, some Nisei (second-generation Japanese American) youth joined the counterculture. When Executive Order 9066 forced 120,000 Japanese Americans into incarceration camps, LA youth carried this style with them into the barracks. Indeed, incarceration brought together city kids and country kids, and immigrants from all over Japan who had lived in different parts of the US. One prominent difference that emerged was between the “LA kids” and everyone else.



LA kids seemed more worldly and sophisticated than Nisei growing up in smaller cities or in farming communities. Some parents also considered them terrible influences. They accused LA kids of being delinquents, used pejoratives like “yogore” (literally, “dirty”) or pachuke (from the Spanish pachuco) to refer to them, and often associated them with a figure often associated with delinquency, due to racist stereotyping by the media: the striking figure of the zoot suiter, usually a Mexican American youth in a flamboyant and exaggerated suit also accused of being criminal.

But to many youth, draped pants, the broad-brimmed hat, and elongated jacket simply represented the height of fashion and a celebration of youthful freedom that ignored the shocked concern of their elders.

The Psychology of Incarceration Rebellion



Why did some of young Japanese Americans turn to this lifestyle? It is likely that forced imprisonment shattered their belief in American democracy. Stripped of their rights, their franchise (voting), and their future, they might have felt hard work was futile. Facing an existential crisis behind barbed wire, some of them formed gangs (like the *Esquires* at the Rohwer camp in Arkansas), stole food, gambled, and fought at camp dances. It was in a way a coping mechanism for a deep sense of futility, anxiety, and being an outcast in their own country.

The War Relocation Authority (WRA) vs. The Yogore

The WRA (the federal agency running the camps) had a specific assimilationist blueprint for solving the "Japanese Problem." They wanted to release internees and scatter them across the Midwest and East (cities like Chicago) so they would quietly fade into the white middle class. To get a release permit, Nisei had to promise to speak only English, avoid gathering in large Japanese groups, and conform to mainstream white standards. The *yogore* completely disrupted this plan:

- They wore loud, unpatriotic clothing.
- They swore in public using a mix of English and Japanese slang.

- By adopting zoot suit culture, they explicitly aligned themselves with Black and Brown working-class youth rather than trying to assimilate into white middle-class respectability.

Why was this story forgotten?

After the war, elite Japanese American leadership organizations, such as the Japanese American Citizens League (JACL), consciously chose to promote the "GI Joe Nisei" image. They heavily publicized the heroic military feats of the 442nd Regimental Combat Team to prove Japanese American loyalty and secure a safe future for the community in post-war America. This hyper-patriotic narrative completely crowded out the stories of the *yogore*, *pachuke*, and draft resisters, rendering them invisible in history books for decades.

Suggested Teaching Activity

To help students understand the experiences of Japanese American youth during incarceration, teachers can engage students in an inquiry using both primary and secondary sources.

Begin by having students read a short secondary source overview on Japanese American zoot suiters and youth culture during World War II. This background reading will provide historical context about incarceration, wartime patriotism, and the emergence of youth subcultures behind barbed wire.

Next, students should analyze a set of primary sources, including photographs of Nisei youth, oral history excerpts from Sus Kaminaka, and government directives or camp newspaper editorials. All can be found in this article by historian Ellen Wu: https://nikkeichicago.org/2014/01/25/the-forgotten-story-of-japanese-american-zoot-suiters/

Working in small groups, students can examine how Japanese American young people navigated life in the camps, expressed their identities, and responded to the loss of their civil liberties. Students should consider questions such as:

- How did incarceration affect young people's sense of belonging and civic participation?
- Why might some youth have embraced styles such as the zoot suit despite criticism from camp officials and community leaders?
- In what ways did federal authorities attempt to regulate the behavior, language, and appearance of incarcerated Japanese Americans?

Conclude the lesson with a whole-class discussion that asks students to reflect on the tensions between patriotism, resistance, and identity during wartime.

As an exit ticket, students can write a short response explaining how the experiences of Japanese American youth challenge traditional narratives of citizenship and loyalty in U.S. history.

Images Used:

1. Frank Tellez, full-length portrait, standing, facing right, wearing hat and zoot suit. Associated Press. Public Domain via Wikimedia Commons
2. “Young Japanese Hold Dance,” Tule Lake War Relocation Center. University of Southern California, Regional History Collection
3. Junichi “Frisco” Yamasaki—posing in drapes, Poston, Arizona, concentration camp, 1942. Gift of Frisco Yamasaki, Japanese American National Museum [2000.415.1]