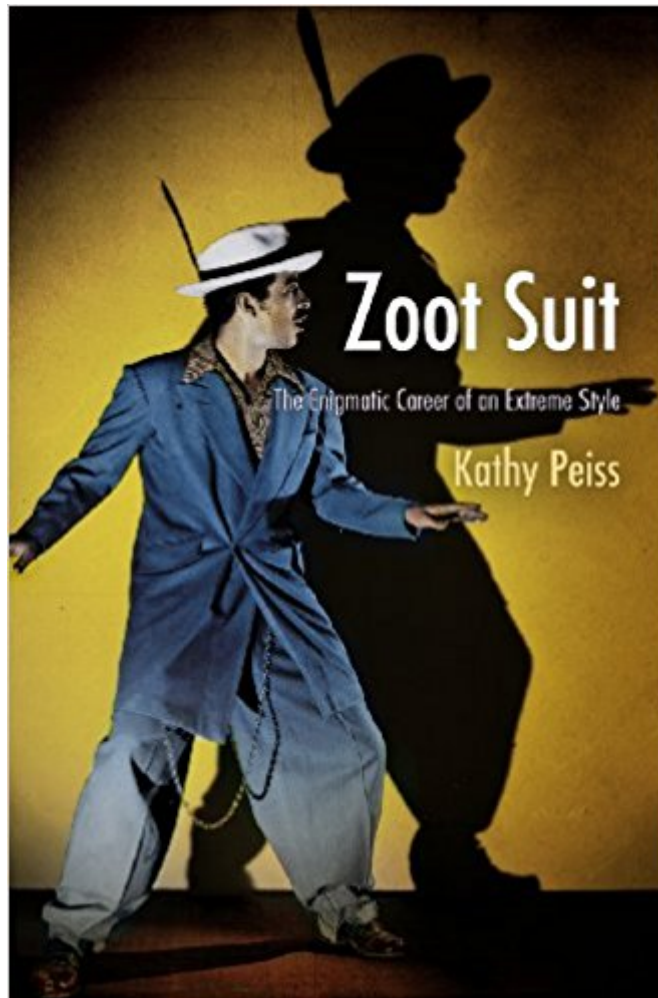




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# Zoot Suit: The Enigmatic Career Of An Extreme Style



## Synopsis

ZOOT SUIT (n.): the ultimate in clothes. The only totally and truly American civilian suit. — Cab Calloway, *The Hepster's Dictionary*, 1944

Before the fashion statements of hippies, punks, or hip-hop, there was the zoot suit, a striking urban look of the World War II era that captivated the imagination. Created by poor African American men and obscure tailors, the "drape shape" was embraced by Mexican American pachucos, working-class youth, entertainers, and swing dancers, yet condemned by the U.S. government as wasteful and unpatriotic in a time of war. The fashion became notorious when it appeared to trigger violence and disorder in Los Angeles in 1943 — events forever known as the "zoot suit riot." In its wake, social scientists, psychiatrists, journalists, and politicians all tried to explain the riddle of the zoot suit, transforming it into a multifaceted symbol: to some, a sign of social deviance and psychological disturbance, to others, a gesture of resistance against racial prejudice and discrimination. As controversy swirled at home, young men in other places — French zazous, South African tsotsi, Trinidadian saga boys, and Russian stiliagi — made the American zoot suit their own. In *Zoot Suit*, historian Kathy Peiss explores this extreme fashion and its mysterious career during World War II and after, as it spread from Harlem across the United States and around the world. She traces the unfolding history of this style and its importance to the youth who adopted it as their uniform, and at the same time considers the way public figures, experts, political activists, and historians have interpreted it. This outrageous style was a turning point in the way we understand the meaning of clothing as an expression of social conditions and power relations. *Zoot Suit* offers a new perspective on youth culture and the politics of style, tracing the seam between fashion and social action.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"An important and valuable book. The breadth of research upon which it is based and Peiss's determination to question conventional assumptions considerably enrich our understanding of the zoot." [—Journal of American Studies](#) "Thorough, well-researched, and illuminating." [—PopMatters](#) "Peiss is a creative and brilliant scholar and her book is a much-welcomed addition to the body of scholarship dedicated to unlocking the riddle of the zoot." [—American Historical Review](#) "Zoot Suit is a sophisticated, independent minded, and valuable book; there should be more work like it in the field. Peiss's principled attention to evidence, her nuanced argument, and her willingness to question conventional assumptions about the meaning of popular forms all go a long way toward re-grounding American Studies in the lived world." [—Carlo Rotella, author of Good With Their Hands: Boxers, Bluesmen, and Other Characters from the Rust Belt](#) "Kathy Peiss brilliantly unravels the many meanings of the zoot suit while sustaining the aesthetic pleasure of its creation in the complex cultural fabric of American life. Zoot Suit is a cultural history laced with the eye of ethnography, showing how an original African American sartorial style carried substantial symbolic power into the lives of Mexican American pachucos suaves, Jewish tailor trumpeters, and all who would wear 'the Drape' as a statement of hipness." [—Nick Spitzer, producer and host of American Routes](#) "Refreshingly skeptical of the intellectual habit of reducing all cultural expression to the political." [—Wall Street Journal](#)

Kathy Peiss is Roy F. and Jeannette P. Nichols Professor of American History at the University of Pennsylvania. She is the author of *Hope in a Jar: The Making of America's Beauty Culture*, also available from the University of Pennsylvania Press, and *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York*.

Cab Calloway knew something about extreme styles. In his *The Hepster's Dictionary* he listed "ZOOT (adj.): exaggerated." Just under it, necessarily, was "ZOOT SUIT (n.): the ultimate in clothes. The only totally and truly American civilian suit." He makes it sound patriotic, but some Americans looked at the zoot suit and were as horrified as only an older generation looking at the peculiarities of a younger generation can be. If the zoot suit was truly American, so were the anxieties it caused, and the race riots it sparked. Kathy Peiss, a professor of American history, has looked at these

interpretations of a peculiar garment, its history, and its influence. It isn't all superficial fashion; her book *\_Zoot Suit: The Enigmatic Career of an Extreme Style\_* (University of Pennsylvania Press) is a deeply researched, scholarly, yet entertaining account of all aspects of a frivolous garment that Peiss dares to take seriously. The design of the suit had many modifications, and came in all colors, but it consisted basically of "the long killer-diller coat with a drape shape and wide shoulders; pants with reet-pleats, billowing out at the knees, tightly tapered and pegged at the ankles; a porkpie or wide-brimmed hat; pointed or thick-soled shoes; and a long, dangling keychain." It took the idea of a suit and stretched it almost to caricature. In one way it was a practical garment. A regular suit during the forties would have been too confining for the gymnastic movies of swing and jitterbug. The zoot suit's roomy pants accentuated leg movement, and pegging them at the ankles meant that they didn't get tangled with the clothes of other dancers. The style spread nationwide, predominantly among non-white young men but also taken up by whites. The War Production Board banned the suit, ostensibly because it used too much cloth that otherwise ought to have gone to the war effort. The order had no teeth and few tailors ever got into trouble. The outlaw nature of the garment was perceived by those who did not wear it, and elders in the Hispanic and black communities cluck-clucked as their sons dressed so outlandishly. The most famous confrontation over the style was the Zoot Suit Riot that occurred in Los Angeles in 1943. Sailors assigned to the area appointed themselves as fashion police, and started harassing and beating up Hispanic men who had the garment on. One sailor told the press, "We'll destroy every zoot suit in Los Angeles before this is over," but this did little to explain why the white sailors were also beating up non-whites who had on ordinary work clothes, nor why no white zoot-suitors were similarly assaulted. It was handy to say that this was an operation against the zoot suit, but it was a simple race riot. The riots spilled into theaters, where management was forced to turn on the lights so that the audience's attire could be checked. Young men were pulled from trolleys, and private homes were invaded. There were five days of rioting, with over a hundred people injured, a climax of growing discontent between races who had been competing for jobs and status. The newspapers in Los Angeles, especially the Hearst press, were hostile to the zoot suiters, associating them with criminality. The *\_Herald-Express\_* explicitly printed instructions on how to "de-zoot," as follows: "Grab a zooter. Take off his pants and frock coat and tear them up or burn them. Trim the 'Argentine ducktail' that goes with the screwy costume." The police and FBI claimed to have reports of wives of sailors being robbed and raped by zoot suiters; the unfounded rumors would churn up hostility and keep the riots going. The press continued to claim that it was the suit itself that was the problem, not any racial hostility, which is to attribute a lot of power to some fancy clothes. The suit is still around; Cab Calloway wore one for his

turn in The Blues Brothers. A form of zoot suit was adopted by young people all around the world, causing international fretting among the elders, who saw the zoot suit as part of the secret weapons the west was deploying against youth, weapons such as "jitterbugging, boogie-woogie, Bikiniism," according to one Romanian commentator. Peiss's engaging book is best when it examines those who examined the zoot suit and tried to put some higher sociological meaning to it, and simply failed or came to contradictory conclusions. I think the best understanding that one can come to is that the younger generation dresses funny and it bothers the older generation. The older generation ought to have the maturity to laugh it off, but then that would break a cycle that is stable and enjoyed at some level by both sides. The next Goth you see, the next kid with a belt around his knees - smile and just be glad the get-up isn't an excuse for riots.

I came across this book at the library and it sparked interest because I have always been interested in chicano culture. This book is short and sweet as well as very entertaining. The author did an outstanding job in her research and there are some great pictures to go along with the story. This book has six chapters all very detailed from the origins of the zoot suit, the LA riot, and the spread of the style. The afterword is great as well as it indulges into the mystic and any last thoughts on the subject. This book explores a lot and if you are interested in black or chicano history then this book is a must read.

This book is on the Rorotoko list. Professor Peiss's interview on "Zoot Suit" ran as the Rorotoko Cover Feature on August 29, 2011 (and can be read in the Rorotoko archive).

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