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“A General Separation of Colored and White”: The WWII Riots, Military Segregation and Racism(s) Beyond the White/Non-White Binary

ABSTRACT

This article uses archival research to explore important differences in the discursive and institutional positioning of Mexican American and African American men during World War II. Through the focal point of the riots which erupted in Los Angeles and other major cities in the summer of 1943, I examine the ways in which black and Mexican ‘rioters’ were imagined in official and popular discourses. Though both groups of youth were often constructed as deviant and subversive, there were also divergences in the ways in which their supposed racial difference was discursively configured. I also consider the experiences of each group in the WWII military, a subject that has received little attention in previous work on the riots. Though both groups were subject to discrimination and brutality on the home front, only African Americans were segregated in the military - a fact that profoundly influenced the 1943 riots. Examining the very different conditions under which these men served, as well as the distinct ways in which their presence within the military and on the home front was interpreted and given meaning by press, law enforcement and military officials helps to illuminate the uneven and complex workings of racism in America, disrupting the common conceptualization of a definitive white/nonwhite color line.

Keywords: African Americans, Mexican Americans, military, segregation, racism, riots

Introduction

When they heard about the riots taking place in Detroit, soldiers from the 543rd Quartermaster’s Negro Battalion at Fort Custer, Michigan, broke into a warehouse and

loaded 178 rifles and a large quantity of ammunition onto several army trucks.

According to the field agent of the Detroit office for the FBI, the soldiers were stopped by a sentry as they proceeded down a road “in the general direction of Detroit.” “The assumption,” the agent wrote, “was that they were on their way to Detroit to assist other Negroes there.” Ten of the men were taken into custody to await court-martial for mutiny.¹

The riots in Detroit were the most deadly among a series of riots that punctured the American social landscape during the war. Between 1942 and 1944, there is record of at least eighteen incidents of violent unrest in American cities and towns (Schaich June, 1975: 386). The summer of 1943 was particularly incendiary, with deadly rioting breaking out in Harlem and Beaumont, Texas, as well as Detroit. While nearly all of the events classed as “race riots” during the war involved the targeting of or protest from African Americans, there was one notable and now notorious exception. Several weeks before Detroit burned, white servicemen stationed in southern California descended upon Los Angeles to “hunt” Mexicans.

For months, sensationalized media coverage of the supposed criminality and sexual depravity of zoot suiters or *pachucos* - Mexican-American youth who had adopted the zoot suit fashion first popularized by black youth in Harlem - stoked outrage in the city. It also intensified the sense of self-righteous fury among the servicemen that regularly clashed with Mexican youths living in neighborhoods near the naval base. In June, servicemen stormed Mexican neighborhoods and downtown Los Angeles looking for zoot suiters. They pulled Mexican, and some African American, boys and men out of streetcars, cinemas and bars to beat them and strip them of their zoot suits, if the victim was even wearing one. Many of those attacked were adolescents, a fact one young Mexican American named Rudy Sanchez bitterly

denounced in a letter he wrote shortly after the riots: “When the sailors of the United States of America beat up twelve and thirteen year old kids of the same Country just because their [sic] Mexicans, you can imagine how brave they must be.”² The worst injury of the riots was inflicted on a black defense worker (not wearing a zoot suit) by a large mob of servicemen who gouged his eye out with a knife.³

For many observers of the events at the time, as well as more recent scholars, the targeting of Mexicans in the Los Angeles riots was a brutal demonstration of the commonalities in the social positioning of blacks and Mexicans. The FBI's Los Angeles field agent noted disapprovingly in his report on the events that “communists” and those with “radical connections” “consistently linked Negroes and Mexicans in their discussion of the riots.”⁴ It is undeniable that the Zoot Suit Riots reflect that there were important overlaps in the ways in which black and Mexican youth were policed, criminalized and contained, as well a marked resonance in the forms of cultural resistance they developed in the face of these forces, both in Los Angeles and elsewhere (Alvarez 2008, Alvarez and Widener 2008, Daniels Spring, 1997). Stuart Cosgrove thus comments that the summer’s riots “sharply revealed a polarization between two youth groups within wartime society: the gangs of predominantly black and Mexican youths who were at the forefront of the zoot-suit subculture, and the predominantly white American servicemen” (1984: 80). Luis Alvarez argues that “the riots provided a national stage on which nonwhites and whites...sparred over who was included equally in the national polity” (2008: 231).

Yet, events in Los Angeles transpired in a manner that differed, conspicuously, from the other riots of 1943. The riots in Detroit were devastating. Thirty-one people, twenty-five of them black, were killed in rioting that lasted several days; police killed seventeen of the black victims. There were two million dollars in

property losses (Sitkoff 1971: 674). In the riots that occurred in Harlem a few weeks later, five people were killed and five million dollars of property damage sustained (Swan 1971-72: 88). By contrast, in Los Angeles, there was little loss of property and no fatalities. Unlike in Detroit, where the original conflict between individuals widened to include large parts of both the black and white populace, in Los Angeles the wider Mexican community did not engage with the white rioters. Nor did they destroy white-owned property as did black rioters in Harlem. Unlike in Harlem or Detroit, the police did not kill anyone.

These differences reflect, in part, that while Mexicans were subject to economic exploitation and social degradations, conditions which were frequently understood in racial terms by white Americans, the garrote of segregation, tightened through both social and institutional practices was applied to African Americans in a singular manner –a manner which had become intolerable in 1943, fomenting widespread resistance. While the brutality to which black and Mexican youth were often subject, whether during riots or in quotidian interactions with the police, highlights the similarity of their experiences, the desperate actions of the ill-fated Fort Custer soldiers draw attention to critical ways in which they fundamentally diverged. The soldiers’ attempt to bring arms to the besieged black people of Detroit offers a poignant illustration of the unbearable pressure of confinement in the “Quartermaster’s Negro Battalion,” as well the intensity of the spatial and social sequestration enforced upon African Americans in Detroit and other US cities. Their actions remind us that the binary division perceived between black and Mexican zoot suited youth and white servicemen obscures the fact that thousands of black and Mexican American youth served in the military. The soldiers’ ill-fated mutiny also illustrates that the common conceptual bifurcation made between nonwhites and

whites more generally obscures the critical fact that African Americans were segregated in the American military and Mexican Americans were not.

There is a growing literature on the Mexican American military experience in World War II (Rivas-Rodriguez 2005, Rivas-Rodriguez and Olguin 2014), but this experience has been largely unexamined in the recent literature on the Zoot Suit Riots. I argue that examining the ways that black and Mexican men were respectively marked or unmarked and rendered conspicuous or invisible within the ranks of the military, as well as within popular and official discourses of the riots, is fundamental to understanding the social positioning of both groups within this period. More broadly, rather than a social landscape split along a broad chasm between white and non-white, this examination also helps to illuminate a terrain that is jagged and multidimensional, relatively tractable along some lines and sharply unyielding in others.

Conceptualizing Multiple Racisms

Many scholars have articulated the need for nuanced studies of racism in multiethnic contexts, appreciating the fact, as John Solomos and Les Back put it, that there is no single racism but “distinct racisms that are constructed and reconstructed through time and space” (1996: 219). In the context of the United States, Claire Jean Kim writes that “differential racialization processes have generated a complex structure of multiple group positions in American society,” in which non-European groups have been “racialized...*differently from and in relation to one another*”(2004: 345). However, while the inadequacy of the traditional black and white binary understanding of race has been thoroughly established, much theorizing replaces one binary for another, presuming a definitive ontological and conceptual divide between

Whiteness and of-Colorness, whose contours are shored up through the meta-force of white supremacy. There is thus often a tension in reconciling the resonance and relationality of different racisms with their simultaneous unequivalence in form, root and consequence. Inherent in the white/non-white or white/people of color binary is the assumption, even if this remains implicit, that both experiences of white racism and racialized oppression are generalizable.

A number of scholars have contended that within the broadly bifurcated view of privileged whites and denigrated racial others, the particularities of anti-black racism, as well as its particular relationship to American history, get lost (Fields 2003, Sexton 2010). David Hollinger argues that “the monolithic character of white racism has been so taken for granted that white racism has been assigned the...capacity to define equally whatever it touched,” casting the African American inheritance of a “multi-century legacy of group-specific enslavement and hypodescent racialization” as just one chapter among others in the long, amorphous story of white supremacy (2009:47). Yet, as Loic Wacquant insists, the conception of (black) race that Americans invented in the “momentous collision of freedom and slavery,” has been “virtually unique in the world for its rigidity and consequentiality” (2001: 117).

Eschewing the “usual refrain to get beyond the Black-and-white framework that tends to lump racisms and minimize anti-Black racism,” Moon Kie Jung and Yaejoon Kwon have recently called for a sociology which “specif[ies] the various racisms that are related but non-equivalent and chart the linkages between them” (2013: 935). In the same spirit, I suggest that in order to understand the complex historical structure of the multiply-racialized American landscape, it is necessary to chart divergences as well as linkages and to map the nuances and particularities that exist within convergences.

To this end, I have analyzed a number of archival materials, to comparatively examine the discursive and institutional positioning of black and Mexican men as servicemen and agents of unrest within military and urban landscapes. While, as noted, violent unrest erupted throughout the early war years, here I focus on the Los Angeles riots, as a critical moment in historical racialization of Mexican Americans, alongside the most severe incidents of rioting which also took place in the summer of 1943 – in Detroit, Beaumont, and Harlem. The FBI’s 1943 *Survey of Racial Conditions*, an exhaustive report compiled from the contributions of fifty-six field units across the country, includes accounts of each of the riots and appraisals of the role of black and Mexican men within them. Internal memos and reports of the wartime military help to illuminate the ways in which the institution’s racial order – and disorder- were both managed and imagined. To gain insight into popular understandings of the riots, I consider the coverage of the summer’s riots in the Los Angeles and national press. Finally, where possible I draw upon the letters, published accounts and oral histories of servicemen as well as observers and participants in the riots.

These documents provide evidence of how racial boundaries were enforced by institutions and perceived by individuals in both urban and military spaces. Furthermore, however, as Atkinson and Coffey note, such documents are not “transparent representations” of social realities, but rather “construct particular kinds of representations” (Atkinson and Coffey 2011: 79). As such, they are themselves sites in which racial meanings were produced. Through a thematic analysis of these documents, I have traced the discursive patterning of difference and the recurrent themes of separation and inclusion, and martial and subversive masculinities through which black and Mexican men were racially inscribed.

The Riots and the Discursive Configuration of Difference

As a number of scholars have noted, sexual deviancy was key among the threats pachucos were perceived to pose to public order in Los Angeles. Some scholars have argued that this sexual threat was imagined to endanger both the sanctity of both femininity and whiteness itself. Eduardo Obregon Pagán, for example, writes that reports of zoot suiters harassing the wives or girlfriends of servicemen stirred the “wrath of all white Los Angeles over an imagined assault on white womanhood.” He goes on to explicitly liken the situation to the Southern context: “[t]he protection of white womanhood from the black rapist (in this case, brown) was a familiar trope that both male and female whites evoked to justify violence against...racialized men” (2003:159). Similarly, Luis Alvarez writes that the servicemen’s interrelated sense of whiteness and masculinity depended upon “protecting the presumed virtuosity of their white mothers, wives, girlfriends and sisters from the vulgar, hypersexual, and violent threats posed by nonwhite youths” (2008:160).

Yet within the broad contours of the racial trope of sexual danger, it is important to remember that “racialized men” did not have a single, general relationship to “white womanhood,” either legally or ideologically. In the country’s anti-miscegenation law, Mexican men and white women everywhere could legally marry and in the majority of states, including California, black men and white women could not (Murray 1997). Furthermore, while Mexicans in the Southwest were disproportionately subject to lynching and mob violence in the 19th and early 20th centuries, it was rarely justified through claims of sexual deviance (Carrigan and

Webb 2004: 41, 42) -- there was no equivalent to the “black beast” discourse wielded against black men in the South.

While the mainstream press coverage of the Los Angeles riots and the reports of the FBI field agents in Los Angeles, Beaumont and Detroit exhibit parallels in their constructions of the menacing criminality of Mexican or black youths, there is also a subtle but important distinction in the ways whiteness is inscribed (or not) upon those with whom these youth are in conflict. Generally speaking, the press accounts in Los Angeles and elsewhere described, for example “women relatives of servicemen,” “innocent women,” and “wives” and “girlfriends” of sailors as being the victims of zoot suiter attacks (Los Angeles Times 1943a: A1; Los Angeles Examiner 1943: 9; Long Beach 1943: 8; New York Times 1943a: 23, 1943: 15), rather than “white women” as such, a point which, as we will see, stands in distinction to reports on alleged attacks involving African American suspects. Similarly, in an example of private discourse, a serviceman named Johnny wrote to prominent Mexican American attorney Manuel Ruiz, with whom he was personally acquainted, angrily condemning “these goddamn Mexican punks,” but making no mention of the race of their supposed victims. He wrote: “I for one would kill any of them that hurt any body I know, soldiers or any of the women I know in L.A.”⁵ Again the victims’ relevance is not couched in their whiteness but in their ties of affection to the servicemen.

This is not to suggest that their whiteness or that of their girlfriends was wholly irrelevant to the servicemen and onlookers of the riots or to the press and law enforcement which described the events; but the marking out the pachucos’ supposed deviance is not the same thing as explicitly delineating whiteness as a salient point of self-reference or a sacred possession to be defended. Such discrepancies as whether the whiteness of these individuals was discussed openly or never mentioned provide

important clues about the social boundaries that were perceived and enforced. While every boundary simultaneously marks an inside and an outside, a Self and an Other, these two entities are not necessarily conceived or expressed in symmetrical terms. French sociologist Colette Guillaumin addresses this imbalance, arguing that racisms arising in egalitarian societies are often predominately “altero-referential”: “A fundamental trait of such a system is the occultation of the Self, of which people have no spontaneous awareness; there is no sense of belonging to a specific group, so the group itself always remains outside the frame of reference, is never referred to as a group” (1995: 50). An “obsession with the Other,” she notes, “remains [the] dominant characteristic” of such racisms (51-52). In the documents considered here, the depraved sexuality and racial otherness of the pachuco has been constructed against a social and moral order in which whiteness remains “always outside the frame of reference.”

Whiteness: Invisible and Emergent

In this regard, it is useful to compare how “Negro” was configured with relation to whiteness in different discourses of the riots. Where whiteness is silently normative and unmarked in the depiction of Mexican difference, in the marking of black difference, it emerges and solidifies. In Beaumont, after the white mob looted the black section of town in response to an alleged rape, newspaper coverage around the country consistently racially identified *both* the alleged victim and the accused. The *Los Angeles Times*, for example, reported that the riots started when a “white woman, mother of three children and wife of a warplant worker, reported that she had been attacked by a Negro” (“Martial Law Invoked” 1943: A). The account filed by the Houston field office in the FBI’s *Racial Conditions* report also explicitly identifies

all actors in the Beaumont drama as “whites” or “Negroes”. The agent describes an alleged attack on a 19 year-old telephone operator. In the two paragraphs describing the event, the young woman is referred to four times as “the white girl” and only once as “the girl.”⁶

Similarly, in the 50-page section of the report discussing “racial conditions” in Detroit and the riots there, whites and Negroes are consistently differentiated throughout. Discussions of conflicts in schools, residential areas, workplaces and so on are all detailed with the racial designation of participants. It is instructive to compare an excerpt from the FBI’s report discussing the Detroit riots with one from the Los Angeles riots. The excerpt submitted by the Detroit Field Officer reads:

The altercation was either between a single white and several Negroes or between a single Negro and several whites...It appears that immediately after the argument began, white people, including sailors, came to the rescue of those whites already engaged, while Negroes assisted their brethren... the word spread like wildfire across the bridge to Belle Isle and many incidents occurred there of a riotous nature. At this point, it should be brought out that reports were received of a group of Negroes on June 20, 1943, snatching lunches from white women and knocking them down. White persons who allegedly attempted to assist these women are said to have been deliberately

attacked by other Negroes. It was originally suggested that this was possibly the origin of the trouble.⁷

The report submitted by the Los Angeles Field Division on “Mexican Youth Gangs (‘Zoot Suiters’)” reads:

During the week ending May 25, 1943, three bands of Mexican youths attacked, beat up and stripped four people in the metropolitan area of Los Angeles. These four were civilians. Two had parked their automobile for a few minutes and were soon surrounded by eight Mexicans who attacked them when they got out of the car and cut them with razors...During May other cases were reported of wives of Navy men being robbed and raped by “zoot suiters” and there were also reports of alleged unprovoked attacks by these “zoot suiters” on lone servicemen. Two servicemen were in hospitals near death, and several others were hospitalized as a result of the attacks.⁸

In the Los Angeles report, there are no “white” people. While “Mexicans” are identified, those with whom they clash are boys, wives, and servicemen and civilians. In neither the newspapers crowing about the servicemen’s “mopping up operations” nor the confidential probes of the Bureau’s Los Angeles field agent, nor indeed the entirely private and candidly angry letter from Ruiz’s friend, Johnny, was whiteness presented as part of the narrative. It was apparently not a “fact” perceived to shape

the picture of events, though the alterity of the Mexican youth was drawn into sharp focus, one way or another, in both types of documents. In Detroit, on the other hand, whiteness is boldly delineated throughout the fifty pages focused on that city in its detailed descriptions of interactions between “white people, including sailors” and “white persons,” “single whites” and “several whites” and “Negros”.

Tellingly, one instance in which the press coverage of the Los Angeles riots explicitly racially identifies a victim as white involves black assailants. The *Daily News* article titled “Near Martial Law in LA Riot Zones” reports a number of arrests and clashes involving “sailors,” “soldiers,” “servicemen” and zoot suit “gangs” and “hoodlums.” None of the participants, however, are racially identified, except in the description of “twelve Negroes [who] ambushed a 17-year-old white high school student” (1943: 1). The high-school student’s designation as “white” seems to become salient in the context of his attack by black assailants. The examples here suggest that the actors’ whiteness became relevant in their interactions with black actors. One imagines that if the woman who reported being attacked by the unnamed “Negro” in the Beaumont coverage was in the paper for another reason, for giving blood to the Red Cross for example, she would just be a “mother of three” or the “wife of warplant worker.” Just as the high-school student becomes a “white high-school student” when attacked by “twelve Negroes”, in the discussion of the alleged rape, she becomes not a woman but a “white woman.” The meticulous discursive marking of not only blackness but whiteness in relation to it, reflects Fay Harrison’s insight that the though “whiteness and blackness have not had fixed meanings and boundaries, the opposition between them has provided the stabilizing backbone for the United States’ racialized social body” (1995: 59). Indeed, just as “white” and “black” were discursively constructed as oppositional and mutually exclusive entities, black people

were marked and separated with equal care and precision from ‘whites’ in all aspects of military life.

“All races other than Negro”

While traditionally participation in the military was seen to transform foreigners into Americans, in important ways, both practically and ideologically, military service only emphasized black people as a problematic, alien and potentially explosive element within the social body. Capturing the military’s critical fault line of racial organization, a 1940 memo from an Army assistant chief of staff stated that “trainees of all races other than negro will be assigned [to military units] the same as white trainees” cited in (cited in Guglielmo 2010: 66). The perception of racial difference, whether ascribed socially or legally, in itself did not determine whether a group would be subject to special procedures. Rather such procedures were shaped, like the very perception of racial difference itself, by practical, and often geopolitical, concerns and specific historical conditions. Under various rationales, specific units were created for some members of some groups, for example Puerto Ricans, Filipinos, Chinese and Japanese, but other members of these groups served within the mainstream body of the military. Critically, African Americans were the only population deemed to require total segregation (Bielakowski 2013:183). As the March on Washington Movement put it: “The instant he puts on the uniform of his country, the Negro becomes a deadly plague carrier, to be quarantined, isolated at all costs from his white comrades in arms” (Macdonald and Macdonald 1943: 9).

Like the so-called one-drop rule uniquely applied to define who was black and who was not for much of the 20th century, as well as Jim Crow segregation, residential hyper-segregation, and more recently mass incarceration, in the first half of

the 20th century, the military became another site in which the boundary setting African Americans “apart from all others” was reinvented and in which the “rigidity and consequentiality” of anti-black racism can be traced. Though ultimately proving less enduring than other forms of segregation, military segregation was of critical cultural and political significance – a fact reflected in the vehemence of black responses to it.

Drawing on the analysis of Rogers Smith, Evelyn Nakano Glenn highlights “martial” virtue as a critical component in the “mutually constituted” ideologies of race and gender from which the ideal of American citizenship was historically constructed. The ability to participate in the military was a quality that defined the citizen through differentiation from the “‘noncitizen’ (the alien, the slave, the woman), who lacked...the qualities needed to exercise citizenship” (Nakano Glenn 2002: 19-20). As we shall see, granted different opportunities of participation, black and Mexican masculinity were mapped onto this ideal of martial citizenship in distinct ways.

The WWII Military’s Black Quarantine

“The Army accepts no doctrine of racial superiority or inferiority,” announced a 1944 pamphlet of the Armed Services. It continued

It may seem inconsistent, therefore, that there is nevertheless a general separation of colored and white units on duty. It is important to understand that separate organization is a matter of practical military expediency and not an endorsement of beliefs in racial distinction.

There must be as little friction within the Army as possible.⁹

Such pronouncements mark a distinct ideological shift from the First World War. After World War I, the America War College's study to assess the role of black men in the military was couched in comparisons of white and negro cranial cavities and took as a foundational fact that in evolutionary terms "the American negro has not progressed as far as the other sub-species of the human family" (1925: 4). By the Second World War while segregation stayed in place, its rationale, at least publicly, had to change. Though presented as the most conducive arrangement for efficiency and social wellbeing, in practice, black separation was achieved only through enormous logistical strain and produced rancorous discord.

To begin with, the sequestration of a million individuals, the maintenance of separate facilities for their housing, feeding, training and bodily waste was a monumental undertaking. "The most ingenious planning, the most complicated and voluminous quantities of paper-work, the tireless efforts of thousands of officers," the March on Washington observed, "are devoted to the great task of keeping apart the races" (Macdonald and Macdonald 1943: 9). The thoroughness with which segregation was undertaken often resulted in absurdities. One black soldier stationed at Camp Barkeley in Texas found that while German prisoners of war could share the "white" latrines with the rest of the American soldiers, he was obliged to use specially designated "colored" latrines (McGuire 1993:51). Clearly, the claim that segregation did not endorse beliefs in racial distinction were farcical. By defining blacks as a distinct population, and then rigorously enforcing the boundaries of that distinction, the military's "quarantine" had the effect of reproducing and exaggerating the very conditions for social "friction" it purportedly held in check, in essence continually

created the very “Negro problem” it purported to manage. The effects of these conditions, as I will discuss below, had far reaching impacts, both within and outside of the military.

“Classed as ‘White’”: Mexicans in the Military

In the 1942 Spring issue of the Southern California student paper, *Mexican Voice*, editor Manuel de la Raza discussed the positive impact the war was having on the status of Mexicans, many of them “fellows who had never felt American.” These young men, he noted, had lived in towns in which the local swimming pool had a day reserved for “Mexicans” and in which they were expected to sit on one side of the movie theatre. “[The war],” he wrote, “has given many of our shy...inferior feeling Americans of Mexican descent a chance to learn something, a chance to fit into the scheme of things, a chance to belong.” He continued: “The draft boards and war have also helped in that those of Mexican descent are classed as ‘white.’ In most cases those of Mexican descent had never thought of themselves as ‘white’” (1942: 8). In contrast to African American servicemen, who were continually marked and measured, it is impossible to assess exactly how many men of Mexican descent served in the American military as they were not even enumerated as a population within it.

The historical origins of Mexicans’ racial classification in the United States, the extent to which, and in what contexts, this classification had practical social currency (if any), and how it shaped Mexicans’ political responses to racism are subjects that have been frequently explored by scholars in the past two decades (Foley 2010, Gross 2006-2007, Martinez 2000, Olivas 2006). Insisting upon Mexicans’ membership in the “Caucasian” race became a political strategy for some, especially middle class

activists, often involving a conscious distancing from African Americans (Foley 1997). However, as Laura Pulido and Manuel Pastor have recently emphasized, this is only one part of a bigger, complicated picture in which many Mexicans could not or did not attempt to define themselves in such terms (2013: 312). The fact that De La Raza commented that most of the Mexicans he knew had never thought of themselves as “white” gives weight to this assertion. Even for De la Raza, the significance of being classed “as ‘white’” is not, seemingly, that it entailed privilege or racial superiority but precisely that it signified being treated like everyone else. Neither the structural implications nor subjective experience of Mexicans’ white classification in the military easily fits into the recurrent historical/sociological themes of a once-racialized minority “becoming white” or “claiming whiteness.”

It is important to remember that while their classification as “white” appeared beneficial to de la Raza and others, Mexicans’ integration in the armed forces was not entirely attributable to this classification because, as noted, the military was not segregated on a white and non-white basis. Furthermore, as Cybelle Fox and Thomas Guglielmo argue, the history of the Mexican-white boundary illustrates that “blurred and bright racial boundaries can coexist and persist” and that such indeterminacy is not necessarily a transitory stage “on the way to something else.” Rather than being drawn inexorably to a permanent position on one side or the other of the white/not-white divide, “Mexicans ‘belonged’ simultaneously to the white and nonwhite categories” and were subject to social forces that pushed in both “blurred and bright directions” (2012: 369). Mexicans’ unmarked integration in the military perhaps better illustrates the multivalence of their racial position than its gravitation toward or seduction by whiteness.

“Complete Americans”: Mexican Incorporation in the Armed Forces

It is clear that Mexican integration in the military did not erase inequality on the home front during or after the war. “We are at war... We are fighting a war so that racial prejudice and intolerance may end,” the Consul General of the Mexican embassy in San Antonio wrote to a judge in Mason County, Texas, in 1942. Noting that “young men both Mexicans by birth and Americans by birth of Mexican parentage are wearing this country’s uniform,” the Consul asserted that it was “confusing, unhealthy and beyond understanding why these men’s families and countrymen are denied a cup of coffee... solely on the grounds of their nationality in restaurants such as King’s Café in Mason, Texas.”¹⁰ The Mexican Ambassador, Francisco Castillo Najera, forwarded a litany of such letters to the Office of Inter-American Affairs during the war. Such letters reveal an obvious similarity in civilian patterns of segregation imposed upon blacks and Mexicans in certain parts of the United States – indeed a number of the complaints Najera forwarded centered on individuals of Mexican descent being told that they would only receive service in the “Colored” section of various establishments.

Yet while the Army had adopted, as William H. Hastie, Civilian Aide to the Secretary of War, put it “the mores of the South” in their management of black troops, thus subjecting many to a harsher segregation than they had ever known, military service often afforded Mexicans an escape from the confines of segregation in which they had grown up.¹¹ In the literature of the period, the relative equality of their participation in the military ranks was frequently discussed in pointed contrast to the discrimination Mexicans faced at home both before and after the war. In 1946, Ignacio Lopez, contrasted the Mexican position in the military with that in civilian life, stating: “Every Southwest community has in it young men, formerly ‘little’

Americans but who were able to act as complete Americans for the three to four years. They know what it is to be released from the minority burden. They find it a heavy one to be asked to pick up again” (Tuck 1946: ix). One Mexican American veteran later recalling his experiences put this more plainly: “In the service we were all equal. We were all Americans, but [we] turned into a Mexican as soon as we took our uniforms off.”¹²

It is important to note that the emphasis in these accounts seems to be on being accepted as Americans, rather than as white. While “Mexican” and “American” might have been mutually exclusive to some, this was not the case for many Mexican American servicemen. There is no indication that while participating as Americans in the military, Mexican servicemen attempted to consciously dissimulate their Mexican identity. To the contrary, Raul Morin, a veteran who later wrote an account of Mexican American experiences in the war, describes an expressive collective pride in being Mexican (1963).

In any case, the effects of military egalitarianism seem to have been mixed. Ambassador Najera also received a letter asking for help from a Mexican soldier serving unhappily in the US Army. Alvaro Guerrero wrote in 1945: “When we were at the front it didn’t seem to matter, whether we were a Mexican, Italian, Greek, etc., but coming back to camp...the prejudice is still there, stronger than ever.”¹³ Despite these limitations, however, the officially unmarked acceptance of Mexicans within the armed forces was meaningful in many ways, often for the men themselves, and also for the ways in which social and military relations involving them came to be interpreted.

A critical aspect in this regard is the participation of Mexican men in combat units, which enabled both a bond of camaraderie with their fellow combatants as well

as a symbolic claim to honorific blood sacrifice. While the Mexican contribution to the American war effort has often been ignored or forgotten in popular memory, the achievements of individual soldiers of Mexican descent during the war did not go unrecognized. In her 1948 work on Mexican American youth in Los Angeles, Beatrice Griffith pointed to Mexican men's participation in combat units to present a positive image of Mexican masculinity: "The war gave much to the Mexican American soldier. Here he was judged as a man and a fighter...[and] earned the respect that all men give to brave fighters" (1948: 265). She cited the comments of General JM Wainwright, who led a large number of Mexican American soldiers in the Philippines: "Almost every unit in the United States army included Mexican American soldiers and they served well ...Anyone would be proud to have served in the same army with these men" (257). Wainwright's sentiment was confirmed in the fact that Mexican Americans received more decorations and Medals of Honor proportionately than any other ethnic group (Rivas-Rodriguez 2005: xvii).¹⁴ The violence central to the pachuco figure's menacing otherness is diametrically refashioned here into the essential quality of patriotic Mexican American manhood, a masculinity which emphasizes Mexican unity within, rather than exclusion from, American society.

Nightsticks and Pistols: The Black Serviceman as an Agent of Disorder

Black servicemen's unique quarantine within the military was saturated with contradictory ideological interpretations. The racial claims of the Army War College two decades previously that black men were prone to panic, cowardly, and inherently subservient were again put forward at the end of the Second World War in a report by the top commanders of the 92nd Division (1925:16). The report asserted that the black

officer failed to make “an aggressive troop leader” because he was the “by-product” of a race into which “servility” had been “bred...for generations” (Converse III et al. 1997: 106). Coexisting alongside the “Army’s stereotype of the Negro...[as] fearful, unreliable and lacking in the manly virtues of a warrior,” Lawrence D. Reddick observed in 1949, was the “apparently contradictory apprehension that the experience of handling firearms and of engaging in battle equips Negroes to achieve equality in America by force” (1949: 12). In either case, in such discourse black men in uniform deviated from the self-reliant, independent ideal of masculine citizenship, either in their unmanly docility or degenerate will to subversion.

Perhaps the most critical aspect of the military’s differentiation of black troops was that the vast majority of them were used as laborers; at the end of 1943, only about 20% of black men in the Army were enlisted in combat units (Lee 2004: 406). Furthermore for the majority of the war, military officials were reluctant to send African American troops overseas, in marked contrast to other specialized units, notably those of erstwhile “enemy alien” Japanese Americans, who were deployed to fight overseas (Takaki 2000). The uneasiness surrounding African American men as wielders of legitimate state violence was reinforced by the frequency with which they became targets of both official and extralegal violence themselves. As in the aftermath of the First World War in which nineteen black servicemen were lynched, many of them in uniform at the time (Mikkelsen 2007), black men in service during the Second World War, continued to face brutality from white civilians and civilian and military law enforcement. In a particularly disturbing incident, the body of Private Felix Hall was found hanging from a tree with his arms bound behind his back in a wood near Fort Benning, Georgia, in 1941 (Lee 2004:349, Macdonald and

Macdonald 1943:2).

As the war continued, there was a marked shift in black soldiers' response to such violence and the more quotidian humiliation of their segregated service. Ulysses Lee notes that in 1943, instances of disorder began to involve larger numbers of troops and that black troops were now increasingly likely to be the aggressors in such incidents (2004: 366). In response to reports of growing tension, the Secretary of War created an Advisory Committee on Negro Troop Policies to investigate. Their report reveals the extent of the problem:

Disaffection among Negro soldiers continues to constitute an immediately serious problem. In recent weeks there have been riots of a racial character at Camp Van Dorn, Mississippi; Camp Steward, Georgia; March Field, California; Fort Bliss, Texas; Camp Breckenridge, Kentucky; and at San Luis Obispo, California. At many other stations there is a smoldering unrest which is quite likely to erupt at any time.¹⁵

As illustrated in the FBI's report of the mutinous men at Fort Custer stockpiling arms to take to Detroit with which we began, the presence of black servicemen permeated civilian riots, both physically and discursively. Warren Schaich notes that black soldiers "clashed violently" with white military police, white police, white civilians, or some combination of the three in eleven of the eighteen incidents of unrest that occurred during the war (1975: 385). Descriptions of black servicemen as existing or potential agents of disorder are included in the reports of FBI agents from all parts of the country, who carefully recorded the many actual incidents of violence as well as indications of dangerous "feelings" and "attitudes" among black

civilians and servicemen. A report from Chicago observed that a speaker at a Conference on Racial Problems claimed, “Negro soldiers were ready to take their guns and ‘clean up’ the South.”¹⁶ In Vallejo, California, after hundreds of black sailors repeatedly clashed with white sailors and marines in December 1942, an informant described “an increasing feeling of bitterness among Negro enlisted personnel,” and, ominously, the sentiment among them that “they would not tolerate mistreatment when released from active duty.”¹⁷

One of the more dramatic incidents in which dissatisfaction with both civilian and military injustice bled into each other were the riots in Harlem, sparked by a conflict between a black soldier and a white police officer who was attempting to arrest a black woman. The (false) rumor quickly spread that the policeman had killed the soldier as he protected the woman and, furthermore, that the policeman had shot him in the back (Swan 1971-72: 87). Having witnessed the riots as a 19-year-old, James Baldwin described this latter detail as an “instantaneous and revealing invention,” which registered with the people of Harlem because it “expressed and corroborated their hates and fears so perfectly” (1984: 110). The fabricated image of a white policeman shooting a black soldier in the back reflected the hard reality that segregation in the military and in civilian life compounded each other, intensely embittering civilians and servicemen alike and binding them together politically. This bond is vividly illustrated in the New York FBI agent’s report that “300 negro civilians and soldiers gathered and demonstrated” and that “[s]hortly thereafter approximately 200 negro soldiers and sailors also demonstrated” in front of the Harlem police station.¹⁸

Even while black servicemen did not figure as primary participants in the Los Angeles riots, a series of confidential memos, written by the area’s senior naval patrol

officer, Clarence Fogg, reveal how overlapping anxieties about restless black servicemen and unruly black civilians permeated at least one military official's reading of the riots. In the aftermath of the events, the Navy command in Southern California met with local law enforcement officials to begin work on contingency plans to prevent further disruptions. Despite the fact that the June riots primarily involved white servicemen and Mexican youth, the plans focused heavily on the "Negro Problem." In two reports issued in July and October, Fogg warned the Navy command of the potential dangers of mutiny among "colored personnel" and rioting among black civilians, the latter, he claimed, the target of an "aggressive campaign sponsored by local, state and national representatives of the negro race... founded upon a planned policy of agitation designed to promote unrest and dis-satisfaction."¹⁹

Indicating the severity of the perceived threat, Fogg wrote:

the Shore Patrol teamed with the Army Military Policeman, will be necessarily injected into any disorderly situation that arises. It is submitted that disorderly colored service personnel, inclined to riot, will not have the same respect for a night stick as for a pistol. (cited in Mazon 1976: 192)

The figures of the black serviceman, "inclined to riot" and the "negro hoodlum" form an aggregate menace, each magnifying the other's estrangement within the bodies of the military and city, each poised to incite disorder from the margin.

"Shoved off onto the Army": The Disappearing of the Mexican American Serviceman

Apparently responding to Hoover's request for information on the matter, the Los Angeles field agent submitted a brief report on why "members of the so-called 'Pachucos' had not been inducted into the military service." The agent stated that while newspapers had reported that they were being excluded from service because of their criminal records, the officials he consulted stressed physical defects like tuberculosis and "low mental conditions." While the medical officers at the city's largest induction station said that they did not feel Mexicans were rejected at a higher rate than other nationalities, other informants disagreed. One of them stated that "most of these Mexican youths are not fit material for the army because of physical disabilities or criminal records" and that they constituted "a local social problem and not one to be shoved off on the army."²⁰

Though Mexican youth came under intense FBI scrutiny as zoot suited deviants and as potential targets of fascist propaganda, once in uniform, "shoved off onto the army," they essentially disappeared from the Bureau's gaze. In the numerous reports and memos filed by the FBI's Los Angeles field agent, in which the riots were probed as well as claims that fascist groups from Mexico were infiltrating and manipulating pachuco gangs, the Mexican American serviceman is notably absent. In one report on the riots, it is mentioned that one informant reported that Mexican and Negro servicemen on leave in the area did "not want to return to camp until this matter is entirely cleaned up."²¹ However, the agent did not comment further on this information, reflecting the resounding – and revealing – disinterest in the role of Mexican soldiers in any of the summer's unrest, or the impact of the events upon them in the FBI discourse and the riots discourse more widely.

There is very little discussion in the contemporary accounts, or more recent scholarship, on what role Mexican American servicemen, if any, played in the Los

Angeles riots, or how many of them were even present. According to Rudy Sanchez, at least one “former ‘zoot zuiter’[sic] (now a sailor)” came to warn the local youth in Sanchez’s neighborhood that 50 sailors, armed with “sticks, boards, clubs, rocks, and even guns” were on their way.²² In Texas, however, there were numerous incidents in which Mexican American servicemen actively rejected the practices of civilian segregation to which they were subject. In 1945, Macario Garcia, a sergeant in the Army who had been awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor for valor in combat, stopped for a cup of coffee in southeastern Texas. When the owner of the café he entered informed him that Mexicans were not served, Garcia angrily protested and another man beat him with a baseball bat. Two white sailors who were also in the restaurant came to Garcia’s aid as he was attacked (Amarillo Daily News 1945: p.12). Another WWII veteran, Alfredo “Fred” Castro, describes in an oral history interview going to a Texas restaurant with some of the other men from his base which also had a “No Mexicans” policy. Echoing incidents in which black soldiers destroyed restaurants in which they were refused service, Castro and his companions broke windows, dishes and mirrors and anything else “that could be broken.” Interestingly, in this case, Castro recalled that the military police chose to look the other way as the men destroyed the restaurant: “They said as long as we have the uniform on, we’re American citizens.”²³ Such a response represents quite a departure from the frequently violent tension that existed between black servicemen and the white military police.

Unlike the black soldier whose presence in every region of the country was probed and assessed for signs of discontent, restlessness, or strife, and though some Mexican servicemen violently protested segregation, the figure of the Mexican in uniform apparently never came to be viewed as a important source of potential

menace or disorder, or even as a necessary target of surveillance. Their integration within and dispersal throughout the armed forces foreclosed any possibility that Mexican soldiers would have either the ideological motivation or the practical means to engage in organized action against military authority. It is noteworthy that in both the stories described above, the Mexican American soldiers received the active support of their white counterparts and, in Castro's case, even the tacit approval of military authorities. Perhaps as they were not designated as a separate population within the military body, military officials did not perceive their challenge to civilian segregation as an attack on established military order. In contrast to the composite threat to order that black servicemen and black civilians were frequently seen to pose, incorporation in the military body rendered the Mexican American serviceman nearly invisible in popular and official interpretations of the riots, both overshadowed by and severed from the salient deviance of the figure of the pachuco.

Conclusion

The mobs of white men in uniform beating and stripping Mexican youth in front of cheering crowds and passive police during the Los Angeles riots violently demonstrated the limitations of Mexican Americans' Americanness. They may have been born in the United States, but aliens they remained. But if the savagery of the mob and the shrill defamation of the press could eject Mexicans from the sanctified social body, the glorified violence of warfare could draw them back in, ideologically and institutionally incorporating them, at least momentarily, as "complete Americans," officially unmarked, if not entirely equal.

On the other hand, if Mexicans could be treated formally "as 'white,'" or "other than Negro" or "Americans all," and if "whiteness" remained discursively

invisible in the shadows of imagined Mexican criminality, we have seen that in the war years, both discursive and institutional practice continually created “white” and “negro” as wholly separate and antithetical. This relationship was continually established in language and mirrored in the precision with which blackness was marked and separated in all aspects of military life. The limitations placed on their participation in state violence, and the often-violent resistance of both black civilians and servicemen to brutality, emphasized and institutionally reinforced blackness as threatening and subversive in the eyes of military officials and federal law enforcement.

The sharp inconstancy in the positioning of blacks and Mexicans in the military and wartime riots discourse – seemingly indistinguishable at some points and dramatically divergent at others – exemplifies Stuart Hall’s observation that “the history of different racisms cannot be written as a general history.” We cannot “[extrapolate] a common and universal structure to racism,” Hall insists, “which remains essentially the same, outside of its specific historical location” (1996: 337). The “historical locations” of anti-Mexican and anti-black racisms in the United States in 1943, though often overlapping and complexly interconnected, had been charted across centuries and continents. That Mexicans, frequently viewed as a deviant and inferior racial population, could be integrated into the Armed Forces, while blacks were segregated from the latrine to the blood bank reflects both the multiplicity of boundaries which have traversed the American landscape, as well as the ferocity with which the division around African Americans, created in the “momentous collision of freedom and slavery,” has since been reproduced and reinforced.

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¹ Detroit Field Division, *FBI's Racon*, p.139.

² Letter from Rudy Sanchez, June 6, 1943, box 1, folder 11, MO349.

³ Communication from Los Angeles Committee for American Unity to Governor's Special Committee on Los Angeles Emergency, June 11, 1943, p.10, box 15, folder 10, MO295, p. 3-4.

⁴ Los Angeles Field Division, *FBI's Racon*, p. 378.

⁵ Anonymous, "Unpublished Letter to Manuel Ruiz from Johnny," p. 3, box 1, folder 3, MO295.

⁶ Houston Field Division, *FBI's Racon*, 289-290.

⁷ Detroit Field Division, *FBI's Racon*, 136-137

⁸ Los Angeles Field Division, *FBI's Racon*, 377-378

⁹ War Department Pamphlet No. 20-6, Command of Negro Troops, 29 February 1944, *Blacks in the United States Armed Forces: Basic Documents*, p. 319.

¹⁰ Letter from Francisco Castillo Najera to Nelson Rockefeller, 16 December, 1942, box 5, folder 11, MO224, p. 1.

¹¹ Memorandum, Civilian Aide to the Secretary of War for Secretary of War, 22 September 1941, *Blacks in the Military: Essential Documents*, p. 112.

¹² Benny C. Martinez by Jackie Rapp, VOCES. Retrieved July 5, 2014.

<http://www.lib.utexas.edu/voces/template-stories>

[indiv.html?work_urn=urn%3Autlol%3Awwlatin.785&work_title=Martinez%2CBenny+C.\)](#)

¹³ Letter from Alvaro B. Guerrero to Francisco Najera, Mexican Embassy, Re: Discrimination against Soldiers of Mexican Descent, June 20, 1945, box 5, folder 12, MO224, p. 1.

¹⁴ Black soldiers, including those who served in combat, were excluded from the highest level of national valor awards -- not one African American was awarded a Congressional Medal of Honor during World War II (Converse et al. 1997). Black servicemen were not simply excluded from the honorific functions of military service but were also systematically dishonored: highly disproportionate numbers of black men received stigmatic "Section VIII" discharges which marked them as "unfit" for military service (McGuire 1993, p.145- 146).

¹⁵ Memorandum, Assistant Secretary of War John J. McCloy for chief of staff, 3 July 1943, subject: Negro troops, *Blacks in the Military, Essential Documents*, p.121.

¹⁶ Chicago Field Division, *FBI's Racon*, p. 97.

¹⁷ San Francisco Field Division, *FBI's Racon*, p. 395.

¹⁸ New York Field Division, *FBI's Racon*, p. 209.

¹⁹ Letter from Clarence H. Fogg, Senior Patrol Officer, Los Angeles, California to Comeleven, San Diego, California, Regarding Hoodlum Attacks on Service Personnel, and Related Negro Problems, Los Angeles, October 16, 1943, box 296, folder P8-5, RG181, pg. 1.

²⁰ Memorandum from Los Angeles Field Division for the Director Re: Mexican Youth Gangs, Aka "Zoot-Suiters" And "Pachucos", June 11, 1943, box 11, folder 8,

RGCP, p. 1.

²¹ Report Re: Mexican Gangs, Aka “Zoot Suiters” And Pachucos, 28 February, 1944, box 11, folder 7, RGCP, p. 19.

²² Letter from Rudy Sanchez, MO349.

²³ Alfredo “Fred” Castro by Erin Neck, VOCES. Retrieved July 5, 2014.

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