

# Summary and response



The Riddle of the Zoot: Malcolm Little and Black Cultural Politics During World War II” in *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* by Robin D. G. Kelley recounts the story of Malcolm X’s days before becoming an Islamic leader. The riddle of the Zoot suit is about determining whether the Zoot suit and other cultural habits of working class African Americans, like Malcolm X, during World War II had a hidden meaning. Zoot suits were coloured suits worn by working class African Americans during World War II at dances. The government and soldiers of the time felt that these suits were unpatriotic due to the fabric limitations and the fact the men wearing them were of military age, but obviously not serving in the armed forces. Malcolm X and his peers did not join the army because of the racial tensions between themselves and the whites. Whether or not these young African Americans were wearing these suits to be unpatriotic or to just have fun is the riddle of the Zoot.

The working class of African Americans’ plight consisted of low paying, dirty, and dead end jobs which did little to inspire hard work. Many did work hard, while some like Malcolm X turned to illegal methods to make money. Either way, working class or criminal, to go out and have fun in a Zoot suit, with conked hair gave young people a way to relax.

The use of Malcolm X to examine the riddle of Zoot by the author is an interesting choice. Whereas there are other famous Zoot suit wearers of the time who did not denounce their actions, Malcolm X scoffed as his days in a Zoot suit. Malcolm X seemed embarrassed by his days in a Zoot suit. This could be as the author suggested as shame because of his conversion to Islam, but in reality the opinion of this author is Malcolm X was ashamed of having fun when so much work needed to be done to advance his people. He

must of thought about all the wasted time spent in jail, dancing at Roseland, and wearing his Zoot suit in his youth. If Malcolm X would have converted to Islam earlier or started to spread his message sooner, history could have been changed. This author thinks that Malcolm X felt that he wasted his youth and mourned his lost time.

What Malcolm X did not realize is his Zoot suit days helped shape his views as much as his conversion to Islam. The injustices he saw, the injustices that forced him to turn to crime helped form his personality. These shameful memories helped Malcolm X become one of the greatest leaders of our time. During these times he was kid being shaped by his environment. Before learning the discipline of Islam, the Zoot suit was a subconscious way of rebelling against the racial inequality of the white government, the war, and poverty. The Zoot suit was a subtle way to have fun, while defying an unjust political system.

## References

Kelley, Robin D. G. "The Riddle of the Zoot: Malcolm Little and Black Cultural Politics During World War II." *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class*. New York: The Free Press, 1994.