

October 2019

The “Bates” Shop: Fishing for Primary Source Documents and Building Media Literacy Through Historical Documents

David Bates

Concordia University Chicago

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/mrj>

Recommended Citation

Bates, David (2019) "The “Bates” Shop: Fishing for Primary Source Documents and Building Media Literacy Through Historical Documents," *Michigan Reading Journal*: Vol. 52: Iss. 1, Article 10.
Available at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/mrj/vol52/iss1/10>

This work is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Michigan Reading Journal by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gvsu.edu.

The “Bates” Shop: Fishing for Primary Source Documents and Building Media Literacy Through Historical Documents¹

by David Bates, Ph.D.

In the wake of the 2016 election, media bias, so-called “fake news,” and the damaging effects of social media on the national discourse have become topics of interest for civically-minded Americans. Unfortunately, recent data suggest that many students are not adequately prepared to discern bias in the things they read. In 2015 and 2016, the Stanford History Education Group conducted a study of media literacy, examining middle school, high school, and college students in 12 states and analyzing nearly 8,000 student responses. Their findings are unsettling to say the least. “Our ‘digital natives’ may be able to flit between Facebook and Twitter while simultaneously uploading a selfie to Instagram,” the report notes, “but when it comes to evaluating information that flows through social media channels, they are easily duped” (Wineburg, McGrew, Breakstone, & Ortega, 2016, p. 4). The report’s lead author, Sam Wineburg, was particularly aghast that more than 80% of middle school students could not tell the difference between a news article and an advertisement, and called for a “massive education response” in civics and media literacy akin to the STEM education boom that followed the launch of Sputnik in 1957 (Wineburg, 2019).

Such a response will take a wholesale restructuring of our approach to civics education as Wineburg himself attests. But there are tasks you can do in your classroom to help build a greater sense of media literacy and civic responsibility among your students. These activities need not be particularly complex—often, they are quite simple. In this column, I will share three sources that recount the infamous Zoot Suit Riots of 1943. Each offers a distinct perspective on the riots and who was



David Bates, Ph.D.

responsible for them. By engaging your students in the simple task of reading these documents and then determining what really happened, you are not only enlisting their skills of analysis, close reading, and comparison, you are also forcing them to confront and reckon with the fact that sources—even “objective” news articles published in mainstream outlets—have a definite perspective, and often an identifiable bias. In so doing, you can cognitively prepare them for the difficult work of sorting good sources from bad, be it in the classroom or in the world of social media.

The Zoot Suit Riots are a pivotal event in U.S. history. In the 1940s, wartime production and the draft created mass labor shortages. In California, the agricultural and aerospace industries in particular welcomed thousands of Mexican migrants and their families (“War and Peace,” 2013). The resulting racial contacts caused tension between White Angelenos and Mexican Americans. Particularly at issue was the pernicious but pervasive stereotype that Mexicans were prone to criminality. Whites pointed to the Sleepy Lagoon murder case of 1942 in which a man of Mexican descent died under mysterious circumstances. In response, 17

¹ Reprinted with permission of *Illinois Reading Council Journal*: Bates, D. (2019). The “Bates” shop: Fishing for primary source documents: Building media literacy through historical documents. *Illinois Reading Council Journal* 47(3), 56-60.

Mexican youths were arrested and held without bail, and then they were convicted in a highly discriminatory trial—nine for second degree murder, the remainder for lesser offenses (Sleepy Lagoon Defense Committee, 1944). The convictions were overturned in 1944, but, in the meantime, the case was a national sensation and seemed to prove to local Whites that Mexicans were a criminal element in their midst (Pagán, 2003, p. 215).



Figure 1. Three men sporting variations on the zoot suit (Atkins, 1946).

Deepening tensions was the rise of the *pachuco* subculture—Mexican youth who favored expensive, flamboyant clothing and enjoyed a lively nightlife. Though groups of *pachucos* were not gangs (at least not in the criminal sense), many Whites viewed them as a threat to public safety; and their extravagant zoot suits—consisting of coats with wide lapels and padded shoulders over pegged, cuffed trousers—became widely associated with criminality in the White mind (“War and Peace,” 2013). The zoot suits were also seen as a symbol of disloyalty. The War Production Board’s fabric rationing

program called for a 26% cut in national fabric use and went so far as to draw up plans for proper, economical suits. Needless to say, the billowy zoot suits did not fit the bill, and this marked their wearers—outfitted by a thriving market of bootleg tailors—as out of step with the national wartime project (Cosgrove, 1984, p. 81).

These tensions boiled over in June 1943. Hundreds of sailors and Marines, on leave before shipping out to the Pacific Theater, made their way from the Naval Reserve Armory in Chavez Ravine (a heavily Hispanic area) to the city’s bars and red-light district. For nearly a week, there were nightly clashes between the troops and zoot suiters; the latter—mostly people of Mexican descent, but also Filipino Americans and African Americans—were pulled from bars, streetcars, and even movie theatres, beaten with clubs and sticks, and often stripped of their clothing. By the end of the riots, more than 150 people had been injured and more than 500—nearly all of them Hispanic—had been arrested (“Los Angeles Zoot Suit Riots, 1943,” 1998). The riots are a seminal event in the history of Los Angeles, and in Chicano/a history more generally. Given the multiple perspectives in play, they also present a prime opportunity to test students’ critical thinking skills.

To analyze the riots, you will need to give students some level of background knowledge. For this particular activity, I recommend keeping this to a minimum. Any modern recounting of the riots will give away the ending, so to speak, by citing the media’s frantic coverage of purported Mexican criminality and repeated instances of police brutality against the Mexican-American community by the Los Angeles Police Department as inciting factors for the riot, then explaining the riots themselves as a sort of pogrom or ethnic cleansing by White sailors and Marines against people of color. To avoid this pitfall, you might give students some basic information on the growth of the city’s Mexican-American community, the *pachuco* subculture, and zoot suits specifically, and ask them to make predictions about what might happen next. You might also refer to the internment of Japanese Americans in this same period as a parallel example of how notions of citizenship can become violently racialized in times of war. When you

are ready, you can present to the students the three documents in question here: two articles from *The New York Times* and an editorial from progressive journalist Carey McWilliams. Each piece will offer a different perspective on the riots and their cause.

The first article, “Not a Race Issue, Mayor Says,” from the June 10, 1943 issue of *The New York Times*, gives a good sense of the official reaction to the riots. What is most striking about this piece is how Los Angeles mayor, Fletcher Bowron, can use so many words and yet say so little. Students should be able to examine his statements—especially milquetoast utterances like “We have here . . . a bad situation as the result of the formation and activities of youthful gangs” (p. 42)—and determine that the mayor is simply hoping to avoid any more disorder. Interestingly, his most pointed words are reserved for the military men involved in the riots: “We expect cooperation from officers of the Army and Navy to the extent that soldiers and sailors do not pile into Los Angeles for the purpose of . . . beating up young men whose appearance they do not like” (p. 42). Given the disapprobation that would accompany even mild criticism of the military during wartime, this is somewhat surprising, and you might ask students to theorize what gave rise to it. Most critical of all, however, students should recognize the mayor’s effort to protect the city and its employees. Complaining that “too many citizens in this community . . . raise a . . . cry of racial discrimination or prejudice against a minority group every time the Los Angeles police make arrests of members of gangs,” he concludes that “they all look alike to us, regardless of color and length of their coats” (p. 42). In analyzing the mayor’s account of the riots, students should be able to discern his particular point of view and the way that point of view colors his view of the riots. Put simply, Mayor Bowron was most interested in preserving order; thus, he blamed the riots (mostly) on the vaguely defined “youthful gangs” and (somewhat) on the rowdiness of sailors on shore leave, while vociferously defending the actions of police both before and during the riot. Push students to think about “official” accounts of events that lack credibility—this can range from something hotly controversial, like the Mueller report (or its summary by the Attorney

General’s office), to something like their parents’ denial of ever partying in high school. What interest would powerful people have in spinning an account of events? How is “controlling the flow of information,” as PR professionals like to say, powerful? Should we believe politicians and other people in charge? Why or why not? Questions like these should prompt your students to think more deeply about the mayor’s words and their significance.

The second source, “28 Zoot Suiters Seized on Coast After Clashes with Service Men” (1943), also from *The New York Times*, offers a subtly different object lesson in the importance of perspective and bias. The story, detailing one night of the riots, contains multiple words and phrases meant to convey specific connotations. The article describes zoot suiters thusly:

[T]wenty-eight zoot-suiters, stripped of their garish clothing and with county jail barbers hopefully eyeing their flowing duck-tail haircuts, languished behind bars today.

[T]he arrests came after a “war” declared by service men . . . on zoot-suit gangs which have been preying on the East Side as well as molesting civilians.

Impetus was given to the clean-up campaign when the wives of two sailors were criminally attacked by the youths.

[T]he service men routed the gangs, depriving them of crude weapons.

[S]ixteen Mexican youths, all armed with some sort of bludgeon, were arrested. . . . They were said to have tried to keep Deputy Sheriffs . . . from arresting one of their number. (p. 15)

After close reading, students should be able to ascertain the clear bias in play: the writer of the article believes that Mexican-Americans, specifically zoot suiters, are at fault for the riots and that the sailors were simply “cleaning up” the streets. What is most significant about this piece is that it is not an editorial but, rather, a news story. Make sure to push this point with students. This news story is clearly not “objective,” but is it possible for any news story to be objective? If so, how? If not, what choices can be made to signal subjectivity

to readers? More importantly, you might ask them how these sorts of biases find their way into news articles today. There will be no shortage of material—look no further than the 2016 election to find numerous articles, and even entire outlets, identified by either the left or right as biased. With this in mind, students can explore the reasons behind certain points of view being prevalent among specific reporters or news outlets. Why would someone hold this particular perspective? Why would readers want to read it? Is it socially helpful or harmful—and how do we make that distinction? Such questions allow this short piece to serve as the basis for a larger exploration of media bias, and hopefully it will lead to students becoming more critically aware of pieces they read.

The final piece in this activity comes from progressive journalist Carey McWilliams (1971). A leading light of California's left, McWilliams advocated for migrant workers, protested Japanese-American internment (one of the few prominent Americans to do so), and strenuously challenged the official account of the Zoot Suit Riots. In a piece for the *New Republic*, McWilliams left no doubt as to his feelings: "Immediate responsibility for the outbreak of the riots must be placed upon the Los Angeles press and the Los Angeles police." He details the local media's long-standing obsession with crimes committed by people of Mexican descent, as well as its systematic efforts to link the terms "zoot suit," "Mexican," and "criminal" in the minds of readers. McWilliams also describes the Mexican community's fraught relationship with the police who engaged in what we would today call a stop-and-frisk campaign against Mexican youths, which increased tensions. He concludes with a series of arguments that "need to be rather dogmatically asserted," including the low incidence of criminality in the Mexican-American community, the implausibility of sailors attacking Mexican youths in self-defense, and the ugly legacy such violence would have for the war effort and the community at large.

McWilliams's (1971) account is interesting for two reasons. First, it is by far the most openly polemical. Unlike Mayor Bowron, who couches his statements in

political hair-splitting, or the second piece from *The New York Times*, which uses subtle phrasing to direct the reader's attention and emotions, McWilliams wears his ideology on his sleeve. Second, of the three pieces cited here, McWilliams' account most closely resembles our modern understanding of the riots. His citing of long-simmering tensions between the police and the Mexican-American community, and his labeling of press reports as prejudiced and inflammatory, echo modern scholars' interpretations of events. You might ask students to consider the implications of this phenomenon. Was McWilliams merely ahead of his time, a counterexample to the oft-argued assertion that "everyone was racist back then"? Or is there something in his particular method of marshaling facts that leads him to a deeper understanding of the riots? Most importantly, what lessons does McWilliams's account—however admittedly slanted it might be—hold for us in terms of media literacy? What qualities does it possess that we can look for in modern news stories?

Though media literacy is a crucial 21st-century skill, building it can be intimidating given the sheer amount of media with which we are all confronted each day. But by pinpointing a single event and asking students to compare accounts of it, you can give them the opportunity to think critically not just about the event itself, but about how depictions of it depend on the author and his or her biases. More importantly, such an exercise leaves students better-armed to examine the media in their own lives and parse out its meanings and perspectives.

References

- 28 zoot suiters seized on coast after clashes with service men. (1943, June 7). *The New York Times*, p. 15. Retrieved from <https://nyti.ms/2U93uW3>
- Atkins, O. (Photographer). (1946). *Three men sporting variations on the zoot suit* [Photo]. Yorba Linda, CA: National Archives, Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum.
- Cosgrove, S. (1984, Autumn). The zoot-suit and style warfare. *History Workshop Journal*, No. 18, 77-91.
- Los Angeles zoot suit riots, 1943. (1998). In *Los Angeles almanac*. Retrieved from www.laalmanac.com/history/hi07t.php
- McWilliams, C. (1971). The zoot-suit riots. In N. C. Rodillas & M. Eaton (Eds.), *A study guideline of the history and culture of the Mexican-American—Secondary grades* (Reprinted article, *New Republic*, 1943). Riverside, CA: Riverside Unified School District.
- Not a race issue, Mayor says. (1943, June 10). *The New York Times*, p. 42. Retrieved from <https://nyti.ms/2U7c5s2>
- Pagán, E. (2003). *Murder at the Sleepy Lagoon: Zoot suits, race, and riot in wartime L.A.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

- Sleepy Lagoon Defense Committee. (1944). *This is the story of a crime* [Flyer].
- War and peace [PBS television series episode]. (2013). In A. Bosch (Producer), *Latino Americans*.
- Wineburg, S. (2019, February 12). The internet is sowing mass confusion. We must rethink how we teach kids every subject. *USA Today*.
- Wineburg, S., McGrew, S., Breakstone, J., & Ortega, T. (2016). *Evaluating information: The cornerstone of civic online reasoning*. Stanford, CA: Stanford Digital Repository. Retrieved from <https://purl.stanford.edu/fv751yt5934>.

Author Biography

Dr. David Bates is Assistant Professor of History at Concordia University Chicago. His first book, *The Ordeal of the Jungle: Race and the Chicago Federation of Labor, 1903-1922*, was published by Southern Illinois University Press in June 2019. He can be reached at david.bates@cuchicago.edu.





Illiteracy is a SOLVABLE problem. Together, we can be part of the solution!

Today, there are nearly 800 million people in the world who cannot read or write a simple sentence. ILA needs your help to change that!

Become an ILA Member to join a meaningful movement and get the practical resources, expertise, and support you need to impact worldwide literacy.

Make your voice heard

- Support ILA's advocacy efforts through our network of councils, national affiliates, and special interest groups

Connect with a community of literacy champions

- Turn to our network of teachers, experts, and leaders (in person at our conference and on social media) for advice and ideas

Come to the ILA conference for connections, knowledge, and inspiration—and for less money

- Enjoy significant registration savings and learn from engaging, motivating speakers

Get revitalizing resources

- ILA E-ssentials: E-publications with practical teaching techniques
- ILA Bridges: Interactive, interdisciplinary modules with step-by-step lesson planning guides
- And only Members are able to subscribe to ILA journals:
 - *The Reading Teacher*: The most popular journal for educators of students up to age 12
 - *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*: The ONLY literacy-focused journal for educators of older learners
 - *Reading Research Quarterly*: The leading global journal offering multidisciplinary scholarship on literacy among learners of all ages

...and freebies

- *Literacy Today*: Our bimonthly magazine that covers the latest literacy education trends and ILA news
- Members receive a 20% discount on more than 200 ILA books, DVDs, and more

Help us transform the world for the better. literacyworldwide.org/membership

Follow these 5 steps to join ILA today!

1. Choose your MEMBERSHIP OPTION (required) and add journal subscriptions (optional):

OPTION 1: BASIC or ONLINE (please choose one)

BASIC Membership (<i>Literacy Today</i> delivered in print)	<input type="checkbox"/> \$39
ONLINE Membership (<i>Literacy Today</i> and added journals available Online Only)	<input type="checkbox"/> \$29
ADD YOUR JOURNALS:	
<i>The Reading Teacher</i> For educators of students up to age 12	<input type="checkbox"/> \$30
<i>Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy</i> For educators of older learners	<input type="checkbox"/> \$30
<i>Reading Research Quarterly</i> The leading journal of literacy research	<input type="checkbox"/> \$30
Access ILA Online access to all journals	<input type="checkbox"/> \$100
RRQ Library Online access to RRQ archives to 1965—only available to RRQ subscribers	<input type="checkbox"/> \$36
SUBTOTAL OPTION 1: _____	

OPTION 2: STUDENT

STUDENT Membership	<input type="checkbox"/> \$24
<i>Requirements:</i> The discounted rate applies for up to five years to students enrolled in an undergraduate or graduate degree program. Please include proof of current student status with payment.	
ADD YOUR JOURNALS:	
<i>The Reading Teacher</i> For educators of students up to age 12	<input type="checkbox"/> \$18
<i>Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy</i> For educators of older learners	<input type="checkbox"/> \$18
<i>Reading Research Quarterly</i> The leading journal of literacy research	<input type="checkbox"/> \$18
Access ILA Online access to all journals	<input type="checkbox"/> \$60
RRQ Library Online access to RRQ archives to 1965—only available to RRQ subscribers	<input type="checkbox"/> \$22
SUBTOTAL OPTION 2: _____	

OPTION 3: EMERITUS

EMERITUS Membership	<input type="checkbox"/> \$24
<i>Requirements:</i> Discounted rate applies to retired Members with 10 or more years of continuous Membership. Please include proof of retirement status.	
ADD YOUR JOURNALS:	
<i>The Reading Teacher</i> For educators of students up to age 12	<input type="checkbox"/> \$18
<i>Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy</i> For educators of older learners	<input type="checkbox"/> \$18
<i>Reading Research Quarterly</i> The leading journal of literacy research	<input type="checkbox"/> \$18
SUBTOTAL OPTION 3: _____	

OPTION 4: 25-YEAR

25-YEAR Membership	<input type="checkbox"/> FREE
<i>Requirements:</i> Discounted rate applies to Members with 25 years of continuous Membership, regardless of retirement status.	
ADD YOUR JOURNALS:	
<i>The Reading Teacher</i> For educators of students up to age 12	<input type="checkbox"/> \$30
<i>Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy</i> For educators of older learners	<input type="checkbox"/> \$30
<i>Reading Research Quarterly</i> The leading journal of literacy research	<input type="checkbox"/> \$30
SUBTOTAL OPTION 4: _____	

2. Enter your SUBTOTAL here:

My Membership is: ☐ NEW ☐ RENEWAL

☐ 2-year Membership (lock-in rates!) Subtotal x 2 = _____

☐ 3-year Membership (save 10%!) Subtotal x 3, minus 10% = _____

☐ Enroll me in AUTO-RENEWAL. ILA will charge future annual dues to my credit card. Contact Customer Service to cancel.

Add a DONATION for ILA literacy efforts: _____

TOTAL enclosed: _____

3. Enter your PAYMENT information here:

Credit card number (Visa, Mastercard, Amex, Discover) _____

Expiration date _____

Signature _____

Check # _____ Purchase order # (include signed copy) _____

Amounts are quoted in U.S. dollars and must be paid in U.S. funds.

4. Enter your CONTACT INFORMATION here (please print clearly):

First name _____	Initial _____	Last name _____
Mailing address _____		City/State/Province _____
Zip/Postal code _____	Country _____	E-mail _____ Telephone <input type="checkbox"/> Work <input type="checkbox"/> Home

5. MAIL: ILA, PO Box 8139, Newark, DE 19714-8139 USA **ONLINE:** literacyworldwide.org/membership **PHONE:** 800.336.7323 (U.S. and Canada) | 302.731.1600 (all other countries) **FAX:** 302.737.0878