

## ABSTRACT

¡Viva La Raza!: Using Audience Reception Theory to Identify the American Hegemonic Influences of Early Mechicana/o Theatre

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Using audience reception theory, the aim of this work is to determine the factors that manipulated and influenced the experience and success of the musical *Zoot Suit*. Whilst studying archival records of the production's reviews, this essay will also analyze the influence the media and newspapers had on how the musical was received and whether these outlets determined the success of Luis Valdez's work. Finally, this research will analyze and compare the Spanish press coverage and the English press coverage with the hypothesis that due to the lack of attention the Spanish press gave to the musical *Zoot Suit*, the ideology of the presence of an absence is considered to be a possible factor contributing to the failure of the musical in New York.

¡Viva la Raza!: Using Audience Reception Theory to Identify the American Hegemonic  
Influences of Early Mechicana/o Theatre

by

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A Thesis

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Para mi mamita linda que extraño tanto, gracias por creer en mi siempre. Todo lo  
hago por tí.

Por mis hermanas Ashley, Valerie, y Lorraine que nunca me dejaron sola, por el  
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## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

Mechicana/o theatre was an integral component in the development of a minority consciousness in the United States that ultimately led to a civil rights movement. Yet, Mexicana/o theatre was not recognized until the late 1960s after a young farmworker approached César Chávez, the most influential Mexican-American leader, and convinced him that theatre had the power to educate his community. Following Susan Bennett's "Theatre Audiences", this thesis will analyze a diverse amount of work produced by Luis Valdez through the lens of audience reception. Subsequently, the methodology of this study will be based on books, play reviews, interviews, dissertations, and published articles. Ultimately, the aim of this research is to uncover suppressions detrimental to early Mexicana/o theatre by looking at these primary sources within a bilingual lens. Finally, comparing tone and demeanor, the later half of this study will analyze how the pinnacle of Valdez's work, *Zoot Suit*, was impacted through hegemony, mass media, and the theory of horizon of expectation.

In 1974, Dr. Jorge Huerta became the first Chicano to obtain a Ph.D. in Theatre in the United States. Throughout his research, Dr. Huerta birthed the terminology Mexicano which he defines as the categorization of shared experiences between those who identify within the Mexican, Latinx, and/or Chicana/o culture. Additionally, this subgroup is typically located in border states such as California and Texas. For the purpose of this study, and to promote inclusivity, I will be using the term Mexicana/o

when referring to individuals who identify within the Mexican, Latinx, and/or Chicana/o culture. Performed on both sides of the border in the 1960s and 1970s, early Mechicana/o theatre was typically located in barrios or campos for a bilingual audience. A majority of the plays performed depicted contemporary sociopolitical issues in a hilarious and comprehensible way. As a result, an inclusive environment was created which served as an early example of minority agitprop theatre. Conversely, when theatre historians identified the initiation of Spanish-language theatre, John Brokaw's research finds that the first Mexican-American theatrical performance occurred in 1598 outside of what is now El Paso, Texas, and was produced by Spanish soldiers in their native language.<sup>1</sup> Dr. Jorge Huerta says, "For generations prior to 1965, Chicano theatrical expression varied from the spiritual to the secular; it was produced in churches and community centers, as well as in legitimate theaters and union halls."<sup>2</sup> Unique to traditional Western Theatre, these productions were focused on instilling a sense of pride and history into the Mechicana/o community. Acting troupes performed mitos with the inspiration of ancient ritual-dramas, and scholars say, "these plays brought the community together, spiritually, culturally and linguistically."<sup>3</sup> Therefore, with such an immense impact on society, my investigation theorizes that the success of early Mechicana/o Theatre was dependent on the horizon of expectations of their patrons.

Given the sociopolitical environment of the 60s, the expectations of audience members grew substantially given the initiation of multiple civil rights movements. Dr.

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<sup>1</sup> John W. Brokaw, *A Mexican-American Acting Company*, 1975.

<sup>2</sup> Jorge Huerta, *Necessary Theatre: Six Plays About the Chicano Experience*, 1989.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

Susan Bennett's theory on Audience Reception analyzes how patrons interpret texts, and in her study "Theatre Audiences" Dr. Bennett emphasizes how a sociocultural environment impacts the development of a theatre. Her work is "a study of theatre audiences as [a] cultural phenomenon...it is particularly concerned with the diversity of theatres which operate in contemporary culture and the different audiences they attract."<sup>4</sup> When Mechicana/o Theatre began, patrons were mostly made up of immigrant farmworker's. Therefore, aligned with Dr. Bennett's theory, early audience members were inevitably affected by American hegemony. Salvatore Babones says, "The idea of American hegemony... has its practical roots in World War II. The United States emerged from that war as the dominant economic, political and technological power."<sup>5</sup> With such power, Americans in the ruling class demonstrated dominance over working-class citizens. The sociopolitical environment instigated patrons who went to the barrios to expect not only entertainment, but also change. Those who led American hegemony were none other than the White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) community.<sup>6</sup> Anthony Ashbolt says, "The attempt to construct an alternative society in the 1960s, to develop counter-institutions or to fashion a new way of life, was always regarded with scorn by conservative ideologues. It was seen as self-indulgence masquerading as social protest."<sup>7</sup> Essentially, Mechicana/o audience members viewed their performances as social protest, while WASP communities found their plays exotic and off-putting.

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<sup>4</sup> Susan Bennett, *Theatre Audiences*, 1997.

<sup>5</sup> Salvatore Babones, *American Hegemony Is Here to Stay*, 2015.

<sup>6</sup> The White Anglo-Saxon Protestant community is an informal term to describe individuals from British descent in the upper-class who identify as White.

<sup>7</sup> Anthony Ashbolt, *Hegemony and the sixties: observations, polemics, meanderings*, 2007.

Created in response to the sociopolitical issues happening in the United States between the 1960s and 1970s, Mechicana/o Theatre ultimately was the result of the Farmworker's Strike Movement along with the Chicano Movement of 1965. Throughout this time Mexican, Latinx, and Chicana/o's arguably faced some of the most discriminatory behavior from both the United States government and its people. During this time, a surplus of Mechicanas/os entered the United States under the Bracero Program given under the orders of President Franklin D. Roosevelt (FDR). In its pinnacle, the program brought an average of 400,000 Mexicans a year into the United States. The American government did so by reaching out directly to then Mexican President Manuel Ávila Camacho.

The Bracero Program grew out of a series of bi-lateral agreements between Mexico and the United States that allowed millions of Mexican men to come to the United States to work on, short-term, primarily agricultural labor contracts. From 1942 to 1964, 4.6 million contracts were signed, with many individuals returning several times on different contracts, making it the largest U.S. contract labor program. An examination of the images, stories, documents and artifacts of the Bracero Program contributes to our understanding of the lives of migrant workers in Mexico and the United States, as well as our knowledge of, immigration, citizenship, nationalism, agriculture, labor practices, race relations, gender, sexuality, the family, visual culture, and the Cold War era... The Bracero Program was controversial in its time. Mexican nationals, desperate for work, were willing to take arduous jobs at wages scorned by most Americans. Farm workers already living in the United States worried that braceros would compete for jobs and lower wages. In theory, the Bracero Program had safeguards to protect both Mexican and domestic workers for example, guaranteed payment of at least the prevailing area wage received by native workers; employment for three-fourths of the contract period; adequate, sanitary, and free housing; decent meals at reasonable prices; occupational insurance at employer's expense; and free transportation back to Mexico at the end of the contract. Employers were supposed to hire braceros only in areas of certified domestic labor shortage and were not to use them as strikebreakers. In practice, they ignored many of these rules and Mexican and native workers suffered while growers benefited from plentiful, cheap, labor.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Bracero History Archive, 2021.

As the granddaughter of farmworkers from California that participated in The Bracero Program, I grew up learning about the abuse and injustices happening on the land where my Abuelito and Abuelita once worked. In fact, during a recent conversation with my Abuelita Porfy, she emphasized how her first job in America was negatively affected by the discrimination brought on by the White Anglo-Saxon Protestant community. It was a humbling experience, however, to learn about the ways both my grandparents used to save their entire salaries in order to support more Mexicans coming into the United States during the time of the Bracero Program. Yet, financially supporting family and friends so that they may eventually benefit from the program is something my Abuelita recalls as common for the community of farmworkers. Farmworkers on the clock and innovative artists off the clock, a majority of all early work from Mechicana/o theatre was produced in low-income barrios. Having a Spanglish target audience, Mechicana/o artists of the 1960s decided to contribute to contemporary American theatre as a response to the prejudice and mistreatment of minority workers. They did so by using a combination of agitprop theatre and commedia dell'arte to exploit inhumane working conditions. Pleading for a union to defend them, those involved in early Mechicana/o theatre began to establish multiple acting troupes that toured nationally in an effort to spread awareness. Luis Valdez, once a young farmworker himself, built El Teatro Campesino which became one of the most renowned acting groups of the 1960s. Members of El Teatro Campesino (ETC), which translates to the Farmworker's Theatre, actively participated in the Chicano Movement by producing shows that portrayed the authentic Mechicana/o experience. The fervent and ground-breaking acting troupe began in Delano, California and then continued to perform in unusual spaces with the aim of advocating for the rights of

Mexican farmworkers. ETC did so by performing actos that portrayed unjust power structures through retelling lived experiences of their community.

Recognized today as the “father of Chicano theater,”<sup>9</sup> Valdez first experienced the magic of theatre while picking grapes under a blazing sun. Huerta says,

Although another person might have attempted to do what he did with a group of striking farmworkers, it was Valdez who went to César Chávez and suggested that the incipient farm labor union sponsor a street theater to educate and entertain the farmworkers. It is doubtful that Valdez realized at the time just how momentous his charge or his influence would be; yet, by 1980, he and his group would be internationally recognized, and a national network of other Chicano theater groups would be expressing the hopes and dreams, frustrations and demands of the Chicano in all parts of the United States and beyond. The Teatro Campesino became the symbol of the Chicano’s theatrical expression, inspiring Chicanos all over the country to form other teatros dedicated to exposing the sociopolitical conditionals of the Mexican-American community.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, encouraging patrons to retaliate against racial injustice, Chicano playwrights such as Valdez benefited from highlighting the minority perspective through theatrical forms known as actos, mitos, and carpas. The difference amongst the three categories is that actos were devised within the farmworkers in the field that dealt specifically with Chicano themes, mitos were parables inspired by ancient-rituals, and carpas were traditional Mexican itinerant comedy tent shows. Broyles-Gonzalez says, “prior to the establishment of the Teatro Campesino in 1965 César Chávez had been wanting to use a *carpa* as an organizing tool. As a child and young adult [Valdez] had witnessed the power of *carpa* performances and was keenly aware of the value and humor as a vehicle of critique and mobilization.”<sup>11</sup> Moreover, the techniques of these performances were

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<sup>9</sup> Mercury News, *Luis Valdez: the father of Chicano theater*, 2007

<sup>10</sup> Jorge Huerta, *Chicano Theater Themes and Forms*, 1985.

<sup>11</sup> Yolanda Broyles-Gonzalez, *El Teatro Campesino*, 1994.

inspired by the legendary Mexican Rasquachi performance aesthetic. When defining the aesthetic, art critic Jennifer Heath says, “in Spanish, rasquache means ‘leftover’ or ‘of no value.’ In Chicano vernacular, it describes an attitude, the taste or lifestyle of the underdog.”<sup>12</sup> Later in the article Heath suggests that the negative connotation the term had impacted the horizon of expectations of patrons. Moreover, scholars today often reference *rasquachismo* alongside movements such as expressionism, minimalism, and surrealism. An early example of a Rasquachi style performance is the *acto*, *Los Vendidos* written by Luis Valdez in 1967. The first performance was in East Los Angeles during a Brown Beret *junta*.<sup>13</sup> Characters of the script, including the Pachuco and the Mexican-American, highlighted notorious stereotypes influenced by American hegemony. *Los Vendidos* serves as an early example of Valdez’s work which uses agitprop theatre to address the way WASP communities perceived Mexicanas/os. To illustrate, the role of Mexican-American is introduced with, “The problems of the Mexican stem from one thing and one thing only: he's stupid. He is uneducated. He needs to stay in school. He needs to be ambitious, forward-looking, harder-working. He needs to think American!”<sup>14</sup> Hence, as *Los Vendidos* highlights prejudice towards first-generation Americans, Valdez also uses this script as an opportunity to explore themes such as xenophobia.

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<sup>12</sup> Maria Anderson, *A lesson in “rasquachismo” art: Chicano aesthetics & the “sensibilities of the barrio*, 2017.

<sup>13</sup> The Brown Berets took on a range of social and political issues that plagued the Mexican American and Chicano barrios of the Eastside in various sectors of life, including educational inequality, healthcare access, police brutality, and wartime casualties. They were active predominantly in the unincorporated area of East Los Angeles, though they also had a strong presence in Lincoln Heights and Boyle Heights. To learn more about their efforts refer to [www.laconservancy.org](http://www.laconservancy.org).

<sup>14</sup> Luis Valdez, *Los Vendidos*, 1967.

Nonetheless, using the struggle of identity, the fear of assimilation, and the stereotypes of Mexican Americans in the script was a tool to promote political awareness. In an interview Valdez did with Bagby, he says:

...working with the Teatro has given [Valdez] a chance to take some of these problems and propose solutions: first economic equalization, so that unshackled by poverty and materialistic dreams, the Mexican-American can then establish an identity which integrates those historic and ethnic elements in which he should have pride. The Teatro has been limited to an audience of either farm workers or urban strike sympathizers, but its unwritten actos have established dramatic images which will last the lives of its audiences.<sup>15</sup>

Embracing their cultural responsibility, Mechicano artists found that retaining the attention of their community required infusing their performances with living memory. Although Mechicana/o art was an artistic development amongst many, patrons were alive to first-hand experience the racism and prejudicial themes early Mechicana/o theatre attempted to portray. Predisposed by living memory, Mechicano audience members connected strongly with themes of violence and abuse of power. Ultimately, Luis Valdez and *El Teatro Campesino* paved the way for Mechicana/o art to be allowed into renowned theatrical spaces. Dr. Broyles-Gonzalez says, “The strong alliance between Chicana/o performed and working-class audiences in the arena of Chicana/o alternative theater is of paramount significance. That alliance constituted for the basis for the choice of aesthetics, production material, performance sites, acting styles, and so on”.<sup>16</sup> All things considered, by distinguishing the effect living memory had on Chicana/o audience members, this essay suggests that phenomenology was integral to the success of Chicana/o theatre. Additionally, theories such as Audience Reception and Horizon of

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<sup>15</sup> Joel Schechter, *Popular Theatre: a Sourcebook*, 2003.

<sup>16</sup> Yolanda Broyles-Gonzalez, *El Teatro Campesino*, 1994.

Expectation serve to further address how the Mechicano community used lived experiences for the advancement of Mechicana/o art.

Born on June 26, 1940, Luis Miguel Valdez was raised in Delano, California; due to his parent's profession as farm laborers, he spent most of his upbringing around agricultural labor camps. His parents, Armeda and Francisco Valdez, raised him and his nine siblings, and Valdez began working in the fields with his parents at the age of six.

In an interview where Luis Valdez was asked where his passion for the theatre began, he responded by saying:

I have been interested in drama since the first grade...I started school in October, I think. The only problem was I didn't know a word of English. The first English word I remember learning was "crawl," and I'll tell you how it came about. The teacher was in charge of the school play that year, and she had this pet -a Mexican kid, who spoke English. She brought him in one day in a monkey suit, with a monkey mask and-well it was a little suit with a tail, and I was really aghast. This was too much. Then I somehow learned that there was going to be a play, that this was tryouts and this kid was going to be one of the monkeys in the play. It was about the jungle, Christmas in the jungle or something. She told him, "crawl," like a monkey I guess, but I remember "crawl." He started bouncing around, and I wanted to be a monkey. I thought, "If she tells me to crawl, I'll crawl." I don't remember if I did, but I got the part. I was one of the monkeys, and we started working on the set with the teacher. I was really fascinated by the fake trees we put up and the stage and the curtain; and the papier-mache masks-they turned me on. But the thing is that my family moved just before Christmas; so I missed being in the play, and I never forgot that.<sup>17</sup>

Therefore, although in the first grade Valdez was neglected the opportunity of experiencing the power of theatre, a couple of years later he would once again become unintentionally exposed to theatre through short skits and improvisation he created while working in the field. Valdez says:

...when I was 11 or 12 I picked up ventriloquism and had two little dummies which I made. My gringo dummy was called Al Nelson, and my Chicano dummy was Marcelino Pimpim. I used to sit with them on my knees and play one against

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

the other in bilingual dialogue in the labor camps where my family worked. During breaks people would set their boxes down under the trees and listen. The dummies would talk about work, no work, pay contractors, being cheated. All my relatives still remember. Years later when I went back they would ask me. *¿Qué pasó con los monos?* (What happened to the dummies?)<sup>18</sup>

As a result, during his pubescent years Luis Valdez created community through theatre. When his family members ask, “what happened with the dummies” they’re simultaneously expressing to Luis that they received joy and entertainment through his performance. Inspired through his family’s reception, Valdez witnessed at a young age that exposing injustices through dialogue had the power to promote awareness within his community. Unfortunately, Valdez’s education was interrupted multiple times due to the necessities of field work. Nevertheless, in 1958 Valdez attended San Jose State College (SJSC), now California State University, where he majored in Mathematics and Physics.

However, after completing an academic year Valdez realized that STEM was not his passion. Subsequently, he later convinced his department to transfer him to liberal studies where he began his journey with the English and Theatre program at SJSC in 1959. Although Valdez’s parents had not gone past elementary school, his ambition to go to college was inspired by his parent’s hard work in the fields. Additionally, in an interview with SJSC, Valdez says, “education was highly regarded and talked about constantly at home... Coming from a farm worker's standpoint and way of life, anything would have been better; I didn't have to become a doctor or a lawyer. My parents would have been proud of me if I would have been a janitor. It was a stable job, it was year-round, and it meant that I would be indoors.”<sup>19</sup> Within this mindset, after San Jose State

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<sup>18</sup> Carlos Morton, *an interview with Luis Valdez*, 1982.

<sup>19</sup> The California State University, *Luis Valdez*, 2022.

College, Valdez began to work for the San Francisco Mime Troupe in 1964, before joining activist Cesar Chavez in 1965 for the Chicano movement. When Valdez joined the troupe, he took the script *The Shrunken Head of Pancho Villa*, which he wrote while studying at SJSC in hopes on producing the play nationally. “The only problem was that there were no Chicano actors” says Valdez “fewer than college”.<sup>20</sup> Throughout this time, Valdez learned of the need to attract large Mechicana/o audiences into the theatre before his desire to produce work in world renowned spaces. To do so, Valdez demonstrated his support to the farmworkers by often participating in strikes alongside some of the most revolutionary leaders of the Mechicano community. Valdez had proven to be a hands-on activist, and was not shy, nor afraid, of making people feel uncomfortable by exposing racial inequalities through protests, performances, and boycotts. Valdez then eventually used these experiences to cultivate awareness within his theatre.

In 1965, at the age of 26, Luis Valdez initiated El Teatro Campesino (The Farmworker’s theatre, hereafter abbreviated ETC) in order to create a space where farmworkers and their families could have a platform to speak about the social issues affecting their community. This project went on to be the cultural and educational arm of the farmworker’s union organized by Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta. The theatre company focused on writing, directing, and acting short plays about the struggles of farmworkers and people of Mexican descent. With these productions, Valdez illustrated the blatant discrimination the Hispanic and Latinx communities endured while living in the United States. His work included caricatures of Mexican people that imagined in an American hegemony. Theatre critic, Ivan Garcia says,

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<sup>20</sup> Carlos Morton, *an interview with Luis Valdez*, 1982.

...they performed short and improvised skits entirely in Spanish about the theme of the greed of capitalism, represented by the patron (boss) and the power of unified campesinos (farm workers). Their goal was to convince scabs, new workers paid to replace those who were striking, to leave the fields and join the strike. In the second year of the strike, when United Farm Workers co-founder Cesar Chavez led supporters on a march of more than 200 miles from Delano to Sacramento, ETC followed the protesters, marking the troupe's first tour. The production budget was essentially nothing and the cast, composed of migrant farm workers supportive of the strike, were largely inexperienced in performance art. All ETC had was a borrowed flatbed truck that served as a stage – and a mission: to make their audience feel solidarity with the farm workers' struggle through performance art.”<sup>21</sup>

One example of Valdez's work was his one-act play, *Los Vendidos*. Written in 1967, the play included farmworkers as performers. According to the company archives:

...in the early years, all of the actors were farm workers. Valdez emphasized ensemble work, in which all actors contributed to the interpretation of the performance. Most troupe members took on multiple roles. One person, for example was an actor, technical director, company manager, and [a] coordinator; another was an actor, business manager, administrative director, researcher, and producer. Members of the Teatro created their own material. They started with no scenery, no scripts, and no costumes. They used props and costumes casually, and hung signs around their necks to indicate characters. Working with their own material, the actors were free to express what they knew and felt... The dramas were short, but Valdez decided to call them *actos* rather than skits, because skits seemed too light a word to express the work they were doing. In 1967 Valdez explained that El Teatro's purpose was to examine and redefine the heart of the Chicano people: ritual, music, beauty, and spiritual sensitivity. He sees theater as a vehicle 'to affect and modify and change and give direction to society. . . You can take people's minds off their problems by entertaining them, but you can also do that by giving them a different perspective,' said Valdez.<sup>22</sup>

Eventually blending their activism and passion with theatre to create an individualistic experience, *El Teatro Campesino* created and performed *actos* that later helped shaped the Farmworker's Strike Movement.

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<sup>21</sup> Ivan Garcia, *Luis Valdez started out as a street performer alongside protesters, launching El Teatro Campesino into years of success*, 2017.

<sup>22</sup> University of California Santa Barbara, *El Teatro Campesino Archives*, 2022.

As the granddaughter of one of the farmworkers in California that participated in the Farm Workers Strike, I grew up learning that Chicana/o theatre began on the land where my Abuelito and Abuelita were abused and discriminated against. Farm workers on the clock and innovative artists off the clock, a majority of all early work from Chicana/o theatre were produced in low-income barrios. Pleading for a union to defend them, those involved in early Chicana/o theatre began to establish multiple acting troupes that toured nationally in order to spread social awareness. *El Teatro Campesino* paved the way for Mechicana/o art to be allowed into renowned theatrical spaces. The fervent and innovative acting troupe performed in abnormal spaces in order to advocate for the rights of Mexican farmworkers.

Early Mechicana/o theatre was performed on both sides of the border in the 1920s and 1930s. Typically located in barrios, the plays were performed for a bilingual audience. Doing so promoted an inclusive environment that serves as an early example of Mechicano political theatre. Using art to promote peaceful protests, Mechicana/o artists gave their generational trauma a platform. Mechicana/o theatre was an integral component in the development of a Chicana/o consciousness that led to the sociopolitical Chicano Movement.<sup>23</sup> Intended to raise audience consciousness about social injustices, the lived experiences of Chicanas/os in the 1960s fueled not only a new form of theatre, however, it also presented the need for a civil rights movement. According to historian Elizabeth Ramirez

In the 1960s, the struggle to understand the Mexican's experience developed into a nationalistic perspective among political activists who were challenging the established Anglo-dominated mainstream society...In the midst of this political revolution, a burgeoning cultural renaissance also surfaced. The arts became

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<sup>23</sup> Jorge Huerta, *Chicano Theater Themes and Forms*, 1985.

prominent, fused with protest, driven by politics, and charged with propaganda. This cultural and artistic flowering was evident in many forms, including music, art, and poetry; however, it was in theatrical expression that the entire spectrum of cultural expression coalesced.<sup>24</sup>

Encouraging patrons to retaliate against racial injustice, Chicano playwrights such as Luis Valdez benefited from highlighting the minority perspective. Compared to the construct of mainstream theatre, Chicana/o theatre found that it thrived when patrons saw art that felt both invasive and personal while challenging American hegemony. As an example, the first surviving archival record of Valdez's work traces back to his 1965 acto, *Las dos caras del Patroncito* (The Two Faces of the Boss). Dr. Jorge Huerta says,

In this three-character, fifteen-minute acto, the grower, wearing a pig-faced mask, is ridiculed and exposed as just an ordinary man, despite his big house and luxury car, his blonde wife (in a mink bikini), and his acres of vineyards. In typical, unreal, and farcical fashion, the grower changes roles with the farm worker in an effort to demonstrate how his troubles overshadow the humble farm worker's 'easy life.' Once the farm worker wears the pig-faced mask, however, he becomes just as oppressive as the grower, while the grower, calling for César Chávez and the union to help him, is carried offstage by his hired guard.<sup>25</sup>

Valdez knew that exposing the inequalities of American hegemony through caricatures had the value of teaching his community about the power structures that were directly impacting them. Without integrating living memory into his productions, most of the Mechicano community could have completely missed or if not ignored Valdez's message.

Theatre scholar Susan Bennett, says:

...if we consider theatre's role in any given cultural system, and then the audience's relationship both to the generally held concept of theatre and to specific theatre products, we are more likely to obtain a fuller comprehension of the production—reception relationship. Peter Stallybrass and Allon White have

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<sup>24</sup> Elizabeth C. Ramírez, *Chicanas/Latinas in American Theatre: a History of Performance*, 2000.

<sup>25</sup> Jorge Huerta, *When Sleeping Giants Awaken: Chicano Theatre in the 1960s*, 2002.

discussed the interrelationship and dependency between high and low culture, and have noted that ‘because the higher discourses are normally associated with the most powerful socio-economic groups existing at the centre of cultural power, it is they which generally gain the authority to designate what is to be taken as high and low in society.’<sup>26</sup>

Thus, as Anglo-Americans dominate the most powerful socio-economic groups in the 1960s and 1970s, Bennett’s theory suggests that the longevity and success of theatre during that time was dependent on the taste of the ruling class. Additionally, Bennett says:

I remain convinced that we must understand both the cultural material specificities of the performance and the horizons of expectations brought to bear by the audience, individually and collectively, in order to begin to describe what we mean by theatre... As this particular interest in calibrating the cultural specificities of identity and their operations in a material world has become a focus in critical as well as theatre/performance studies, there has been an ever-increasing interest in non-traditional forms of performance often characterized precisely as the cultural specificities of an Other represented for the viewing publics’ entertainment and engagement.<sup>27</sup>

Audience reception theory, thus, identifies the way in which audience members process and react to theatre. Since early Mechicana/o artists used agitprop theatre to urge its community to defend themselves against abusive authoritative figures, Bennett’s theory suggests that the cultural material used for these themes were imperative. Given that the minority consciousness was growing in the United States, Bennett implies that missing the horizon of expectation of theatre goes inevitably impacts the success of Chicana/o theatre.

“Theatre audiences bring to any performance a horizon of cultural and ideological expectations” Bennett says, “that horizon of expectation is never fixed and is always

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<sup>26</sup> Susan Bennett, *Theatre Audiences*, 1997.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

tested by, among other things, the range of theatre available, the play, and the particular production”.<sup>28</sup> Conversely, Oxford defines Horizon of Expectations as, “the shared ‘mental set’ or framework within which those of a particular generation in a culture understand, interpret, and evaluate a text or an artwork. This includes textual knowledge of conventions and expectations (e.g. regarding genre and style), and social knowledge (e.g. of moral codes). It is a concept of reading (and the meanings this produces) as historically variable. The term is central in Jauss's reception theory”.<sup>29</sup> Hence, when the Horizon of Expectation is not met, Bennett suggests the success of the production is at stake. Moreover, Bennett’s analysis suggest that politics is central to both the production and to reception.

Similarly, Hans Robert Jauss’s theory emphasizes that Audience Reception influences the significance and longevity of theatrical work. Dr. Mambrol says,

The phenomenological method of Husserl and the hermeneutics of Heidegger paved the way for what became known as reception theory. One of the foremost figures of reception theory, Hans Robert Jauss (1921-1997), studied at the University of Heidelberg with the hermeneutic philosopher Hans Georg Gadamer... Jauss challenged objectivist views of both literary texts and literary history, urging that the history of a work’s reception by readers played an integral role in the work’s aesthetic status and significance... He insists that the audience of literature does not merely play a passive or formal role; indeed, the “historical life of a literary work is unthinkable without the active participation of its addressees.”<sup>30</sup>

Accordingly, Jauss’s theory of Horizon of Expectation is applicable to the early works of Chicana/o theatre as it provides an academic prospective that validates the lived

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Oxford Refence, *Horizon of Expectations*, 2022.

<sup>30</sup> Nasrullah Mambrol, *Key Theories of Hans Robert Jauss*, 2018.

experiences of Mechicano audience members. Dr. Mambrol says, “Jauss uses the hermeneutic philosophical term “horizon of expectations” to designate the framework of expectations and assumptions that bring the worlds of reader and author together in the constitution and interpretation of texts.... Hence the concept of “horizon of expectations” is both historical and trans-subjective”.<sup>31</sup> Therefore, the success of Chicana/o theatre, Jauss’s theory argues, relied on cultural history. Moreover, his theory implicated the significance of early Chicana/o work was gained through the individuals who first-hand encountered the sociopolitical abuse characterized onstage. Dr. Broyles-Gonzalez says,

The year 1965 marked the beginning of a widespread Chicana/o theater renaissance... and entire Chicana/o theater movement exploded onto the cultural scene in a matter of months. Dozens of Chicana/o theater groups made their appearance across the Southwest and the Midwest during the 1960s and 1970s, performing, for the most part, within Chicana/o communities. Generated by the anger and hope of the progressive social movements of the time- such as the civil rights movement, the antiwar movement, the United Farm Workers movement, the Chicano movement, and the women’s movement- a widespread theatrical mobilization sought to affirm an alternative social vision that relied on a distinctly Chicana/o aesthetic. Despite existing differences among Chicano theatrical groups they nonetheless manifested an astounding degree of similarity or common ground. Those commonalities were rooted not only in a shared working-class social experience but in a shared cultural heritage of performance forms.<sup>32</sup>

While applying Gramsci’s theory to early Chicana/o art, my findings suggest agitprop Mechicana/o theatre was a cultural response to the sociopolitical corruption that drastically damaged the working class. American hegemony, therefore, reflected and benefited the values of upper and middle-class Anglo Americans in the 1960s. More importantly, as Chicana/o Theatre developed there was an ongoing transformation of American class structure that lasted until the 1980s. The lack of exposure and restrictions

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Yolanda Broyles-Gonzalez, *El Teatro Campesino*, 1994.

to resources explains why Mexican-American artists struggled to satisfy the standards of American theatre. Dr. Huerta writes, “prior to the founding of the Teatro Campesino in 1965, little attention had been paid to the Chicano’s theatrical activity outside the church. It seems that Chicana/o ‘s were more interesting to historians and theatre chroniclers as ‘folk’ than as activists, and a search for records of political theater in the barrios had limited results.”<sup>33</sup>

With the rise of a political theater in the Chicana/o community in the late sixties and seventies, attention had to be given as well to political aspects of this activity, including the work of many *teatros*, or theater groups, that began to follow in the wake of the highly successful Teatro Campesino.<sup>34</sup> Nonetheless, Yolanda Broyles-Gonzalez also comments on the shared vision behind the initiation of Chicana/o theatre that aligns with Jauss and Bennett’s theories. She says, “a strong commitment to “liberation” and the Chicana/o “life-struggle” implied a social and political alliance between performer and spectator unlike that found in the world of mainstream theater” she says, “The strong alliance between Chicana/o performed and working-class audiences in the arena of Chicana/o alternative theater is of paramount significance. That alliance constituted for the basis for the choice of aesthetics, production material, performance sites, acting styles, and so on.”<sup>35</sup> As a result, I argue that both Audience Reception and Horizon of Expectation serve as literary theories that distinguish influential sociopolitical factors of Chicano theatre.

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<sup>33</sup> Jorge Huerta, *Chicano Theater Themes and Forms*, 1985.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Yolanda Broyles-Gonzalez, *El Teatro Campesino*, 1994.

As we have seen, the development of early Mechicana/o theatre was the result of minority acting troupes using lived experiences to create *actos* in *carpas*. Using their impromptu performances as a demonstration of resistance, Luis Valdez is encouraged to invent devised theatre with themes of abuse and injustices. As Bennet's theory suggests, the expectations of Valdez's patrons were dependent on the sociopolitical movements happening around them. Therefore, the following chapter investigates specific events which impacted the phenomenology of Mechicana/os in the twentieth century.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Sociopolitical Events that Impacted Early Mechicana/o Theatre

The most important historical influences for early Mechicana/o Theatre include World War II, the Farmworker's Strike Movement, and the Zoot Suit Riots. Subsequently, the repercussions of these events led to a violent representation of Mechicana/os in English and Spanish Press. Through archival work, this essay will analyze the sociopolitical contributions that Mechicana/o historical events and movements had on early Mechicana/o theatre. Furthermore, using theories of audience reception, this research uncovers hegemonic influences that structured the conceptualization and representation of *actos* and *carpas*.

Approximately 500,000 Mexican-American soldiers were involved in America's effort in World War II. This unprecedented participation came mostly from first-generation Americans. As a result, these active Mexican-American soldiers felt strong patriotism towards the United States because of their heritage. Nevertheless, prejudice led Mechicanas/os to historically view their military service as "vehicle of assimilation and of economic advancement."<sup>1</sup> As a result, Mechicanas/os saw the war as an opportunity for advancement in social class. "The largest minority group in California during the 20th century was Hispanic Americans..." Joshua Paddison says, "...most prominently Mexican Americans. One-half million Mexicans migrated to the United States during the

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<sup>1</sup> Yolanda Broyles-Gonzalez, *El Teatro Campesino*, 1994.

1920s, with more than 30 percent settling in California.”<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, however, with an influx of Mexican/as racial tensions between their community and the WASP community in Southern California grew intensely. After World War II, it was a shock to many the display of prejudice behind the actions of WASP communities. Once loved and wanted for their cheap labor, now Mexican/as were being kicked to the street like dogs while being degraded and harassed by servicemen. Additionally, priority for job fulfillment was given to soldiers returning from the war. As a result, Mexican/as grew bitterness towards Anglos as they were believed they were responsible for their loss of income. As an illustration, in the article *Mexican Americans Continued Their Fight for Freedom After WWII*, Dr. Arnick says:

...with the rising number of Mexicans coming to the United States in the 1920s after the war, many Mexicans living in the United States were left jobless and unemployed. The Mexicans who immigrated to the United States obtained jobs due to the high demand for supplies in the war, but when the war ended, they were let go. The jobs that continued after the war was given to people that were deemed ‘white’ enough”.<sup>3</sup>

Unlike Anglo soldiers, however, when Mexican/a soldiers of World War II returned to the United States they were met with unfulfilled promises and severe discrimination from the citizens they protected. In the process of their deployment, many individuals believed their service in the military would aid them in identifying with WASP communities. Many assimilated because, “whiteness played a vital role in the Mexican Americans search for their civil rights and their identity as an ethnicity in the United States”.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Joshua Paddison, *1921-present: Modern California - Migration, Technology, Cities*, 2005.

<sup>3</sup> Arnick, *Mexican Americans Continued Their Fight for Freedom After WWII*, 2015.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

Consequently, when returning home these soldiers efforts were proven ineffective as WASP men and women continued to handle them without remorse.

Aware of the racial tension and discrimination, interviews done post-war in English and Spanish Press offered distinctive insights into what a Mechicana/o soldier would endure throughout WWII. Generally, most published articles in English were rooted in patriotism and encouraged the participation of other Mechicanas/os to serve in the army. Additionally, many articles published in English press emphasized that the opportunity to obtain financial security was the main reason behind a high amount of minority soldiers enrolling. To illustrate, an interview with a Mechicano WWII veteran explains the intentions behind a large recruitment of Mexican-American soldiers. “Lauro Castillo grew up in a poor farming family in South Texas... The U.S. Army provided an escape from poverty but also exposed him to the brutal reality of war. He was an infantryman in some of the toughest battles of World War II”.<sup>5</sup> Thenceforward, Castillo declares his time serving in the military as a fulfilment to his “obligation” to the United States. Consequently, as Mechicanos began moving up social classes due to increased economical wealth, many minority families saw the war as an opportunity for advancement and eventually encouraged their children to enlist in the military.

Comparatively, the role of Mechicanas during and after WWII was immensely effected by cultural barriers that impeded them from leaving home to serve in the military. Before WWII, young Latinas were expected to stay-at-home and bear children. This ideology has been passed through generations and continues to impact modern-day Mechicanas. However, as Mechicana/o families were introduced to the possible benefits

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<sup>5</sup> Marcos Castillo, *Lauro Castillo*, 2012.

the military could provide, the community began to reidentify the role of a Mechicana. Mechicanas often went against the advice of their elders and continued to enlist in the army at a rapid pace. In an article published by El Paso ISD they say, “Bilingualism was highly sought after during the war and so they found important work in cryptology, communications and interpretation. As linguists, nurses and Red Cross aids, and in the WAACS, WAVES, and Marine Corps Women’s Reserve, Latinas broke through both gender and cultural barriers to serve their country”.<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, however, Mechicanas received hardly any recognition for the work done through WWII. Despite their tremendous participation in the war, Mechicana’s parents would not be able to claim death gratuity if their child died while serving. The stark difference between the Mechicana and Mechicano experience during WWII highlights diverse contrast between the treatment of soldiers. Battling segregation at the same time, Mechicana soldiers suffered much more than acknowledged in academia. Moving forward after WWII, the Mechicana/o community was so distraught with mixed emotions on the mistreatment of their soldiers, that Mechicanas/os did not quite understand how to react as a community whose genders had distinct experiences. After constantly enduring xenophobia, minorities returning from the war became increasingly upset as they witnessed their peer’s benefit from white privilege. Thus, what followed the war was a detrimental ideology which influenced citizens of Southern California to cultivate antagonism towards Mechicanas/os.

Until the early 1960s, a majority of Mechicanas/os silently endured the harassment that followed World War II by working intense physical labor jobs for

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<sup>6</sup> El Paso Independent School District, *The American War Effort at Home and Abroad*, 2019.

extremely low wages until the Farmworker's Strike Movement of 1965. With few jobs available to Mechicanas/os after the war, to some, slaving away in a hot field for long hours seemed like a small price to pay for someone yearning after the American Dream. As Mechicanas/os left the battlefield, many were under the assumption that walking into the grape fields of California equated economic freedom. With the demand for their labor after World War II, farm owners were expected to produce more food with fewer workers while complying with a whole new set of regulations. For this reason, an article published by Equal Justice Initiative says, "in the 19th century, Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, and Mexican workers did most of the low-paid, physically-demanding agricultural work in western states like California and Arizona... [additionally] Migrant workers lacked educational opportunities for their children, lived in poverty and terrible housing conditions, and faced discrimination and violence when they sought fair treatment."<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, when farmworkers would attempt to organize unions amongst each other each, almost all efforts were violently suppressed.

Nevertheless, with the commencement of the Bracero program, Mexican workers were allowed to enter the United States on a temporary basis between 1942 and 1964. By the time the program ended it was estimated that approximately 4.6 million Mexican nationals came to work in the U.S. Unfortunately, however, many laborers faced an array of injustices and abuses, including substandard housing, discrimination, and unfulfilled contracts or being cheated out of wages. To illustrate, in an interview with Bracero migrant farmworker, Chris Luna says, "I went to the offices and I told them that I wanted to go back to Mexico, that I didn't want to work under those conditions. The person there

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<sup>7</sup> Equal Justice Initiative, *The Farmworker's Movement*, 2014.

told me, he said, well, you know, it cost us a lot of money to bring you here, so we'd rather have you stay.”<sup>8</sup> Hence, as migrant farmworkers were denied equal rights, they were ultimately forced to endure inhumane living conditions. For instance, farmworkers were typically stripped of their clothes to be fumigated by the processing center they worked for. To illustrate, when describing the lived experiences of her father, Mary Vargas says,

As a family provider, he figured the Bracero Program was his ticket to a better future. He felt at ease knowing he was going to the USA with his cousin. As they arrived in Arizona, he found himself in a small room overcrowded with others. His stomach growled with hunger; he was surviving on limited meal portions. After a couple of days of waiting, he started to smell. No showers or restrooms were available to them. They were ordered to form 2 lines. They were told to take off all their clothes and walk into a room and stand there. Soon, he heard a spraying sound. He found himself covered with a white powder substance, he was told the powder was to kill lice, yet no shower was provided afterward.<sup>9</sup>

Furthermore, when highlighting the conditions of their work environment, the United Farm Workers coalition (UFW) says,

Grape pickers in 1965 were making an average of \$.90/hour, plus ten cents per “lug” (basket) picked. State laws regarding working standards were simply ignored by growers. At one farm the boss made the workers all drink from the same cup “a beer can “in the field; at another ranch workers were forced to pay a quarter per cup. No ranches had portable field toilets. Workers’ temporary housing was strictly segregated by race, and they paid two dollars or more per day for unheated metal shacks-often infested with mosquitoes-with no indoor plumbing or cooking facilities. Farm labor contractors played favorites with workers, selecting friends first, sometimes accepting bribes. Child labor was rampant, and many workers were injured or died in easily preventable accidents. The average life expectancy of a farmworker was 49 years.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Shereen Meraji, *Documenting the Stories of Bracero Guest Workers*, 2006.

<sup>9</sup> Mary Vargas, *Un Simple Bracero*, 2022.

<sup>10</sup> The United Farm Workers, *UFW History*, 2022.

With many braceros remaining in the United States after their contracts ended, however, the Immigration and Naturalization Service began Operation Wetback in 1954 where many US-born children of Mexican braceros were wrongly repatriated, along with their parents. In an interview with Gloria Mendez from Fresno, California, she says,

My father Raul lived most of his young life in Juarez, Mexico...at the age of 15 he came back to the U.S. and started to work in the fields in Fresno County. Whenever the "Migra" would come in the fields looking for Mexicans without proper papers to work, my father wouldn't run because he was an American...but because he spoke no English and couldn't explain where he was born, he was deported twice back to Mexico.<sup>11</sup>

Similarly, speaking on program itself, scholar Jorge Durand says, “3 un acuerdo bilateral para la importación de trabajadores mexicanos.... El programa era novedoso y ambicioso, y tenía la peculiaridad de ser una propuesta específica del Gobierno De Estados Unidos a la que el Gobierno mexicano accedió después de una exitosa negociación” (The importance of this program lies in the fact that for the first time the United States was willing to establish a bilateral agreement for the importation of Mexican workers.... The program was innovative and ambitious, and had the peculiarity of being a specific proposal of the United States Government to which the Mexican Government agreed after a successful negotiation).<sup>12</sup> Under these circumstances, Mechicanas/os felt obligated to respond to the exploitation of immigrant workers but had no concrete plan or leader to guide their mission. Fortunately, however, a Mexican-American man, Cesar Chavez would soon initiate a peaceful national civil-rights

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Jorge Durand, *Rostros y Rastros: Entrevistas a trabajadores migrantes en Estados Unidos*, 2002.

movement amongst Southern Californians that would redefine the way farmworkers were treated in America.

Named after his grandfather, Cesar Estrada Chavez was born in Yuma, Arizona on March 31, 1927. Most known for his nonviolent practices towards sociopolitical change, Don Chavez<sup>13</sup> was inspired most by tactics of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. After losing their own family farm, Don Chavez and his six siblings became long-term migrant farmworkers during the Great Depression. When interviewed about his experience in the American educational system Don Chavez revealed that leaving school was an easy decision as he despised attending class. Since he only spoke Spanish at home, Don Chavez's experiences were traumatizing in school as he would be physically assaulted as a form of punishment from WASP teachers for speaking his native language. He says, "The teachers were mostly Anglo and only spoke English. Spanish was forbidden in school. He remembers being punished with a ruler to his knuckles for violating the rule. He also remembers that some schools were segregated and he felt that in the integrated schools he was like a monkey in a cage. He remembers having to listen to a lot of racist remarks. He remembers seeing signs that read whites only."<sup>14</sup> Moreover, since the work of Don Chavez required constant traveling, he and his brother, Richard, attended thirty-seven schools. Due to the constant change of schools, Don Chavez and his siblings were never allowed enough time to build relationships with teachers and students. The decision for him to drop out of school was largely due to an accident his father had that left their household unemployed. Since Don Chavez did not

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<sup>13</sup> "Don" is a prefix term used within the Mechicana/o community when referring to a well-respected elder.

<sup>14</sup> Crystal Wilson, *Who is Cesar Chavez?*, 2017.

want his mother, Juana, to work in the fields, he chose not to go to high school and instead became a migrant farm worker. Over time, after first-hand experiencing the injustices his people faced, Don Chavez was able to work alongside community groups and churches who were affiliated with the civil rights movement. As a result, farmworkers were eventually able to put enough pressure on the government to create sociopolitical change. Unfortunately, however, their efforts to create an equitable and peaceful environment amongst Americans lasted shortly as the hate from WASP communities continuously grew.

WWII and the Bracero Program instilled deep prejudice which racialized criminality. As a result, Mechicanas/os who explored liberty through fashion were met with discrimination. WASP communities were enraged to see Mexican-American youth wearing “zoot suits;” this style of dress included high-waisted pants and long blazers with excess fabric through the width of the pants and arms sleeves. Additionally, the suits were often accompanied with fedoras and chains hanging from the waist. Consequently, Mechicanas/os were harassed daily for their aesthetic as hegemonic Americans because they believed individuals who wore extra fabric on their bodies at a time of rationing and restrictions were being blatantly disrespectful to the veterans and active members of WWII. The youth that took on this style were labeled as *pachuco*, which was a derogatory way to label a Mechicana/o gang member. Coined in the 1940s, pachucos and pachucas were mostly made up of Mexican, African American and Jewish youth living in the working class. Furthermore, the pachuca defied social norms as well as challenged femininity. “Pachucas wore... improvised men’s jackets with short skirts, fishnet stockings or bobby socks pulled up to the calves, platform heels, saddle shoes or

huarache sandals. They piled their hair high in a pompadour style and wore heavy makeup, especially lipstick.” Going against gender and cultural norms, these pachucas were constantly exposed to belittlement by civilians for their aesthetic. Additionally, although the origin of the word *pachuco* is unknown, most scholars believe the term originated in El Paso, Texas. An article released by Mercury News says, “The city of El Paso was typically referred to as Chuco town or El Chuco and people moving from Los Angeles to El Paso would say they were going pa El Chuco (to Chuco town).”<sup>15</sup> Nonetheless, Mechicano scholar Gilberto Perez says, “the direct translation to English for the *pachuco* is the Zoot Suiter”.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, Perez encourages others to view *pachucos* as classy gangsters who endured injustices in the hands of wealthy Americans and local law enforcement. Additionally, Dr. Javier Duran says, “The pachuco's strategies of survival are reflected in the codified language of the body (hair style, tattooing, dress, gestures, and dance) and in the equally codified language of space (marking territories with graffiti in the city, the barrio, and the street).”<sup>17</sup>

Unfortunately, many Mechicanas/os faced harassment from government officials regardless of their sense of style. Thus, the ideology of a crime belonging to a race ultimately impacted the way American government officials treated their citizens. Dr. Covington, says,

Because American criminologists live in a society that racializes a number of problem behaviors, including crime, it is conceivable that widely held beliefs about race that predate graduate training will find their way into assumptions

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<sup>15</sup> Mercury News, *Zoot Suit Riots: Sailors vs. pachucos a turning point for Latino culture in California*, 2013.

<sup>16</sup> Gilberto Perez, *Pachuco*, 2021.

<sup>17</sup> Javier Duran, *Nation and Translation: The ‘Pachuco’ in Mexican Popular Culture: Germán Valdéz’s Tin Tan*, 2002.

about the relationship between race and crime. Such preprofessional beliefs are transformed into “facts” when they are met with widespread agreement from other criminologists...When crime is thus racialized, whole communities or whole categories of phenotypically similar individuals are rendered precriminal and morally suspect.<sup>18</sup>

For this reason, hundreds of Mechicanas/os were rounded up by LAPD. More importantly, biases in the legal system led officials to believe any crime connected to a dagger correlated with Mechicana/o gang members.

The greatest example of this would be the Sleepy Lagoon Murder Trial of 1942. In early August of that year, a birthday party was thrown at the Delgadillo’s home near a reservoir popularly known as “the sleepy lagoon.” It was frequently visited by Mechicanas/os who were denied entrance to public pools. After a surge of young couples visited the lake, however, the reservoir earned its nickname the Lover’s Lane. The swimming hole was located at the Williams Ranch in what is now known as Commerce, California. Allegedly, at around 10 p.m. eight to ten young men showed up to Delgadillo’s party uninvited and were ordered to leave upon arrival. However, they did not leave without threatening the owner of the home that they “would be back to devastate the party.”<sup>19</sup> In anger, those men walked half a mile before encountering members of their rival gang parked by the reservoir at Sleepy Lagoon. After assaulting them while parked, the victims, including Henry Leyvas and his girlfriend Dora Barrios, returned to their own neighborhoods to collect a group of 30 friends and family to join them in retaliation. However, when they returned to the place they were once parked, the

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<sup>18</sup> Jeanette Covington, *Racial Classification in Criminology: The Reproduction of Racialized Crim*, 1995.

<sup>19</sup> La Opinion, *El Problema Juvenil Se Ha Agravado*, August 3, 1942.

victims could no longer find the men who attacked them. Instead, they followed the music coming from a house nearby and decided to seek justice right there and then with those individuals. Jesus Ambrosio says, “Henry and his friends were convinced that the guys who had assaulted him earlier were at this party, and they headed to the ranch, and there was a ten-minute fight.”<sup>20</sup> The next morning, 22-year-old José Díaz was found lying in the middle of the road wounded by beatings and stab wounds.

Eleanor Delgadillo Coronado, the person whom the party was thrown for, testified that she saw Díaz along with Luis Vargas and Andrew Torres leave the house together after the party began to “break up.”<sup>21</sup> Díaz and his friends were walking home from the Delgadillo’s party at around 1 a.m. when they encountered their attackers who waited for them to walk far enough to be in a dark area. Once hidden, Díaz endured multiple blows to the face with closed fists, as well as being hit in the arms and head with a club. When found 30 minutes later, Díaz’s pockets were flipped inside out and he was bleeding profusely from his mouth and ears while his eyes were swollen shut. When identifying how Diaz defended himself, Dr. Pagán says,

José Díaz tried to duck under his lean arms to shield himself from the punishing beating, but he could feel his strength slip-ping away. He struggled to defend himself, punching into the dark night at the men who surrounded him, but his aim was bad. Fear surging through his mind caused him to swing wildly, and he was almost too drunk to keep his balance. He hit someone, though, three or four times, hard enough to skin his knuckles and break his finger.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Jesus Ambrosio, *LA Public Library's archival photos show the real people who inspired 'Zoot Suit'*, February 16, 2017.

<sup>21</sup> Eduardo Obregón Pagán, *José Gallardo Díaz*, 2022.

<sup>22</sup> Eduardo Obregón Pagán, *Murder at the Sleepy Lagoon : Zoot Suits, Race, and Riot in Wartime L.A.*, 2003.

An hour and a half after admitted, José Díaz died without regaining consciousness at the Los Angeles General Hospital. The following Monday morning, Díaz's death made the front cover of the *Los Angeles Times*. The entire Mechicana/o community was in disbelief and utter shock at his murder. Dr. Pagán says, "In response to his death.... the governor's office urged Los Angeles law enforcement agencies to crack down on juvenile delinquency. The police and sheriff's office coordinated a massive dragnet, arresting hundreds of young people..".<sup>23</sup> LAPD executed mass incarceration by arresting citizens based on minor offenses ranging from vagrancy, curfew violation, "unlawful assemblage," or possessing a draft card with an incorrect address. Consequently, the police department was able to round-up an estimated 600 Mechicanas/os in a matter of eight days. Taken into custody August 10, 1942, trials for the Sleepy Lagoon murder trial were not set until January 1943. Thus, six months later, twenty-two young men were charged with Jose Díaz's murder. Those convicted include: Manuel Delgado (1924-1999), Enrique "Henry" Leyvas (1923-1971), John Matuz (1922-X), Jack Melendez (1921-X), Angel Padilla (1924-X), Ysmael "Smiles" Parra (1922-2001), Manuel Reyes Salazar (1925-1995), José "Chepe" Ruiz (1925-1996), Robert Telles (1924-1967), Victor "Bobby" Thompson (1921-1998), Henry Joseph Ynostroza (1924-2006), Gustavo "Gus" Zamora (1922-1983), Andrew Acosta (1925-X), Eugene Carpio (1925-1970), Benny Alvarez (1923-2000), Victor Segobia (1927-X), Joseph Valenzuela (1923-1982), Edward Grandpré (1924-1982), Ruben Peña (1926-1998), Daniel Verdugo (1923-1995), Joe Carpio (1924-1984), and Richard Gastelum (1925-?). The Zoot Suit Discovery Guide from Pomona College says,

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<sup>23</sup> Eduardo Obregón Pagán, *Sleepy Lagoon Murder Trial*, 2013.

Prosecutors withheld clean clothing and haircuts from the Sleepy Lagoon defendants for two months preceding the trial, so that the accused would look like stereotypical "boy gangsters" when they appeared in court... One prosecution witness, Lieutenant Edward Duran Ayres of the Los Angeles Sheriff's Office, testified that Mexicans had a racial propensity for violence, rooted in a pre-Columbian disregard for human life exemplified by Aztec sacrifices. More specific prosecution testimony included identifications by guests at the Delgadillo party and statements to police by the defendants, several of whom incriminated each other.<sup>24</sup>

Additionally, Dr. Pagán says, "The prosecution based part of its case on the "distinctive appearance" of the accused, arguing that their love of jazz fashion was evidence of their social deviancy."<sup>25</sup> Consequently, all but five of the 22 Sleepy Lagoon defendants were convicted of murder and/or assault. The sentences varied from one year in county jail to life in prison. Equally important, the young girls who were victims of abuse after parking at the "lover's lane" were sentenced to the Ventura School for Girls, a draconian reformatory, without benefit of jury or trial. Expecting to be there for years, women such as Lorena Encinas gave up their entire life as they were taken into custody over suspicion of being accomplices to the *pachucos*. Historian and Mechicano Scholar, Eduardo Pagán says, "The reformatory was a facility for wayward and sexually promiscuous young women; having a daughter incarcerated there was a great shame for any family."<sup>26</sup> Most interestingly, in the same article Pagán reveals through Lorena's dying testimony that her younger brother Louis Jesus escaped imprisonment with the help of his older sister.

Pagán says,

According to Ted Encinas, Lorena's son, on the evening of August 1, 1942, Lorena attended a birthday party at the Williams ranch. She told her children

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<sup>24</sup> Pomona College Department of Theatre & Dance, *Zoot Suit Discovery Guide*, 2022.

<sup>25</sup> Eduardo Obregón Pagán, *Sleepy Lagoon Murder Trial*, 2013.

<sup>26</sup> Eduardo Pagán, *Lorena Encinas*, 2022.

decades later that Louis and some friends had crashed that party, and after a brief altercation the family ordered him to leave. He told her that upon leaving, he and his friends encountered a boy who had just left the party and ‘jumped him’. Later, when the Los Angeles police answered a call that there had been a murder near the house, they questioned Lorena. She refused to say anything and was subsequently taken into custody... Lorena, who had an insight into the murder that the others didn't, adamantly rebuffed the prosecution's attempts to get a confession or to point the finger at any of the young men on trial. Lorena had much to lose as the result of her silence... Lorena had to give her child up to her mother to raise for the length of her internment. Her brother Louie's safety, however, was preeminent to her and she would allow her friends and herself to be locked up before implicating him. Louie had had a close call as it was. According to Lorena, he had been picked up in the citywide dragnet, but was released when the 600-strong group had been whittled down to the 22 boys who eventually were put on trial. Lorena was released when she turned 21 on September 4, 1943.<sup>27</sup>

Therefore, as the complexities of the trial ensued, many Mechicanas/os were enraged at the fact that members of their community were being thrown in and out of jails being wrongly committed, while, as Dr. Pagán points out, actual criminals were still walking in the streets of Los Angeles. For this reason, scholars firmly believe that “the trial is still considered by many as one of the most egregious miscarriages of justice in the United States”.<sup>28</sup>

Consequently, throughout the mid-1940s minorities were inclined to demonstrate resistance to the government in both peaceful and violent ways. They were determined to seek justice for their brothers and sisters who had suffered violence as a result of prejudice in the hands of policemen and servicemen. The press at the time discredited Mechicanas/os by posing them as a threat to the community in labeling these individuals as “hoodlums” during the trial. Most pivotal to the research, however, the tone of the Spanish press was completely different compared to newspapers like the *Los Angeles*

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Pomona College Department of Theatre & Dance, *Zoot Suit Discovery Guide*, 2022.

*Times* and the *Herald Express*. To begin with, Spanish press hardly ever covered the trial while English press was printing the murder on their front pages. For example, the day after Diaz's murder, the front cover of the biggest Spanish newspaper in Los Angeles, *La Opinion*, mainly covered topics related to Nazis. It wasn't until August 3, 1943, that the Spanish press began to cover Diaz's death in small print saying "*El Problema Juvenil Se Ha Agravado*" (The Problem with the Youth Has Gotten Worse).<sup>29</sup> Additionally, in the article the newspaper confirms an additional death along with a high count of casualties—a topic unaddressed in English Press. With 11 injured and 2 dead, *La Opinion* said LAPD declared a war against young Mechicanas/os believed to be gang members. Furthermore, the article goes on to explain that the second death belonged to an unknown victim who drowned while running away from the fight at the party. For this reason, *La Opinion* says "*Armados con manivelas de automóviles y cadenas...regresaron al lugar, golpearon a las victimas y apuñalaron en el estómago a dos de los invitados...El hombre, que no se ha podido ser identificado, saltó al lago para escapar de sus peseguidores, según se informó a la policia*" (Armed with car cranks and chains...they returned to the scene, beat the victims and stabbed two of the guests in the stomach...The man, who could not be identified, jumped into the lake to escape his pursuers, according to reports to the police.).<sup>30</sup> Hence, the article goes on to provide a plethora of witnesses who testify seeing an unknown body jump into water while running away from gang members that were chasing him to beat him to death.

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<sup>29</sup> La Opinion, "*El Problema Juvenil Se Ha Agravado*", August 3, 1942.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

It is important to point out that the distinction of mentioning additional deaths in Spanish press ultimately led to some confusion within the Mechicana/o community. It was not until a week after Diaz's death that the Spanish press, such as *La Opinion*, began to print the murder investigation on their front pages with bold letters. Saying, "23 *Jovenes Pandilleros Acusados De Asesinato: No se les Acepta la Fianza*" (23 Young Gang Members Accused of Murder: They've Been Denied)<sup>31</sup> shows that the Spanish press was expressing more empathy for those being accused of murder. Pointing out that these young men were denied bail, the article informs its readers of the plans the governor of Los Angeles. "Ordeno que hagan uso de la autorización que tienen para llevar a cabo una completa investigación sobre lo que ha ocurrido en conexión con la Guerra de las pandillas. Espero que tomen las medidas necesarias para poner fin a esta situación" ( I order that you use the authorization you have to conduct a full investigation into what has occurred in connection with the Gang War. I hope you take the necessary measures to put an end to this situation).<sup>32</sup> Declaring a war with pachucos, Governor Olson tells anyone who will listen that he will do whatever he deems "appropriate" to end the fight against Mechicana/o youth. Moreover, the article blamed *pachucas* for instigating the fight and pleads them to turn themselves into a juvenile delinquency center. Additionally, *La Opinion* blames the violence at the Delgadillo's party to be derived from the use of marijuana. Uniquely, the article also mentions the reason the men were kicked out of the Delgadillos home was because the men from the 38<sup>th</sup> street gang were caught trying to steal beer. Furthermore, because Henry Leyvas, the

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<sup>31</sup> *La Opinion*, 23 *Jovenes Pandilleros Acusados De Asesinato: No se les Acepta la Fianza*, August 7, 1942.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

protagonist of the musical *Zoot Suit*, once belonged to the 38th street gang, he was the first suspect to speak to the judge. Even though he denied being a part of the gang and explained to the judge that moving *barrios* confirmed his absence, Judge Charles W. Fricke was inclined to believe the testimony of others and sentenced Leyvas to life in prison.

The Zoot Suit Riots occurred a couple of months after Jose Diaz's death in the Sleepy Lagoon Murder trial. With the substantial amount of Mechicanas/os entering the United States prior to World War II through the Bracero Program, tension was building in the West Coast between the youth and servicemen over sociopolitical disagreements. Additionally, initiatives were made by Wartime Productions Board to enforce regulations on the making of clothes directly targeting the Mechicana/o community. In rebellion, adolescents from the *barrios* to downtown L.A. were strutting their coats and porkpie hats. As Mechicanas/os were becoming the dominant minority in Los Angeles, an influx of adolescents become more comfortable sharing their unique style in places outside their *barrios*- something Dr. J. Chiodo points out was abnormal for older generations. In his article, "The Zoot Suit Riots: Exploring Social Issues in American History", Dr. Chiodo emphasizes that as Los Angeles was growing in numbers of Mechicanas/os the city was simultaneously housing some of the largest military bases in the country. As a result, his article stresses the following:

Men from all over the country who had no previous experience with the Latino culture were now located in direct proximity to large groups of young Latinos. At first, the servicemen merely ridiculed the Latino males attired in zoot suits. However, this later turned into resentment because the zoot-suiters were not wearing military uniforms and fighting for their country. In addition, the local

press had been promoting fear by asserting that a “Mexican crime wave” had hit the city and zoot-suiters and gangsters were one and the same.<sup>33</sup>

Consequently, the tension between servicemen and Mechicana/o youth led to violent encounters that caught the attention of major American newspapers. On June 2, 1943, *The Los Angeles Times* published the article “Youth Gangs Leading Cause of Delinquencies” by Gene Sherman illustrating such encounters. Sherman acknowledges the opinion of Herman G. Stark, L.A. Chief of delinquency prevention, declaring that although zoot suits became the identity of criminals most Mechicana/o youth participated in this style as an effort of “being different”. He says, “thousands of zoot suit wearers are non-delinquents”.<sup>34</sup> However, the following day, on June 3, 1943, the streets of Los Angeles became a blood war between WASP servicemen and Mechicana/o youth. When describing the worst race riot in the city to this day, a recent documentary released by PBS says:

For 10 straight nights, American sailors armed with make-shift weapons cruised Mexican American neighborhoods in search of "zoot-suiters" — hip, young Mexican teens dressed in baggy pants and long-tailed coats. The military men dragged kids — some as young as twelve years old — out of movie theaters and diners, bars and cafes, tearing the clothes off the young men's bodies and viciously beating them. Mexican youths aggressively struck back... One LA paper even printed a guide on how to "de-zoot" a zoot-suiter. When the violence ended, scores of Mexicans and servicemen were in hospital beds.<sup>35</sup>

An estimated 50,000 sailors crowded the streets of LA throughout these ten long nights. Worse, mobs of off-duty officers and civilians flooded the roads joining the sailors in their belligerent behavior. On June 5, 1943, *The Herald Express*, Los Angeles’ biggest

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<sup>33</sup> John J. Chiodo, *The Zoot Suit Riots: Exploring Social Issues in American History*, 2013.

<sup>34</sup> Gene Sherman, *Youth Gangs Leading Cause of Delinquencies*, 1943.

<sup>35</sup> PBS, *Zoot Suit Riots*, 2022.

newspaper at the time, wrote on its front cover, “The fleet men, who went methodically about applying the fist’s and rope’s ends to the gang terror problem, reported ‘all’s well,’ following a night of wild rioting which sent the hoodlums under cover.”<sup>36</sup> Scholars argue that the resentment is rooted from a couple things. First, there was a high number of Mechicanas/os volunteering in the armed forces at the time, therefore WASP sailors, soldiers, and marines viewed any Mechicana/o who roamed the streets of L.A. wearing a zoot suit as war-dodgers. On the other hand, Eduardo Pagan says, “...by wearing their zoot suits, and swaggering down the streets in public, these kids defied the norms of segregation”.<sup>37</sup> In truth, however, most of these kids were just too young to join the military.

Secondly, historians suggest that the inception of the riots began three days prior to June 3<sup>rd</sup> when a sailor lost a fight against a young Mechicano. The documentary says:

As a group of service personnel were passing a group of civilian youth, one young man raised his hand in a manner that one of the sailors thought was threatening. One of the sailors turned around, and grabbed the arm of the young civilian, and from that point the fight broke out. It seemed that both sides were primed for confrontation, and the street seemed to explode in a fight. In the process, the sailor had his jaw broken, he was knocked unconscious, and his buddies had to drag him back to the armory.<sup>38</sup>

Returning with their clubs and belts, these servicemen committed heinous crimes against Mechicanas/os in downtown Los Angeles. Not satisfied, however, the sailors began crossing rivers to get to *barrios* in East Los Angeles such as Boyle Heights to attack more youth. Art Arenas, who first-hand witnessed the riots says, “I was in the theater

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<sup>36</sup> The Herald Express, 1943.

<sup>37</sup> PBS, *Zoot Suit Riots*, 2022.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

downtown and watching a movie. All of a sudden the lights went on, and you hear a lot of noise -- commotion, and a lot of guys yelling or something. Now you turn around and you see these servicemen, beating the heck out of all these Mexicans.”<sup>39</sup> After witnessing these men burn their baggy trousers and long padded jackets to the ground, Mechicanas/os ultimately defended themselves. Jennifer Robinson says, “On the fifth day of the riots, 5,000 civilians showed up to assist the service members. Mexican American kids organized and fought back. For days, the LAPD hung back. Finally, on June 8, military authorities and civilian leaders declared the city off-limits to servicemen, ending the rioting. The next day, the city council banned the wearing of zoot suits on LA streets”.<sup>40</sup> Consequently, any minority who continued to style themselves in oversized clothing throughout this ban became labeled as *pachuco* or *pachuca*. Moreover, in an attempt to unionize, *pachucos* and *pachucas* created their own language amongst themselves, *calo*. The Zoot Suit discovery guide from Pomona College says:

The use of Caló by Mexican youth was an act of defiance and resistance. It represented the refusal of Mexican youth to assimilate into the United States culture and signified their determination to create a legitimate national identity as both American and Mexican.... Mexican youth had the unique ability to codeswitch between standard English, Spanish, and Caló, while inventing new neologisms.... they were multilingual pioneers and creators of a new language, identity and culture.<sup>41</sup>

Though meaningful to the Mechicana/o community, the press depicted their culture as a threat to all of America. On July 16, 1944, a *Los Angeles Times* article titled “Youthful Gang Secrets Exposed,” tried to analyze “*calo*” saying, “Gang members speak

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Jennifer Robinson, *American Experience: Zoot Suit Riots*, 2022.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

a strange argot unintelligible to the uninitiated.”<sup>42</sup> The article goes on to say, “The fantastically high pompadour of the girls serves another purpose than that of the gang trademark. It is used to conceal both a knife and a finger-nail file. The gangsters themselves carry knives attached to the grotesquely heavy chains leading from belt to trousers pocket; sometimes the knife is carried taped to the thigh.”<sup>43</sup> Consequently, this image the press was pushing impacted the way they were treated, as individuals reading these headlines became more and more repulsed at Mechicana/o youth. Influenced by the journalists working under William Randolph Hearst in the early 1900’s, reporters pushed a false narrative for the purpose of increasing revenue.

Additionally, given that newspapers were high in demand during the 1940s, the articles published heavily impacted the public opinion. As a result, Mechicanas/os living in Los Angeles during the 1940s endured overwhelming persecution from the majority. Hence, it was impossible at the time for one to be in the public eye without the fear of being arrested or beaten by local servicemen. For example, Dr. Escobedo says:

Amelia Venegas left her East Los Angeles home, baby in arms, to buy milk at a local market. Concerned by news of recent skirmishes between Anglo servicemen and Mexican American zoot suiters on city streets, the young mother impulsively grabbed a pair of brass knuckles found months earlier on a local sidewalk. With wartime emotions at heightened levels, a woman left alone while her navy husband fought overseas could never be too careful. Yet for all of her precautions, trouble would soon befall Mrs. Venegas. As she and her baby witnessed police officers harassing a group of zoot suiters, Venegas felt a sense of injustice rise within her. Unable to contain her emotions, the Mexican American woman cursed the law enforcement officials for their hostile treatment of the young men... Unmoved by her verbal denunciations, the officers immediately arrested Venegas

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<sup>42</sup> The Los Angeles Times, *Youthful Gang Secrets Exposed*, 1944.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

for disturbing the peace and, upon finding the brass knuckles on her person, charged the young mother for carrying a concealed weapon.<sup>44</sup>

*The Los Angeles Times* went on to label Venegas as a *pachuca* and featured a photo of her on the front cover holding a tight fist and gnarring her teeth while looking into the camera. Though she had never committed a crime before, most Mechicanas/os who found themselves in the same predicament as Venegas were chained and locked away.

Ultimately the Zoot Riots were ended after all Navy shore leaves were cancelled and the press stopped misrepresenting Mechicana/o youth wearing zoot suits. On top of that, however, Mexican ambassadors in the White House demanded that the Secretary of State conduct a formal inquiry of the situation, leading to investigations uncovering those guilty of committing heinous crimes. With accountability at their forefront, it was still difficult for Mechicanas/os to regain any trust with servicemen or civilians from the West Coast.

As we have seen, the violent representation of Mechicana/os in English and Spanish Press led to an unprecedented amount of discrimination from WASP communities. Consequently, the tension that resulted from WWII, the Farmworker's Strike Movement, and the Zoot Suit Riots still pierce the streets of the L.A. today. We've learned that the Sleepy Lagoon Murder Trial of 1942 is what ultimately pushed Mechicanas/os to go from peaceful protest and boycotts to initiating defense committees. In the next chapter, we will explore the process in which a bunch of activists got together to appeal the sentences of all those prosecuted. Valdez illustrates this process with depth in the second act of his award-winning production *Zoot Suit*.

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<sup>44</sup> Elizabeth R. Escobedo, *The Pachuca Panic: Sexual and Cultural Battlegrounds in World War II Los Angeles*, 2007.

## CHAPTER THREE

### *Zoot Suit* at The Mark Taper Forum

This chapter examines the production process of the musical *Zoot Suit* which premiered August 17, 1978 at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles, California. When Luis Valdez and members of ETC collaboratively produced the musical, *Mechicana/o actos* evolved into mainstream, Broadway-bound theatre. Before doing so, the work of ETC had earned respect and high value by the *raza* in Southern California. Reviews of ETC in the mainstream press, however, led to a loss of support. Both English and Spanish language press influenced cultural divisions amongst the community that ultimately led to the shutdown of *Zoot Suit* on Broadway. Therefore, the goal of this chapter is to identify how the Spanish and English press effected the audience reception of the *Mechicana/o* community in the premiere of *Zoot Suit* in 1978.

Distinctively, *Zoot Suit* initially began as a sociopolitical response based on historical fact but artistic liberties and/or historical inaccuracies caused some issues. The *Zoot Suit Riots*, previously mentioned in Chapter 2, served as the foundation that encouraged Chicano artists like Valdez to produce plays that reflected the macro and microaggressions endured within the *Mechicana/o* community. Unfortunately, decisions by the playwright endangered the authenticity of the experience, and the *Mechicana/o* audience became suspicious of Valdez's work. For instance, in dramatizing the violence in *Zoot Suit*, Valdez's inconsistencies with the Sleepy Lagoon Murder Trial resulted in backlash from those originally convicted of the felony. The musical emphasizes the usage

of a switchblade for *pachucho* youth: historically none of the members from the 38<sup>th</sup> Street Gang carried one. The eight surviving defendants of the Sleepy Lagoon Murder Trial filed a lawsuit against Luis Valdez and other collaborators for defamation and won. Each member was awarded a percentage of the proceeds from the musical. Consequently, Mechicana/o patrons began to take notice of Valdez's inconsistencies; as a result, Mechicana/o patrons become disinterested in the work.

Luis Valdez's *Zoot Suit* opens with a backdrop filled with a collage of newspapers reporting the 1940's riots between servicemen and Mechicanas/os. The set intentionally highlights an article published by *Los Angeles Herald Express* in 1943 titled, "Zoot-Suiter Hordes Invade Los Angeles. U.S. Navy and Marines Are Called In."<sup>1</sup> When the play begins, El Pachuco enters downstage using his switchblade to slice himself through the wall of newspapers. Dr. Shakina Nayfack says, "with something between a glide and a strut, he moves effortlessly, yet full of control, time and space at his command. He is the ultimate rebel, the dashing and daring provocateur, *el carnal de aquellas*."<sup>2</sup> The prologue says that although *caló* has been recognized by scholars and civilians as a blend of cultures and languages, the play uses this term to describe a form of language adaptation and code switching. Therefore, when El Pachuco first speaks in Act I his dialect is infused with *caló* shortly before breaking the fourth wall and addressing the audience in perfect English. The scene continues with a dance being hosted in a local barrio where members of the real Sleepy Lagoon Murder Trial, Henry Reyna and Della

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<sup>1</sup> Los Angeles Herald Express, *Zoot-Suiter Hordes Inade Los Angeles. U.S. Navy and Marines Are Called In*, 1943.

<sup>2</sup> Shakina Nayfack, *Que Le Watcha Los Cabrones: Marking the 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Luis Valdez's 'Zoot Suit*, 2009.

Barrios, are characterized. Additionally, the scene begins with an American sailor, Swabbie, dancing with his Asian-American girlfriend amongst the couples living in the *barrio*.

Shortly after the dance begins, sirens are heard while detectives and officers of LAPD swarm the stage intending to arrest any Mechicana/o wearing a zoot suit. However, while arresting almost everyone in sight, Sargent Smith allows for Swabbie and his girlfriend to flee the scene without repercussions. Other character such as Henry and Della are threatened with guns and then rounded up, along with 300 other boys and girls, at the Central Jail in Los Angeles. Immediately after, the stage is filled with press taking photos of those arrested while reporting the four different headlines released on August 2, 1942. These articles mimic the historical response of the press during the Sleepy Lagoon Murder Trial.

Emphasizing the role the press played in the trial, Valdez uses the following couple of scenes to uncover the conversations being had amongst Mechicanas/os who were weary of their safety due to the mass incarceration rates. In Scene 3 of Act 1, El Pachuco and Henry are locked up expressing their frustration towards the justice system of America.

Henry: I don't like this, ese. I DON'T LIKE BEING LOCKED UP!

Pachuco: *Calmantos montes, chicas patas*. Haven't I taught you to survive? Play it cool.

Henry: They're going to do it again, ese! They're going to charge me with some phony rap and keep me until they make something stick.

Pachuco: So what's new?<sup>3</sup>

The scene goes on to reveal that Henry was preparing to report for the Navy the next morning and that the roundup prohibited him from doing so. While later being

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<sup>3</sup> Luis Valdez, *Zoot Suit*, 1978.

interrogated by Lieutenant Edwards and Sergeant Smith, Henry explains that this was not his first time being framed for a crime he didn't commit. Referring the issue of mass imprisonment on people of color at the time, Reyna reflects to when Edwards accused him of stealing his own father's car. At the same time, unbeknownst to the officers, El Pachuco is speaking into the ears of Henry during the interrogation encouraging him to not comply with LAPD officers. Consequently, Edwards and the press leave the stage while Sergeant Smith abuses and beats Henry with a rubber sap as a tactic to get him to leave a statement.

Referring to the death of 22-year-old farmworker José Díaz, Valdez goes on in the next couple of scenes to portray the horror the Mechicana/o community endured because of Díaz's death. Valdez blends fantasy and fiction to expose the complexities of the trial. By Scene 5 of Act 1, we are introduced to a WASP ally, Alice Bloomfield, whose role is to advocate for the Mechicanos being accused on the Sleepy Lagoon Murder trial. Alice asks Lieutenant Edwards intrusive questions during press conferences. As a result, reporters around her ask her questions in a degrading manner such as time when she was asked, "what paper are you with, lady? *The Daily Worker*?"<sup>4</sup> Then, the play later goes on to reveal a second WASP ally, George Shearer, (based upon the historical Chief Defense Lawyer, George E. Shibly). By the end of Scene 6 of Act 1, all men suspected of murder join with George to fight for their freedom.

Then, flashbacking to the night of the dance, *Zoot Suit* portrays what Valdez believes to be the details of the case. In Scene 7 of Act 1, Rudy, Henry's younger brother, is seen drinking against the orders of his parents and, while under the influence, he

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

involves himself in altercations with leaders of rival gangs while dancing in the *barrio*. As a result, we witness the most controversial scene of the show when the Downey gang and the 38<sup>th</sup> Street gang get into a knife fight. Using their switchblades, they battle each other until Henry has Rafas in a position where he is on the floor with a blade at his throat. At this point, El Pachuco enters his consciousness and reminds Henry of the attention the public eye, including the press, had on his actions. Additionally, he reminds him that murdering another Mexican is “exactly what the play needs right now... That’s exactly what they paid to see. Think about it.”<sup>5</sup>

Subsequently, in the play Henry chooses to spare Rafas’ life and demands him to leave the dance along with his friends. Foreshadowing the violence to ensue, Della asks, “Hank, what if Rafas comes back with all his gang?” To which he responds, “We’ll kill the sons of bitches.”<sup>6</sup> Scene 8 of Act 1, *Zoot Suit* jumps back to Henry’s cell where he’s being held captive during the trial. Here, Mr. Reyna is first introduced to Alice who explains to him that she is “...from the progressive press”<sup>7</sup> while working for the *Daily People’s World*. Though hesitant to cooperate at first, Henry is convinced to work with Alice after learning that most of his family had already conducted a one-on-one interview with her. Then, Valdez uses the end of the scene to reference the fact that the defendants of the Sleepy Lagoon Murder trial were withheld from clean clothes and haircuts in order to appear barbaric for court. In shock, all parties enter the following scene to commence the trial where the Judge is being played by the same actor that portrays Lieutenant

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

Edwards. Defending all twenty-two men, George struggles at first to gain any traction in the courtroom after the judge denies his movement to all the boys to have access to basic hygiene products. Additionally, George fails to object the plaintiff's motion to have each defendant stand up when their name is mentioned for identification purposes. Though arguing that the motion was self-incrimination, the Judge continues to proceed with the case and dismiss George's plea. Ultimately, the scene ends with all men being found guilty of first-degree murder and the women being sent to a private school for nuns. Paralleling events in the actual trial up until this point, Valdez then shifts the focus of the play to highlight a fabricated romantic relationship between Alice and Henry.

Act II begins with the illustration of the Henry, Joey, Smiley, and Tommy transitioning to the San Quentin prison. As the men struggle with depression in their cells, the second scene of the act introduces the newsletter that was created by the Sleeping Lagoon Defense Committee. Alice, the editor of this paper says, "Announcing the publication of the Appeal News... to be sent to you twice a month for the purpose of keeping you reliably informed of everything."<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately, however, the aid from their WASP ally served useless as members like Smiley were getting upset over Alice's fundraising tactics for the newsletter. Respectfully adapting her campaigns, the men still quarrel with Alice as they are weary of her agenda. As a result, Henry voices out that he refuses to take any help from the committee while he tells Alice, "I don't need defending, esa. I can take care of myself".<sup>9</sup> After an outburst from Ms. Bloomfield, Henry recants his decision and chooses to go forward with Alice's ideas. By the end of scene three, all

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

the men incarcerated are in joyful spirits with Alice and they wish each other well as they say goodbye. Furthermore, the fourth scene starts with George enthusiastically meeting his clients at San Quentin to discover updates they may have had since being imprisoned. It is incredibly hopeful and inspiring as the men speak of the learning their lesson by Warden Duffy, as well as revealing their post-jail aspirations. Their joy lasting only for a short moment, the scene later goes on to reveal that George has been drafted into World War II and will no longer be able to represent them as their lawyer. After eruptions from the men, George interrupts them to remind them of the defense committee that was now an accumulation of thousands of people. George says, “We’ve got a heck of a fine team of lawyers working on the brief. With or without me, the appeal will be won.”<sup>10</sup> In a bittersweet manner, the men say goodbye to one another and make arrangements to see each other after the war. Yet, moments later, after George exits Henry gets into a physical altercation with the prison ward after being mistreated by the officer. As a result, in the fifth scene, Henry is sent to solitary where he goes back and forth with Pachuco until he furiously tells him to “FUCK OFF!”<sup>11</sup> Moreover, the following scene is an illustration of the Zoot Suit Riots of the 1940s where Henry’s younger brother, Rudy, is seen fighting a sailor with a switchblade. After Pachuco stops Rudy from committing murder, he then goes on to argue with Press about the description of Mechicanas/os in mainstream media. Then, Press is joined by a couple of sailors who, in prejudice, assault Pachuco by beating him up and stripping him naked. As Henry watches helplessly from his position, we witness the brutality pachucos and pachucas experienced in Los Angeles

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

throughout World War II. Nevertheless, in the seventh scene *Zoot Suit* explores with detail the romantic relationship between Henry and Alice. It starts off with Alice reading the endless amount of letter she wrote to Henry while in solitary. However, because of his position, Henry was not allowed to view these letters until he completed his 90-day sentence. In outrage, when Alice finally meets Henry, she interrogates him about the altercation he had with the warden, but Henry interrupts her as they again argue over her intentions behind leading the defense committee. Then, Henry goes on to claim that the men incarcerated were going to lose the appeal Alice was setting up because he believed the case would just receive another prejudice judge. In tears, both Alice and Henry passionately share their feelings towards the case and one another. After, Alice rejects Henry's sexual advancement by saying, "if I thought making love to you would solve all your problems, I'd do it in a second. Don't you know that? But it won't".<sup>12</sup> Then, after she finishes speaking, Henry brings her into his close embrace and they passionately kiss in front of the guard. Later, after Alice is escorted out, the guard re-enters and tells Henry that he is a free man. Afterward, the eighth scene illustrates Rudy's journey in joining the military. The press is heavily involved in this scene as they narrate the updates behind the war. During its time, this was one of the only ways for Rudy's family to know how he was doing. The end of the scene highlights the headline declaring the freedom of all men and women wrongly convicted in the Sleepy Lagoon Murder Trial. Finally, the ninth scene begins with the celebration of all Rudy, Henry, Dolores, Lupe, George, and Joey. Never believing the day would come, the families of these men were overwhelmed with relief to see their children released from prison. Rudy then mentions that he requested

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

special time off in the military to be at Henry's homecoming. As a result, the audience becomes aware that his stay is only temporary. Before leaving, however, Rudy insists Henry to go out that night to get drunk. Without hesitation, they both agree and follow the rest of their family into the house where a feast is set to celebrate the successful appeal. Later, Pachuco is left alone with Henry where they discuss the aftermath of the trial. Inevitably, Della interrupts to confess her love to Henry where he then agrees to commit himself to her as they engage again in a romantic relationship. Shortly after, however, Alice enters the scene where she tells Henry "te quiero" (I love you)<sup>13</sup> then leaves. Consequently, Henry is flustered by having to make a decision between the women and eventually Della interrupts him to say that he had to make a decision immediately. Ultimately, Henry decides to keep his original commitment with Della and sends off Alice. In a gloomy manner, the scene goes on to flashback to the way Rudy was treated while Henry was imprisoned. Rudy says, "They ganged up on me, carnal. You left me and they ganged up on me. You shouldn't have done it, carnal. Why didn't you take me with you. For the jefitos? The jefitos lost me anyway".<sup>14</sup> Rudy goes on to share that he was stripped publicly of his clothes, like Pachuco, for the purpose of disgrace and shame. At this moment, they are interrupted by an altercation happening outside the home with an officer and Joey. The Press then foreshadows the endings for the life of Henry based off this dispute. Predicting that Henry would be sent back to prison, Pachuco interrupts the Press to offer a diverse amount of positive happy endings. Lastly, the scene

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

ends with the entire Mechicana/o community coming together to uplift and encourage one another through prejudicial times.

Premiering on July 28, 1978, *Zoot Suit* was produced at the Mark Taper Theatre in Los Angeles, California. Hosting over 700 patrons a night, every single performance of *Zoot Suit* was sold out as the crowds showed immense support for Valdez's work. After performing the original schedule set for the musical, the show had already broken the Taper's box office record with obtaining close to \$358,000.00 in sales.<sup>7</sup> The Mechicano community were inspired by the fact that not only was the Mark Taper Forum standing where a *barrio* was once, but the credibility that Valdez had earned through running *El Teatro Campesino* encouraged members involved in the actual trial to come support the show. For instance, Lupe Leyvas, Henry's sister, and her family purchased 121 tickets for \$879.50; furthermore, the producers of the show were inspired to transfer the production from the 740-seat Mark Taper Forum to the 1,200-seat Aquarius Theater in Hollywood.<sup>8</sup> The show was a theatrical success in Los Angeles and the audience wanted more and more; eventually the Mark Taper Forum extended the show throughout the rest of their season, and even so the box office was selling out tickets fast. Shortly after the premier of the musical, an article written by Sylvie Drake in *The Los Angeles Times* read, "... the play is about one thing: what it is to be a member of a minority beaten down by a hostile majority".<sup>15</sup> As a result of immense praise, the musical caught the attention off all of America. New York looked at *Zoot Suit* to potentially become the first Chicano play on Broadway. In an article written by the Center Theatre Group, they interview Luis Valdez

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<sup>15</sup> Sylvie Drake, *Zoot Suit': Tailor-Made as L.A. Theater*, 1978.

who says, “When the character of El Pachuco, memorably played by Edward James Olmos, swaggered onto the Taper stage, Chicano theatre became American theatre.”<sup>16</sup>

Gordon Davidson, artistic director of the Center Theatre Group and owner of the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles, had a long-term interest in producing theatre for the Mechicana/o community. Recognized as the “Godfather of Chicano Theatre” in an interview with the Oscars<sup>17</sup>, playwright Luis Valdez writes that Davidson was responsible for bringing the civil rights movement onstage. He says:

I was the first playwright he invited in to discuss his ideas... I had never forgotten the killer potential (pun intended) of the most infamous pachuco murder case in Southern California history. By no strange coincidence, Gordon was on the same track. We agreed that the Sleepy Lagoon case and the subsequent Zoot Suit Riots would be our point of focus. “Zoot Suit” was the result of a year of deliberations, collaborations and dogged research to find the heart line of the story.<sup>18</sup>

Davidson played an enormous role as he invested in early Mechicana/o theatre when other artists adamantly believed that there was no space for that work. His collaboration sped up the production process of the musical, and eventually Davidson was able to influence others to invest in this creative process. Theatre critic Jules Aaron says:

*Zoot Suit* evolved last spring from the Taper's Theatre for Now Festival, and reflects the efforts of Gordon Davidson, Artistic Director of the Taper, and Kenneth Brecher, Director of New Programs, to foster theatre indigenous to the Los Angeles area... *Zoot Suit* is an effective blend of entertainment and polemics, written in a combination of English, Spanish, and *calo* (street dialect). Using the Chicano culture in Los Angeles as a sociological framework... Valdez unifies the piece's mixture of melodrama, irony, and didacticism through dazzling theatrical images which place El Pachuco and the Press in the center of the action.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Center Theatre Group, *How 'Zoot Suit' Changed Theatre Forever*, 2017.

<sup>17</sup> Lourdes Portillo, *Luis Valdez, Academy Visual History*, 2014.

<sup>18</sup> Luis Valdez, *He Put Civil Rights Onstage*, 2016.

<sup>19</sup> Jules Aaron, *Theatre Journal* 31, no. 2, 1979.

However, producer José Delgado says in an interview that he was the one who sent the letter that originally reached out to Davidson and offered Valdez's work for "L.A. talent." This offer did not include the contribution of other ETC members, and Davidson did not respond to the proposal until months later. Delgado describes his experience meeting Davidson for the first time and says, "we asked him if he got the letter"; Davidson says, "yes, I got the letter, we have to talk."<sup>20</sup> Shortly after, Delgado headed to Los Angeles to continue his research. He states "We found the files, Carey McWilliams's files at UCLA, stayed there for about three or four days, gathered as much information as we could, brought it back, showed Luis the stuff. He got all excited about it and came up with the title for this piece that he was going to write called *Zoot Suit*...Gordon was very excited and interested in the idea; From there it went into the hands of the Mark Taper Forum."<sup>21</sup> Hence, their study and development served as the foundation of the production process. Moreover, scholar Yolanda Broyles-Gonzalez argues that the musical was a collaboration effort from members of ETC, however, the work is commonly credited solely to Luis Valdez. There were months of research and writing done by Luis Valdez and members of his troupe before the production process began. In her book *El Teatro Campesino*, Yolanda Broyles-Gonzalez says,

Most [ETC] ensemble members participated in the *Fin del mundo* tour, but a few did participate in the *Zoot Suit* project. Roberta Delgado did the initial research for the dances of the period and then acted as assistant to the choreographer in subsequent productions...Diane Rodríguez and Socorro Valdez had minor acting roles. Philip Esparza became associate producer. Although the ensemble's participation in the final *Zoot Suit* production was minimal, much of the play was in fact the product of the ensemble's prior collective creativity.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Delgado and Esparza Interview, 1983.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Yolanda Broyles-Gonzalez, *El Teatro Campesino*, page 178, 1994.

Furthermore, in an interview with Broyles-Gonzalez, ETC ensemble member, Olivia Chumacero says,

“Luis Valdez has drawn from our collective work even years later. The first time that I saw the play *Zoot Suit*, ‘Baby Zoot’ (the first showing of the script to a private audience) at the Mark Taper forum, I sat there and I could tell you who the people were who had improvised the blocking and the types of scenes that Luis used. I could sit there and tell you: ‘Socorro thought of that’ or ‘so-and-so put that together’ or ‘this person improvised that particular blocking’.”<sup>23</sup> Therefore, as Yolanda Broyles-Gonzalez argues, *Zoot Suit* was in fact a collaborative production process that belonged to the Mechicana/o community, not a sole playwright. This assumption is significant in order to understand the theoretical framework of *Zoot Suit*. Thus, the *Zoot Suit* Riots and the Sleepy Lagoon Murder Trial fueled Mechicana/o artists to come together and illustrate the identity of their community onstage. Broyles-Gonzalez states “...*Zoot Suit* is very much a product of the general Teatro Campesino conglomerate performance style: the Rasquachi mixture of style and performance genres- vignettes of action, song, dance, dialogue-in rapid and smooth transition, which is in turn a hallmark of the Mexican popular performance tradition.”<sup>24</sup>

Eventually, Luis Valdez obtained a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation and was commissioned to write the musical, while ETC members had to pick up the work Valdez left. As a result, tension arose within ETC, and the future of their collaborative efforts seemed to be coming to an end. Additionally, tension within the company grew as the dissatisfaction teatristas held towards Valdez’s portrayal of women in ETC conflicted with their own personal beliefs. Unfortunately, Mechicana/o artists found it hard to separate from Valdez as he instilled a family-like environment where he played the “father” and the other thespians were left to bear a cultural duty to their maestro<sup>25</sup>. Most

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<sup>23</sup> Yolanda Broyles-Gonzalez, *Radical Street Performance*, 1994.

<sup>24</sup>Yolanda Broyles-Gonzalez, *El Teatro Campesino*, page 178, 1994.

<sup>25</sup> The term maestro is translated to teacher in English; however, in the Mechicana/o culture when an adolescent calls their elders maestro they are ultimately showing a great sign of respect toward their mentor.

theatre scholars often miscredit the work of Zoot Suit solely to Luis Valdez; however, the work belonged to all of ETC's teatristas/os. Through devised theatre, Mechicana/o artists continued to walk alongside Valdez as they collaborated on "Baby Zoot"; a rough draft of play dedicated to reflecting the Chicano experience.

When speaking of her experiences working on "Baby Zoot", ETC ensemble member Yolanda Parra says:

He [Luis] pulled a lot of stuff out of them and they [ETC ensemble members] gave him a lot of material, tons of material in the improvisations. And you see that material appear even in Zoot Suit. He took characters that had been developed within the group in a collective situation. As director he might come out and say: "This is the situation." But then it was the actors that made it happen for him... In a lot of ways Luis was created by El Teatro Campesino. The unquestionable loyalty of the members also created him.<sup>26</sup>

Speaking to the devised theatrical experience, Parra, like others, were encouraged to collaborate artistic ideas in hopes of their work later being recognized. After viewing "Baby Zoot" members of the acting troupe encouraged Valdez to make multiple changes to the script. Broyles-Gonzalez says "These transformations-rewritings and restaging's- can be viewed as a response to changing relations of production... Zoot Suit went through at least nine rewritings... in each of those scripts the Sleepy Lagoon Murder Case took on a different configuration."<sup>27</sup> For instance, we know that the early characterization of El Pachuco was not as prominent until later versions of the musical. Additionally, she says, "a second important feature of the second draft is the introduction of the villainous Press, or Reporter, character, who illustrates and personifies the key

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Yolanda Broyles-Gonzalez, *El Teatro Campesino*, 1994.

position played by the Hearst newspapers in swaying public sentiment and motivating the rioting against Chicanas/os in general and *pachucho* youth in particular.”<sup>28</sup>

However, those who viewed the private showing argued that the production was way too violent for the public taste. “It is significant that the first draft of *Zoot Suit* was rejected by the Mark Taper Forum, on the grounds that it was too ‘realistic’...”<sup>29</sup> says Broyles-Gonzalez. As a result, to level out its goriness, Valdez incorporated fabricated storylines. Notably, theatre critics were against the early changes in the script and viewed the adaptations as inauthentic. To illustrate, the original performance of *Zoot Suit* ran at least 3 hours, however, after censoring his work the play’s time got cut in half. Thus, the participation and contribution of ETC ensemble members was vital to the rewritings of *Zoot Suit*; unfortunately, *teatristas/os* continue to be denied recognition for their work. Nevertheless, throughout the process of writing the play, Valdez often abandoned his acting troupe and eventually ETC was came to an end. Before doing so, Valdez felt “institutional pressure”<sup>30</sup> to take the criticism of his colleagues and rewrite *Zoot Suit* to accommodate to the taste of Southern Californians before premiering at the Mark Taper Forum. Theatre critics, however, were against his revisions and instantly began to publish condescending reviews. For example, Hispanic critic Emilio Carballido says, “*la version original tenía un magnífico don de ambigüedad y una fuerza emotive muy inusitada... la version preseta allí [Aquarius] mostró cambios radicales en relación con la original*”( the original version had a magnificent gift of ambiguity and a very unusual

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

emotional force... the version presented there [Aquarius] showed radical changes in relation to the original)<sup>31</sup>. Subsequently, both Spanish-language and English-language critics agreed that the adaptations being done to *Zoot Suit* were detrimental to its authenticity. Ironically, Gordon Davidson's original request asked Valdez to consider writing a play that would accurately "reflect the history of Los Angeles."<sup>32</sup>

As a non-profit theatre, the Mark Taper Forum was renowned for using theatre as a tool to educate their community. In order to attract a larger crowd, there were various marketing tactics the company used to attract audience members from diverse backgrounds. "California State University, Northridge Professor of Chicana and Chicano Studies Denise Sandoval was only seven years old when *Zoot Suit* premiered, but she remembers her parents telling her about the show, and also seeing a plane advertising it with skywriting above her grandparents' home in Lincoln Heights. 'I got so excited that a play about Mexicans was in the sky,' she said. 'I thought it was so cool!'"<sup>33</sup> Additionally, Dr. Lucas says

Luis Valdez and the Center Theatre Group capitalized on the visual and dramatic potential of the stylish *pachuco* as a symbol of popular Chicana/o culture when they marketed the play *Zoot Suit*. The most famous poster for the play, designed by Ignacio Gómez, exoticizes the *pachuco* by advertising the boldness of zoot suit fashion and revealing its aesthetic attractiveness as a theatrical symbol. This full-color image outlines the *pachuco*'s black and red zoot suit with a thin white halo effect. As though the *pachuco* had stage lights behind him. This *pachuco*'s body faces the spectator, whereas his head turns in slight profile, giving the impression that he is aware of his audience but does not feel the need to address them directly.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Center Theatre Group, *How 'Zoot Suit' Changed Theatre Forever*, 2017.

<sup>33</sup> Center Theatre Group, *How 'Zoot Suit' Changed Theatre Forever*, 2017.

<sup>34</sup> Ashley Lucas, *Reinventing the 'Pachuco': The Radical Transformation from the Criminalized to the Heroic in Luis Valdez's Play 'Zoot Suit'*, 2009.

The marketing done above was an approach used to specifically attract the Hispanic, Black, and Asian audiences through lived memory. The hopes of the creative team behind marketing believed this community would have a mirror-like encounter after identifying similar aesthetics. Consequently, when perspective patrons came across these posters, they instantly recollected a personal experience that coincided with the character *Pachuco*. As a result, their approach led the musical to receive overwhelming support from diverse patrons in Los Angeles.

Contrastingly, to reach WASP audience members in Southern California members of the production team conducted multiple interviews with media outlets to spread the word on the new musical. Actress and playwright Evelina Fernández, who was cast as Della Barrios in the original production, says, “It was the first time Latinos attended the theatre in huge numbers. We didn’t realize it at first, but it soon became apparent that we were making history in the American theatre, and that the play’s truths about racism and discrimination suffered by Mexican-Americans in the U.S. struck a full emotional and political chord in our community”.<sup>35</sup> Her response encouraged WASP Americans who felt some sort of “white guilt” to support the premiere at Mark Taper Forum.

Furthermore, articles published in mass media for the advertisement of *Zoot Suit* include a personal statement from Luis Valdez recollecting his time with Mexican-American leader César Chávez. Published in *The Los Angeles Times*, Valdez articulates, “I knew two *pachucos* early in my life. One, my cousin, Billy Miranda and the other his close friend, Cesar Chavez...Billy freely escaped the barrio’s boundaries despite the ethnic discrimination that effectively imprisoned so many other residents... *Pachucos*, in

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<sup>35</sup> Center Theatre Group, *How ‘Zoot Suit’ Changed Theatre Forever*, 2017.

this tradition, were intensely loyal to each other and provided mutual support when faced with the often brutal oppression by their Anglo neighbors...Billy awakened my interest in my people's history and made me proud of my culture."<sup>36</sup> Subsequently, this publication was one of Valdez's first attempt to reach his audience prior the premiere of *Zoot Suit*. Moreover, Valdez reached his WASP audience by reminding them of the xenophobic actions perpetrated by their community towards Mechicanas/os such as the Zoot Suit Riots. Additionally, since these proceedings happened within their lifetime, WASP patrons in the late 1970s felt compelled to show their allyship with the Chicano Movement by endorsing *Zoot Suit*. By illustrating the innocence of the over 600 Mexican-American youth that were persecuted by LAPD, Southern Californian newspapers declared the production appropriate for even the Non-Mechicana/o community. As editor Warren Robak advertised, "Whites, Blacks, and other races will find *Zoot Suit* just as compelling as Hispanics because it's about an underdog pulling, struggling, and fighting for his life."<sup>37</sup> Consequently, while some patrons viewed the musical as theatrical education, others believed this was their opportunity to fact check their parents. For instance, in the article "Zoot Suit Pulls the Nostalgic and the Curious", Marjorie Miller writes "about 150 mostly Mexican-Americans, mostly under-30 ticket-seekers wanted to see the new play as one put it, 'to see if it's like my parents said it was.'"<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Luis Valdez, *Once Again Meet the Zoot Suiters*, August 13, 1978.

<sup>37</sup> Warren Robak, *Don't miss 'Zoot Suit'; Portrait of Los Angeles is fascinating*, August 18, 1978.

<sup>38</sup> Marjorie Miller, *Zoot Suit Pulls the Nostalgic and the Curious*, July 31, 1978.

As part of advertisement, the production team of *Zoot Suit* partook in multiple interviews to explain the historical and cultural importance of the trial while emphasizing the potential impact this production had on the Chicano Movement. The newspaper *Albuquerque Journal* wrote, “a restless, talented, young radical playwright, Luis Valdez finally found a way of merging social conscience and theater...the 14-day run of the play has been sold out. [Jose] Delgado (member of ETC) said the play is an attempt to show Anglo and Chicano audiences what Chicano actors and writers can do.”<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, in an interview between Luis Valdez and Roberta Orona-Cordova, the playwright identifies, “El Pachuco [as] a symbol of our identity, our total identity, with ancient roots.”<sup>40</sup> Therefore, the overall tone of interviews for the premiere of *Zoot Suit* highlighted heretofore unheralded achievements of Mechicanos in theatre and how the play established the presence of their cultural identity.

For this reason, tickets at Mark Taper Forum sold out. Throughout the main stage run, *Zoot Suit* broke the Taper’s box office record, making a total of \$357,843. Previously, the record was broken by *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf*; however *Zoot Suit* made a profit exceeding \$20,000 of this production. High ticket sales were again the result of lived memory, and Mechicanos/os were ultimately responsible for the majority of the profit made. “When *Zoot Suit* first opened at the Mark Taper Forum in 1978, little about the production screamed hit” says *New York Times* writer, Robert Ito. “Much of the cast had scant acting experience. The story itself was a Brechtian take on a relatively obscure unsolved murder in 1942 Los

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<sup>39</sup> Hugh Gallagher, *Teatro Campesino Idea: Picket Lines to Triumphs*, April 23, 1978.

<sup>40</sup> Roberta Orona-Cordova, *Zoot Suit and the Pachuco Phenomenon: An Interview with Luis Valdez*, 1983.

Angeles... But audiences kept coming, and coming, selling out show after packed show. Fans came one week and returned with their families the next.”<sup>41</sup> Nonetheless, some of the biggest contributors to ticket were the families personally affected by the Sleepy Lagoon Murder Trial.

Inspired by the traditional approaches of ETC, *Zoot Suit* developed a relationship with its patrons through community engagement thanks to the contribution of Los Angeles' leading nonprofit theatre company, Center Theatre Group (CTG). Recognized today as one of the nation's most influential nonprofit theatre CTG believes “theatre creates an extraordinary connection between artists and audiences that only starts on the stage. Theatre creates the energy that feeds a city, a culture, and a society. Theatre reflects the community it serves.”<sup>42</sup> As a result, defendants of the Sleepy Lagoon murder trial felt compelled to support the production. For example, Henry Reyna's entire family attended multiple performances of the musical, influencing others around them to do the same.

The instant success of that production motivated the Mark Taper Forum to open its main season that same year with an eight-week run of *Zoot Suit*. That run also met with an overwhelming response, breaking single-day sales records for the theater. Almost \$18,000 in tickets were sold on the 1st Sunday tickets were offered for sale. Among those waiting in line were Lupe Leyva's the real-life sister of the play's protagonist “Henry Reyna” ... the day tickets went on sale Lupe Leyvas, her brother Rudy, nieces, nephews and cousins purchased 121 tickets for \$879.50. The play very clearly spoke to a need in the Chicana/o community to see realistic images of its own history in the entertainment world.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Robert Ito, ‘*Zoot Suit*,’ a Pioneering Chicano Play, Comes Full Circle, Jan. 26, 2017.

<sup>42</sup>Center Theatre Group, *About us*, 2022.

<sup>43</sup> Yolanda Broyles-Gonzalez, *El Teatro Campesino*, 1994.

Accordingly, ticket sales for the premiere of *Zoot Suit* exceeded the expectations of all participating in the production team. The support from the Los Angeles community went so far, that eventually L.A. Mayor Tom Bradley proclaimed “*Zoot Suit* Week”; a commemoration that lasted from November 13-20, 1978.

Audience reception of the Los Angeles patrons was the make-or-break deal for *Zoot Suit*. Though clouded with a few negative reviews from Non-Mechicana/o critics, a majority of the Mechicana/o community felt satisfied with Valdez’s dramatic portrayal of the Sleepy Lagoon Murder Trial. On the other hand, long-time supporter of Valdez’s work Sylvie Drake commented on the premiere saying, “those who know the language will recognize the vulgarisms as more pungent than they are translated to be. Those who don’t will sense it-which is all the purpose they need to serve.”<sup>44</sup> Meanwhile, Chicana/o critics like Richard García were dissatisfied with Valdez for his glorification of the *pachuco*. The Chicano historian firmly believed that *pachucos* were nothing but gangsters looking for trouble, and the violent connotation of the term was later published in *The Los Angeles Times* near the premiere of the production. Titled “Do Zoot Suiters Deserve Hooray’s” Garcia says, “most *pachucos* end up dead, in prison, or an alcoholic. The current celebration of an underclass of dropouts and failures is damaging...The *pachucos* were lumpen- groups of chronically unemployed and often delinquent youths.”<sup>45</sup> Consequently, members of the Mechicana/o agreed with García and slowly began distancing their support towards Valdez.

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<sup>44</sup> Sylvie Drake, ‘*Zoot Suit*’: *Tailor-Made as L.A. Theater*, August 27, 1978.

<sup>45</sup> Richard García, *Do Zoot Suiters Deserve Hooray’s*, August 27, 1978.

Opinions as such, however, cloud the historical and cultural context of the pachuco lifestyle with negative illustrations that only highlighted crimes committed by Chicana/o youth; however, Mexican-American leader “César Chávez was a pachuco”.<sup>46</sup> So, who is responsible for the misconception of *El Pachuco*? Scholar Yarbrow-Bejarano blames Luis Valdez for portraying *El Pachuco* in such a manner where they were not considered a productive member of the labor force.<sup>47</sup> Subsequently, Mechicanas/os had mixed feelings about *Zoot Suit*. While some of the community members felt joy to finally receive recognition in mainstream theatre, the press was hesitant to accept Valdez’s work as it was.

To further study the impact of the media, we must compare the narrative between dialogue targeted to Anglo vs Mechicana/o audience members. For Southern Californians, most of the community look towards newspapers such as *The Los Angeles Times* and *The Herald Express* for their English press. Contrastingly, for Spanish press the community read *La Opinión* which was #1 best-selling Spanish newspaper in all the United States. An article released by *The Los Angeles Sentinel* introduced the idea of *Zoot Suit* to patrons saying, “continuing the policy of presenting proactive new plays for adventurous audience during its New Theatre for Now series, the Mark Taper Forum has commissioned Luis Valdez”. With an uplifting tone, smaller English language press was presenting *Zoot Suit* in an optimistic way before its premiere. On the other hand, however, in the fall of 1978, renowned theatre critic Richard Eder says, “...the play’s

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<sup>46</sup> Yolanda Broyles-Gonzalez, *El Teatro Campesino*, 1994.

<sup>47</sup> Yvonne Yarbrow-Bejarano, *The Female Subject in Chicano Theatre: Sexuality, "Race," and Class*, 1986.

point is not to depict the Anglo world in itself but as it felt, in pain and bewilderment, by the Chicanos. By and large, it does this in a measured and touching fashion...‘Zoot Suit’ has too many easy answers. It makes too demagogic an appeal to the emotions of an audience that is assumed to be Chicano.”<sup>48</sup> Therefore, impacting the horizon of expectation of future patrons, publicists such as Eder were swaying audiences to become weary of Valdez’s work before being exposed to it. Nonetheless, specific members of the press like Eder played a vital role in the reception of the production due to the massive number of consumers they reached during the late 1970s. Nevertheless, the play was often labeled in mainstream newspaper advertisements as a comedy. On the contrary, small press outlets, such as *The Desert Sun*, promoted *Zoot Suit* by revealing the names of cast and crew members in an attempt to entice theatre goers. To counteract the negative attention, Valdez released his own statement to the *Los Angeles Times* shortly before his debut saying, “this specially-commissioned play is based on a largely unknown and neglected saga of Los Angeles history.”<sup>49</sup> With his statement, the goal of Valdez was to remind audience members that the sociopolitical message of *Zoot Suit* was created with the intent to both entertain and educate. As such, patrons were encouraged to support Valdez’s work as an effort to bridge the gap between Mechicanas/os and WASP community members. After the premier on July 28, 1978, -some companies published glowing reviews encouraging members of the community to support *Zoot Suit*. For example, in *The St. Louis Post-Dispatch* John M. Wilson said, “...Zoot Suit, the Luis Valdez play about the oppression of Los Angeles Chicanos in 1940s, is a current hit at

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<sup>48</sup> Richard Eder, *Stage: Taper Forum Presents ‘Zoot Suit’*, 1978

<sup>49</sup> Luis Valdez, *Zoot Suit*, 1978.

the Mark Taper Forum.”<sup>50</sup> On the other hand, others neglected the success of the production despite the play breaking box office records.

The daily mainstream Spanish-language newspapers of the time included *La Opinión*, *El Diario De La Gente*, and *El Nuevo Herald*. A majority of Hispanic press tiptoed around sociopolitical topics impacting WASP communities in fear of misrepresenting the Mexicanas/os agenda. In an article released by the University of California Santa Cruz, Mayela L. Caro says, “Writers for *La Opinión* did not want white Americans to question the loyalty of the Hispanic community. If *La Opinión*, the most popular Spanish-language newspaper, was writing negative stories on white servicemen, the Hispanic community’s loyalty to the war effort could be in question.”<sup>51</sup> Inevitably, Spanish language press coverage on *Zoot Suit* was biased due to its illustration of the Zoot Suit Riots in the 1940s. More importantly, the number of articles written for the production in Spanish were few and far apart. In fact, a majority of the Spanish language press done for *Zoot Suit* weren’t interviews conducted until decades after its premiere. As an example, *La Opinión* released an article about *Zoot Suit* 20 years after its premiere saying, “*En Los Angeles tuvo un éxito de taquilla sin precedentes --primero en el Mark Taper Forum, donde se estrenó, y luego en el teatro Aquarius de Hollywood, donde disfrutó de una larga temporada.. Valdez piensa que, más que una pieza histórica sobre los pachucos de la posguerra, Zoot Suit continúa siendo una obra relevante*”( In Los Angeles, it was an unprecedented box-office hit -- first at the Mark Taper Forum, where it premiered, and then at Hollywood's Aquarius Theater, where it enjoyed a long run.

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<sup>50</sup> John M. Wilson, *Chicanos Making Inroads in the Movies*, 1978.

<sup>51</sup> University of California Santa Cruz, *Press*, 2014.

Valdez thinks that more than a historical piece about post-war pachucos, *Zoot Suit* continues to be a relevant work).<sup>52</sup> Here, *La Opinion* is acknowledging *Zoot Suit*'s legacy and impact its work had on Mechicana/o culture. Intriguingly, the same Spanish-language newspaper did not promote Valdez's and ETC's play during its premiere in Los Angeles. As pointed out by Caro above, their absence in advertisement was rooted in a philosophy that feared the power of WASP communities. Additionally, in the same article writer for *La Opinion* Mejias-Rentas goes on to interview Luis Valdez who says, "*Con el crecimiento de la presencia latina en California y los Estados Unidos, tenemos que tener acceso a todos los tipos de comunicación. El teatro es la más básica forma de expresión. También ayuda a desarrollar escritores en esta sociedad donde el entretenimiento es tan importante*"( With the growth of the Latino presence in California and the United States, we have to have access to all types of communication. Theater is the most basic form of expression. It also helps develop writers in this society where entertainment is so important).<sup>53</sup> Here, Valdez shifts the narrative in the article to focus on the low engagement of Mechicanas/os with American Theatre. Though there was nothing that prohibited the attendance of Mechicanas/os, Valdez uses this interview with *La Opinion* to address the lack of productions with themes that resonated with his community at the time. Consequently, with the goal of encouraging sociopolitical conversations, Valdez expresses to Spanish-language press that *Zoot Suit* was written with the intent to create a space for Mechicanas/os in American theatre.

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<sup>52</sup> Antonio Mejias-Rentas, *Tiempo y Lugar Para Zoot Suit: Luis Valdez Cree Que Su Historica Obra Con Musica Tiene La Misma Relevancia Ahora Que Hace 20 Anos; Esta Siendo Repuesta Por Primera Vez Por El San Diego Repertory*, 1997.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

Comparatively, bilingual newspapers in the mainstream media emphasized that Valdez's work was an educational opportunity. For instance, the article "Artes Chicano is Taking Culture to the Stage" by *El Diaro de La Gente* says, "...the new hit 'Zoot Suit' by Luis Valdez of Teatro Campesino is a smash hit...preparing to entertain, as well as educate the world about Latinos in Los Barrios."<sup>54</sup> *El Diaro de La Gente* was a biweekly paper written by a group of Chicano undergraduates at the University of Colorado. Recognized as the United Mexican American Students (UMAS), this group of scholars dedicated a large portion of their time covering any subject that impacted the Mechicana/o community. As a result, they were one of the only Hispanic newspapers in America that advertised *Zoot Suit* during its premiere in Los Angeles. Consequently, with such a lack of support from Spanish-language press, the reception of the production was affected.

As we have seen, the reception from the premiere of *Zoot Suit* in Los Angeles far exceeded anyone's wildest expectation. The marketing tactics, such as articles providing a non-violent prospective of pachuchos, attracted Mechicana/o patrons to the theatre. Subsequently, with a positive tone from English and Spanish press, *Zoot Suit* was set to be a huge success in the West Coast. The next chapter analyzes the Broadway debut of *Zoot Suit* and investigates how its reception was impacted by negative theatre critics in English press and an absence of marketing from Spanish press.

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<sup>54</sup> El Diaro de la Gente, *Artes Chicano is Taking Culture to the Stage*, 1978.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### *Zoot Suit* at The Winter Garden

Leading up to the Broadway premiere of *Zoot Suit*, this chapter compares the narrative developed within the theatre critics of English and Spanish press regarding the New York production. Additionally, through archival work the goal of this chapter is to both investigate how the lack of Spanish press coverage contributed to the Mechicana/o audience reception and analyze how the demographics of the Winter Garden played a role in the shutdown of El Teatro Campesino's work after 41 performances. Using interviews and archived newspaper articles, this chapter will explore the Anglo-American hegemonic influence behind the challenge of getting Mechicana/o's to the Winter Garden theatre. Moreover, after identifying the narrative of both English and Spanish press, this chapter will research how the bilingual mainstream media chose to portray the premiere of *Zoot Suit*.

The Shuberts became incredibly interested in working with Luis Valdez after witnessing the praise the production was receiving in the West Coast. After all, Shakina Nayfack says, "with minimal advertising in predominantly Latino publications, tickets for the two-week run still managed to sell out well before opening night."<sup>1</sup> With such a massive turnout of Mechicanas/os, investors like the Shuberts quickly grasped the opportunity to endorse Valdez's work in hopes of attracting a new audience to their theatres. In an article released in *The New York Times*, theatre critic John Corry says,

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<sup>1</sup> Shakina Nayfack, *Que Le Watcha Los Cabrones: Marking the 30th Anniversary of Luis Valdez's 'Zoot Suit'*, 2009.

“When the Shuberts produce, their partners generally are other big producers, or else corporate entities. The Shuberts say they were willing to put up the entire \$700,000 it cost to import ‘Zoot Suit’ from Los Angeles and produce it here, but that then other producers said they wanted to be involved, too. The Shuberts laid off part of the \$700,000 with them.”<sup>2</sup>

Yet, there were still investors in New York like Dasha Epstein who believed producing *Zoot Suit* was a mistake. In an interview released by *The New York Times* with Mireya Navarro, Epstein reveals that she had been looking for a play that would lure Mechicana/o patrons to New York for at least the last decade. Navarro says, “[Epstein] had considered and rejected financing projects like ‘Zoot Suit’, .... Ms. Epstein said she feared that the work was too Mexican and would not speak to the more diverse Latino population of New York City.”<sup>3</sup> With reason, Epstein was speaking about the large Puerto Rican community that lived in New York at the time. Although the play correlated with their identity, some investors believed that the cultural differences in experiences within Hispanics would lead to a lack of patrons in New York. In the spring of 1980, the U.S. Census Bureau reported New York’s population to be an estimated 7,071,639 individuals. Of those numbers, almost 20 percent of them were Hispanic with an increase of approximately 10 percent since the last decade. *New York Times* writer Michael Oreskes says, “About 860,000 of the city’s 1.41 million Hispanic people, or about 61 percent, are Puerto Rican.”<sup>4</sup> For this reason, Epstein and others predicted the downfall of

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<sup>2</sup> John Corry, *Presenting the Amazing Shuberts — ‘Bernie & Gerry’*, 1979.

<sup>3</sup> Mireya Navarro, *The Tricky Business of Cross-Cultural Theater: The Challenge (Beyond the Anglos) Is Attracting Latinos of All Stripes*, 2001.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Oreskes, *Census Traces Radical Shifts in New York City’s Population*, 1982.

*Zoot Suit* on Broadway. The expectations of those who invested, however, assumed Valdez's production would be a phenomenon on Broadway. For this reason, the campaign team felt comfortable spending an additional \$125,000 for advertising and operating expenses.<sup>5</sup> In doing so, however, the campaign team expected Valdez to apply different adaptations to the script that would make the storyline connect with Broadway's standard patron.

Moreover, the difference between the demographics of the Winter Garden Theatre and the Mark Taper Forum were significant in the 1980s. In the review, *Zoot Suit: From the Barrio to Broadway*. R.G. Davis says, "The success of *Zoot Suit* in L.A. was due, in part, to the California audience...which could read the geography and personal Chicano experiences into the play..."<sup>6</sup> As the majority of Hispanics who lived in New York identified as Puerto Rican, however, patrons felt indifferent towards Valdez's work. Additionally, when *Zoot Suit* premiered at the Winter Garden Theatre on March 25, 1979, a majority of theatre critics for mainstream newspapers were dissatisfied with the work of Luis Valdez and wrote bad reviews for the production.

Despite critics publishing encouraging articles the morning of opening day, the overwhelming number of derogatory reviews that came after the show premiered and thus overshadowed any opportunity for success. For instance, in a supporting tone Richard L. Coe of the *Washington Post* said, "... 'Zoot Suit' could be to Hispanics what 'The Wiz' has been to blacks. Above all, 'Zoot Suit' is a swell show in every sense of the

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<sup>5</sup> Yolanda Broyles-González, *El Teatro Campesino: Theater in the Chicano Movement*, 1994.

<sup>6</sup> R.G. Davis, *Zoot Suit: From the Barrio to Broadway*, 1981.

term--colorful, novel, passionately conceived, theatrically staged.”<sup>7</sup> With Coe’s article printed on the day *Zoot Suit* launched, prospective Mechicana/o patrons in New York still carried some enthusiasm about the production. In the same tone, in early March of 1979, the *New York Times* published an article saying, “The play deals with the murder in 1942 of a Mexican-American youth in Los Angeles that resulted in a shameful kangaroo trial of several gang members...that murder trial and those riots - in the light of their consequences in consciousness-raising - are as important to Latin pride in Los Angeles as Rosa Parks refusal to ride in the back of the bus was important to black pride in Montgomery, Alabama.”<sup>8</sup>

However, the day right after opening night renowned theatre critic Richard Eder said in the *New York Times* that *Zoot Suit* was “overblown and undernourished.”<sup>9</sup> Additionally, he goes on to say, “The early version, which I saw last April, was interesting and affecting though very uneven. The revisions, which are in the direction of theatricality and away from the elements of naturalism that contributed to both the play’s character and its awkwardness, have had the effect of making it windier, more grandiloquent and less alive.”<sup>10</sup> Here, Eder is referring to the multiple rewrites *Zoot Suit* underwent due to the fact that the initial script was too grotesque for a New York audience. It is important to note, however, that individuals under contract by the Shubert Organization to revise the script were quitting without notice halfway through the project

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<sup>7</sup> Richard L. Cole, *City Cowboys and the West Coast Stage*, March 25, 1979.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Thompson, *A Dynamo Named Gordon Davidson*, 1979.

<sup>9</sup> Richard Eder, *Theater: Zoot Suit, Chicano Music-Drama*, 1979.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

leaving Valdez and his team hindered. Ultimately, as Eder emphasizes, Valdez's adaptations to the script for Broadway patrons impacted the authenticity of the production and inevitably pushed theatre goers away. Agreeing with Eder, Kerr Walter says in the *New York Times*,

“‘Zoot Suit’, which has been brought from a successful run in Los Angeles to the Winter Garden, has its heart in the right place and its foot firmly lodged in its mouth...He wants us to share the feel of family life inside the *barrio*, he wants us to understand how gangs are formed and why they fulfill a need...He is utterly unable to resist a cliché, possibly even to recognize one. No matter how ready we are to respond to the cry of the narrative or to the glimpses of Chicano life...we are everlastingly brought up short, almost slapped in the face, by stale phrasings that are meant to convey emotion”.<sup>11</sup>

Nonetheless, other newspapers such as *Newsday* said, “...although the play is frequently vivid, it is badly flawed by its simplistic, agitprop approach.”<sup>12</sup> Also, theatre critic Emory Lewis said, “*Zoot Suit* spotlights a fascinating bit of history, but it ultimately fails as theater. Valdez's plot is simplistic, and lacks dimension. Subtlety is conspicuously missing”.<sup>13</sup> As a result, prospective patrons decided to not support the production after reading the opinions theatre critics wrote for mainstream media. Consequently, *Zoot Suit* shut down only after 41 performances at the Winter Garden. Though breaking box office records in Los Angeles, *Zoot Suit* struggled to attract audiences to their debut at the Winter Garden which ultimately impacted its longevity.

In response to its negative attention in New York, theatre critic Sylvie Drake wrote an article for the *Los Angeles Times* titled “Zoot Suit Keeps Chin Up Despite

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<sup>11</sup> Walter Kerr, *Stage View: 'Zoot Suit' Loses Its Way in Bloodless Rhetoric*, 1979.

<sup>12</sup> *Newsday*, *Theater Review: Play of fact and fantasy*, 1979.

<sup>13</sup> Emory Lewis, *'Zoot Suit': a Chicano morality tale*, 1979.

Negative Reviews.”<sup>14</sup> He said *Zoot Suit*, “...opened in Broadway’s Winter Garden March 25 only to be clobbered by mostly negative reviews the following morning. Critics called it ‘primitive’, ‘simplistic’, ‘bombastic’ and generally not acceptable...it was rejected by the major press, appreciated by most of the Hispanic press and fell into divided minds among TV reviewers.”<sup>15</sup> Hence, the response from mainstream media was dreadfully impacting the success of *Zoot Suit* as theatre goers who read these articles were discouraged from supporting the production.

More importantly, Drake emphasizes that the bad reviews were pushing away the Hispanic audience in New York which underwent the most extensive P.R. campaign ever for a Hispanic Broadway audience. This included cast members, partners of ETC, and staff from the Mark Taper Forum uniting to advertise *Zoot Suit* in high schools, community organizations, and even places such as public transportation. Drake says, “they formed a ‘Barrio Brigade’ of Latino youngsters to distribute leaflets, buttons, and posters. Most importantly, this group of individuals made it possible through the Theater Development Fund and group sales, to see the show for as little as \$4.50. And they sent out 40,000 mailers, each with a personal letter enclosed.”<sup>16</sup> As a result, this group spent an extensive amount of hours advertising *Zoot Suit* to the New York Hispanic community with hope of drawing them to the theatre. Kenneth S. Brecher, production associate, who led the campaign said in an interview, “people said, ‘there are no Hispanics on

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<sup>14</sup> Sylvie Drake, *‘Zoot Suit’ Keeps Chin Up Despite Negative Review*, 1979.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

Broadway'. I said look at Broadway. They're there. They just don't go inside the theatres. They've never felt welcome."<sup>17</sup>

Brecher recognizes that his efforts to attract a large Mechicana/o audience to *Zoot Suit* failed because Broadway was viewed as an elitist activity reserved for the WASP community. Significantly, Brecher's efforts were recognized by WASP patrons who voiced out, "there isn't a Latino in the city who hasn't been made aware of 'Zoot Suit'."<sup>18</sup> With word spreading like wildfire, the team behind *Zoot Suit* at the Winter Garden Theatre was incredibly disheartened when turn out rates for the production were putting donors in a deficit. As a result, mainstream media blamed that the absence of Mechicana/o audience members led the downfall of *Zoot Suit*. Ed Kimble, a *Times* staff writer says, "they received standing ovations at most of their performances, but from a half-filled auditorium."<sup>19</sup> On the contrary, Sylvie Drake points out what she believes to be the flaws of the production which ultimately led to its downfall. She says, "...when 'Zoot Suit' opened at the Mark Taper Forum...some more conservative elements in the Chicano community saw it as a glorification of the wrong values. Pachuquismo, they felt, was ancestor to gang violence and hoodlum behavior."<sup>20</sup> Hence, Drake indicates that this mentality impacted the horizon of expectation of Mechicana/o patrons, which ultimately pushed them away from the Winter Garden Theatre. Nevertheless, in his most recent book, "The Theatre of Luis Valdez", Dr. Michael Chemers says, "...thanks to the

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ed Kimble, *'Zoot Suit' star decries stereotypical roles*, 1979.

<sup>20</sup> Sylvie Drake, *'Zoot Suit' Keeps Chin Up Despite Negative Review*, 1979.

differences in language, style, and experiences [Zoot Suit] remained barely recognizable as American to the white mainstream audiences of the time... The longevity of the play is linked directly to this desire to establish an American identity within the so-called “American Dream” that nevertheless resists a white hegemony.”<sup>21</sup> As such, the sociopolitical message behind *Zoot Suit* was dismissed by theatre goers who viewed Valdez’s agitprop theatre as merely bad entertainment.

Concurrently, interviews with the original cast members displayed passionate responses defending the work of Valdez. For instance, while speaking to Ed Kimble, Lupe Moreno Ontiveros, who played Henry’s sister says, “it’s not that we weren’t ready for Broadway. They weren’t ready for ‘Zoot Suit’.”<sup>22</sup> Playing the role of Dolores Reyna since the production at the Mark Taper Forum, Ontiveros goes on in the interview to call out New York critics for rejecting *Zoot Suit* solely because it was a culture unbeknownst to them. Additionally, while addressing theatre critics, Edward James Olmos, who plays El Pachuco says, “Richard Eder, I’m sure, will go to his grave realizing that he had really defiled the American theater, by not giving *Zoot Suit* the rites of passage”. Here, Olmos is suggesting that mainstream critics who wrote defamatory reviews, like Eder, are at fault for hindering the longevity of the show.

In an article published on April 29, 1979, the day *Zoot Suit* shut down, Staff writer Alfredo Lopez says, “a play’s closing is seldom news. But ‘Zoot Suit’s’ closing has a significance that reaches further than its much-publicized arrival on Broadway. It attests, on the one hand, to the power of critics to affect a play and, on the other, to the

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<sup>21</sup> Michael Chemers, *The Theatre of Luis Valdez*, 2021.

<sup>22</sup> Ed Kimble, *‘Zoot Suit’ star decries stereotypical roles*, 1979.

ability of Broadway audiences (the traditional theater public) to understand it.”<sup>23</sup> Shifting then the focus to the show’s audience reception, Lopez emphasizes Susan Bennett’s theory on horizon of expectation. Speaking to those expectations, Phil Esparza says in his interview with Lopez, “we laid out a challenge to the traditional audience and its critics. Can you accept a culture on its own terms and deal with art that arises from that culture?.”<sup>24</sup> Answering his question later in the same interview Luis Valdez says, “it’s obvious that ‘Zoot Suit’ has its roots in another kind of theater- street theater- and there are problems in going before a traditional theater audience with this kind of work. When you add to this the fact that it’s a foreign play, a different culture, you began to see the difficulties.”<sup>25</sup> Thus what Esparza is suggesting is that given the subject matter and presentation format of *Zoot Suit*, the production was set up to fail for New York audiences. In other words, many theatre critics believed there was no room for *actos* or *mitos* on Broadway.

In similar fashion, after the premiere of *Zoot Suit* on Broadway Spanish-language press released articles about the production sparsely. In 1979 the Hispanic paper, *El Renacimiento* says, “*Por primera vez, una obra hispano-americana, hizo su presentación oficial en el Teatro Winter Garden de Broadway, la meca del teatro en Nueva York. Desde Los Angeles, California, trayendo el drama, las luchas y el triunfo del pueblo chicano, llegó ZOOT SUIT, de Luis Valdez, una obra valiente, veraz, aleccionadora*”(For the first time, a Hispanic-American play made its official presentation at the Winter

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<sup>23</sup> Alfredo Lopez, *Zoot Suit: failure felt by a culture*, 1979.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

Garden Theater on Broadway, the mecca of theater in New York. From Los Angeles, California, bringing the drama, the struggles and the triumph of the Chicano people, came ZOOT SUIT, by Luis Valdez, a brave, truthful, sobering work).<sup>26</sup> To explain, the article implies that *Zoot Suit* was written with the intent of becoming a phenomenon in the Mechicana/o culture. Given the subject matter of the play, theatre critics for Spanish-language press predicted that the reception of the show on Broadway would be similar to the response it received in Los Angeles. Nevertheless, the article goes on to explore the image of the Pachuco while giving an in-depth description of the Sleepy Lagoon Murder Trial. Then *El Renacimiento* continues to say, “*la reacción del público, en especial del hispano, es de profunda identificación con los personajes. Todos, quien más quien menos, han vivido el drama de ser inmigrantes y ven en la obra un reflejo de sus vidas... El público con sensibilidad social y que no cede ante los prejuicios, sale entusiasmado de la obra*”( the reaction of the public, especially the Hispanic, is one of deep identification with the characters. All, some more than some, have lived the drama of being immigrants and see in the play a reflection of their lives... The public with social sensitivity and that does not give in to prejudice, leaves the play enthusiastic).<sup>27</sup> Therefore, taking a dig at those who wrote bad reviews of *Zoot Suit*, the paper implied prejudice obscured their viewpoint of the show. Intriguingly, in the same article, Mullins highlights an interview Luis Valdez did with Radio Wado where he predicted such negative response. Here, Valdez tells the radio hosts, Rafael Fonto and María del Carmen, that although he was hopeful to get a similar response in New York, Valdez was

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<sup>26</sup> Carlos Mullins, *El Renacimiento: 'Zoot Suit' recuerda el pasado*, 1979.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

aware that the justice system of America, the press, and anybody who lived in Los Angeles throughout the 1940s would despise *Zoot Suit*. Though the production was a mixture of fantasy and fact, Valdez foreshadowed the subject matter of *Zoot Suit* would hurt the Mechicana/o community due to its truth and relevance to contemporary patrons. Nonetheless, Mullins finishes his article by pleading the Mechicana/o community to go watch the Broadway premiere. He says, “*recomienda a todos los hispanos que vean Zoot Suit. Es un deber de todos apoyar, difundir y presenciar esta obra teatral, que es un canto de exaltación y reivindicación del pueblo hispano en general*”( I recommend all Hispanics to see *Zoot Suit*. It is everyone's duty to support, spread and witness this play, which is a song of exaltation and vindication of the Hispanic people in general).<sup>28</sup>

“Writers for Spanish press like Mullins advocated the value of Valdez’s work to the Mechicana/o community while reminding them of the importance of their presence.

Likewise, the tone of bilingual press emphasized the importance of involvement from New York Mechicana/o patrons. Their willingness to come to the theatre and be exposed to sociopolitical themes contributed to the growing minority consciousness in America during the 1980s. To illustrate, in 1979 *El Diario de la Gente* says, “in the play, El Pachuco is the symbol of Chicano pride and spirit. He encourages Chicanos to continue the struggle against oppression”.<sup>29</sup> As the article points out, alike *actos*, the goal of *Zoot Suit* was to explore themes of harassment with the expectation of patrons seeking real-life changes. Comparatively, not all bilingual press published optimistic articles advertising its premiere. A handful of Spanish-language and/or bilingual press bashed

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> El Diaro de la Gente, *Zoot Suit*, 1979.

*Zoot Suit* blaming its failure on Broadway to the misrepresentation of Mexicanas/os onstage. For instance, Yvonne Yarbo-Bejarano and Tomás Ybarra-Frausto say, “not all pachucos were *lumpen*...Valdez’s portrait of El Pachuco and the pachuco gang members furthers a simplistic stereotype.”<sup>30</sup> Subsequently, Hispanic patrons who came across these articles felt invoked to reject the production. Nevertheless, after witnessing the low attendance of Hispanics seeing *Zoot Suit* at the Winter Garden Theatre, Carballido says, “*Broadway, a más de una calle, es un modo de hacer teatro... la obra se marchó... al enorme, inhospitalario ‘Winter Garden’, teatro muy propio para inmensas comedias musicales. Ahí llegó ‘Zoot Suit’ reducida en tamaño, racionalizada, con sus contradicciones simplificadas a un didactismo casi de pizarrón; árida y francamente fría por falta de ese público fanático de los Angeles*”( Broadway, more than one street away, is a way of doing theater... the play left... to the enormous, inhospitable 'Winter Garden', a theater very suitable for immense musical comedies. There came 'Zoot Suit' reduced in size, rationalized, with its contradictions simplified to an almost blackboard didacticism; arid and frankly cold for lack of that fanatic audience in Los Angeles).<sup>31</sup>

After an extensive amount of research, when pin-pointing the downfall of *Zoot Suit* I would agree with a statement made by Dr. Jorge Huerta shortly after the Broadway premiere. He says, “Applauded by some, scorned by others, Valdez had seemingly abandoned the ‘Rasquachi’ theatre of the people for a slick, professional standard that he had been opposed to for so long.”<sup>32</sup> Additionally, R.G. Davis says, “it is possible the play

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<sup>30</sup> R.G. Davis, *Zoot Suit: From the Barrio to Broadway*, 1981.

<sup>31</sup> Emilio Carballido, *Teatro Campesino en Nueva York*, 1979.

<sup>32</sup> Jorge Huerta, *Luis Valdez's Zoot Suit: A New Direction for Chicano Theatre?*, 1980.

failed on Broadway as Valdez contends, because of racist reviewers...Focusing on the issue of racism, however, diverts us from a far more significant issue: that 'Zoot Suit', as presented on Broadway, was in fact a bad play, politically and aesthetically."<sup>33</sup>

Furthermore, Davis goes on to explain that, "the false love story between Alice and Henry, a love which never happened in the real case, is so badly written that the progressive Alice-and in turn her politics- is laughed at."<sup>34</sup> Consequently, adding fictional story lines to *Zoot Suit* for the purpose of financial benefit only put the Winter Garden theatre in a \$800,000 deficit. It was obvious that the Mechicana/o community was not content with the identification Valdez had portrayed of them and believed not only that it was inauthentic, however, it was also arrogant while feeding into the narrative of contemporary stereotypes. Additionally, *El Diario de la Gente* says, "a related shortcoming is the depiction of the white lawyer and organizer from the Defense Committee, by the time the defendants are freed, it makes the lawyers and organizers come off as the saviors of the Chicano youths."<sup>35</sup> Nevertheless, an essential factor to the shutdown of *Zoot Suit* was the dramatic difference in populations between a New York and Los Angeles. Given that the West Coast was predominately Hispanics from Mechicana/o descent, producers like the Schubert's failed to acknowledge the difference in cultures within ethnicity. Consequently, the target audience for the Broadway premiere of *Zoot Suit* could not associate themselves with the issues of pachucos. Above all, I would suggest that the lack of Spanish-language press covering *Zoot Suit* impacted the

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<sup>33</sup> R.G. Davis, *Zoot Suit: From the Barrio to Broadway*, 1981.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> El Diaro de la Gente, *Zoot Suit*, 1979.

longevity of the production. By not promoting its marketing poster or publishing interviews, the absence of the play in their media led to a disconnect within the Mechicana/o community. By and large, analyzing the reception of *Zoot Suit* through Jauss' theory on Horizon of Expectation aids this thesis in uncovering the difference in cultural assumptions that shaped the experience of Mechicana/o patrons. Susan Bennett's "Theatre Audiences" emphasizes that the sociopolitical events happening in between the premiere of *Zoot Suit* at Mark Taper Forum and Winter Garden Theatre shifted the frameworks of ideas from which Mechicanas/os identified with. As a result, the contrast between receptions of both shows demonstrate the way in which mainstream American Theatre failed to appropriately identify the sub-groups within the Mechicana/o community.

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