

**Looking for a Third Space:  
*El Pachuco* and Chicano Nationalism  
in Luis Valdez's *Zoot Suit***

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In *Zoot Suit: An American Play* (1978), Luis Valdez emphatically reasserts the figure of the *pachuco*, which, as Jorge Huerta, Marcos Sanchez-Tranquilino, John Tagg, and Angie Chabram-Dernersesian have all theorized, marks the limit of the first stage, or wave, of Chicano cultural nationalism. As an outgrowth of Valdez's work with *El Teatro Campesino* (The Farmworker's Theater), *Zoot Suit* also represents the culmination of what is generally recognized as the first stage of his work (1965–1978), which, not coincidentally, parallels the initial period of the Chicano Civil Rights Movement in the Southwest.

Valdez began his "professional" writing and directing career in 1965 when he founded the Teatro Campesino during the Delano Grape Strike as a way to gain support for the United Farm Workers of California (UFWOC), then under the leadership of Caesar Chavez. At this time, Valdez's writing and directing focused on what he called *actos*; collectively created, *actos* were highly improvised skits that focused on the multiple oppressions experienced by the Chicano *huelguistas* (strikers) at the hands of the growers and *esquiroles* (scabs). According to Valdez, "The *actos* were born quite matter of factly in Delano. *Nacieron hambrientos de la realidad* [They were born of the hunger for reality]. Everything and anything that pertained to the daily life, *la vida cotidiana*, of the *huelguistas*, became food for thought, material for *actos*" (*Early Works* 11; italics added).

In 1967, in an effort to form a permanent theater company and thereby expand its political base, Valdez and the Teatro Campesino left the sponsorship of the United Farm Workers. According to Jorge Huerta, "It was not an ideological difference that motivated the separation, but the need to become a full-time theater, unencumbered by the daily demands of a struggling labor union. Valdez had to ask himself if he could really accomplish his goals with a sometime troupe, or if the Teatro Campesino could become a major force in the wider spectrum of the burgeoning Chicano Movement" (61). Valdez located the theater permanently in San Juan Bautista, California. Writing in 1970, Valdez explained the decision to leave the union: "*El Teatro Campesino* was born in the *huelga* [strike], but the very *huelga* would have killed it. . . . A struggle like the *huelga* needs every person it can get to serve

its immediate goals in order to survive; the teatro, as well as the clinic, service center and newspaper, being less important at the moment of need than the survival of the union, were always losing people to the grape boycott. When it became clear to us that the UFWOC would succeed and continue to grow, we felt it was time for us to move and to begin speaking about things beyond the *huelga*: Vietnam, the barrio, racial discrimination, etc" (*Early Works* 10; italics added).

In order to conceptualize Valdez's emerging political goals during the late 1960s and early 70s, Jorge Huerta has introduced the term "Mechicano" to describe the Teatro's broadening audience. As I understand the term, "Mechicano" suggests a unification, or alliance, of various subject and class positions (and therefore political interests) within the Chicano community in order to challenge Anglo-American racism. Mechicano is a fusion of the words "Chicano" and "Mexican." Although the origin of the word "Chicano" is uncertain, according to Huerta

most observers agree that "Chicano" came from the people themselves; it is a self-definition that denies both a Mexican and an Anglo-American distinction, yet is influenced by both. In essence, Chicanos assert that they are neither Mexican nor Anglo-American, employing a term that stems from barrio realities and linguistic patterns on this side of the Mexican border [the United States]. The term has been in common usage for generations and is often employed to distinguish between the middle-class Mexican American and the working class Chicano, a delineation that separates the so-called "assimilationist" from the political activist. There are still many Americans of Mexican descent who see the term Chicano as "common" and indicative of a low-class status. (4)

Mexican, on the other hand, Huerta defines as *los undocumentos*, Spanish-speaking, undocumented workers, or "illegal aliens," who are denied citizenship but, ironically, form a vital part of the American economy. So, following Huerta's definition, Mechicano can be understood as a working class audience that has experienced the same consequences of racism: "poverty, alienation, exploitation in wars, manipulation by government, ignorance in the schools, and injustice in the courts" (Huerta 5). Nevertheless, because of the way Valdez envisioned his audience, "Mexican" could also be understood to represent the more liberal segments of the Mexican-American middle class, especially those families with children attending college for the first time in the 1960s. Valdez called his audience "*la raza*" (the race), or "*la gente*" (the people), and seems to have had in mind a more broad coalition of political and social interests than Huerta theorizes (*Early Works* 10; italics added). This is

not to say that Huerta is wrong, but in essentializing the term *mechicano* as working class, he marginalizes the importance of the Chicano student movement, which was largely an effect of an emerging Mexican-American middle class whose children, under "minority" status, were now in the 1960s entering the California university system and finding themselves alienated. Valdez was trying to turn this audience into political activists; he used their alienation in an essentially Anglo system as a catalyst, not only to encourage theater but also to construct a cultural nationalism based on identity politics or difference.

Valdez's strategy, then, in politicizing, and in other cases repoliticizing, his audience was to reject "assimilationist" politics and to refigure cultural stereotypes by controlling them and by then reasserting them as positive. The plays Valdez produced directly after leaving the UFWOC—*The Shrunken Head of Pancho Villa* (1964)<sup>1</sup> and *Los vendidos* (*The Sellouts*; 1967) focused on characters who deny their identity in order to "blend into the allegorical melting pot" (47). According to Huerta, "By focusing on characters who deny their heritage and attempt to blend into the allegorical melting pot, [these] plays demonstrate what the Chicano should not be and indicate positive alternatives to such behavior....[T]he ideal characters exhibit a political awareness that suggests an active substitution to assimilation" (47).

Another—and related—goal of the Teatro at this juncture was to foster cultural nationalism by self-representation. As Huerta puts it, the desire for self-representation was part of a "renaissance of cultural and political activity among Chicanos" during the campaign for civil rights post-1965: "[Chicanos] would no longer acquiesce to the stereotypes and racial biases that plagued all aspects of the media but would, instead, fight for dignified representation on stage and film, in print and on the air" (Huerta 2). Part of this struggle, as the term Chicano suggests, was an active and sustained rejection of Anglo modes of culture, most prominently represented by the figure of the Mexican-American "sellout," in favor of a positive rearticulation of previously racist stereotypes. In other words, to help construct a unified Chicano movement, Valdez and other cultural workers took "outlaw" figures—stereotypes that were largely the projections of Anglo-American fear and racism—and gave them a positive value by using these outlaws to define Chicano identity.

One of the outlaw figures that Valdez chose as the embodiment of Chicano identity was the *pachuco*. In fact, by 1977, when he started to write *Zoot Suit*, the *pachuco* was his pre-eminent symbol of cultural resistance and self-definition. As Huerta points out, the "renegade" was essential to Valdez's theater from the beginning: "Above all, Valdez's plays reflect a struggle for cultural survival. The initial search for identity in the first play will recur in

each succeeding work, with certain character types returning in different forms. The youthful renegade, the *vato loco* [crazy dude] or *pachuco*, is present in each of the plays and finds his ultimate personification as the narrator of *Zoot Suit*" (50; italics).

Valdez viewed the *pachuco* as a Chicano archetype, as, in his words, a "Jungian self-image" (Savran 265); and as both the precursor and definition of what Valdez called "Chicano consciousness," the *pachuco* gained his value because he both rejected and was rejected by the Anglo culture that encircled and in many ways controlled Valdez's audience. His non-conformity to the values of the majority culture made him a threat, and Valdez used this threat as a strategy of what Frederic Jameson calls "fabulation" to construct solidarity through "CHICANO POWER." That is, for his Mechicano audience, the *pachuco* represented a fantasy of empowerment, a figure, for the most part, that was not determined by Anglo life; he represented, as Valdez said, "the power inside every individual that's greater than any human institution" (Savran 265); yet for most of Valdez's Mechicano audience, material transcendence of racism and poverty was difficult, if not impossible—the *pachuco* therefore created solidarity out of the hope embodied by his resistance.

Historically, the *pachuco* style, or *pachuquismo*, emerged in the early 1940s in Los Angeles and New York. The visible sign of *pachuquismo* was the *tacuche*, or zoot suit: "the padded, finger-length coat with wide lapels; the narrow-brimmed lid or hat; the draped pants with reat-pleats, ballooning to the knee then narrowing tightly at the ankle; the looping [watch] chain; the double-soled shoes..." (Sanchez-Tranquilino and Tagg 559). Like his fashion, the *pachuco*'s culture was, as Sanchez-Tranquilino and Tagg note, "an assemblage:" "It was a cultural *affirmation* not by nostalgic return to an imaginary originary wholeness and past, but by appropriation, transgression, reassemblage, breaking and restructuring the laws of language: in the speech of *Caló* and *pochismos*,<sup>2</sup> but also in the languages of the body, gesture, hair, tattoos, dress, and dance; and in the languages of space, the city, the *barrio*, the street" (559). *Pachuquismo* sought to construct a discursive space of and for its own identity; as Sanchez-Tranquilino and Tagg suggest, a "third space" assembled from but not of the *buenas garras* (fine clothes or rags) of two cultures: "a third space, between the dualities of rural and urban, Eastside and Westside, Mexican and American, and, arguably, feminine and masculine. Not pure negation. Not *mestizo*—half and half—but an even greater *mestizaje*. A new space: a new field of identity" (560).

Valdez was drawn to *pachuquismo* because, as he said to Carlos Morton in an interview in 1982, it "was the direct antecedent of what has come to be termed 'Chicano consciousness:' "

In the 1940s *pachucos* were caught between two cultures, viewed with suspicion by both conservative Mexican-Americans and Anglos. The *pachucos* were the first to acknowledge their bicultural backgrounds and to create a subculture based on this circumstance. The Anglo establishment, caught up in its "war-time hysteria" labeled the *pachucos* "zoot suiters" after their most flamboyant fashion. They were highly visible and easy targets for the U.S. Servicemen in Los Angeles in 1942. The *pachuco* emerged as a cult figure for he was the first to take pride in the complexity of his origins, and to resist conformity. (Morton 75)

Further, for Valdez, the *pachuco* represented a transgression in style and in language that simultaneously revealed the limits of Anglo-American democracy and in theory projected a more utopian politics based on hybridity and inclusion. As Sanchez-Tranquilino and Tagg write, "Tragic, heroic, delinquent, or grotesque, without a clear identity or location, the *pachuco* is a scandal of civilized meaning" (559). The very visiblens of the *pachuco* style was a threat because it destabilized conventional and normative cultural codes, meanings which could only be restored by outlawing the *pachuco*; in fact, *pachucos* attempted to subvert conventionalized meanings and modes of dress by reappropriating and subverting them, much like the culture of Gangsta' Rap does today. To quote Sanchez-Tranquilino and Tagg again: "[*Pachucos*] got into the dress codes of white male status and normality, playing with the images of an Anglo popular culture's own masculine "outsiders"—the Southern dandy, the Western gambler, the *modern* gangster. They did not negate "the very principles" of North American fashion, as [Octavio] Paz tells us, but subsumed them in their own rhythms, arenas, and exchanges..." (559). As Valdez writes in the prologue of *Zoot Suit*, "The *Pachuco* Style was an act in life and his language a new creation" (25; italics added).

More specifically, in *Zoot Suit* Valdez "recovers" the *pachuco* "as the proto-subject of national regeneration" in a period (the late 1970s) when the Chicano Civil Rights Movement was "entering a less militant phase" (Sanchez-Tranquilino and Tagg 558, 561). The play is a reconstruction of the Sleepy Lagoon Trial and the "Zoot Suit Riots," which took place in Los Angeles during the summers of 1942 and 1943, respectively. Briefly,<sup>3</sup> in August of 1942 the Los Angeles Police Department used the murder of José Díaz as a pretext to arrest and question over 600 Mexican-American adults and teenagers, who the police had identified as "suspected gang members." The arrests led to a mass trial in which seventeen Chicano youths were illegally convicted and imprisoned for murder. These convictions were overturned by

an appellate court in 1944. As in the Chicago trial on which Richard Wright's *Native Son* is based, the racism of Los Angeles newspapers made it easier for the court to ignore "normal judicial procedures" to gain convictions (Mazón 21–2). Los Angeles newspapers also made it possible for Anglo-Americans to blame "Zoot Suiters" for the "riots" that took place between June 3 and June 13 of 1943, even though eyewitness accounts clearly showed that American military personnel were responsible for the majority of the violence and property damage. In fact, as Mauricio Mazón has argued, the term "Zoot-Suit Riots," coined by the newspapers, is a misnomer because white servicemen actually started the rioting, during which they arbitrarily attacked men wearing zoot suits and, in many cases, raped *pachucos* who were wearing zoot suits. The "war-time hysteria" made it possible for the newspapers to construct *pachucos* as traitors. As Mazón writes, "Zoot-suiters transgressed the patriotic ideals of commitment, integrity, and loyalty with noncommitment, incoherence, and defiance. They seemed to be marking time while the rest of the country intensified the war effort" (9). And as Valdez notes above, their "flamboyant fashion" made them visible symbols of transgression during a period of hyper-conformity.

It is fitting then that in *Zoot Suit* Valdez uses newspapers and the Press as omnipresent symbols of Anglo racism and brutality. One of the most important instances of this device occurs in scene nine of act one, where at the opening of the Sleepy Lagoon Trial, the Judge is wheeled in on his "throne," which is made of "newspaper bundles piled squarely on a four-wheeled hand truck." The Press also rides in with the Judge, "holding the State and Federal Flags" (52). Valdez does this to underscore the collusion between the State and the Press in the contravention of justice during the Sleepy Lagoon Trial; he also does this to draw attention to the Press's ability to define and control the symbolic and social arenas in which the *pachucos* act. As *El Pachuco* says to the Press, "The Press distorted the very meaning of the word 'zoot suit.' All it is for you guys is another way to say Mexican" (80).

Throughout the play, Valdez's characters, and in particular *El Pachuco*, oppose the Press's ability to define reality, but they are only partially successful in challenging the racism and violence created and advocated by the Press and the State. In the play's opening scene, for example, *El Pachuco* "plunges" a switchblade through a "giant facsimile" of *The Los Angeles Herald Express* (June 3, 1943). The Headline reads: "ZOOT-SUITER HORDES INVADE LOS ANGELES. US NAVY AND MARINES ARE CALLED IN" (24). As he "emerges from the slit," he "dons" his coat and hat and "becomes the very image of the *Pachuco* myth." "HE proudly, slovenly, defiantly makes his way downstage. HE stops and assumes a pachuco stance"

(25; italics added). Edward James Olmos's portrayal of *El Pachuco* in the movie version of *Zoot Suit* is instructive here. As Olmos emerges from the knife cut in the newspaper, his body assumes a semi-erect, stylized slouch that he maintains throughout the play. Like his switchblade, his body becomes a phallic weapon that cuts through not only the reality constructed by the Press but also counters the realistic acting styles used by the play's other actors; Olmos's stylized performance gives *El Pachuco* a mythic dimension; his body moves in and out and between the other actors almost like a knife. His patterns of speech and movements are a direct contrast to the documentary style used by the other actors in creating the fiction of Los Angeles in the 1940s. As "HE" says, *El Pachuco*'s performance embodies "the secret fantasy of every bato [dude] in and out of the *Chicanada* [neighborhood] to put on a Zoot Suit and play the Myth *más chucote que la chingada* [just like a motherfucker]" (26; italics added). In this context, "*Chinanada*" has a double meaning: it suggests not only the act of intercourse but also the idea of relentless verbal or physical badgering. Both meanings suggest a kind of assault which conveys the thrusting of a knife or the phallus during sexual intercourse. "Playing" the myth can then be read as a relentless style or performance that defies normal modes of conduct and/or conventional codes of dress and speech, a style that asserts its reality by calling attention to its pretense, a visible act of rebellion that is "a construct of fact and fantasy" (25). Additionally, one of the root meanings of "*Chicanada*"<sup>4</sup> is chicanery or trickery, which Valdez uses to suggest that the space in which *El Pachuco* acts is subversive.

To emphasize the *chicana*, or chicanery, of *El Pachuco*'s space and performance, Valdez has him break realistic theatrical conventions. As Valdez said in an interview with David Savran,

With *Zoot Suit* I was finally able to transcend social conditions, and the way I did it on stage was to give the *Pachuco* absolute power, as the master of ceremonies. He could snap his fingers and stop the action. It was a Brechtian device that allowed the plot to move forward, but psychically and symbolically, in the right way.

And Chicanos got off on it. That's why a half-million came to see it in L.A. Because I had given a disenfranchised people their religion back. I dressed the *Pachuco* in the colors of Testatipoka, the Aztec god of education, the dean of the school of hard knocks. (265; italics added)

In addition to having *El Pachuco* control the action of the play, Valdez also has him directly address the audience as well as the main character within the play. At one point, for example, when the main character, Henry Reyna, is

about to kill a rival gang member, *El Pachuco* stops the action and comments, “*Qué mamada* [What luck], Hank. That’s just what the play needs right now. Two more Mexicans killing each other.... Everybody’s looking at you.... That’s exactly what they paid to see. Think about it” (46; italics added). *El Pachuco* then snaps his fingers to resume the action, and Reyna lets his rival go.

This scene is typical of the way Valdez uses the Brechtian concept of estrangement. By having *El Pachuco* interrupt the killing, he prevents the audience from psychically participating in the murder of “two more Mexicans.” As an educator, *El Pachuco* problematizes the audience’s desired response by contextualizing the violence. In doing so, the stage becomes *El Pachuco*’s *chicanada*, in which he subverts the audience’s ability to identify with practices and social codes that have limited the solidarity of the disenfranchised—practices such as gang warfare. Nevertheless, despite Valdez’s claims to the contrary, *El Pachuco*’s power is not absolute; the master of ceremonies is unable to transcend social conditions; he cannot escape the violence of the “Zoot-Suit Riots.”

At the beginning of the second act, *El Pachuco* warns the audience:

*Watchamos* [we watch] pachucos  
 los batos  
 the dudes  
 street-corner warriors who fought and moved  
 like unknown soldiers in wars of their own  
*El Pueblo de Los* [Los Angeles] was the battle zone  
 from Sleepy Lagoon to the Zoot Suit wars  
 when Marines and Sailors made their scores  
 stomping like Nazis on East L.A.... (65; italics added)

Here *El Pachuco* outlines the action of the second act in advance and in effect prepares the audience for the violence that comes in scene six (“ZOOT SUIT RIOTS”), where he substitutes himself for one of the *pachucos* in order to face an angry mob alone: “EL PACHUCO is overpowered and stripped.... The PRESS and SERVICEMEN exit with pieces of EL PACHUCO’s zoot suit. EL PACHUCO stands. The only item of clothing on his body is a small loincloth.... HE opens his arms as an Aztec conch blows, and HE slowly exits backward with powerful calm into the shadows” (81). Valdez reads this scene as *El Pachuco* saying, “‘It’ll take more the the U.S. Navy to beat me down’.... ‘I don’t give a fuck what you do to me. And I reassert myself, in this guise [the zoot suit]’” (Savran 265). This scene also links *El Pachuco*’s resistance with his Aztec past, in an attempt to ground his resistance in a historical continuum that has its origins in pre-Columbian America.



Nevertheless, while Valdez's reading is accurate, I find that it is problematic because in order to preserve or model dignity, *El Pachuco* chooses to be a victim; his substitution as victim also calls attention to the actual violence endured by Mexican-Americans, which *El Pachuco* cannot alleviate or fight, even in a symbolic manner. This is not to fault Valdez, however. The play must be read historically in the context of the Chicano Civil Rights Movement. His essentialization of Chicano identity, as I suggest at the beginning of this essay, marks the limits of the first stage of Chicano cultural nationalism. At this point, resistance is figured by essentializing identity (*El Pachuco*) and by providing a usable past that empowers that identity as a political weapon. Still, as Henry Giroux has recently argued, the practices of "identity politics" that emerged in the late 1970s, with their emphasis on difference, have become ineffective because of their "modernist" conception of personal agency. That is, to use Giroux's words, "Instead of recognizing multiple, collective agents capable of both challenging existing configurations of power and offering new visions of the future, modernism constructed a politics of identity within the narrow parameters of an individualism that was fixed, unburdened by history, and free from the constraints of multiple forms of domination" (63). Again, Valdez's essentialization of Chicano identity in *Zoot Suit* was a historically necessary political act to give, as he says, "a disenfranchised people their religion back." However, this reduction of identity ultimately produced an impasse because it marginalized lived social conditions and other possible identities.

To be fair, Valdez does try to problematize his "modernist" tendencies in the play by providing multiple endings for the character of Henry Reyna. Nevertheless, this deconstruction of identity will be ignored by most male members of the audience because they will have identified in advance with the "absolute power" of *El Pachuco*. In other words, playing the myth *más chucote que la chingada* hinders Chicana participation because the code of its resistance is "machismo," as Angie Chabram-Dernersesian comments. "Within this logic," she writes, "if Chicanas wished to receive the authorizing signature of the predominant movement discourses and figure within the record of Mexican practices of resistance in the U.S., then they had to embody themselves as male, adopt traditional family relations, and dwell only on their racial and/or ethnic oppression" (83).

Chabram-Dernersesian's critique of Chicano nationalism and Giroux's critique of identity politics are useful not only because they allow us to read *Zoot Suit* in its historical context, but also because their critiques suggest ways for us to rethink the processes of cultural nationalisms in order that we might move beyond the limited (and limiting) politics of difference. Such movement

is necessary in the United States if we are to rearticulate a vision of democratic culture that moves beyond the narrow borders of identity politics, so that we might indeed discover a "third space" that addresses and transforms the shared oppressions of marginalized communities.

### Notes

1. *The Shrunked Head of Pancho Villa* was written in 1964 when Valdez was a student at San Jose State.

2. *Caló* and *pochismos* are used here to denote the hybridity of the pachuco's language. According to Sanchez-Tranquilino, "*Pochismos* or *Anglicismos* are translated and Hispanicized English words taken over into southwestern interlingual slang. *Caló* draws on Southwestern Spanish, regional dialect, Mexican slang, and words that have changed little in form and meaning from Spanish Gypsy slang of the fifteenth century; but it is also a language of constant innovation, kept in restrictive usage by frequent and rapid changes of content through the invention of new terms" (564).

3. For a detailed account of the Sleepy Lagoon Trial and the Zoot-Suit Riots, see Mauricio Mazón, *The Zoot-Suit Riots: The Psychology of Symbolic Annihilation* (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1984).

4. In the movie version of *Zoot Suit*, Valdez substitutes the word *pachucada* for *chicanada* in order to further assert *El Pachuco's* control of meaning and social space.

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