

Performing (R)evolution: The Story of El Teatro Campesino

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El Teatro Campesino, a Chicano theatre company that started in California in 1965 as the theatrical arm of the United Farm Workers' Union, is a particularly compelling site to explore the increasing de-radicalization and corporate re-configuration of cultural resistance in the United States. Interestingly, Teatro Campesino—in most histories of the Chicano Movement¹—is positioned both as the “original,” anti-assimilationist Chicano protest theatre, and as the first Chicano theatre company to “make-it” in the American mainstream with productions such as *Zoot Suit* (1978) and *La Bamba* (1987). The dual and somewhat contradictory role carried by Teatro Campesino in American historiography is addressed in various ways in scholarship that tells a decade spanning “story” of Teatro Campesino. The story of Teatro Campesino is generally told in ways that either a) trace the life of this theatre company as a rags-to-riches narrative where a poor “theatre of the people” eventually breaks into the mainstream, producing successful stories of Chicanoness for a mass audience,² or b) foreground the Teatro Campesino story as a narrative about an alternative grassroots theatre that failed Chicanos/as by “selling-out” to the American culture industry.³ In contrast, I am not so much interested in framing Teatro Campesino's story as one of success or of failure, because the focus here remains primarily on the company's intentions and choices and does not work to contextualize these choices in terms of the historical and material circumstances out of which Teatro Campesino's performances emerged. Rather, this paper considers Teatro Campesino's transition from being a small activist theatre in Delano, California during the Grape Pickers Strike, to becoming a “professional” company creating plays and films in Hollywood and on Broadway in terms of the spaces—materially and discursively speaking—within which

¹ I use “Chicano” rather than “Chicano/a” throughout this paper as a way to foreground the male-dominated agenda of both the Chicano Movement and of Teatro Campesino.

² See Jorge Huerta's introduction to *Necessary Theatre*, Henry Elam Jr.'s *Taking it to the Streets*, Elizabeth Ramirez's “Chicano Theatre Reaches the Professional Stage: Luis Valdez's *Zoot Suit*,” or Betty Diamond's “*Zoot Suit*: From the Barrio to Broadway” for some examples.

³ See Yolanda Broyles-Gonzales's *El Teatro Campesino: Theatre in the Chicano Movements* or Rosa Linda Fregoso's “Intertextuality and Cultural Identity in *Zoot Suit* and *La Bamba*.”

Teatro Campesino's "political theatre" was produced. Examining Teatro Campesino's shift in focus, from overtly critiquing capitalism and farm worker injustice to attempting to make Chicanos "visible" in mainstream plays and films, I will be probing into questions about the corporate hegemony in the U.S., about the interconnectedness of economic and racial subjugation, and about the relationship between Chicano resistance narratives and progress-oriented narratives of capitalist America. Most broadly, the "story" of Teatro Campesino as I am going to tell it will raise questions about the role and resonance of resistance to the *status quo* within an increasingly corporatized North America.

Part I - Decentring Capital in the *Actos*

In the "early period" of El Teatro Campesino (1965-1970), all of the company's performances were explicitly geared toward staging alternatives to the poverty and racism experienced by Mexican farm workers in California. The *actos* (as these early Teatro Campesino sketches were called) foregrounded and challenged not only the unjust U.S. agribusinesses system, but also racist stereotypes of Mexicans prevalent in the U.S.. In an interview in 1966, Luis Valdez, one of Teatro Campesino's founding members, stated, "We don't think in terms of art, but of our political purpose in putting across certain points" (Bagby 78). He went on to explain that the *actos* "are directed at the farm worker; they're supposed to represent the reality that he sees. It's not a naturalistic presentation; most of the time it's a symbolic, emblematic presentation of what the farm worker feels" (83). Through the use of heightened, parodic figures, Teatro Campesino was able both to stage and to challenge the social inequality experienced by the migrant Mexican farm workers.

In ways that are relevant to my discussion of Teatro Campesino's *actos*, Elin Diamond's Brechtian/feminist analysis outlines the ways in which an emblematic approach to theatre can foreground the historical processes and systems through which particular bodies (women, people of colour) have become marked as Other within dominant discourses. She writes, "The character is never the focal point on the Brechtian stage, but rather the always dissimulated historical conditions that keep her from choosing and changing. The actor *shows* this, and shows his showing, displacing attention from virtuosic impersonation to demonstration—demonstration not *of* authority, but *as* praxis" (47). Diamond stresses that "the actor must not lose herself in the character but rather *demonstrate* the character as a function of particular socio-historical relations, a conduit of particular choices" (50). In line with Diamond's analysis, the *actos* were, as Valdez indicated, "about reality," but the use of a satiric and emblematic approach to representing that reality allowed the performances to gesture toward the socio-historical and systemic, rather than merely particularized, nature of the labour injustices the farm workers were experiencing. Further, the use of masks and placards to foreground key players and to encode the performances themselves made overt Teatro

Campesino's unmistakably political interpretations of and solutions to the labour injustices in California.

Quinta Temporada (The Fifth Season), one of Teatro Campesino's fifteen-minute *actos*, provides an example of an emblematic and systemically oriented critique of the multiple oppressions faced by Mexican farm workers. In the first moments of *Quinta Temporada* an actor comes onto stage with a placard that says "Farm Worker" and declares that he is looking for a job. A second actor dressed in khaki clothing and covered in money enters, announcing, "I am summer." Summer proceeds to move slowly across the stage as the farm worker quickly picks off the money/fruit attached to Summer. This initial sequence foregrounds the main issue of the performance; "capital" becomes both the symbolic and physical center of the *acto*. Further, by deliberately masking the "use value" of the fruit with its "exchange value" of money, Teatro Campesino literalizes the alienating gap emerging from the capitalist commodification of both the fruit and the farm worker's own labour. Thus, in the performance, Teatro Campesino stages the injustices of the California agribusiness system by positioning the farm worker in *relation to* the system, as both product of and abused actor within the process of capitalist commodification.

Teatro Campesino's use of personified seasons to forward the action of the play further serves to highlight oppression in terms of repetitive cycles of abuse and systemic relations of domination. Until the farm worker becomes fed up and strikes, the basic vicious cycle staged in the play unfolds as follows: the farm worker energetically leaps toward Summer (and later Autumn) to hurriedly pick the money/fruit; just after the farm worker removes the money, the predacious labour contractor (satirically named "Don Coyote") extracts the money from the farm worker's back pocket and hands it over to the grower/boss ("Patron"). The cycle of exploitation continues through to autumn, until Winter steps on stage declaring, "I am Winter and I want money. Money for gas, lights, telephone, rent. Money!" (27). By the time Spring comes around, the hungry, maltreated farm worker decides to go on strike, which eventually leads to the grower signing a fair contract through the union. The play ends with a "Fifth Season," the season of social justice, chasing the grower off the stage. In this way, *Quinta Temporada* marks the farm worker's strike, and the grower's eventual signature on the union contract, as necessary challenges to the repetitive seasons of exploitation operating within the California farm-labour system. While *Quinta Temporada* (among other *actos*) evidently produces a kind of Manichean formula of good and bad players, the performance mobilizes these binaries in terms of systemic disparity rather than individualized injustice to show the inadequacy of a system that is predicated on relations of inequality.

For a further example, in *Las dos Caras del Patroncito (The Two Faces of the Boss)*, the comic inversion of the roles of the grower and the labourer illustrate abuse to be an element of the agribusiness system, rather than the fault of individual, "evil" bosses. In this sketch, a

conversation between a farm worker and his boss (who wears a comic pig mask) turns into the boss envying the “easy life” the farm worker has: “Hell you got it good here . . . You sure as hell ain’t got my problems, I’ll tell you that. Taxes, insurance, supporting all them bums on welfare. You don’t have to worry about none of that” (11). However, when the grower gets what he wants and switches places with the farm worker—by removing his mask to the gleeful laugh of the farm worker who tells him “Patron, you look like me!” (16)⁴—he discovers that life as a farm worker is not what he had imagined. In fact, the play ends with the grower-turned-farm worker calling for César Chavez’s help.⁵ On the other hand, the farm worker-turned-grower is as abusive to his boss as his boss was when in the position of authority. The continuation of the abusive grower-farm labourer relationship foregrounds the subjugation of the Mexican farm worker as a deeply ingrained component of the farm-labour system regardless of the particular individual in charge. In this way, both *Quinta Temporada* and *Las dos Caras del Patroncito* illustrate the ways in which racism and economic oppression are systemically linked, using techniques designed to gather a collective opposition to racist U.S. migrant labour practices by “demonstrat[ing] the character[s] as a function of particular socio-historical relations” (Diamond 50) rather than as individuals marked by either an essentialized inferiority or inherent superiority.

Part II - Moving Forward: Theatrical (R)evolutions

In the early 1970s, Teatro Campesino continued performing *actos* though it broadened its focus from the United Farm Worker’s strike to examine issues related to Chicano education (*No Saco Nada de la Escuela/I Get Nothing Out of School*), to foreground the importance of non-violent protests (*Militants*), and to destabilize stereotypes of “Mexicans” prevalent in the dominant U.S. imaginary (*Los Vendidos/The Sell-Outs*). By the mid 1970s and early 1980s, Teatro Campesino had re-located to San Juan Bautista, California, at which point, as many scholars have noted, the company gradually began to “professionalize,” performing for a broader audience, auditioning “professional” actors from L.A., and producing plays that gestured beyond the immediate concerns of the Chicano Movement. Henry Elam Jr., in his comparative study of Teatro Campesino and the Black Revolutionary Theatre, suggests that the “mainstreaming” of Teatro Campesino had primarily to do with “the dissolution of the conditions of urgency” (133) that existed in the 1960s and early 1970s, arguing that it was the “urgent, insistent times” (133) that had created such a favourable atmosphere for social protest theatre. However, as Yolande Broyles-Gonzales points out, the 1970s, 80s, and 90s were no less “urgent times” for Mexican-Americans. In fact, according to Broyles-Gonzales, there was a “dramatic increase in Chicano/a and Latino/a poverty levels throughout

⁴ The dialogue continues with Patron saying, “You mean . . . I . . . look like a Mexican?” (16).

⁵ Chavez, along with Dolores Huerte, founded the United Farm Worker’s Union.

the 1970s and the 1980s, along with the continuing unequal access to education. Sheer survival has become increasingly difficult in the 1990s” (236). How then, can we explain the de-radicalizing impulse emerging in “activist” theatres such as Teatro Campesino? And what does this de-radicalizing impulse have to do with efforts to re-frame the work of political resistance in terms of increasingly de-historicized, individualized expressions of hardship?

In order to approach an answer to these questions, and before examining Teatro Campesino’s eventual embeddedness within dominant funding and performance structures, I think it may be useful to contextualize Teatro Campesino’s social protest theatre within both capitalist and revolutionary progress-oriented narratives of the 1960s and 1970s. In spite of the strategically effective critiques of injustice staged in the *actos*—“effective” in the sense that the farm workers engaged actively with the performances and actually began striking and unionizing in increasing numbers—the *actos* evidently *did* perpetuate other problematic power dynamics that were being fostered and sustained within the Chicano Movement more broadly. For example, the “revolutionary” agenda embraced by Teatro Campesino and the Chicano Movement articulated resistance to economic exploitation and racism in exclusively male terms. Angie Chabram-Dernersesian emphasizes that within the Chicano Movement, “resistance to racial, ethnic, and political domination is embodied in Chicano masculinity,” suggesting that the “nature of Luis Valdez’s alternative drama [. . .] inverts power relations at the level of gender (and by extension, class and race) while reinscribing pejorative views of Chicana women, views that are nourished by their bodies and subordinate position in U.S. society” (141).

Additionally, the clearly oppositional framework and male-dominated emancipatory rhetoric of the Chicano Movement within which the *actos* emerged, employed a positivist, progress-oriented narrative that on some levels disturbingly echoed that of American free-market capitalism. In *The Revolutionary Imagination in the Americas and the Age of Development*, María Josefina Saldaña-Portillo explores the disconcerting resemblances between the “free world” capitalist narratives of liberation and the revolutionary narratives of counter-hegemonic collectivities both within and outside the United States. Saldaña-Portillo suggests,

a normative theory of human transformation and agency [. . .] is at the heart of the discursive collusion between revolutionary and development discourses [. . .] As narratives of liberation, both discourses share an origin in imperial reason: in those Enlightenment doctrines of progress, evolution, and change that were historically articulated with the practice of European colonialism and colonial capitalism. Thus, even as post-World War II discourses of [. . .] revolutions were specifically articulated *against* colonial and neocolonial relations of power, both shared a theory of human perfectability that was itself a legacy of the various raced and gendered subject formations animating colonialism. (7)

For example, the 1969 Chicano Manifesto, “El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán” (“The Spiritual Manifesto of Aztlán”)—which in Chabram-Dernersesian’s words “articulates the case for Chicano self-determination and nationhood” (116)—posited a strongly anti-assimilationist agenda that supplanted U.S. nationalist discourse with an equally essentializing embrace of a new Chicano nation and identity. “El Plan” states, “We are free and sovereign to determine those tasks which are justly called for by our house, our land, the sweat of our brows and by our hearts” (83).

Valdez also set out a clearly nationalist and evolutionary vision for Chicanos in his introduction to *Actos* (1970): “Chicanos must not be reluctant to act *nationally*. To think in national terms: politically, economically and spiritually” (3). He goes on to explain that a nationally oriented Chicano theatre will “require a couple of generations of Chicanos devoted to the use of the theater as an instrument in the evolution of our people” (3). Thus, even as it imagines Chicanos rather than Anglos in a position of dominance, the Chicano nationalist narrative that emerged in the 1960s in some senses reinstated the same notions of progress and human perfectability that continue to fuel neoliberal narratives in the U.S., narratives that mask exclusions and exploitation by appealing to progress and individual success. Saldaña-Portillo stresses what is perhaps most disturbing about revolutionary movements’ embrace of a teleological, developmentalist rhetoric: “the age of development [. . .] render[s] as ‘natural’ certain normative concepts of growth, progress, modernity” (6) and, I would add, male-supremacy. Before continuing, I should stress that while the masculinist, positivist undercurrent to the Chicano movement may have, in fact, re-instated a progress-oriented drive toward a purportedly “universal” emancipation that was in fact marked by many troubling exclusions, the short-term effectivity of Teatro Campesino’s interconnected criticisms of capitalism and racism staged in the *actos* should not be overlooked. Rather, I think the *actos* represent *both* a provocative example of a way to engage in systemic and collectively motivated critiques of unjust relations of power, *and* a site from which to move toward theorizing how the positivist, masculinist undercurrent of the early work of Teatro Campesino perhaps facilitated Teatro Campesino’s heightened focus on *individualized* struggles, as well as its gradual move into the so-called “mainstream.”

Part III - Granting Access

Taking Saldaña-Portillo’s suggestion into consideration—that capitalist ideals of growth, progress, and modernity have been quietly naturalized even within counter-hegemonic narratives in the United States—I turn at this point to examine the ways in which funding played a significant role both in enabling Teatro Campesino to produce plays that were gaining increasing currency within the “professional” mainstream, *and* in complicating the critique of the status quo that Teatro Campesino mobilized in the *actos*. That is, this section considers Teatro Campesino’s

shift in the early 1980s in terms of the broader de-radicalizing pressures facing the arts and culture sector, and in light of the ways in which government and corporate funding structures implicitly perpetuate and support liberal democracy and global capitalism even while providing assistance to groups marginalized within these hegemonic systems. In “The Privatization of Culture” George Yúdice, referring to government funding practices in the 1960s and 1970s, writes,

as alternative spaces were drawn into [government] funding policies [. . .] those who worked in these spaces were shaped subjectively by their own practices as they conformed to the measures and procedures of applications and meeting eligibility. It might be said that the NEA brought alternativity into the fold as it created the means for its empowerment. (21)

In fact, for 15 years, recognizing the ways in which reliance on grants could dramatically shift artistic practice, Teatro Campesino had done without grant support. Valdez wrote in 1970, “The corazón de la Raza⁶ cannot be revolutionized on a grant from Uncle Sam” (*Actos* 3). Since Teatro Campesino’s primary political thrust was to challenge economic and social inequality in the U.S., to turn to government funding seemed to undercut the counter-hegemonic politics of the *actos*.

By the late 1970s, however, Teatro Campesino started relying on grants to sustain its theatre practice. In 1978, Valdez received a Rockefeller Foundation “playwright-in-residence” grant which led to the production of the widely successful play, *Zoot Suit*, and in 1980, the company received one of NEA’s Institutional Advancement Grants. Clearly invoking developmentalist rhetoric, A.B. Spellman, the director of the Expansion Arts program at the time that Teatro Campesino received the grant, explained that the NEA grants (given under the Expansion Arts program) were designed for “organizations that had developed from populist origins [. . .] What they needed next was assistance to gain a firm administrative footing” (quoted in Drake 6). The “playwright-in-residence” Rockefeller Foundation grant that Luis Valdez received in 1978 was similarly geared toward providing financial assistance to “under-developed” or “minority” performance groups. However, both grants carried specific stipulations: the NEA grant required that Teatro Campesino “gain a firm administrative footing” through the creation of a hierarchical, highly stratified administrative apparatus, while the “playwright-in-residence” grant implicitly favoured the notion of a single author-genius, a stipulation that ran counter to the collective creation approach in which Teatro Campesino had engaged up to that point. The hierarchical division of labour that emerged as a result of the grant stipulations became difficult to sustain when, in 1981, the three-year NEA grant was frozen under the Reagan administration. The sudden in-flux and then reduction of money for Teatro Campesino created a different kind of economic need in the company, a need that intensified the theatre’s focus

⁶ “Corazón de la Raza” translates as “heart of the people.”

on projects that would be economically successful. Tellingly, in 1983 Valdez commented in a Teatro Campesino board of directors meeting, “we’re in business. The only question is: ‘What will our product be?’” (quoted in Broyles-Gonzales 237). Broyles-Gonzales notes that at this point in Teatro Campesino’s history there was “a new commitment to mass marketing” where “the idea of selling the theatrical product [became] the chief consideration; all other considerations [became] secondary” (237). The artistic and political vision of Teatro Campesino was, in a sense, rendered subordinate to the bottom-line; finding the best Chicano *product* to sell to a broader American audience increasingly became Valdez’s and Teatro Campesino’s priority.

Part IV – Visibility Politics: *Zoot Suit* and *La Bamba*

Therefore, beyond dramatically shifting the administrative apparatus and authorial approach of Teatro Campesino, the grants also seemed to shift the ideological thrust of the theatre performances themselves. In their “professional” performances, instead of using money and economic inequality as the thematic center of the productions (as they had in performances such as *Quinta Temporada*), the Teatro Campesino members seem to have pushed their criticism of capitalism to the background—even as capitalism, evident in Valdez’s heightened interest in the “business” of theatre, remained the controlling framework within which these performances were produced. For an obvious example, as Teatro Campesino moved from overtly challenging social inequality in its plays, the company simultaneously came to rely on a heavily corporatized marketing apparatus for “professional” productions such as *Zoot Suit*. A *New York Times* article that ran a few weeks before *Zoot Suit* opened on Broadway made explicit mention of the marketing apparatus of the play: “Now promotion efforts have gotten into the act. In a few weeks, 50,000 coke bottles will turn up on supermarket shelves wearing *Zoot Suit* collars. These collars will advertise what Coke is calling ‘a night on the town’, offering in exchange for six bottle caps discount tickets to the play plus a free dinner” (15).

Interestingly, Teatro Campesino’s very pronounced entrance into the marketplace was accompanied by an artistic trend toward predominantly realist rather than emblematic representations on stage and screen. Additionally, while most of Teatro Campesino’s previous work had focused on the immediate concerns of the Chicano community—from highlighting social inequality in the education system, to mobilizing critiques of California agribusiness—both *Zoot Suit* and *La Bamba* centre on historical U.S. stories in ways that ironically *de*-historicize and undercut the transgressive potential of these representations of “Chicanoness.” Teatro Campesino’s seemingly distinct trends toward both realism and “history” are arguably interconnected. By mobilizing realist representations of the personal stories of male figures, Henry Reyna and Ritchie Valens in *Zoot Suit* and *La Bamba* respectively, these productions

make invisible the socio-historical, systemic, and interrelated issues of racism and economic exploitation. Even as the stories of Ritchie Valens and Henry Reyna are situated in “history,” history is used as a static backdrop to the difficult internal struggles both these characters face, rather than as an active, shaping force in positioning and policing Henry’s and Ritchie’s particular subjectivities.

While *Zoot Suit* explores the Sleepy Lagoon Trial, an unjust mass trial of Mexican-American youth that unfolded in Los Angeles during 1942, the glossing of this historical injustice in a strange “swinging 40s” nostalgia produces the Sleepy Lagoon Trial as a kind of remote historical referent, rather than as a suggestive and damning history of the present; the play thus provides a comfortable enough distance from the “real event” for Anglo audiences to remain safely outside the net of complicity. In terms of the play’s realist inflections, *Zoot Suit*’s larger-than-life character, El Pachuco *does* initially seem to play a similar role to the emblematic characters of Teatro Campesino’s *actos* as the only character to undermine the mimetic contract of the play. Like the highly exaggerated characters of *Las dos Caras* and *Quinta Temporada*, El Pachuco’s heightened, stylized performance appears to foreground his performance *as* a performance. At one point El Pachuco interrupts the play’s action to admonish Henry with an indignant “órale pues! Don’t take the pinche play so seriously!” (78).

However, El Pachuco’s ability to produce a kind of Brechtian distancing effect—by stepping back from, commenting on, and at times even intervening in, the play’s action—is dramatically undermined when we discover part way through the play that El Pachuco is actually Henry Reyna’s conscience; Henry tells El Pachuco, “*Sabes que, ese*. I’ve got you all figured out. I know who you are, *carnal*. You’re the one who got me here. You’re my worst enemy and my best friend. Myself” (78). At this point it becomes clear that El Pachuco’s authority over the play serves less to provide a space for the performance to gesture toward unjust hegemonic systems and processes that actively marginalize the Chicano youth who have been put on trial; instead, El Pachuco’s authoritative role is most overtly used to foreground Henry as a man with *choice*, a man who can step outside oppressive circumstances through his own strong will and determination. Alternately, if Henry makes the wrong choices, his continued imprisonment—both literally and figuratively—can only ever be marked as his fault; “*You’re* the one who got me here” (78), Henry tells his “self.” Broyles-Gonzales points out that in Henry’s prison scene in solitary confinement, El Pachuco and Henry’s dialogue “only fleetingly touches on the realities of the judicial system or the impending appeal. Instead, the dialogue focuses on the nuclear self, entirely divorced from sociohistorical realities” (210). Henry’s struggle is thus situated *outside* the hegemonic and historical processes that construct him in particular ways and is re-framed in terms of his own will and determination, in terms of a deeply personalized and dehistoricized battle within Henry Reyna’s own mind.

Similarly, *La Bamba*, the widely successful Hollywood film about Mexican-American rock legend Ritchie Valens, focuses on a historical moment that provides an even less threatening vehicle for staging Chicano identity. In *La Bamba*, Ritchie, a poor Californian “barrio boy” ends up rocketing to commercial culture industry stardom. As Rosa Linda Fregoso and others have pointed out, Teatro Campesino’s version of Valens’s story disturbingly de-ethnicizes Valens, performing a version of Ritchie’s story that clearly caters to dominant (i.e., Anglo) interests. For example, Fregoso suggests that *La Bamba*’s reading of Valens’s life overlooks “Valens’s deep cultural roots in a Mexican working-class music tradition, or his close ties to black musicians such as Little Richard and Bo Diddley,” adding that in this way, “*La Bamba* distorted key details about Valens’s childhood formation in Mexican music, depicting him instead as just a rock-and-roll musician” (40). In fact, at the time of the film’s release, in a *New York Times* interview with Lawrence Van Gelder, Valdez foregrounds how *La Bamba* became a way to tell a broader story of rock-and-roll in America, a move that may have contributed to the film glossing over many of the particularities of Ritchie’s Chicano upbringing: “One aspect of ‘La Bamba’ is [...] a rags-to-riches story that points out where most of the rock-and-roll of the 1950’s came from—from the working class in America. And the mythical image of the poor boy with a guitar is the consistent factor of all those major pioneers, from Elvis to Ritchie” (n.p.). Interestingly, the “rags-to-riches” narrative invoked by the film, where a “poor boy with a guitar” rises to rock-and-roll fame, also follows a de-ethnicizing arch where in order to transcend the conditions of his working class Mexican-American upbringing Ritchie must rise above not only his poverty but also his “Mexicanness” to fully enjoy commercial success. Cynthia Hamilton stresses, referring to hegemonic trends emerging in the U.S. in the 1970s and 80s, “To be American, one had to strive to be non-ethnic and nonworking-class. This process obscured relations of power and the promotion of a new ‘synthetic’ culture that helped to eradicate all references to working-class resistance” (173).

The story of Ritchie Valens certainly avoids any reference to working-class Chicano resistance except as depicted in the vilified character of Ritchie’s half-brother, Bob. In a move that further erases (by internalizing and particularizing) social and historical struggles of working-class Chicanos/as, *La Bamba* shows Ritchie, like Henry Reyna, battling against a dark other “self.” In the case of *La Bamba*, it is Ritchie’s surly and markedly ethnicized half-brother who shadows and undermines Ritchie on his road to success. In contrast to Bob, Ritchie Valens (who changes his name from Ricardo Valenzuela—an act of misnaming that helps to make Ritchie less “ethnic” and more accessible for an Anglo audience) is represented as sweet, dutiful, and hardworking, a young man who manages to “pull himself up by his boot straps” and out of the barrio through his own determination and love of rock-and-roll. In this way, *La Bamba* makes race-based poverty an individualized moral issue rather than one of systemic inequality. The equation is simple: if you are dutiful

and good like Ritchie, you can make it. If, on the other hand, you are a drunk and aggressive Mexican *macho* like Bob, you won't.

Thus, Ritchie's story as presented in *La Bamba* is predictable and generalized, "a rock 'n' roll fairytale of saintly ambition" (Howe n.p.) that offers viewers a safe affirmation that the American dream is for anyone honest and hard-working enough—even poor Mexican-Americans. Ironically, one *New York Times* reviewer comes close to critiquing *La Bamba* for being *too* conventional: "[Valens is] a strong, sympathetic figure even when saying things like 'My dreams are pure rock-and-roll' or 'One of these days I'm going to buy you the house of your dreams, Mom.' Lines like these abound in Mr. Valdez's screenplay, but they're so predictable they have a certain charm" (Maslin n.p.). Even though Ritchie's story ends with a tragic airplane crash that ended his life, the tragedy is not made out to be the result of any moral indiscretions on Ritchie's part (immorality remains entirely the domain of Ritchie's half-brother); instead, the crash is given its tragic force because it comes on the heels of Ritchie finally overcoming hardships, most notably his unsavory beginnings in the Mexican-American barrio and his consistent tension with his crass, disrespectful, working-class brother, to finally "make it" as an all-American rock-and-roll star. In other words, the plane crash—while it could certainly be read as a (somewhat obscure and indirect) commentary on the impossibility of true success for a poor Mexican-American boy from the barrios⁷—seems to lose its potential to be an indictment of the mainstream in the context of Ritchie's blameless character and fairy-tale like ascent to stardom; Ritchie is presented as being as deserving of his success as he is unworthy of his death.

Victor Valle comments, "In an industry that thrives on Cinderella stories, *La Bamba* reaffirmed Hollywood's favorite narrative clichés . . . the hardworking ordinary underdog who succeeds through sheer will and natural virtue" (292). The quotation provides a tidy summary of what is most troubling about Teatro Campesino's later performances. Paralleling the heightened focus on the "individual" rather than collective agency within neoliberal discourses, both *La Bamba* and *Zoot Suit* construct stories about "heroic" male Chicanos who struggle independently to overcome hardships, hardships that are smoothed into a deterministic "that's just life" equation. The heightened individualism of these later productions de-contextualize the historical stories of Chicanoness by locating what are, in large part, systemic issues within the mind of the protagonists, and by using history as a *prop*, rather than as a dynamic, contradictory, shaping *process*. The relationship between race and economic oppression is also disturbingly elided in both *Zoot Suit* and *La Bamba*. Teatro Campesino's ability to "break into" dominant discursive

⁷ Victor Fuentes notes that there is an "ironic sense" to the "sequences of assimilation [...] [I]n *La Bamba*, 'the American dream' ends up in a nightmare of death" (212). He does go on to suggest, however that "given the mythical dimension of [...] [the] film[], at another level, death has the positive sense of being an initiatory death" (212).

spaces with productions such as *Zoot Suit* and *La Bamba*, like the success story of Ritchie Valens, is perhaps part of the broader neoliberal tendency “toward the symbolic (and not necessarily economic) valorization of sectors other than the white middle class” (Yúdice 29). Indeed, the symbolic inclusion of Chicano bodies within the dominant imaginary, rather than signaling a parallel economic inclusion of these racialized bodies, overwrites a systemic critique of capitalism with a pacifying gesture toward “marginalized” populations. The inclusion of versions of Henry’s and Ritchie’s stories in the U.S. performance canon certainly makes *visible* Chicano presence but does not contest the historical processes through which and by which Mexican-Americans became marked as Other in the first place.

While I argued earlier that the *actos*, in their use of satirical and overtly representational characters, had the *potential* to challenge an essentialist closure of identity and gesture toward the historical processes through which Chicano identities are produced, even these performances were informed and limited by a politics of identity that also paradoxically *reinforced* individualizing and essentialist understandings of difference. Pointing to the ways in which many of the counter-cultural and liberationist practices of the 1960s and 1970s relied on male-dominated narratives that upheld modernist conceptions of personal agency, Henry Giroux writes, “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). Thus, Teatro Campesino’s entrance into the mainstream does, on one level, “makes sense” in the context of a resistance movement that did not recognize that the language of emancipation and vanguard heroism mobilized within it and *against* Anglo American hegemony and race-based economic oppression, was language that could be turned around to provide an easy (and albeit ironic) justification of a heroic Chicano theatre company leading the pack to gain economic “success” within dominant Anglo American artistic spaces. However, Teatro Campesino’s move “from the barrio to Broadway” (Diamond, Betty 124)—from protest theatre to a brand of success that was not just marked by a broader base of support and a wider reach for their art, but that saw them “making it” in the most cherished and the most uncritical spaces of Anglo American culture, Broadway and Hollywood—can not simply be read as a product of Valdez’s artistic perseverance or misguided heroism. Rather, the story of Teatro Campesino needs to go beyond contextualizing the possible ideological reasons behind Valdez’s selfish or heroic decision to “go mainstream,” to consider the (interrelated) material avenues that enabled Teatro Campesino’s success.

Yúdice theorizes the disjuncture between the anti-assimilationist stances of various civil rights movements, and their later incorporation

into the so-called “mainstream.” Taking the focus away from the “decisions” and “intentions” of marginalized groups, Yúdice argues:

By the early 1970s, the activism of Chicano and ethnic militants had been drawn overwhelmingly into institutionalized cultural and social welfare spheres [. . .] This increase in governmentalization is an important conditioning factor in the emergence of the politics of identity, especially the way the late capitalist welfare state translates the interpretations of people’s needs into legal, administrative, and therapeutic terms, thus reformulating the political reality of those interpretations. (54)

Yúdice goes on to foreground how through various development projects initiated by NGOs, government funding bodies, and arts organizations, “minority” groups have been given access to rights—better jobs, better representation, “dignity”—that already exist within the coordinates of global capitalism and liberal democracy. Thus, the symbolic “recognition of difference” within the multicultural, liberal pluralism emerging in the 1980s and 1990s in the U.S., seems to be less a move to connect “minority cultures” with pursuits of social justice and equity, and more to recognize and tolerate cultural difference within the framework and rhetoric of global capitalism.

Metaphorically mirroring Yúdice’s claims about governmentality, it is telling that even as *La Bamba* and *Zoot Suit* focused more explicitly on the “individual” and naturalized the relationship between the historical figures and the economic and racial oppression they both faced, Henry and Ritchie are nevertheless produced as “pawns” of either benevolent or unkind Anglos. In *Zoot Suit*, the non-Chicano defence lawyer and Sleepy Lagoon defense committee leader act as “white saviour” figures who work tirelessly to appeal the unjust conviction of the Chicano youths. Similarly, in *La Bamba*, it is Ritchie’s producer/manager who “wins” Ritchie success. In other words, these so-called “minority” stories are re-positioned as American neoliberal success stories of underdog “individuals” overcoming hardships while simultaneously being framed in terms of the enabling presence of Anglo heroes and gatekeepers. It remains the role of Anglos to determine how the Mexican-American Other can access dominant material and discursive spaces.

So, why tell this particular version of the story of Teatro Campesino? By contextualizing Teatro Campesino’s intentions and choices more specifically in terms of the broader material and discursive processes that made possible its move into the mainstream, I hope to present Teatro Campesino’s story as more than just a story of artistic triumph or failed political resistance. Indeed, in some ways, Teatro Campesino’s entrance into the “mainstream” *was* a remarkable achievement, but an achievement that needs to be read in terms of what that achievement meant and for whom. Many accounts address Teatro Campesino’s professionalization and the institutionalization of Chicanismo, more broadly, as an inevitable and even desirable outcome of the Chicano Revolution. For example, Rosa Apodaca, one of the members of the Teatro Campesino collective, challenges the claim that the company sold out, stating, “You know, that

really gets to me! The Chicano Movement started because we needed better representation, we needed to have better wages, we needed to treat ourselves with dignity and respect [. . .] and once people started getting those things it was like ‘Oh! Damn you for getting that job! Sellout!’ It’s like, ‘Wait a minute! Isn’t that what you wanted for me?’” (Reynolds n.p.). Eugene Van Erven, in his book *Radical People’s Theatre*, also suggests that Teatro Campesino’s “selling out” was not only something to be celebrated, but was, perhaps, even revolutionary. He writes,

It should not be forgotten that before el Teatro Campesino no other Mexican-American company had ever been able to gain any kind of recognition in professional arts circles. Campesino’s commercial success and even its penetration into Hollywood must, then, be considered a revolution of sorts and an enormous boost for Chicano respectability and social dignity. (53)

Both Van Erven and Apodaca have a point; Teatro Campesino did attain a particular kind of success, but a success that was in some ways compromised by an economic and ideological system that focuses on individual rather than systemic change. While many Chicana/o Movement activists engaged in the important work of lobbying for better access to post-secondary education and for better representation in mainstream media, other portions of the Movement in which Teatro Campesino participated throughout the 1960s and 1970s seemed to call for a more radical kind of social transformation that challenged the injustices enabling U.S. hegemony, rather than seeking representation within the so-called mainstream. My point then is not to admonish Teatro Campesino for “going mainstream,” but to destabilize the clear evolutionary arch that presents the neoliberal dream of individual economic success as *the only* logical end-point, the “reward” so-to-speak, of Teatro Campesino’s struggles in the barrio.

On the other hand, in my discussion of “what gets lost” in Teatro Campesino’s entrance into the mainstream, I do not mean implicitly to valorize Teatro Campesino’s early productions in an unproblematized fashion, or to suggest that there ever can be a “pure” space of critique outside the dominant. While there are important differences between the kinds of critiques put forward by Teatro Campesino in the *actos* and the ones offered in their later productions,⁸ all of Teatro Campesino’s approaches to Chicano cultural expression were necessarily enabled, defined, and constrained by dominant artistic, social, and political trends. Indeed, in some ways the patriarchal and nationalist emancipatory rhetoric fueling Teatro Campesino (and the Chicano movement) from the mid 1960s to the 1970s undercut the collectivist critiques of economic and racial oppression staged in the *actos* and perhaps facilitated or “made

⁸ That is, performances such as *Quinta Temporada* explicitly linked “capital” to racial subjugation, a link that became obscured in *Zoot Suit’s* and *La Bamba’s* production of safe, media-friendly, representations of “Hispanics” sustained by an increasingly invisible, naturalized relationship to capitalism.

sense” of Teatro Campesino’s decision to pursue a kind of success defined and sustained by Anglo American hegemony. And yet, despite highlighting Teatro Campesino’s uncomfortable and perhaps inevitable collusion with dominant discourses, I do not want to imply that capitalist and cultural critique cannot and should not occur within dominant artistic spaces. I only want to point to the dangers of overwriting systemic critiques of capitalism (and its links to raced and gendered oppression) with manifestations of resistance that remain safely sanctioned by the apparatus of capital. Overall, I have been using Teatro Campesino as a starting point to negotiate tensions between cultural production and funding, between revolutionary and developmentalist narratives (and their masculinist undercurrents), and between economic inequality and representations of race. I have situated my telling of a condensed version of the “story” of Teatro Campesino in the context, on one hand, of the corporatization of the arts and culture, and, on the other, of the hegemonic U.S. discourses that produce and sustain capitalism as the largely naturalized framework within which even so-called “political” or “transgressive” acts are produced.

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