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October 26, 2020  
ES 324 - Dr. Navarro

### Midterm Essay

In the film *Zoot Suit*, Luis Valdez, utilizes neo-noir elements to show that violence has and always will be perpetuated by American institutions onto minority communities who are then ironically labelled the “thief” or the “criminal.” Luis Valdez pays particular attention to institutions of Los Angeles such as the police force, the justice system, and the press to depict that a war has been waged upon Chicanx communities long before America’s conception of what war means was formed by World War II. Minority communities have always known the feeling of pervasive cynicism and distrust of everything; they simply did not have to go to war to know that this country’s humanity is questionable. Valdez similarly constructs El Pachuco, a violent anti-hero, to personify the cynicism of Chicanos and similarly provide a mythic legend of resistance who subverts white narration of Chicano events/history. El Pachuco, by sequencing and editing of scenes, is uplifted as the truth-teller in direct contrast to the media and the state.

One of the most critical aspects of noir in the film, that highlights lived realities for Chicanos, is the intense pessimism that pervades Los Angeles communities primarily due to the narrative-setting power of corrupt institutions. Hank’s perception of himself is influenced by the criminality placed upon all Chicanos in Los Angeles. The skepticism with which he approaches those that seek to help him is precisely because he has internalized the narrative of violence and murder that the press and the justice system has perpetuated about Chicano existence and their identity as “social problems.” Alice references this yellow journalism and societal use of Chicanos as scapegoats when she says, “did you know that you’re here because some big shot up in San Simeon wants to sell a few papers? It’s true.. so he’s the man who started all of this

Mexican crime wave stuff... someone's using you as a patsy... as a victim." Every one of Hank's actions is informed by a constant battle to free himself from societal expectation and the constant assumption that he is viewed as nothing more than a criminal. In his interpersonal relations with Dela, we witness how the domestic order distorts the social order, when she asks him "Why does everything have to be a crime with you, can't you just love somebody?" Something as pure as love is tainted by the oppression and subjugation of Chicano bodies in the political realm. Likewise, this fear of being treated like a criminal pervades generations and extends its influence into the family sphere. For Hank's father the word "Chicano" had the same societal consequences as the word "zoot suiter" had for Hank. Every Chicano must wrestle with the reality that parts of their identity will always be politicized and the way they choose to express such identity is subject to policing and social regulation.

Hank as a character is utilized to show that in America, but especially in L.A., Chicanos are prevented from accessing justice. Hank's character is so committed to the concept and the prestige of being in the Navy, yet it is Navy sailors who de-zoot our El Pacucho hero. This consistent contradiction speaks to the futility of assimilation for Chicanos, who are consistently still relegated to positions of "other" in our society. Hank is failed by every American institution that the Navy supposedly seeks to defend and is ultimately denied the freedom that he would be fighting to protect. Hypocritically, the act of violence is condemned when Hank draws his knife, but is morally uplifted when used in war by America. I believe Luis Valdez purposely uses Hank's character to show the ultimate reason for his cynicism -- being jailed and cast away by a country that he did everything in his power to be qualified to defend.

The anti-hero of *Zoot Suit* manifests in the double consciousness of Hank and his alter ego, El Pachuco. This tension between Enrique Reyna, who is adamant on being referred to by

his anglicized Hank name, and El Pachuco, a indigenous symbol of raza empowerment, is a personification of the internal struggle experienced by all Chicanos who must balance their Americanness with their brownness/Mexicanness. Luis Valdez, in describing El Pachuco, says “he represents the essence of what *pachuquismo* is all about... this struggle for identity” (List 71). El Pachuco is the realization of an identity fully formed for Chicanos who have had to suppress their pride, yet he is specifically not perfect and is often self-destructive in his commitment to separate from whiteness. We understand El Pachuco as a hopeless, distrusting character whose cynicism knows no bounds, yet we are never intimately aware of his history. Conversely, Luis Valdez, in mapping the character arc of Hank, provides key reasons as to why Hank starts to evolve into El Pachuco and deviates from any sense of trust he had before the trial (the reasons being a predatory justice system and a deceitful press). By making El Pachuco a personification of the conflict happening for most Chicanos, his anti-heroism is made to be more real and attainable. Only when Hank accepts this part of his consciousness does he “discover the Chicano essence deep within himself” as he says, “I got you figured out... I know who you are. You’re the one who got me here. You’re my worst enemy and my best friend, myself” (Fregoso 37).

Luis Valdez makes his anti-hero indigenous partially so that the greater audience is cognizant of a civilization that existed prior to the violent form of civilization that the Anglos brought. This points us to the false truths that L.A’s white supremacist institutions are built on and lets us conclude that we cannot trust their “expertise” or their assessment of the 38th street gang’s morality. During a poignant scene, Luis Valdez juxtaposes the American court system that made fools of the defendants (making them rise every time their name is called) with the press’ claims that the Aztec justice system was bloody and “barbaric.” Luis Valdez sequences his shots

so that we first witness the press saying, “c’mon you weren’t even wearing clothes when the white man pulled you out of the jungle” and are then confronted with the imagery of El Pachuco being stripped *by* white men. When he rises in his loin cloths as a Christ-like figure of defiance and brilliance it is solidified that “heroes of the past” have “connectedness to present political agendas” (List 70). El Pachuco “shows how the traditions of the past relate to the conditions of the present” as his character often draws parallel between the indigenous experience of colonization with the modern Chicano experience of zoot-suit persecution (List 78).

*Zoot Suit* is Chicano noir precisely because its assessment of America’s justice system and biased press is startlingly provocative in its pessimism. As demonstrated throughout the film, Chicano identity will always be formed in direct tension with the identity set for them by these institutions. More importantly, Luis Valdez suggests that the foundation of modern Chicano identity, as personified by El Pachuco, is in the unwillingness to accept the reality that these institutions seek to set.