Mia Martinez

Instructor Name

Course Number

28 May 2019

Title: Zoot Suit and the borderline debate

The play *Zoot Suit* is a play by Luis Valdez that is based on the events of the Zoot Suit Riots and the ‘Sleepy Lagoon Murder Trials’. The play introduces the zoot suit culture to its audience, which had historically become popular within Mexican-Americans in the 1940’s, and attempts to confront the racial prejudices of that era. The essay will identify the aim and claims of the Valdez’s *Zoot Suit*, analyzing his arguments, reasoning, and rhetoric along with divulging upon some of the creative techniques employed in the play to enhance its impact. Through the analysis, the current border wall debate will be investigated in terms of how a reproduction of *Zoot Suit* could impact the debate. One of the key aims of reproducing the play today would be to convince the audience how the premise of those who favor building the wall is largely based on the same prejudices that impacted the Sleepy Lagoon trials.

**Part I**

Valdez’s *Zoot Suit* dramatizes the widespread discrimination suffered by Mexican-Americans during the 1940’s. At the time, Chicano youth would wear stylized oversized jackets, known as zoot suits, to combat the discrimination against them as a form of political and social rebellion. Under this context, Valdez’s play attempted to challenge the audience’s capacity for critical thinking through a combination of information, entertainment, and persuasion. The play attempted to expose the various stereotypes that led to the marginalization of the Mexican-American community, debunk certain myths about the Chicano culture and to induce a behavioral change among people through challenging the audience’s notions (Valdez).

One of the central claims of the play is that media frenzy, rumors, false beliefs, or illogical reasoning coupled with certain myths and stereotypes can lead to judgments that in turn create injustice. In the play, the Sleepy Lagoon Murder Trial led to the imprisonment of the boys who would wear Zoot Suits, who were released only after the injustice was exposed. The stereotypes and the myths led the people to pin Jose Diaz’s murder on the gang known as ‘the boys’, who were earlier involved in a disruption at the Sleepy Lagoon ranch. ‘The boys’ were charged, but the decision was later reversed by the court of appeals on grounds of lack of evidence and prejudice influencing the trials. The key audience of the play are people belonging to minority groups, especially those hailing from the Mexican-American or Chicano culture, as these events form an important part of their history.

Luis Valdez was an influential playwright and director who came to be recognized as the father of the Mexican-American Theater. He founded the El Teatro Campesino theatre that served as a platform to express the political and social concerns of the community through his plays, among which *Zoot Suit* carries a notable position. The play was a form of agitprop drama and used a number of pathos appeals to highlight the social injustices of the times. It incorporated the use of rapid scenes with little transition, depending on a semi-documentary technique characterized by Depression era newspapers. It dramatized injustices to awaken and educate responses, a means by which heavy biases of the media and the court were illustrated to help the audience empathize with the condition of the Chicano people through the 1940s. The courtroom scenes depicted in the play used constant interjections to narrate the injustices, while the play’s conclusion depicted the main character’s final confrontation with a biased reporter to highlight the various injustices endured by the Chicano people.

In terms of the reasoning and logical appeals employed by the play, ‘The Press’ was made the chief antagonist and the hero’s counterpart in the play. The racist public hysteria during the era was symbolized by the press and the news media of the time, who also played a role in convicting the main character Henry. It showcases how the term ‘Zoot Suit’ itself became a derogatory term, and labelling all Mexican-Americans as Zoot Suits characterized the yellow journalism of the day. Any person wearing a Zoot Suit was associated with crime and rebellion by the press, whereas ‘the boys’ would wear it to make a stance against the oppression and discrimination by the police and the press. Through these illustrations, the audience can deduce that the community at that time was inclined towards legal retribution rather than fairness and justice. It can also be inferred that the fear mongering in the community made Henry an easy target of misunderstanding, and such prejudices significantly affected the trials.

A range of creative techniques were employed by Valdez in presenting these issues. The center of attention in the play is El Pachuco, who is depicted as the ideal Chicano. El Pachuco is also the alter-ego of Hank or Henry Reyna, he is shown as a master of ceremonies who would dress in a zoot suit, and stand in defiance of the authorities. The character is self-reliant and unsinkable who flags the people’s spirits and earns respect throughout the community. Eventually, Henry is falsely imprisoned for a crime, and the play while his alter-ego El Pachuco, unconventionally, serves as the narrator of the play. The comic, romantic, tragic, and heroic portrayal of his life resonates the character with the audience and raises the stakes in the story, thus captivating them while also serving as a social commentator.

**Part II**

An analysis of Valdez’s Zoot suit can help us analyze and reach a resolution of modern political debates involving minorities, because the play allows us to see how stereotyping and bad press can influence political and law enforcement opinions. In this regard, reproducing the play for modern audiences could have significant impact on the recent border wall debate.

The border wall debate centers on the Trump’s administration’s quest to build a giant wall on the southern Mexican border. As a symbol of his administration and presidency, the debate has become an emotionally charged issue with President Trump capitalizing on public fears, through media propaganda, to gather support for building the wall. These fears involve stereotypes and images, that Mexican immigrants are tax evaders and burden the welfare system, and that they are generally murderers and rapists whose presence causes crime rates to surge. Conversely, the other side of the debate sees it in terms of a battle between ideologies hidden behind the guise of border security. They argue that the wall carries ideological significance and does not resolve the issues claimed by the other side (Heyman). Support for the border wall is generated through rhetoric that relies upon stereotypes, designed to channel fear, while the actual threat does not match that level of hysteria (Schubert).

It was the same volatile mix of national security concerns, fear, and stereotypes that led to the Zoot Suit events that now characterize the border wall debate. Valdez’s *Zoot Suit* demonstrated that showcasing a people to be a larger problem than what they actually are only adds to tensions and bias. The wall would divert resources away from the genuine threats to public safety and invest it into perpetuating division and sentiments against immigrants (Gitlin). Hence, a reproduction of Valdez’s play would should aim to convince the other side of the error of its ways by challenging their convictions and thinking on the issue.

There are a number of misunderstandings promoted by pro-wall political rhetoric that the play should challenge. For instance, the notion that the wall would stem crime and improve public safety just as it did in the case of the wall in El Paso, Texas has to be challenged, since actual figures show that crime rates before building that wall were half than those after the fencing began. Moreover, the crime rates also surged in the following years despite the wall being complete indicating that the presence of the wall did not serve as a mediating factor in crime rates. Additionally, there is little data available to pin the rising crime wave on immigrants, which in fact shows a negative correlation of crime with the rising number of immigrants (Associated Press).

In addition, the use of stereotypes in mainstream media also corresponds with the cultural preconceptions and expectations of the majority audience in order to attain commercial success. The political rhetoric employed by President Trump and his supporters rely on a common ground that is created between both ends of the political spectrum as a result of the cognitive configuration of the masses regarding Mexico by means of storytelling. Mexicans are usually given the roles of minor figures while Mexico is depicted as a country of socially deprived individuals who are given to stealing, and are frequently deported from the U.S. due to crime and illegal entry. Political rhetoric relies on these group stereotypes in order to legitimize restrictive immigration policies in the name of enhanced border security (Schubert). Hence, both a misrepresentation combined with a negative moral evaluation is used to justify building the wall to curb crime and improve the economy.

In conclusion, the incidents covered in the play are dramatized by Valdez to confront the racial prejudice against the Chicano people during the 1940s. It serves as a corrective and an instrument for historical education highlighting the media misrepresentation of the zoot suit wearers, while also showing ways how a counterculture can serve as a powerful way to achieve social change. Just as how the media, community leaders, the police, equated zoot suits with crime, which led to the Henry’s imprisonment in *Zoot Suit*, the current trend of negative media portrayal of immigrants in populist rhetoric and popular entertainment reinforces a negative social practice. A reproduction of Valdez’s play aiming to convince the other side of their convictions and thinking could serve as a powerful solution in this regard.

# Works Cited

Associated Press. "FACT CHECK: Trump's Wall Mirage, Immigrant Stereotypes." 11 February 2019. *VOA News.* 28 May 2019. <https://www.voanews.com/a/fact-check-trump-s-wall-mirage-immigrant-stereotypes/4782857.html>.

Gitlin, Marty. *The border wall with Mexico*. New York, NY: Greenhaven Publishing, 2018.

Heyman, Josiah McC. "Constructing a Virtual Wall: Race and Citizenship in U.S.–Mexico Border Policing." *Journal of the Southwest* 50.3 (2008): 305-334. <https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Josiah\_Heyman/publication/259914054\_Constructing\_a\_Virtual\_Wall\_Race\_and\_Citizenship\_in\_US-Mexico\_Border\_Policing/links/54fcc67e0cf20700c5e96ee1/Constructing-a-Virtual-Wall-Race-and-Citizenship-in-US-Mexico-Border-Poli>.

Schubert, Christoph. "Constructing Mexican Stereotypes: Telecinematic Discourse and Donald Trump’s Campaign Rhetoric." *Critical Approaches to Discourse Analysis across Disciplines* 8.2 (2017): 37-57. <https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/fass/journals/cadaad/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Volume-8\_Schubert.pdf>.

Valdez, Luis. *Zoot Suit & Other Plays*. Houston, TX: Arte Publico Press, 1992.