



2010-11-24

A Comparative Analysis of Parallel Revisionism in the Plays *Rabinal Achí* and *Zoot Suit*

Matthew C. Lewis

Brigham Young University - Provo

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A Comparative Analysis of Parallel Revisionisms in the Plays

Rabinal Achí and *Zoot Suit*

M. Christopher Lewis

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

L. Howard Quackenbush, Chair
Russell M. Cluff
Daryl R. Hague

Department of Spanish and Portuguese

Brigham Young University

December 2010

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ABSTRACT

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This study draws parallels between the dramatic works *Rabinal Achí*, an anonymous ancient Mayan text, and the Luis Valdez masterpiece *Zoot Suit*. The parallel that I seek to establish is one of the strong trend of historical revisionism in both works as well as a parallel development of plot and characterization. This work does not claim to be representative of revisionism as a whole, nor does it seek to establish a new official history, but it does to demonstrate how both works, even though they are separated by hundreds of years, share a common bond of subversion and direct opposition to established norms and to the “facts” of a recorded official history in an attempt to give voice to the experience of the historically overlooked individual.

Keywords: Luis Valdez, *Rabinal Achí*, *Zoot Suit*, History, Revisionism

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my thesis chair Dr. L. Howard Quackenbush, for teaching me to love theatre and showing me how to navigate the world of academia. I am indeed greatly, and forever indebted to him for his guidance and candor. He has truly been much more than a professor, he has been a mentor and above all else a friend; Dr. Russell M. Cluff for being an example of professionalism and how to blend dreams with the responsibilities of real life; Dr. Daryl R. Hague for helping me realize that this was what I wanted to do, that was all that mattered, and how to find connections in everything I do. I consider myself blessed for having known these men and for being taught by them. I am grateful to Luis Valdez who showed me that not only was theater fun, but essential to the past, present, and future. I am most indebted to my parents, for their unwavering support, criticism, and expectations. I am who I am, and anything that I have ever accomplished is because of my mother, Terry Lewis; this project is in all reality hers.

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INTRODUCTION: QUESTIONING THE (HI)STORIES:
TOWARDS A REVISIONIST THEORY

Los que no creen en la inmortalidad

Creen en la historia.

-José Martí

The ancient Mayan playwrights have created a legacy that has reached throughout history to embed itself in some of the finest works of their descendants. In his epic poem *Pensamiento Serpentino*, Luis Valdez (1940) not only affirms this timeless connection but establishes its historical influence as completely necessary in understanding modern society. Valdez states that the freedom of the modern Chicano is based on an understanding of his “propio pueblo, his *Popol Vuh*, his *Chilam Balam*” and emphatically continues “y qué lindo es estudiar lo de su pueblo de uno” (173). Valdez places high regard on the importance of studying and understanding one’s roots, the respective legacy and the history of the pueblo. Michel Foucault, talks of a “notion of spirit” (22) which allows us to find common meaning, and symbolic links between works and throughout time; it is of interest to my current study to note the several similarities, this common “spirit” as Foucault would put it, which are to be found between the two hundred year old Mayan text¹, *Rabinal Achí* (c. 1855) and the Chicano drama *Zoot Suit* (1978). By looking closely at the two works and the corresponding relationship between them, we are able to learn and understand more about each work individually and their situation in the larger scope of history. It is precisely here that my investigation takes shape, looking at the common element of revisionist theory that forms a bond between both works.

Written and performed as a Ballet of sorts, *Rabinal Achí* is the representation of a battle, the capture and legal proceedings culminating in a public execution/sacrifice in the town of Rabinal. The work shows the struggle between neighboring tribes and warriors who at one time fought together as brothers-in-arms. The work is representative of actual events, and it is quite possible that in the early years of the production the work ended with the actual sacrifice of a captured foe on behalf of the village, or at least has its roots in a similar ancient occurrence. *Rabinal Achí* has been included in, and is at least mentioned in, any respectable anthology of pre-

Columbian literature. It was interestingly written down and preserved for us today, not as an example of Mayan art or drama performance, but as a cultural study of the people and as an example of the Mayan language and dialect. There is very little, if anything, written about its inherent quality and worth as a work of art, much less its value as social theater, questioning and revising the established historical construct within which it is situated.

Zoot Suit unwinds in a similar fashion as we see the incarceration, murder trial, and ultimately the sacrifice (although not the explicit execution) of our protagonist, Henry Reyna, to satiate the demands of a panicked and prejudiced society surrounding the Sleepy Lagoon murder trial and the happenings of the American homeland during the Second World War. This work, similarly based on real-life occurrences, demonstrates how the society of the 1940's used the minority Latino class to cleanse their hands of the hardships and struggles of the times, not unlike the Mayan priest sacrificing El Varón de los Queché to fulfill a religious rite and social obligation to the war-torn people of Rabinal. *Zoot suit* has been studied extensively as an example of the performed works of *El Teatro Campesino* movement, which began in the mid-1960's, and as Valdez's masterpiece. It is rarely, however, studied for its implicit value as a revisionist text, challenging a commonly accepted history of the Sleepy Lagoon murder trial. The thematic similarities shared between *Rabinal Achí* and *Zoot Suit* are too significant to ignore, and the stylistic presentation of revisionist theory demands closer investigation.

I will establish a theoretical common ground on which to base my research, after which I will look closely at each work individually and then conclude with an exploration of a direct comparison of the parallel revisionism in the dramas to illustrate that when taken together, these fundamental works represent a cultural mirror that binds the ancient Mayan with the modern Chicano. To fully enter into a dialogue with these two dramas, it will first be necessary to

establish a theoretical base and make an approach to historical revisionism. I will look at the dual nature of history and how this allows for a revisionist paradigm; history being a legacy of the powerful and of those who have triumphed, history as myth and legend, and finally the connection between history and fiction. Working to create a definition to adequately form a revisionist construct within history, I will show how these characteristics of history set up and demand the existence of a revisionist theory within the study of history to more fully describe the human experience.

At this point it seems essential that we study in some depth the concept of the past and revisionist theory. History, historiography, metahistory, and historicism² are all simply catch phrases from different schools of thought for one thing: how we tell our story. Just how we will tell this story seems to be plagued by division and dissent among scholars, whether they be scientists, historians or literary critics. Greenblatt attributes this contention to the idea of perspective, he explains that “Kant emphasizes the extent to which knowledge of objects is always a matter of perception, and thus is dependent on the mental faculties and concepts through which people perceive the world” (Robson 105). This difference in perspective is what leads to a distinction between history as a science and history as a creative process. Assigning scientific validity to history is easy; “In fact, in its traditional form, history proper was concerned with defining relations ... between facts or dated events: the series being known, it was simply a question of defining the position of each element in relation to the other elements in the series” (Foucault 7). This method of simply defining a chronological relation of dates and facts seems to align very well with the concepts of a scientific method and allows for the formulation of what has been deemed historical fact. Paul Hamilton points out that a rough consensus now exists in the West as to what is economically, politically, and socially desirable (177), and history simply

has the job of confirming and recording the times, dates, places, and the people involved in what is deemed to be historically desirable to society. The information contained in a “scientific history” is concrete, provable, and definable. For example, we see that the date, time, or location of the murder at Sleepy Lagoon does not change regardless of who looks into the event³. It is this idea of a fixed, immutable group of facts that has given way to the popular belief in, and an unquestionable following of, history. However, the predicament in which society finds itself quickly becomes apparent; society is not simply interested in a list of scientific names, dates, and places. We are curious, and have a tendency to ask “why?”, and we want to know what people were thinking and feeling when history happened. The question of perspective surfaces and we are left asking are we content with a provable, factual science of events, or do we require something more from history? Whose perspective is valid and whose is not? As soon as history pretends to explain the perspective of the individual, to expound on the feelings, ideas, or reasoning behind an event, in short to describe the experience of history, we are no longer in a scientifically quantifiable position. Even with the existence of historical documentation, such as journals and letters, the document may still be questionable, doubtable. It is always written from a specific and biased point of view, and has a schema unique from our own, making it very difficult to find what concrete historical information is and what is simply historical opinion based on experience and propaganda. It is this shift from quantifiable facts to the individual and independent experience that leads Quackenbush to suggest that “El significado y uso de la palabra ‘historia’ ya no es de confiar” (9). History suddenly loses its validity as a science when it steps out of the quantifiable realm and into a now critical social study concerned with the perspective and experience of the individual. Suddenly, there is no claim to a superior sense of

historicism, and there appears a general lack of an acceptable and adequate official history, as history must now concede to the individual perception of an event.

Looking at the individual perspective that history attempts to capture with its investigation we quickly see that the individual experience of history allows for, and even demands the acceptance of multiple individual histories surrounding any one quantifiable event. Each person experiences an event in a unique and independent manner:

Science crucially neglected a large area of human experience-- typically represented in poetry and fiction-- which it was palpably unable to regulate. Art [...] had come to represent the ultimate failure of science to order our lives in their entirety [...]. What science could not as yet explain inevitably took on the subjective character of irrationality in which they were dismissed by the prevailing scientific world view. (Hamilton 59)

Applying what Hamilton has said, history becomes art when it begins to explain the human experience; history is akin to “poetry and fiction” when it decides to explain what science deems irrational, or subjective, what it is unable to regulate. I would argue here that it is in this void between science and the human experience where literature has cemented itself, to fill in the gaps left by science, and answer the questions of society; history forms an important and fundamental part of the literary canon. Foucault states that art is precisely what has come about “[...] in place of the continuous chronology of reason,” and that there is a new “type of history peculiar to each one, and which cannot be reduced to the general model of a consciousness that acquires, progresses, and remembers” (8). This new history⁴ is aware of its creative role and the power of experience to shape the current trends in society; these trends in social history are what Rivkin and Ryan refer to as cultural meaning:

History is not some unmediated reality out there, some stable background that the literary text reflects or refers to; it is not a context. Rather, it is like the literary text itself [...].

Such a view might seem to undo the privilege of the literary text or of history [...] but it does make it possible to study relations between texts both literary and historical and discover how they ... negotiate ... cultural meaning. (506)

It is the relationship between history and literature that exposes the significance behind the events, which allow us to grasp at meaning in the dates and times, to more aptly appreciate the experience of perceiving history. In *The Pursuit of History*, John Tosh explains “history is essentially a hybrid discipline, combining the technical and analytical procedures of a science with the imaginative and the stylistic qualities of an art” (161), and it is due precisely to this hybridity that society can no longer confide in history as Quackenbush suggested. Interestingly, the hybrid nature that gives concrete information, dates and places, paradoxically causes doubt in the validity of the experience, and to question the legitimacy of perception. History needs this firm scientific foundation as a basis for the historically quantifiable experience, to allow the historian the ability to fill in the gaps and tell the (hi)story of the human experience, so as to more fully understand the cultural meaning of our past, link it with our present, and prepare for the future.

The inherent problem in a binary history stems from the fact that the science is the same for everyone; the perception of the experience is not. One has the ability to overlook the inconvenient aspects of history in favor of a more conducive, condoning, or blatantly constructed perspective or interpretation of history. Society has been slow to learn that “history unmasks the [...] historians, who were traditionally represented as truth seekers. The historian’s search does not aim at truth, but at knowledge, which is understood as a source of power” (Juan-Navarro 48).

In contrast, world leaders have been quick to see the power that historical knowledge has to offer and have stepped in, applying the “knowledge is power” concept, basing ideology on perception and experience, all the while claiming a “true history” founded on scientific fact, delivering “historical” validation for their dominion of the willing or unwilling masses. The role of history in an ever-changing political society gives a great deal of power to the historian. Walter Benjamin pointed out this predicament when he stated: “the one who researches history is also the one who makes history” (Kittsteiner et al. 189). Therefore, when historians determine what to study and formulate in history, their own personal preferences, wishes and desires influence their course of study. Historians can be influenced by a desire for political acceptance, a sense of officiality, perhaps a drive for power, or even by fear. An unbiased “history for history’s sake” mentality has rarely, if ever, been encouraged, and historians find themselves subject to the reigning ideology. Traditionally, we can see that “(Historicism) presents itself as empathy for the victor [...] Articulating the past historically does not mean recognizing it ‘the way it really was’, it means seizing hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger” (Kittsteiner et al. 180). It is of no surprise that history tends to demonstrate empathy for the victor, when the victor is in no way interested in teaching the past but in securing the present; they are interested in using history only as far as it strengthens their current position. Given that “All teaching interprets history” (Covino 1), the up-and-coming powerful elite have been able to influence history by determining its teaching and distribution, exercising their control of academic and social institutions. Only the “official” version of history is produced and circulated, and this “official history” is often, if not always, supportive of those in a position of power.

The historian, and therefore History, is undeniably tied to the victor. Certeau demonstrates this connection stating: “El historiador recibe de la misma actualidad los medios

para realizar su trabajo y los elementos de determinación de su interés” (25). The historian receives from the current ruling class the determining attitude that will be taken towards history. Historians have often faced opposition and/or restrictions when trying to present an alternate perspective, or take a different stance on “the way it really was” that does not fit into the accepted and proclaimed “official history”:

La historia mundial, en general ha sido escrita por los vencedores, y no por los vencidos. El nacionalismo, el patriotismo, y la identidad social se basan en una interpretación algo prejuiciosa, y a veces restringida o tergiversada de lo que es “la historia.”... La política, la sociedad, la religión, y las predilecciones nacionales ejercen gran influencia sobre los historiadores. (Quackenbush 13)

This biased history of the world, written for the conquerors by the historians, is not to be completely disregarded; it does in fact offer one side of a valid perspective on society. The real obstacle for the ethical study of history comes when we realize that we must explicitly confront the defects of this historical narrative. Tradition has shown that, “while repetition of false statements does not make them true, it does make further repetition more likely, and critical examination of the evidence less likely” (Levin 527). To overcome the historical censorship imposed on society and to free ourselves to study and entertain conflicting and alternate dialogues on experience is a difficult process “partly because, even understanding that there is always more than one history, it is not so easy to enter into a new and unfamiliar one” (Walder 1077). However, there is an emerging practice of public history, determined to allow the individual to confront and question the established historical norm and realize their own place within history. “(Public historians) utilize their skills more subtly in efforts to shape public consciousness through the presentation of the past in public areas. Seeking to return history to

the communities that made it and to help average people grow more aware of their own role in the broader scope of history” (Ritchie 93). Public History is simply attempting to do what literature has always done; present the varying perspectives in life, whether it be experiencing the past, situating the present, or creating the historical future. Nonetheless, Public History is influenced heavily by society and the spirit of the time, and even though it may seem a more unbiased, personal level of history, it is still subject to the imposition of a dominant ideology. History, as a discipline, has been unable to break out of a culturally biased routine dictated by the social victor. The history of the subjected, conquered and colonized is still in need of a voice, a cultural prophet if you will, to stir up the remembrance of the people of their history, not just the history imposed by those who have won.

Public historians, uniquely, have been much more accepting of the individual experience in their search for historical meaning, looking at legend and myth to find a fuller, more accurate and complete way of expressing the perspective of the individual experience. History has traditionally rebuked and denied the role of myth in situating the human experience within its Historical context; however, with the emergence of a public history, myth is making quite a comeback in mainstream culture⁵.

Returning to Valdez’s declaration that the freedom of the modern Chicano is based on an understanding of his “propio pueblo, his *Popol Vuh*, his *Chilam Balam*”; society could very well accuse Valdez of ushering in public historicism. Valdez calls for a return of history to the “pueblo” that made it, so that the modern Chicano can understand his or her role in that history and design a place in the future. I should point out that the history that Valdez mentions is not that of documented crop rotations or economic records; he does not mention the need for the modern Chicano to understand the dates and times of the birth and fall of the great Mayan

empire or the arrival of Cortés. He is not interested in the scientific, in the quantifiable of his people. When he talks of “qué lindo es estudiar lo de su pueblo de uno” (173) he is talking about the communal myths of the Mayan tradition, for Valdez the history of the ancient Maya is not their chronology, it is their *Popol Vuh*, their *Chilam Balam*, their ancient scripture and legend. It is through an experience with their mythic history that they will be made free, “[...] historical reason will be grasped from the inside by the sympathetic relocation or transposition of ourselves into the lives of others. The symbols and expressions we inherit in the shape of historical records are already in the form by which we understand them” (Hamilton 63). The myths come to us already organized according to the cultural symbolic order of the people; history has done a great disservice to the individual by relegating the power and influence of myth to superstition and hearsay:

[Myth] demonstrates that we understand the past by appreciating our historical distance from it; this difference, however, is only graspable by us through traditions linking us with the past. [...] Tradition is the process by which we both question the past and feel addressed by it [...]. Tradition is the mode in which our existence is historically differentiated and thus authenticated. This dialogue with the past is ongoing, just as our futures are open-ended. (Hamilton 79)

This tradition that Hamilton uses to enter into his question-and-answer dialogue with the past can be found only through an acceptance and appreciation of myth, in the story that has influenced and shaped or reshaped society. History cannot look to tradition as a differentiating and authenticating force, as proof of ideology, and then disregard the forces of myth that have led to the formation of such traditions. Juan-Navarro says he “sees an important change taking place

in Spanish-American literary history: the introduction of the necessary ambiguity to represent the modern world [...] with the great universal myths” (57).

By forming a literary tradition based on both the historical and mythical, one is able to move into a new realm of understanding of the historical experience of the individual. Society is able to step out of the rigid construct of a quantifiable history and into a literary history that truly allows for the investigation of the unknown human experience. “The problem is no longer one of tradition, of tracing a line, but one of division, of limits; it is no longer one of lasting foundations, but one of transformations that serve as new foundations, the rebuilding of foundations [...] this new form of history is trying to develop its own theory” (Juan-Navarro 5). By reworking the theory surrounding history and its authenticity, the reach of historical importance is expanded to previous, scientifically unreachable realms of the human experience. This new theory, which accepts myth and fiction as a valid way of expressing and approaching history, allows for a closer investigation, a transformation, and rebuilding of both myth and history in an attempt to establish a foundation on which to explain the modern experience. Myth should be seen as a supplement to history, it should be allowed to help with the treatment of topics that seem to otherwise go unaddressed by history. This modern version of myth can be found in works of art and fiction that bind the past with the present:

On the one hand, myth allows for the exploration through writing of a past dominated by oral tradition. It therefore functions as a supplement to history, since it allows us to accept a reality that escapes the historical register. Fiction on the other hand, is free from the empiricist constrictions of historiography. This freedom enables us to reorganize our construction of the world and to present alternatives (that) --although eccentric-- may still be feasible. (Juan-Navarro 257-8)

As Juan-Navarro has pointed out, allowing for alternatives that have not been deemed historical by the “official register” is fundamental to understanding the complexity and depth of history; the relationship between myth and history demonstrates that not everyone experiences major events in the same manner, not everyone sees things in the same light, or perhaps more precisely, not everyone is able to understand or explain an experience in the same way. It is through this reevaluation of historical foundations that the individuals who created history will be able to reconcile their ancient experiences and traditions with current historical understanding, to allow them the retrospective and introspective opportunity to situate themselves within history and begin to formulate their present and future.

The historical register should be an unbiased and independent entity recording the historical workings of a people whether they are brought to light or not and independent of any ruling ideology. Juan-Navarro has said of Latin-American authors:

In the aim of exploring the dark areas of the official register, these authors resort to alternative documentary sources, such as myth and apocryphal history. As Levi-Strauss suggests, myth is never ahistorical, because it is by nature rooted in the real experience of the community. Such experiences materialize in different forms of oral narratives that, while inherently unstable, are nevertheless always rooted in reality. (257)

This idea of experience always being rooted in reality is a strong concept indeed and it is here that I draw the connection between the historical and the fictional account. “Historical fiction and nonfiction [...] become concerned with filling in the gaps and correcting the distortions of traditional history books and curricula” and we see ourselves confronted by “a history not then taught in history books” (Harris 110). To understand the role of fiction in history Bryant has said:

[Historicism] seeks to find external causes, both public and private, for the workings within imaginative texts, and to do so it locates the casual link between history and text in the author. [...] writers, not history are the cause of the text. Imaginative texts are a discourse between author and history, and it is the obligation of historicists to retrieve as best they can the dynamics of the discourse. (5)

In a similar manner to all myth being rooted in reality, the literary text is based on the author's experience with history and within history, and it is the historian's responsibility to sift through the creation of the author to find the history and describe the experience. Society must construct a modern historicism that does not reject fiction for fiction's sake, but one that is accepting of individual perspective and experience within any historical construct. Juan-Navarro talks of the New World's historical tradition "not as a radical rejection, but rather a reworking of the past within an inclusive conception of fiction and history" (273). This connection between history and fiction is seen more and more each day; the influence it is having on modern society is ever present. As Fernando Aínsa points out, "Ahora se multiplican las novelas sobre temas históricos, donde a través de la reescritura anacrónica, irónica o paródica, cuando no irreverente y grotesca, se dinamitan creencias y valores establecidos" (75-6). It is not only novels with historical themes that are challenging established beliefs and values, but all art and literature are capable of this rewriting process to shed new light on the situation of the individual.

History, together with fiction, plays the role of filling in those gaps that exist in the question of human experience. Society would be incapable of going beyond the chronological, the descriptive, and the scientific history without the freedom of fiction to situate experience, draw upon, and bring to light the forgotten, the buried, and the denied histories so often condemned by an unwilling and threatened "official world view." This ability of fiction to work

with history to revise the official historical register, to find the truth of individual perspective, and present the varying experiences surrounding a solitary event in time is what allows for an acceptance and study of the *Rabinal Achí* and *Zoot Suit* as historical works, and to realize, as Quackenbush puts it “El revisionista histórico puede dar a entender que el relato de un acontecimiento ‘oficial’ se acerca más a la ficción que a la verdad. La literatura puede darnos un tratamiento más equilibrado de los casos del que podemos encontrar en la historia oficial” (22). Finding a proper balance between history and fiction to construct a more accurate version of the human experience is a difficult endeavor indeed; however, when taken together, they can paint a fuller picture of the perspective of each individual and each experience giving a greater appreciation and understanding of the human condition.

Allow me to regroup before moving on to formulate a definition of historical revisionism. It is apparent that history is made up of a quantifiable science of chronology and events, as well as an artistic element of expression to explain the experience of historical human perception. Those in power, the historical victors, are aware of this creative nature of history and implement a historical perspective sympathetic and supportive of their own regime and ideology. One of the greatest threats to this hierarchy of a “historically supported” power is myth. Myth brings into question the morality and legitimacy of the modern ruling ideology and juxtaposes it with an accepted communal past of tradition and experience that formulates the present role of the individual. History, therefore, has traditionally fought against myth, to erase traditions and to maintain the illusion of a historically deserved power. Nevertheless, myth is deeply rooted in the literary tradition and has survived to some degree the historical attack. We are faced with the realization that history, when it steps out of its role as scientist, is in fact merely a work of art, fiction, a story told to fill in the gaps between the different pieces of each event. When history is

viewed as merely a way of telling the story of what happened, the experience of each individual and their individual perspective becomes a valid and legitimate explanation of the historic event. The varied and alternative perspectives are the fundamental basis for a revisionist history. To unlock the complete historical register this revisionist theory combines the fictitious story and the documentable information to form a more complete understanding and experience of the historical event.

Quackenbush warns us that “antes de ponernos demasiado pesimistas con respecto a la historicidad de la historia o con respecto a los senderos no-históricos que siguen algunos con respecto a su re-invenición nos conviene recordar que hay gran valor en la historia misma” (10). We are all tied to history, regardless of the manner in which it has been recorded, told, twisted or hidden; we cannot separate ourselves from the legacy that has led up to our existence and current situation. There *is* great value in history itself. “History reminds us that there is usually more than one way of interpreting a predicament or responding to a situation, and that the choices open to us are often more varied than we might have supposed. [...] History is an inventory of alternatives, all the richer if research is not conducted with an eye to our immediate situation in the present” (Tosh 30-1). If history is an inventory of alternatives, a reminder of individual experience and choice as Tosh argues, may I then, in turn, declare that all history is revisionist? And just what is revisionist history? Historical revisionism is not a denial of, neither is it antagonistic towards established history⁶. History as a science is the chronicling of events; as a social science it is the study of the past. All history is at one point revisionist in nature, even if it is simply revising the unknown. With time, or influence, the findings of history become solidified and generally accepted as truth. “All historical research is revisionist, involving a reexamination of what we thought we knew in accordance with the latest evidence and interests,

to make the past relevant for the present” (Ritchie 930). When history becomes the standard of knowledge, it is no longer revisionist. However, there is always further study to be performed. William A. Covino suggests that we have learned to distrust interpretations, “to recognize further that all writing is interpretive: history or poetry or philosophy or journalism represses something in order to say something else” (2), But the “[...] goal is to bring light to the dark areas of the historical register [...] to give voice to the silences of our history” (Juan-Navarro 54). And in giving voice to the silences of our history, Foucault has pointed out that “The manifest discourse, therefore, is really no more than the repressive presence of what it does not say; and this ‘not-said’ is a hollow that undermines from within all that is said” (25). Foucault continues “There is the distinction ... between the *macroscopic* and *microscopic* scales of the history of the sciences, in which events and their consequences are not arranged in the same way” (4) and, as a result, “a different history is being written. *Recurrent redistributions* reveal several pasts, several forms of connexion [sic], several hierarchies of importance, several networks of determination, several teleologies, for one and the same science” (5). Historical revisionism is a reexamination of the past “truths”; it is searching for the repressed and dark silences of history with a renewing and rejuvenating vision. It is, as Fernando Aínsa states in his book (whose title could stand alone as the definitive definition of historical revisionism; *Reescribir el pasado*), “buscar entre ruinas de una historia desmantelada por la retórica y la mentira al individuo auténtico perdido detrás de los acontecimientos, descubrir y ensalzar al ser humano en su dimensión más vital, aunque parezca inventado, aunque en definitiva lo sea” (111-12). Historical Revisionism calls into question a biased, immutable history and allows for myth and legend to form part of the basis for understanding the historical. It is the story of the individual, and how the individual perceives and experiences history. Although Historians may argue that their concerns lie only in the past,

that it is not their job to draw out the practical import of their work. However, they are in fact the only people qualified to equip society with a truly historical perspective enabling us to understand the past and situate the future (Tosh 48). Walter Benjamin explained the role of the revisionist historian by saying:

The Copernican turn in considering history is this: ‘what happened’ in the past was taken to be the fixed point and the present was seen as a groping effort to lead knowledge to this solid ground. Now this relationship is to be turned around and what happened is to be subjected to a dialectical reversal and the intervention of an awakened consciousness. (Kittsteiner et al. 189)

Through this reevaluation and questioning of the past, revisionists have focused on the present as the only known truth, the only time period that we can truly grasp, and have begun the reformulation of the past based on the experiences of the moment. The past is no longer the constant, fixed point of reference, with the “awakened consciousness” of Benjamin, the past is being rewritten with all the experience and understanding that the present perspective can bring. Paul Hamilton in his treatment of historicism has pointed out that “there is nothing contradictory in an event; the contradictions arise from the different conceptions of the event” (82), and then continues: “History must be contradictory to be adequate to the discursive effects characterizing an epoch” (119). It is this contradiction, the contention in the experience that is not only necessary as Hamilton explains, but characterizes history and gives way to the necessity of a revisionist construct within the historic paradigm. Historical revisionism is the contradiction that enables historical progress.

So why is history, and more particularly historical revisionism, important? In Latin America, there has been an amazing amount of historical literature produced dating back to the

pre-Columbian era and extending to the modern Hispanic culture. The remarkably high number of works of theater with historical connotations that have been written should be of particular interest to the current and up-and-coming scholar; echoing the words of Quackenbush: “Pero lo que más me maravilla es la falta de interés crítico en este fenómeno” (11). It is due to this general lack of interest that we begin to look at the drama produced with a critical eye, exploring the worth of Hispanic theater not only for its implicit value as an art form, but for what it has to offer in revising and shedding new light on the perceived history of the past. *Rabinal Achí* and *Zoot Suit* are works that deserve this new evaluation, for their individual quality, their uncanny connection to each other, and the implicit revisionist power they have to offer to a modern analysis.

Notes

¹ I reference here Brasseur de Bourbourg's referenced date of 1855 when he recorded the play. However, the play itself is much older, and the actual publication of the work was roughly ten years later.

² I do not want to understate the importance and the unique characteristics of the multiple disciplines surrounding the study of history and I wish to give due respect to each. However, it is not within the scope of this project to enter into a detailed study of each individual school of thought or theory.

³ There is conflict within history when assigning certain series of events a specific beginning or ending, this does not contradict a scientific approach to history. This is merely a question of defining parameters and forming a consensus among peers. The individual events of World War II are not questioned, what constitutes the official start or end of the war may be argued. The time, date, or specific events, are not in question, and thus, the historicity remains intact. There is always the possibility of human error when assigning dates. It is not uncommon for dates of birth, publication dates, or even the dates of major events to be mistaken and altered later to reflect new findings and more accurate methods of investigation and calculation.

⁴ Not to be confused with Greenblatt's New Historicism.

⁵ I would cite any number of modern Hollywood productions, which have recontextualized such historical figures as the gladiators, Robin Hood, or Scottish independence fighters, leaning more and more towards the mythical and legendary than the historical. The individual bases his knowledge and understanding of history far too often on the flashy, sexy, computer generated "based on a true story" idea of history that is simply made to sell.

⁶ We should point out here that the denial of an event does not negate its occurrence. For example, the counter-culture movement denying the Holocaust is not based on historical fact; it is a question of perspective, and does not negate the validity of quantifiable historical information. The movement is not unlike the small child who believes that what he cannot see cannot see him. Just because one did not experience the Holocaust, does not mean that it, as an event, did not happen, and when evidence both of personal experience and scientific documentation of existing facts is available, the current position of denying individuals is found lacking.

CHAPTER 1: RABINAL ACHÍ

¡El cielo, la tierra, estén contigo!

Varón de los Queché, *Rabinal Achí*

In 2005 UNESCO declared *Rabinal Achí* a “Masterpiece of the oral and intangible heritage of humanity.” The drama has been recognized for its worth by scholars and institutions, and yet remains relatively untouched by critical analysis. A cursory search for information on the play brings such titles as: “Ethnomusicology”, “Articles on psycholinguistics”, and “The palatalized velar stop in proto-quichean”, none of which consider *Rabinal Achí* on a literary level. I did find a title that caught my attention: “El bien y el mal: música, alcohol, y mujeres” by Sergio Navarette Pellicer. Alas the article was once again a socio-cultural treatment of the Mayan people and did not touch on the drama itself as art. It is interesting that this “masterpiece of the oral and intangible heritage of humanity” has received so little attention by theater scholars. What we do have are various editions, mostly based on the Brasseur version, and several reviews which generally center on the history that contributed to our current possession of the text. The shared idea that each of the varied articles, book reviews or editions has in common is a great appreciation for the importance of the work. “La lectura de este drama de los maya-quichés, permitirá al estudiante de literatura y de historia del arte dramático, entender mejor la evolución del teatro en México, del siglo XVI al presente, si toma en cuenta, como punto de partida, tal obra: La única superviviente del teatro prehispánico” (Monterde V). Not only does the *Rabinal Achí* allow us to understand the evolution of theater in México¹ better, but could also give us important information on the development of theater in the greater western hemisphere:

Theatre historians are wont to locate the start of Western Theatre in Greece. Tracing its course from there to the present day, they give considerable attention to Rome, England, Italy, France, Russia, Scandinavia, Ireland, and the United States; and they make appropriate glances eastward to note Oriental influence on the theatre of the West.

However inclusive this survey is intended to be, there is at least one Western theatre that the historians consistently over-look. This is the theatre of the Mayan Civilization, one that antedates any other in the Western world by hundreds of years. (Klein 269)

To understand the influence that *Rabinal Achí* has had on the development of the western theater tradition it is first necessary to understand the importance of the work itself. It must first be situated within its own cultural setting before it can be fully understood within the greater scope of what theater is today. Theater in the ancient Mayan realm was essential to the community as a whole. The Spanish chroniclers and the scholarly priests that were fortunate enough to witness the civilization describe the spectacle that was theater performance in the most eloquent terms and in their accounts often reserve the highest praise for the singing, dancing and performances surrounding the theatrical presentations. Maxine Klein made clear the important role that the theater played in society when she said:

To understand this earliest theatre of the Americas, one must know something of the civilization that produced it. Most importantly, one must realize that the primitive Mayans did not differentiate their theatre, or any other of their aesthetic activities, from the rest of their daily life. For them, art and the workday world were intermixed. And it was this very admixture which gave their theatre its compelling force. (269)

Theater was an integral part of the civilization; Francisco Monterde and several other scholars have carried out exhaustive studies on the role theater played in the everyday life of the Mayan community. The Plays were performed outdoors, in open spaces that were designed and exclusively designated for the performances. The plays would last for hours, “[...] se desarrollaban escenas cómicas preferentemente, con atavíos muy vistosos. Los intérpretes con frecuencia se disfrazaban de animales, y su caracterización y sus palabras divertían mucho a los

espectadores” (Monterde VII). These ancient performances were of three types: the simple song and dance routine, dances with recitation, and the complete drama where music, dance, and dialogue came together. Theater played a strong role in the daily events of the people, they were not just occasional productions with entertainment value but were constantly being prepared and practiced with everyone participating, as well as the preparation of special productions during festivals of political, social, and religious significance.

Monterde calls the *Rabinal Achí* the only surviving example of Prehispanic Theater, which is not entirely true. There are several important prehispanic dramas². What sets *Rabinal Achí* apart from the others is the unique, independent nature of the play:

Vertido a la escritura latina desde 1856, no deja aún de ser, según mis conocimientos, la única pieza del antiguo teatro amerindiano que ha llegado hasta nosotros, sin que podamos descubrir en ella, sea en la forma, sea en el fondo, la más mínima traza de una palabra, de una idea, de un hecho, de origen europeo. La pieza pertenece –por entero– a los tiempos prehispánicos. (Cardoza 5)

Although the play does belong completely to prehispanic times, and pertains particularly to the Mayan Civilization, this is not to say that it is free from outside influences. Cardoza continues by saying: “Dije al principio que ni en la forma ni en el fondo de esta pieza, se encuentra ningún rastro de cosas europeas. No he hablado de *influencia*. En efecto, me parece que una influencia nefasta obró indirectamente; creo que el texto, tal como nosotros lo poseemos, está truncado” (13). The work contains no European element, thematic or theoretical; *Rabinal Achí* is free from the European theatrical form, the influences that Cardoza references are the missing elements, the explicit and overt Mayan ideologies that were so commonly censured during the indoctrination of the New World stage.

The importance of this work should be clear with respect to what it has to offer in terms of the socio-cultural and theatrical tradition and offers many avenues of study to those willing to engage the text. The well recognized Mayan scholar David Tedlock has mentioned the historical foundation of the play by saying, “The main characters in *Rabinal Achí* resemble historical figures, the deeds they narrate resemble historical events, and most of the places they mention can be located in geographical space (157). The historical nature of the play is what is of greatest interest to my study. History was as important to the prehispanic peoples as their theater; it is of no wonder that the two are so closely related, and were often inseparable:

La historia era algo que cultivaban con verdadera asiduidad. Fernando de Alba Ixtlilxochitl nos especifica cómo en estas disciplinas había especialistas que se dedicaban a los anales: <<poniendo en orden las cosas>> de cada año; otros, a la genealogía; otros pintaban los mojones que establecían los límites de las ciudades y pueblos, y otros, la repartición de las tierras. Estaban tan adiestrados a recordar, que Fray Jerónimo de Mendieta explica que oyendo una o dos veces un sermón o la historia de un santo y <<siguiendo los códices>>, los podían memorizar. ... Junto a los templos había unos recintos especiales llamados *cuicacally* (casas de canto), en donde hombres y mujeres viejos enseñaban a bailar y a poner en escena las historias, al mismo tiempo que aprendían los signos en honor de los dioses. (Cardoza 325)

It is for this central role of history in the lives of the people that Diana Taylor has argued that “terms such as theatre and performance imperfectly signal sixteenth-century systems of incorporated practice that create and transmit social memory” (356). I agree with Taylor, in that the practice and importance of the Mayan drama comes from the social memory it produces, the communal history that was shaped and shared by all, simply calling it a theatrical performance

does not capture the true essence of the event. I would argue that the true strength of the drama comes from its ability to rework, revise and renew the story with each telling; to reincorporate the present individuals and situate them within the past, establishing a continuation of the communal memory. In *Rabinal Achí*, “al avanzar la obra, con el diálogo se retrocede en el tiempo, ya que aquél recuerda los pormenores, en proceso regresivo: antecedente remoto del análisis retrospectivo, ibseniano, y de la técnica pirandelliana con la que se llega, tras sucesivas revelaciones, a reconstruir e integrar el pasado de personajes” (Monterde XIII). The spectators were part of the play; it would begin in the present time, draw them in, and incorporate their current situation with the past happenings. The revolving influence of the drama allowed for greater understanding and connection with the past. The Mayan people understood that history could only be understood as we looked back upon it; it was not the immutable concrete history of the western-world science, but a force of change and a blessing that allowed for communion with the past and guidance in the present.

The drama was a reconstruction and an integration of the past with a present significance. Just as historical revisionism is a reexamination of the past and a search for the repressed and dark silences of history, *Rabinal Achí* is a retrospective work sharing the rejuvenating vision of revisionist theory. The historical value of the play is remarkable, but its true literary value comes from its revisionist strength. I will give a brief background of the play, and then turn my focus to the document itself as an example of revisionism. I will discuss the title, religion, the poetry/oral tradition of the work and then look at the content of the work itself in a revisionist light to show that *Rabinal Achí* is not only one of the first, but one of the most important revisionist texts of the western theater tradition.

It is not my intent to give an exhaustive background of *Rabinal Achí*. This has been carried out to a satisfactory manner by individuals much more qualified than myself. However, to understand the work it is important to be aware of how it came about. Charles Etienne Brasseur de Bourbourg, an abbot and self-proclaimed historian, was named as the parish priest of the small village Rabinal. Cardoza says, “Brasseur, probablemente, hablaba menos quiche... y entendía menos la mentalidad y la imaginación de los quichés” (XII). After helping a sick family member in 1855 of the native Mayan Bartolo Ziz, Brasseur learned that Ziz knew of a dramatic work of which he had heard mentioned only in hushed voices, and to which he had noted several vague references during his time with the Mayan people. He quickly asked Ziz to tell him of the work. There was great hesitation on the part of the Indian due to the fact that it seems to have been forbidden to perform or talk about the work (Cardoza XVII). Ziz eventually conceded and helped the priest record the work. Ziz claimed to have been one of the actors of the drama, and that his parents had made him memorize the speeches in his youth. It seems that in 1850 Ziz had copied down the cantos of the play from an ancient text to insure their survival. No one was allowed to see either the original codex or the copy Ziz had made, and both have long since been lost or destroyed. The work was dictated to Brasseur who wrote it down in Quiché, translated it to French and later, with the help of his native servants, into Spanish. After acquiring the work, Brasseur insisted on seeing it performed live. Funded by Brasseur and the Catholic Church, Ziz undertook the preparations for the staging of the play. According to Pedro Henríquez Ureña the play was shown for the first time to the modern audience in January of 1856 (Cid and Marti 208).

The Brasseur manuscript has been the basis for the majority of the current editions of *Rabinal Achí*. One of the more prominent versions comes to us by way of Georges Raynaud, a

French scholar of linguistics and religion. Cardoza translated the unpublished Raynaud version into Spanish and noted that, “no se propuso el profesor Raynaud que su texto sirviera para llevarlo a escena, con un criterio de teatro ‘actual’. Está trabajado, más bien, sencilla, eruditamente, como un documento valioso de la lengua quiché” (XVI). With all of the attention that the theater and performing arts received from early historians in the various annals of history and culture, it is interesting to me that the *Rabinal Achí* was maintained simply as a historical and linguistic record. It is even more interesting that the play was not discovered and recorded earlier. The initial conquest had occurred some 300 years earlier, and there had been several highly qualified historians searching and working among the people. How is it that *Rabinal Achí* was not discovered prior to Brasseur? I would argue that the special nature of the play is what protected it and preserved it until a time when it was able to come to light without the harsh censorship so common during the Conquest:

El ocultamiento del *Rabinal-Achí* hasta que lo descubriera, tradujera y difundiera el abate Brasseur, se debe al celo catequizador de los religiosos. Celo al cual debemos destrucciones de códices, monumentos arquitectónicos, escultura, cerámica, y otras artes y artesanías. Son muchos los autores que nos hablan de teatro prehispánico, de bailes con parlamentos recitados, cantados o salmodiados. Estimo lo contrario de Francisco Monterde cuando asienta en el prólogo aludido: “La carencia de obras de la poesía dramática precortesiana –que, sin haber española– no debe tomarse como prueba de una actitud desdeñosa hacia ese teatro, por parte de los conquistadores, bélicos o espirituales”. En el avasallamiento colonial, en el mundo de la encomienda, de la esclavitud por conquista, lo que conocemos es lo que ha podido salvarse. Todo rastro

profano se consideró como superstición, como herejía, como perversidad de idólatras.

Los testimonios son muy numerosos. (Cardoza XIII)

I would especially like to echo the words of Cardoza, “what we know is what was able to be saved” (XIII, my translation). The fact that *Rabinal Achí* was performed only on special occasions and was apparently forbidden to be revealed to the Spanish inhabitants is quite possibly the only manner in which we have been able to save one of the most important theatrical works of the Mayan civilization and possibly the world.

Speaking of Brasseur, Maria Sten noted “A ello hay que añadir varios volúmenes de apuntes etnográficos e impresiones de viajes en Centroamérica y en México, apuntes de un valor desigual e impregnados de una imaginación no siempre del todo verídica” (141). The revising trend surrounding the *Rabinal Achí* can be seen before we even begin to consider the text. Certeau points out “El historiador sustituye el conocimiento del tiempo por el conocimiento de lo que está en el tiempo” (25). So the “how-we-know”, as Taylor puts it, “seems based on assertions by unidentified witnesses and the highly suspect reworking of lost originals” (356), and Foucault points more to the conflict inherent in the document:

Scholars have asked not only what these documents meant, but also whether they were telling the truth, and by what right they could claim to be doing so, whether they were sincere or deliberately misleading, well informed or ignorant, authentic or tampered with. But each of these questions, and all this critical concern, pointed to one and the same end: the reconstitution, on the basis of what the documents say, and sometimes merely hint at, of the past from which they emanate and which has now disappeared far behind them. (6)

When we consider *Rabinal Achí* and how it came into our possession, the ideas posed by Foucault and the context of the document become very important. The story has been recorded

that while Ziz and his helpers were preparing for the monumental performance to usher in a new era of the historic work, Brasseur grew impatient and reprimanded his Mayan colleagues:

“¡Y bien, ustedes no la saben pero yo sí la sé!” y repitió algunas frases que había aprendido de memoria, agregando con tono enfático: “Yo sé todas esas historias y todas esas tradiciones mejor que ustedes: es por eso que estoy entre ustedes; yo soy el que sabe”. El discurso y la citación les dejaron estupefactos y en el mismo momento tomó el cuaderno en donde recopilaba su traducción y les recitó corrientemente una página entera. (Cardoza 18)

When considering the authenticity and purity, and thus the historicity of the document, the attitude of Brasseur and those working with him must be taken into consideration. It would appear that Brasseur considered himself more familiar with the traditions and legends than the people themselves, and goes so far as to say that his assistants “[...] know no grammar, but it is incredible the lucidity with which they explained the forms and the compositions of the phrases of this Indian drama [...] I immediately corrected the manuscript and translated it into French” (Yurchenco 40). It was also roughly ten years after this first performance that Brasseur actually published his French translation. Were there other changes made in those ten years? I would be curious to see what corrections Brasseur felt the work needed, after being dictated to him by actual participants in the work.

The Brasseur edition is not the only version of the play that seems to be plagued by questionable motives. The Denis Tedlock study has been heralded for being more approachable by the contemporary reader, and he prides himself on the fact that he went directly to the source, the village of Rabinal, to record the performance in 1998 and not simply translate someone else’s version. However, what “Tedlock fails to mention is that the performance that lead to his

version was sponsored by the International Red Cross, seeking to use the confrontation of the two honorable warriors as a model for thinking about armed conflict in Guatemala” (Taylor 372). When we consider the actual document and how it has been created and preserved, we are faced with the same problems as history itself; those in charge are deciding what is important, what should be recorded, what is “official”, and what is to be repressed. Taylor raises the question: “Does the situation surrounding the Tedlock and Brasseur productions make any difference to the meaning of the performance, or does it change the participants’ commitment to what they are doing” (372)? What was altered from the work to protect native beliefs and traditions and appease powerful and wealthy outsiders? These questions must be taken into consideration when looking at the drama and its socio-cultural and historical significance.

Rabinal Achí was brought to light after some three hundred years of cautious and clandestine performance. I would argue that the versions we are fortunate enough to possess are not concrete, quantifiable historical documents, constituting some unknown truth about the past or a fixed idea of the representation of the play. They were never meant to be looked at as the mere detailing of some historic event. They are not, as Tedlock suggests, the simple representation of a real historic event. They contain the experience of the individual, the connection that binds the modern man with his *Chilam Balam*, with his *Popol Vuh*. The documents are plagued with conflict because they, by their nature, are an eternal revision of the human story, always linking the current generations with those that have gone before. Cardoza explains that:

Nuevas versiones aparecen y aparecerán del *Rabinal Achí*. No puede existir la auténtica y definitiva. En verdad, no hay formas invariables en estas tradiciones populares;

tampoco lograron en su origen descubrir el alfabeto que fijara la palabra misma. Los vecinos de Rabinal guardan versiones que las modifican quienes las conservan. (XII)

As Cardoza affirms, there is not a definitive version of the *Rabinal Achí* because every generation, every pueblo, will have its own connection with the ancients, will have its own story to tell. *Rabinal Achí* is not a historic document; it is the creation of history, and the continued story of human experience.

I would like to consider quickly the title of the work. To begin with, there is evidence to suggest that originally the work was known as *El baile del tun*, or “dance of the drum” (Monterde X, my trans.). Exactly how or when it came to be known as *Rabinal Achí* is unclear. The title comes from the Character; Rabinal, where he is from, and *Achí*, a title meaning lord or sire and is often translated as *Varón*, therefore we have also seen the title translated as *El Varón de Rabinal*.

The interesting element of the title is that *Varón de Rabinal* is not the protagonist of the story. This is made clear by the fact that he does not appear at all in the second act of the play. If we were to assign the protagonist role to anyone it would be *Varón de los Queché*. He is the only character present throughout the entire work, and all action seems to revolve around him, his capture, and his sacrifice. Monterde points out that perhaps this focus on *el Varón de los Queché* “se explique no por compasión hacia el vencido –que aquí, en vez de ser débil, es fuerte, valeroso, resuelto–, sino por simpatía natural hacia el infortunado: aquél a quien la suerte ha vuelto las espaldas, y que, a pesar de eso, no se doblega ante el infortunio” (XVII). Why would a major work be titled after a supplemental character? It is quite possible that the Mayan people did not follow our western tradition of naming literary works after their protagonist or the major events. I would like to speculate as to where the title comes from without making

generalizations that could only be validated after investigating several other works within the same genre. The problem we quickly run into, however, is a lack of any other work of this type, relatively free from outside influence for adequate comparison. I would argue that *El baile del tun* seems a much more fitting and appropriate title for the work, and its change suggests from the very beginning a revising element in the drama.

Speaking of the revisionist nature of the document and its first known modern performance mentioned earlier; it would be safe to suggest that the title has also been revised with time, possibly to coincide with the location of its discovery and initial presentation.

Looking at the structure of the drama, the poetic language used in the work has drawn quite mixed reviews. Monterde refers to the formulaic repetitions as “fatigoso” (XVI). Maxine Klein acknowledges that the language is not enticing to the current generation of scholars, but gives great credit to the performers in their own time. “Undoubtedly this language is much too repetitious for our modern taste, but no matter how we may respond, there is every reason to believe that the Mayans, themselves, found their plays enormously entertaining, in fact it was precisely to the end of being entertained that they went to the theatre” (274). Not only would I argue that these theatrical representations were very entertaining, but were also of the utmost importance to the Mayan people. The dances and the songs were common events in society. Klein has also pointed out that “in the hierarchy of the Mayan theatre, the spoken dramas seem to have occupied a select place since they were reserved only for very special occasions” (272). During these instances when the people would gather, Tedlock has observed that the spectators would sit on all four sides, that “no one is in an ideal position to catch all of the words all of the time, but everyone has moments when they come through clearly” (16). I would suggest that the spectators were familiar with, and even had large sections of the drama memorized, so that even

when they were not in the best position to hear the actors, they were well aware of what was going on and the meaning of the work.

In *Rabinal Achi* the dialogue between the characters is very formulaic and there are several key phrases that are often repeated by the main actors. The repetition in the work is a form of poetic parallelism that was a familiar poetic language and means of literary storytelling. However, the significance of the repeated lines goes beyond just artistic creation in the work. Cid and Martí have explained:

Todo esto propicia, en vez de la asonancia o rima de otros idiomas, el paralelismo en la composición literaria, es decir, la repetición de ideas, palabras, frases, párrafos iguales o muy parecidos... no podemos olvidar que el paralelismo no responde sólo a una fase externa de la expresión lingüístico-literaria, sino que responde al concepto que ellos tenían de teogonía y a su equilibrio político, social, y cultural. (217)

This “repetitious” and “fatigoso” language embodied every aspect of the lives of the Mayan people; it was a way to show their connection with the universe, with each and every part of daily life. We cannot know precisely what these theatrical presentations signified for the participants and spectators. However, Diana Taylor has pointed out that “The vast majority of the population learned and transmitted knowledge through the embodied practices that are the repertoire. Through formal and informal techniques of incorporation, rather than inscription, people memorized and rehearsed fundamental social precepts” (358). The parallelism was used to show a connection between each individual and their neighbors, between man and the gods, with the Mayan people and nature. The memorized and repeated language in this work of art was used to bring the past and present together in a common bond, to teach society the precept

that had been established by the ancestors and allow for the remaking of social norms to insure the continuation of society.

So what role does the poetic parallelism play in the study of revisionist theory with respect to *Rabinal Achí*? These works of drama were strictly memorized, and performed with a rigor of exactitude rivaling anything we have today. However, the work was passed on from generation to generation, with a large gap in its open performance. *Rabinal Achí* became part of the oral tradition of the ancient Mayan people and, as with any work conserved by the oral tradition, it was open to the influences of time, and the interpreter. Francisco Monterde puts it very eloquently, “En cualquier obra humana, y más en el teatro, si se conserva por tradición oral, influyen aquellos que año tras año la interpretan. Lo menos que le puede suceder es que el tiempo la mutile paulatinamente. Así aconteció con el *Rabinal Achí*, y en él son perceptibles las mutilaciones” (XXI). In the oral tradition, the drama becomes reflective of the individual’s version of history, those in charge of the work impose their ideas of what elements are important, of what balance is needed, revising the impact of the story with each telling. *Rabinal Achí* allows for a new telling with each performance, the poetry is the same, but the oral tradition which tells the old story, the myths and legends, is renewed time and time again, creating a new understanding and connection with history by involving the individual in the creation process. The language used by the story teller is one of the most revising elements available.

When talking about history, religion is perhaps the most revising force with which history has had to contend. Generally speaking, religious historicism is subjective, based on opinions and interpretations of a highly personal nature. Quackenbush has pointed to visions, iconography, personal tales of miraculous happenings that hold no proof, sacred objects with superhuman powers, meditations, ecstasies, prophecies, and phantasmagoric myths to explain the

ever-changing and revising role of religion within history (23). History cannot compete with the faith of the believer, the zeal of the fanatic, or the devotion of the puritan. It is of no wonder then that the topic of religion has been at the base of most arguments surrounding the authenticity of *Rabinal Achí* and any historical significance that the work may possess. In looking at *Rabinal Achí* there appear to be missing elements that appear in other plays of the time, chief among them is the absence of any major religious references. It needs to be remembered that the *Rabinal Achí* is a literary work; however, the ancient Maya did not distinguish between their religion, history or fiction; they were used interchangeably to tell the story of the people and were recorded simultaneously. Art was used to tell the story of real life; no distinction was made between the performance and the day-to-day grind of the individual. The lack of religious references and characters suggests that they were removed, either by the native performers to protect their sacred beliefs, or by those foreign powers that wished to subject and destroy any ideology that did not reflect the colonizing machine (whether spiritual or political). Luis Cardoza y Aragón began by pointing out that “el ambiente moral de la obra nada tiene de cristiano; las imágenes y las expresiones, poco de común con las europeas” (XVII), and later stated:

Al contrario de todo lo que nos han dicho los autores antiguos y modernos, al contrario de todos los ejemplos conocidos, la religión no juega aquí ningún papel; ni una sola vez se habla de los dioses, ninguno de sus nombres es citado, ningún rito, ni la más pequeña señal de ceremonia religiosa, ningún sacerdote representaba siquiera un papel mudo.

¿Cómo es eso, por ejemplo, que cuando el drama termina, cuando el Varón de los Queché es muerto por esas Águilas y Jaguares, no es arrancado su corazón y presentado a los

cuatro puntos cardinales y a sus dioses y después al sol y a su animador sobrenatural, etc.? (13)

It is interesting that the work would be described as completely free of European-Christian influence and also free from any native religious content given the all-inclusive nature of Mayan theater. There has been much speculation on the role of religion within the work. Maxine Klein argues:

Rabinal is not religious: in the play there is no mention of the gods and the priests appear only to dress the stage. Neither is the play a history: the precise historical moment of the play is never defined. Nor is it a documentary: the play avoids commenting on social or political conditions. As one critic succinctly points out, the play is, quite simply, "art": In place of a rigid and dry narration, *Rabinal* transports us by means of the ingenuous arrogance of its text to a far-away world in which the actors, in spite of their primitiveness, sensitively portray the spirit of gentleness and courage of their men, the purity of their women, and the beauty of their culture's music, song and dance. (274)

And as Cid and Martí have speculated; “pudiera ser que, al igual que los Incas, tuvieron los maya-quiché un teatro civil, distinto del religioso” (216).

It is possible that *Rabinal Achí* is simply a work of art, and that the Maya-Quiché distinguished between civil and religious theater. However, a distinct separation of religion from everyday life occurrences would seem to conflict with other current anthropological, historical, and literary findings. I agree fully with Klein in that the Maya-Quiché appreciated art, and the spirit of their men and women is portrayed beautifully through their song and dance, but to claim a general lack of religion, history, and documentation throughout the work is a dangerous generalization, as is her observation of primitiveness in the actors, due to a lack of supporting

evidence and the absence of similar works on which we can base a sound investigation. I would also agree that the Maya-Quiché had a varied understanding of genre, and depicted civil, as well as religious themes in their theater; it has also been observed that comedy and tragedy played central roles in the artistic creation of the ancient people. Yet it is well documented, as I have mentioned before, in the writings of the early priests and scholars involved in the colonizing effort as well as modern investigators, that the theater performances of the Mayan people were an integration of all aspects of life, and where one theme may not be the central focus, all aspects of life were brought together in the genre of drama that is *Rabinal Achí*. I would argue that the general lack of religion in the work is a result of the revisionist trend surrounding the drama.

Raynaud was one of the first to popularize the idea that *Rabinal Achí* had been altered, citing the lack of religion in the work. However, Cid and Martí have published their belief that “Raynaud considera que la tragedia ha llegado truncada hasta nosotros, y esto nos parece posible. Con lo que no estamos de acuerdo, es que base su aserto en que la religión no desempeña ningún papel” (216). Francisco Monterde also points out that “además de que estaban prevenidos contra los idólatras, conviene recordar que no era visto entonces con gran simpatía el teatro profano” (VII). I would agree that religion plays an important part in this work, and remind the reader that religious theater, like all religious literature of the time, was condemned to the flame. It should not come as a surprise that the role of religion in the play took a back seat in its modern production, how else would a work of such great importance to the cultural inheritance of the Mayan people survive?

In defense of the role of religion in the work I would point quickly to two examples. Cardoza talks of the sacred significance of the number 13. It is a European superstition to avoid the number and the Mayan people were very much interested in numerology, the number 13

having very special significance and appearing in all aspects of life, for example having 13 gods of the upper world, 13 numbered days of the week, and so on. However, the number 13 does not appear explicitly in the work, the number 12 having taken its place. “Aun en menores detalles esa mutilación se manifiesta. La aritmología sagrada de los indígenas civilizados, tenía como santísimo el numero 13; 12 es absolutamente europeo y en vez de 13 Águilas, 13 Jaguares, encontramos aquí dos grupos de 12” (Cardoza 13). There are two possible explanations (among others) for this religious discrepancy. First, it is quite possible that Brasseur, knowing of the sacred numerology of the Mayan people changed the number to maintain a level of Christian control over the pagan belief in an effort to indoctrinate the people and put an end to the tradition, or Bartolo Ziz, being very aware of the censuring nature of the Catholic priests of the time changed the number to avoid an open confrontation with the patrons of the production. I lean more towards the second, based on the idea that the 12 Águilas and the 12 Jaguares are never presented alone in the work; they always appear in the presence of el Varón de Rabinal, or Jefe cinco-lluvia. When we consider the soldier/priests with the respective authority figure in each act of the work, there always appears the 13 members of the hierarchy of the clan, fulfilling the ancient religious significance in a subversive manner.

The second example revolves around el Varón de los Queché. Every scholar, even those who deny the existence of any religious reference or symbol in the work, acknowledges, and refers to the death of Varón de los Queché as a sacrifice. The subtitle of the Tedlock version reads “A Mayan Drama of War and *Sacrifice*” (my emphasis). I would argue that there is no sacrifice without religion. If there were no semblance of religion in the work, the death of Varón de los Queché would simply be an execution, not a sacrifice, and the work loses the dramatic force to bind the present spectator with past ancestors. Monterde points to the religious rite

saying: “durante el Segundo acto, en que no hay subdivisión alguna y cuyo ritmo es más grave, se desarrolla en sus diversas etapas el ritual que precede al sacrificio” (XII). Although we are not allowed to see the actual sacrifice, the heart is never cut from his chest and presented to the gods; it is the sacrifice that gives the drama the power to supersede history and revise the story from a singular event to an ongoing process and experience for the modern participant in the work. The sacrifice goes from being religiously beneficial to the ancient Mayan to a vicarious offering on behalf of the audience in attendance during each given performance.

Religion, even if censured, is an unmistakable part of *Rabinal Achí*. Echoing the words of Luis Cardoza: “Desde luego, no podemos tornar, en modo alguno, por más empeño que pongamos, a la mentalidad de los rabinaleños, de los quichés anteriores a la dominación española. Ellos veían el *Rabinal-Achí* con otra actitud espiritual, con otros ojos, con otra imaginación. Estaban frente a distinta realidad, con su mitología vehemente y actuante” (XV).

When we turn our attention to look more specifically at the content of the work and less at the form we quickly find that *Rabinal Achí* has much more to offer than being a simple example of a revised document. The work itself begins *in medias res*, Varón de los Queché has already been surrounded by the Rabinal soldiers, the public does not know what his crimes are and does not know what led up to this point. However, every single individual watching the work would know from the beginning exactly what fate lay in store for our protagonist. The fact that the story is being told in a retrospective, as well as a real time fashion allows for the revisionist theory to revise and retell the story with an emphasis on the current situation of society and alter the telling to focus on new or different aspects of the story to appeal to and appease the current generation. This is a prime example of the power and importance of revisionism at work. The historical facts are known, Varón de los Queché has been captured for

his crimes and will be sacrificed to the gods on behalf of the people. This factual, event-based vision of history is not enough to validate the sacrifice and satisfy either the public or the gods, they need the story that accompanies facts. The work is charged then with showing an admirable adversary, worthy of sacrifice, and a credible executioner. The history that concerns the viewing public is not one of facts but one of worth and individual experience. If the sacrifice is to have any meaning to the gods, and more importantly to society, the story teller must concern himself with the individual perspective, the feeling behind the facts, the legend and myth that connect the people with their past. *Rabinal Achí* gives us that story, by presenting us with the captured Varón, and then telling us why his sacrifice is valid, creating the history that surrounds the few facts and the ominous ending.

Notes

¹ The work is in actuality from Guatemala. I would remind the reader that Guatemala formed part of México until 1823 and the Drama is therefore often given the general setting of “ancient México” refereeing to the extent of the Mayan civilization.

² I would suggest the *Ollantay* and *El Güegüense o Macho Raton* for example.

CHAPTER 2: ZOOT SUIT

We're all in jail [...] some of us

Just don't know it.

-Luis Valdez, *Zoot Suit*.

Luis Valdez was born in Delano, California, in 1940. He was the second of ten children born to migrant farm worker parents. “By the age of twelve he had developed an interest in puppet shows, which he would stage for neighbors and friends” (Huerta 26). Valdez later attended San José State College where he wrote and staged his first official dramatic performance, *The Shrunken Head of Pancho Villa*, in 1964. The following year Valdez helped found El Teatro Campesino, a small theater company performing “*actos*” to “dramatize the need for a farm workers’ union” (27). El Teatro Campesino carried their message of organizing a workers’ union from the fields to the general public until 1967 when Valdez decided to focus on his theater, and by 1971 the group had moved to their permanent home in San Juan Bautista, California. Perhaps Valdez’s most financially successful endeavor was his Hollywood film *La Bamba*, which stylized the life of singer Ritchie Valens, but there is no question that *Zoot Suit* is Luis Valdez’s most famous piece and is the work with which he is most commonly associated.

In staying faithful to the theme of revisionism that I have presented in this study, I will look briefly at the history surrounding this monumental work, the Teatro Campesino, and Luis Valdez. I will present the historical frame for the play, the Sleepy Lagoon murder trial, and look at the differences that appear between the official story of the event and the stylized drama. I will then turn my attention to the Pachuco, the Press, the film, and the play to demonstrate how Valdez has created one of the greatest examples of revisionist theater we have to date.

The Teatro Campesino was founded in 1965 in conjunction with the California Grape strike and the political activities of Cesar Chavez. This politically charged environment proved a productive atmosphere for Luis Valdez, as a playwright and actor, as well as for the other members of the organization. Jorge Huerta described the early troupe by saying “what the incipient teatristas lacked in formal training, they compensated for in sheer vitality and

commitment” (3). In the early stages the group was not formally trained and had little if any professional experience other than the short career of Valdez, but they soon began to draw renowned talent. After a few years of performing in the fields, on the back of flat bed trucks, and in small community centers, Valdez and the group decided that they needed to focus on their art and message, and could no longer dedicate themselves full time to the union efforts. By 1971, the group had found a permanent home in southern California and were producing and performing their works in theaters across the southwest and continued to expand throughout the U.S. and Europe. Huerta continued talking about the expanding group and mentions that “their audiences, like the first striking farm workers, were totally in tune with what they were seeing on stage. One of the most important premises of the theater, that critical connection between performer and audience, was unwavering in the initial stages of teatro Chicano” (3). Even though the troupe had left the ranks of the labor union and the explicit fight for the organization, their work continued to deal with the social and political themes that surrounded the everyday life and situation of the Chicano community. The group, with their theater – for the people and by the people – mentality, seemed to experience an unlimited string of successes and grew exponentially in popularity.

Huerta emphasizes the importance of the collectivity of the organization as a whole saying “the very real dimension of this endeavor rests in its efforts to counteract the human fragmentation and deformation inherent in capitalist society” (36). It is well documented that the group would work on each piece in a collaborative manner. In an interview Olivia Chumacero described the process in the following manner:

It was a collective way of working, we made our own costumes, we built our own props and sets [...] we did all the work collectively, which meant that at a certain time we all

took time to make the props, or to make the set. At a certain time we all took time to clean up. All the work was done in that way. Of course the person or persons who were more knowledgeable in a certain area were responsible for that area, but everybody had to help. Ves? (Broyles-González 131)

However, due to such huge success, in 1977 Valdez was offered the opportunity to write and direct a work for the prestigious Mark Taper Forum. The offer excluded the Teatro Campesino ensemble and marks the beginning of what will become Valdez's independent career leading him to Broadway and, ultimately, Hollywood. Valdez has been criticized for taking credit for the works of the Teatro Campesino, given the highly collaborative and improvisational nature of their productions. It has been said that "the group dynamics of theatrical creation are subsumed under the individual rubric of Luis Valdez, thereby reducing the terms 'collective' and 'improvisation' to something that happens under the aegis of a genius" (Broyles-González 130). I believe that this topic deserves its own study, and that I could not address it adequately in this investigation. Suffice it to say that it should be understood that the works produced by the group were the product of much participation, influence, and sacrifice on the part of all members. Huerta describes Valdez as the "charismatic leader who had gathered together a group of striking farm workers and created the ever-evolving Teatro Campesino. And this was the man who, along with his Teatro Campesino members, has inspired an entire movement of Chicano theater groups" (6). It is understandable that the director and leader of the group would put his name on the finished product of a work. I do not believe that it was ever Valdez's intention to diminish the significance of the support and influence that the collective nature of their work had on any of the group's productions. As Valdez began working on his play for the Mark Taper Forum, originally entitled *Baby Zoot* (Broyles-González 179), the play drew upon the traditions of the

Teatro and the inspiration of many individuals. Even though the play was written by Valdez without the ensemble, “*Zoot Suit* is very much a product of the general Teatro Campesino conglomerate performance style: the Rasquachi [sic] mixture of style and performance genres—vignettes of action, song, dance, dialogue—in rapid and smooth transit, which is in turn a hallmark of the Mexican popular performance tradition” (178-9). Soon after the first version of ‘Baby Zoot’ was rejected by the foundation for being too realistic, Valdez was ready to begin staging the song, dance, and dialogue of the newly titled *Zoot Suit*.

The play was given an initial ten day run and opened in California in April of 1978. The work was so well received that it was scheduled for the Mark Taper Forum’s main season run starting on August 17, 1978. *Zoot Suit* opened to sold-out crowds in the Aquarius Theater in Hollywood California, on December 3, 1978 and ran for ten months, setting box office records for the longest running and highest grossing production originating on the west coast (Broyles-González 179). During its successful west coast run, Valdez began working on the Broadway production which opened on March 25, 1979. *Zoot Suit* ran for a mere five weeks in New York’s biggest theater, The Winter Garden, at a loss of \$825,000 (189). After such stunning reviews and amazing success in California, it is understandable that Valdez would want to take his masterpiece to Broadway. Jorge Huerta tells of a conversation he had with Valdez before the production was staged when Valdez told him of his wish to take his play to New York. When Huerta asked why? Valdez’s reply was simple: “They won’t take us seriously until we succeed on their turf, on their terms” (Huerta 5). It is unknown if Valdez feels that he was successful or not in his purposes given the play’s short and unprofitable run, but there is no question that Valdez opened the doors for other Chicano productions, and the New York experience was not the end of *Zoot Suit*. The production continued to run in California, and Valdez was soon slated

to write the screenplay and direct the film version of the drama. The film premiered in 1981 and served as the springboard for his Hollywood career.

From the California grape fields with the migrant workers, to the bright lights of New York, and finally settling in Hollywood, Valdez's journey appears to have been as epic as that of the characters in his plays. In total *Zoot Suit* went through five performance sites and had at least six major scripts (Broyles-González 179). The history of the playwright and the drama are as interesting as the material used for the Teatro Campesino's theatrical productions.

As I turn now to look explicitly at the play *Zoot Suit* I will be focusing my study on the revisionist themes that run throughout the work and seem to be a motivating force behind the development of the story. Valdez was well aware of the looming shadow that history had cast over his characters and the society that they represent. In real-life there was an obvious social victor creating an official history of the events surrounding the Sleepy Lagoon in sight of an obvious lack of quantifiable evidence, and a complete disregard for the individual perception of the actual happenings at the party. This official history is exactly what Valdez aimed to call into question. By creating a play based on Chicano myth and identity, he allowed an artistic representation to tell the story of the oppressed individual. By questioning history and those in authority, Valdez aims to give voice to the multiple and varied experiences surrounding the ominous Sleepy Lagoon murder trial and present an alternative version of the events. This complementary story allows for a revising of the traditionally accepted account and for the foundation of a new official history that takes into consideration the experience of the individuals who were previously silenced in the historical debate.

The plot for *Zoot Suit* is taken from events surrounding the 1942 trial for the murder of José Díaz¹ that supposedly occurred at the Sleepy Lagoon², in southeast Los Angeles. The State

of California decided to try twenty-two Pachuco youths together in one mass trial where twelve of the Pachucos were unjustly convicted of criminal conspiracy and murder. The twelve men were in jail for approximately two years while their lawyers fought for their freedom and eventually won on appeal. In an interview, Luis Valdez described the climate that surrounded the trial and the subsequent U.S. Marine riots in the barrios by saying:

Public Resentment against zoot suiters grew, compounded by a certain ‘wartime hysteria’³ in 1942, as the federal government mounted extensive campaigns to encourage patriotism and spur the World War II defense efforts, those who were out of step with the majority customs or who jarred cultural norms and dress codes, were often abused.

(Broyles-González 181)

This abuse is also apparent today with a general lack of information available surrounding the actual Sleepy Lagoon trial, and the events involving the treatment of the Chicano community. Essential experiences in shaping the current situation are, as Huerta states in the introduction to *Zoot Suit*, “incidents that are carefully ignored by most high school history books” (13). It is no surprise that most information surrounding these events is not from the point of view of the community that was personally affected (victimized) by the happenings. Perhaps this explains the resentment that many felt towards Valdez and his play when he strayed from the documentary style seen in earlier versions of *Zoot Suit* to create his “construct of fact and fantasy” (Valdez 25). There are in fact changes in the play that do not reflect the exact happenings of the trial and the surrounding drama. For example, the protagonist and leader of the 38th street gang, in real life was Henry Leyvas⁴, not Hank Reyna. However, the changing of a name is an easily forgivable liberty for a playwright. Where Valdez encountered more criticism is in his portrayal of the Chicano community themselves as having little to do with the

defense committee organized to aid in raising funds, hiring lawyers, and disseminating information. In fact, as Broyles-González points out, the Chicano community “was active and indispensable in organizing the defense” (203). Aside from the absence of the Mexican-American community in the play the appearance of the “white savior character” was seen as a huge departure on the part of Valdez from the actual proceedings of the Sleepy Lagoon trial. The characters of Alice Bloomfield⁵ and George Shearer⁶ represented to many the idea that the Chicano community was unable to help themselves and needed to turn for relief to the same society that was responsible for their struggles and continued oppression.

These differences, although important in understanding the true happenings and events of the time to insure they do not continue today, can be seen as indicative of the forces of a historical revisionism at work in the Valdez production. I would suggest that Valdez never had any intention of offending the actual members of the 38th street gang and their families and, even less, the community (of which he is an active part) that rallied behind their own in a time of great need, regardless of the seemingly insurmountable odds when facing the United States Government. I would argue that Valdez, true to his revisionist style, used the context of the Sleepy Lagoon murder trial to tell a larger story. Let us not forget that *Zoot Suit* is a revisionist work. Despite all of its historical liberties, the work aimed to call attention to another perspective, the point of view of those directly involved in the events, and to question the official history of the proceedings. *Zoot Suit* served to open a discourse that allowed for the reexamination of not only this particular case in the 1940's, but the situation of the Chicano community in the 1970's when the play was first staged, as well as the current status of the Barrio today as the work continues to be performed and studied. *Zoot Suit* should not be disregarded all together as historically inaccurate or as an attempt by Valdez to appease his

Anglo critics. To be fully appreciated and understood, the work must be situated as a revisionist work, questioning a predominant ideology and established history that denies the experience of the oppressed and marginalized protagonists. It should be noted that even Yolanda Boyles-González, one of the more out-spoken critics of Valdez's use of the history, sums up her argument by stating: "Although the play does not diminish the importance of the Sleepy Lagoon victory it does situate it within a larger context of continued oppression" (187).

An essential part and an amazing example of the revisionist force of the play can be found in the Pachuco identity assumed by the central characters. In his monumental work, *El laberinto de la soledad*, Octavio Paz points out: "como es sabido, los 'pachucos' son bandas de jóvenes, generalmente de origen mexicano, que viven en las ciudades del sur y que singularizan tanto por su vestimenta como por su conducta y su lenguaje" and continued "[...] y el primer enigma es su nombre mismo: 'pachuco', vocablo de incierta filiación, que dice nada y dice todo" (16). According to Paz the pachuco figure "parece encarnar la libertad, el desorden, lo prohibido" (19), and that "A través de un dandismo grotesco y de una conducta anárquica, señalan no tanto la injusticia o la incapacidad de una sociedad que no ha logrado asimilarlos, como su voluntad personal de seguir siendo distintos" (17). All of this leads us to Paz's conclusion that "la irritación del norteamericano procede, a mi juicio, de que ve en el Pachuco un ser mítico y por lo tanto virtualmente peligroso" (19). In 1942, the Pachuco was seen as a delinquent, a thug and gangster. In accordance with the observations that Paz made, it is easy to understand that they were an easy target for the wartime hysteria in the California neighborhoods. So I am pressed to ask the question, if the Pachuco was such an antisocial anarchist embodying an ancient Mexican myth that personified danger to the predominantly

white society, why did Luis Valdez choose to base his protagonist on such a disreputable historical figure? In a note in a later edition of his book, Paz states:

En los últimos años han surgido en los Estados Unidos muchas bandas de jóvenes que recuerdan a los “pachucos” de la posguerra. No podía ser de otro modo; por una parte la sociedad norteamericana se cierra al exterior; por la otra, interiormente, se petrifica. La vida no puede penetrarla; rechazada, se desperdicia, corre por las afueras, sin fin propio. Vida al margen, informe, sí, pero vida que busca su verdadera forma. (16)

Boyles-González has also pointed out that “el Pachuco was rehabilitated during the Chicano movement and had been reconstituted as something of a positive antihero” (188). In the opening monologue of *Zoot Suit* we see:

PACHUCO: The Pachuco style was an act in Life
and his language a new creation.
His will to be was an awesome force
eluding all documentation ... (Valdez 25)

Seeing the Pachuco as this awesome force of myth brings to mind Roland Barthes when he affirmed in his study that “myth confers historical intention and natural justification on its belief system, giving to the contingent the appearance of the eternal” (Juan-Navarro 258). The Pachuco is in itself a symbol of the revisionism at work. From the vilified gangster portrayed in the 1940’s to the antihero of the Chicano movement in the 70’s, the clothing, the slang, the persona, has undergone a transformation to redefine the struggles and the oppression of the marginalized underclass. This figure described by Paz as wanting to remain distinct has in fact become a symbol for the modern Chicano movement and the ideology of finding their own space, “no quiere ser mexicano, pero tampoco yanqui” (Paz 20). Boyles-González has stated:

El Pachuco and the play *Zoot Suit* must also be understood within the historical context of the 1970's: as a part of the Chicano movement's revalorization of traditionally maligned sectors within the barrio or within Chicana/o working-class reality. Such a revalorization of the *Pachuca/o*— a conscious crediting of what can be considered his or her admirable dimensions—must be seen in the general context of cultural nationalism and the Chicano movements intense debate concerning Chicana/o identity. (200)

This independent identity is an essential part of the history of Henry Reyna, the Sleepy Lagoon, and the modern Chicano movements and helps to understand the revisionist trend questioning a history that did not tell the story of their community the way that the barrio faced it. Valdez tells us that perhaps not all Pachucos were the tyrannical gangsters portrayed by history, but also shows that they were not innocent, naïve, Mexicans willing to be passively controlled by an oppressive society. *Zoot Suit* and the Pachuco figure are simply reflections of a society trying to find its own historical voice, to establish the truth of their own unique experience.

If we look briefly at the character in the play, El Pachuco, we see that not only is the pachuco figure a symbolic representation of revisionist power, but the actual personage in the play embodies the same element of autonomy from and even a power over the established historical register, personified in the play by the Press. To begin with, I mention El Pachuco's capacity to control the time, space, and the very historical outcome of the play. Looking at the use of time in the play, El Pachuco appears to be the only character with the ability to start and stop the action at will. During Henry's interrogation by the police after his arrest, El Pachuco momentarily stops the action to state that:

PACHUCO: You don't deserve it, ese, but your [sic] going to get it anyway. (Valdez 32)

Furthermore, after Henry's beating, he seems to have the power to lead the play back to the night of the party, before the murder and arrest ever took place. Later in the work, during the court hearing, with a simple snap of his fingers El Pachuco is able to stop the trial and move the action forward, jumping past information he deems unnecessary:

PACHUCO: (*Snaps. Does double take on JUDGE.*) You know what. We've already heard from that bato. Let's get on with the defense. (*Snaps. PRESS sits. George Stands.*) (Valdez 54)

He also stops time and moves the action along when Henry asks for time to think when faced with the decision between Alice and marrying Della.

I would argue that the most impressive act of control that El Pachuco displays comes at the end of the play when he is the driving force behind the alternate endings that are presented. After the happy reunion between the boys and Hank's family the play seemingly ends by the press announcing the outcome:

PRESS: Henry Reyna went back to prison in 1947 for robbery and assault with a deadly weapon. While incarcerated, he killed another inmate and he wasn't released until 1955, when he got into hard drugs. He died of the trauma of his life in 1972.

However, by exerting his power over the Press and history, El Pachuco steps in and allows the people close to Henry to announce their view of what will come and then, as we shall see, authoritatively ends the play:

PACHUCO: That's the way you see it, ese. But there's other ways to end this story [...]

Henry Reyna ... El Pachuco ... The man ... the
myth ... still lives. (*lights down and fade out.*) (Valdez 94)

I would also like to point out that El Pachuco is the only member of the cast that is allowed to directly question or oppose the Press, whose role we will discuss momentarily, and he in fact corrects the Press, again exerting his authority over them. After the arrests, the Press begins publishing sensationalized headlines about the Pachuco gangs. They begin each headline by announcing that the events have taken place in the City of the Angels, after listening for a moment to the reports, El Pachuco steps in:

PRESS: The City of the Angels ...

PACHUCO: (*Sharply.*) El Pueblo de Nuestra Señora la Reina de
los Ángeles de Porciúncula, pendejo. (Valdez 28)

This confrontation is especially significant seeing as how EL PACHUCO corrects the Press, the presumed authority and official historical register, by citing the actual and historically official name of the beloved Californian city. This banter between the characters shows that even though they may live in the same land, they are from very different homes.

It is very important to note, as Broyles-González eloquently points out:

El Pachuco's [...] important function as a theatrical device rests with his role as omniscient master of ceremonies facilitating the play's presentational mode and its many transitions. He allows us to move smoothly in and out of the past. With a snap of his fingers, a wave of his arm, of a turn of his body El Pachuco changes scenes, flips us into a courtroom, or into the Reyna home, beckons dancers onto the stage, flirts or kids with the audience – breaks through the play's dramatic climaxes, turns tragic moments into humorous ones, injects cynicism onto light hearted moments. As a commentator *outside*

the action he serves as a perpetual distancing device (what Brecht calls a *verfremdungseffect*), which forces us to reflect on the theatricality of what we are seeing, instead of allowing us to be unthinkingly absorbed by the action. (199)

This clear ability to control the story and the development of history gives El Pachuco unmatched power and dominion over the press, the law, and society as a whole. Valdez's use of the Pachuco as a revisionist device demonstrates to the Chicano community the ability and power that they have to rise up and control their own destiny, to find their own place in history. Valdez masterfully uses El Pachuco to create a metatheatrical environment which powerfully denies the audience the comfort of merely being entertained. El Pachuco not only controls the action of the play but calls the public to action, forcing them to make a choice about historical opinion, to decide for themselves what is fact and what is fantasy.

I would mention briefly the artistic representation of the press in the play, which is sadly not as drastic in the film version. Valdez created a faceless and timeless protagonist when he chose to use the press and the image of the newspaper in his play to represent the source of oppression and instigation of the problems surrounding the pachuco youth. To begin with, Valdez used actual newspapers, and bundles of papers for the set of the production. At the beginning of the play, El Pachuco must use his switch blade knife to cut through a huge backdrop that is painted to represent the front page of the newspaper (Valdez 25). Later when Henry is in jail, his imprisonment is represented by bundles of newspapers being stacked in each of the four corners of what would be his cell (47). If we continue looking at the stage set as a symbolic representation of the historical power of the newspaper and the press, we must also note that the judge's bench during the trial is also made up entirely of stacks of bundled newspapers (52). Of particular interest is the scene at the Reyna home. Henry's mother,

Dolores, hangs newspapers on the family clothesline in front of their home, representative of “airing ones dirty laundry.” It is fascinating to see that the secrets, the lies, the fronts that every family has are represented by newspapers hung out to dry (33). Each of these instances is representative of the power and imposition of the press in the lives of the individual. Both Henry and his pachuco counterpart must triumph over the news media. El Pachuco must do so in order to assume his role in the play and to exert control over the force of history and Henry in order to gain his freedom in an oppressive society and his independence from the control of a biased history. The Newspaper becomes a symbol for both the explicit and implicit domination by a manufactured and mainstream history.

Turning to the Press as characters in the play, and not the newspaper as a prop, we see several very important and equally interesting elements in Valdez’s personification of history through the news media. When Alice and Henry meet for the first time in jail before the trial has begun, Alice asks Henry a very foreboding question:

ALICE: [...] Are you aware you’re in here just

because some bigshot up in San Simeon wants to sell more
papers? It’s true. (Valdez 49)

This idea of the reporter’s ability to manipulate the events surrounding the 38th street gang, to create history just to sell more papers, is further demonstrated in the court proceedings. In the play, the media serves as the prosecution during the trial (52) and later, the same Press acts out the part of the jury pronouncing the boys guilty of all charges that they themselves fabricated against the boys (63). The examination of Della on the stand is an outstanding representation of the sensationalized journalists going after their story. Each question is asked in rapid succession

and twisted in a way that by answering one question she is forced into implicating the boys in an unrelated matter⁷.

Perhaps the most damning example of the construction of an official history based on hearsay and a political agenda by those in power comes at the close of the trial when the Press offers its closing argument:

PRESS: Your Honor, ladies and gentlemen of the jury. What you have before you is a dilemma of our times. [...] The specific details of this murder are irrelevant before the overwhelming danger of the pachuco in our midst. I ask you to put them in the gas chamber where they belong. (Valdez 61-2)

There are two points that I would like to draw from this dialogue; first, the idea that specific details are irrelevant. Valdez wittingly constructs a critique at once of the past, present, and future. When we do not concern ourselves with the details, and allow someone else to do our thinking for us and simply hand down the verdict, we are at the mercy of those controlling history, the true dilemma of our time. Secondly, the very power of this discourse comes from the image of the gas chamber. I would remind the reader that the play is set in 1942, a time when the gas chambers of World War II's Germany were a very real and pressing symbol, the play was then performed in the aftermath of the Vietnam War. Valdez paints a picture here of the Press suggesting, not the punishment for the crime at hand, but the systematic extermination of the Mexican-American. This could easily be darkly representative of the final outcome, a symbolic genocide, if the Chicano community allows itself to forget, overlook, or be guided away from its place in history.

When we begin to look at the play in the larger scope of a revisionist text, I am reminded of Stephan Greenblatt's argument that: "Borrowing freely from his culture, the writer is able to draw on existing forces to provoke interest, pleasure, pain, or disquiet, or a range of other responses, so it is not simply a case of using these elements as source material, but instead they are employed in order to intensify the dramatic effect of the play on the audience" (73). This freedom to borrow from culture, or the culture of any time period, is indeed what gives literature its revising strength. Which stories ultimately get told and from what point of view lies strictly in who is in power, and who is willing to stand and question that power. The film version of *Zoot Suit* is perhaps proof of Greenblatt's concept of borrowing from culture. Luis Valdez based his work on the happenings, and cultural surroundings of a murder in 1942. The drama was, however, just as relevant and alive in 1978. The borrowed culture and the freedom that Valdez exercised on the work allowed him to not simply create a retelling of events, or a criticism of the past, but to intensify the connection that the film had with the viewer.

The film was given a scant budget of 2.5 million dollars, and was shot in a rushed fourteen days (Broyles-González 208). Gone from the Hollywood production is the overbearing and ever present use of the symbolic newspaper and press. However, I would be doing a disservice to the reader if I didn't mention the performance of Edward James Olmos as El Pachuco in the film. Olmos's presence in the film can only be described as captivating; he controls the character with a style and swagger that makes everyone in the audience want to put on the tacuche and be a zooter. At the same time, Olmos looms ominously over the public in his calm controlled demeanor, always larger than life and never quite allowing the spectators to relax, or simply to sit back and to be entertained by his smooth and elegant confidence. His

complete dominance of this mythical role had me believing in his authority over the powers that be: the press, history, and society.

There are two differences that I would like to point out about the film. The first is the notably multi-racial crowd that surrounds Henry and the 38th street gang. In both the play and the film, the characters Swabbie, a white sailor in the navy, and his girl Manchuka, a Japanese-American play prominent roles. In the film we see another couple that does not appear explicitly in the play. This couple is an African-American couple which is present from the very beginning, performing with Hank and the boys in the club and in other dance numbers. They also show up at the Sleepy Lagoon after Henry is attacked by the Downey gang. Valdez draws attention to the couple almost immediately in the play when they are roughed up by members of the Downey gang for being in the dance hall when “it aint their night” (Valdez DVD). This conspicuous reconstruction of the film to coincide with a more diverse production⁸ could have been an imposition by the Hollywood production machine, or could have been an attempt on the part of Valdez to further push his revisionist agenda and further instruct the audience by showing the racism that existed among the minorities, that the oppressive Anglo-American attacked other groups as well as the struggling barrio.

The second scene that I would like to cite, that differs from the play, is an intimate moment shared between Henry and his father. In the film, before Henry leaves with his friends for the dance hall, he is stopped by his father who calls for two glasses and his bottle of tequila. This is a significant event and a rite of passage for the twenty-one-year-old Reyna. It is interesting that this is portrayed in the film, but not in the theatrical version. I suggest that by portraying this important moment shared between a father and a son, Valdez is giving a mark of realism and validity to the experiences that Henry is about to go through as a Navy recruit. This

scene represents the approval, by his father, of whom Henry has become and that he is now prepared to act for himself and to enter the Navy. This contrast between Henry as a man, accepted by his father for who he is and for the decisions he has made, is in stark contrast to the portrait that the press immediately begins to paint of our protagonist. Valdez gives us both sides of the history, and the audience is left to decide which Henry Reyna is the historical pachuco.

Concluding with our look specifically at *Zoot Suit*, I would like to cite one critic's response to the theatrical production of the play, it reads: "[...] the plot is almost totally stereotypical anti-American establishment. But let's take *Zoot Suit* out of its unfairness as factual drama and see it as pure fiction: on that level it is riveting drama told with tough, bitter, and ruthless wit, performed with consummate acting and direction by a cast of virtually unknown professionals" (Broyles-González 190). It is interesting that if we forget all historical connotations, overlooking any sense of reality, and we approach the play as a pure work of fiction, that only then is it good theater. Broyles-González cited the New York theater critic when she wrote: "that is, if we performed the impossible feat of 'putting aside' what the play was saying, the play's actual substance, then it would be a great play" (190). This seems a strikingly odd comment from someone who had just seen a play that demonstrates the power of the press in creating historical sentiment. This particular critic could not have done a better job of proving any message that Valdez might have envisioned about the official register or the idea of historicity and the gross abuse of its power by the news media.

Zoot Suit is indeed a masterpiece of revisionist ideology. Valdez cunningly demonstrates the dangers associated with an official history and its abuse by those in power. He shows that the official record is in fact not necessarily any more unbiased, accurate, or real than the construct or combination of fact and fantasy that comes out of the barrio. The play is unrelenting

in its attack against generally accepted history and portrays revisionist ideology in a poetic fashion. Let us remember quickly the precepts: the questioning of the “official” history, the use of myth and literature to tell the story of the “historical” event, and the allowance for multiple interpretations of the historic. We see that Valdez has indeed created a tale that demonstrates the nature of history and its creation, allowing for a direct questioning of perspective and pronounced reality. The play blends the myth of the pachuco seamlessly into the work, and in fact helped with the recreation of the pachuco persona, it forms a modern mythological archetype, representative of modern Chicano ideology. Ultimately, the drama presents multiple expressions of the same events, culminating in a fractured ending that calls for each individual to decide what will be the historical end of the play.

More than simply being an example of revisionism, *Zoot Suit* is a call to action for individuals on all sides of the spectrum. John Tosh has said: “The fact that social action is both something we choose to do and something we have to do, is inseparably bound up with the further fact that whatever reality society has is an historical reality” (213). I suggest that *Zoot Suit* demonstrates that, just like social action, revisionism is both something that we choose to do, and something we have to accept.

Notes

¹ In the play the character is named José Williams. It is interesting to note that Henry tells Della that the surname had been Gonzales, and speculates that the change was made to give them more class. This is an interesting example of revisionism within the Hispanic community and deserves to be noted.

² The Sleepy Lagoon was a reservoir where the local Hispanic community would congregate due to the fact that they were not allowed in the public swimming pools. It later became, as the play demonstrates, a “lover’s lane” for the youth.

³ It is interesting to note that it was in February, 1942 that the U.S. government began the relocation of Japanese-Americans to internment camps. This “wartime hysteria” that Valdez mentions seems to be the driving force behind much of the public sentiment towards minorities during this period.

⁴ Henry Leyva actually died of a heart attack in 1971, not one of the possible outcomes presented by Valdez at the end of his play (Broyles-González 183).

⁵ Alice Greenfield McGrath did indeed exist and aid in the trial. However, she was a paid employee of the Sleepy Lagoon Defense Committee and was not hired until after the end of the first trial (Broyles-González 203).

⁶ George E. Shibly was in fact only one of five lawyers working the Sleepy Lagoon case, one of which was retained by the Mexican consulate (Broyles-González 203).

⁷ See pages 58-9. The dialogue is so expertly written I would need to cite the entire discourse to demonstrate the important and poetic nature of the scene.

⁸ However, it is possible that the characters existed in the theatrically staged versions of these works, and were just as racially diverse. In my studies I was unable to find evidence to suggest this.

CHAPTER 3: CORRESPONDING TALES, PARALLEL REVISIONISMS

Victory apparently demanded less soul

Searching than defeat

-Antonin Artaud, Theater and its Double.

The works *Zoot Suit* and *Rabinal Achí* are indispensable pieces of the theater canon separated by nearly four hundred years, and they deserve a continued and critical investigation. I have attempted to show how each play stands as a prime example of revisionist theory and individually has much to offer the modern student of Hispanic theater. However, when we study these works together, as linked theatrical representations, there is a new strength and significance that surrounds the two plays that leads to a greater understanding of historical revisionism in general. In this chapter I will draw the parallels between the two drama pieces and show how, when we consider these works in reference to each other, we are given a broader and much more significant picture of the role of historical revisionism in the Latin-American theater tradition. There are several important stylistic similarities to be found in these two works, namely the ritual dress, a very specific use of language, parallelism in characterization, and the use of music and dancing in the plays. I will look at each of these elements to show the connection these works share and how this association makes them more than just individual examples of revisionism in theater. I will present the trial of both protagonists and show the similarities that link both cases together. I will look at the influence that revisionism has on the chronological structure of the work and then draw comparisons between the relationships of the central characters and the dualism that connects Henry and the Pachuco as well as Varón de los Queché and Varón de Rabinal. In conclusion I will show the parallel revisionism apparent in the works and how this impels the audience in both cases to action, to question established ideas of history, and to revise it accordingly.

The clothing worn by the warriors of *Rabinal Achí* as well as the drapes of the pachuco youth play a significant role in these works. In *Rabinal Achí*, when our protagonist is taken

before the king and is sentenced to be sacrificed, he is granted a few last wishes before being sacrificed. Principal among these desires is that he be allowed to wear a special shroud:

EL VARÓN DE LOS QUECHÉ: Está aquí lo que dice también mi voz: “Te
prestaré la obra pulida, brillante, esplendente,
muy bien tramada, labor de mi madre, de mi
señora, para que te adornes con ella en los vastos
muros, en la vasta fortaleza, en los cuatro rincones,
en los cuatro lados, como suprema señal de mi muerte,
de mi fallecimiento, aquí bajo el cielo, sobre la tierra”. (Monterde 60)

This special shroud is so important that it is given to Varón de los Queché as a sign of his death, but when it is given to him a servant begs that he take care of it, and not defile it:

UN SIRVIENTE: Está bien, mi gobernado, mi mandatario
daré a ese valiente, a ese varón lo que pide.
Valiente, varón, aquí está esa labor bien tramada
que deseas, que solicitas. Te la doy, pero no
la deshagas, no la maltrates. (61)

These ceremonial clothes were of such great importance that it was made by the queen herself (mi madre, mi señora, were all terms of respect for the queen) and granted only to a warrior worthy of its prestige. Cardoza also mentions the importance of the costumes worn by the actors emphasizing the masks used in the drama stating that “la máscara es la identidad de cada personaje” (xvii). The clothing and masks used in the play were excellently crafted and were worn with pride and professionalism. The clothing did in fact represent the identity of each character and was well known and easily recognized by the viewers.

In a similar fashion, the clothing of the pachucos in *Zoot Suit* is of equal importance. The very first stage direction that Valdez gives us in his play is to describe the clothing of El Pachuco, and how precise the character should be in how he wears it:

(El Pachuco) He adjusts his clothing, meticulously fussing with his collar, suspenders, cuffs... pulls out his coat and hat. He dons them. His fantastic costume is complete. It is a zoot suit. He is transformed into the very image of the pachuco myth, from his pork-pie hat to the tip of his four-foot watch chain. Now he turns to the audience. His three-soled shoes with metal taps click-clack as he proudly, slovenly, defiantly makes his way downstage. He stops and assumes a pachuco stance. (Valdez 25)

The painstaking lengths to which Valdez goes to describe the pachuco drapes shows us the importance of the costume in the work and the need to represent the reality of the pachuco myth through his garb.

Continuing with the importance of the costumes in the plays, it is necessary to draw attention to what Octavio Paz has said about the suit and the accessories worn by the pachuco: “El traje del pachuco no es un uniforme ni un ropaje ritual. Es, simplemente una moda” (18). I would disagree with Paz’s observation and draw attention to the importance of how the characters dress in both works. Perhaps the symbolic significance of the clothing is most clearly seen in the representations where it is taken away. Just before his death on the altar, Varón de los Queché returns the ceremonial clothing to the king:

VARÓN DE LOS QUECHÉ: ¡Oh jefe Cinco-Lluvia! Dame tu aprobación,
ante el cielo, ante la tierra. Aquí tienes lo que
me habías prestado, lo que me habías concedido.
Vengo a devolverlo, vengo a dejarlo suspendido

a la entrada de los vastos muros, de la vasta fortaleza.

Consévalo, guárdalo en su cubierta, en su caja.

En los vastos muros, en la vasta fortaleza. (Monterded 62)

In *Rabinal Achí* this disrobing is representative of the loss of power, and the imminent death of our protagonist. We could say that this is the moment where Varón de los Queché becomes aware of the weight of his situation and must begin to decide what his future will be, if he will continue to fight, join the Rabinal tribe, or allow himself to be sacrificed. I believe it is no coincidence that there is a similar scene in *Zoot Suit*. While Henry is in solitary confinement El Pachuco transports the action to the street of the barrio to show Henry what is going on in the outside world. We see a fight break out and Henry's little brother Rudy pulls a knife against the sailors and marines that have been called in to "control" the zoot suiters. In his elegant pachuco style, El Pachuco snaps his fingers and sends Rudy off stage with the rest of the gang, now only he remains to face the men. In the film version EL Pachuco drops the knife intentionally and allows the soldiers to over take him. In both the film and the theatrical version he is outnumbered and quickly overpowered. The soldiers viciously beat El Pachuco, strip him of his zoot suit and leave him lying on the ground (Valdez 78-81). When Henry approaches his wounded friend, an Aztec conch sounds and El Pachuco withdraws dressed only in a ceremonial loincloth leaving Henry totally alone (81). This scene shows the stark connection that Valdez envisioned between his zoot suiters and the ceremonial dress worn by ancient Aztec and Maya warriors. El Pachuco even says that the purpose of the zoot suit was "to look like a diamond, to look sharp ... finding a style of urban survival" (80). It is apparent that Paz did not fully understand the significance of the pachuco drapes and the deeper meaning behind them.

In comparing the similar events in *Rabinal Achí* and *Zoot Suit* where El Pachuco is stripped by the soldiers and reporters, and Varón de los Queché returning the sacred shroud to the king Jefe Cinco-Lluvia, we see a striking resemblance between the two works and the importance of the clothing as something much more than a simple fashion trend. The clothing was representative of the power and pride of those wearing it and easily identified them and their affiliations. The tacuche and ceremonial shroud were not arbitrary props used to dress the actors, they were implemented as a way of connecting the viewer with the past and link history with the present so that it could be experienced and understood in its present day significance.

I mentioned in the previous chapter on *Rabinal Achí* the criticism of the poetic language implemented by the characters and how it appears unappealing to the modern or unaccustomed spectator. The deliberate repetition of certain phrases and the pluralistic nature of their remarks are not unlike the Chicano slang used by El Pachuco, Henry, and the gang. The Chicano slang, known as Caló, seems fun, flashy, and absurd at times during the performance, but it is similarly foreign and difficult for a modern and unaccustomed audience and is a means to communicate in code. Edward James Olmos commands such an amazing control of the slang in his dialogues in the film that it is next to impossible to not be swept away and find oneself repeating the phrases after him. Although Olmos's performance is spectacular there are phrases and references that any outsider would find nearly impossible to decipher, yet, just like *Rabinal Achí*, we are always able to follow the development of the story. As discussed earlier, this faithful representation is essential to the revisionist themes running through both plays. If the individuals are to be given an equal place in history, or be freed to tell their story, they must be allowed to do it with their own voice, and with their own words. The parallelism of repeated phrases used in *Rabinal Achí* and the Caló of *Zoot Suit* were used to show a connection between each individual and their

neighbors, between man and the gods, with the Mayan people and nature, with the Chicano and the barrio. The specialized vocabulary and the deliberate manner in which it was presented in these works of art was used to bring the past and present together in a common bond, to tell the story so that each community could understand in its own way, but in such a way that only those willing, and able to truly listen would catch the higher meaning behind the linguistic intricacies of the drama. The slang became a subversive way for the underrepresented voice to find its way into the main stream history without the same level of censorship they would encounter otherwise. They revise the story and offer their perspective, questioning and altering the official version by subtly presenting the same story but in their own words, words unfamiliar to their oppressors.

It is appealing that just as the poetic language implemented in *Rabinal Achí* was considered too repetitive and bothersome, the music and dancing in *Zoot Suit* was similarly criticized as detracting from the overall impact of the story. According to Broyles-González this is particularly apparent in the film. She states: “There is another very striking feature of the film which... tends to downplay the seriousness of each historical event as well as the story’s overall historical thrust. [In the work] that feature is the overly prominent and often gratuitous use of music, singing, and spectacular exhibitionist dancing” (211). This is an alluring statement. I would argue that Valdez’s deliberate use of music and dancing is in fact a product of the Chicano’s Indian and Mexican heritage, in accordance with the ancient traditions and myths he looked to as inspiration in developing his work.

With *Rabinal Achí*, the singing and dancing play essential roles. It was in fact a ballet, and often referred to as the “baile del tun.” For example, when Varón de Rabinal captures Varón de los Queché, it is represented by a dance with intermittent dialogue, and anticipating his death,

Varón de los Queché also dances in the court of Jefe Cinco-Lluvia. Varón de los Queché goes so far as to ask that after he is sacrificed, his bones be turned into instruments and be used to play the great drums:

VARÓN DE LOS QUECHÉ: Está aquí, también, el hueso de mi pierna;
está aquí la baqueta del tambor grande, del tamboril,
que harán palpar el cielo, la tierra, en los vastos muros,
en la vasta fortaleza. (Monterde 60)

If it is considered such an honor that Varón de los Queché would want his bones used to make the sacred music that would be heard in heaven and on earth, why should we criticize Valdez for implementing the singing and dancing in his own work? In fact, throughout *Zoot Suit* Valdez gives specific direction to what classic big band songs should be played and when. From Duke Ellington's "Perdido" during the opening scene to Glen Miller's "American Patrol" during the violent beating and stripping of El Pachuco. I would suggest that these songs were chosen explicitly by Valdez to coincide with the scenes in which they were heard. In the drama the music and dancing play a central role in developing the characters, and setting the mood throughout as the plot develops. By my count there are only three songs that appear in the film where no music is called for in the theatrical version. All three songs are performed by El Pachuco and his accompanying ladies. I hardly consider three songs to be "overly prominent" or "gratuitous" and I believe that they are in no way "spectacular exhibitionism." I would agree that the added songs do not always seem entirely necessary to develop the story or to help the audience to understand Valdez's message, but they never detract from it either. We should remember that in both cases the music and dance were there for the enjoyment of the public as part of their cultural heritage.

The use of music and dancing was an essential part of the ancient Mayan theater. It was an intricate part of how the story was told and how the action was presented. In a similar manner, Luis Valdez used the music and dances popular in the time of Henry Reyna, Boogie-woogie, the Swing, and Jitter bug, to help develop and tell the story of *Zoot Suit*. The music and dancing in both works serves as a powerful element that binds the individual experience with the larger picture of history. They gave validity to the unique experience and allowed the characters to share a common thread with the viewers. In both works, the music was enveloped within the production, giving new meaning and relevance to the songs and presenting their revised significance to the public to help convey a new history and enhanced experiences to the dramatic presentation.

It is essential to mention the fact that both works have at their center a trial where the lives of the protagonist's hang in the balance. These court scenes are very important to the development of our characters¹. In each case, even though the outcome is known from the beginning, after the sentence is passed the future of our protagonists is changed. The interesting element to these scenes is that even after the courts have ruled both men still act as though they are in control, as if they have a say in the final outcome. Let us look at each instance separately and then what they have to offer together.

Henry Reyna had signed up for military service. He was leaving the next day to report for active duty in the Navy. His friends and family were all proud of him, especially his father. When Henry was arrested he would have automatically missed his report date and would have been in trouble with the military. The outcome of the trial, as El Pachuco points out to a frustrated Reyna, would indeed make him unfit for military service. Henry, seemingly unwilling to accept this reality, continues to hold out hope for a fair verdict by the jury and later that the

appeal will work. It is also important to note that throughout the work *El Pachuco* is constantly reminding Henry that this is not just another story, and things will end badly. Even after the acquittal is announced and the boys are freed from jail, just when things seem like they are going to end the way that they should and justice will prevail, *El Pachuco* brings both the audience and the cast back to reality:

EL PACHUCO: And that's the perfect way to end this play—happy
ending y todo.

But life ain't that way, Hank.

The barrio's still out there, waiting and wanting.

(Valdez 88)

The fact of the matter is that the audience is given the outcome from the very beginning. *El Pachuco* is constantly reminding us that what we are watching is a play and that in real-life things do not go the way we want them to go.

Turning to the trial of *Varón de los Quiché*, we again see that even though we have a set and universally known ending from the very beginning of the work, our protagonist continues to fight, act defiantly, and hold out hope that his fate will not end on the sacrificial stone. The audience is well aware from the very onset of the play that someone will be sacrificed, that the play will end in bloodshed. *Varón de los Queché* would have seen several such executions. Would he really believe his fate to be any different?

Each trial also shares a common scene for our lead actors. In both presentations the warriors are given a supposed way out. With Reyna, after he is arrested and before he is beaten by the police, Lt. Edwards acts as though he and Henry are friends and he wants to help him. However, this friendship comes at the expense of turning in all of his friends. Lt. Edwards

begins by talking to Henry about when he was just a kid, the head boy at the catholic youth center, and about going to movies. He reminds Henry that he even helped him set up the youth center (Valdez 31). Then, when the issue of Reyna needing to report to the Navy the next day is mentioned, Lt. Edwards begins to make a deal with Henry:

LT. EDWARDS: It's still not too late, you know. I could release
you in time to get sworn in.
... Tell me, Henry what do you know about a big
gang fight last Saturday night out at Sleepy Lagoon?
... Play square with me. Give me
a statement as to what happened at the Lagoon, and I'll
go to bat for you with the Navy. I promise you. (31)

It seems like a good deal to the average audience member, if Hank makes the deal he can still join the Navy, make his family proud, and get out of the barrio and the gang. But there is much more to it; to fully understand we need to look first at *Rabinal Achí*.

After his capture, Varón de los Queché is taken before the king Jefe Cinco-Lluvia. He is told that he will be treated like a hero, given a grand welcoming, and offered anything he wants. All he needs to do is humble himself before the king and agree not to cause any scandal in the “vasta fortaleza” (Monterde 49). Varón de los Queché is unwilling to make such a promise. However, even more important in this scene is the ultimate offer of Jefe Cinco-Lluvia to allow Varón de los Queché to join the tribe of the Rabinaleños, through marriage, and to enjoy all of the benefits of being a full member of the clan:

JEFE CINCO-LLUVIA: Quizás ese valiente ha venido para convertirse
en yerno de clan, cuñado de clan, en los vastos

muros en la vasta fortaleza.
Si es sumiso, si es modesto, si se humilla, si
humilla su cara, entonces puede entrar. Esto
dice mi voz ante el cielo, ante la tierra. (Monterde 40).

Again we see what appears to be an offer too good to be true. Varón de los Queché is not simply being offered a pardon and a stay of execution; he is being offered a wife and riches by a king ready to receive him as a son. Why would a warrior not want to save himself from having his heart cut out, especially if the condition is receiving land, a wife, and power?

When we compare these two cases we need to look at the reactions of the parallel characters. In the case of Henry Reyna we have El Pachuco in the interrogation room with him, encouraging Hank not to tell the cops anything, reminding him that they are lying, telling Henry to spit in the officers face (Valdez 32), and then after they beat Henry to get information:

EL PACHUCO: Get up and escape, Henry...
leave reality behind
with your buenas garras...
escape through the barrio streets of your mind
through a neighborhood of memories . (33)

To associate this with Varón de los Queché and his parallel character, El Varón de Rabinal, we see a similar development after Jefe Cinco-Lluvia suggests that he might consider bringing Varón de los Queché into the clan. In the case of *Rabinal Achí* things are slightly different, the difference is that Varón de Rabinal addresses the king directly; he does not exist outside of the constructs of the play as does El Pachuco.

VARÓN DE RABINAL: Jefe Cinco-Lluvia, dame tu aprobación, ante

el cielo, ante la tierra. Mi voz dice esto: Aquí
está mi vigor, mi desnudo, que habías entregado,
que habías afirmado a mis labios, en mi cara.
Dejaré aquí, por consiguiente, mi flecha, mi escudo.
Consérvalos, pues guárdalos en su cubierta,
en su arsenal; que reposen allí: yo reposaré
también, porque cuando debíamos dormir
no había, a causa de ellos, reposo para
nosotros. (41)

Effectively, Varón de Rabinal, is resigning from the service of the king. At first glance this may appear that Varón de Rabinal refuses to allow Varón de los Queché to join their clan, to marry one of their women, ultimately to be forgiven for his crimes against the king and the Gods. Then again, as Monterde points out, at this time it was not uncommon for worthy and valiant soldiers to be offered a place in a new clan after being captured (92). If this was a common occurrence what would Varón de Rabinal's complaint be? I suggest that both El Pachuco and Varón de Rabinal understand that if their counterparts give in, if they succumb to the beatings, to the bribery, then they are in fact not admirable opponents. If they were to accept their respective deals, they would in fact not be worthy of them.

In both cases the audience, as well as the protagonists, are aware of the ominous ending waiting for them, whether it is the obsidian knife and the sacrificial stone, or the continued discrimination, the harassment in the barrio, or the gas chamber (or ultimately a heart attack). They are offered a way out that seems appealing not only to them but to the public as well. In each instance, the warrior and the pachuco, keep fighting against the inevitable history because

they know that if they do not they are not worthy to continue in it. This need to fight against the established order of things and their fate is represented by the revisionist trend in each work, and of each hero. By being in history, but refusing to be consumed by it, the men are free to criticize and rebel against it, regardless of the outcome.

Looking at the chronological make up of the two works the observation of Luis Cardoza is central to understanding the structure of the plays. He says: “Lo importante para el estilo está en el presente y eso es lo que persigue: es el presente lo que anunciará el principio, ocupándose después del pasado” (12). What Cardoza is pointing to is the remarkable fact that neither of these historical Works begins with any attempt whatsoever to transport the audience into the past, into the historical. This is demonstrated by the manner in which the works were presented. *Rabinal Achí* was performed outdoors, the town would be called together, and everyone would come. The spectators at the event knew they were going to see a public sacrifice, and that it would be on their behalf. The actors would begin by playing music and dancing for the audience and when the time was right they would begin the play. In a like fashion, both the theatrical and the film versions of *Zoot Suit*, make it very clear from the beginning that the present audience, is metatheatrically, watching a play. There is no attempt to give a sense of situational historicity by either dramatic representation or stylistic formation. *Rabinal Achí* and *Zoot Suit* aim to make the action that the public will experience relevant to them. They do not attempt to situate the importance of the events in the past. This is in accordance with the ideas of a revisionist history. That is, it is only through the present that we can understand the meaning and significance of the past. This is most appropriately demonstrated by the opening scenes of *Zoot Suit*, the film, where we see individuals (actors in the film) arriving at the theater to watch a play. We witness them take their seat, and then are presented the stage, building the illusion that we, as spectator's,

have also just arrived to watch the play. In the stage version this is also accomplished when the Pachuco announces:

PACHUCO: ... Vamos a dejarnos caer un play, ¿sabe? (Valdez 25)

He then steps out of character to address the audience, announcing to them that they will be watching a play that is based on both fact and fiction (25). Each of these examples serves to draw in the audience right away, not into the past, but into the significance of the play and the role that each of the present-day spectators plays in forming the present and past, and creating the future, not only in the play.

I would also draw your attention to the fact that both works start *in medias res*. By starting the plays in the middle of the action, the spectator is immediately committed to the plot and the characters. It is interesting to note that in both cases the plays begin with the capture of the protagonist: in *Rabinal Achí* we begin by seeing Varón de los Queché being confronted by Varón de Rabinal and his soldiers. In *Zoot Suit* the plot begins when Henry and the gang are arrested by Sgt. Smith². I argue that both works intentionally start in the middle of the action for two reasons. First, because the stories were well known to the public watching them and were, therefore used as a stylistic element to catch the audience's attention. The second, and more important reason behind the abrupt beginning, serves as an alienating effect. This effect separates the viewer from the known past, and forces him or her into a position of equal creation with the actors as the story unfolds. By getting their attention and removing them from the stable past they are familiar with, the work is then free to reconstruct the events in conjunction with the public, creating a unique and individual history for the group.

Apart from starting *in medias res*, neither play is presented in a chronological order nor does either work move the story along in a linear fashion. Instead, we are often shown the

present outcome and then have the events that lead up to it revealed to us. For example, in *Zoot Suit*, we see Henry arrested, and then, we are later told of the supposed murder. Likewise, in *Rabinal Achí*, we see the capture of Varón de los Queché, and then, we learn that he had previously kidnapped the king of the Rabinaleños. Both works seem to immediately cause us to sympathize with the underdog, the true victim, and then play with our sympathies by making us question the legitimacy of their capture and treatment. Both Plays for a moment seem to suggest that the official history could be right, but quickly turn away from the notion when they begin to uncover the rest of the story. This is done to situate the works within the historical construct that they will then question and ultimately reject. By continuously presenting the action in an inverted chronological development the official history is constantly being revised and updated to show the public how things could have been, and perhaps how we should believe that they were. The past is repeatedly shown to have brought the wrong conclusions, imprisoned the wrong man, or accused an honorable warrior of treason and set up their punishment as historically justified. We are forced to rethink our belief in history and to reevaluate what is considered historical.

Perhaps one of the strongest connections between these two works is the parallelism that ties the characters together. In the ancient Mayan tradition, everything is always presented in twos, in a balanced uniform manner. This is seen from the representations of the gods, always appearing in pairs, to the poetic language of *Rabinal Achí* and the repetition of phrases by multiple characters (Cardoza 11). In *Zoot Suit* we see this very clearly in the relationship between Henry and El Pachuco. Broyles-González has talked about their relationship showing precisely this parallel, balanced relationship:

As a theatrical device, the mythical EL Pachuco ... is Henry Reyna's doppelganger (*cuate*), his alter-ego, or super-ego, always at Reyna's side and visible and audible only to Reyna... Throughout the play, El Pachuco and Reyna are seemingly at odds. They represent the dialectical unity of opposites, united in contradiction, providing the two sides of every story, two opinions on every discussion, and two possible reactions to every action. At times El Pachuco utters what Henry is thinking and cannot express without editorializing; at other times he serves as the voice of historical experience repeatedly warning Henry not to expect justice in a society without justice. He goads Henry to do things he might not want to do, to think things he had not thought. He serves as a mirror of Henry... He embodies the voice and wisdom, of conscience, of the school of hard knocks. Henry Reyna and El Pachuco are not necessarily *separate* entities but a carefully constructed duality within one Chicana/o youth. (97-8)

Henry does not always choose to follow El Pachuco's advice, and El Pachuco is not always a voice of reason for Henry. This parallel nature allows for both individuals to grow and develop. They are there for each other, in support against the dangers that lay outside of themselves. At times El Pachuco is a voice of reason and support, at other times he is the driving force behind Henry's seemingly rash or impulsive behavior. However, neither is a complete person without the other. Perhaps the play would not function if we were to lose either character, but more importantly, we would definitely lose the invaluable insight that we gain into the mind and feeling of Henry if we did not have El Pachuco at his side.

Perhaps the parallel nature is not as evident in the characters of *Rabinal Achí*, but after seeing the connection between Henry and El Pachuco, it is easier to draw the comparison. Just like Henry and El Pachuco are at odds with one another, they are connected in their

contradictions and their internal struggle. In the Mayan drama, Varón de Rabinal and Varón de los Queché share a similar correlation. Throughout the entire first act the two warriors always appear together, it is not until Varón de los Queché is taken before Jefe Cinco-Lluvia that Varón de Rabinal leaves him. I would argue that Varón de Rabinal leaves because he does not agree with what is about to take place. I do not reference the impending sacrifice, but the fact that the king will disrespect Varón de los Queché by offering him a way out of his death. As I mentioned before when we talked about the trials, Jefe Cinco-Lluvia will offer our protagonist the opportunity to unite himself with the Rabinal clan, but in so doing Varón de los Queché would prove that he is not truly a valiant warrior, nor would he be worthy to be Varón de Rabinal's brother, even if only in his death. It is central to note the conversation where Varón de los Queché refers to the warrior of Rabinal, who has taken him captive, as his brother and asks if they cannot once again have that fraternal relationship:

VARÓN DE LOS QUECHÉ: No podríamos proceder lucidamente como
hermano mayor, como hermano menor? Te adornaría,
te decoraría con mi oro, con mi plata. (Monterde 32)

At first glance this may appear as a vain attempt on the part of Varón de los Queché to purchase his freedom by bribing Varón de Rabinal. This would not be in accordance with the character of our protagonist. I suggest that Varón de los Queché is aware of the offer that will be made to him by the king, and wishes that his brother could join him and his clan in the hills of his people. Varón de los Queché understands that his counterpart cannot let him go or join him any more than he can forsake his own pueblo and join with the Rabinaleños. The two warriors recognize in each other the honor and valor that they themselves seek to embody. In their connection they may not share the same situation or development that unites Henry and El Pachuco, but their

bond is no less real and no less important in the development of the characters and their roles in the ancient drama. If we look at the criteria that Broyles-González set for the relationship between Henry and his alter-ego we will see a similar thread connecting our Mayan soldiers. Throughout *Rabinal Achí* the men seem at odds with each other, they similarly represent the Mayan concept of duality and equilibrium in all things. Connected in their contradictions, they present both sides of the story, the varying opinions and possible reactions to their situation. They remind each other not to expect justice or mercy in a society that cannot afford either. The Varón de Rabinal serves as a mirror of Varón de los Queché, and we can only speculate that if the roles were reversed (and I am sure that the Queché clan had their similar theatrical works surrounding their own ritual sacrifices), Varón de los Queché would be acting in a similar fashion as Varón de Rabinal. The respect that these men had for one another as brothers-in-arms and later as worthy opponents is evident in the work and connects them just as Henry and El Pachuco are bound together.

It should also come as no surprise that these works that share so many similarities are also both theatrical works. Valdez could have easily chosen to write poetry or fiction to convey his feelings about the Sleepy Lagoon trial, just as *Rabinal Achí* could have followed in the tradition of the great Mayan poets popular at the same time. However, there is a great strength that comes from the social nature of theater that is difficult to match with any other art form with regard to bringing the people together. Diana Taylor has noted that “performance as spectacle creates a network of relations in which social arrangements, hierarchies, and values are made visible” (365). This is particularly noticeable when we consider *Rabinal Achí*:

In the massive performances held around the temples, individuals saw their relationship to earthly and divine powers. These social actors, priests, victims, participants, were all

invested in the system of norms and beliefs that governed social practice. It is only within this network that people could function and form a sense of identity. The generalized fasting, abstinence, bloodletting, and staying awake for nights on end, for example, induced an altered state of consciousness in members of the population, and made them active participants in the struggle to assure the continuation of the world. The network, held together by shared beliefs, expanded throughout enormous stretches of the Americas by means of synchronized ceremonies and observances. (Taylor 365-66)

As Taylor points out, the theater creates a network where individuals could function and form a sense of identity in the whole. Both *Rabinal Achí* and *Zoot Suit* are prime examples of the individual searching for a sense of identity within a larger community. Each work served to bring together both those who could sympathize with and those who would be responsible for the plight of our characters. Through the medium of the stage, the authors were able to create works that make the audience, as Taylor said, “active participants in the struggle to assure the continuation of the world” (366).

It becomes clear that *Zoot Suit* and *Rabinal Achí* attempt to restructure and revise; they allow us to shed new light on historical events where little was or is known, or where there was only one official story. Through the constant theme of revisionism, as well as a parallel development of both characters and plot, these two works shadow each other, eventually reaching a common climactic ending of human sacrifice. I suggest that one of the principal elements running through these plays is the ambivalent nature towards the official history and the individual personal experience. Juan-Navarro has pointed out regarding Hispanic literature:

Faced with the chaos that dominates the contemporary reality of the Americas, they construct systems of order and symmetry within their works, while simultaneously

revealing through them the arbitrary and provisional nature of these systems. These authors present the constructions of reality that regulate our daily experience in all their contingency, and thus question the legitimacy of the hegemonic cultural forms that we accept as natural. (261)

The authors of both works created characters and placed them securely within a societal system that reflected perfectly the daily life of the viewer. They created a work that would be readily identifiable and legitimate to the audience. The authors then placed within this natural, real world construct characters with the ability to question, confront, alter, or even destroy the very historical system that they so perfectly represent. These works mirror each other very closely in the driving force of revisionism, presenting to us men of honor, valor, worthy of our admiration, trapped within a hegemonic culture that has controlled and silenced these individuals for too long. The protagonists find themselves raging against a system, seemingly impervious to the fact that they will indeed die, that there is nothing they can do to alter their fateful end. The audience is then left, as Juan-Navarro states, to continue questioning the “hegemonic culture,” the official world view of history that the heroes began. This dual revisionism, that calls into question the very existence of the natural sense of these works, that allows the spectator to relate with and recognize a familiar reality, is in fact the most powerful force that these works share. It is the common bond that allows us to make all other connections between the plays, to see the relevance that they present to the past, present, and future reader.

In conclusion allow me to quote Luis Cardoza y Aragón when he said “*El Rabinal Achí*, es, en cierto modo, una obra de la Resistencia contra el ocupante, contra el conquistador” (xiv), and this could equally be said of *Zoot Suit*. These Works mirror each other in a parallel development establishing and revising the story in one dramatic scene after another. From the

similarities between the implementation of ritual dress, specialized language, music and dance we can draw close comparisons between the importance of the individual and her or his place in society. Looking at the trials, the structure of the plays, and the dualism in the main characters we see shared themes that reflect the common problems faced by both works and how they fought to overcome them regardless of the time that separates them. In an overarching look at the works the revisionisms apparent in the dramas become the driving force behind the development of both characters and plot. Walter Benjamin has said that we cannot imagine, or allow ourselves to speculate about “redemption *in* history, but only *from* history” (Kittsteiner 187). It is through the implementation of revisionist themes and motifs that *Zoot Suit* and *Rabinal Achí* have formed a bond in which the characters have demonstrated this need to be freed from history and have shown that the only way to do this is through a revisionist shift away from the official histories towards a more inclusive and individualized retelling of their stories.

Notes

¹ I would like to quickly mention here the female characters in both of these dramas even though this is a concept that deserves its own study. It is important to note that in both plays there are woman figures central to the plays that have imperative roles surrounding the court scenes. In *Zoot Suit* we have both Della and Alice who fight for Henry and try to help him. They are both in love with him, and he with them. This love triangle has been criticized, especially the portrayal of Alice as a “white” savior figure. However, when we take into consideration *Rabinal Achí* and the role of Ixok-Mun who represents Varón de los Queché’s interests in the court, perhaps the severe criticism of a woman coming to the aid of our protagonists is not warranted. In *Rabinal Achí*, Ixok-Mun is the only female character to have a speaking role (because of this it has been suggested that the role was actually played by a man, I however do not agree with this assumption, because she is costumed and characterized throughout the play as a woman). She would have represented the strong, valiant, and intelligent women of the tribe. It would have been disrespectful to Varón de los Queché, and demeaning to the Rabinal tribe to represent it in any other way. It is important to note however that it is not Ixok-Mun who is offered to Varón de los Queché as a marriage prospect. Comparing this important role to the women in *Zoot Suit*, Alice would be representative of an excellent parallel for Ixok-Mun the “lawyer” volunteering to help our Queché/Chicano captive. Both women were portrayed as intelligent, independent, and strong. Both fought for the underdog, and the repressed. We can also look at the characters of the Princess and Della as comparable roles. Della loved Henry, and planned on marrying him when he got back from the war. The Princess would have been honored to be married to such a warrior as Varón de los Queché. In *Zoot Suit*, Della tries to help Henry by testifying in court, and then waits for him to get out of jail, but makes it very clear that she will not wait for him if

he is entertaining the thought of a relationship with Alice. In a similar fashion Madre de las plumas, another princess, is willing to marry Varón de los Queché to help him avoid having his heart cut out. It is significant that the last thing that Varón de los Queché does before turning himself over and demanding to be sacrificed is dance with the princess.

The role of the women in these two dramas is not only parallel, but a very significant representation of another oppressed and underrepresented character in theater and society. By using central women character in each of these works, the authors are able to give a voice to the historically marginalized group. It is a worthy study to look closer at the roles that these women play in the dramas, and how they add to the new histories proposed by the revisionist themes.

² Both plays actually start with dance scenes, but the confrontations in both cases seem to propel the plot into action.

CONCLUSION

History warns us that it is the customary fate of new truths
to begin as heresies and to end up as superstitions.

-Tomas Huxley

A young Latino man dressed in the long coat and chain of a zoot suit, and a young Mayan warrior dressed to the hilt and ready for battle may not appear to have very much in common at first glance, when in reality the two are connected by a tie covering several hundred years, crossing national borders, and bridging cultural change to unite these two individuals within a parallel existence. In closing this study I will review quickly the concepts of historical revisionism and look at what we have found with regards to *Rabinal Achí* and *Zoot Suit*. As Fernando Aínsa has said: “no modificamos la realidad, pero sabemos transfigurarla en el Teatro de las palabras” (81).

History is science, and art. The powerful have always been the ones who determine what the official history will be and generally institute a history sympathetic to their ideology (and desire for power). Art has often been implemented to tell the unrepresented, oppressed, and silenced story of history. Chief among the genres questioning an official history is theater, due to its direct contact with the people and its inherent social nature which gives it a heightened ability to confront the past and allow for a reformulation in the future. This is the basis for a revisionist theory of history. Historical revisionism calls into question a biased, domineering history. It is the story of the individual and his experience and perception of the world in which he lives. Tosh explains revisionism by reminding us that “new facts continue to be added to the body of historical knowledge, while at the same time the credentials of the established facts are subject to constant reassessments” (157). This tendency towards a historical revisionism is found abundantly in Latin-American literature.

The Plays *Rabinal Achí* and *Zoot Suit* are perfect examples of historical revisionism at work. Both of these works represent historical situations with a modern and critical eye, attempting to go beyond the official history surrounding the event. As Greg Dening writes:

“Presenting the Past' will always imply bringing the past and present together. It will also imply that the past will not be replicated or repeated, but represented, shaped, staged, performed in some way other than it originally existed” (372). These words ring true in these two fascinating dramas. By presenting the past, these authors are reshaping the events and reformulating the present opinion of those events. We have seen how both works as artistic products are examples of revisionism at work. From the questionable translation and production history of *Rabinal Achí* to the several revisions that *Zoot Suit* underwent, both works are examples of the power of a historicizing machine and the difficulty that a marginalized work faces in widespread social distribution.

Through linking the common social elements of religion, ceremonial dress, and music, the works are taken out of a strictly historical setting and revitalized as pertinent to the modern spectator. Both works aim to show a connection with the current viewer regardless of the time in which it is presented. We have found that these works are much more than just simple representations of actual events. They are not merely stories of underdog individuals being pursued and persecuted by those in power. We see that these plays are parallel tales of subversive reassessment, retelling history and formulating what could have been for an audience inundated by the propaganda of the official story. We have learned that the stylistic representation of these plays is developed in a similar fashion, facilitating the revisionist themes. The chronological structure lends itself to questioning established events and forces spectators to make decisions for themselves. The characterization seems to be an archetype of revisionism, creating dualities in the major characters within the respective works and parallels between protagonists in both works which show the individual condemned by history to die, but reborn to

produce a change in the people and to give voice, through their own experiences and sufferings, to the individual stories silenced by history.

With a revisionist reading of these plays we are given an insight into the characters and the stories, and we see that these plays are much more than a representation of oppression. Applying revisionist theories to these works shows us that, as Brecht has mentioned, “one thing has become quite plain: the present-day world can only be described to present-day people if it is described as capable of transformation. People of the present-day value questions on account of their answers. They are interested in events and situations in face of which they can do something” (274). These works were not meant merely for theatrical enjoyment; they presented real-world situations, disguised as the historical past, to represent conditions and issues facing members of the audience.

When comparing these plays through a revisionist lens the bonds between them become apparent and significant to our study. The common implementation of subversive language can be seen as more than just stylistic decisions on the part of socially adept playwrights. It is an intellectual rebellion against the oppression that had silenced the individual voice for so long. The trials can be seen as mirror representations of an attempt by those in power to subjugate and silence the members of the lower classes who have found a means of expression and no longer bow to the authority of established history, whether it be through bribery, intimidation, or physical violence. The characters themselves become connected through the hundreds of years separating them as examples of revisionist forces confronting, questioning, and reestablishing the histories saved by society.

Ultimately, *Rabinal Achí* and *Zoot Suit* are connected by bonds that allow us to understand them more fully and value the influence that they have had on the societies within

which they are situated. This paper has suggested only a few of the possible connections between these works and only a small number of the revisionist elements. The role of women in both works as revising forces is only one of the many topics that still need to be discussed. The greatest influence that revisionist history has had on both of these works, is the manner in which it revitalizes the plays, in their corresponding timeframe, and securely situates the works as unique representations of the voiceless and the oppressed. The dramatic representations of these men and their situations have shown a need to question established norms and official histories. These works serve as living testaments to Octavio Paz's profound statement, which sums up the need and the strength of the revisionist argument: "El hombre, me parece, no está en la historia, es la historia" (28).

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