

On Strike and On Stage: Migration, Mobilization, and the Cultural Work of El Teatro Campesino

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***Abstract:** This essay looks at the role of labor activism through the cultural work of El Teatro Campesino, the theater company that emerged from the farmworkers' strike led by Cesar Chavez in Delano, California, during the mid-1960s. Through make-shift performances along the picket line, the farmworkers and their creative visionary, Luis Valdez, innovated Chicano/a performance and created an activist aesthetic that has continued to influence Chicano/a performance and art. Their productions, which started as small improvisational acts, drew from a wealth of transnational influences as well as from a larger proletariat and activist theater tradition. However, El Teatro Campesino adapted these techniques to their local resources. The result created a unique forum that enabled promotional education about unions and workers' rights to exist side-by-side with themes of self-reflection and criticism concerning the risks of identity politics. The essay explores the methods by which El Teatro Campesino questioned and critiqued ethnic identity and argues for a more complex approach to their earlier picket-line entertainment. It proceeds to consider the importance of cultural production for labor mobilization, and argues for a more integrated analysis of the relationship between activism and art.*

***Keywords:** Chicano/a studies, performance, labor studies, transnationalism, Global South, multi-culturalism, identity politics, ethnic studies, hemispheric studies*

In 1965, in the midst of the farmworkers strike led by César Chávez in Delano, California, El Teatro Campesino (ETC) emerged as a cultural response to a political struggle.¹ The six thousand farmworkers, or *campesinos*, who stood the picket line also represented many others who faced insecure seasonal work; degrading pay that was often stolen by labor contractors; inhumane living conditions; and barriers of language and immigrant status that left them vulnerable within “America’s most exploitative industry” (qtd. in Elam 41). The theater group’s founder, Luis Valdez, combined his education in experimental drama with his desire to participate in the strike against the oppressive agricultural labor conditions that he witnessed in his community. The ETC’s cultural resistance to mainstream theater merged with the political platform of the strike: Valdez organized performances that enacted the public denouncement of ranchers and “irresponsible legislators” that he wrote into his 1966 political manifesto “The Plan of Delano.” Valdez verbalized the sentiment of Cesar Chavez’s organizational methods: “PLAN for the liberation of the Farm Workers associated with the Delano Grape Strike in California, seeking social justice in farm labor with those reforms that they believe necessary for their well-being as workers in the United States”². Valdez paralleled the migratory ritual of labor with the religious ritual of a pilgrimage, claiming that “[t]he Pilgrimage we make symbolizes the long historical road we have traveled in this valley” (63-64). In doing so, he made a poetic gesture that sutures labor to the identity of the participants, and insisted that it is just as essential as one’s spirituality. Throughout the manifesto Valdez painted a rhetorical vision to show how the exploitation of the worker affected the community on a spiritual level. With capitalized phrases such as “GOD SHALL NOT ABANDON US” and “WE SHALL OVERCOME,” Valdez located civil rights at a level deeper than the protection of the body of the striker; it also involved the soul of both the worker and the community.

The participants in the Delano strike shared in Valdez’s vision of the inextricable bond between culture and work. Just as the workers migrated and mobilized, so did their theater. ETC toured the migrant workers’ camps and picket lines performing short, entertaining sketches called *actos* that encouraged community involvement and dramatized worker injustice. Of-

1 The Delano grape strike in September 1965 involved, alongside Chávez, the National Farm Workers Association and the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee.

2 See Chávez, César and Luis Valdez, “Plan of Delano.”

ten *actos* were improvised on top of flatbed trucks and involved heavily stereotyped stock characters such as “*Patron*” and “*Campesino*.” ETC created a moveable theater for a migrant workforce and—despite its modest and ephemeral quality—its legacy constitutes an important component of Chicano/a cultural history. As Jorge Huerta argues, “I believe that all theatrical activity of Chicanas and Chicanos today [...] owes its existence, directly or indirectly, to the Teatro Campesino” (239). Huerta joins other critics in recognizing ETC’s impact on building community and forming cultural identity, even though many of those critics, including Huerta, have argued that the early *actos* could be reduced to a simple message: “‘join the Union’” (Huerta 245). For example, Harry J. Elam Jr. depreciates the *actos* as an expression of Chicano/a nationalism that “often reinforced notions of essentialized homogenous [...] Chicano identities” (Elam Jr. 29).

This essay challenges both Huerta’s instrumentalist and Elam’s nationalist interpretations of the *actos*. By contrast, I concentrate on how labor politics and worker solidarity disrupted representations of ethnic unity. Here, the concept of “community” encompasses everyone in the worker camps: not only Chicano/a migrant workers but also multiple other ethnicities such as Filipinos, Japanese, and Mexicans, women and children, and educated leaders such as Valdez. Rather than solely focusing on how ETC created a map of Chicano/a nationalist identity, this essay focuses on another map: one that connects their cultural work to global labor movements. Through an analysis of ETC’s early performances—specifically *Las dos caras del patroncito* (*The Two Faces of the Boss*; first performed in 1965) and *Los vendidos* (*The Sell-Outs*; first performed in 1967)—I argue that the messages these *actos* produced were more complicated than critics have claimed. This essay looks at how the strike and the aesthetic choices made on the picket line innovated new forms of cultural expression.

Theater performances did not lead directly to political action; rather, they created a culture of work where artistic expression reflected an experience that had been determined by labor and class. In *Hard Work: Remaking the American Labor Movement*, Rick Fantasia and Kim Voss refer to American labor as “an exceptionally hostile terrain” (34) for worker solidarity because it is “difficult to attain union membership in the United States...and once union membership is attained it must be constantly defended against aggressive employer opposition” (20). Fantasia and Voss join labor critics who acknowledge that the U.S. collective bargaining practice often fails workers. As labor historian Nelson Lichtenstein argues, this “makes neces-

sary the creative rediscovery of organizing strategies” beyond conventional legal approaches.³ In California, the workers faced not only racial hostility that determined union exclusion, but also further marginalization as agricultural workers. In the Plan of Delano, Valdez refers to “the rancher’s argument that the plight of the Farm Worker was a ‘special case’” (Chávez and Valdez 64), which meant that the government felt it could compromise the workers’ access to full recognition of citizenship because of their status as ethnic others and (possibly) foreigners. As many labor scholars have noted, the institutionalized racism and increasingly conservative politics of organized labor throughout the twentieth century in the United States led to alternative structures of labor organization.⁴ Fantasia and Voss note how “social movement unionists have focused instead on attempting to build unions as organizational vehicles of social solidarity” (127) that prepare workers to resist oppression in the workplace as well as in other aspects of society with no direct connection to labor, such as citizenship and ethnicity. In other words, being of Mexican descent had nothing to do with the physical act of grape-picking, yet ethnicity became associated with certain labor functions and thus gave reason for xenophobic Americans to assume that all people of Mexican descent were illegal migrants.

ETC developed as an early precursor for social movement unionism. It exemplifies how the worker-centered style of cultural activism--presently the most successful improvement to mobilization within the United States--is part of a historical continuum. Groups like ETC offered marginalized workers a means to process and communicate the oppressive labor conditions under which they lived. ETC’s cultural work, as a communal process and a constant struggle, opened up spaces for social movement activism and helped to bolster the importance of bringing art into the workplace for those who did not have the luxury of considering art and work as separate entities in their lives. As Randy J. Ontiveros argues in *In the Spirit of a New People: The Cultural Politics of the Chicano Movement*, “The members of El Teatro Campesino rejected this ideological divide and instead with their audience drew active parallels between commodity labor and creative labor” (146). Ontiveros views the commodity-creative labor platform as an origin point for a Chicano/a sensibility that eventually left labor behind for other social and artistic pursuits. While I agree with this model of Chicano/a cultural de-

3 For more on labor relations and alternative organizational methods see Lichtenstein, Clawson, and Fine.

4 Ibid. See also Fantasia and Voss.

velopment, I am suspicious of the suggestion that labor dropped completely from the picture. Even if content shifted over time, the aesthetic forms generated during the strike developed a style that continued to impact theatrical productions. This style connected labor injustice to other injustices in the lives of the community members—an oppressive “*Patron*” could be a ranchero, a professor, a fellow Chicano/a, or even the state of California.

In their *actos*, ETC critiqued a labor system that depended on stereotyped identities to oppress others. Therefore, while they used their Chicano/a identity as a tool of solidarity, their productions also represented cultural and ideological differences. This challenged the monolithic vision of the migrant worker: stereotypes were mocked and deconstructed on stage, even if it meant showing the cracks in ethnic solidarity. ETC recognized that ethnic identity is necessary for political action, and Valdez even referred to Chicano theater as “a theater that is particularly our own, not another imitation of the *gabacho*” (foreigner or Anglo) (Valdez 7, my emphasis). Yet in the *actos* divergent voices on stage presented debate, rather than a collective didactic statement. The relationship between labor and identity performance in ETC’s productions deserves further critical attention beyond the existing emphasis on ethnic solidarity; hence, this essay views ETC from the perspective of the working body as well as the acting body.

A Hemispheric Approach, a Global Aesthetic

The migrant work force at the center of ETC embodied the transnational labor of “Americanity,”⁵ as they were (and still are) in constant negotiations with national, linguistic, and cultural borders, as well as a constant struggle for *el jale* (work). Performance and theater provides a passageway to understand how systems of production (whether it be labor, theater, or identity) are set within a porous global network of exchange. As Diana Taylor notes, “Decentering a U.S. America for a hemispheric Americas seems urgent and overdue. This remapping would also show histories and trajectories omitted from earlier maps; we could include the routes made through specific migrations by exploring embodied performances such as the *pastorela*, *moros y cristianos*, *carpa*, and other performances” (Taylor 277). Taylor asks us to look at migration through the imprints of theatrical processes; I would ex-

5 For more on “Americanity” and the hemispheric relationship between ethnicity and labor, see Wallerstein and Quijano, and Saldívar.

tend this further to add the global history of radical theater technique based on the labor issues that informed the Teatro's methodology and aesthetic. Theater acted—and still acts—as a conduit to other cultures that shared similar ideals: a performativity of connectedness. To admit a political inspiration from places such as the Soviet Union would have been dangerous and polarizing; to share theatrical and artistic techniques, such as a migratory theater that educated and rallied workers to the cause, was a softer, more subversive approach.

ETC may be a point of origin for Chicano/a performance, but the group's method of combining political issues with theater fits within an extended tradition dating back (at least) to 1919, when Soviet revolutionaries in Russia founded a movement to communicate the news through public dramatizations that disseminated information (and propaganda) quickly and efficiently.⁶ This evolved into "The Blue Blouse" Theater, so named for their blue shirts worn in solidarity with the factory workers for whom the actors performed. The theater blended its political messages with theatrical technique: avant-garde expressions, miming, dancing, visual effects. As John W. Casson notes, "The idea of dramatizing the day's news meant that actors could not prepare the drama but had to be spontaneous" (Casson 110). This created ephemeral and slapdash performances that dismantled the conventional impression of theater as a bourgeois institution. The Blue Blouse aesthetic crossed over to the United States in the 1930s as an influential model for the Living Newspapers, one of the art initiatives of the Works Progress Administration. The Federal Theater Project hired actors to perform sketches that explicated major social issues and government policies. Huerta cites the Living Newspaper among the eclectic array of transnational expressive forms that Valdez drew on for his most famous play, *Zoot Suit* (1979), and its ephemeral style influenced the migratory theater on the picket lines. Other influences included the Mexican/Southwestern *carpas* (tent plays) and *corridos* (border ballads). This eclectic array of sources evinces how ETC practiced a truly global theater.

These various theatrical and other expressive traditions had no distinct hierarchy within ETC's aesthetic, which was as much a product of local environmental factors as of the aforementioned global theatrical influences. The structure of the picket line and labor camps required mobility, improvi-

6 See Casson.

sation, and encouraged audience participation that pushed for innovations in performance. ETC contributes to a more global vision than the dominant Eurocentric historical view of avant-garde theater. Performance studies scholar James M. Harding sees global avant-garde traditions as “not of *derivative*, but of *independent* parallels” to the European avant-garde tradition (Harding 28). Decentering Europe allows for a more balanced history of theatrical practice that resists the standard critical view of Western colonization of art across the Americas and privileges theater as a site of political resistance. The Blue Blouse Theater, the FTP’s Living Newspapers, and ETC share performance techniques that were developed to promote social improvement through labor reform, and where the need to migrate to their audiences under tight budgets influenced their methodology and style. Within the U.S., they aligned with another activist tradition of bringing literacy and culture into the workplace. Since many of these constituents did not have traditional engagements with the written word, activist culturists had to bend their method of communication. Examples include the Free Southern Theater’s performances in churches and cotton fields in rural Mississippi, and the *lectores* (readers) who read both newspapers and works of fiction aloud to the Cuban cigarworkers in the factories of Florida. These locations of alternative literacy were important extensions of social justice and labor reform movements because they helped fortify community bonds through cultural participation. As if to counteract the dehumanizing process of menial labor, art held the possibility of re-humanizing and politicizing the worker.

Luis Valdez’s personal relationship with European-influenced modes of drama, such as the San Francisco Mime Troupe, created an aesthetic dialogue with the local materials he encountered on the picket line and in the work camps. He referred to Brecht and avant-garde drama to inform his dramatic vision, especially concepts of improvisation, audience ownership and involvement, displacement of the script and dramatist, and the emphasis on ritual practices. However, the elements within the worker-camp environment pushed his vision to an unexpected degree. Valdez explained how certain challenges with the participants helped to develop the form of the plays: “I wrote a play for the farm workers that were in the Teatro at the time. It was maybe a two or three page sketch, an *acto*. And I handed it out and the *campesinos* grabbed it and they could barely read it. They could barely read it...So I took all the pages away from them and I said okay no

more script, we're just going to improvise.”⁷ Valdez then described how he would sketch outlines of action with the farmworkers, and how “that developed a collective style for us.” This rapid style not only facilitated production of the *actos* but also instilled the farm worker with agency in the creative process, since he had to improvise and develop characters on the go. In her chapter on ETC, Yolanda Broyles-Gonzalez describes a scene that sounds very much like Brecht’s vision of theater: “There was virtually no artistic direction of labor into playwright, director, set designer, sage designer, and so on. And although Luis Valdez held the title of ‘director,’ he was more typically taking direction from the others than giving it” (224). The collective work of union formation and the ideals of a participatory utopian society framed the workers’ communal approach to theater production. They already had the information necessary to create the organic, participatory theater experience that Valdez desired, and which Brecht had developed into theory as early as 1930.⁸

Reading ETC’s performance methodology in tandem with theories that stem from a Western tradition can highlight differences in perception. For instance, if we consider the *campesinos*’ rejection of scripts in terms of mime, an often-neglected aspect of Valdez’s background, we find a similar methodology that refutes language in favor of bodily expression. Applying the concept of post-lingual expression to ETC amends Valdez’s narrative that the farmworkers’ illiteracy was the sole reason for the improvisational method. A revisionist view unearths a new approach: that both the farmworkers’ and Valdez’s rejection of the script also acknowledge the inadequacy of language as the best means of communication. The body takes priority over the voice, and thus the performance reflects the importance of the body as a medium of expression. Performance provided not only a quick and easy mode of communicating to many people at once, but also it made space for the body’s visibility as a way to resist the social invisibility of the migrant worker. In the spontaneity of improvisation, words are transitory and less important than the embodiment of a character, as evident

7 From “Necessary Theater: Luis Valdez” (1998), an interview with Jorge Huerta.

8 For more details on Brecht’s approach to theater, see Brecht (1957) and especially “A Short Organum for the Theater,” the essay where Brecht outlines theories of performance that existed organically within ETC. Brecht argues that the practice of dissociating the actor and his role, which he termed the “alienation effect,” engaged the critical eye of the audience: “A representation that alienated is one which allows us to recognize its subject, but at the same time make it seem unfamiliar... designed to free socially-conditioned phenomena from that stamp of familiarity that protects them today” (192).

through Valdez's lack of master scripts. For example, in *Las dos caras* Valdez directed actors to convey the character of "Patroncito" through tone, stance and expression; the farmworker performed a stereotype—a universal boss figure—rather than a specific person. The actors also lent personal experiences to their improvisation, so that the stage drama paralleled the social drama of the picket line.

ETC's transcendence of language was also more conducive to a community rapidly generating new languages. The performance reflected the spontaneous confluences of Spanish, English, *caló*, and other regional inflections that composed a *jale* dialect—a means of multilingual communication specific to the workplace. The language of the *actos* is an expression of Chicano/a identity insofar as it shows an infusion of Spanish (and perhaps other indigenous languages or Tagalog) into the English language. However, it is a dialect specific to labor, and many of the words and pronunciations in the performances would have been unintelligible to other Spanish speakers outside of the community. Expressions of identity migrated between ethnicity, class, and political ideology, all defined under the elusive title of *campesino*. Moreover, each *acto* changed according to the actors as well as the audience demographic of the camp/community and replicated the migratory nature of their lives by continuously reshaping performances. Critics such as Broyles-Gonzales, Huerta, and Ontiveros have noted the difficulty in writing about these performances that were never the same twice and thus can never be accurately recorded as *the acto*. It is a challenge to apply critical discourse to ephemeral performance given the role of collective authorship and improvisation. Yet critics must meet the challenge in order to fully explore the impact of groups such as ETC that have expressed themselves artistically through unrecorded means.

Between Reality and the Stage:

Stock Characters and Ethnic Stereotypes

The *campesino* faced what Valdez referred to as the "special case" that dehumanized the worker and compromised basic workers' rights, such as a labor contract. The *Patroncito* in *Las dos caras* articulates this "special case" with reductive generalization such as "All my Mexicans love to ride in trucks" (19). Since the workers have been provided with free housing and transportation and supposedly need so little to get by, they can be denied the right to organize: "You got it good!" (21). The *actos* represented how

oppressive workplaces made real humans into stock characters without individuality--what *Patroncito* refers to as “my Mexicans” (19). As labor and ethnic identity were simultaneously imposed on to the body of the worker, so were they critiqued together in the *actos*. In *Quinta Temporada* (1966), characters such as “Spring” and “Churches” symbolize important factions of *campesino* life, while in other plays the audience was meant to interpret a character as emblematic of anybody within a particular locality, even to the point where the characters would wear signs around their necks signifying their roles. The sign communicates to the audience that the character “*Campesino*” should represent the multitude of farmworkers while “*Patron*” should symbolize the many types and forms of oppressive landowners. Primarily, this kind of profiling—in the fields and on stage—sutures together one’s ethnic identity and labor role. However, performance’s artificial environment highlighted the unnaturalness of this assignation.⁹ The performances on the picket line experimented with these oppressive relationships and larger social issues through comedy and debate. The body of the *campesino* on stage gained the agency lost through real-life exploitation in the fields; the actor could manipulate and even laugh at the stereotypes that oppressed him. Beyond the humor, the actor embodied the means by which the larger collective body (the union) could also obtain agency for social change.

The stock characters in *Las dos caras* show this process in action. The character of *Patroncito*, a land-owning farmer, berates the young Mexican worker, continuously calling him “boy,” micromanaging his actions, and even patronizing him with hollow gestures of friendship. The *Patroncito* and the *Campesino* both would have been played by farmworkers, so for the sake of differentiation, the *Patroncito* wears a pig mask—an easily removable signifier. The body of the *campesino* beneath the *Patroncito*’s mask destabilizes the oppressor’s identity as the audience perceives him as a role to be performed—not only with masks but also other signifiers of his power. The performative aspect in the stage directions of the *Patroncito*’s entrance, “*driving an imaginary limousine, making the roaring sound of the motor*” (18), imbues his performance with a hyper-artificiality, where the dialogue he speaks can then also be rendered as performed lies. Valdez claimed the *acto* was written as a response to the “*phoney ‘scary’ front of the ranchers*”

9 See note 8 for Brecht’s explication of this dissociation between performer and character.

(17). ETC used humor to mitigate fear of the ranchers: the pig mask and imaginary limousine provide kitsch props to represent symbols of power. Moreover, when the *Patroncito* demands that the *Campesino* character speaks English, the migrant-worker audience would have been aware that the person behind the mask has the ability to understand Spanish, thus amplifying that English is here a performative language of power—language itself becomes a prop or costume. Without the funds for elaborate staging, the feeble costumes and cheap props barely mask the performer in his role. Having a *campesino* playing the part of a rancher would expose how the real rancher's power relies on a group of symbols that are as easy to remove as a mask—which is exactly what happens next.

The *Patroncito* feels the pressures of being a capitalist boss and desires what he views as the carefree life of the farmworker: “Sometimes I sit up in my office and think to myself: I wish I was a Mexican” (23). In the surrealist world of the play, the two characters proceed to change clothes and roles. They exchange the props that perform their positions of power(lessness): the *Patroncito* gives the farmworker his cigar and whip while taking the farmworker's hat and shears. The previously oppressed worker begins to turn on his own boss, subjecting him to the same oppressive language and abusive working conditions. By the conclusion, the *Patroncito* exclaims, “You know, that damn Cesar Chávez is right” and cries, “Where's those damn union organizers!” (20-1). The *acto* uses different influences from avant-garde theater and *commedia dell'arte*, such as stock characters, masks, and surrealism, as a means to enact what seems absurd: that one could change the hierarchy of power with the ease of exchanging a mask. The Anglo patron can easily become an oppressed farmworker simply by wearing the sign that reads “CAMPESINO.” The changing of the costume and subsequent identity reversal destabilize the means by which the body is assigned a role in performance. The audience can then extend the scene to the larger social processes to which the characters correlate. The result is that the *acto* can then also question the method by which society assigns the individual body restrictive roles, such as “Chicano/a” or “farmworker.” Beyond this, the *acto* opens up possibilities for the audience to conceive a future where individuals are no longer defined by limited labor and ethnic roles. A new warning (or moral) emerges from *Las dos caras* beyond the instrumental imperative to “join the Union.” By suggesting that the roles of oppressed and oppressor are interchangeable, audiences and performers alike are encouraged to consider whether social change is more complicated

than taking down the boss. Indeed, both the farmworker and the *patron* are players within the larger capitalist system, and the *acto* remains ambiguous on whether or not the farmworker is victorious, or whether he continues to be imprisoned by the cycle of oppression.

Through a mockery of all components of the capitalist exploitative system, the *actos* employ a degree of *relajo*, a word roughly translated as an uproarious *mêlée*, a “‘negative’ form of expression in that it’s a declaration against, never for, a position” (Taylor 129).¹⁰ Many of the *actos* within the Teatro’s repertoire stand for worker mobilization while leaning toward the elements of *relajo* that equalize all facets in the capitalist system—from the worker, to the contractor, to the boss, to the state—in a mockery of the establishment as a *whole*. A detailed reading of how all the early *actos* used a *relajo* aesthetic through layers of ethical and ethnic ambiguity to convey the complexity of the movement would be impossible, but a brief mention of a few *actos* will detail ETC’s methodology.

Quinta Temporada further complicated reductive notions of solidarity through the character Don Coyote, the labor contractor or middleman, who exploits the workers for the rancher. Yet he is also a target of abuse and oppression by the patron because of his shared ethnic identity with the workers. As such, he is “*one of the most hated figures in the entire structure of agri-business*” (italics in original, 28), and his character exemplifies how ETC subversively challenged systemic capitalism beneath the surface of their more overt critique of the patron. Don Coyote steals from the *Campesino* and exploits him in the name of the boss, yet in the face of Winter (a character conceptualizing the hardships of the off-season), the contractor shares the same fear of poverty and suffering as the *Campesino*. Don Coyote turns to the *Campesino*, exclaiming, “*Lío es lío, yo soy tu tío, grillo*” (“A problem’s a problem, I am your uncle, you cricket”) (32). The “problem” is not only the exploitation of the farmworkers, but also the familial relationship the workers have to the farm labor contractor: the oppressed worker in the *acto* is literally related to the oppressor, alluding to how immigrant groups often extended familial ties based on ethnic or nationalist relationships. As seen in *Las dos caras*, the capitalist system in all its complexity compromised a utopian vision of ethnic nationalism and solidarity: the audience had to process the paradox of the Chicano contrac-

10 Taylor also defines *relajo* as “an act of disidentification insofar as it rejects any given categorization without pronouncing or owning another” (129). See Taylor for further discussion.

tor who belonged to neither “us” nor “them” in the strike. The *acto* does not conclude with an obvious call to organized labor; rather, it suggests to the audience that every “character” in the system—worker, contractor, boss, even the church—is subject to the seasonal cycle of agriculture and the crests and troughs of capitalism.

ETC walked a careful line in their critiques of ethnic solidarity, considering the power of cultural ties in worker mobilization. After all, ethnic identity was (and is) central to political empowerment. Yet, for every overt “join the Union” message in their *actos*, ETC provided ambiguous characters and scenes that invited further reflection on the system as a whole. In the 1970 *acto* titled *Huegalistas (Strikers)*, the Coyote character returns as one of the enemies of the *campesinos*. ETC labeled the strikers in the *acto* as *Campesino Filipino*, *Campesino Mexicano*, and *Campesino Tejano* in order to demonstrate their commitment to diversity across ethnic and cultural lines. They even included a woman: *Campesina Casada* (Married Farmworker). The workers band together (“se fajan”) as “hombres de la raza” (men of the race) (Valdez 96), yet the meaning of *la raza* expands since during the *acto* the *campesinos* embrace non-Chicanos/as even as they exile one of their own: Coyote. The fact that the *acto* includes a woman challenges the use of “hombres” as well. The *huegalistas* shout “hombres de la raza” but the visual representation on stage at the performance suggested open membership to workers from different ethnicities, nationalities and genders.

Ethnic unity is also challenged in another *acto*, *The Militants* (1969). However, rather than a separation of labor roles into contractor and farmworker, the two militant Chicanos are separated through their ideological differences. The militants have been invited to lecture at the University of California about the social movement of the strike, but the “gabacho” (“Anglo”) professor cannot tell them apart and refers to them as Chicano #1 and Chicano #2. Their differing degrees of militancy incite an argument that ends in a deadly duel. The search for an authentic Chicano ideology is mocked: when the facilitator asks “Will the real militant Ben Dejo [pendejo = idiot] please rise?,” the stage direction notes that “Both rise” (92). The fight turns into a masculine competition over who is more radical and more violent, with one of the Chicanos claiming, “I know what it takes: a good pair of...bigotes! [mustaches] [...] Vivan los bigotes!,” while the other replies, “What bigotes, ese, you can’t even grow one!” (94). Their hyper-competitive dialogue reduces the movement to props and costumes:

bigotes, *camisas*, *huaraches*, and guns. The ETC presented a complicated moral to their audiences, since the debate between the two Chicanos represented different degrees of militancy that would have appealed to a variety of members involved in the movement. However, as with the other *actos*, *The Militants* warns against reducing the movement into masculine stereotypes as the competition for authenticity distracts from the movement's goals. Rather than mobilizing their audiences, the two Chicanos end up dead on stage.

Many of the *actos* within the Teatro's repertoire stand for worker mobilization and use the elements of *relajo*—ambiguity and self-criticism—to frame the context where even the strongest advocate for *la raza* (such as the militant) bears the guilt of reducing individuals to stock characters. The *actos* oscillated between ethnic pride as a means of organizing and continuously being critical of that very action. This dialectic structure provides a deeper, more multi-faceted component to conventional definitions of protest art.

Selling Out Ethnic Identity

One of the ETC's most heavily anthologized *actos*, *Los vendidos* (*The Sell-outs*), is also one of their most critical on the subject of ethnic identity—another example of the tension between the ETC's support for group cohesion and simultaneous criticism of its limitations. In the absurd world of “Honest Sancho's Used Mexican Lot,” a secretary for California governor Ronald Reagan, Mrs. Jimenez (she pronounces her name “JIM-enez”), is looking for a Mexican to purchase. Sancho the dealer is selling Mexican robots that represent different Mexican/Chicano/a stereotypes: the farmworker, the *Pachucho* (a zoot-suit style gangster figure), the *Revolucionario*, and so on. Sancho finally sells her the Mexican-American businessman robot, an embodiment of white-dominant American culture, for \$15,000. Yet at the conclusion of the *acto*, the audience discovers that Sancho is the real robot, and that the other robot stereotypes are actual people profiting from mechanically acting out those stereotypes.

Like the other *actos* discussed above, *Los Vendidos* emphasizes the performance of identity through their staging of stock stereotypes rather than realistic characters. Sancho describes the (supposedly robotic) farmworker through his *huaraches*, which make him more durable for labor, with the “wide-brimmed sombrero [as] an extra added feature” (42). As Sancho

snaps his fingers, the farmworker provides the mechanical movements of picking invisible crops; Sancho further dehumanizes the worker through offensive comparisons to cars, such as the “Volkswagen of Mexicans” (42). Through this continued metaphor, the worker’s mechanization critiques the tenacious correlation between the farmworker’s ethnic identity and ability to perform his labor. Sancho uses the body to justify his functionality: “Do you see these little holes on his arms that appear to be pores? During those hot sluggish days in the field when the vines or the branches get so entangled, it’s almost impossible to move, these holes emit a certain grease that allows our model to slip and slide right through the crop with no trouble at all” (42). This comedic description is meant to incite laughter from the audience, as they could recognize the ridiculous method by which the boss views their bodies as machines for labor. The audience could also then question the connection between one’s ethnicity and suitability for work. Furthermore, Sancho showcases the actions of striking and scabbing as performative elements of the farmworker’s identity. The farmworker is “programmed to strike” and shouts “Huelga! Huelga!” at Sancho’s command. Another snap of Sancho’s fingers and the farmworker changes to scabbing when he says, “Me vendo barato” (“I sell myself cheaply”) (43). The mockery of political action seems counterintuitive for a theater group meant to incite audiences to strike or join the union, and suggests that there are more complicated messages below the surface of *Los vendidos*. I would argue that even the striker as a robot is an object of consumption, and serves a political purpose for Mrs. Jimenez, who symbolically stands in for the state. The *acto* communicates through *relajo* that as long as the Chicano/a hangs on to their ethnic identity, they sell-out to the social expectations of others and in turn make themselves vulnerable to racial profiling.

The ethnic stereotypes that follow the farmworker in Sancho’s presentation to Mrs. Jimenez are Johnny Pachucho, a *Revolucionario*, and finally Eric Garcia, the acculturated Mexican-American. None of these stock characters are related to a labor category as specific as that of the farmworker, yet they are described in the same fashion. Sancho emphasizes their mechanic functions that are actually stereotypes: knife-fighting, romancing women, dancing, getting arrested, being subject to police brutality, and so on. The action on stage communicates a disturbing message: Johnny Pachucho is useful because, as Sancho notes, “He is a great scapegoat” (45), existing simply to break the law and be abused within the system. His legal transgressions allow authoritative figures, such as the Los Angeles Police

Department, to remain in authority and justify racial profiling. Like the *pachucho*, the other characters' social roles are equal to that of the farmworker and are restricted by the same racist boundaries. The "Mexican-American," Eric Garcia, fulfills Mrs. Jiminez's request for an appropriate body to serve as "a brown face in the crowd" (50) at a state function; he exists as a suitably sanitized version of the Chicano. Sancho ensures her that he is a "political machine" that will make speeches condemning Mexicans and proclaiming "God Bless America!," and that he is even "programmed to eat Mexican food at ceremonial functions" (49-50). As a representative of Mexican-American identity, Eric Garcia is only allowed performative involvement in the political system. More than that, though, the *acto* suggests that *all* Chicano/a political activity is similarly performative and restricted by stereotype, whether it is contributing to the system or resisting it (as in the case of the striking farmworker or Johnny Pachucho). *Los vendidos* thus places the politically conscious Mexican-American, the *Revolucionario* and the *pachucho* on the same level as the exploited farmworker in order to show the various ways that the larger social system exploits Chicanos/as. In this way, *Los vendidos* transfigures labor exploitation as symbolic of the myriad social injustices experienced by Chicano/a people. Society polices the ethnic/political identity (recall the performance of the striker) in the same way that the economy determines the relationship between labor and ethnicity.

Once more the audience is asked to interpret the scene, not as burlesque but as a moral drama that warns against the adoption of capitalist ideals. The *campesino*/Chicano/a audience is pulled into the scene with Mrs. Jiminez, adopting her white gaze onto the Mexican bodies that exist only as items to be consumed. The fake robots are engaged in a meta-performance, Chicanos/as pretending to be Chicanos/as; they profit from assumed stereotypes while "selling out" aspects of their culture. Whether or not the characters are justified in tricking whites out of their money is debatable—and that is the point. The purpose of the *acto* does not directly correlate with union recruitment; rather, its purpose is to incite discussion within the audience and provide them with the opportunity to interpret allegorical messages. The definition of worker solidarity expands into a larger culture of social awareness and advocacy for change.

Furthermore, the ethnic stereotype reveals ways in which non-occupational identities still "work" within society. The image of the thief symbolized by Johnny Pachucho also reflects the thieves at the State Department and the stereotype of the crooked politician. The comparison between the

pachucho-thief and the political thief raises the question of whether or not stealing can be considered as a mode of labor that functions as an integral part of the larger capitalist economy of exploitation. This question dovetails with a prevalent message throughout the Teatro's *actos*: that those in power are victims of their own hierarchy, and thus perform within a restricted range of identities, leaving themselves open to the same exploitations. This is exactly what happens when the fake robots profiteer from their ability to exploit Mrs. Jimenez's preconceived notions of Chicanos/as: essentially, they cheat the State out of its money by selling their own stereotypical images. As much as the *acto* raises significant criticisms of the system, it also asks the audience whether or not this is a heroic deed or whether they are thieves mirroring those in the State Department. Does the audience cheer on those transgressing the system, or do they recognize the fake robots as sell-outs who are compliant within a cycle of theft and exploitation?

The Spirit of the Picket Line and the Labor Aesthetic

In *Los vendidos*, the performance of the exploited and dehumanized farmworker serves as a platform on which to expose other forms of manipulation within Chicano/a society. The *acto* exemplifies how work—both labor and the cultural work of artistic production—shaped ETC's aesthetics. Even though ETC shifted the context of their productions to other social issues, the environment of the picket line determined the *rasquache* aesthetic that impacted future productions of Chicano/a theater, as well as art that privileges mixed media, collaborative production, and non-verbal forms of communication. Diana Rodriguez, a former ETC member, reflected on this dynamic in ETC's 1980 production *El fin del mundo*, a play which combines Aztec/Mayan mythology with the contemporary issue of youth drug usage: "When you take something like *Fin del mundo* and script it, it doesn't make sense. Because the piece that we performed in 1987 was a visual piece, and to explain it in a script and to have another theater company do it, well they just couldn't" (qtd. in Broyles-Gonzales 225). *El fin del mundo* is far removed from the Delano strike temporally and in terms of its content, yet in its form, the play maintains the spirit of the picket line.

The strike illuminated the need for a migratory literature where texts are not necessarily made of words, and which allows for a continuous linguistic spontaneity emerging from the diverse regional experiences of their audiences. Indeed, as Rodriguez suggests, text-based forms of expression (i.e.,

the novel) and even the translation of the *actos* into printed words—including the text used for this essay—are inadequate representations of the performances as they were meant to be performed. In this way, ETC innovated cultural forms of expression that the critical discourse on performance is still struggling to register and articulate. ETC's staged dialogue between a utopian vision of ethnic nationalism and its counter narrative warns against the exploitation of that same ethnic identity by capitalism. The early *actos* of ETC embraced the global histories of both labor and theater in its cultural activism. This approach moves beyond nationalism and recognizes not only the complexity of the relationship between labor and capitalism, but also of the diverse community at the intersections of labor and ethnic identity, and the individuals at work within it.

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