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Title

Remembering Chavez Ravine: Culture Clash and Critical Race Theater

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4gw5j737>

Journal

Chicana/o Latina/o Law Review, 26(1)

ISSN

1061-8899

Author

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Publication Date

2006

DOI

10.5070/C7261021168

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REMEMBERING CHAVEZ RAVINE: CULTURE CLASH AND CRITICAL RACE THEATER

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I. EXAMINING CHICANA/O HISTORY, THEATER, AND CRITICAL RACE THEORY¹

It's revisionist history . . . It's claiming that we're here. We're part of American history or world history. And it's also reclaiming the other side, the other point of view . . . In *Chavez Ravine*, we take the point of view of the residents. They're the heroes, you know. We don't take the point of view of let's say the developer. We already know that issue. It's been written about. (Herbert Siguenza, 2004)²

The Taper stage certainly isn't a classroom, but we feel a great responsibility with this piece to get the facts right, because the collective memory of a community is a precious thing. (Richard Montoya, 2003)³

In the epigraphs above, members of the three-man, Chicano-Latino theater group Culture Clash, describe their revisionist history approach to playwriting as demonstrated in their 2003 play *Chavez Ravine*.⁴ Culture Clash, comprised of performance artists Ricardo "Ric" Salinas, Herbert Siguenza, and Richard

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1. This article reflects portions of my research presentation at the LatCrit X Conference in San Juan, Puerto Rico, October 6-10, 2005. The study discussed here draws on a larger oral history research project focused on Culture Clash and Chicana/o performance art. See David G. García, *The Evolution of a Critical Race Theater: Culture Clash and Chicana/o Performance Art, 1965-2005* (2006) (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles) (on file with author).

2. Interview with Herbert Siguenza, Playwright, Actor, Culture Clash, in Silverlake, Cal. (Mar. 9, 2004).

3. As quoted in *Los Angeles Times*. See Mike Boehm, *Requiem for the Ravine: A Latino Community Once Flourished Where Dodger Stadium Stands. Its Still-Debated Demise Fuels a New Play*, L.A. TIMES, May 18, 2003, at E1.

4. Culture Clash, *Chavez Ravine* (May 2003) (Written by Culture Clash, Directed by Lisa Peterson, Los Angeles, Cal.) (on file with author). Throughout this article, I italicize *Chavez Ravine* when referring to the play and leave it in regular font when referring to the place and community of Chavez Ravine.

Montoya, originated on May 5, 1984.⁵ For over 20 years, Culture Clash's theater has illuminated the perspectives of urban communities often marginalized by mainstream historical accounts. Their brief remarks above suggest that they seek to "reclaim" community memory as a valid part of U.S. history. In this essay, I draw on critical race theory ("CRT") and the concept of counterstorytelling within the critical race tradition to analyze Culture Clash's *Chavez Ravine*, which recounts the largely ignored experiences and actions of a Mexican American community in 1950s Los Angeles.

Culture Clash's evolution as playwrights has found them constantly challenging a majoritarian perspective similar to the counterstories in CRT literature.⁶ Rooted in critical academic and community traditions, counterstories give an account of historical events through the perspectives of socially and racially marginalized communities.⁷ Since 1994, Culture Clash's theatrical approach has exhibited a composite counterstorytelling methodology. In much the same way academic counterstories are created, Culture Clash begins with empirical data, collecting and transcribing individual interviews with residents of urban communities in various U.S. cities. Culture Clash adds breadth and depth to these interviews by examining social science and humanities scholarship, as well as the popular press and judicial records that relate to these communities. The trio transforms this information into characters and scenes for the stage culminating in a unique Culture Clash blend of comedy and social commentary. Although Culture Clash asks interviewees general questions about their experiences as residents in a particular city, issues of race and racism often surface. Culture Clash validates these voices and recognizes that the experiences of socially and racially marginalized communities merit center stage.

Chavez Ravine exhibits a critical race counterstory. The play recounts the history of three predominately Mexican American

5. This study includes oral history interviews, as well as analysis of live performances, scripts, flyers, and performance programs. From 1984 to 2003, Culture Clash wrote and performed ten original plays, adapted and produced the Frank Loesser Broadway musical *Señor Discretion Himself* and Aristophanes' *The Birds* and wrote and starred in a Fox television show *Culture Clash*. They are currently touring their compilation play *Culture Clash in AmeriCCa*, which weaves together scenes from five of their ethnographic, site-specific plays, and they will premiere two additional original plays in 2006, *Zorro in Hell* and *Water and Power*.

6. Daniel Solórzano & Tara Yosso outline this methodology in their article, *Critical Race Methodology: Counterstorytelling as an Analytical Framework for Education Research*, 8 QUALITATIVE INQUIRY 23 (2002). For an example of composite counterstorytelling, see RICHARD DELGADO, *THE RODRIGO CHRONICLES: CONVERSATIONS ABOUT AMERICA AND RACE* (1995).

7. See, e.g., Patricia Williams, *THE ALCHEMY OF RACE AND RIGHTS: DIARY OF A LAW PROFESSOR* (1991).

communities:⁸ Bishop, La Loma, and Palo Verde. The City of Los Angeles leveled these communities in the 1950s for a public housing project and ultimately to make way for Dodger Stadium.⁹ Culture Clash highlights the resistance of Mexican women who organized against the power brokers of Los Angeles. The sheriff's department later evicted and physically removed these women from their homes live on national television. Noting that the *Battle for Chavez Ravine*¹⁰ served as a precursor for the Chicana/o Movement of the 1960s and 1970s, Culture Clash asserts that the displaced Mexican American families of the Ravine cultivated a legacy of resistance against social injustice and that such "memory cannot be flattened."¹¹

I argue that the counterstory presented in *Chavez Ravine* exhibits a *critical race theater*. I define a critical race theater as performance art that illuminates the lives and histories of marginalized communities while challenging social and racial injustice. Using satire, cultural symbolism, poetry and comedy, critical race theater places at center stage the experiences of People of Color and their cultural resilience and resistance. Below, I analyze what I assert to be a *critical race theater* account of the historical events that took place during the removal of almost 3,800 people from three predominately Mexican American neighborhoods in 1950s Los Angeles.¹² To contextualize this discussion, I

8. I use the terms Mexican and Mexican American interchangeably throughout this article, noting that in Chavez Ravine, some families were recent immigrants, while others had lived in Los Angeles for generations and their children and grandchildren were born in the United States. While these communities may not have used the term Chicana/o to refer to their progressive political identity, they certainly contributed to the struggle for Chicana/o civil rights.

9. My goal here is to analyze the theater of Culture Clash and discuss the ways they interpret and present history on stage. For a more comprehensive account of the historical events and figures shaping the City of Los Angeles during this time period and specifically to Chavez Ravine, see RODOLFO F. ACUÑA, *A COMMUNITY UNDER SIEGE: A CHRONICLE OF CHICANOS EAST OF THE LOS ANGELES RIVER 1945-1975* (1984); RONALD W. LÓPEZ, *THE BATTLE FOR CHAVEZ RAVINE: PUBLIC POLICY AND CHICANO COMMUNITY RESISTANCE IN POST WAR LOS ANGELES, 1945-1962* 26 (1999). See also Thomas S. Hines, *Battle for Chavez Ravine*, 8 *FRONTIER* 7 (June 1957); ERIC ÁVILA, *The hottest battle in California since the war with Mexico: The Dodgers come to Los Angeles*, in *REINVENTING LOS ANGELES: POPULAR CULTURE IN THE AGE OF WHITE FLIGHT, 1940-1965* 110-72 (1997); ERIC ÁVILA, *Suburbanizing the City Center: The Dodgers Move West*, in *POPULAR CULTURE IN THE AGE OF WHITE FLIGHT: FEAR AND FANTASY IN SUBURBAN LOS ANGELES* 145-84 (2004).

10. See Thomas S. Hines, *Housing, Baseball, and Creeping Socialism: The Battle of Chavez Ravine, Los Angeles, 1949-1959*, 8 *J. URB. HIST.* 123 (1982). See also LÓPEZ, *supra* note 9, at 1-25.

11. Culture Clash, *supra* note 4, at 132.

12. Ronald W. López notes that by claiming eminent domain over the area, the City of Los Angeles removed 1,100 families from Chavez Ravine. He also explains that developers planning the proposed public housing projects for the area based their designs for a total population of 3,769 people. See LÓPEZ, *supra* note 9, at 68.

first introduce critical race theory, majoritarian storytelling, and counterstorytelling.

II. CRITICAL RACE THEORY

What is it that characterizes the new jurisprudence of people of color? First, is a methodology grounded in the particulars of their social reality and experience. This method is consciously both historical and revisionist, attempting to know history from the bottom.¹³

As described by legal scholar Mari Matsuda, CRT can identify, analyze, and challenge racism as it is experienced, responded to, and accounted for in U.S. history. Originating in schools of law, the critical race movement seeks to account for the role of race and racism in the U.S. and to challenge the many forms of racism as they intersect with other forms of subordination such as gender and class.¹⁴ Although CRT scholars focus primarily on the study of law and more recently on examinations of education and social science, critical race scholars consistently look to history to demonstrate patterns of racism and the legacy of White privilege. Matsuda explains, “[t]he desire to know history from the bottom has forced these scholars to sources often ignored: journals, poems, oral histories, and stories from their own experiences of life in a hierarchically arranged world.”¹⁵ While a few scholars incorporate popular culture into their critical race analyses of social institutions,¹⁶ to date (and to my knowledge), no publications use CRT as a lens to analyze theater. This essay will address how Culture Clash performs those histories and experiences of racism and resistance usually omitted and distorted by mainstream historical accounts.

Matsuda defines CRT as the work of legal Scholars of Color who account “for the role of racism in American law and that work toward the elimination of racism as part of a larger goal of

13. Mari J. Matsuda, *Public Response to Racist Speech: Considering the Victim's Story*, 87 MICH. L. REV. 2320, 2323-24 (1989).

14. CRITICAL RACE THEORY: THE KEY WRITINGS THAT FORMED THE MOVEMENT (Kimberlé Crenshaw et al. eds., 1995); CRITICAL RACE THEORY: THE CUTTING EDGE 225-35 (Richard Delgado & Jean Stefancic eds., 1999); Margaret E. Montoya, *Celebrating Racialized Legal Narratives*, in CROSSROADS, DIRECTIONS, AND A NEW CRITICAL RACE THEORY 243, 243-50. (Francisco Valdés et al. eds., 2002); CRITICAL RACE FEMINISM: A READER (Adrien Katherine Wing ed., 1997); GLOBAL CRITICAL RACE FEMINISM: AN INTERNATIONAL READER (Adrien Katherine Wing ed., 2000).

15. Matsuda, *supra* note 13, at 2324.

16. Elvia R. Arriola, *LatCrit Theory, International Human Rights, Popular Culture, and the Faces of Despair in INS Raids*, 28 U. MIAMI INTER-AM. L. REV. 245 (1997); Richard Delgado & Jean Stefancic, *Images of the Outsider in American Law and Culture: Can Free Expression Remedy Systemic Social Ills?*, 77 CORNELL L. REV. 1258 (1992); Tara J. Yosso, *Critical race media literacy: Challenging deficit discourse about Chicanas/os*, 30 J. POPULAR FILM & TELEVISION 52 (2002).

eliminating all forms of subordination.”¹⁷ As a framework, CRT accounts for the central role of race and racism in U.S. history and seeks to eliminate racism and all forms of subordination based on gender, class, culture, language, and national origin.¹⁸ Educational sociologist Daniel Solórzano¹⁹ identified the following five tenets that characterize CRT and set it apart from other frameworks:

1. The centrality of race/racism and intersectionality of race/racism with other forms of subordination (e.g. gender, class, language, culture, phenotype, surname, immigration status, sexual orientation);
2. The challenge to dominant ideology;
3. The emphasis on the experiential knowledge of People of Color;
4. The commitment to social justice; and
5. The use of interdisciplinary methods and historicity.

These five CRT themes are not necessarily new, but together they offer a framework grounded in a rich legacy of critical race scholarship.²⁰ CRT learns from the strengths and limitations of various theoretical traditions. For example, in its critique of class-based inequality in the U.S., CRT scholars look to the strengths of Marxism and neo-Marxism, while also learning from Marxism and Neo-Marxism’s insufficient analysis concerning the links between class, race, and gender. Moreover, Latina/o critical race (“LatCrit”) theorists extend critical race discussions to address the layers of racialized subordination such as language, immigration status, culture, and sexuality that comprise Chicana/o, Latina/o experiences.²¹ CRT and LatCrit theory challenge popular

17. Mari J. Matsuda, *Voices of America: Accent, Antidiscrimination Law, and a Jurisprudence for the Last Reconstruction*, 100 YALE L.J. 1329, 1331 n.7 (1991).

18. CRITICAL RACE THEORY: THE KEY WRITINGS THAT FORMED THE MOVEMENT, *supra* note 14; CRITICAL RACE THEORY: THE CUTTING EDGE, *supra* note 14.

19. Daniel G. Solórzano, *Images and Words that Wound: Critical Race Theory, Racial Stereotyping, and Teacher Education*, 24 TCHR. EDUC. Q. 5 (1997).

20. See Derrick A. Bell, *Who’s Afraid of Critical Race Theory?*, U. ILL. L. REV. 893 (1995); Daniel G. Solórzano & Tara J. Yosso, *Critical Race and LatCrit Theory and Method: Chicana and Chicano Graduate School Experiences*, 14 INT’L J. QUALITATIVE STUD. EDUC. 471 (2001).

21. See, e.g., Elvia R. Arriola, *March!*, 19 CHICANO-LATINO L. REV. 1 (1998); Leslie Espinoza & Angela P. Harris, *Embracing the Tar-Baby: LatCrit Theory and the Sticky Mess of Race*, 10 LA RAZA L.J. 499 (1998); Symposium, *Difference, Solidarity and Law: Building Latina/o Communities Through LatCrit Theory*, 19 CHICANO-LATINO L. REV. 1 (1998); Symposium, *LatCrit: Latinas/os and the Law*, 10 LA RAZA L.J. 1 (1998); Francisco Valdés, *Poised at the Cusp: LatCrit Theory, Outsider Jurisprudence and Latina/o Self-Empowerment*, 2 HARV. LATINO L. REV. 1 (1997); Francisco Valdés, *Under Construction: LatCrit Consciousness, Community and Theory*, 10 LA RAZA L.J. 1 (1998).

and academic discourse in the U.S. by naming, theorizing, and mobilizing from the intersections of racism. LatCrit's expansion of the CRT dialogue recognizes that silencing or omitting the multiple experiences of People of Color limits social justice struggles.²²

A. *Critical Race Storytelling*

In de-centering whiteness, critical race scholars such as Richard Delgado identify at least two types of storytelling: majoritarian storytelling and counterstorytelling.²³ Because CRT originated within the field of law, scholars exposed the racism in "race neutral" and "objective" legal storytelling by drawing on the lived experiences of People of Color. Instead of placing Whites at the center of the story as usual, CRT challenges the idea of race neutrality and reveals the role of race and racism in jurisprudence.

In the U.S. entertainment industry, most storytelling occurs from a majoritarian, White perspective—the perspective of race, gender, and class privilege. For example, portrayals of Chicanas/os, Latinas/os are often filtered through a White, male, upper class lens. Chicana/o, Latina/o images in mainstream Hollywood have consistently reflected the cultural stereotypes and historical distortions created by those with social and racial privilege (e.g. early 1900s films depicting White actors in brownface, 1960s Westerns highlighting caricatures similar to Frito bandito, 1970s and 1980s urban gang films, and 1990s Taco Bell Chihuahua).²⁴ For

22. Today, the CRT family tree reflects the roots of previous theoretical models, and the branches of multiple racialized experiences, as articulated by women (Fem Crits), Latinas/os (LatCrit), Asian Americans (AsianCrit), Native Americans (TribalCrit), and White scholars challenging racism by exposing White privilege (WhiteCrit). For FemCrit, see Kimberlé Crenshaw, *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics*, 1989 U. CHI. LEGAL F. 139 (1989); Kimberlé Crenshaw, *Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color*, 43 STAN. L. REV. 1241 (1993); CRITICAL RACE FEMINISM: A READER, *supra* note 14. For AsianCrit, see Robert Chang, *Toward an Asian American Legal Scholarship: Critical Race Theory, Post-Structuralism, and Narrative Space*, 81 CAL. L. REV. 1241 (1993); Margaret Chon, *On the Need for Asian American Narratives in Law: Ethnic Specimens, Native Informants, Storytelling and Silences*, 3 ASIAN PAC. AM. L.J. 4 (1995). For TribalCrit, see Robert A. Williams Jr., *Vampires Anonymous and Critical Race Practice*, 95 MICH. L. REV. 741 (1997). For WhiteCrit, see CRITICAL WHITE STUDIES: LOOKING BEHIND THE MIRROR (Richard Delgado & Jean Stefancic eds., 1997).

23. Richard Delgado, *Storytelling for Oppositionists and Others: A Plea for Narrative*, 87 MICH. L. REV. 2411 (1989).

24. See, e.g., STEVEN W. BENDER, *GREASERS AND GRINGOS: LATINOS, LAW, AND THE AMERICAN IMAGINATION* (2003); CHICANO CINEMA: RESEARCH, REVIEWS, AND RESOURCES (Gary D. Keller ed., 1985); GARY D. KELLER, *HISPANICS AND UNITED STATES FILM: AN OVERVIEW AND HANDBOOK* (1994); CHICANOS AND FILM: REPRESENTATION AND RESISTANCE (Chon A. Noriega ed., 1992); CHON A.

contemporary U.S. society, Chicanas/os, Latinas/os may almost seem non-existent in mainstream media except as criminals, welfare mothers, gardeners, maids, and sexually promiscuous women.

This well-documented pattern of racism in mainstream media means that Chicana/o, Latina/o performers rarely find the opportunity to portray multidimensional characters, let alone characters that critique structures of inequality in American society. Recognizing the severe restrictions placed on Chicana/o, Latina/o actors, Culture Clash has survived and succeeded in theater for over 20 years by writing and producing their own material. When describing the lack of opportunity for Culture Clash as actors, Richard Montoya acknowledges that even in theater productions, "nothing is going to happen until Culture Clash writes."²⁵

B. *Majoritarian Storytelling*

Within historical scholarship, majoritarian storytelling refers to a method of recounting history from the perspective of White, male, and class privilege. Similarly, majoritarian stories on stage and screen interpret and present history from a socially and racially privileged perspective that does not question the status quo. Under this guise of neutrality, majoritarian versions of history tend to silence experiences of subordination and usually omit or minimize voices of resistance.²⁶ The resulting portrayals of Chicanas/os, Latinas/os are one-dimensional characters outside of any historical context and interpreted through culturally and racially distorted lenses.

Like White privilege, majoritarian stories pervade mainstream media, theater, and historical texts, and they seem to be a natural part of everyday life, or merely the way things are, so to speak. In contrast, Culture Clash's brand of performance presents satire with an overt political purpose. The trio explains:

Humor has been used throughout the history of theater not merely as a tool to evoke, but to instruct and to politicize . . . Culture Clash has attained a certain comic sensibility by borrowing their formulas to create laughter. Laughter—it is a key payoff for Culture Clash's style of satire. Entertainment is crucial. But just as important are the hidden messages we use in

NORIEGA, *SHOT IN AMERICA: TELEVISION, THE STATE, AND THE RISE OF CHICANO CINEMA* (2000); *LATIN LOOKS: IMAGES OF LATINAS AND LATINOS IN THE U.S. MEDIA* (Clara E. Rodríguez ed., 1997).

25. Interview by Carlos San Miguel with Richard Montoya, Ric Salinas, & Herbert Siguenza, Actors and Playwrights, Culture Clash, Los Angeles, Cal. (Apr. 24, 2000).

26. See Solórzano & Yosso, *supra* note 6.

our comedy to teach, to criticize, or to pay homage to. We are social commentators.²⁷

Culture Clash's theater aims to question the status quo and breakdown stereotypes rather than perpetuate them by constantly challenging the majoritarian perspective and asserting a counterstory.

C. Counterstorytelling

Critical race counterstorytelling in historical scholarship refers to a method of recounting history through the perspectives of socially and racially marginalized communities.²⁸ Counterstories expose, analyze, and challenge racial privilege evidenced in majoritarian stories while listening to and learning from the voices of People of Color. The CRT literature reveals at least three forms of counterstorytelling in academic scholarship, (1) autobiographical,²⁹ (2) biographical,³⁰ and (3) composite.³¹

CRT scholars such as Derrick Bell and Richard Delgado have popularized this tradition of storytelling in scholarly circles with their composite characters Geneva and Rodrigo Crenshaw respectively.³² Similar to autobiographical and biographical counterstories, composite counterstories listen to the experiences of People of Color to expose and challenge racism.³³ In critical

27. Culture Clash, *Homage to the Masters*, in A Bowl of Beings Performance Program, at 7-8 (Los Angeles Theater Center, 1991) (on file with author).

28. See DERRICK A. BELL, *AND WE ARE NOT SAVED: THE ELUSIVE QUEST FOR RACIAL JUSTICE* (1987); DERRICK A. BELL, *FACES AT THE BOTTOM OF THE WELL: THE PERMANENCE OF RACISM* (1992); DERRICK A. BELL, *GOSPEL CHOIRS: PSALMS OF SURVIVAL FOR AN ALIEN LAND CALLED HOME* (1996); DERRICK A. BELL, *AFROLANTICA LEGACIES* (1998); DELGADO, *supra* note 6. See also RICHARD DELGADO, *THE COMING RACE WAR? AND OTHER APOCALYPTIC TALES OF AMERICAN AFTER AFFIRMATIVE ACTION AND WELFARE* (1996); Richard Delgado, *Rodrigo's Fifteenth Chronicle: Racial Mixture, Latino-Critical Scholarship, and the Black-White Binary*, 75 *TEX. L. REV.* 1181 (1997); RICHARD DELGADO, *WHEN EQUALITY ENDS: STORIES ABOUT RACE AND RESISTANCE* (1999); RICHARD DELGADO, *JUSTICE AT WAR: CIVIL LIBERTIES AND CIVIL RIGHTS DURING TIMES OF CRISIS* (2003); Richard Delgado, *Rodrigo and Revisionism: Relearning the Lessons of History*, 99 *Nw. U. L. REV.* 805 (2005).

29. See, e.g., Margaret Montoya, *Máscaras, Trenzas, y Greñas: Un/masking the Self while Un/braiding Latina Stories and Legal Discourse*, 15 *CHICANO-LATINO L. REV.* 1 (1994); Michael A. Olivas, *The Chronicles, My Grandfather's Stories, and Immigration Law: The Slave Traders Chronicle as Racial History*, 34 *ST. LOUIS U. L.J.* 425 (1990); Williams, *supra* note 7.

30. See, e.g., CHARLES R. LAWRENCE III & MARI MATSUDA, *WE WON'T GO BACK: MAKING THE CASE FOR AFFIRMATIVE ACTION* (1997); Lilia Fernández, *Telling Stories about School: Using Critical Race and Latino Critical Theories to Document Latina/Latino Education and Resistance*, 8 *QUALITATIVE INQUIRY* 45 (2002).

31. See DELGADO and BELL, *supra* note 28; see also TARA J. YOSSO, *CRITICAL RACE COUNTERSTORIES ALONG THE CHICANA/CHICANO EDUCATIONAL PIPELINE* (2005).

32. See DELGADO and BELL, *supra* note 28.

33. See, e.g., Daniel G. Solórzano & Dolores Delgado Bernal, *Examining Transformational Resistance Through a Critical Race and LatCrit Theory Framework: Chi-*

race scholarship, composite counterstories integrate: (1) empirical research data (e.g., interviews, surveys); (2) social science, humanities, legal, and other scholarship; (3) judicial records (court filings, rulings, oral arguments); (4) authors' professional and personal experiences; and (5) collective history and community memory. Scholars create composite characters that embody the patterns and themes surfacing in this data, and place these characters in social, historical, and political settings that speak to the conditions and lived experiences of People of Color.

In 2003, Culture Clash created a counterstory based on ethnographic research of their adopted hometown, Los Angeles. Drawing directly from oral histories of former Chavez Ravine residents, interviews with city officials, memoirs of politicians from the time period, newspaper accounts, maps, photos, and scholarship about Los Angeles politics of the era, Culture Clash recounts this complex history satirically "mixing fact with fiction."³⁴ Theater scholar Ashley Lucas comments that this weaving of multiple sources together might cause some audience members "to wonder how much of this representation of culture, time, and place has been invented or shaped by the writers' dramatic interpretation."³⁵ However, she continues:

The same questions ought to be asked of more traditional renderings of history as well. *Chavez Ravine* not only provides an alternative version of history but demands that its audiences reconsider the nature and function of history in general as it relates to notions of politics, social stratification, and ethnicity.³⁶

Indeed, Lucas reminds us that mainstream historical accounts tend to minimize or even omit discussions about Mexican and Chicana/o communities struggling against injustice. Culture Clash does not claim to tell the definitive story of Chavez Ravine, nor does a theatrical format allow them to present an exhaustive history. Still, Culture Clash interprets historical materials just as an academic historian might sift through the archives and oral accounts to offer her or his own interpretation. For example, they quote verbatim from in-depth interviews with

cana and Chicano Students in an Urban Context, 36 URB. EDUC. 308 (2001); Daniel G. Solórzano & Tara J. Yosso, *A Critical Race Counter-Story of Race, Racism, and Affirmative Action*, 35 EQUITY AND EXCELLENCE IN EDUC. 155 (2002); Daniel G. Solórzano & Tara J. Yosso, *Maintaining Social Justice Hopes within Academic Realities: A Freirean Approach to Critical Race/LatCrit Pedagogy*, 78 DENV. U. L. REV. 595 (2001).

34. Culture Clash, *supra* note 4, at 94.

35. Ashley Lucas, *Chavez Ravine: Performed History in Los Angeles 5* (Depts. of Ethnic Studies & Theatre, Univ. of Cal., San Diego, Working Paper, 2004), available at http://calcultures.ucsd.edu/working_papers/Ashley_Lucas.pdf.

36. *Id.*

historical figures such as the former Los Angeles Housing Authority Site Commissioner Frank Wilkinson and with former Chavez Ravine residents. *Culture Clash* fictionalizes their account for dramatic purposes and infuses the play with slapstick comedy, satire, music, and dance; yet *Chavez Ravine* remains grounded in the research. Historian Eric Ávila notes, “As *Culture Clash* shows through their research—which is exactly how an academic historian does research—there are multiple realities which all need to be told and made accessible to everyone.”³⁷ Indeed, armed with all the theatrical and comedic tools acquired in 19 years of performing together, and a wealth of skills gleaned from *teatro*³⁸ influences along the way, *Chavez Ravine* chronicles a decade of Los Angeles history and illuminates the lives of uprooted Mexican Americans who courageously fought to save their community.

I use Solórzano’s³⁹ five tenets of CRT to analyze *Culture Clash’s Chavez Ravine*. However, I argue for the purposes of analyzing theater, his first tenet should be separated into two distinct tenets. My work distinguishes between centering race/racism and emphasizing the intersectionality of racialized subordination. I therefore assert that a critical race theater:

1. Centralizes issues of race and racism;
2. Emphasizes the intersectionality of race and racism with other forms of subordination, such as gender, class, language, immigration status, and sexuality;
3. Challenges dominant ideology by performing counterstories that critique mainstream versions of history;
4. Utilizes satire to facilitate audience’s critical social consciousness;
5. Focuses on experiential knowledge by creating composite characters, based on oral interviews and historical documents;
6. Draws on interdisciplinary methods to perform history.

37. *Id.* at 20 (quoted in Tiffany Ana Lopez, *Chavez Ravine by Culture Clash: A Discovery Journal*, in *Innovative Theater and Creative Education for Young People: Performing for L.A. Youth 8* (Mark Taper Forum Theater Education Program, 2003). Discovery Guide- Part 1, available at <http://www.taperahmanson.com/download/sg2-14.pdf>.

38. I use *teatro* and theater interchangeably, yet I note that Chicana/o *teatro* refers more specifically to agit-prop performance—theater intended to agitate and politically inform (propogandize) while entertaining—such as that exhibited by El Teatro Campesino in the 1960s and 1970s. For further discussion of the dual function of Chicana/o theater, see W.B. Worthen, *Staging América: the Subject of History in Chicano/a Theatre*, 49 THEATRE F. 101, 102 (1997).

39. See Solórzano, *supra* note 19.

As this essay will show, *Chavez Ravine* weaves together historical materials, ethnographic interviews, slapstick comedy, poetry, music, and political satire, exemplifying a continuity of Chicana/o *teatro* traditions and a determination to carry the *rasquachi* aesthetic⁴⁰ into the new century.

III. REMEMBERING CHAVEZ RAVINE

Why don't they play ball in [Mayor] Poulson's backyard—not ours!

(Avrana Arechiga, former Chavez Ravine resident, 1959)⁴¹

When I die, bury me face down so the world can kiss my ass.
(Statement from a sign in the home of Lola Fernandez, a former Chavez Ravine resident)⁴²

Chavez Ravine captures the defiance expressed in the above epigraphs. To connect with the audience immediately, Culture Clash begins the play on opening day of the 1981 baseball season when Fernando Valenzuela pitched his first game and shut-out the Houston Astros. The spirits of two former Chavez Ravine residents, María Salgado Ruiz (Eileen Galindo) and Henry “Hank” Ruiz (Salinas), speak to Fernando (Siguenza) while he is on the pitcher's mound. Seen only by Fernando, María and Henry begin to tell their story, letting this rookie know that he is pitching on “sacred land.”⁴³

40. I assert that in theater, a *rasquachi* aesthetic refers to performance methods that exhibit the cultural wealth, resourcefulness, and perspectives of marginalized communities. A *rasquachi* aesthetic generates from Mexican and Chicana/o working class communities and was popularized by the Mexican comic “Cantinflas” and the theater of El Teatro Campesino (ETC). Without a budget, stage, costumes, or props, these everyday people-turned artists created educational *teatro* to address issues of social inequality. The actors made theater with what was available: creativity, talent, humor, imagination, and a critique of social inequality. They cut up cardboard boxes to make signs that quickly identified characters, used flatbed trucks for a stage, and altered their own clothes for costumes. This *rasquachi* aesthetic also challenged audiences to use their imaginations, so when actors sat on a milk crate and bounced slightly side up and down, the audience could image they were in a car, driving on a bumpy road. For more on *rasquachismo*, see Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, *Rasquachismo: A Chicano Sensibility*, in CHICANO ART, RESISTANCE, AND AFFIRMATION 1965-1985 155-62 (Richard Griswold Del Castillo et al. eds., 1991). See also discussions of the *rasquachi* aesthetic in ETC's work in YOLANDA BROYLES-GONZÁLEZ, EL TEATRO CAMPESINO: THEATER IN THE CHICANO MOVEMENT (1994); JORGE A. HUERTA, CHICANO THEATER: THEMES AND FORMS (1982); NECESSARY THEATER: SIX PLAYS ABOUT THE CHICANO EXPERIENCE (Jorge A. Huerta ed., 1989).

41. Mrs. Arechiga yelled these remarks in Spanish as sheriff's deputies physically removed her from her home in Chavez Ravine. ACUÑA, *supra* note 9, at 75.

42. Don Normark notes that Lola Fernandez was one of the multiple families physically removed from their homes in Chavez Ravine. Outside of the view of the television cameras documenting the evictions, Lola Fernandez apparently struggled with sheriff deputies and was placed in solitary confinement for one month in a Los Angeles jail on charges of “assaulting an officer.” See DON NORMARK, CHAVEZ RAVINE, 1949: A LOS ANGELES STORY 17 (1999).

43. Culture Clash, *supra* note 4, at 6.

Similar to Luis Valdez's *Zoot Suit*, which premiered at the Mark Taper Forum in 1978, *Culture Clash* brings satire, original music, and a *rasquachi* aesthetic to this two-act, chronological narrative drama. Like the Pachuco character in *Zoot Suit*, a Chicano poet named Manazar (Siguenza) serves as the narrator in *Chavez Ravine*, speaking directly to the audience and offering insight into the thoughts of the other characters. Manazar represents the late poet Manazar Gamboa, who was from the Chavez Ravine neighborhood of Bishop. He invites the audience to visualize his former community:

Manazar: I have to take you back to the beginning, the genesis of this place. Hey, it's my job as your dead poet/slash/ghost presence/slash/narrator device *que la chingada* . . . but first I have to read you the rules *gente* . . . Rule number one, ok: the other actors will pretend not to hear or see me. Rule number two, only you, the audience can hear or see me, so feel free to buy me a drink after the show⁴⁴

Manazar introduces some of the early history of Chavez Ravine, when families emigrated from Mexico in the early 1900s and built their homes in the hills adjacent to downtown Los Angeles. Around 1840, this area was granted by the Los Angeles *ayuntamiento* to Julian Chávez, who moved from New Mexico in the 1830s and settled in the ravine.⁴⁵ Manazar informs the audience that he will "bring out professional actors" to "dramatize these historical events" and drawing on the *rasquachi* aesthetic of El Teatro Campesino (ETC), three actors walk on stage with cardboard signs across their chests displaying their character name "Child," "Campesino," and "Old Man." Manazar announces, "*Orale*, please welcome the Eminent Domain Players!"⁴⁶ Indeed, these three actors represent the communities eventually displaced under the city's eminent domain policy.

The *Culture Clash* trio, Eileen Galindo,⁴⁷ and three musicians (John Avila, Randy Rodarte, and Scott Rodarte) portray over 50 different characters to recount the layers of Chavez Ravine's history. The former community comes back to life through the composite characters and a set that includes large reprints of photos of 1950s neighborhoods. Together, this ensemble weaves

44. *Id.* at 22.

45. *Ayuntamiento* refers to the Mexican governing council. For more discussion of the origins of Chavez Ravine, see LÓPEZ, *supra* note 9, at 9; see also ÁVILA, REINVENTING LOS ANGELES, *supra* note 9, at 114.

46. *Culture Clash*, *supra* note 4, at 22.

47. Though women have performed with the trio in supportive roles in a few of their plays, with this role, Eileen Galindo performs as the first female lead in a *Culture Clash* play.

music and comedy into a dramatic counterstory of overt racism, Cold War politics (McCarthyism), and Chicana/o community resistance.

Through the composite characters of María Ruiz, her mother, and her brother Henry Ruiz, *Chavez Ravine* uncovers a complex and not often-told piece of Los Angeles history. The Ruiz family characters collectively personify twelve actual families who refused to sell their homes and were forcefully evicted from Chavez Ravine on May 8, 1959. In particular, the Ruiz family closely resembles the resistance displayed by the Arechiga family. In real-life, the eviction of seventy-two year old Manuel Arechiga and his sixty-two year old wife, Avrana Arechiga garnered mass media attention. It took four sheriffs to physically remove the Arechiga's daughter, Aurora Vargas, from the family home, with two holding her by the arms and two by the ankles. Eleven other families were also forcefully evicted and had their homes bulldozed, but the Arechiga family's experience, captured on live television and documented in newspapers and still photos, captivated the nation and inspired Culture Clash's Ruiz family characters.

Similar to their real-life counterparts, the fictionalized characters of Henry or "Hank" (played by Salinas) is a WWII veteran, who recently returned from military service and struggles to raise a young family. The Ruiz family lost their older brother Arturo in WWII. María (Galindo) is a Mexican American whose love for her community fuels her activism to protect the neighborhoods of Chavez Ravine. Mrs. Ruiz (Montoya) is a Mexican American grandmother who adamantly fights to protect her home and community.

Because the audience watches the opening scene with Fernando Valenzuela pitching, it becomes clear that the entire play takes place within what is now Dodger Stadium. To emphasize this point, Culture Clash asks the audience to participate in a seventh inning stretch as Stadium 'vendors' walk through the aisles, singing "Take Me Out To The Ballgame" while throwing bags of popcorn out to the theater audience.

Culture Clash's depiction of 1950s Los Angeles initially features Chavez Ravine residents reminiscing about the economically impoverished, yet culturally wealthy, community cultivated in these three neighborhoods of Bishop, Palo Verde, and La Loma. They then introduce the well-intentioned Los Angeles Housing Authority Site Commissioner, Frank Wilkinson (Montoya), who developed plans to create a public housing project in Chavez Ravine. In conjunction with the Federal Housing Act of 1949, Wilkinson labels Chavez Ravine a "blighted community"

and uses the city's "eminent domain" power to convert the private land into city property for the "greater public good."⁴⁸ Overtly, residents would sell their homes to the city at a "fair market price," and Wilkinson would oversee their temporary accommodations during the construction of the public housing project. Then, the residents would be offered the first opportunity to move back to Chavez Ravine upon the completion of Elysian Park Heights. However, the Chavez Ravine residents express apprehension and distrust of Wilkinson and architect Richard Neutra's (Siguenza) housing project plans:

Neutra: Ladies and gentlemen, I have designed a new modern village with plenty of light, air, and space. Interior streets will end in cul-de-sacs that are very safe for children to play. The two story units will face wonderful gardens and finger parks.

The Rodartes: What the hell are finger parks?

Resident: What the hell are culo-sacs?⁴⁹

Again, through the Ruiz family experience, Culture Clash personifies the beginning of the permanent disruption of the community bonds nurtured in Chavez Ravine. For example, when Henry Ruiz announces to his mother and María that he will sell his house to the city, Mrs. Ruiz exclaims:

Mother: Hank, do what you have to do, you have your own *familia* now. Your sister and I are staying put. But do me a favor, *si vendes tu casa*, if you dare sell that little house that your father built with his hands and sweat and blood, don't look back *mijo*, because you will never ever set foot in this house again, *me entiendes?*⁵⁰

Culture Clash also illuminates the resilience and resistance of Mexican American communities through María's character. María organizes a homeowners' coalition to challenge Wilkinson's plans for Chavez Ravine. She does not trust that the city will follow through on its promises to the residents. María represents the real-life activism of Mexican American women, who contribute to the legacy of organizing against injustice.⁵¹

48. Culture Clash, *supra* note 4, at 64.

49. *Id.* at 63.

50. *Id.* at 40.

51. See, e.g., VICKI L. RUIZ, FROM OUT OF THE SHADOWS: MEXICAN WOMEN IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY AMERICA (1998); MARY S. PARDO, MEXICAN AMERICAN WOMEN ACTIVISTS: IDENTITY AND RESISTANCE IN TWO LOS ANGELES COMMUNITIES (1998); see also Dolores Delgado Bernal, *Grassroots Leadership Reconceptualized: Chicana Oral Histories and the 1968 East Los Angeles School Blowouts*, 19 FRONTIERS: J. WOMEN STUD. 113 (1998).

While the community mobilizes against the city's plans, other politicians and entrepreneurs in Los Angeles work to undercut Wilkinson's housing project altogether. Instead of offering safe and affordable housing for low-income communities, these power brokers seek to profit from the Chavez Ravine land. *Culture Clash* portrays these men through the characters of Mover (Salinas) and Shaker (Montoya).

Mover: I got 40 acres up at the Ravine and I ain't selling at their price see.

Shaker: I got three lots up Bunker Hill with the DWP. That's still the big game in town.

Mover: Not this subsidized housing for the poor! Cry me a river!

Shaker: It's un-American.

Mover: That land should be used for private real estate interests.

Shaker: Preserve the free enterprise system for all Americans. And I mean all Americans! Except the japs, the chinks, the hebes, the spics, the fags, and the niggers. I leave anybody out?

Mover: The micks, the guineas and the krauts.

Shaker: Them too. We need to stop the Housing Authority before they break ground see.⁵²

As these two characters reveal the racist sentiment behind their plans to profit from Chavez Ravine, another schemer, named the Watchman (Siguenza) joins them. The Watchman represents the *Los Angeles Times*, who wages a publicity war against the L.A. Housing Authority by playing up public fears of communism in a post-WWII "red scare" climate. The Watchman claims Wilkinson is a communist infiltrator and brands the subsidized public housing as a socialist conspiracy. To further doom the housing project, the Watchman engages in backroom politics with "a committee of twenty-five of the most powerful men in Los Angeles"⁵³ and ensures that the men find a new city mayor who will carry out their whims.

Watchman: You think the voters will want to re-elect a commie sympathizer? Besides, I got the perfect stooge and my money says he'll be the next mayor.

Shaker: Meanwhile we let the City Housing Authority continue to do our dirty work.

52. *Culture Clash*, *supra* note 4, at 44.

53. *Id.* at 47.

Watchman: Bingo.
 Mover: Getting rid of the Mexicans?
 Watchman: Bingo again. So what d'ya say?⁵⁴

The plot begins to unfold as Wilkinson refuses to answer questions about his political affiliations at a hearing for the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC). He is subsequently fired by the L.A. Housing Authority and black-listed from finding work. With an anti-housing project and anti-socialism platform, Norris Poulson (played by Salinas) runs for Los Angeles City Mayor and the Watchman's manipulative tactics put him in office in 1953. As the new Mayor, Poulson works to stomp out "creepy socialism"⁵⁵ and cancels the Elysian Park Heights housing project. Poulson then begins a concerted effort to guarantee the men who put him in office profit from this newly acquired city property. He sets off to convince baseball team owner Walter O'Malley to relocate the Brooklyn Dodgers to Los Angeles.⁵⁶

Culture Clash infuses a *rasquachi* aesthetic into their performance to further demonstrate the resourcefulness and creativity of marginalized communities. For instance, Culture Clash displays their own imaginative resourcefulness in a scene where County Supervisor Kenneth Hahn (Salinas), O'Malley (Montoya), and a Department of Water and Power helicopter pilot (Galindo) survey Chavez Ravine as the potential site of Dodger Stadium. Manazar stands behind the three sitting characters and swings a long object over his head to simulate a propeller. The actors sway back and forth, side-to-side in unison, successfully

54. *Id.* at 48.

55. Here, Culture Clash emphasizes the way the Watchman controlled Poulson. In reality, the *Los Angeles Times* referred to the housing project as a form of "creeping socialism." In the play, the Watchman whispers this phrase to Poulson, who hears the words incorrectly and exclaims, "Creepy socialism!" *Id.* at 72.

56. Ronald López notes that Los Angeles County Supervisor Kenneth Hahn initiated discussions with Walter O'Malley to relocate the Brooklyn Dodgers to Los Angeles. See LÓPEZ, *supra* note 9, at 140-45. Rodolfo Acuña also explains that then Los Angeles City Council member Rosalind Wyman joined downtown businessmen and Mayor Poulson to promote the Dodger deal. See ACUÑA, *supra* note 9, at 76-77; see also LÓPEZ, *supra* note 9, at 140-45. The City offered O'Malley the Chavez Ravine land in part because of their complete disregard for the residents who had been displaced with a promise for public housing. In a 2003 interview with the *Los Angeles Times*, Wyman reiterated this disrespect for the three, predominately Mexican American neighborhoods and the vibrant community they had cultivated in Chavez Ravine. She remarked, "I wanted my city to be big league. Chavez Ravine just sat there, nonproductive." See Boehm, *supra* note 3, at E38-39. It should be noted that Culture Clash performed *Chavez Ravine* during a specific time period in Los Angeles history, when Kenneth Hahn's son James Kenneth Hahn served as the mayor of Los Angeles and Walter O'Malley's son Peter O'Malley and Rosalind Wyman both sat on the Board of Directors for the Los Angeles Music Center-the umbrella organization encompassing the Mark Taper Forum which hosted the performance.

and humorously projecting the illusion of flying in a helicopter, hundreds of feet up in the air.

In a later scene, Culture Clash combines a *rasquachi* aesthetic with slapstick comedy as Mayor Poulson travels to Vero Beach Florida to persuade O'Malley to bring the Dodgers to Los Angeles. The O'Malley and Poulson characters mime Manazar's descriptions of this meeting:

Manazar: Nobody really knows what happened that day, so I'll sort of summarize, freely mixing fact with fiction. The negotiations were like a sparing match (the negotiators shadow-box)
Like a game of ro-sham-po (they play ro-sham-po and audience hears them say "rock, paper, scissors")
Chest thumping (they thump their chests).
And tap dancing (they tap dance). With fancy moves y todo 'a la River dance, ahoo-hoo! Some say Mayor Poulson gave O'Malley the shirt off his back (he offers shirt to O'Malley).

O'Malley: No. (Poulson offers his underwear).

Manazar: And his chonies ("underwear").⁵⁷
At the end of the day, it looked like LA was gonna get those Brooklyn Bums after all. The city was gonna spend a pile of dough to clear and level the land. And O'Malley would build himself a dream stadium.⁵⁸

Through *Chavez Ravine*, Culture Clash recounts a story ignored by many mainstream accounts of Los Angeles history. Indeed, by telling the history of Chavez Ravine to the character of Fernando Valenzuela as he begins his career with the Dodgers, Culture Clash emphasizes the importance of retelling community histories and carrying on the oral tradition. Though their characterization did not fully capture Fernando's magnetic charisma and talents that led to the first mania in baseball—"Fernandomania"—Culture Clash's Fernando character represents the resilience of Mexican communities in the United States.⁵⁹ An immigrant from Sonora, Mexico himself, Fernando and his left-handed screwball brought thousands of Mexican and Chicana/o

57. Culture Clash, *supra* note 4, at 94.

58. *Id.* at 96.

59. It can also be argued that the Dodger organization marketed "Fernandomania" to sell more tickets. Still, Valenzuela's talents and graciousness attracted unprecedented numbers of Dodger fans, most of who had never heard of the history of Chavez Ravine.

Stadium. Los Angeles power brokers marketed the referendum to city residents using Hollywood celebrity endorsements, such as actor Ronald Reagan on a telethon that sought to garner “yes” votes for Proposition B as a vote “for baseball.” María challenges the power of celebrities and money by organizing Chavez Ravine residents to vote against the proposition and encourages by showing them that they are not alone in their struggle. She cites multiple Los Angeles residents who openly support their cause and oppose the referendum, including Eli Kovner of the *Eastside Sun* newspaper—a highly regarded Rabbi in Boyle Heights, and the first Mexican Los Angeles City Councilman—Edward Roybal.⁶¹ In spite of strong financial backing and Hollywood celebrity support, Proposition B passed by only a narrow margin.

Chavez Ravine (6) uses interdisciplinary methods to present a critical race theater that challenges racism and documents a community’s struggle for social justice. Culture Clash uses judicial records, oral histories, memoirs, academic scholarship, newspapers, poetry, music, slapstick comedy, and satire to tell a racialized, classed counterstory through gendered, bilingual voices. The scene recounting the events of May 8, 1959 evidences this interdisciplinary approach to performing history. Manazar narrates the televised eviction, when L.A. County Sheriffs removed the twelve remaining families in Chavez Ravine. The scene follows with sheriffs physically carrying María and her mother out of their home in handcuffs. María shouts, “*Si, se puede!*” as the rest of the ensemble hold up enlarged archival photos of the actual Chavez Ravine residents, the former neighborhoods, and the forced eviction. The strong voice of María’s mother (Mrs. Ruiz) rises over the commotion and quiets the crowd. She declares,

Mother: We are not the Mulhollands. (We hear the
 pump action of a shotgun)
 We are not the Lankershims or the Van
 Nuys, (We hear the pump action of a
 shotgun)
 But you’ll remember this name, Arechiga
 (We hear the pump action of a shotgun)

61. *Id.* at 99, 114.

Cabral, Casos y Lopez, (We hear the pump
 action of a shotgun)
 Perez (We hear the pump action)
 Ramirez (We hear the pump action)
 You took our sons to fight your war, And
 now you take our homes. (We hear the
 pump action of a shotgun)
 Our land, (We hear the pump action of a
 shotgun)⁶²
Mi casa no es tu casa. Sabes que? Why don't
 you tell the *pinche* sheriff to build a stadium
 in his own goddamn backyard. (We hear
 bulldozer/siren and city sounds).⁶³

This defiant speech resonates with the community organizer's slogan "Remember Chavez Ravine!"⁶⁴ Through the portrayal of Mrs. Ruiz, *Culture Clash* affirms the importance of telling the counterstory of Bishop, La Loma, and Palo Verde. While the lives and struggles of Mexican immigrants, Mexican Americans, and working class Families of Color may be considered marginal in most mainstream historical accounts, *Culture Clash* honors these communities. By telling this counterstory in a mainstream theater venue, *Culture Clash* publicly reclaims the historical significance of these families standing up against injustice.

Indeed, through *Chavez Ravine*, *Culture Clash* demonstrates the ongoing need to nurture community memory and collective history. This example of critical race theater portrays the complexity and humanity of Los Angeles history as it both depicts and adds to the legacy of Chicana/o community resistance. Though their neighborhoods were eventually bulldozed,⁶⁵ Manazar reminds the audience:

Manazar: Memory cannot be flattened. Memory is
 history singing in tune with the stars, and no
 sheriff's baton can reach that high.⁶⁶

62. *Id.* at 133-34.

63. *Id.* at 135.

64. LÓPEZ, *supra* note 9, at 22.

65. *Culture Clash* cites the late Manazar Gamboa's epic poem that accounts for the joys of his childhood neighborhood and the pain of its destruction. See MANAZAR GAMBOA, *MEMORIES AROUND A BULLDOZED BARRIO: BOOK ONE* (1996).

66. *Culture Clash*, *supra* note 4, at 132.