

Ethnic Identity between Assimilationism and  
Separatism: August Wilson's Joe Turner's Come and  
Gone and Luis Valdez's Zoot Suit

الهوية العرقية بين الاندماجية والانفصالية: مسرحية "ذهاب جو ترنر وعودته"  
للكاتب أوجست ولسن ومسرحية "بدلة زووت" للويس فالديز

Dr. Amal Ibrahim Kamel  
Department of English language and Literature  
Faculty of Arts - Fayoum University

د. أمل إبراهيم كامل  
قسم اللغة الإنجليزية وآدابها  
كلية الآداب - جامعة الفيوم



**Ethnic Identity between Assimilationism and Separatism: August Wilson's *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* and Luis Valdez's *Zoot Suit***

**Abstract**

Despite the multicultural nature of the American society, as it embraces multiple ethnic groups, it hides a long history of alienation, displacement as well as psychological deprivation of ethnic Americans. Therefore, ethnic American literature is characterized by a resistance of racial discrimination practiced against ethnic minorities such as African-Americans and Mexican-Americans. This study aims to examine August Wilson's *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (1984) and Luis Valdez's *Zoot Suit* (1979) to highlight the oppression and marginalization of African-Americans and Hispanics in the American society. These issues will be approached from the theoretical perspective of critical race theory. The theory is used to investigate how Wilson and Valdez explore the dilemma of dual cultural identity of ethnic minorities in the diasporic American society.

**Keywords:** Ethnic identity, African-Americans, Hispanics, diaspora, migration, integration.

الهوية العرقية بين الاندماجية والانفصالية: مسرحية "ذهاب جو ترنر وعودته" للكاتب  
أوجست ولسن ومسرحية "بدلة زووت" للويس فالديز

**ملخص البحث:**

بالرغم من الطبيعة المتعددة الثقافات للمجتمع الأمريكي، حيث إنه يضم جماعات عرقية متعددة، فإنها تخفي تاريخاً طويلاً من الاغتراب والتشرد والحرمان النفسي للأمريكيين ذوي الأصول العرقية المختلفة/ غير البيضاء. ولذلك فإن الأدب الأمريكي العرقي يتسم بمقاومة التمييز العنصري الذي يمارس ضد الاقليات العرقية كالأمريكيين من أصل أفريقي والمكسيكيين-الأمريكيين. ويهدف هذا البحث إلى دراسة مسرحية "ذهاب جو ترنر وعودته" للكاتب أوجست ولسن ١٩٨٤، ومسرحية "بدلة زووت" للويس فالديز (١٩٧٩) لتسليط الضوء على قمع وتهميش الأمريكيين من أصل أفريقي ومن أصل لاتيني في المجتمع الأمريكي. وسيتم تناول هذه القضايا في ضوء الإطار النظري لنظرية العرق النقدية. وتستخدم هذه النظرية لدراسة كيف يستكشف ويلسون وفالديز معضلة الهوية الثقافية المزدوجة للأقليات العرقية في المجتمع الأمريكي متعدد الثقافات.

**الكلمات الرئيسية:** الهوية العرقية، الأمريكيين من أصل أفريقي، اللاتينيين، الشتات، هجرة، تكامل.

## **Ethnic Identity between Assimilationism and Separatism: August Wilson's *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* and Luis Valdez's *Zoot Suit***

Marginalized social groups have found in multicultural theatre a powerful medium for the expression of their alienation and displacement as it helps in presenting how they are pushed aside by their community; and ethnic minorities are no exception. The 1980s has witnessed many attempts to unite various ethnic groups in the American society under one umbrella and there was a tendency to celebrate cultural diversity as a means of resistance and change. This study aims to explore how August Wilson and Luis Valdez attempt to dramatize the vicissitudes of racism in America through a group of characters of mixed ethnicity who claim their rights to be heard and struggle in their way of self-definition, social acceptance and integration. This study aims to examine August Wilson's *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (1984) and Luis Valdez's *Zoot Suit* (1979) to highlight the oppression and marginalization of African-Americans and Hispanics in the American society. These issues will be approached from the theoretical perspective of critical race theory. The theory is used to investigate how Wilson and Valdez explore the dilemma of dual cultural identity of ethnic minorities in the diasporic American society.

Critical race theory (CRT) started in the mid-1970s in the field of legal studies by writers who have been "challenging racial orthodoxy, shaking up the legal academy, questioning comfortable liberal premises, and leading the search for new ways of thinking about our nation's most intractable, and insoluble, problem – race" (Delgado xvi). It seeks racial justice and reform and it sheds light on issues racial injustice and discrimination nonwhites face on daily basis in the diverse American community. "Critical race theorists emphasize the ways in which racism is normalized in US culture, such that the principles of liberalism are not adequate to address its distortions" (Rivkin 962). Adopted by cultural studies, critical race theory is defined as a framework that "considers many of the same issues that conventional civil rights and ethnic studies discourses take up, but places them in a broader perspective that includes economics, history, context, group – and self-interest, and even feelings

and the unconscious” (Delgado 3). Moreover, because Latinos felt that their main interests are not covered by the fundamental tenets of CRT, Latino critical theory (LatCrit) later emerged as “supplementary and complementary, to critical race theory” (Valdes 26). It raises the issues that concern Latino group and calls for their rights. Nevertheless, Solorzano and Bernal assert that “a critical race and LatCrit framework is committed to social justice and offers a liberatory or transformative response to racial, gender, and class oppression” (313); thus referring to the integration of both theories and their main goal.

There are five main tenets of CRT provided by different sources: (1) the idea that racism is ordinary; (2) the notion of interest convergence; (3) race as a social construct; (4) counter storytelling; (5) white supremacy and privilege. First, racial power is maintained over time as people of color are marginalized and ‘othered’ by the dominant culture. They tend to form an enclave to live in. Whites claim that they rule by merit and talent and that they are not held responsible for the struggle people of color had to face on daily basis. This fact leads to the difficulty of eradicating racial segregation. Second, Derrick Bell’s theory of interest convergence or material determinism refers to the fact that a large number of society, like the elite white, are less motivated to cure the ills of racism. They take no positive step towards racial emancipation. Bell criticizes the conventional image of law, provided by the liberals, as neutral and objective because it hides its role in sustaining racism. Third, refers to the idea that race is not a genetic product but it is created by society and results in people of color being always denied their rights and excluded from participation in community activities. Fourth, critical race theorists favor using narratives to explore the experiences of ethnic minorities and the oppression they suffer from. Writers of color use counter storytelling to narrate their experience with racial discrimination and the legal system. Fifth, the whites enjoy a myriad of benefits as they represent the dominant race in the American society. Only the whites have the right to possess and to exclude others. They are the primary recipients of civil rights legislation (Delgado 7-10).

Critical race theorists aim at defying the ideological contestation of racism in the American community as a whole; and their target is

social transformation through empowering marginalized populations. “Color-blindness” has been advocated as the norm of both racial and social enlightenment. “Once the irrational biases of race-consciousness are eradicated, everyone will be treated fairly, as equal competitors in a regime of equal opportunity” (Crenshaw et al xvi). CRT comes as a reaction to the large scale practices of racial bias still inflicting the American society despite the efforts exerted by civil rights movements that failed to totally eradicate apartheid from all mainstream American institutions. Critical race theorists deplore the fact that “the deeply transformative potential of the civil rights movement’s interrogation of racial power was successfully aborted as a piece of mainstream American ideology” (Crenshaw et al xvi). The limitations of left-liberal accounts of race in legal studies and the shortcomings in the application of the civil rights doctrines have led to the need for an alternative intellectual premise and methodology that would consider the accomplishment of integrationist discourse and strategy as its determinate goal. Critical race theorists oppose racial domination and attempt to accomplish racial impartiality through the implementation of antidiscrimination norms and legal amendment. Moreover, CRT offers a critique of liberals’ “affirmative action”\_ the idea that racism is an obvious fact\_ due to the fact that it does not succeed in obliterating racial power and white supremacy. Crenshaw rightly contends: “Critical Race Theory fully comprehends that the aim of affirmative action is to create enough exceptions to white privilege to make the mythology of equal opportunity seem at least plausible” (xxix). In 1984, Delgado conducted a research and proved that white law professors quoted each other and excluded nonwhite scholars; he published his “Imperial Scholar” as a reflection of continuing racial discrimination in the civil rights field. Delgado thus uncovered racist practices that prevent any steps towards an integrated society.

This paper aims at exploring how far people of color suffer from oppressive racial discrimination of the dominant culture and how far they react to it either by assimilationism or separatism. Separatism entails negative abandonment of the Anglo community and complete adoption of ethnic cultural heritage. In contrast, “Assimilationism” refers to “both

adoption of mainstream cultural norms and loss of indigenous cultural distinctiveness” whereas integration is “a political goal of gaining access to institutions, opportunities, levers of power, in the mainstream economic, social, and political structures” (Hall 2). Moreover, it will be shown that through defiance of mainstream exclusionist forces and adherence to their cultural inheritance that people of color can achieve a compromise or rather can negotiate their double identities. CRT is chosen to be applied on the two plays under examination as it “not only tries to understand the social situation, but to change it ...to transform it for the better” (Delgado 3). Utilizing a CRT lens helps in unmasking the oppression practiced against minority populations in America, working towards the elimination of racism, empowering oppressed ethnic groups and motivating them to express their resistance and to find relief through sharing their cultural experience with one another.

Both Wilson’s *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* and Valdez’s *Zoot Suit* address issues related to their marginalized ethnic cultures. They both have a historical background; *Joe Turner* is based on the Great Migration in the early decades of the twentieth century and *Zoot Suit* is based on the Zoot Suit Riots in 1943. A number of thematic parallels exist between both plays as they both deal with ethnic injustice and social rejection that individuals of mixed identity suffer from. Moreover, both plays reject either assimilation or separation and sustain integration as a positive means of participation in the dominant cultural and social paradigms. George de Vos defines ethnic group as a “self-perceived group of people who hold in common a set of traditions not shared by the others with whom they are in contact” (9). In his play *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*, Wilson reconstructs the life and diasporic experience of ethnic group of residents in a boarding house in Pittsburgh Pennsylvania in 1911 and their struggle for social acceptance. Arguably they represent the massive migration from South to North America of sons and daughters of former slaves who wish to escape the hegemonic racism and slavery of the South due to constitutional discrimination. Wilson opens his play with the ‘juba’ dance; a dance routinely performed by the inhabitants in the boarding house as an expression of their deep-rooted connection to their heritage and culture. This dance was basically performed by original plantation

slaves in the South. The juba dance connects African spiritual practices and Christian beliefs. By this significant opening, Wilson refers to some of the ways by which historically marginalized populations embrace their cultural values and heritage. In this sense, Wilson reveals the divided nature of the American community. Shafer maintains that “As a child Wilson suffered the effects of racism in America: when his family tried to move into a mostly white neighborhood, bricks were thrown through the windows and when he went to a largely white high school, white students left ugly, racist notes on his desk” (268). Thus Wilson’s artistic vision is deeply connected to his personal experiences.

*The Encyclopedia of Latin American Theatre* describes Luis Valdez’s theatre, Teatro Campesino, as “revolutionary both in its content and in its presentation” and that it “was lively, spontaneous, heterogeneous, satirical, and politically compromised” (81). The language used in Valdez’s plays was a mixture of English, Spanish and Chicano. The acto is the most popular form of Chicano theatre; it is a “short flexible dramatic sketch that communicates directly through the language and culture of the Chicanos in order to present a clear and concise social or political message” (Kanellos 73). *Zoot Suit* is based on historical events in 1943 in Los Angeles when a gang of sailors attacked a group of Mexican-Americans wearing zoot suits. Violence and racial tensions were the outcome of this assault for several weeks as many Mexican Americans were arrested for being accused of murder of what was then known as the Sleepy Lagoon Case. In *Zoot Suit*, Valdez depicts the struggle of some Mexican-Americans and how they are always subject to investigation, kept under scrutiny and persecuted wrongfully. The play reveals how racist practices deprive people of color of their autonomy and ultimately alienate them. The zoot suit represents more than a fashion for Mexican-Americans; it works as a token of their uniqueness and a cultural identifier for Chicanos who suffer from marginalization and exclusion at the hands of white Anglo Americans. Although the uniqueness of Chicanos is manifest through the uniformity of their clothing, it is “for Angelenos, servicemen, and police, like waving a red flag in front of a bull” (Heyck 6). Because Mexican American youth were constantly beaten by U.S. sailors and marines, the zoot suit riots break out. The play

further reveals how Chicanos as ethnic minority group lead a life of poverty and humiliation in their own country in the 1970s as well. Hernandez- Truyol asserts that “Issues of race and sex are illustrative of the narrow, myopic, Western/Northern power centered...perspective that must be transformed” (411).

The title *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* comes from a blues song about Joe Turner, a white man who used to capture slaves to work in his plantation. Though an off-stage character, Joe Turner embodies the repression and harassment that African-Americans had suffered from at the hands of the white man. Harold Loomis, the protagonist of *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*, is a former clergyman who suffers from disruption of family ties as he searches for his wife Martha; yet the quest is basically for his identity. Loomis is now homeless and tired after spending seven years of enslavement and hard labor for Joe Turner. He was kidnapped by Joe Turner in the middle of a sermon and he is now one of the residents of Seth’s boardinghouse. Almost all those inhabitants represent the struggle of African-Americans to find a better environment in a hostile world which deliberately denies their presence. Bette Dickerson notes that the Moynihan’s Report undermines the “African-American culture as uncivil, unworthy, or unfitting for mainstream America and therefore not worthy of all the rights and privileges of white America” (84).

As a tormented individual, Loomis has to deal with the consequences of being subjected to long years of repression and racist practices. He says to Bynum: “The ground’s starting to shake. There’s a great shaking. The world’s busting half in two. The sky’s splitting open. I got to stand up” (55). Suffering from psychological problems, Loomis then cries for help and screams his anger against the other residents to stop their Juba dance especially when they mentioned the Holy Ghost in their song. He suddenly begins to speak in tongues. It seems that his enslavement stripped him of his faith in Christianity and created a divided self or a conflict between his African roots and Christian faith. In his influential book, *The Souls of Black folk*, Du Bois emphasizes that “It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others...one ever feels his

twoness - an American, a Negro, two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings, two warring ideals in one dark body whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” (5). Loomis suffers from this contradiction of twoness; he has a horrible vision that reflects his physical and psychological torment: bones walking upon the ground and bones sinking into water and turning into black flesh. Then overwhelmed by horror and a type of madness, Loomis collapses onto the floor. His surrealistic vision accounts for a whole race of forgotten slaves who died in slave ships and thrown into the ocean. The vision refers to the brutality by which enslaved Africans were treated. Thus racism leads to what Williams calls “corrosive psychic effects”, and “spirit murder” (318) of Loomis.

In *Zoot Suit*, Henry, the protagonist of the play, is presented as a tormented individual too who struggles with opposing forces: El-Pachuco, a mythical figure representing his subconsciousness or his ethnic roots, believes that Henry will never be accepted in the mainstream American community due to his Mexican origins, Henry’s white comrades who try to assist in his integration in the society, and himself who is eager to serve his country as a citizen. When the play opens, Henry and his girlfriend, Della, were arrested by the Los Angeles police among seventeen of Mexican American members of the 38<sup>th</sup> street gang as suspected guilty of the Sleepy Lagoon Murder. Ethnic hatred, police brutality and distrust are embodied through Lt. Edward and Sergeant Smith who keep on insulting the boys and treating them like animals.

The press, as a character in the play, contributed to defaming Mexican Americans and depicting them as “untrustworthy or even criminally oriented” (Luckenbill 1); a fact that led to the zoot suit riots in 1943. The social conditions, the Great Depression in 1930s, and the effects of the Second World War have all contributed to portraying a negative stereotype of Chicanos. They have often been described as the ‘Lazy Mexicans’ who must conform to the predominantly Anglo society. Furthermore, they have been treated as “alien workers” who represent “threats to employment” in America (Luckenbill 1). As a victim of racial injustice, Henry was accused of being the leader of the street gang and was abused by the authority although he was preparing himself to serve in

the American navy. As a result of the soldiers stripping Henry of his zoot suit, El-Pachuco tells him that he will not be accepted as an American citizen due to his ethnic origins and that:

This ain't your country. Look what's happening all around you. The Japs have sewed up the Pacific. Rommel is kicking ass in Egypt but the Mayor of L.A. has declared all-out war on Chicanos. On you! ...Is that what you want to go out and die for? Wise up. These bastard paddy cops have it in for you. You're a marked man. They think you're the enemy.  
(30)

In this sense, Henry is not merely stripped out of his zoot suit but of his cultural identity as well. El-Pachuco's speech could lead Henry to take a separatist attitude towards the American culture. At the same time, songs like the following encourage Henry to have ethnic pride and resist dominant exclusionist forces that stereotype Mexican-Americans and to establish his ethnic affiliation:

Put on a zoot suit makes you feel real  
Roots  
Look like a diamond, sparkling, shining  
Ready for dancing  
Ready for the boogie tonight. (26)

It is through reminding Henry of his Aztec heritage that El-Pachuco empowers Henry and makes him resist humiliation and social rejection in the predominantly Anglo society. In his interview with David Savran, Luis Valdez clarifies the significance of El-Pachuco in the play: "The Pachuco is the Jungian self-image, the superego if you will, the power inside every individual that's greater than any human institution" (265). El-Pachuco tries to disillusion Henry who thinks that by joining the navy and fighting for his country, he will put an end to the struggle for social acceptance:

Pachuco: The city is cracking down on pachucos, carnal. Don't you read the newspapers? They're screaming for blood.

Henry: All I know is they got nothing on me. I didn't do anything.

Pachuco: You're Henry Reyna, ese – Hank Reyna! The snarling Juvenile delinquent. The zootsuiter. The bitter young pachuco leader of 38<sup>th</sup> Street. That's what they got on you. (29)

El-Pachuco thus shows Henry that it is his ethnic identity that lies behind being accused of murder and that joining the Navy is a “stupid move” (30) because it will not help his self-affirmation. Moreover, as an “Aztec god of education” (Savarn 265), El-Pachuco teaches Henry that the war is inside and that he must fight racism and intolerance in the American society that stretched to the limits of the absurd, claiming “no court in land will set [you] free” (78). “Language presents the strongest barrier to the residents of Hispanic ghettos: poor English communication skills ensure that Hispanic immigrants remain segregated in Spanish-speaking neighborhood, limiting their ability to move up the social and economic ladder” (Benjamin A. Lawson 69). As a Mexican-American, Henry's Calo language, which is a mixture of Spanish and English, and his skin color identify him as an outsider. “By every social indicator, racism continues to blight the lives of people of color, including holders of high-echelon jobs, even judges” (Delgado 10). The American legal system is depicted as a corrupt system that represses weak minority subjects. Latinos of Mexican origin “continue to suffer disproportionately from poverty and from low educational attainment” (Villenas and Deyhle 418); consequently, the outcome is their “racialization as a monolithic Hispanic Other” (414).

Similarly, financial abuse and economic exploitation are dramatized in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* as Selig, a white man and a peddler provides Seth with raw materials and takes the products and sells them to other blacks. Selig's ancestors had a long history of trading in blacks and capturing slaves. Taylor E. argues: “Individual racist acts are

not isolated instances of bigoted behavior but a reflection of the larger, structural, and institutional fact of white hegemony” (122-3). Although Selig “controls the economy in which Seth’s labor is traded” (Nadel 99), he has a kind of popularity and likeability in the African-American community. In a personal interview, Wilson confirms the depiction of Selig in a favorable light: “I like Selig. I like the idea that he’s a People Finder...I like his honesty; I like his straightforwardness. I like the fact he presents himself without apology” (199). Seth is viewed by his creditors as “a nigger nothing”; ironically, the same term used by Seth to refer to Loomis. As Hernan Vera and Joe R. Feagin rightly contend: Some “African-Americans use the term [nigger] to remain mindful of social realities or ‘to keep it real’...Others recognize it as a means of gaining empowerment and defying racial subordination while distinguishing themselves from (the culturally self-ostracized) assimilate ‘Negro’” (107). Violation of civic and human rights is dramatized through Jerney’s character who has been arrested by the police, accused of being drunk though he was not. Bertha refers to the fact that the corrupt system often imprisons innocent blacks: “You know the police do that. Figure there’s too many people out on the street they take some of them off” (13). Wilson criticizes officers of the law for discrimination against black citizens. As an innocent man, Jerney was fired from his job as he refused to be exploited by a white man and to give him part of his salary. But Molly advises him to go back to work as the employers would not be able to remember his face as they treat all blacks like animals.

Villenas and Deyhle note that minority groups are treated as outcasts whose presence in the mainstream community is marked by “castification”, i.e. “an institutionalized way of exploiting one social group...reducing this group to the status of a lower caste that cannot enjoy the same rights and obligations possessed by the other groups...to disempower them”(419) . Moreover, endless quest is a recurrent motif throughout *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*. Besides Loomis’s search for Martha, we find Mattie searching for her husband Jack, and Jeremy looking for his girlfriend. Ironically, Bynum is also looking for the ‘shining man’, a missionary who conducted a cleansing ritual for Bynum

and seems to show him the way. Generally speaking, after the migration, ethnic minority groups used to live in houses owned by slumlords known as “ghettos”. Paul A. Jargowsky clearly states that “terms such as ghetto and barrio clearly have racial and ethnic connotations [and] class connotations” (7). Nevertheless, the playwright’s choice of a boardinghouse as a setting where people are temporarily staying signifies the unrest that African-Americans have to endure. Takaki asserts that many Africans who immigrated to the north were “restless, dissatisfied, unwilling to mask their true selves and accommodate to traditional roles” (344).

Like El-Pachuco in *Zoot Suit*, Bynum Walker in *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* is presented as a conjurer or a spiritual leader who has supernatural power that brings about people dispersed by harsh circumstances. He has learnt how to bind people together from the ‘shiny man’ and the spirit of his father. The shiny man has given Bynum cleansing in blood ritual and guidance. This accounts for the reason that people come to him to find each other. Bynum has already found his song (i.e. his individual and cultural identity and autonomy) and he “gives the impression of always being in control of everything. Nothing bothers him. He seems to be lost in a world of his own making and to swallow any adversity or interference with his grand design” (4). Bynum’s mission in life is to mend shattered relationships and to help in the reunion of broken families. As a wise man, Bynum advises Mattie not to go back to Jack as he is not a suitable mate for her and he also advises Jeremy, who is in a need for a suitable woman after his girlfriend had suddenly left him, to unite with Molly. The companionship between Jeremy and Molly is what they both need to form “a new identity as free men and women of definite and sincere worth” (*Joe Turner*, Introduction).

Similarly, in *Zoot Suit*, El-Pachuco works as a supernatural figure that has the power to stop the action by a snap of his finger. He can also go back to the past to reveal much more about Henry’s life. The play, therefore, evokes Brechtian technique of alienation as manifest in El-Pachuco’s ability to direct his speech to the audience to prevent any emotional identification with Mexican-Americans. Alternating Spanish

and English language is remarkably used; especially in moments of intimacy or emotional intensification, the characters resort back to Spanish as in the dance or the fight scenes. As the play progresses, Henry is happily waiting for being enlisted in the American navy and his readiness to serve his country like any patriotic figure is highly stressed. Henry's mother, Dollores, tells him that she will get rid of his zoot suit immediately after he joins the navy claiming: "They've put you in jail so many times" (34). Henry's belief in his duty towards his nation reflects his assimilationist attitude. He says to his mother: "Don't worry. By this time next week, I'll be wearing my Navy blues, Okay?" (34). In contrast to Henry's inexperience as a young man, El-Pachuco represents the voice of wisdom and guidance of an older generation. He wants Henry to be proud of his ethnic identity, to be connected to his heritage and to defy assimilatory pressures. Unlike Henry's expectations, he was treated violently by the police after arresting him. He was "handcuffed to a chair and beaten by police" (71). Becoming dirty and tired, "he and his codefendants were brought before the Grand Jury covered in bruises" (71). They were not even allowed to take a bath or change their clothes and were "completely terrified by the treatment they had just received" (72). Thus, violation of human rights and denial of civic rights are basically depicted in the play.

During Henry's trial, the press plays its role in influencing public opinions and the judicial system by warning them of expected future violence from people of Mexican origins. For the press, Pachuco gangs embody "rape, drugs, assault and violence" (62). The press character says: "We are dealing with a threat and danger to our children, our families, our homes. Set these pachucos free, and you shall unleash the forces of anarchy and destruction in our society" (62). The press delivers a lengthy speech that unmasks prejudice, intolerance of other cultural framework and biased perspectives. Its antagonistic attitude and exclusionist ideology "render Latinos as 'immigrants', foreigners who have no claim to [America], while European Americans are constructed as [its] natural owners and inheritors" (Villenas and Deyhle 421).

In prison, Henry's dreamy and unrealistic attitude to life is lucid when he was still talking about "the appeal" or joining the navy. El-

Pachuco warns him claiming: “stop hanging onto false hopes” (78). In his interview with Roberta Orona-Cordova, Luis Valdez describes the role played by El-Pachuco in the play: “[El-Pachuco is] the rebel...who refuses to give in, refuses to bend, refuses to admit he is wrong...what this figure represents is a self-determined identity, it comes from its own base” (98). Thus this mythical character stands for the Chicanos connection to their heritage rather than their separatism from the mainstream American cultural forces. It enhances a sense of pride in Mexican roots and it marks a reaction to a long history of ethnic struggle for social acceptance in a poly-ethnic community. Moreover, it helps Henry to balance his Mexican and American identities without either complete separation or negative assimilation. Valdez confirms that young Chicanos should learn how to achieve balance in their life because if they merely “follow the white man”, they will lead a life of humiliation and oppression. Fanon (1967) argues that: For the man of color to assert his own individuality,

There is only one way out, and it leads into the white world. Whence his constant preoccupation with attracting the attention of the white man, his concern with being powerful like the white man, his determined effort to acquire protective qualities...that is, the proportion of being or having that enters into the composition of an ego.  
(60)

By its dialectical logic, El-Pachuco attacks the press claiming: “The press distorted the very meaning of the word ‘zoot suit’. All it is for you guys is another way to say Mexican. But the ideal of the original chuco was to look like a diamond...finding a style of urban survival” (79-80). Through skillfully manipulating El-Pachuco as a means of illuminating others, Valdez could resist dehumanization and exclusion of Chicanos in 1970s. When Henry was fighting with Rafas, El-Pachuco warns him that this fight will sustain the stereotypical view propagated by the media about Mexican-Americans that they are aggressive and Henry learns the lesson very well and stops the knife fight. In addition, in order to preserve the integrity of the Chicanos in the American

community, El-Pachuco wants Henry to marry Della, the Chicana, and not Alice, the Anglo-American.

Significantly, Valdez introduces two white characters who seem to support the rights of Mexican-Americans as a minority group living in a poly-ethnic community. These characters are George Shearer who represents the defense committee and Alice Bloomfield who works as a reporter from the *Daily People's World*; they help Henry to harmonize his double identity and regain his freedom. This step might be a reference to the importance of encompassing minorities within the social fabric. The speech delivered by George serves a number of functions: it counterbalances that delivered by the press, it rejects the exclusionist measures of the dominant social structure and it calls for justice for all American citizens regardless of their color or race. George says: "All the prosecution has been able to prove is that these boys wear long hair and zoot suits. And the rest has been circumstantial evidence, hearsay and war hysteria" (62). According to George's discourse, the whole American society should fight "racial intolerance" and "totalitarian injustice" and stop looking at Mexican-Americans as "inhuman gangsters" (62). Edward Said refers to the importance of resisting the colonizing power of the dominant culture arguing that: "the great movement of decolonization" aims at asserting ethnic minority groups' "national identities, self-determination, and national independence" (xii).

As for Alice, she prepares a publication containing current events focusing on the Sleepy Lagoon murder case to keep the boys informed about their appeal. Ironically, Alice too fights for her right to be a communist and a Jew. She shares an experience of myriad forms of oppression similar to Henry's and she tries to help him to believe in himself claiming: "Henry, no matter what happens in the trial, I want you to know I believe you're innocent" (51). Significantly, because the play opposes assimilationism, a suggested marriage between Henry and Alice will be impossible. Carole Hamilton describes the role played by Alice in Henry's life as based on guardianship same as the role played by El-Pachuco. She argues that when Alice meets Henry in his solitary confinement, "the transfer of mentorship has completed, and Henry will

be in her hands until he returns to society, rising from the dead” (n.p.). Arguably, marrying Alice is similar to joining the navy as both suggest assimilation into the Anglo-American culture whereas Henry’s interaction with El-Pachuco represents his ethnic cultural inheritance and separation. The resolution of the play occurs when Henry chooses unassimilated integration into the dominant culture together with keeping his distinctive cultural heritage and this is described in the play as to “fight in new ways”. In his interview, Wilson criticizes the “melting pot” notion of ethnicity claiming: “Blacks don’t melt in a pot...because we’re very visible minority... We have a culture” (173).

Actually, the play’s end does not resolve the conflict as although the zoot suitors are released due to legal misconduct, the vicious cycle of victimization still exists. During the Pachuco gang’s celebration of their release, George’s car is stolen and the cops arrest Joey; a sign that marks an endless practice of humiliation and inhuman treatment of ethnic minorities. El-Pachuco concludes the play with the following powerful words: “The cops are still tracking us down like dogs, the gangs are still killing each other, and families are barely surviving” (88). The press screams: “Kill the Pachuco bastard” (80). *Zoot Suit* ends with a scene embodying Henry’s vision of the beating and stripping of El-Pachuco. The final scene presents spiritual rebirth and final sacrifice of El-Pachuco who exits “into the shadows” after being humiliated (81). Yet, out of this sacrifice, he arises as the “Aztec god of education” (Savarn 265). Henry’s vision of El-Pachuco’s sacrifice binds together the two poles of his antithetic identity to make him psychologically whole. This wholeness resolves Henry’s inner conflict and leads to a form of reconciliation or integration into the mainstream community without assimilation.

Arguably, the role played by El-Pachuco in Henry’s life parallels the role played by Bynum in Loomis’s life. When Loomis falls down in paralysis after the terrible vision, Bynum is the only one who could assist him. It seems that Bynum has had this revelatory encounter before. Loomis could not understand the significance of his vision until Bynum interprets it. Both of them repeat words and phrases that recall the blues or African music and song. The spiritual healing effect of these blues

was great as it binds Loomis to his African heritage and identity. Finding his song necessitates that Loomis restores his true identity and self-worth of which he was deprived during years of slavery. Bynum assures him that he still possesses his African heritage deep inside his heart but he has forgotten it because of enslavement and repression. Brutal captivity has deprived him of freedom:

Bynum: What Joe Turner wanted was your song. He wanted to have that song to be his. He thought by catching you he could learn that song. Every nigger he catch he is looking for the one he can learn that song from. Now he's got you bound up to where you can't sing your own song .Couldn't sing it them seven years cause you was afraid he would snatch it from under you. But you still got it. You just forgot how to sing it. (73)

In order to restore his song, Loomis has to learn to obtain a free soul and defy objectification and subordination to the white man. Reuniting with his wife is only the beginning; a means by which Loomis can be connected to his African roots. He says: "I been wandering a long time in somebody else's world. When I find my wife that be the making of my own" (72). Unfortunately, when Loomis finally finds Martha, he realized that they have become completely different and that the bond between them does not exist anymore. He says to her: "Now that I can see your face I can say my goodbye and make my own world" (90). For Loomis, separation entails self-realization. He must make his own way in life and he wants to belong to himself. Bynum claims that he "can't bind what don't cling" and that he "bound the little girl to her mother" (91). Bynum knows that Loomis's and Martha's lives are different now and he cannot bind them together. He, nevertheless, uses his magic to bind Zonia to her mother.

The resolution of the play occurs when Loomis decides that he will not leave anybody else to bind him up and that he will pursue his freedom. Loomis feels that Christianity views slavery with passivity and that it seems to approve the superiority of the white race and the

subjugation of his black folks. It neither offers him salvation in his life nor has been able to help the oppressed. He claims: "I don't need nobody to bleed for me! I can bleed for myself" (93). Fanon (1963) asserts that without obtaining cultural identity "there will be serious psycho-affective injuries and the result will be individuals without an anchor, without a horizon, colorless, stateless, and rootless" (218). The play ends with Loomis slashing himself across the chest with a knife and bleeding for himself to get rid of his Christian identity that is no longer related to his experiences. He wants to create an African god that replaces the privileged position of "what August Wilson calls 'the white man's god'" (Shannon 137).

Instead of separating himself from the world, he embraces his own power to enact transformation; and more importantly, he wants to renew his spirit and to gain self-worth and reunion with his African roots. Undergoing a spiritual resurrection, he asserts his individuality in sacrificially binding himself to the community of his vision or rather to his heritage. The blood sacrifice is a metaphor for personal transformation and rebirth. Through this cleansing ritual and communion with his own heritage, Loomis could find his song and his distinctive identity as an African. He has been transformed from being a former slave into 'the shining man' that Bynum was searching for. Loomis has become "shining like new money!" (94). He rejects assimilation and creates a better means through which he can balance his African and American identity. Embracing his 'Africanness', Loomis becomes an illuminating figure for African-Americans or a symbol of creating his vision in life and freedom. His attitude is similar to the one described by subsequent critical race theorists: "to join our society on anything like equal terms, minorities and women must demand neither mere entry nor special accommodation. Instead they must demand transformation" (Williams 305).

To conclude, both *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* and *Zoot Suit* address black self-definition rather than black and white relationship in a pluralistic society. The plays richly explore issues of displacement and suggest harmonious integration of 'hyphenated Americans' into the dominant culture. The protagonist in each play struggles against

intolerance and racism, refuses assimilation and chooses unassimilated integration as a means of ensuring his connectedness to his ethnic origins. Blacks are depicted as the victims brutalized by the whites, nevertheless, they defy the challenges and choose to preserve their distinctive cultural identity and personal heritage for the purpose of social change, emancipation and self-determination. Transformed into autonomous subjects, they choose participation in the larger society without cultural assimilation. The presentation of Bynum and El-Pachuco as guiding spirits in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* and *Zoot Suit* respectively is symbolic of the necessity of embracing the culture of the past and the belief in spiritual and supernatural power. Both plays make an outraged but reformative call to social justice. On the technical level, both Wilson and Valdez combine traditional dance and song with myth and epic techniques to integrate African-Americans and Chicanos into their culture. A close analysis of *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* and *Zoot Suit* can lead one to argue that both Wilson and Valdez reject assimilated ideology that makes the minor cultures immersed in the American cultural fragmentation. They both write for the purpose of empowering their diasporic communities with ethnic pride and racial solidarity as well as interaction with the mainstream community. The outcome is undoubtedly an undeniable mark that enriches ethnic minority theatre.

## WORKS CITED

- “Chicano”. *The Encyclopedia of Latin American Theatre*. Greenwood, 2003.
- Crenshaw, Kimberle et al. *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings that Formed the Movement*. The New Press, 1995.
- Delgado R. and Jean Stefancic. *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*. NY University Press, 2001.
- De Vos, George. “Ethnic Pluralism: Conflict Accommodation” in *Ethnic Identity: Cultural Continuities and Change*. Edited by George de Vos and Lola Romanucci-Ross. Palo Alto, Mayfield Publishing Company, 9, 1975.
- Dickerson, B. *African American Single Mothers: Understanding their Lives and Families*. Sage, 1995.
- Du Bois. *The Souls of Black Folk*. Penguin Books, 1965.
- Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Translated by Charles Lam Markmann, Grove Press, 1967.
- . *The Wretched of the Earth*. Translated by Constance Farrington, Grove Press, 1963.
- Hall, P. “(Structural) Integration vs. (Cultural) Assimilation: A Distinction with a Difference”. The 16<sup>th</sup> Annual Pan-African Studies Conference, Indiana State University, 1999, [hartford-hwp.com](http://hartford-hwp.com)
- Hamilton, Carole. “Zoot Suit”. *Drama for Students*. Encyclopedia.com. Accessed 10 June 2017, [encyclopedia.com](http://encyclopedia.com)
- Hernandez-Truyol, B.E. “Race, Sex and Human Rights: A Critical Global Perspective”. Proceedings of the Annual Meeting. Implementation, Compliance and Effectiveness. *American Society of International Law* 9, (April), 1997, pp.409-414.
- Heyck, Denis. *Barrios and Borderlands; Cultures of Latinos and Latinas in the United States*. Routledge, 1994.
- Jargowsky, A. *Poverty and Place: Ghettos, Barrios, and the American City*. Russell Sage, 1997.
- Kanellos, Nicolas. “Folklore in Chicano Theatre and Chicano Theatre as Folklore”, *Journal of the Folklore Institute* 15, 1, 1978, p. 73.
- Lawson, M.R. and A.B. Lawson. *Poverty in America: An Encyclopedia*. Greenwood, 2008.
- Luckenbill, Dan. *The Pachuco Era*. University of California, 1990, [ecchistory112.files.wordpress.com](http://ecchistory112.files.wordpress.com)
- Nadel, Alan. “Boundaries, Logistics, and Identity: The Property of Metaphor in *Fences* and *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*” in *May All Your Fences Have Gates: Essays on the Drama of August Wilson*. Edited by Alan Nadel. U of Iowa, 1994, pp.86-104.
- Orona- Cordova, Roberta. “Zoot Suit and the Pachuco Phenomenon: An Interview with Luis Valdez” in *Mexican-American Theatre: Then and Now*. Edited by Nicolas Kanellos. Arte Publico, 1983.
- Rivkin, J. and M. Ryan. “Introduction: Situating Race” in *Literary Theory: An Anthology*. Edited by J. Rivkin and M. Ryan. Blackwell Publishing, 2004, pp.960-963.
- Said, Edward. *Culture and Imperialism*. Knopf, 1993.

- Savran, David. *In Their Own Words: Contemporary American Playwrights*. Theatre Communications, 1988.
- Shafer, Yvonne. "Breaking Barriers: August Wilson" in *Staging Difference: Cultural Pluralism in American Theatre and Drama*. Edited by Marc Maufort and Peter Lang, 1995, pp. 267-285.
- Shannon, Sandra G. *The Dramatic Vision of August Wilson*. Howard UP, 1996.
- Solorzano D. and D. Delgado-Bernal. "Examining Transformational Resistance Through a Critical Race and LatCrit Theory Framework: Chicana and Chicano Students in the Urban Context." *Urban Education* 36, 308. Sage Publications, 2001, pp. 308-342, [uex.sagepub.com](http://uex.sagepub.com).
- Takaki, Ronald. *A Different Mirror*. Little Brown, 1993.
- Taylor, E. "A Primer on Critical Race Theory". *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* 19 (Spring), 1998, pp. 122-124.
- Valdes, F. "Under Construction. LatCrit Consciousness, Community, and Theory." LatCrit: Latinas/os and the Law: A Joint Symposium by "California Law Review" and "La Raza Law Journal" *California Law Review* 85(5), (October), 1997, pp. 1087-1142.
- Valdez, Luis. *Zoot Suit and Other Plays*. Arte Publico Press, 1992.
- Vera, H. and J. Feagin. *Handbook of Sociology of Racial and Ethnic Relations*. Springer, 2007.
- Villenas, S. and D. Deyhle. "Critical Race Theory and Ethnographies Challenging the Stereotypes: Latino Families, Schooling, Resilience and Resistance". *Curriculum Inquiry* 29(4), (Winter), 1999, pp. 413-445.
- Williams, Joan. "Dissolving the Sameness/Difference Debate: A Post-Modern Path Beyond Essentialism in Feminist and Critical Theory." *Duke Law Journal* 2, (April), 1991, pp. 296-323.
- Wilson, August. "August Wilson Playwright". Interview by Bill Moyers. *A World of Ideas*. Edited by Betty Sue Flowers. Doubleday, 1989, pp. 167-180.
- . *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*. Penguin Books, 1988.

