

**Author:** James Huerta

**Title:** L.A. as Borderland: Teaching Luis Valdez's Zoot Suit

**Content/Subject Area:** US History, English Language Arts, Spanish

**Keywords:** LA History, WWII, US History, Chicano, Caló, Identity, Language, Post-Colonial

**Grades:** 11th and 12th Grade

**Time:** One and a half to two eighty-minute sessions in blocks for each lesson.

### **Introduction**

In order to understand the border, students can take an initial step in realizing that the Customs and Border Patrol define the border, and are able to enforce their jurisdiction, within 100 miles of a boundary of the United States. This opens the idea of places not normally thought of as borderlands and more specifically places like Los Angeles, that do not exist on the border like Nogales, Arizona or El Paso, Texas, to be thought of as borderland. Luis Valdez's seminal work *Zoot Suit* is just one example of the ways in which the culture of the borderland far extends the reach of what may be considered borderlands. His play is an important work that demonstrates the use of Caló, a Spanish patois used by Mexican Americans typical of the early to mid 20th century. Also, his play contextualizes the experience of Mexican Americans in Los Angeles, and the greater United States, within the imagination of the press and centers of power during World War II.

### **Standards**

#### **California History and Social Science Framework**

- Industrialization, Urbanization, Immigration, and Progressive Reform
  - Who came to the United States at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century? Why did they come? What was their experience like when they arrived?
- America's Participation in WWII
  - How did WWII serve to advance movements for equality back home?
- Movements for Equality
  - What does "equal rights" mean?
- Contemporary American Society
  - In what ways have issues such as education; civil rights for people of color, immigrants, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender Americans, and disabled Americans; economic policy; recognition of economic, social and cultural rights; the environment; and the statuses of women remained unchanged over time? In what ways have they changed?

#### **Common Core Standards for English**

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.1, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.2,  
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.3

**Materials and Resources (For Both Lessons, All Resource Materials are hyperlinked below)**

1. Projector
2. Computer
3. Internet Access
4. Zoot Suit, By Luis Valdez
5. How to Tame a Wild Tongue, By Gloria Anzaldúa
6. Ignacio Gómez Art - El Pachuco
7. Zoot Suit Discovery Guide from Pomona College
8. Images of Pachucos as linked in lesson
9. Caló Glossary

**Lesson 1: The History of the Sleepy Lagoon Murder Trials and Zoot Suit Riots**

**Objectives:**

- Students will be able to understand the historical context of the play Zoot Suit by Luis Valdez.
- Students will be able to analyze the depiction and portrayal of Mexican-American/Latinx youth across time.
- Students will be able to describe the significance of the portrayals of Mexican-American, Chicano, Latinx youth across time.

**Guiding Questions:**

- What was Los Angeles like during the WWII era for Mexican-American/Chicano youth?
- In what ways were some Mexican-American/Chicano youth portrayed in the media?
- How does the portrayal of Mexican-Americans, Chicanos, or Latinx communities play a role within society today?

**Instructional and Lesson Activities**

**1. Engage**

- Begin by having students do a quick write on their own. Answer/Brainstorm the following question: How are youth portrayed in the media today?
- After they write about this. Allow them to share with a partner. Then, ask them: How are Latinos in America portrayed?
- Students can share with a partner.
- Students share out and discuss with the entire class. This can be a short discussion of 10-12 minutes.

**2. Explore**

- Introduce the play Zoot Suit, Author and year written. Tell students that the play takes place in Los Angeles during WWII.
- Ask students to discuss how they think Latinos in the United States were portrayed in the media in that era.
- Allow students to explore [newspaper articles from Pomona College Zoot Suit discovery](#)

[guide](#). Also, articles can be chosen specifically and divided.

- Ask students to choose one article and answer the following questions: Who is the article about? What event is the article reporting on? Does the writer have any bias, how do you know? What are three words that stick out to you, highlight them. Why do these words stick out to you?
- Discuss as a group the articles that students chose, or the articles that have been given to the students.
- Discuss, who are these articles about? How do these articles portray those who are at the center of the articles? Students, with the help of the teacher need to arrive to the point that Zoot Suiters, or Pachucos, are Mexican American/ Chicano youth.
- Show images of Zoot Suiters/Pachucos: [KCET Article](#), [Ignacio Gomez Painting](#), [David Williams Contemporary Pachucos](#).

### 3. Explain

- In pairs, students create a t-chart that compares and contrasts the ways in which Pachucos and Zoot Suiters were portrayed in the photographs along with those of the newspaper articles.
- Discuss and share out the comparisons that are made. Discuss and share out the reasoning why there may be similarities and differences.
- Explain that the play that they will read will offer another portrayal of Zoot Suiters/Pachucos

### 4. Elaborate/Extend

- Students can read about Sleepy Lagoon Murder trial. Resources: [Pomona College](#), [LA Law Library](#), [Online Archive of California](#), [UH Digital History](#)
- Students can read about the Zoot Suit Riots. Resources: [Pomona College](#), [LA Times](#), [National Geographic](#),
- Read Octavio Paz's essay that criticizes Pachuco youth [Pachucos and Other Extremes](#).
- Read excerpt from Kathy Peiss book [Zoot Suit: The Enigmatic Career of an extreme style](#)
- Read article from Laura Cummings [Cloth Wrapped People](#)
- Read article from [Luis Leal](#) on Paz's perceptions of Pachucos and Chicanos
- Students can make predictions about what they think the play will be about.

### 5. Evaluate

Students will work on their own, or in pairs, to create a presentation that analyzes the ways in which Latinos are currently portrayed in the media. Students will have to research at least three current news articles. They will be evaluated using a [presentation rubric](#).

### **Lesson 1 Modifications**

1. Student choice of readings can be purposely limited by the teacher. For example the sources from the media linked to above can be chosen by level. Readings can come with glossaries for ELL students.
2. If specific readings are assigned, specific guiding questions can be given to students.
3. For discussions accommodations can be made depending on the teacher's need to guide the discussion. A more socratic method can be used with the teacher asking specific questions. Or, a more open and student led discussion can be used through Harkness Discussion for more advanced students.
4. See, Think, Wonder can be used as a strategy into the photographs and painting by Ignacio Gomez.
5. The assessment can be given specific parameters depending on student population. It can

be shortened. A teacher can also use this as an opportunity to use notes and practice simple constructions by providing suggest sentence constructions and even suggested presentation structure.

## **Lesson 2: Understanding the language of Zoot Suit**

### **Objectives:**

- Students will be able to understand the role of language in the play Zoot Suit.
- Students will be able to discuss and analyze the use of voice in Zoot Suit.
- Students will be able to discuss and analyze the role of language within the identity politics of post-colonial contexts.

### **Guiding Questions:**

- What is the role of the language choices made by Valdez?
- How does Valdez create a unique voice in the play?
- In what ways does language play a role in the identity politics of post-colonial contexts?

## **Instructional and Lesson Activities**

### **1. Engage**

- Begin by having students make a list of current slang they use.
- Allow students to share out. Tell you the meaning.
- Think, Pair, Share: Under what circumstances do you use these terms? What is different about using the context under which you may or may not use these words?

### **2. Explore**

- Students read the first page of Zoot Suit by Luis Valdez
- What does it sound like? Ask for students to read it.
- Teacher reads it.
- [Video](#) - High School Production - show first 3mins 30 seconds
- From Film 5:30 - 6:41
- What is he saying? Students paraphrase the prologue in small groups. .
- Students can share-out, or perform, their paraphrase.

### **3. Explain**

- Introduce students to the terms Caló and Patois. Define them.
- Handout/Distribute a [Caló glossary](#) for the play.
- Have students correct their previous paraphrase.
- Discuss: What are the implications of using language in such a way? To what effect is the playwright using language in this case? What role does language play in the Mexican American community? Latinx?
- Read and annotate: Gloria Anzaldúa's How to Tame a Wild Tongue.
- Discuss her ideas about language. Return to the question: To what effect is the playwright using language in this case? Discuss the use of slang in everyday language.

### **4. Elaborate/Extend**

- Students can research other uses of Caló in popular culture.
- Students can watch a performance of the poem [A Pachuco Portfolio by Raul Salinas](#).

- Students can use [SOAP Stone](#) to analyze the play rhetorically throughout their reading.
- Read and Discuss the essay [Caló: The Other Spanish by George R. Alvarez](#)
- Rewrite and perform a prologue using slang from today.

### **5. Evaluate**

Write a one to two page analysis of the prologue featuring Pachuco. Students should use specific evidence and connect at least one idea from Anzaldúa's *How to Tame a Wild Tongue*. The will be evaluated using the [reading analysis rubric](#).

### **Lesson 2 Modifications**

1. Provide a glossary of terms to refer to for the Anzaldúa text.
2. Provide guiding questions for the reading.
3. Provide a planning guide to use specific quotes from the texts. Have students write their thesis. Then choose specific quotes from the texts that they will include in their writing.

### **Additional Resources**

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## **Reflection**

In the creation of my lessons I really wanted to contextualize the borderlands within the context of Los Angeles. I was really drawn to the policy implemented by the Border Patrol that outlines the jurisdiction of this entity up to 100 miles from any international border. This includes places we typically think of as being border cities, but it also includes places that we do not include in our traditional notion of borderland. Also, I want to contextualize a specific place for my student population that may, or may not, be from Los Angeles and have them understand the influence and experience of specifically Mejicanos and Mexican Americans in the past and up to the present. I believe that in some ways, the border exists everywhere immigrants are, as such, the complexities of their lives demand that they navigate these borders constantly. At

times, irregardless of actual proximity to a border. I hope that my students gain a better understanding of Los Angeles, the influence of Mexican Americans, and the ways in which all Latino youth may negotiate the borders they carry.