Media Hysteria and Racial Myth: Miscarriage of Justice in Luis Valdez's "Zoot Suit" and Ken Burns's *The Central Park Five*

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In a survey of Los Angeles county adults concerning the portrayal of blacks in news media, Travis L. Dixon of the Department of Speech Communication at the University of Illinois at Urbana found that members of the community who regularly viewed local news stations on which Blacks were overrepresented in criminal reporting were more likely to suggest harsher sentencing for black and racially unidentified hypothetical suspects than they would for white suspects, and were more likely to perceive blacks as violent. While varying in degree, this positive relationship between frequency of reporting on black crime and perception of blacks as violent was observed in people regardless of educational background, income, race, level of racism as measured by the Modern Racism Scale, and political affiliation. This evidence suggests that what Dixon refers to as chronic activation, or frequent exposure to an image which reaffirms a stereotype (107), has a considerable cognitive effect and plays an unmistakable role in the shaping of the cultural imaginary. So what would it mean if the news media was invested in a racial project which aimed to portray members of minority groups as violent criminals in a society whose justice system is based on the judgment of a jury of one's peers? In Luis Valdez's "Zoot Suit" and Ken Burns's *The Central Park Five,* two different real-life court cases involving falsely accused groups of black and Latino teenagers are recounted. In both cases, the mostly young male groups are convicted of the crimes in question, despite a lack of physical and genetic evidence linking them to the crimes. In these stories, each trial takes place in the midst of political tension, caused in "Zoot Suit" by U.S. involvement in World War II, and in *The Central*

Park Five by the savings and loans crisis of the late 1980s and an uptick in crime that was overwhelmingly blamed on minority groups. The trials are accompanied by a frenzy of news media coverage that criminalizes the young suspects by appealing to assumptions about the quality of their character based on their racialized physical appearances. By emphasizing the use of racial stereotypes in local media coverage surrounding the two cases, Valdez and Burns recast the teenagers in their respective stories as innocent victims of structural racism and suggest that assumptions about criminality and race are inherent to the justice system and become dominant public opinion as a result of biased coverage by the news media. "Zoot Suit" and *The Central Park Five* suggest that subject racialization in each story by the news media not only supports, but also becomes an essential component of the criminal justice system, creating an atmosphere in which minority suspects must attempt to prove their innocence in a criminal justice system which touts the claim that the accused are innocent until proven guilty.

The suggestion that news media plays a role in perpetuating ideology is not new to academic discourse. Marxist thinkers have long considered the news media to be an apparatus that helps to uphold the system of capitalism, but it has become clear that the news media works to maintain other dominant ideologies, as well. In an excerpt from his 1987 essay about television news titled "Culture, Ideology, Interpellation," John Fiske addresses Louis Althusser's assessment of the news media as an Ideological State Apparatus, an organization which works to perpetuate the dominant ideology and uphold the existing social hierarchy through the interpellation, or hailing of individuals as subjects. Fiske explains that society is structured in such a way that it "is not an organic whole but a complex network of groups, each with different interests related to each other in terms of their power relationship with the dominant classes. Social relations," says Fiske, "are understood in terms of social power, in terms of a structure of domination and subordination" (1268). This can clearly be seen in the United States, a country that has a population

composed of members of a number of religious and racial groups, but maintains a predominantly white male ruling class and jails members of other racial groups in much higher numbers than whites. Fiske goes on to explain that this social structure is dependent on the subjection of citizens to an ideology. The job of creating subjects and naturalizing ideology falls, as has already been suggested, to Althusser's Ideological State Apparatuses. The news media, as an Ideological State Apparatus, hails individuals making them subjects of the dominant ideology. In simpler terms, the news media helps people to understand which group they are to identify with, how that group relates to other groups in the structure of social power, and how members of the social group in which they have been placed are to behave.

The heavy stereotyping and portrayal of both groups of minority teenagers in "Zoot Suit" and *The Central Park Five* occurs in different terms, but is still an act of interpellation by the news media. The hailing of minorities as criminals is expressed in "Zoot Suit" most potently by the literal hailing of individuals by a newsboy shouting headlines in order to sell newspapers. "EXTRA! EXTRA! ZOOT-SUITED GOONS OF SLEEPY LAGGOON...EXTRA, EXTRA. READ ALL ABOUT THE MEXICAN BABY GANGSTERS. EXTRA, EXTRA" (Valdez 38), he yells. Here, we see that the newsboy first assigns a particular mode of dress to the suspects in the Sleepy Lagoon murder and implies through the use of the word "goon," which is synonymous with the modern term, "thug," that the public should believe the accused have a tendency toward violent crime. He then specifies the ethnicity and age of the suspects in his declaration that they are "Mexican baby gangsters." Through this shouting, the newsboy interpellates the passersby, telling them exactly which group they are to fear while simultaneously belittling young Latinos, suggesting that they have less social power than members of other racial groups. This same interpellation is displayed through both print and television news headlines which briefly flash on the screen in *The Central Park Five*. These headlines, preceded and followed by white noise, describe

a black crime wave much like the Mexican crime wave portrayed in the media coverage in "Zoot Suit." In this case, the accused black and Latino teenagers are described as "savage" members of a "wolf-pack" running through the city committing crimes simply for the love of violence. While race is never implicitly mentioned, the appeal to savage, animal instincts incites memories of the racial language applied to blacks for hundreds of years in the United States and an interview clip in which former New York governor Mario Cuomo tells a news anchor that the rape of a white woman (which these young black and Latino boys have been accused of) is "the ultimate shriek of alarm...the ultimate siren that says none of us are safe" (Burns 57:58) hails whites and blacks alike to fear young black men.

While it is important to understand that the portrayal of minorities as criminals hails the general public to fear members of minority groups, particularly the young men in these groups, the hailing of these young minority men must also be emphasized. In an article titled, "The Representation of Cultural Identity in *Zoot Suit* (1981)," Rosa Linda Fregoso acknowledges the construction of a violent Chicano masculinity in the image of the pachucho, a zoot suit wearing Mexican gangster, by the news media which she attempts to deconstruct by suggesting that "*Zoot Suit*'s male subjects are in fact reversals of dominant depictions of Chicano masculinity" (660). While Fregoso is correct in saying that the young men of "Zoot Suit" do not perfectly play the roles in which the dominant ideology, or in Fregoso's words, "dominant paradigm," casts them, it seems clear that the dominant myth of Chicano masculinity, or machismo, plays an important role in the construction of the young men's identities. This can be easily seen in the interaction between two of Valdez's characters: El Pachuco and Henry, or Hank, Reyna. While Reyna and the other young men do not perfectly perform their warrior machismo, El Pachuco maintains a militant devotion to the role in which the ideology has cast him, consistently reminding Reyna where he fits into the social structure and advising him to act accordingly. When a small scuffle breaks out at a dance and the police arrive, Reyna is held back while many others

who are present are either released or lead away by police. As Reyna awaits his imminent arrest, he immediately calls out for El Pachuco, confiding in him that he doesn't want to be arrested. El Pachuco is quick to remind Reyna that "the city's cracking down on pachucos…[and] screaming for blood" (Valdez 29). Reyna responds that the police have no reason to convict him, but El Pachuco makes it clear that his name and appearance will be reason enough. As Reyna recognizes the truth in what El Pachuco says, he begins to panic. El Pachuco responds to Reyna's distress simply by saying, "Haven't I taught you to survive? Play it cool" (29). In this exchange, we see in Reyna's moment of panic that he is not naturally the tough, cutthroat gangster the dominant ideology suggests that he is. However, as he comes to realize that his individual identity will not keep him out of prison, his demeanor changes; he smokes a cigarette and laughs at his predicament, then suggests that, though he expected to join the Navy and return to his home country a hero, he will never be what society does not allow him to be. Reyna immediately begins to toughen up his act and responds to the hailing of himself as an enemy to the dominant ideology rather than behaving as a passive respectful subject that would deconstruct the image of Chicano machismo that dominates cultural ideology.

While Althusser's theory of interpellation by Ideological State Apparatuses does much to inform the reading of these two stories, it is complicated by the portrayal in both "Zoot Suit" and *The Central Park Five* of a cooperative relationship between the police and the news media. According to John Fiske, Althusser writes that each Ideological State Apparatus "is 'relatively autonomous'…and there are no overt connections between it and any of the others—the legal system is not explicitly connected to the school system nor to the media, for example—yet they all perform similar ideological work" (Fiske 1270); however, in both "Zoot Suit" and *The Central Park Five*, an explicit connection between police and news media is made. On multiple occasions, interviewees in *The Central Park Five* give an account of the relationship between police

and the news media suggesting that the two institutions acted together to convict the young men. In a sequence in which an important press release is described, Lynell Hancock, professor of Journalism at Columbia University, states, "The police controlled the story from the beginning. They created the story…and all the pieces fell into place" (1:03:23). The suggestion that the police created the story places the police in a position of power and suggests that the media is little more than a public outlet for police opinion. In "Zoot Suit," the line between the justice system and news media are similarly blurred; however, the serious implications surrounding the cooperation between parts of the justice system and the news media are more clearly illustrated. The news media is the clear enemy of the pachucos from the start and clearly controls the narrative. During the scene in which Reyna and the others are arrested, Valdez's press character enters with the police and prompts the reading of headlines by the supposed criminals, such as, "Death Awakens Sleepy Lagoon…LA Shaken by Lurid 'Kid' murder" and "One Killed, Ten Hurt in Boy Wars: Mexican Boy Gangs Operating Within City" (Valdez 28). These headlines act to raise suspicion toward the group of young Latinos and seem to guide the actions of the police. Immediately following the arrest, another scene chronicles Reyna's interrogation. The press character is the first to speak in this scene and as the interrogation unfolds, Lt. Edwards, the police officer who is most involved in the prosecution of Reyna, mentions that the police are "under strict orders to crack down on all malcontents" (Valdez 31). By representing Lt. Edwards as the highest ranking police official and including the press character, who is granted access to every operation carried out by the justice system in the story, eventually even acting as the prosecuting attorney and the jury when the boys go to trial, Valdez suggests that influence of the news media directs the focus of police toward minority individuals and is capable of shaping public opinion in such a way that conviction of accused minorities is almost guaranteed.

The history of minority criminalization in United States news

media is very long and its impact has been, for many people, devastating. The portrayal of Latinos and blacks as lazy, aggressive, hyper-masculine criminals has perpetuated the same racist fears that supported Jim Crow segregation for nearly one hundred years. Just as Valdez's "Zoot Suit" and Burns's *The Central Park Five* suggest, these fears make minority groups the target of the criminal justice system and have given rise to police officers and prosecutors with almost entirely unchecked power when dealing with members of minority groups. As a result, false accusations have become false convictions, no evidence has become enough evidence, and murders of minority individuals by police officers have been determined inconsequential. Recently, the United States has seen an increase in the reporting of incidents in which young minority men who have not committed any significant crime have been killed by police officers. In the aftermath of these nearly unbearable tragedies, some in the news media have continued their attempts to portray minority individuals as dangerous criminals who deserved to die, but many others have pointed out the extreme abuse of power by police and the racism behind it. Because of the shifting of blame that has apparently begun to take place in recent media coverage, Americans who have long hoped to see the end of racism may maintain some small hope. While the refusal to indict officers who have killed young minority men suggests that structural racism will continue to exist in this country for many years to come, the recognition of structural racism by the news media and the public outrage with which these injustices have been met are at the very least small steps in the right direction. By directly addressing the involvement of media in the perpetuation of racist ideology through these pieces of dramatized documentary, Valdez and Burns have taken control of an Ideological State Apparatus and helped to establish social power for minority groups that are generally granted little to none.

Works Cited

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