

Culture Clash's
Chávez Ravine:
Red Scare Politics
in a
Los Angeles Community

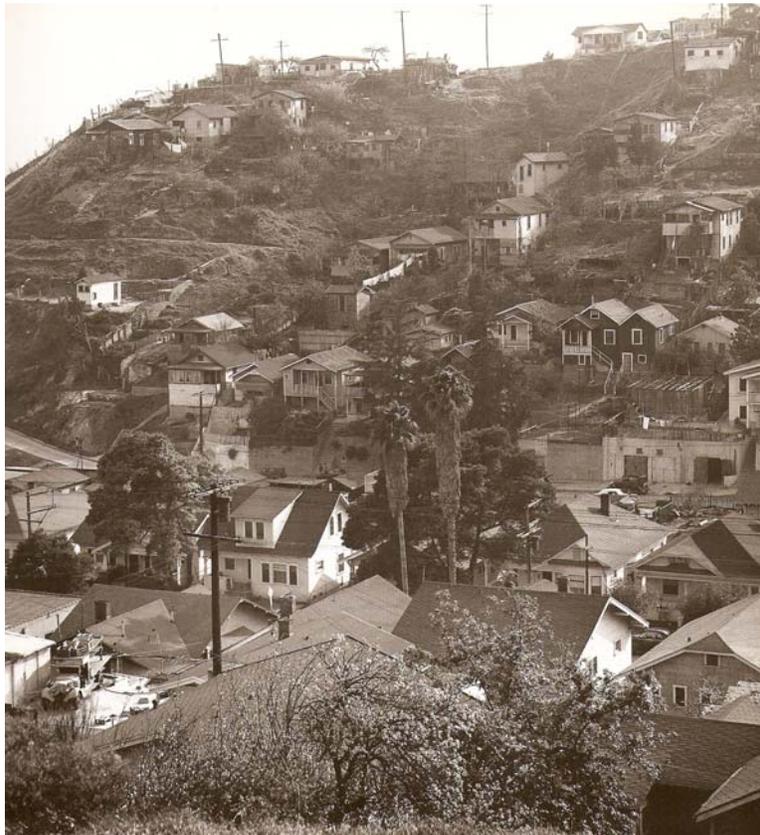


Photo Taken By Don Normark

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It is 1981, opening day at Dodger Stadium: dodger dog in hand, seated in the stands and surrounded by fans dressed in blue, one can see the infield, the pitcher's mound, and the scoreboard. As the game begins the animated commentary of famous baseball sports announcer Vin Scully, played by Richard Montoya, comes to the forefront. History is about to be made, or more appropriately retold, as Mexican rookie Fernando Valenzuela (Herbert Siguenza) takes the mound. Slowly, "small houses gently fall from above onto the outfield" and "like ghosts from another era, two Chávez Ravine residents enter."¹ This was the start of the May 17, 2003 premier of the play *Chávez Ravine*² at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles, California. The play was written and performed by the acclaimed Chicano/Latino comedy troupe Culture Clash. Taking their audience on a whirlwind adventure back in time, this set the stage for the story of the once thriving immigrant community in the rolling hills of Los Angeles know as Chávez Ravine. In 1949, the community became one of the eleven proposed sites for a major public housing project in Los Angeles. The residents united to prevent the housing project from uprooting their community. They took up a fight against the Los Angeles City Housing Authority and the politics of anti-Communism. After a long struggle, the residents of Chávez Ravine had lost the battle. They left without a community, without a home, and without faith in the American government.

With its political focus on the lost community of Chávez Ravine, Culture Clash's satiric performance in the play *Chávez Ravine* is not just a comedic interpretation of Red Scare politics and society in the 1950s. Rather, satire is the device Culture Clash uses to create an artistic form of resistance that acts as an inspiring commentary on the community's ability to resist government injustice. Firstly, the use of performance art brings history alive, resisting blind-belief in

¹ Culture Clash, "Chavez Ravine" *American Theatre* 20.9 (Nov 2003): 6. <http://find.galegroup.com>.

² On Audio CD. Clash, Culture. *Chávez Ravine*. L.A. Theatre Works, 2005.

history textbooks and thus creating an entertaining, active, and intellectual historical record of the events that occurred in Chávez Ravine. This critical, yet comedic, account of events allows for the exposure of hidden truths about the history of Los Angeles and the United States. Secondly, *Chávez Ravine* reformulates history, enlivening the marginalized voices (minority rights advocates and Chicanos of the 1950s) that Red Scare, anti-Communist, politics systematically silenced. Lastly, *Culture Clash* steps away from relying on passive, purely slapstick comedy by creating a satiric play that calls for the audience to become intellectually active and to consider the role of politics and the role of communities in today's society.

In order to get a clear sense of the type of performance given in *Chávez Ravine* a brief history of *Culture Clash* and Chávez Ravine is necessary. Formed in San Francisco's Mission District on Cinco de Mayo 1984 by Richard Montoya, Ricardo "Ric" Salinas, and Herbert Siguenza, *Culture Clash* revived the Chicano art movement of the 1980s. In forging their way to the forefront of Chicano art, they proved that they were not just comedians. They were intellectuals taking a critical look at their own communities, at their own cultures, at themselves, and at their own place in American society.³ Starting out as rookies, like Dodger great Fernando Valenzuela, the group found their niche in ethnographic, site-specific theatre that explored the complexities of race, community, politics, wealth, and everything in between. The history of Chávez Ravine was just waiting for *Culture Clash* to discover it. Chávez Ravine was home to many generations of families, mostly Latino, who, despite being poor, were living the American life. Then, in 1949 the Los Angeles City Housing Authority approved a public housing project that aimed to remove the "blights" in Los Angeles. The CHA sent out eviction notices, and while some residents submitted, others united in a force

³ More about *Culture Clash* in *Culture Clash in AmeriCCa: Four Plays* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, Inc., 2003), vii-xi.

of resistance against their removal. Meanwhile, in events central to Culture Clash's *Chávez Ravine*, the Red Scare took hold of the United States as the Cold War with the USSR waged on. In attempts to fight Communism and save Democracy, the U.S. government blacklisted and severely punished people who had Communist sympathies. Anti-Communist leaders in Los Angeles saw public housing as the promotion of Communist ideals and quickly squashed the CHA's dream to help the economically disadvantaged residents of Chávez Ravine. Culture Clash analyzes and questions the government involvement in Chávez Ravine. The group aims to prove that despite our ideologies, cultures, ethnicities, and other differences, we are all Americans and deserve just treatment under American ideals.

American history has taught readers much about the country's growth as a nation and as a political, economic power; but what one learns in a history book cannot always be trusted. In *Chávez Ravine*, Culture Clash offers a historical record that veers away from the history in textbooks. Two Chicano/Latino scholars, Tara J. Yosso and David G. García, from the University of California, Santa Barbara and the University of California, Los Angeles, respectively, explore *Chávez Ravine* in the context of critical race theory—a concept that was derived out of critical legal studies in the 1980s. In their essay, Yosso and García argue that Culture Clash participates in critical race theatre (a derivative of critical race theory) by presenting the community wealth that the ravine held.⁴ In their discussion of mainstream history and social science, they remind us of how “contemporary and secondary-school textbooks oversimplify the complexities of U.S. history by ignoring the historical contributions of Mexicans and Mexican Americans.”⁵ We all share a common history and ignoring one group's prominence in American history hides the truth about our country.

⁴ For further investigation of critical race theory and theatre, see Yosso and García's essay “‘This Is No Slum!’ A Critical Race Theory Analysis of Community Cultural Wealth in Culture Clash's Chávez Ravine.” *Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies* 32 (2007): 145-180.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 152.

Culture Clash accomplishes in *Chávez Ravine* what Yosso and García believe history textbooks shamefully ignore. The group contests written history by employing a racialized conception of history told from the Chicano/Latino viewpoint that is just as intelligent and scholarly as traditional forms of historical documentation. Furthermore, Culture Clash does not simplify the complexities of history, as secondary school textbooks do. Instead, they conduct extensive research in order to provide a critical learning experience for their audience members. These extensive research methods combined with their political comedy⁶ allow the group to offer more than just a dull and incomplete narrative about a Los Angeles community. For *Chávez Ravine*, they conducted a historical analysis that included newspaper articles, interviews with participants in the battle, and Don Normark's pictorial novel *Chávez Ravine, 1949: A Los Angeles Story*.⁷ History textbooks often leave out the role of Red Scare politics in the change of Chávez Ravine into a baseball stadium, but in performing history, the group uses their careful research to bring to light the fact that the residents in Chávez Ravine were innocent victims of America's fight to preserve democracy. Ashley Lucas, academic scholar and PhD graduate from the University of California, San Diego, contends that in comparison with written history, performance history has a more permanent effect and influence with its audience because it is not mere imitation. Culture Clash does not just retell history in their performance; instead, history becomes active and thus subject to thought that is more critical. Lucas notes that written history produces a passive effect because its "textual medium often . . . lulls the reader into a belief in the credibility of the

⁶ For a review of Culture Clash's previous work, see "Mambo combo." *American Theatre*. (March 1998). <http://find.galegroup.com>.

⁷ The community of Chávez Ravine was picturesquely captured and documented in 1949 by the photographer and historian Don Normark. In search of life, Normark, with a 35mm camera, found himself in a foreign rural village that was vibrant with energy and a sense of kinship. For more on Normark's pictures of Chávez Ravine see his book *Chávez Ravine, 1949: A Los Angeles Story* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1999).

writer.”⁸ Culture Clash are the authors of this history and the audience knows that the group has obvious biases and ideas that are subject to scrutiny. The group is vehemently against the authorities who destroyed the Mexican village in the hills of Los Angeles, saying “mi casa no es tú casa.”⁹ Yet an audience does not expect the group to know everything or to be unbiased. The audience can clearly define the group’s message and think about our government’s extreme tactics to protect America. With textbooks, we do not question the information presented in them—we believe, due to socialization, that these books hold the absolute truth. Culture Clash is effectively able to use artistic performance to recreate history and ensure that the audience never forgets the community of Chávez Ravine.

In remembering this community, it becomes evident that Red Scare politics in the 1950s silenced many people and voices, including those from Chávez Ravine. Frank Wilkinson and architect Richard Neutra were at the head of the plan to create public housing in Chávez Ravine. While many would find reason to blame Wilkinson and Neutra for starting the process of destruction in Chávez Ravine, Culture Clash takes a different approach. In an interview with the group by John Glore, Richard Montoya describes how “the Housing Authority was full of intelligentsia, of *dreamers* who advocated for the poor people . . . [Wilkinson is] a kind of hero . . . He risked assassination, he risked everything.”¹⁰ Culture Clash does not ostracize Wilkinson in *Chávez Ravine* but instead celebrates his persistent activity as an activist for the poor. Wilkinson was the unlikely hero whose good intentions could not save Chávez Ravine or himself from the Red Scare. To depict the political powers that the *dreamers* and residents faced, Culture Clash sinisterly presents the

⁸ Ashley Lucas, “Chavez Ravine: Performed History in Los Angeles.” In *Performing the (Un) Imagined Nation: The Emergence of Ethnographic Theatre in the Late Twentieth Century*. PhD diss., University of California, San Diego (2004) 84–123.

⁹ “My house is not your house.” Culture Clash, “Chavez Ravine” *American Theatre* 20.9 (Nov 2003): 62. <http://find.galegroup.com>.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, An Interview with John Glore, 2. Emphasis added.

“Watchman,” working behind the scenes to destroy the planned housing project in Chávez Ravine. On one occasion in the play, *Culture Clash* reveals the malicious intentions to destroy Wilkinson:

CHIEF PARKER: Police Chief Parker here. Hello Watchman. Yes, dirt on Frank Wilkinson from the Housing Authority. My intelligence man has been eyeballing the pinko for months. I’ll call the bureau myself, we’ll go right to the top.

A phone rings.

DIRECTOR HOOVER: J. Edgar Hoover here. Hello Chief Parker, why I’ve got a dossier on Wilkinson bigger than Uncle Miltie’s pecker. The poor bastard will never know what hit him.

A phone rings.

WATCHMAN: Watchman here. Why thank you, J. Edgar. We certainly know who wears the pants in Washington. We’ll get this information to the right hands. Frank Wilkinson’s dead; he just don’t know it yet.¹¹

The authorities are collectively plotting the demise, or rather the assassination of the “pinko” (a disapproving term for a left-wing sympathizer) Frank Wilkinson. A dossier is a collection of documents that contains private or secret information about a person; during the Red Scare these types of files were very common. The creation of these file shows just how far the U.S. was willing to challenge its own ideals to protect democracy. *Culture Clash* conducts these scenes in a film-noir style—film-noir was a cinematic genre, popular during the 1940s and 50s, which featured an extensive use of shadows, had a cynical outlook, and an antihero (Frank Wilkinson)—that implicates the idea of smoky back room politics. This provokes the audience into thinking and recognizing how much planning went into destroying public housing and its backers. *Culture Clash*, in this way, provides a reformulation of history that speaks for those who were allegedly Communists during the Red Scare. They not only focus on the changes that Chávez Ravine underwent from the 1950s to the 1980s, but they also

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 41.

critically change how history is usually told; the group articulates a revised history that sympathizes with marginalized men and women who were directly targeted by red-baiters.

In articulating this history, one role that stands out in *Chávez Ravine* is that of Maria Salgado Ruiz, played by Eileen Galindo. Maria is the female community leader and organizer in the fight to save Chávez Ravine, and as the central character in *Chávez Ravine* she helps the group form their ideas about gender in relation to the political climate that surrounded the 1950s. The character of Maria is loosely based on the actions taken by real life resident Aurora Vargas (also a composite of her mother and sister—the Arechigas), who served as a leader/community activist and resistor during the takeover.¹² Documented in a historical Los Angeles Times article is the forced eviction of the last families in Chávez Ravine. The paper describes the scene as a “melee” and as a “battleground,” suggesting that those still living in Chávez Ravine were wild rebels resisting the authority of the law.¹³ In a way, the paper is accurate in describing this as a battleground—the community was fighting a war against the government to maintain equality, but their tactics were in no way excessively violent. The Times was a major player in the attacks against the “Reds,” and from this account, it is clear that they were not fond of the community resistance that had built up in Chávez Ravine. The City of Los Angeles faced influential, intelligent women who were fighting for their Latino community knowing that the possession of their homes by the government was undemocratic. The fact that Culture Clash recognizes this, calls to their ambition, firstly to elucidate the prominence of Chicanas in their communities and in the political sphere, and secondly to present history as close to the truth as possible. David

¹² For a look at similar communities under “siege,” including Chávez Ravine, see Rodolfo F. Acuña’s novel *A Community Under Siege: A Chronicle of Chicanos East of the Los Angeles River 1945-1975*. Monograph Series, no. 11. (Los Angeles: UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center, 1984).

¹³ For a look at this article see “Chavez Ravine Family Evicted; Melee Erupts: Screaming Woman Removed.” 9 May 1959, 1-2. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers Los Angeles Times (1881 - 1986)*. 3 May 2008 <<http://www.proquest.com/>>.

Román, a prominent Chicano scholar, once wrote that Culture Clash “locks women into subordinate roles, inscribes inflexible definitions of masculinity and femininity”¹⁴ and thus does not critically consider the influential role of women in society. Román, in response to a previous Culture Clash play (*S.O.S.—Comedy for these Urgent Times*), argues that Culture Clash operates within a binary that presumes male predominance in Chicano/Latino culture, in fact in all cultures. However, in *Chávez Ravine*, Culture Clash has come a long way in their understanding of women. Maria fights until the end, confronting Wilkinson saying, “tell me exactly what is going on. [Our community is] dark and empty with no trespassing signs all over the place. Did you read the Times this morning? ‘Housing Project Doomed.’”¹⁵ Culture Clash creates Maria as a strong, independent woman who is willing to confront male authority figures, demanding answers, and is persistent in her attempt to protect the most important thing in her life—her family-like community. She gives a collective voice to Chávez Ravine and embodies the cultural resistance that occurred in spite of the looming possibility of being condemned a “Red.” Culture Clash celebrates the essential role of women in history and gives voices to men and women of the Cold War era.

As Culture Clash continues to present a minority point-of-view history, they, as entertainers, also strive to impart knowledge to their audience. In *Chávez Ravine*, the troupe fulfills their roles as entertainers and educators, proving to their audience that they can provide a comedic, yet intelligent, performance about history. In the group’s effort to capture just what was lost when this community was demolished, characteristics that are recounted throughout the play, Culture Clash uses the character of Manazar (Siguenza), the dead poet from Chávez Ravine, as the narrator and link between the twenty-first century

¹⁴ Quoted in Dorrine Kondo’s essay “(Re)Visions of Race: Contemporary Race Theatre and the Cultural Politics of Racial Crossover in Documentary Theatre” *Theatre Journal* 52 (2000): 90-91. This source gives a strong analysis of race and gender in Culture Clash’s performance techniques.

¹⁵ Culture Clash, “Chavez Ravine” *American Theatre* 20.9 (Nov 2003): 41. <http://find.galegroup.com>.

audience, the 1981 Dodger game, and the 1950s community of Chávez Ravine. Towards the beginning of the play, Manazar recounts the richness of the community:

I wanna talk about this photograph right here. I see uncles, I see primas, I see my sister, oh mira there's Joe Guerra and his brother Johnny. Oh, there's father Tomas. You see that morenito kid right there in the middle, that's me with my carnal, they used to call me Nonio. My neighbors were Italians, Slavs, Russians, some Germans, but for the most part it was pura Mexicanada, puro frijol. We had everything here man, a malt shop, a beauty parlor, and on Friday and Saturday nights we would go to the dances. Oh yeah! Sometimes the pachucos came. . . . We had our own comedians too. We had a little stage right there . . . they would get up there and talk all kinds of trash.¹⁶

Through this account, Chávez Ravine comes to life and it becomes evident that this was a community tied together by their common identity as foreigners making efforts to assimilate but also to preserve their cultural traditions. Culture Clash ensures that the community is recognized for its enchanting quality rather than its perception as a ramshackle village. They thrived in these hills, having their own schools, shops, and forms of entertainment. Although economically disadvantaged, the people of Chávez Ravine led happy and fulfilling lives. The audience is given this kind of reverie about the past and at the same time is entertained by phrases like “puro frijol,” by the bilingualism—not just using Spanish and English separately but using them together—and the vaudeville (a comic play with songs and dances) elements of the play. This representation of Chávez Ravine is comedic because it maintains a certain charm while still using satire; the group is, to a certain degree, playing off racial stereotypes of Chicanos, Russians, Jews, and many other people found in *Chávez Ravine*. Perhaps most importantly, through these carefully formed satiric elements, former residents of Chávez Ravine are given a sort of closure—their community is finally being given the attention and respect it has always deserved. Culture Clash and supporters ask that their audience never forget what happened in those hills. Yosso and García simplify Culture Clash's impact by

¹⁶ Culture Clash, “Chavez Ravine” *American Theatre* 20.9 (Nov 2003): 20-21. <http://find.galegroup.com>.

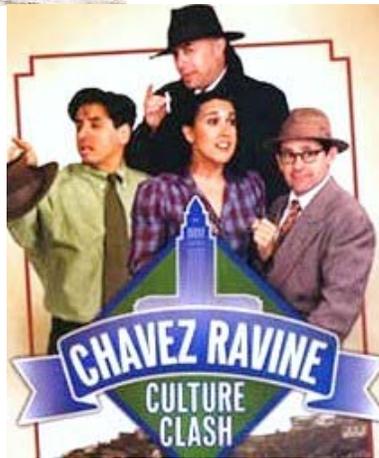
saying that they use the stage like a classroom, but with more humor.¹⁷ While this is true, Yosso and García miss the fact that Culture Clash is not just lecturing their audience about the events of Chávez Ravine. Instead, they are attempting to provoke their audience into thinking about how the government's abuse of power in the 1950s has affected our conception of the role of government in our communities. These topics require self-reflection and critical thought about the condition of our society. Culture Clash emphasizes in the play *Chávez Ravine* that this community was thriving in cultural diversity and would have sustained its diversity had the city recognized what they were destroying.

Culture Clash has managed to depict history in a manner that does not claim to contain all the truths or to have all the answers. They provoke the audience to think critically about the United States in terms of domestic policies and equality of its citizens. By bringing to life of a community that was lost over fifty years ago, the comedy troupe presents history from a new viewpoint—an immigrant, minority perspective. While many scholars have investigated and explored Culture Clash's work, very few have shown Culture Clash's art to be a “thinking, making, and doing” process. In *Chávez Ravine*, the group thinks about the political ideologies and the social conditions in the 1950s concluding that what happened to the residents and *dreamers* was unjust. They then made a play, creating a unique stage that allowed for time travel and reflection on the past. In doing all of this, Culture Clash's main concern was being able to convince the public that citizens must be critical of their governments in order to evoke change. The community of Chávez Ravine resisted and lost, yet they created a form of resistance that would be influential in social movements to come (like the Civil Rights Movement and the United Farm Workers Movement). Those who were victims of Red Scare politics will never receive the justice they deserved, but through their

¹⁷ Yosso and García's essay “‘This Is No Slum!’ A Critical Race Theory Analysis of Community Cultural Wealth in Culture Clash's Chávez Ravine.” *Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies* 32 (2007): 145-180.

performance in *Chávez Ravine*, Culture Clash celebrates those silenced minority and Chicanos voices of Los Angeles. They keep the resistance alive. Future minorities struggling to be heard in Los Angeles, and throughout the United States, can look back upon the community of Chávez Ravine, and upon this play, for inspiration and knowledge of what our government is truly capable of doing in times of chaos and fear.

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¹⁸ Top two photos are from Don Normark's pictorial book *Chavez Ravine, 1949: A Los Angeles Story* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1999). Center picture found at <http://www.culturevulture.net/Theater/ChavezRavine.htm>. Bottom pictures found in Yosso and García's essay "'This Is No Slum!' A Critical Race Theory Analysis of Community Cultural Wealth in Culture Clash's Chavez Ravine." *Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies* 32 (2007): 145-180.

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