

Historical Subjectivity and the Revolutionary Archetype in Amiri Baraka's *The Slave* and Luis Valdez's *Bandido!*

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The early works of Amiri Baraka and Luis Valdez reflect some of their aesthetic, social, political, and ideological convergences that coincided with the tumultuous period of social protest during the 1960s and 1970s. Both playwrights defined their social and artistic work by engaging with issues of race, ethnicity, justice, and nationalist aspirations for their respective groups at a critical juncture in American history. The death of Malcolm X marked an ideological shift in Baraka's artistic work when he formed the Black Arts Repertory in Harlem in 1965; for Valdez, it was the Delano grape strike of 1965 that led to the creation of the strike's artistic unit, *El Teatro Campesino* (The Farm Worker Theater). Their dramatic work during this influential period of black and Chicano theater was closely connected by their critique of social and economic conditions of marginalized members of their respective groups—blacks living in major urban cities and Chicano farm workers in California.^[1]

Several scholars have discussed the aesthetic, cultural, and social significance of the works of Baraka and Valdez within their respective groups and the larger American theater tradition,^[2] but only Harry Elam has studied their work comparatively. In his study *Taking It to the Streets*, Elam systematically explores their social protest theater by focusing on their points of convergence and similarities.^[3] Elam argues that living in a multi-ethnic society, “demand[s] not only that we acknowledge diverse cultural experiences but also that we investigate and interrogate areas of commonality. Only in this way can we move beyond the potentially polarizing divisions of race and ethnicity.”^[4] Cross-cultural studies, Elam adds, should “challenge the internal and external social restrictions and cultural expectations often placed upon critics of color to study only their native group.”^[5] My comparative analysis of Baraka and Valdez is informed by Elam's emphasis on the importance of comparative studies that stress points of convergence between African American and Chicano theater in order to examine the parallels of both groups' trajectory in their fight for social inclusion that is reflected in their artistic output.

In this essay, I examine Baraka's *The Slave* (1964) and Valdez's *Bandido!* (1981) and how both plays imaginatively challenge prevalent historical narratives of their respective groups by reexamining significant historical events—the legacy of slavery and the aftermath of the U.S.-Mexican War (1846-1848) respectively—through their use of the revolutionary archetype in order to situate the history of African Americans and Chicanos within the larger U.S. historical narrative. An element that distinctively connects *The Slave* and *Bandido!* is their use of experimental elements that reflect some of the characteristics associated with postmodernism, such as the challenge of historical accounts by dominant groups, the marginalization and fragmentation of subjects who destabilize a totalizing historical

narrative, and in the case of *Bandido!*, the use of self-reflexivity to disrupt and undermine its own narrative. A comparative analysis of the plays' emphasis on the history of violence, oppression, and discrimination, and their aesthetic representations of revolutionary figures, reveals points of convergence in the playwrights' artistic work that in turn reflects larger commonalities within the African American and Chicano theater traditions.

The Slave engages with the era of slavery through the representation of Walker Vessels as a revolutionary leader in a contemporary context who carries the legacy of armed resistance dating back to the antebellum era. *The Slave* innovatively reshapes special and historical chronologies by presenting Vessels at the beginning of the play as a field slave in the antebellum South. The play's events abruptly move to a race war between a black and a white army at an unnamed city and in an unspecified future. Vessels, now the leader of a black liberation army, returns to confront his ex-wife, Grace, and her current husband Bradford Easley, and to take his two daughters, who live with their mother and remain upstairs sleeping for the duration of the play. Their altercation results in the shooting of Easley by Vessels. As the advancing black army approaches the city and the shelling increases, the house is hit and Grace is fatally wounded. Before the house collapses, Vessels doubts the goals of his revolution and tells Grace that their two daughters are dead, possibly by his own hands.

Bandido! recreates the life and myth of Tiburcio Vásquez, a historical outlaw and alleged revolutionary figure, and revisits the plight of *Californios*, the Spanish-speaking population in California, after the U.S.-Mexican War. Vásquez belonged to a prominent California family of Mexican descent who eventually lost his land and social standing after the war. Vásquez lived as an outlaw in California for years but was eventually captured. *Bandido!* covers key events in Vásquez's last two years before his capture and prison sentence for his involvement at a store robbery at Tres Pinos, in Northern California, where three white Americans were killed. The play moves back and forth between vignettes of Vásquez's life as an outlaw, his romantic life, and scenes at a San Jose jail before his execution. Before his capture, Vásquez confesses his intent to incite a revolution against the Anglo majority in California, but his plan fails to materialize, due in part to his own ambivalence regarding the consequences of a violent revolution.

The Slave is often characterized as a representation of the volatile and racially charged politics of the sixties and *Bandido!* as a reflection of the conciliatory multiculturalism of the eighties;^[6] however, both plays grapple with the ambivalence of presenting, to different degrees, the idea of overt armed revolution, which remains an unresolved tension throughout the plays. Although *The Slave* and *Bandido!* were originally staged in different periods,^[7] Valdez's play is a continuation of his previous work during the sixties, a time when both playwrights shared similar aesthetic and political views related to people of color's shared struggle against oppression. It is significant that the revolutionary theme surfaces at a period in the playwrights' careers when they wrote commercial plays targeted to broader and mixed audiences.^[8] Before his more militant period working at the Black Arts Repertory, Baraka wrote critically recognized plays, most notably *Dutchman* (1964); similarly, when Valdez moved from Delano in order to professionalize *El Teatro Campesino* troupe, his project reached its peak with the Broadway production of *Zoot Suit* in 1979.^[9] This is a contrast to the period when they produced social protest plays that were performed for predominantly black or Chicano audiences.^[10] My analysis of the dramatic texts explores what Jon Rossini describes as the "aesthetic[s] of resistance" inscribed in *Bandido!* that are similarly applicable to *The Slave*.^[11] *The Slave* stages a black revolution, and although *Bandido!* is considered a less confrontational play, or even containing "proassimilationist themes," as

Yolanda Broyles-González maintains,[\[12\]](#) Vásquez explicitly considers inciting an armed revolution in California against whites.

Revolution and History in Baraka and Valdez

Baraka and Valdez embraced nationalist aspirations for their respective groups and were attracted to revolutionary ideas during the early sixties, an influence that, although clearly reflected in *The Slave*, is also present in *Bandido!* Baraka and Valdez, as Elam explains, were not only artists, but also they were activists and social theorists of their respective movements.[\[13\]](#) In their early activism and plays, Baraka and Valdez shared a social and artistic vision that emphasized racial and ethnic consciousness based on militancy and nationalistic ideas. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, Valdez acted as one of the intellectual theorists of *El Movimiento* (the movement), the more militant and nationalistic branch of the Chicano civil rights movement. Valdez's early writings focused on the development of a Chicano identity embedded with nationalism, indigenous myths, and Catholic symbols.[\[14\]](#) After Valdez moved from Delano, he commented that *El Teatro Campesino*'s performances moved beyond farm workers' concerns and increasingly engaged with other broader social issues such as the Vietnam War and racial discrimination.[\[15\]](#)

Both Baraka and Valdez were similarly influenced by the Cuban Revolution, which presented a powerful example of a successful armed uprising in the American continent. In the case of Baraka, he described his travel to Cuba in the early sixties as a turning point.[\[16\]](#) The Cuban Revolution was also an important event for Valdez. Jorge Huerta explains that before his involvement with César Chávez and the farm workers' strike, Valdez traveled to Cuba in 1964 and became an open sympathizer of the revolution.[\[17\]](#) Although the aesthetic output and social activism of Baraka and Valdez converges in the late sixties and then diverges stylistically and ideologically in the late seventies, the influence of revolutionary thought is similarly present in *The Slave* and *Bandido!*

The Slave and *Bandido!* resonate with postmodern premises advanced by Linda Hutcheon and Phillip Brian Harper regarding the history and social position of racial and ethnic minorities in the U.S. As W. B. Worthen has noted, Valdez's disruption of historical objectivity in *The Shrunken Head of Pancho Villa* (1964) and *Bandido!* not only takes elements from Chicano history, but its treatment reflects some postmodern characteristics such as the subversion and fragmentation of historical events. Worthen explains the use of the term "postmodern" in his analysis of contemporary Chicano/a playwrights by noting that "the thematics of Chicana/o history plays are inseparable from their rhetoric, typically from the use of discontinuity and fragmentation, appropriation and hybridity, heteroglossia and pastiche. This formal complexity might appear to verge on the blank aesthetic of the 'postmodern.'" [\[18\]](#) In an earlier and often-cited discussion on history and postmodernism, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, Hutcheon argues that a characteristic of postmodern narratives is the author's challenge of the past as an objective and monolithic reality rather than a constructed set of discourses. Hutcheon describes this type of narrative as "historiographic metafiction," in which authors both revise and undermine the past as it "reinstalls historical contexts as significant and even determining, but in so doing, it problematizes the entire notion of historical knowledge."[\[19\]](#) A postmodern interpretation of history, however, does not render the past an undetermined reality; rather, it creates competing views that are open to multiple interpretations. *The Slave* and *Bandido!* reflect Hutcheon's characterization of history as malleable by challenging its objectivity in relation to the past history of their respective groups.

Moreover, Harper has argued that some of the aesthetic works by minority authors can be interpreted as engaging with elements of the postmodern experience, particularly their engagement with marginality. In studying the emphasis on the fragmented and decentralized self that forms part of the postmodern condition, Harper argues that the alienation, despair, uncertainty, and fragmentation characteristic of postmodernism have been present in the work of some minority writers prior to the sixties since their postmodernist tendencies “deriv[e] specifically from [their] socially marginalized and politically disenfranchised status.”^[20] The “social marginalization” that creates a “fragmented subjectivity” in these texts, Harper argues, does not stand as the sole characteristic of the postmodern subject; however, social fragmentation should be considered part of such marginalization.^[21] *The Slave* and *Bandido!* explore two revolutionary archetypes and their condition as marginalized and decentered subjects based on their past and current social limitations. Emerging from groups on the margins of society, the revolutionaries’ call for armed confrontation against whites inventively contests their alienated social position.

Amiri Baraka’s *The Slave*

The Slave aesthetically engages with the history of violent militant resistance by minority groups that at times tends to be overlooked in contemporary social discourses in favor of a historical narrative that invokes the nonviolent struggle by civil rights activists. *The Slave* has commonly been studied as a radical and confrontational social protest play that attempts to raise racial and ethnic consciousness and nationalist sentiments through representations of armed confrontation.^[22] The prospect of armed resistance and militant confrontation by some people of color also contributed to social change, and Baraka’s play is significant since it counterweights the prevalent narrative that the social gains of the sixties and seventies by people of color were achieved only through nonviolent resistance. Baraka’s confrontational rhetoric, shared by emerging radical activists such as Eldridge Cleaver and Huey Newton, is evident in his non-fiction of the early sixties, collected in *Home: Social Essays* (1965), which condemns the conditions of blacks living in urban cities and the nonviolent methods to solve racial and economic inequality advocated by black civil rights leaders. Baraka defiantly argues that the “struggle is not simply for ‘equality’” but “to completely *free* the black man from the domination of the white man.”^[23] Baraka frames his confrontational stance and social demands based in part on his first-hand experiences dealing with inequality and discrimination in urban enclaves such as Harlem.^[24] Echoing the seemingly senseless violence during the race riots in some major urban areas such as Watts, Detroit, and Newark in the 1960s, *The Slave* mirrors blacks’ simmering frustrations and responses to a deep-rooted sense of despair.

The Slave challenges received histories regarding the era of slavery by creatively dislocating and extending the scope of the militancy of the sixties by presenting Walker Vessels both as a revolutionary leader and a slave—presumably a rebel leader—who carries on the legacy of black armed resistance from the antebellum South. Some critics have focused on how Baraka engages with the era of slavery in an experimental form in other plays such as *Slave Ship* (1967) and *The Motion of History* (1976);^[25] however, almost no attention has been given to the experimental engagement with history already found in *The Slave*.^[26] Baraka’s play invokes the figure of the slave revolt leader, a figure that prior to the sixties tended to be mediated through the texts of white historians and writers,^[27] to address historical misconceptions regarding the treatment of slaves. In his nonfiction, Baraka challenges the myth of the content slave and the attempt at myth-making in historiography and social discourses that present blacks during slavery as passive subjects who “didn’t mind being [slaves].”^[28] Baraka rejects this view by

emphasizing the tradition of armed slave resistance, since according to Baraka, “the records of slave revolts are too numerous to support” the “faked conclusion” that slaves coexist harmoniously with their masters.[29]

Baraka subverts white historiography on stage by invoking the tradition of black self determination dating back to David Walker and armed resistance by slave revolt leaders such as Gabriel Prosser and Denmark Vesey by, as Werner Sollors points out, naming *The Slave*'s main character Vessels.[30] Baraka's use of the slave rebel figure, however, is experimental and differs from other conventional representations of armed resistance by black authors such as Arna Bontemps's *Black Thunder* (1936), a fictional recreation of the historical 1800 Gabriel's Rebellion. In *The Slave*, Vessels is not the historical reincarnation of Walker or Vesey propelled into the future; instead, Vessels's initial position in the play as an outspoken and discontent slave is a symbolic figure of resistance who projects the legacy of slave rebellions and violent suppressions into a hypothetical future.

The Slave's prologue presents Vessels as a character who attempts to articulate his grievances but fails due to his position as a field slave, which reflects his social marginality. The prologue purposefully obscures chronological time as Vessels appears as an “*old field slave*” who is “much older than [he] look[s] . . . or maybe much younger” at different periods during the play.[31] Vessels initially takes the form of a seer, elder statesman, or a black preacher, but as he attempts to express his thoughts, he grows “*anxiou[s]*,” “*less articulate*,” and “*more 'field hand' sounding*” (45). Scholars agree on the cryptic nature of Vessels's opening speech;[32] nonetheless, Vessels's restlessness and belligerent intent while still a slave is evident when he remarks that “[w]e are liars, and we are murderers. We invent death for others” (43). Vessels's condition as a slave makes him unable to articulate a coherent message; as a result, his inability to effectively communicate marginalizes him and, at the same time, connects him to the emerging restlessness and frustration among disenfranchised blacks that finds a physical expression in an altered social context in the play's subsequent acts. Signaling the ineffectiveness of rhetoric, Vessels turns to physical violence as a tool to address his social grievances.

Vessels's initial position as a “*field hand*” is significant for Baraka in the context of slaves' hierarchies and class distinctions among blacks since he believes that the source for black liberation in past and contemporary times will be carried out by marginalized subjects rather than blacks in relative positions of authority or class standing. In the introduction to *The Motion of History*, Baraka makes the distinction between slaves who were “house servants and petty bourgeoisie-to-be” and “field slaves” who represented the majority and the authentic revolutionaries.[33] Hence, Vessels's initial position as a marginalized field slave connects him to the majority of disenfranchised blacks rather than to the black middle class leaders of the civil rights era, who in Baraka's view, asked blacks to “renounce [their] history as pure social error” and look at “old slavery” and its legacy of social and economic disparities as a “hideous acciden[t] for which no one should be blamed.”[34] Vessels's position as a field slave functions as a social critique of black civil rights leaders and their methods, thus presenting a clear ideological contrast between his radical militancy and their nonviolent social activism.

The Slave destabilizes dominant historical narratives of slave suppression on stage by presenting a decentered subject who carries the legacy of armed resistance and has the potential to challenge the status quo through open revolution. The play's first act propels Vessels into a contemporary city in the 1960s where he becomes the leader of a “black liberation movement” who is able to mount an effective military offensive against whites (58). As Larry Neil observes, Vessels in the contemporary context “demands a

confrontation with history. . . . His only salvation lies in confronting the physical and psychological forces that have made him and his people powerless.”^[35] Vessels refers to the source of his actions when he maintains that he is fighting “against three hundred years of oppression” (72). Vessels, moreover, echoes the intent of former slave rebel leaders such as Nat Turner when he boasts that he “single-handedly. . . promoted a bloody situation where white and black people are killing each other” (66). Neil contextualizes the violence depicted in *The Slave* by arguing that despite Western society’s aggression toward the oppressed, “it sanctimoniously deplore[d] violence or self-assertion on the part of the enslaved.”^[36] Vessels’s armed resistance—taken as a continuation of past instances of slave rebellion—figuratively subverts the historical record since an organized and open slave revolt in the U.S. did not last more than a few days. *The Slave* attempts, as Baraka notes in his often-cited essay, “The Revolutionary Theatre” (1964), to take blacks’ revolutionary “dreams and give them a reality”;^[37] as a result, Baraka’s play goes beyond the representation of the militancy and radicalism of the sixties by creating a fictional counterview of the historical record of slave revolt suppressions.

Despite the inclusion of a race war in *The Slave*, the play shows the limits of a military and bloody confrontation between blacks and whites on stage; instead, it concentrates on the tension between Vessels’s revolutionary goals and his ambivalent feelings toward whites due to his former acceptance of racial pluralism. Although the war has been raging for months and has tangible consequences, since it is noted that Vessels’s “noble black brothers are killing what’s left of the city,” or rather “what’s left of this country” (49), it is only alluded to intermittently rather than enacted. The war serves mainly as a background to the verbal abuse, physical violence, and aggression in the living room among Vessels, Grace, and Easley.^[38] The animosity between Vessels and Grace derives also in part from Baraka’s radicalization and his own personal struggles to reconcile his black nationalism and his marriage to Hettie Jones, a white woman.^[39] The emotionally charged scenes and recriminations between the three characters expose the simmering feelings of rage and racial animosity that remained under the surface before the war.

The Slave presents a clash between a black radical and a white liberal, and Vessels’s confrontation with Easley symbolizes his attempt to overcome his past and continue his revolution. Samuel Hay maintains that in *The Slave* and other plays of the same period, “Baraka repeats Baldwin’s theme [in *Blues for Mr. Charlie* (1964)] that burning all bridges to white liberals is the first step toward liberation.”^[40] Vessels does not direct his hatred against prejudiced whites but against Easley, a college professor with a “liberal education, and a long history of concern for minorities” (52). Consequently, Vessels’s shooting of Easley represents the end of possible coexistence between blacks and whites, echoing the radical view—embraced by Malcolm X and other black militants—that white liberals could not contribute to the struggle for black liberation. Grace realizes, however, that in trying to overcome his former relationships with whites, Vessels risks destroying himself and his family. Even though Vessels’s role as a revolutionary leader fulfills a long-awaited dream and struggle for liberation that has extended for centuries—exactly what Baraka exhorts in “The Revolutionary Theatre”—*The Slave* depicts the revolution’s toll on Vessels and his inability to successfully navigate his own racial allegiances.^[41]

The Slave’s ending ultimately negates Vessels’s prospects for a successful revolution—even within the fictional setting created by the play—and reveals the fate of his family when he asserts that his two daughters are dead, most likely by his own hands. Following the death of Easley, the fate of his children in *The Slave*’s final scenes becomes the focus of attention; however, Vessels’s actions and statements suggest that he arrived at Grace’s house with the intention of ending his children’s lives. Vessels

mentions at different times that he returned to Grace's house because he "want[s] those children" (65), but the stage directions at the beginning of act one suggest that he could have already taken their lives before confronting Grace. After the shelling increases and the house is hit, Grace is fatally hurt. When Grace asks him to "see about the girls," he repeatedly tells her that "they're dead" (87, 88). Scholars are divided regarding the fate of the children, suggesting that they could have died in the burning building, Vessels could have taken their lives, or that the scene is vague and unclear.^[42] Although the play's ending appears perplexing, Vessels's seemingly incomprehensible actions gain meaning by taking into consideration that he arrived to Grace's house with the premonition that his revolutionary fight may not succeed. During a moment of weakness or sincerity, Vessels confesses to Grace: "I was going to wait until the fighting was over . . . until we have won, before I took [the children]. But something occurred to me for the first time, last night. It was the idea that we might not win" (68). Baraka in later years conceded that some of his plays preceding Malcolm X's death, including *The Slave*, were "essentially petty bourgeois radicalism, even rebellion, but not clear and firm enough as to revolution."^[43] Based in part on Baraka's own acknowledgement that Vessels lacked revolutionary conviction, some scholars have described Vessels's fight as futile.^[44] Jerry Gafio Watts inconclusively suggests that the ambiguous fate of the children is "more annoying than provocative," leaving the ending of the play without "any resemblance of meaning."^[45] Vessels's actions and the fate of his children, however, achieve an important symbolic meaning in the context of Vessels's former self as a slave when, during the antebellum period, some slaves took the extreme action of ending their children's lives in order to spare their fate as slaves.

The ending of *The Slave* inventively engages with the era of slavery by drawing parallels with tragic episodes during the antebellum era such as the well-known case of Margaret Garner, a runaway slave, who took the radical measure of taking her daughter's life before her capture as an alternative to slavery, an episode masterly rendered in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987). Henry D. Miller observes that in Baraka's plays, characters "are not human beings at all, but political abstractions."^[46] Although the absence of Vessels's daughters during the play may suggest a metaphorical interpretation of these characters, his disturbing actions toward them are also pragmatic, as Vessels reasons that the fate of non-whites may be in jeopardy after a possible military victory by the white army. Vessels returns to Grace's house because he believes he is "rescuing the children" from an unspecified danger (69); his rescue takes the form of a desperate form of protection. Morrison's use of Garner's story continued a tradition in antislavery writing that called attention to slaves' attempts to gain their freedom since, according to Paul Gilroy, the "horrific" story of Garner was often used by some abolitionists to raise awareness for the antislavery cause.^[47] In a similar manner, and in relation to calls for a black revolution in the sixties, Vessels's seemingly incomprehensible actions in *The Slave* dramatize the way in which oppressive race relations cornered individuals into taking desperate actions, as Garner's story also demonstrates. As a result, the children in *The Slave* represent the unfulfilled aspirations of a black revolution just as Garner's daughter symbolizes slaves' negated freedom. In Baraka's rendering of this parallel episode, Vessels's dreams for liberation are shattered for him and his children as they ultimately perish, and he returns to his slave-like state at the end of the play.

Beyond reflecting Baraka's radicalization and frustration regarding the marginalized conditions of urban blacks during the sixties, *The Slave* craftily contextualizes its radical and militant message by merging Vessels's revolutionary aims with historical instances of armed resistance by blacks. The play's endurance rests in its reminder that the gains for social recognition during the sixties were not only achieved through acts of nonviolent resistance, but also through the prospects of violent confrontation.

Aesthetically, *The Slave* uses innovative techniques that reflect postmodern anxieties in relation to the challenge and subversion of dominant historical narratives about the era of slavery; Vessels's discomfiting revolutionary message that stresses militancy, nationalist aspirations, and radical actions in the face of racial oppression stands as a form of historical memory that reflects the contentious history of race relations—not only during the sixties but also at different junctions in American history. The play's engagement with the position of marginalized subjects and their past history of resistance found in black theater is similarly present in the Chicano theater tradition.

Luis Valdez's *Bandido!*

Critical discussions of Valdez's works are often divided within the framework of Valdez's collaboration with *El Teatro Campesino* and his post-80s projects; however, *Bandido!* has not been commonly explored as the continuation of the nationalist and revolutionary themes and creative engagement with history already present in his pre-*El Teatro Campesino* play, *The Shrunken Head of Pancho Villa*, which introduced the use of the archetypal revolutionary for the first time in Chicano theater.^[48] Scholars have pointed out that the characters of the two brothers in *Shrunken Head*, Joaquín and Belarmino, reflect—and physically appropriate—characteristics of two historical figures of resistance, Joaquín Murrieta and Francisco Villa.^[49] The ethos of Villa is staged both in a “realistic” and “surrealistic” manner as their father, Pedro, allegedly fought alongside Villa during the Mexican Revolution while Belarmino acts literally as the missing head of Villa.^[50] The play is explicit in relation to Villa's symbolism as a “peasant outlaw” and as “revolutionary giant.”^[51] *Shrunken Head* shows an imaginative treatment of history and the revolutionary figure that is recovered and situated within an American historical context in *Bandido!*^[52]

The emphasis on the history of the Southwest in *Bandido!* serves to reclaim past events of war and conquest and to situate early Mexican Americans within a geographical space neglected to them in prevalent historical narratives. Huerta correctly notes that with *Bandido!*, Valdez offers Chicanos a historical “presence in the state of California.”^[53] Previously the largest group in the state, *Californios* were considerably outnumbered only a decade after the discovery of gold in 1848. They faced social and economic discrimination—and more importantly—they lost most of their land and social position despite the protections granted in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. Before the 1860s, *Californios* owned the most valuable land in California, but “by the 1870s, they owned only one-fourth of this land” and by “the 1880s Mexicans were relatively landless.”^[54] The historical Vásquez traced his ancestry to the first *Californios* who arrived in the eighteenth-century, and his loss of land and social status forms the basis and context for Vásquez's actions in *Bandido!*; he mentions that a “hundred years ago, [his] great grandfather founded San Francisco with [Juan] De Anza. Fifty years ago José Tiburcio Vásquez was the law in San José”;^[55] but Vásquez laments that he “cannot even walk the wooden side-walks of either city without a leash” (110). Vásquez's reversal of fortune represents the fate of *Californios* after the U.S. annexation of the territory.

Valdez's play challenges dominant narratives of the U.S. westward expansion that exalts the economic success stories of white Americans by focusing on Vásquez as a marginalized subject who, similar to Vessels in *The Slave*, revolts against the social order. In the introduction to *Bandido!*, Valdez subverts such narratives by contending that the “American mythology” that constitutes the history of the Old West remains “under constant revision” (97). *Bandido!* presents an alternative interpretation to the meaning and symbolic significance of Vásquez despite, or because of, his ominous ending since, as Valdez also

notes, Vásquez holds the distinction of being the last man to be publically executed in California in 1875 (97). There has been a shift in analyses of *Bandido!* from looking at the play as a distortion of history to reevaluating the play as recontextualizing history and questioning its neutrality. Scholars and reviewers who saw the 1994 staging of *Bandido!* were critical about what they perceived as “revisionary history” (89).^[56] Broyles-González, for instance, argues that the plight of the historical Vásquez in *Bandido!* is “wholly distorted by omissions.”^[57] Valdez’s intent, however, is to take advantage of the malleability of historical accounts—as the play’s introduction suggests—to create his own revolutionary archetype.

As a contrast to Baraka’s loose amalgamation of figures of resistance in *The Slave*, *Bandido!* is based on the historical Vásquez; however, rather than simply contesting negative historical characterizations and presenting the *true* Vásquez, Valdez’s play carves its own figure of resistance based on competing interpretations. Although the revolutionary dimension of the historical Vásquez has been disputed by historians,^[58] the revolutionary figure in *Bandido!*—just as in *The Slave*—is used as a symbol of resistance able to embody, as Huerta notes, Chicano’s “struggle against oppressive forces.”^[59] Rossini rightly observes that Vásquez in *Bandido!* stands as a rebel archetype since Valdez “reject[s] the easy label of criminal and tak[es] seriously Vásquez’s revolutionary potential.”^[60] The representation of Vásquez in *Bandido!* is more complex than a simple revisionist rendering of Vásquez’s life on stage; rather, *Bandido!*’s portrayal of Vásquez reflects what scholars such as Juan Alonzo have identified as the reconceptualization of the figure of the nineteenth-century outlaw and bandit after the eighties.^[61] *Bandido!* balances two seemingly contradictory accounts in relation to the historical character of Vásquez and presents two Vásquez figures: a bandit innocent of shooting three Americans who becomes a figure of nonviolent resistance, and an armed rebel who attempts to incite a revolution in California.

On one hand, *Bandido!* rejects the simplistic characterization of Vásquez as a petty thief and makes him a symbol for *Californios* against the American expansion into the Southwest that similarly echoed the nonviolent actions by Chávez during the Delano strike in the 1960s. In *Bandido!*, Vásquez acknowledges his “twenty years as a horse thief and stage robber,” but contends that his “career grew out of the circumstances by which [he] was surrounded” (127). Vásquez’s actions reflect the changing circumstances of Mexican Americans as he adds: “I was thirteen when gold was discovered. As I grew to manhood, a spirit of hatred and revenge took possession of me. I had many fights in defense of what I believed to be my rights and those of my countrymen” (127). In the play’s early scenes, Vásquez acts as a scrupulous bandit who restrains himself from shooting victims during his raids. Vásquez informs his band before the raid at Tres Pinos that his “[f]irst cardinal rule” is “no killing” (116). When Vásquez is captured and sentenced for his involvement in the robbery, his hanging takes the form of an act of arbitrary justice, but also symbolizes the limits of passive resistance by Mexican Americans after the annexation of California.

On the other hand, *Bandido!* employs the rebel figure inscribed in the history of Mexican Americans in the Southwest to articulate a message of resistance. Valdez connects Vásquez’s rebellious actions to early California outlaws such as Murrieta and “Mestizo” revolutionaries such as Villa already present in his militant play *The Shrunken Head of Pancho Villa*.^[62] As the play progresses, *Bandido!* imaginatively uses Vásquez’s revolutionary potential—whether historical or fictional—to insert a militant message as Vásquez shares his plans to begin a revolution in order to liberate California from U.S. control. After the raid at Tres Pinos, Vásquez is once again on the run when he reaches the San Fernando Mission. There, he finds refuge in the estate of Don Andrés Pico, a historical figure, who during the U.S.-Mexican War “defeated the U.S. Cavalry at the Battle of San Pasquel [*sic*]” (138).^[63] During their meeting, Vásquez

invites Pico to join him in fighting Americans one more time when he confesses: “I’m talking about a revolution. With a hundred well armed men, I can start a rebellion that will crack the state of California in two, like an earthquake, leaving the Bear Republic in the north, and [a] Spanish California Republic in the south!” (137). Vásquez, however, is subsequently captured without enacting his plan. The scene is significant for its symbolism since Vásquez’s desire to begin a revolution is explicit. Rather than resolving these two facets of Vásquez’s life—as an innocent outlaw and a revolutionary—*Bandido!* purposefully complicates these two competing narratives.

An element that differentiates *The Slave* and *Bandido!* is that Valdez’s play self-reflexively exploits and interrogates the facts and myth of Vásquez’s life as it accentuates and undermines the play’s own historical significance through the use of parody and the inclusion of fragmented and competing narratives within the play. Hutcheon explains that “[p]arody is a complex genre, in terms of both its form and its ethos. It is one of the ways in which modern artists have managed to come to terms with the weight of the past.”^[64] *Bandido!* creates two parallel narratives through the “play within a play” device in which some of the play’s scenes are a reenactment of a play written by Vásquez himself about his life staged by Samuel Gillette, a theatrical “impresario,” while Vásquez awaits his sentence in a San Jose prison (98, 100). Gillette’s artistic vision, when reenacting Vásquez’s life on stage, and the writing and rewriting of Vásquez’s own story in *Bandido!* examine and parody the process of theatrical representation and historical certainty. Hutcheon describes parody as the “perfect postmodern form” since “it paradoxically both incorporates and challenges that which it parodies.”^[65] Under this view, *Bandido!* calls attention to Vásquez’s significance while simultaneously undermining the veracity of such assertion.

A marked difference between *The Slave* and *Bandido!* is that although both plays revolve around the possibilities of armed resistance and revolution by minority groups against a larger white population, the style of *The Slave* is tragic; in contrast, *Bandido!* combines realistic elements with melodrama.^[66] Huerta, for example, argues that *Bandido!* is divided in two distinct sections and explains that “[w]hen we are with Vásquez in the jail cell, we are observing the real man; when the action shifts to the melodrama stage we are sometimes watching the Impresario’s visions and sometimes we are actually watching Vásquez’s interpretation.”^[67] Other scholars, however, have observed that the line between the melodrama sections and the realistic jail scenes becomes blurred and problematic as the play progresses.^[68] The use of melodrama, ultimately, adds an additional dimension to Vásquez as a multifaceted character.

Bandido! weaves Vásquez’s competing nonviolent and revolutionary message as Vásquez himself directly writes and rewrites his own story while in jail, thus mediating a set of seemingly contradictory positions. After the first staging of Vásquez’s play by Gillette, Vásquez complains about Gillette’s emphasis on his private life as “melodrama” where Vásquez’s alleged romantic exploits are accentuated through his relationship with Rosario, a married woman (109). Rather than resolving the tension between Vásquez’s personal life and his public persona, Valdez’s play self-reflexively exploits the apparent contradictions. Gillette expresses skepticism regarding Vásquez’s desire to prove his innocence during the killings at Tres Pinos and to enhance his pacifist stance, while at the same time trying to incite an armed revolt that reflects his revolutionary aspirations. When Vásquez and Gillette are negotiating the terms for staging Vásquez’s play in San Francisco, Vásquez tells Gillette: “If I’m to be hanged for murder, I want the public to know I’m not guilty” (110). Gillette objects to this request as he wonders: “Twenty years as a vicious desperado and never a single, solitary slaying?” (110). At the same time,

Gillette agrees to buy Vásquez's revised play and stage it in San Francisco but with "none of this Liberator of California horseshit" since he would "be laughed out of the state if [he tries] to stage that" (140). Vásquez's own crafting of his story and Gillette's assistance as theater producer and businessman combine to mediate the play's layered message.

Despite its revolutionary message, *Bandido!* portrays an unsuccessful revolution as Vásquez questions his actions due to his ambivalence regarding his intent to incite a revolution and his hybrid cultural identity as he decides—before his execution—to avert an armed confrontation. Before Vásquez's capture, Cleodovio Chávez, one of Vásquez's band members, is attracted to the possibility of gathering a group of armed men and "slaughter[ing] every gringo [they] meet" since he reasons, "[I]f they're gonna hang us, it might as well be for something good—not petty thievery" (145). In a subsequent scene, Vásquez averts the possible confrontation by sending a letter to Chávez, who has not been captured, asking him "not to get himself and a lot of innocent people killed" (150). The possibility for armed confrontation—which is set in motion in *The Slave*—is averted in *Bandido!* due to Vásquez's own hybrid cultural identification as a *Californio* and an American. A significant gesture in *Bandido!* is that although Vásquez was chased in his homeland and persecuted by American authorities, he considers himself a product of his mixed Mexican and American background. Vásquez displays what Ramón Saldívar has identified as an "in-between existence" present in Mexican American narratives since the formation of the U.S.-Mexican border.^[69] In *Bandido!*, Vásquez has the opportunity to stay in Mexico, but he returns to California; when asked about his motives, Vásquez responds that he has "never relished the idea of spending the rest of [his] days in Mexico" since California is "where [he] belong[s]" (138). The character of Vásquez signals a transition in Valdez's drama from presenting the memory and ethos of Villa, a Mexican revolutionary, in *The Shrunken Head of Pancho Villa* as an archetypal figure to Vásquez in *Bandido!*, a Mexican American figure of resistance, who belongs to the history of the U.S. and the Southwest.

Conclusion

The Slave and *Bandido!* use innovative dramatic techniques that reflect postmodern concerns in post-sixties minority theater regarding the malleability and fragmentation of historical narratives to question historical representations of their respective marginalized groups. Both plays reclaim previously overlooked figures in dominant historical discourses and offer them agency to recreate and alter the historical memory of each group. The plays transform marginalized subjects, from a slave and an outlaw, respectively, into revolutionary figures to create a historical continuity between previous instances of armed resistance and revolt from past to contemporary times. Both revolutionary leaders engage, in different degrees, in a quest to gain their freedom and previously negated historical spaces—a black nation and an independent California respectively—that can be achieved through violent means. *The Slave* and *Bandido!* revolve around the haunting memory of race relations in the U.S. and episodes of armed resistance by altering historical narratives as Baraka's contemporary revolutionary figure carries the history of slave rebellions, while Valdez's play disrupts historical representations by allowing its revolutionary figure to write and rewrite his own legacy.

The Slave and *Bandido!* ultimately present unfulfilled revolutions even in their fictional settings and show a similar ambivalence regarding their revolutionaries' actions and intents toward whites. Despite its representation of a race war, *The Slave* is less radical than commonly assumed since Vessels struggles unsuccessfully to jettison his previous racial pluralism and his past relationships with whites. Vásquez in *Bandido!* similarly struggles to incite a revolt against whites in light of his hybrid cultural identity.

Although both plays appear to respond to different social and political historical periods, they interrogate and grapple with ever-present questions of race and ethnic identity, and the position of people of color in the U.S., that continue to define American society in contemporary times. *The Slave* and *Bandido!* represent an instance, among others, in which the themes, tropes, and techniques used by black and Mexican American playwrights and writers after the sixties converge to show that some of the aesthetic work by authors of color share deeper commonalities.

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[1] The term Chicano/a refers to individuals of Mexican descent living in the Southwest. For a detailed description of the social and political connotations of the terms Chicano/a, Mexican American, and Mexican in the context of Chicano theatre, see Jorge Huerta, "When Sleeping Giants Awaken: Chicano Theatre in the 1960s," *Theatre Survey* 43, no.1 (2002): 23.

[2] See Jorge Huerta, *Chicano Theater: Themes and Forms* (Ypsilanti: Bilingual Press, 1982), 11-45; Yolanda Broyles-González, *El Teatro Campesino: Theater in the Chicano Movement* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994), 3-35; Jorge Huerta, *Chicano Drama: Performance, Society, and Myth* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 26-44; Larry Neil, *Visions of a Liberated Future: Black Arts Movement Writings* (New York: Thunder's Mouth, 1989), 62-78; Jerry Gafio Watts, *Amiri Baraka: The Politics and Art of a Black Intellectual* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 259-90; and Henry D. Miller, *Theorizing Black Theatre: Art Versus Protest in Critical Writings, 1898-1965* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2011), 179-216.

[3] Elam's expansive analysis covers their one-act and extended plays from 1965 to 1971, concentrating on their plays' shared themes and elements such as the influence of the social context, the content and form of the dramatic texts, and their performing spaces. Harry J. Elam Jr., *Taking It to the Streets: The Social Protest Theater of Luis Valdez and Amiri Baraka* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 17.

[4] *Ibid.*, 4.

[5] *Ibid.*, 7.

[6] Watts, *Amiri Baraka*, 82-83; and Broyles-González, *El Teatro Campesino*, 235-36.

[7] *The Slave* opened in the St. Marks Playhouse in Greenwich Village in December 1964 while *Bandido!* was first staged in San Juan Bautista in 1981, and then at the Mark Taper Forum in California in 1994. Miller, *Theorizing Black Theatre*, 205; and Jon D. Rossini, *Contemporary Latina/o Theater: Wrighting Ethnicity* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008), 88-89.

- [8] See Broyles-González, *El Teatro Campesino*, 232; Watts, *Amiri Baraka*, 83; and Werner Sollors, *Amiri Baraka/LeRoi Jones: The Quest for a "Populist Modernism"* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), 134.
- [9] Huerta, *Chicano Theater*, 61; Broyles-González, *El Teatro Campesino*, 170-71, 189.
- [10] Scholars have discussed the role of audiences in relation to *The Slave* and *Bandido!* by focusing on Baraka's goal of creating a black militant consciousness and Valdez's attempt during the eighties to avoid the confrontational rhetoric characteristic of *El Teatro Campesino*'s plays. See Guillermo E. Hernández, *Chicano Satire: A Study in Literary Culture* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1991), 50; Broyles-González, *El Teatro Campesino*, 172-73, 229, 235-36; and Watts, *Amiri Baraka*, 83.
- [11] Rossini, *Contemporary Latina/o Theater*, 92.
- [12] Broyles-González, *El Teatro Campesino*, 235.
- [13] Elam, *Taking it to the Streets*, 3.
- [14] Valdez states in his manifest-poem, *Pensamiento Serpentino* (Serpentine Thoughts), that "To be CHICANO is to love yourself / your culture, your / skin, your language." "Pensamiento Serpentino," in *Luis Valdez—Early Works: Actos, Bernabé and Pensamiento Serpentino* (Houston: Arte Publico, 1990), 175.
- [15] Luis Valdez, "Notes on Chicano Theatre" in *Luis Valdez—Early Works*, 10.
- [16] Baraka wrote about his experiences visiting the island and witnessing first-hand the results of the revolution led by "a group of young radical intellectuals" much like himself; "Cuba Libre," In *Home: Social Essays* (New York: William Morrow, 1966), 38; See also, Amiri Baraka, *Conversations with Amiri Baraka*, edited by Charlie Reilly (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994), 132; and Komozi Woodard, *A Nation within a Nation: Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) & Black Power Politics* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 52-54.
- [17] Huerta, "When Sleeping Giants Awaken," 25.
- [18] W. B. Worthen, "Staging América: The Subject of History in Chicano/a Theatre," *Theatre Journal* 49, no. 2 (1997): 103.
- [19] Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory and Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 89.
- [20] Phillip Brian Harper, *Framing the Margins: The Social Logic of Postmodern Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 3.
- [21] *Ibid.*, 28-29.
- [22] For discussions on *The Slave*, see Sollors, *Amiri Baraka/LeRoi Jones*, 134-138; Lloyd Brown, *Amiri*

Baraka (Boston: Twayne, 1980), 147-50; Neil, *Visions of a Liberated Future*, 67-74; Watts, *Amiri Baraka*, 78-84; and Miller, *Theorizing Black Theatre*, 205-11.

[23] Amiri Baraka, "Black Is a Country," in *Home: Social Essays*, 84.

[24] Amiri Baraka, "Cold, Hurt, and Sorrow (Streets of Despair)," in *Home: Social Essays*, 94-95.

[25] Watts, *Amiri Baraka*, 269-73, 445-49.

[26] In his analysis of *The Slave*, Brown discusses briefly the significance of Vessels's position as a "field slave" as an archetypal figure of black militancy. Brown, *Amiri Baraka*, 150.

[27] Thomas R. Gray, *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1831) (Baltimore: Lucas & Denver, 1831), 6. Gray describes Turner during his 1831 slave rebellion in Virginia as "fiendish" and "savag[e]" and guided by a fundamentalist vision of retribution and conflict enacted in religious scriptures.

[28] Amiri Baraka, "Street Protest," in *Home: Social Essays*, 98.

[29] *Ibid.*, 98.

[30] Sollors, *Amiri Baraka/LeRoi Jones*, 135.

[31] Amiri Baraka, *The Slave in Dutchman and The Slave: Two Plays by LeRoi Jones* (New York: Morrow, 1964), 43, 44. All subsequent references are indicated in parenthesis.

[32] For discussion on *The Slave*'s prologue, see Sollors, *Amiri Baraka/LeRoi Jones*, 137; Watts, *Amiri Baraka*, 78-79; and Miller, *Theorizing Black Theatre*, 209-210.

[33] Amiri Baraka, introduction to *The Motion of History and Other Plays*. (New York: William Morrow, 1978), 13. See also, Amiri Baraka, "What Does Nonviolence Mean?" in *Home: Social Essays*, 137.

[34] Baraka, "What Does Nonviolence Mean?," 135, 137.

[35] Neil, *Visions of a Liberated Future*, 70.

[36] *Ibid.*, 71-72.

[37] Amiri Baraka, "The Revolutionary Theatre," in *Home: Social Essays*, 211.

[38] Neil correctly observes that *The Slave* "is essentially about Walker's attempt to destroy his white past. For it is the past, with all of its painful memories, that is really the enemy of the revolutionary." Neil, *Visions of a Liberated Future*, 70.

[39] As Baraka comments in his *Autobiography*, his increasingly militant stance against whites opened a chasm between him and Hettie Jones, which forms the basis of the confrontation between Vessels and Grace in *The Slave*. *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka* (New York: Freundlich Books,

1984), 195-96.

[40] Samuel A. Hay, *African American Theatre: A Historical and Critical Analysis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 95.

[41] Years later, Baraka observed that Vessels's revolutionary goals were hindered due to his inability to shed his past. Baraka asserts that going "through the whole process of breast-beating, accusations, and lamenting meant" that Vessels still had "a relationship with his wife, with his past." *Conversations*, 134.

[42] See Miller, *Theorizing Black Theatre*, 210; Watts, *Amiri Baraka*, 82-83; Hay, *African American Theatre*, 95; and Sollors, *Amiri Baraka/LeRoi Jones*, 137.

[43] Baraka, Introduction to *The Motion of History*, 12.

[44] See Watts, *Amiri Baraka*, 80; and Sollors, *Amiri Baraka/LeRoi Jones*, 136.

[45] Watts, *Amiri Baraka*, 83.

[46] Miller, *Theorizing Black Theatre*, 210.

[47] Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 66.

[48] Huerta describes the significance of *Shrunken Head* since it marked the first time that "a Chicano playwright began to explore the idea of being marginalized in this country" and "became the first produced play written by a Chicano about being Chicano." "Looking for the Magic: Chicanos in the Mainstream," in *Negotiating Performance: Gender, Sexuality, and Theatricality in Latin/o America*, ed. Diana Taylor and Juan Villegas (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), 38.

[49] See Jorge Huerta, introduction to *The Shrunken Head of Pancho Villa* in *Necessary Theater: Six Plays about the Chicano Experience*, ed. Jorge Huerta (Houston: Arte Publico, 1989), 143-44; Huerta, *Chicano Theater*, 53-54; and Worthen, "Staging América," 111, 118.

[50] Luis Valdez, *The Shrunken Head of Pancho Villa* in *Necessary Theater*, 154.

[51] *Ibid.*, 155, 160.

[52] Huerta points out that Valdez's experimental style in *Shrunken Head* "set the tone for all of [his] later works, none of which can be termed realism or realistic" (*Chicano Drama*, 60). Similarly, the importance of history for Valdez was closely connected to Chicano identity and this theme is present at different stages during his career. Reflecting on the role of history within the Chicano movement, Valdez explains that he and other Chicano artists during the 1960s were "forced to re-examine the facts of history, and suffuse them with [their] own blood—to make them tell [their] reality." "La Plebe," in introduction to *Aztlán: An Anthology of Mexican American Literature*, ed. Luis Valdez and Stan Steiner (New York: Knopf, 1972), xxxi.

[53] Huerta, *Chicano Drama*, 30.

[54] Rodolfo Acuña, *Occupied America: A History of Chicanos*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harper, 1981), 104.

[55] Luis Valdez, *Bandido! In Zoot Suit and other Plays* (Houston: Arte Publico, 1992), 110. All subsequent references are indicated in parentheses.

[56] Rossini discusses the negative reviews by theater critics of the 1994 staging of *Bandido!* in *Contemporary Latina/o Theater*, 89-90.

[57] Broyles-González, *El Teatro Campesino*, 232.

[58] The historical Vásquez was aware of the symbolic meaning of his actions and told at least one reporter about his intent to incite revolution in California. Before his execution, however, “Vásquez made no claim of being a revolutionary and offered no excuses for his lengthy criminal career” and “never took any steps to carry out a revolt against the Anglo majority.” John Boessenecker, *Bandido: The Life and Times of Tiburcio Vásquez* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2010), 372.

[59] Huerta, *Chicano Drama*, 31.

[60] Rossini, *Contemporary Latina/o Theater*, 92.

[61] Juan J. Alonzo. *Badmen, Bandits, and Folk Heroes: The Ambivalence of Mexican American Identity in Literature and Film* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2009), 135-39.

[62] Valdez, “La Plebe,” xxvi-xxvii.

[63] The Battle of San Pasqual was a short-lived battle of the U.S.-Mexican War fought between Stephen Kearny’s troops and a group of *Californio lanceros* (California lancers) led by Andrés Pico. After a brief scrimmage, the battle turned into a standoff with Kearny’s brief siege of the village of San Pasqual. John S. Eisenhower, *So Far from God: The U.S. War with Mexico: 1846-1848* (New York: Random House), 222-26.

[64] Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms* (New York: Methuen, 1985), 29.

[65] Hutcheon, *Poetics*, 11.

[66] For discussions on Valdez’s use of melodrama in *Bandido!*, see Huerta, Introduction to *Zoot Suit*. In *Zoot Suit and other Plays*, 18; Worthen, “Staging América,” 113-15; Huerta, *Chicano Drama*, 29-30; and Rossini, *Contemporary Latina/o Theater*, 78-87.

[67] Huerta, *Chicano Drama*, 30.

[68] See Broyles-González, *El Teatro Campesino*, 137, 232; Worthen, “Staging América,” 114; and Rossini, *Contemporary Latina/o Theater*, 89.

[69] Ramón Saldívar, *Chicano Narrative: The Dialectics of Difference* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 17.



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