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Author

Paez, Joshua

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“Fit for Entry”: Researching and Remembering the 1917 Gasoline Bath Riots at the U.S.-Mexico Border through Theatre

Researcher: Joshua Páez

Introduction

Chicano playwright, Luis Valdez states, “My approach to political theater is that the way to the mind is through the heart. If you can touch the heart, then people will come to the ideas themselves.” He adds “The American idea of social equality and human respect has to be constantly defended from generation to generation. What happened to the Japanese is echoed tragically in what’s happening to Latinos on the Mexican border”. Theatre is an undeniable tool for storytelling due to its influence and inherent efforts to recount events or morals. As time passes by, performance spaces provide a unique platform that allows stories from the past to become alive and present. A play based on a historical event or figure presents viewers an opportunity to witness the often invisible or misremembered lives, practices, and struggles that one would have faced in a particular time or place. Those stories are produced through the collaboration of several theatre makers, building on a play that serves as a blueprint. This article documents my proposed outline for a play titled *Fit for Entry*, where I use theatre as a tool to recount an unexplored event in order to spread awareness and illuminate its connection with today’s political climate. Back in 1917, Mexicans who needed to cross the El Paso, Texas border to the U.S. to work, faced a humiliating and discriminatory practice: they were inhumanely disinfected with toxic chemicals through the use of gasoline baths, as the result of a U.S. border policy. A Mexican woman, Carmelita Torres, took it upon herself to use her voice and advocate against the practice, leading to a protest to express the injustice that her community was facing at the time. *Fit for Entry* finds inspiration in her fight.

I did not know about Torres or the Gasoline Baths until I watched, *The Dark History of “Gasoline Baths” at the Border*, a short video by Vox, a liberal American news website. I was left intrigued, and wanted to explore more. Through the McNair Scholars Program and following my interest in playwriting, I decided to develop and create a dramaturgical outline and narrative for a potential play about Carmelita Torres who made an impact by simply speaking up during a time when advocacy felt like it wasn’t an option. It made me realize that the story is about an underrepresented community that gets left out of American history textbooks as a result of the U.S. dismissing its discriminatory actions and injustices committed through laws from the past. Through my own Latinx lens, I aim to humanize the voices of people of color who are often silenced and are not spotlighted to contribute to American history. I see the creation of an original play based on this event as a way to catalyze change, to create conversation, empathy, and transformation. While the play is not yet fully written, I reflect in this paper the theatrical structure and form I hope to fully develop that are based on Indigenous Mayan numerology. Inspired by Luis Valdez’s *Theatre of the Sphere* and its integration of Mayan numerology, my play will find its structure in the understanding that each scene is numbered in a way that signals cyclical time and layers. Through the use of articles and books, I will be able to paint a full picture of who Carmelita Torres was and what exactly occurred on the day that she used her voice to assert the injustice taking place that would become to be recognized as the “Bath Riots” for the dramaturgical development of an original play.

Literature Review

Considering that the sources about the gasoline bath riots were scarce, I had to piece together information from the Vox video, as well as from text from literary sources. Interestingly, other researchers mentioned a similar challenge in finding information about the riots. David Dorado Romo, author of *Ringside Seat to a Revolution: An Underground Cultural History of El Paso and Juarez, 1893-1923* states:

My interest in the El Paso-Juarez Bath Riots didn't start with something I read in any history book. Most historians have forgotten about this obscure incident that took place on the border in 1917. I first heard of the U.S. government's policy that provoked these riots while I was still in high school. One evening, during a family dinner, my great-aunt Adela Dorado shared her memories with us about her experiences as a young woman during the Mexican Revolution. She recalled that American authorities regularly forced her and all other working-class Mexicans to take a bath and be sprayed with pesticides at the Santa Fe Bridge whenever they needed to cross into the United States. My great-aunt, who worked as a maid in El Paso during the revolution, told us she felt humiliated for being treated as a "dirty Mexican". She related how on one occasion the U.S. customs officials put her clothes and shoes through a large secadora (dryer) and her shoes melted.

The passing down of oral stories within families sustained a past that would have otherwise been erased and forgotten since it hadn't been documented in history books. Besides this revealing and personal statement, Romo recounts the shocking discovery he found in an article written in 1938 in a German scientific journal. The article praised the El Paso method of fumigation and explained that the Nazis adopted it to exterminate millions of human beings. I was surprised to learn that a U.S. practice inspired another country to take it to a devastating and unfathomable extreme. That historical connection – that a

U.S. policy had such a strong influence over the Nazis agenda in the genocide of millions – incited me in part to write about it to prevent history from repeating itself in the future as it had done in the past.

The article, "The Bath Riots: Indignity Along the Mexican Border" further explains the role and impact that the seventeen-year old Mexican maid, Carmelita Torres had on the riots. The author Burnett expresses "[w]hen Torres and the others resisted the humiliating procedure, onlookers began protesting, sparking what became known as the Bath Riots"(1). Burnett adds that "the Mexican housekeepers who revolted had good cause to be upset. Inside a brick disinfectant building under the bridge, health personnel had been secretly photographing women in the nude and posting the snapshots in a local cantina". This was not the first time the U.S. has abused its power. As Burnett makes clear, the rioters' actions were triggered by the growing abuse perpetrated by U.S. officers who took photos of Mexicans, particularly Mexican women, while they subjected them to the humiliating "disinfecting" process.

I decided to center the voice of Carmelita Torres in my play because she was the first to rightfully rebel. Of course, many other women rallied behind her and followed her lead. While many Mexicans at the time felt that it was necessary to comply with the abusive practices, as a way to be able to work in the U.S., Carmelita Torres didn't. A woman who at the time was supposed to remain obedient, by societal standards, and not argue against the rules, she summoned within herself the ability to speak up and use her voice against the racism that the Mexican community was facing. Torres and protesters were particularly angry about the photos posted in the cantina, where the U.S. agents were able to dismiss as mere "rumors" perhaps because the accusation came from women. In patriarchal societies where inequities between men and women are rampant, women's voices and testimonies are often given less value and credibility than that of a man. That

additional element was something that I discovered to keep into consideration to include in the development of the original play. Here, I was reminded of Anzaldúa's writing about rumors and gossip. Tala Khanmalek, who wrote an article titled "Wild tongues can't be tamed": Rumor, racialized sexuality, and the 1917 Bath Riots in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands" states, "As Anzaldúa explains, rumor, like gossip, is a gendered category of speech; its lack of credibility stems not from each rumor's uncertainty but from the association between rumor and women with loose tongues. In contrast to "well-bred girls" who never speak out of turn, "ser habladora was to be a gossip and a liar, to talk too much" (1987, p. 76). Anzaldúa goes on to explain, "hocicona, repelona, chismosa, having a big mouth, questioning, carrying tales are all signs of being mal criada" (p. 76). Gossip is therefore an illegitimate source of knowledge—to be a gossip is to be outside the bounds of proper femininity".

Carmelita Torres was able to promptly sense the malicious underlying purpose behind the delousing process in the gasoline baths. Chicana writer, Gloria Anzaldúa describes,

"la facultad is the capacity to see in surface phenomena the meaning of deeper realities, to see the deep structure below the surface. It is an instant "sensing," a quick perception arrived at without conscious reasoning. It is an acute awareness mediated by the part of the psyche that does not speak, that communicates in images and symbols which are the faces of feelings, that is behind which feelings reside/hide. The one possessing this sensitivity is excruciatingly alive to the world. Those who are pushed out of the tribe for being different are likely to become more sensitized (when not brutalized into insensitivity)".

As I gather the information about the event, this concept allows me to better understand the formation of Carmelita's thought process in terms of character development for the play.

METHODOLOGY/ THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

After acquiring as much information as I could uncover about the riot and Carmelita, I began the planning with a story and outline that best demonstrates, reflects, and empowers the voices behind the event in a just manner. I decided to make this outline for the play a generational passed-down story that is shared with family members as time goes by. I found it best to start in the present to include the context of who Carmelita was and then dive into the story, transporting the audience from the year 2023 to 1917 instead. I created a generational family tree on my own to best understand the structure and track who is the person telling the story to and why. I came up with the names of Carmelita Torres's family, since none were found during my research for me to use and went from there as to how the day of January 28, 1917 began and ended. I settled on titling the original play based on the event, "Fit for Entry". The following outline details the play's synopsis alongside the scene descriptions with the implementation of the time, setting, and characters that are involved in each one of them.

The reason I chose the title "Fit for Entry" was because it makes literal reference to the inspection from the U.S. officers at the U.S.-Mexico border towards Mexicans crossing, judging whether they are deemed qualified and safe to be granted entrance. The title is also meant to evoke reference to how each of the Southern U.S. border entry points have the title "port of entry" followed by the city's name. In another lens, it's my statement to assert that anybody is fit for entry regardless of their background and their migration to another country which shouldn't be examined through a humiliating process when the people crossing have well-intended necessity to do so. As I progressed through each scene, the majority of these scenes were not what I found throughout my research. The only mentions that were expressed in my research were the name of Carmelita Torres and what she did. I couldn't find any information concerning her

background, family, or endeavors after her protest. It appears as if she disappeared out of plane sight afterward with no trace to follow. It led me to conclude that she must've been disappeared by the U.S. officers which doesn't sound surprising and it's unfortunate to know that people of color who are outspoken about their beliefs, are often vanished for speaking the truth against the injustices being committed towards them. I believe that everyone has family members which is why I created them to humanize Carmelita as a young woman who must've had people looking for her after her disappearance. Each scene in the play served to retain Carmelita as the main protagonist, as well as informing the audience about the policies that were in place and how that led to the bath riots.

In the play's epilogue, I included it to metaphorically bring Carmelita Torres back to life and pass on her knowledge to one of her future family members, in this case, Marisol. Many Páez 8 stories about Latinx communities focus on hardship and these stories are important but I aspire to instill hope in my work. For each scene number, I researched the meanings behind each number which is why I settled for ten scenes with an epilogue since the Mayan numerology reference that I incorporated appears to align well and naturally with the form of the play based on the characteristics from each one of them. For example, the epilogue which would be the eleventh scene in a sense, stands for the following indigenous Mayan meanings: spiritual enlightening, awakening, intuition, and higher consciousness.

Original Play Layout with a Working Title of "Fit for Entry"

<p>Play's Synopsis</p>	<p>As Marisol assists her uncle Sergio in settling into their new home, she stumbles upon a picture frame containing the image of a girl with auburn-colored hair. Intrigued, Marisol's curiosity gets the best of her, and she can't resist asking her uncle about the girl. This simple question sets the stage for a captivating tale – the girl is Carmelita Torres, the sister of Marisol's great-grandmother. The narrative takes a step back in time to 1917, where Carmelita bravely voiced her dissent against the unjust treatment of Mexicans at the El Paso border. These injustices even extended to the use of toxic chemicals in gasoline baths. The heart of the story lies in the day Carmelita sparked what would be remembered as the "Bath Riots," a story that leaves a lasting impression of courage and resistance.</p>
<p>Scene I – The Girl in the Picture Frame</p> <p>Number 1 represents: exploration, centering, change, beginnings, reminder of your own personal power</p>	<p>SETTING: A bright living room space, mildly filled</p> <p>CHARACTERS: Marisol, Sergio</p> <p>TIME: March 27, 2023, present day, 9:28am</p> <p>SYNOPSIS: MARISOL, a 17 year-old girl alongside her uncle, SERGIO, 48, are moving in boxes into their new home. One of the boxes breaks open, dropping albums and picture frames. One of the frames is the portrait of a Mexican girl with compelling auburn-colored hair. Marisol asks her uncle who that girl is, prompting him to explain that she is Marisol's great grandmother's sister, Carmelita Torres. Sergio proceeds to tell the story of the girl.</p>

<p>Scene II – Quarantine Request & Delousing Process</p> <p>Number 2 represents: duality, energy being distorted, inner knowing</p>	<p>SETTING: El Paso, Texas; Gasoline bath station set-up</p> <p>CHARACTERS: 1917's El Paso Mayor Tom Lea Sr. , U.S. Officer #1, Miguel</p> <p>TIME: January 26, 1917, 7:28am</p> <p>SYNOPSIS: EL PASO MAYOR TOM SEA SR. enters and recites the telegram he sent to the U.S. Surgeon General calling for a quarantine against Mexican border crossers that declares, " HUNDREDS DIRTY LOUSEY DESTITUTE MEXICANS ARRIVING AT EL PASO DAILY/WILL UNDOUBTEDLY BRING AND SPREAD TYPHUS UNLESS A QUARANTINE IS PLACED AT ONCE/THE CITY OF EL PASO BACKED BY ITS MEDICAL BOARD AND AND STATE FEDERAL AND MILITIA OFFICIALS HERE FEEL THAT THE GOVERNMENT SHOULD PUT ON A QUARANTINE/PLEASE INVESTIGATE AND ADVISE ME THIS NECESSARY TO AVOID TYPHUS EPIDEMIC. TOM LEA". He exits. U.S. OFFICER enters giving orders as to how to proceed next. MIGUEL, a Mexican crosser obeys and goes through the delousing process physically where he is put through the degrading and inhumane conditions as if he was cattle. A barrel of the chemical Zyklon B is visibly seen. After the delousing process is over, the U.S. officer and Miguel exit.</p>
<p>Scene IV – El Chisme y Los Rumores</p> <p>Number 4 represents: structure, finding your inner strength, persistence, support</p>	<p>SETTING: Outdoors; Carmelita's neighborhood</p> <p>CHARACTERS: Sara, Rosa, Carmelita, Ana</p> <p>TIME: January 28, 1917, 7:10am</p> <p>SYNOPSIS: SARA and ROSA are bonding over some chisme they had heard about that has been circulating in the neighborhood while they are drinking their morning cafecito. It's customary for them to meet in the morning and get each other up to speed about the news that spreads. As CARMELITA is walking past them, they stop her and have a discussion about what is occurring at the border. Another woman, ANA, joins in and reveals to them that it is rumored that the women that go through the delousing process and get naked, have their pictures taken by the officers and are posted in the bars. The news infuriates Carmelita since she isn't going to let any idiot get away with that and exits.</p>
<p>Scene V – The Call</p> <p>Number 5 represents: curiosity, adventure, gathering all your life experiences, freedom</p>	<p>SETTING: A bright living room space, mildly filled</p> <p>CHARACTERS: Marisol, Sergio</p> <p>TIME: March 27, 2023, present day, 10:01am</p> <p>SYNOPSIS: Going back to the present day, the story is interrupted by a phone call that SERGIO receives and for which he steps away. MARISOL is left behind in the living room contemplating what else her tía Carmelita had to go through and face. Sergio returns, apologizes for pausing, and continues the story.</p>

<p style="text-align: center;">Scene VI – Quarantine Request & Delousing Process</p> <p>Number 6 represents: imperfection, death, unconditional love</p>	<p>SETTING: Santa Fe Street Bridge, crossing ground between both the U.S and Mexico</p> <p>CHARACTERS: Diego, U.S. Officer #1, Carmelita, U.S. Officer #2, 6–8 Mexican Protesters</p> <p>TIME: January 28, 1917, 7:28am</p> <p>SYNOPSIS: DIEGO, 23, alongside his dog, approaches the border where they intersect with U.S. OFFICER #1 who questions him whether the dog is free of lice. Diego doesn't quite understand him and restates the question for clarification. He replies back with the term "firulais". Diego tells the officer that the dog doesn't have lice and moves on, exiting the scene. CARMELITA enters and questions the officer about the baths/delousing process. He says the process is required to cross the border. She resists and lets him know of what she has heard in terms of a mysterious "polvo blanco" being laid on Mexicans crossing as well as the naked women pictures being taken. She continues arguing. U.S. Officer #2 enters to check what is happening. As Carmelita's frustrations become palpable, 6–8 MEXICANS waiting to cross, overhear her reasoning and rally behind her. They begin to shout strong language towards the officers, demanding to be treated with dignity. The officers retreat while the crowd and Carmelia stay behind. Then they all exit.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Scene VII – Closed Door</p> <p>Number 7 represents: logic, understanding, feel empathy for others, rebirth</p>	<p>SETTING: Private office space</p> <p>CHARACTERS: U.S OFFICERS #1 & 2</p> <p>TIME: January 28, 1917, 8:45am</p> <p>SYNOPSIS: U.S. OFFICERS #1 and #2 have a discussion about what is going on at the bridge where Mexicans are refusing to go through the process. They go over the policies that they have to enforce. After taking a while with their decision making, they question who spearheaded the chaotic protest to retrieve them. They exit.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Scene VIII – Break it Up</p> <p>Number 8 represents: victory, prosperity, overcoming, power of transitions</p>	<p>SETTING: Santa Fe Street Bridge, crossing ground between both the U.S and Mexico</p> <p>CHARACTERS: Carmelita, 6–8 Mexican Protesters, U.S. Officers #1 & #2</p> <p>TIME: January 28, 1917, 8:56am</p> <p>SYNOPSIS: CARMELITA alongside her crowd continue to protest. U.S. Officers #1 & #2 come to take Carmelita and two other men in the crowd. They exit and the crowd disperses. Carmelita, the two men and the officers re-enter and they question her about the disruption she caused.</p>

<p style="text-align: center;">Scene IX – Mi Hija</p> <p>Number 9 represents: completion, fulfilling life's journey, new beginnings</p>	<p>SETTING: Streets of Ciudad Juarez, Mexico</p> <p>CHARACTERS: Adela, Cristela, Carlos, Antonio</p> <p>TIME: Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, 8:28pm</p> <p>SYNOPSIS: It's night time, ADELA enters and can't help but go out and walk the streets and surroundings that her daughter Carmelita may have passed by. She is taking steps, when she stumbles upon her husband, ANTONIO, where she informs him that Carmelita hasn't come back home and hasn't heard anything about her whereabouts. Disoriented and heartbroken, she can't help but call out for her daughter to hear her voice and return back to her. CRISTELA and CARLOS enter and continue calling out for her sister's name. The shouts slowly become less audible with the noises of the night becoming much more resounding. The family exits.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Scene X – MAM</p> <p>Number 10 represents: divine guidance and protection, law, judgment, love, unconditional self-sacrificing love</p>	<p>SETTING: A bright living room space, mildly filled</p> <p>CHARACTERS: Marisol, Sergio</p> <p>TIME: March 27, 2023, present day, 11:13am</p> <p>SYNOPSIS: Returning back to the present day, MARISOL feels defeated in disbelief at her tía's vanishing. SERGIO reminds her of her value, to not be afraid to use the voice she holds and to stand up for what she believes deep inside is right. Sergio heads out to help Marisol's mom with the boxes that she brought, leaving Marisol behind. She remains in silence.</p> <p>*MAM = translates to ancestor in K'iche Maya</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Epilogue</p> <p>Number 11 represents: spiritual enlightening and awakening, intuition, higher consciousness</p>	<p>SETTING: In Nepantla, an in-between space, no set physical location</p> <p>CHARACTERS: Marisol, Carmelita</p> <p>TIME: a "liminal" space, where reality takes on different forms</p> <p>SYNOPSIS: MARISOL meets CARMELITA and they have a discussion.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">END OF PLAY</p>

Based on my work researching this event, my next step is to write the actual play using the outline that I created. I have created the blueprint that I need to guide me. I will write the dialogue, create the characters' personalities, and include all the stage directions necessary to fully engage the reader and allow them to visualize each scene. I consider Carmelita Torres's bravery in voicing her objection against a policy practice to be inspiring and the knowledge of this event to be known by spreading awareness through a piece of literature. In this case, a play to cement and have on record to share with others about the historical events that have occurred in the U.S.-Mexico border to shed a light on how its immigration policies have come to be made today. Through the use of theatre, I believe that you can inform others about stories that help them reconsider the thoughts that they may have due to the spread of misinformation or simply because they haven't uncovered the reasoning behind how something came to be. The hope is to spotlight and bring back to life, through theater, the events in the past that can help us better understand our present world.

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Joshua Paez

Biography

My name is Joshua Páez and I'm a fifth-year, third-year transfer student at UC San Diego. I am double majoring in Theatre and Dance with a minor in Chicanx and Latinx Studies. I am the student rep/ambassador for the Chicanx and Latinx Studies Program as well. I have been involved in theatre productions as well as producing and directing my own LAB within the department. My long term goal includes pursuing an MFA in playwriting to further continue my interests in exploring narratives from underrepresented communities to educate and entertain audiences.

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