Chapter II

Project of Nationalism and the Politics of Form

The sixties in the history of United States of America was an age of cultural and political renaissance. One of its unique features was the nature of communism in its expressive dimension nearer home. The home grown revolution in Cuba (1959) hardly matched the western perception of communism as an extension of Soviet Power. It was intelligentsia inspired rather than proletariat powered. The same was the case in Latin America and Algeria (1962) in Africa. Inspired by these movements numerous social and political struggles emerged in the 60s and 70s in the United States.

The United Farm Workers Organization, the single most inspirational movement for the Chicano emerged in celebration of their freedom from a claustrophobic centre to reaffirm the identity of U.S.A., as also the survivalist identity of its subaltern voices. The 1960s witnessed the emergence of various organized community movements in different areas of the Southwest such as the League of United Latin American citizens (LULAC), the Spanish Speaking Congress, etc. Complementing these movements emerged artistic and cultural movements like Teatro Campesino. The political locale of the plays of Valdez’ plays and the founding of Teatro Campesino are to be found in the Chicano experience of marginalization and oppression and the
Chicano tradition of circumventing and opposing the reality of their subjugation. The National Farm Workers Association was the retort of a class that in course of trailing the crops found themselves making homes in a succession of labour camps.

The Chicano farm workers in America were always on the move in accordance with the seasonal needs of the crops. The resultant lack of a permanent domicile status contributed to their invisibility. The unorganized labour force more or less in circulation and an ergonomic pattern strictly instrumental to the agri-business were taken for granted by the growers. The farm workers who went largely unrepresented were the victims of the state policy that excluded agriculture from the Labour-Management Relations Act of 1947 (Taft-Hartley) and from the jurisdiction of the National Labour Relations Board.

Among some of the unaccounted factors is the ill effect of such movement on the schooling of the farm worker children. Disrupted schooling accounts for the piteous performance of the farm worker children whose retreat from school before high-school graduation is attributed to genetically decided factors like low IQ. The ideological network that built the social formation of the farm minorities is reflected in the popular dogmas of ethnically sensitive California State. The media endorsed references as cited by John. C. Leggett indicate arbitrary standards of the system:
Filipinos as ‘the most worthless, unscrupulous, shiftless, diseased, semi-barbarian that has ever come to our shore’; to the Mexicans as ‘childish, lazy, unambitious’; ‘Japanese as tricky and sexually lax’; Hindus as ‘lean, lanky and enervated’; and Negroes as ‘notorious prevaricators.’ (43)

They revolved around the positive testimonials of the charter groups and social figures engaged in active promotion of such ideological social domain. Such mystical notions gained circulation during the days of American Expansionism when the Anglo adventurers (encroachers of Mexican ranches) campaigned to get the law changed so that some of the land would be declared free from these “shiftless, unworthy vagabonds.”

The consolidation of the land into quasi-feudal fifes necessitated the special mystique surrounding the Mexican labourer constrained to a life of migrancy. It informs the cultural frame of dealing with the migrant labourer even today. They were called “tramps, shiftless fellows who actually preferred the open road and jolly camaraderie of the tramp jungle to a settled and decent life” (Dunne 36). The academia had certified these dogmas and so it was fool proof gospel truths. The instructions given by the ranch owner, Henry Miller of Miller and Lux farm to his foreman about dealing with the migrant labourers sums up the attitude of the growers towards the farm labourers:
Never refuse a tramp a meal, but never give him more than one meal. A tramp should be a tramp and should keep on tramping. Never let the tramp eat with other men. Make them wait until the men are through and then make them eat off the same plates. (Dunne 36)

The social circulation of such ideas together with low income per labourer meant that more members of the family would have to work in the fields. This is another key factor that accounts for the low academy education of the Chicanos. These constructs became the inescapable reality of the society of farming majority states of America, where it was the growers who called the shots. The national interest of the United States of America virtually created the earlier mentioned farm worker group of liminal identity operating in the social geographical no man's land along the diplomatic space manoeuvred by America.

This vicious circle of poverty fostering greater poverty was also subject to dramatization by the Teatro ensemble. The union movement, and more importantly its artistic wing the Teatro Campesino, is unique for creating for itself a discursive space outside that of the “school-mediated, academy-supervised” one that speaks to a “reasonably precise bureaucratic and technological communication” (O'Leary 47) mode. Working on the picket lines during the day, Valdez and his compact Teatro Campesino group occupied the nights to develop their
major dramatic tool, the *acto*, a short skit. *No Saco Nada de la Escola* grew out of a street show performed at a bus terminus. The *ensemble* members make it clear to the fellow passengers that they need to be informed of the bus routes since they cannot read signs in English. But what attracts the attention of the onlookers is the fact that without the help of a single English word they use their body to communicate their predicament. *No Saco Nada de la Escola* literally meaning, I don’t get anything from school comprehends the psychic torture of a Chicano kid in American schools. Steiner reports the views of a teacher:

“We are teaching these kids with psychological guns pointed at their heads,” angrily observed Sal Castro, a Los Angeles high school teacher. “If a kid speaks in Spanish, he is criticized. If a kid has a Mexican accent, he is ridiculed. If a kid talks back in any language, he is arrested... We have gun point education. The school is a prison. (210)

Towards the end of the performance they engage the onlookers in mooting the point whether it is superior to be able to communicate in two languages or just perfect English; so much for the myth of their genetic attunement to physical labour.

The *actos* were very functional in that they were short, simplistic, didactic and very much to the point. They evolved collectively through
improvisation by both the Teatro members and the members of the audience. There was no pretence to creating great art. The content of the small presentations came from everyday working experiences of the farm workers themselves. The actos had a small number of characters identified by signs hung around their neck or by masks, little or no scenery, a strongly defined social situation or incident, a presentation of clear positions, and a choice of possible solutions. The most important content of the actos was the hardships of the farm worker. There were always too many workers, and most of them were too late to arrive at the site. This trend of always finding themselves out of the means of earning livelihood made them an easy prey of the labour contractors at one end and the Wobblies at the other end of the political spectrum. In Marxian terms it was the self identity of a fully class-conscious working class and their shared sense of commitment to a collective realization of socialism that was in this context typified by the NFWA.

The agriculture based economy of the southern states in the U.S. with its capitalistic relations of production and its division of labour patterned on compartmentalization was supported by easy availability of cheap work force pouring in from the neighborhood characterized by political turmoil. The populace of California was a composition of ninety-seven percent farm workers and stoop labourers and three percent rich ranchers who controlled the economy of the region.
Moreover “the rail road moguls had accumulated some 20 million acres” of the fertile land of California “in rights of way given to the railroads by the U.S. federal government” (Leggett 1). It was mainly the United States takeover of California and the rail road corporations that took the land far beyond the reach of the ones who tended it. A large number of these Mexicans displaced from their habitat were employed by the rail road, a corporate enterprise of the state.

The rail road, during its construction, was a major provider of livelihood for these poor who were constrained to migrate. The winners of purloined land and the federal state machinery, in the course of the Anglo-American takeover of the regions of Mexico, decided the fate of the people of the region. Teatro created for itself a mediation-free discursive space by making all these historical facts the stuff of their theatre in the line of Arena Theatre of Sao Polo. Like the Arena theatre they made all the shared space like a restaurant or even a railway platform stage for their “invisible theatre” (Boal 122) works. The farm workers of the UFWOC would go to a railway platform and as they pretended to wait for the train would enquire of other passengers if they were allowed to travel without a ticket. To the bafflement of the passengers they would persist that they were entitled to travel since their forefathers were the ones who had provided dirt cheap labour without which these railroads wouldn’t have been possible. As the
nonplussed fellow passengers looked on they would actually board one of the trains and make it a point to offer the same argument to the ticket checker. When they were handed over to the authorities they would offer to pay their fine with labour power since they were short of money power. This technique of radical intervention in the state apparatus was a means by which they availed themselves of the social platform to speak mirth to power. This was also a method of pointing to the contingency factor of a system that was being treated as inscrutable and timeless

Apart from the rail road and mining, agriculture employed most of the Mexican-Americans. The nature of these occupations tended to isolate the work force into enclaves of labourers that swarmed near the work places where they were constrained to spend an average of fourteen hours a day. This also resulted in their exclusion as a minority from the larger American social community. Among this community of migratory workers the farm worker community was the single largest group that did a wide variety of jobs from picking cotton to pruning and tending grapes and a variety of fruits that were grown in the southwest. It was during this age that the fertile area acquired from Mexico came to be known as the fruit basket of America. It was mainly the comprador who mobilized the labour force to meet the demands of the fields; he was understandably loyal to the investors of capital since
he was a party to the share of surplus generated. Moreover he was permitted to help himself to all the usurious and other illegal profits he might make out of the hapless condition of the migrant labourers he had provided. The comprador became the modern version of the slave driver who facilitated the oppression of the labour class. Most of the groups of transient labour force were at the mercy of the labour contractors who were expedient in solving the problems of language, culture and racial.

This social predicament is dramatized by the Teatro farm workers in a very obtrusive way by combining the “newspaper theatre” (Boal 121) and the invisible theatre. The most remarkable aspect of the theatre is the place of its enactment. A group of workers go to a market place and read out a statistical data of historical import to the labourers like the fruit export rate and/or the market prices of the fruits exported. This statistical news item is concretized as the experiential real by the farm worker who, even as the news is being read out, mimes what it means to his class — poverty, hunger, torture, unemployment or deportation. This highlighted another important aspect of the labour reality. Even as the capitalists were spoilt for choice of labour force the unsettled workers scurried about in search of means of subsistence.
During the Depression years the farm worker group under discussion in this study found themselves thronging to the state of California at the rate of “3000 a day to a single valley:

They settled into a life of indescribable wretchedness. It was reported that an “average of forty-one people lived in a one-room shack made of linoleum and cardboard. A ranch that housed around four hundred people were provided a single shower and a single toilet. (Dunn 45-46)

Such accommodation was provided by the growers on their own property and the pickers found themselves stranded within the ranch. They could turn to no higher authority than their corporate bosses. Thus from the perspective of these farm workers they who had never been included under the legislations that safeguarded the rights of industrial workers were excluded from the machinery of collective bargaining.

Again, Marxism offers a theoretical space for land and the real sensuous existence of human lives in the way that the Chicano farm workers were tied to the land as a point of their identification. Marx defines land as “man’s inorganic body” since “land is the only entity that makes a direct entry into human history through production” (Foster 72). According to Marxian economic theory human beings create their own practical relation to land by producing their means of
subsistence, while in a capitalist society it is the politics of demand and supply that informs the status of all relations of production. Capital economics commoditize everything including land and human labour. This results in the alienation of labour. The agri-giants who are entitled to the surplus generated at the point of production see to it that only a pittance is paid back to the labourer involved in generating the surplus. The farm worker and the grower are essential in the business of making the land yield profit. The farm worker works the fields for wages that he receives. Neither is directly tied to the land as his inorganic body. Thus in a capitalist economy, land as a source of production is objectified and labour is taken for granted in the relations of production. Land becomes a platform for profit maximization for the class that owns it while for the labour class it becomes the factor alienating it from the most basic requirements needed for its reproduction.

Henry Ford, the American car manufacturer who is credited with originating the trend of large scale production set the cultural ambience of America as a mass producing /consuming nation state. The enormity of the scale of social exchange became the organizing principle of the American ethos. Arguably, exaggeration became the mark of everything American and it was measured in material terms. The materialistic pattern of unfettered production, one important legacy of the Industrial Revolution, is evident in the spirit behind the waves of
migration from Mexico to the U.S. While the access to the Mexican migrants was in the interest of employers of farm labour and employers of low paid labour, the agricultural labourers in the south western border of the U.S. made double or triple the pay they made in Mexico. The pay difference between Mexico and the United States was very large in rail road, mines and factory occupations, but it was particularly so in the agriculture sector. The Mexicans working in the United States were poorly paid by American standards but were prosperous by Mexican standards. It was the pay difference that decided the magnitude of these migrations. There were many groups who followed the crop, season after season.

There were continuing waves of migration from Mexico and sometimes deportations back to Mexico too. A large number of these migrants from Mexico came to stay for a season or a few years to accumulate money and return to Mexico. The Chicanos with permanent domicile status, a group scattered through the sprawling farms of the southern states, shared the interests of the Chicano political generation that viewed its experience in America as a transitory one because they hoped to go back to their mother country and to a life of better economic security. The labour market extended into the region of the Mexican state and evidently it was not just the national space but the
borderlands too that had become the staging ground for social, economic, cultural and political forces transcending the nation-state.

Borderlands, viewed from the position of nation as fabrications, “do not happen by accident. They are constructed, defended and (in too many tragic cases) bloodily contested by groups of people” (McLeod 68). The U.S.-Mexico border was the sensitized area where two cultures, two political systems, and two economies came face to face since migration was an ongoing reality of this region. Together they shared the common experience of the Americans, including the aspirations and struggle for the realization of the American Dream. In spite of their share of aspirations and hopes these farm workers continued accepting the ongoing abuse since they were left with little choice. The theme of the borderlands is the concern of many actos as well as the mitos (theatrically a religious enactment of life). In the intrusive way of doing theatre, Teatro takes the borderland which, for them, is a living entity breathing terror to the society where it is an impersonal entity.

Very often the state took on the role of negotiating the borders. In the role of the arbitrator it was assisted by the ideological state apparatus which helped enforce the ideology of the state. In the wake of the World War II the state had to intervene to deal with the labour shortage in the fields as manpower was drained from the fields into the military and into the war plants. Thus the United States was forced to
negotiate with the Mexican government about importing *braceros* into individual farms. “The *braceros* were labourers who came into the United States under the informal agreement with the Mexican government” (Dunne 47). These workers or *braceros*, under the terms of the programme came under an agreement with the individual ranch owner. “They were an ideal commodity since they could be imported for the duration of a season and could be sent home at the end of the harvest” (Dunne 47). In the light of the severe shortage of labour created by the World War II *braceros* or the workers from across the border found the power to bargain.

However, the essentially hegemonic state got around every participatory program when the labour contractors, aided and abetted by the growers, engaged in employing illegal wetbacks that bid way lesser than the *braceros*, and the state authorities chose to look the other way. Moreover, at the end of the season they were deported at a tip off from the ranchers. The Border Patrol which was part of the repressive state machinery held arbitrary powers to deport illegal labourers while these groups were twice disadvantaged in that they were uprooted as well.

Delano, California was a unique prototype of the quasi-feudal agricultural pattern that existed in all the agrarian states in the South. To the east of Highway 99 existed a life and a people who had realized
the American Dream and were understandably at a loss to apprehend the degree of rancour of the labour strike of 1965 that broke in the Valley and the rapidity of its spread across the farmland in the United States. The life to the east of the Highway was one of opulence and they could never see the relevance of a farm workers’ union; naturally they dismissed as absurd the demand to recognize the National Farm Workers Association (NFWA) as the bargaining agent for the farm workers. This state, “the heartland of one of the richest industries in the U.S.A, a 4.08 billion-a-year industry called agri-business” (Dunne 3) is a typical cross-section of the U.S. state enterprise for it is also the home of an inarticulate subculture of farm workers who are submerged in a culture of silence. Highway 99 that cuts straight through the Great Central Valley of California is as much a socio-economic divide as it is a geographical dividing line. The west side settlement clusters constitute the residual deposits of successive waves of minorities who had migrated over the decades to the region.

Ethnically disadvantaged groups like the Native Americans, the Chinese engaged by the Whites to do all the dangerous and demanding tasks, the Japanese who followed the Chinese, the Filipinos and the Sikhs and a spattering of Italians and dirt-poor British-Americans constituted the residential group to the west side of the valley. Their world has always been the misery of anonymous toil under the
blistering sun and food insecurity to admit any space for existence, let alone unionizing. The ethnicity patterns of these groups who, time and again had attempted to unionize had never been uniform enough to admit any recurring ethnicity formula. These different ethnic nationality groups who had been the victims of discrimination and tended to identify with their experience of insecurity and victimization developed a progressive ideology calling for systemic changes in order to reverse the dominant trend. Edward Thompson explains class formation thus:

Class happens when some men, as a result of common experiences (inherited or shared), feel and articulate the identity of their interests as between themselves, and as against other men whose interests are different from (and usually opposed to) theirs. (8-9)

The NFWA which operated under the broader umbrella of the Chicano cultural struggle necessitates a fresh focus on the implications of the term ethnicity and its cognizance of the identity plank. These groups who found their common factor in their being confined to an instrumental position in relation to the mode of production sought to unite on the plank of a political position vis-à-vis the state and hence formed a political generation.
Here, to the west side ethnic national divide was also a geographical divide along the two sides of Highway 99; hence the Highway could be called a classic metaphor of the U.S. Nation and all it signature values. The groups to the west side were given second class citizen status and their perception of commonality was in their situation of oppression. Their awareness of their oppression placed them in a confrontational relation vis-à-vis the State which, in this context, was embodied in the political clout of the ranchers to the east side of the Highway. Over the decades the federal state welfare packages had, in the name of development of the economy, privileged the propertied class. A cursory look at the federally funded project provides a telling inventory of the state’s developmental priorities:

(1) cheap-for-the-user water irrigation projects, (2) the availability of federally backed low interest loans to help agricultural production, (3) soil/plant experiment stations (4) free scientifically researched agricultural literature (5) generalized state university support, (6) eligibility for disaster relief and (7) legal exclusion of farm workers from federal laws which could help these laborers to unionize. (Legget 63)

From the farm worker (subaltern) angle these measures can be read as the state violating the rights of the minority groups in the name of development. Here the terminology and the politics of terming, as in
the case of the term development itself, get problematized. The resistance groups, whose existential priorities were minimum subsistence wages, pesticide free working conditions and tolerable working hours, could never be brought round to see any logic in bourgeois developmental paradigms. This situation can be phrased in Gramscien logic as class struggle reaching a stage where the proletariat in a bid for “rights to freedom, personal safety and daily bread is forced to create its own legality, its own apparatus of resistance and defence. At certain moment in the life of the people this force transcends every whim, every personal impulse” (Gramsci 15). This then is the logic behind the illegal and bitter labour strike that broke out in Delano, California.

The *Teatro ensemble* has shown its awareness of this historical stigma of subjugation of a whole race in the interest of the charter groups. Many of its performances have made use of Aztec and Mayan signs like that of the serpent revolving round the idea of spiritual and mental re-conquest of their Indian origins. They comprehend, physically, the signs like the serpent in the act of shedding its skin. This enactment of the historicity of their subaltern position always leads to the great embarrassment and irritation of the onlookers on whom its performance has been imposed. *El Teatro Campesino*, was not just a vehicle of entertainment, it was serious business with serious
consequences. Valdez says “I was beaten and kicked and jailed, in the sixties essentially for doing theatre. I knew the kind of theatre we were doing was a political act” (Savran 261). Teatro is also the awareness of the fact that it cannot escape the grubbiness of its socio-politics; and hence it speaks through the least mediated and so the most immediate of languages, the language of the body. More often than not these spectacles end up in the arrest of the performers. Their vision and their rapid transformation from ragged campesinos to the multi racial Chicano of today was made possible mainly through the Teatro. It gave all the farm workers a voice and a platform to communicate on its own terms and what is more, make themselves heard to the charter groups. It was a political movement of the type formulated by the terms of Marxian class-consciousness.

The origins of the movement are to be sought in the dire situation of crisis faced by an ethnic group within the “melting pot” (Prchal 29) of America. The farm worker with developed class consciousness finds his leverage in the reality that he is instrumental in generating surplus for this new American (bourgeois). He uses this as the plank of protest. The Latino workforce in the North American continent indispensable to the corporate American enterprise was the largest among the ethnic groups absorbed into the system as an instrumental entity. Thus the irony of the nationality factor of the American statehood intensified as
different groups with different relationships to the prevalent mode of production found their ethnicity a defining factor, and, more often than not, just a coincidence.

Many Chicano poets and writers of the period dwell on the theme of the salient Chicano tradition. Poets like Miguel Méndez voiced their concern about the invasion of the printed word which was rapidly destroying the oral tradition of the Chicano. This concern of the Chicanos led to the Chicanismo movement of the 60s developed in the literary-cultural sphere as an alternative force to the chauvinism of the American nation. Chicanismo is the awareness of the oppressed Chicano political community of the power of the decontextualised word in building an imperial nation like the U.S.A. Chicanismo aimed at introducing into the American cultural tradition the strain of the oral that had the authentic force of the body to counter notions such as the one popularized by the studies at the Davis Campus of the University of California. These studies provided empirical proof backing up the notion that the cultural background of the Mexicans makes them more conducive to the type of stoop labour and hours of hard work demanded by the farming sector. This was the atmosphere created by the ideological state apparatus to structure within the discourse of the state the acts of plunder and the systematic oppression they practised on the marginalized groups. This encroachment spread during times of crisis
when they found themselves heavily dependent on the print culture for visibility. The moment it sought to be heard it found itself implicated in the whole system of the society. The practice of the academia demonstrates the power of the word in weaving the image of America as destined for greatness. The oral, alternatively, was whatever was delivered without any mediation. It was the communication practice with the organic interaction between just the source and the target.

This political pattern of oppression that necessitated its class identification also becomes a part of the equation, when identification is sought on an ethnic platform. This was the discourse that the Chicano culture of the oral challenged. It was targeted at the orientalist discourse that gave their oppressors power over their lives. They showed their awareness of the social situation that made minorities of them and showcased them only as part of the discourse of the mainstream. Michael Parenti has, in *Inventing Reality* pointed out the striking similarities in the economic and political realities shown by the nations of Latin America, Africa and Asia:

Lumped together under the designation of the “Third World” they are characterized by (1) concentrated ownership of land, labor, capital, natural resources, and technology in the hands of rich persons and giant multinational corporations; (2) suppressive military forces financed,
trained, equipped, and assisted by the United States — their function being not to protect the populace from foreign invasion but to protect the small wealthy owning class and foreign investors from the populace. (137)

This awareness of the cause of their poverty and invisibility spawned radical political groups whose growing ethnic awareness launched the age of the post-modern. Political activism snowballing among sociological groups in the social front caused such interventionist tactics like the Chicanismo. At the most existential level it meant using any common social space to voice its concerns. It was communication at the crudest level aimed at unsettling a structure that had managed to subaltern them for so long. They would go directly to a restaurant and by helping themselves to a sumptuous meal without the means to pay would try to drive home the reality that every individual irrespective of his pecuniary situation was entitled to the right to good food.

Complementing the various high profile political movements emerged cultural movements premised on the Chicano mythic memory. The Chicano theatre movement is to be comprehended in the context of their oppositional practice of resisting the cultural and economic domination by charter groups. Rosa Linda Fergoso phrases it thus:

The social and political context of the Chicano movement opened up a discursive space for the formation of
alternative representations of Chicano/a cultural identity. Cultural workers nurtured by the political activism of the Chicano Movement rejected the assimilationist thrust of previous generations of Mexican Americans rather than conforming Chicano/a identity to the melting-pot ideology, Chicano movement intellectuals affirmed precisely the identity that the dominant order had positioned as the ‘Other.’ They elevated as positive the identity of those subject-ed by the dominant culture and Mexican-American middle-class intellectuals to the realm of the ‘inferior,’ namely the pintos (ex-convicts), the pachucos street-youth), and the (mostly Axtec) warriors of indigenous peoples. (633)

Chicano Theatre is a revival of a pre-Cortesian cultural memory of their homeland, the Aztlan. Hence the cultural practice of the Chicanos, construed here as a constitutive social practice was Marxist in the sense that it was directly related to their historical reality and was the direct fallout of their perception of the cultural construct of imperial nature. Their cultural revival was a tool for resisting the construct of the capitalistic mode of the real. It raised problems of humanization as the central concern of a cultural regenerative movement. As Bullet Mata, a character in the Teatro play Mundo Mato phrases it:
Reality is some goon kicking you in the ass. It is the shivering dawn and burning sun and four hours of sleep on a hard floor before picketing for another twelve hours on cold rice and beans. It’s the taste of your own blood, before you realize you have been hit. It’s what you believe. 

*Actions, not words.* (Valdez *Mummified* 68)

This expression of belligerence is the perfect reaction to the rapacious language of Yankee imperialism.

This unique resistance mode brought into existence a different real, one that challenged the conceptualized totality of the sign system implicated in the Eurocentric cultural real. Thus the alternative Chicano mythic memory is conceptualized as more than just a real, a deferred form of the imperial dialectic, the experiential real of the oppressed Chicano present. The dominant strain of U.S. nationalism is symbolized in the figure of Uncle Sam who is the archetypal figure of exploitation. The protests were directed against the structure of nationalism, which in essence came to signify the perfect figure of exploitation — Uncle Sam who made use of migrant labour to aggrandize himself and promote his economic and political position. When the charter group astride the mode of production also holds the reigns of authority, the society perpetuates the imperial drama of the colonizer-colonized in all its state organizations and institutions.
Chicano cultural revival took off from the material oppression experienced by the Hispanic ethnic nationality group in America and the most notable feature of this movement was that it was adamant in communicating in Spanish to express its rage at being culturally “othered” by the Anglo.

The sign in the Chicano oral communication was not what originated from a great individual and travelled down to the passive receiver in the linear transmission mode. The communication itself was of primary significance which circulated in the community involved in a relationship of shared cultural memory. Thus the oral was the density of experience of the self that entered into organic relationships with a community. In such communication domain the word was more than a disembodied entity. It was an organic extension of the body whose memory and experience circulated in the whole endeavour. It never had the objectified existence to negotiate outside its context of origin. It is here that the relevance of theatre as a communication medium and the point of divergence of El Teatro as a cultural movement of artistic concern resides.

El Teatro in practice was pure theatre, that is, the carnival of “free people singing” (Boal 95) and performing so that they could be heard. It was a celebration of the freedom to express. Theatre initially, was any expression with density enough to draw attention to its mode of
celebration. Another very notable feature of the theatre form is its immediacy. It is also anything delivered without any mediation. Later the ruling classes took possession of the theatre and built their dividing walls. Raw theatre, to the authorities was an art form with incendiary potential. So it had to be sized down as a cultural practice which would constellate round the organized network of the hegemony of the dominant structure. This motive informed the separation of the actors from the spectators and later on the nuances of division between the actors in terms of the importance of their roles. Theatre had to be structured to communicate effectively the order of disciplining, and coercive indoctrination began.

What happened to theatre is not a coincidence; the transition from an unmediated form of expression to a cultural medium is controlled by the forces of history. It validates the Lacanian theory of social-psychosis of the capitalist super-ego that circulates through the society to maintain imperialist status-quo. It is in fact the repression involved in historicizing; putting history within the structure of language, which informed the passage of theatre from a performance based art to a script based cultural form. It is in Fredric Jameson’s linking of Freudian psychoanalysis to Lacanian structuralism that we find a Marxist validation of the appropriation of the theatre as an art form. (Roberts 56-57)
Theatre is the language of the body with experience and a baggage of memory too intense to be repressed. It is real theatre “too full of sudor, sangre and body smells to be boxed in” (Valdez Early Works 6). A boxed in form of art was too antiseptic and undramatic for theatre. Fluidity of social structure is the space that makes theatre relevant within a society. The intensity of experience decides the persuasiveness of the language of theatre and it is relevant to the extent that signification can never be subject to the fixity of the word. The self, ego and its social position are contingent on the sign system which takes form within a system of floating signifiers and signifieds. Theatrical signification is not reducible to a set of signifiers that share a one-to-one relationship with the performance form.

The charter groups have always been concerned about the danger lurking in theatre. It is the performing body that is the signifier and the intensity of the sign is decided by the historical position of the performer and it is capable of spreading strong messages with the dangerous potential of problematizing the position of the receiver by its sheer intensity. So the cultural form of the theatre had to be bound up with institutional structures. Thus it became essential for theatre in the bourgeois mode to be reduced to a sanitized display of craft. Performance per se, the life of theatre, was reduced to one of the many aspects of the theatre. Thus when theatre was brought within the
capitalist social system the performance text gained primacy over the performing body.

It is no accident that novel became the signature cultural form during the period of *bourgeoisie* ascendency. It was the objectivity of commoditization that made the printed word so important within a capitalistic social structure. The linear conception of history became a construct necessary to the Eurocentric print culture which runs parallel to nationalism. The sanitized text—or the virtual that is taken to be the real—is the product that is available for capitalistic mode of quantification.

Everything had to be concretized in material terms. This explains the importance of the word to the American society. Everything including human life and relations took form within the shape of the objectivity of the word. Word as a social form of exchange could be separated from its context and still be fleshed out with implications. The canonical works of American provenance got the discursive space to phrase the theme of the new world as a space of hope and refuge for the oppressed of the world, a brave new world in search of ideals of freedom enduring the birth pangs of a new world.

The indigenous in the American context were always the experiences and expectations that got idiomatic focus in literary representations of America from seventeenth century onwards. The
emphatic exclusion of the episodes of the earlier settlers or the American-Indians, their tales of displacement — the natural fallout of expansionism, is a capitalist obsession of keeping at bay a diseased realm of its socio-political life. The obsession with guilt (Hawthorne — the element of Puritanism of its culture), the ideology of movement as the intended teleology of progress (Melville), the insistence on the mundane aspects of life (Robert Frost), and so on, defined the ideological structure of thoughts and feelings of an American. Huck Finn, with the boisterousness of the matter-of-fact sarcasm of Mark Twain, formed just one voice in the heterogeneous national culture. Within the propriety of Anglo wisdom Huck had to be a vagabond, a social other so that the dominant always had the defining final word. All these material and human factors were always active in a relationship of mutual exchange setting the complex equilibrium of hegemony of the American structure.

What happened to theatre, one of the very few cultural forms with a potential for a subversive hypertext, is of greater interest. Within the American national space it is impossible to think of theatre without the Broadway and the enclosed space of the proscenium. It was to reify the individual as the Americanized audience, the refined social consumer who would pay for the splendour on display. Mainstream theatre in the American context was a complex social affair and heavily loaded with
the value of affluence. Theatre, following the ideological line of the art and literary culture of the structure, exuded the spirit of a total disaffection or determined bohemianism. It was a rather safe political stand taken by seriously committed playwrights like Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller and Edward Albee. The only legitimate stand for an intellectual to take seemed to be a resolute rejection of public values tinged with a spattering of nostalgia for a gentler and nobler America. Broadway plays were realistic due to economic rather than social or aesthetic reasons. The economic demands of the Broadway fostered a particular kitschy theatricality seeking mass appeal. It had to be an economically serious affair where entertainment value spelt the lowest common denominator as a norm. This explains the limited latitude of theatre in America which has stagnated when compared to the mainstream theatres of European nations like Germany.

The major playwrights of America have always used the meta-narratives of their times to give form and expression to the ideological exchange which elaborate the dominant hegemony rather than question it. Eugene O’Neill’s Emperor Jones revolves round a serious character caught within the deranged psychosis of his own Jungian and Freudian ghosts. Politics of racial equations are marginalized in the process. Tennessee Williams’ characters are caught in the confusion and nostalgia of values in a consumerized world of emotional sterility and
impotence. Arthur Miller’s protagonists have internalized their social worth in terms of cars, refrigerators, and wire recorders. Their tragedy is precisely that they are never able to free themselves from their sheer pride of possessing. Edward Albee is somewhat more in touch with his existential situation in that he emphasizes the element of man’s personal responsibility of getting in touch with the fragmentary character of his existence—Zoo Story may be read as an attempt to take up the responsibility to read history in social existence. There is an awareness of the alienated person who is out of touch with himself and with the world outside, and Albee tries to draw attention to the fact that the individual experiences himself as he experiences others, as things. Thus a desperate sort of humanism is seen in Albee.

However it was Off-Broadway, beyond the Broadway, that provided a taste of the conviction that theatre could aspire to more than technical virtuosity, rhetorical acting and melodramatic displays. Many of the theatres that emerged as amateur groups were committed to releasing the artistic practice of theatre from the hit-or-flop patterns that the Broadway forced on them. None of them however went beyond a point and with the arrival of a new decade, many of them shifted focus from their commitment to explore the boundaries of theatrical expression. There were a wide variety of such theatre groups released from the aesthetic standards and economic necessities of the Broadway
and they were mostly united in defining themselves in opposition to the theatrical, commercial and political values. However they were funded by a variety of Poverty Programs of the state and so Uncle Sam always spelt the final word.

This was the time space of the political struggle of the Chicano community movement and the relevance of *El Teatro Campesino* which drew upon the Chicano cultural memory. It proved its relevance in its persistent use of body in communicating. It refused to accept the decontextualised word of the structurally authenticated lofty individual. *La Carpa de los Rasquachis, The Tent of the Underdog* emerged from the experience of the Chicano peculiarly after crossing the border and the *Teatro ensemble* staged the whole Chicano real on Highway 99. It depicts the life cycle of an average Chicano from his pre-migratory experience leading to his crossing the borders into the U.S. and the indignities to which he is exposed till his death. The significance of the corridor (a bi-lingual piece with dance and narration to the accompaniment of performance including mime) is that while an actor alternated between narrating and singing the episodes in Spanish, another mimed the physical movements. These pieces were subject to no greater critical acclaim than that their random audience. The farm workers reacted to the history so totally with their face, body, and voice that the audience never noticed the total absence of verbal semiotic
network. At the end of a performance the audiences were shocked that they were taken through the play without the aid of a single English word. This is the point of body politics that Chicano oral culture foregrounds to the rejection of the power of the disembodied word. When the body with the genuineness of experience can speak so volubly why privilege an inert medium to voice its real?

The point of oral culture and performance medium is its refusal to accept the inert objects of the print culture. It is perhaps difficult to understand the life world conjured up by the Chicano mythic memory since within the traditional academic circles the print medium has become the communication mode. The world is engrossed in a semiotic paradigm where the degree of the decontextualised relevance of the word is considered to be the certificate of its merit. This makes it difficult to understand an artistic movement which posits a paradigm of body oriented communication practice.

The importance of the Teatro oral mode of communication is to be located in the space of the context-free communication of the type illustrated by McCarthyism. Cesar Chavez, the founder of the Chicano farm worker’s union, was the victim of the neo-fascistic potential of the word in conjuring up subject realities of the charter group interests. The farm workers’ union organizers saw how essential it was for people to voice their concern to get justice done. It became clear to the
organizers of the community movement that since many dangerous notions had become embedded into the consciousness of an uncritical public they needed to drum up support from outside quarters to preempt the fate of the union organizers who had gone before them. *Actos* posited a social position of a total rejection of the male-centered approach of text-based historicizing, the danger of whose limits McCarthyism displayed.

It was the logistical impossibility of organizing a movement from the side of an unequally distributed scattered ethnic nationality group, mere instruments, suspended within a sprawling geographical space with the mode of production and the relations of production all against them, which caused the failure of all previous attempts. The highly lopsided distribution of land, unusual in a modern industrial society, made the job of picketing a logistical impossibility. Along with the ideological commitment to release oppressed ethnic nationality groups from the thraldom of silence it is the progressive mode of programming the operation that struck at the root of essentialism of the grower-certified mode of social reality of the South. Thus Cesar Chavez under the auspices of NFWA invited the backing of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) who were all too eager to be associated with the high-profile event. It was the SNCC and CORE that lent the two-way radios that
made inter-ranch communication a reality. It was so essential in co-coordinating the intra-Delano space which otherwise was logistically unviable to the already disadvantaged picketers.

The Teatro Campesino movement by continuing with the oral Rasquachi tradition of the underdog effectively challenged the authenticity of the script. Within the Teatro performance tradition, true to the vibrancy of theatre form, it is the body that is given authenticity to communicate its memory of oppression. It creates a space to challenge the patriarchal construct in which the text-based communication mode gains authenticity. The body as the communicator performs the oppression and degrees of “unfreedom” it is subject to. El Teatro Campesino or the Farm workers’ Theatre came into being as a challenge to the very culture of print oriented communication. It is the experience of Luis Valdez, himself a descendent of migrant farm worker parents with a fractured education and the experience of many such farm workers that gave flesh to the indigenous theatre group of the El Teatro Campesino ensemble. It was conceptualized as a tool of non-violent protest to render the interest of an ever expanding Chicano and more specifically the campesino audience. Luis Valdez narrates his encounter with the first English word at school:
The teacher was in charge of the school play that year, and she had this pet – a Mexican kid who spoke English. She brought him in one day in a monkey suit, with a monkey mask... She told him “crawl” and he started bouncing around (Bagby 72).

Thus he learnt the word “crawl” through the body language. This is the Chicano oral culture of learning language as the expression of all the experience it is subject to including the experience of their immediate and distant predecessors through interaction with their community. The function of the Teatro was to educate the campesinos about communicating effectively through this very medium of the body. This is why the Teatro became an important tool in putting across the fundamental issues raised by the union movement which could never succeed without campesino participation. It aimed at promoting a cohesive, supportive and active farm worker community. It was conceptualized as a theatre of commitment to awaken the collective social conscience of an economically exploited people, hence a strongly defined social situation presented in a very functional way. Their modus operandi was a collective mode of artistic creation. However, the Teatro will be remembered in the American theatre history for the introduction to the American stage, a functional and incisive observer – the joker or the Chicano version of it, the pelado. He is
indispensable to an oral mode of communication. He is a typical Chicano ethnic creature since he is rooted in the traditional Mexican art form, the carpa (tent show). For him his body, his attire/ lack of it and his facial expressions were the most important tools of communication. He was licensed to use his body, the most vocal medium of the intensity of its experiential real. Thus unlike in the decorous bourgeoisie theatre he could live out all he wanted to reveal through his very body without being offensive. This is the life of the actos where the body speaks more realistically and effectively than words.

Notes

1 Orientalism is a concept elaborated by Edward Said in his book by the name. He makes specific reference to the attitude of the Europeans towards the Orientals which helped the European supremacy over the oriental nations of the globe.