

Dictionary of Literary Biography® • Volume Two Hundred Nine

# Chicano Writers

## Third Series

Edited by  
Francisco A. Lomeli  
*University of California, Santa Barbara*  
and  
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## Edit Villarreal

(7 September 1944 - )

Kat Avila

**PLAY PRODUCTIONS:** *The Fat Man Likes Poached Eggs*, New York, Theatre for the New City, 12 June 1983;  
*Crazy from the Heart*, New Haven, Yale Repertory Theatre, Winterfest VI, 9 January 1986;  
*My Visits with MGM (My Grandmother Marta)*, San Jose, San Jose Repertory Theatre, 17 January 1992;  
*The Language of Flowers*, Seattle, Contemporary Theatre, 19 October 1995;  
*Marriage Is Forever*, San Diego, San Diego Repertory Theatre, 2 April 1999.

**TELEVISION:** *La Carpa*, script by Villarreal and Carlos Avila, *American Playhouse*, PBS, 16 June 1993;  
*Mangua*, script by Villarreal and Bennett Cohen, PBS, 15 October 1997;  
*The Fix*, script by Villarreal and Cohen, PBS, 22 October 1997.

**OTHER:** *My Visits with MGM (My Grandmother Marta)*, in *Shattering the Myth: Plays by Hispanic Women*, selected by Denise Chávez and edited by Linda Feyder (Houston: Arte Público, 1992), pp. 143-208.

**SELECTED PERIODICAL PUBLICATIONS—UNCOLLECTED:** "El Teatro Ensemble de UCSD: First International Tour," *Americas Review*, 17 (Summer 1989): 73-83;  
*The Language of Flowers* [excerpts], in *Ollantay*, forthcoming, 1999.

Edit Villarreal's bilingual/bicultural plays have been presented successfully before both Latino and non-Latino audiences, an unusual accomplishment given the limited access that Latino theater professionals have had to important performance spaces. Part of her success is attributable to the fact that she writes for a crossover audience. In an unpublished 1 April 1996 letter she explains:

I tend to want to introduce one group of people to another—the Mexican immigrant to mainstream audi-



*Edit Villarreal (from Southwest Magazine, Summer 1993)*

ences, the Latina to mainstream audiences, the middle-class Chicano to mainstream audiences. In this sense, I am not writing particularly to Latinos. I'm writing about Latinos to mainstream audiences. I believe this is very important work to do. I want to tear down

stereotypical attitudes held by non-Latinos about Latinos. At the same time, I do not want to reinforce stereotypical attitudes Latinos have about themselves; so I have no desire to write to the converted, so to speak.

The drawback in not writing especially for Latinos and not using the confrontational manner some playwrights employ toward the mainstream is that Villarreal's work is sometimes overlooked by reviewers and scholars in favor of the work of Latino-intellectual-crowd-pleasing writers such as Josefina López and Cherríe Moraga. On the other hand, theater critic Richard Scaffidi, critiquing Villarreal's 1992 play, *My Visits with MGM (My Grandmother Marta)*, for *Drama-Logue* magazine (28 May - 3 June 1992), supports her strategy:

What may be most refreshing about Edit Villarreal's comedy . . . is that it emphasizes character-driven humor rather than cultural/political correctness. . . . what best serves "the cause" is not indulgent or strident speechifying but honest, accessible and universal theatre.

It is the rare playwright who is as comfortable or as adventuresome moving between cultural settings and views as Villarreal; with her craft she demonstrates how to create new cultural material and survive within a Eurocentric theater paradigm. Her distinctiveness as a Latina playwright stems partially from the intersection of her Ivy League training with her practical upbringing in a Texas border town.

Edit Emilia Villarreal was born on 7 September 1944 in the bilingual town of Brownsville, on the Rio Grande at the southernmost point in Texas. She is a fourth-generation Chicana on her mother's side and the eldest of four children; she has two sisters and a brother. Her mother, Elba Cortinas, a registered nurse, was born in Brownsville, and her father, Emilio Villarreal, was also born in Matamoros, Mexico, just across the border. He died in November 1944 while serving in the U.S. Army Air Corps during World War II. A bold and curious child, Villarreal loved the hurricanes that frequently hit the town; disregarding warnings, she would sit by a window to watch things blow past in the wind. Her widowed mother eventually remarried.

Until the age of six Villarreal was looked after by her maternal grandmother, Marta Garza, who had been born on a ranch in Monterrey in the Mexican state of Nuevo León. The feisty, pragmatic character of Marta Grande from *My Visits with MGM* was based largely on Garza, a Methodist who immigrated to the United States when she was fifteen as a ward of the Baptist Church. She came with her younger sister during a great dispersion northward caused by the Mexican Revolution of 1910 to 1920. Stubbornly postponing mar-

riage until she was twenty-four, Garza eventually wed the American-born Juan Cortinas.

Villarreal went to Catholic elementary schools in San Antonio, even though she was not Catholic, because those schools offered the best education in the area. Her family then moved from Brownsville to Los Angeles for better work and educational opportunities. In California, Villarreal attended public schools because her family could no longer afford Catholic ones. In 1962 she graduated from Arroyo High School in El Monte.

Like many talented Latino playwrights, Villarreal studied under the influential Cuban-born dramatist María Irene Fornés at the International Arts Relations (INTAR) Hispanic American Arts Center in New York City; from January to June 1981 she was a participant in the Hispanic Playwrights Laboratory there. She earned a B.A. at the University of California, Berkeley, in 1967 and an M.F.A. in playwriting at Yale University in 1986. After graduation she started teaching at the University of California, Los Angeles, where she is presently a professor in the School of Theater, Film and Television. In September 1988 Villarreal married Los Angeles-born writer Bennett Cohen, whom she met while both were working at Berkeley Stage Company; the couple has no children.

Besides being active as a playwright and dramatist, Villarreal is a theater critic and book reviewer, with published articles in *Theatre Journal*, the *San Jose Mercury News*, and *The Washington Post*. She has been an artist in residence in several places, including the Yaddo Arts Colony in 1986 and the University of California, Riverside, New Plays Festival in 1993. She served as a panelist and text evaluator for the National Endowment for the Arts 1993 Opera-Musical Theatre Program and as a juror for the 1994 P.E.N. West Award in playwriting and the 1994-1995 Minneapolis Playwrights Center Jerome Fellowship Awards. Her professional affiliations include membership in the Writers Guild of America.

Villarreal's piece *The Fat Man Likes Poached Eggs* was performed at a United Nations rally in Central Park in 1983. Her first full-length play, *Crazy from the Heart*, was performed as part of Winterfest VI at Yale Repertory Theatre in 1986. Malcolm L. Johnson, writing for *The Hartford Courant* (24 January 1986), called *Crazy from the Heart* "the most original of the Winterfest plays" that year. The play has had several public readings since then and has been performed in workshops.

*Crazy from The Heart* dramatizes a Native American gambling game, called variously the Hand Game or the Stick Game or the Grass Game. One team guesses in which hand or hands an opposing player has hidden the marked bone or bones. When a team is in possession of the bones, they sing gambling songs as a group to help their player fool the opposing team. With every



Scene from a 1993 Milwaukee Repertory Theatre production of Villarreal's 1992 play, *My Visits with MGM* (*My Grandmother Marta*), with Mariela Ochoa as *Marta Feliz*, Renee Vator as *Marta Grande*, and Feiga M. Martinez as *Florinda* (photograph by Jay Westhauser)

correct call of the bones a team loses one or more of their sticks. The game ends when one team has all the sticks and all the bones. Games can easily last a full day, and usually go on even longer.

The setting is a private game, played in traditional Indian style, in which possessions, not money, are bet. Participants from various tribes have converged in the sparse northern Nevada desert, not far from a powwow taking place on the other side of Pyramid Lake. It is Minnie's game, and on her heels is George, who hopes to learn all of her gambling secrets. Minnie forces George to become partners with Lawrence, who declares that this game is his last and that he is moving to Los Angeles. Minnie teams up with the brash Bodie. Matt and Roseanne, a married white couple, have to settle for side betting because they are non-Indian.

Tension builds as the gamblers, bet by bet, remove from their treasure bags what they are willing to risk for the game. A fascinated Matt, who has studied Minnie's game for four years, explains to a proportionately disinterested Roseanne, who tagged only along to keep watch on her husband, how to play: "Keep betting, Rosie, keep betting

until you cut through to something you really care about. Find the dearest thing you love and risk it, Rosie."

Roseanne, encouraged on by Matt to reexamine their marriage and her values, learns her lessons only too well. In the end she rises above the gibes of the group to teach Matt a thing or two about the game and about what it means to love someone fully. Roseanne is actually a cardsharp, but she has been pushed into the biggest game of her life naive and unprepared. Their marriage is on the rocks; Matt has known this fact for some time but has been unable to resolve the situation. Subconsciously or not, aching for a return to simpler times, he makes Roseanne strip herself of all their material possessions.

The play belongs to Roseanne, but it also focuses on presenting Native Americans humanistically on the stage in a culturally relevant setting. *Crazy from the Heart* is innovative in its portrayal of Native Americans; it is a refreshing encounter with their courage and unapologetic sense of humor.

The widely produced *My Visits with MGM* (*My Grandmother Marta*) evolved from a twenty-five-page poem, "Boogie to Grandma," written on Mother's Day 1983, three years after Marta Garza's death from an intestinal obstruction. During winter break 1988, Villar-



real rewrote the poem as a play. An experiment with magical realism, *My Visits with MGM* was intended to be not only an homage to Villarreal's grandmother but also a comedy about assimilation and a critique of the powerful Roman Catholic Church.

*My Visits with MGM* depicts the ways in which three generations of women discover what it means to act on behalf of the self and to have the courage to live a life compatible with a woman's personal rhythms and truths, unswayed by the tiresome opinions of society. It pays tribute to the protective mantle of knowledge and guidance one Chicana grandmother bequeathed to her granddaughter.

The play is prefaced by "Marta Grande's Poem," a *corrido* (ballad) with English and Spanish lyrics informing the audience that the historical starting point for *My Visits with MGM* is the Mexican Revolution, from which many a Chicano has inherited a story. The ballad tells of fifteen-year-old Marta Grande and her thirteen-year-old sister, Florinda, leaving behind a crowded family of brothers and sisters for a fresh start in the United States. As the play begins both women have died; the blackened, burned-out shell of Marta Grande's home dominates the stage. Granddaughter Marta Feliz has come back to Texas from California to inspect the destruction. Recollections come flooding back and propel her into an altered state of consciousness in which her grandmother, grandaunt, grandfather, mother, and best friend rise phoenixlike from the shadows to re-create scenes from her memory. At the end of the play, the audience's attention is returned to the fire-scarred house. When Marta Feliz departs from the burnt house for the last time, her snapshot images of Marta Grande and Florinda have been restored.

Just as Marta Grande's life began when she left her family cocoon in Mexico, her granddaughter Marta Feliz's life changed dramatically after a priest and friend, the comical Father Ernesto, persuaded her to leave her native Texas for California. Both women leave familiar surroundings to risk all they have for better lives elsewhere, on their own terms, repeating an intimate and courageous part of the American experience. The grandaunt, Florinda, represents the sad side of that experience, of immigrants who never adjust. The Church becomes Florinda's crutch; she clings to it in direct proportion to her perceived alienation in the United States. The ghostly Marta Chica, Marta Feliz's mother, represents the strong work ethic and culture-erasing assimilation that first-generation Americans inculcate in their sons and daughters for survival and success.

José Cruz González, project director at South Coast Repertory in Costa Mesa, California, selected Villarreal's script for further development and a public reading as part of the annual Hispanics Playwrights Project (HPP) in summer 1989. In an interview with Chuck Graham in the *Tuc-*

*son* (Ariz.) *Citizen* (5 July 1990), González spoke about directing *My Visits with MGM*:

I've never been so personally involved with a play in my life. . . . [Villarreal] has such a strong sense of these characters. The writing is so real. And to be honest, it sounded so much like the way I grew up.

Within three years there were three equity productions of *My Visits with MGM*. In January 1992 the play was fully produced by San Jose Repertory Theatre in California directed by Peggy Shannon. Months later, the Bilingual Foundation of the Arts (BFA) in Los Angeles produced a Spanish-language version of *My Visits with MGM* (translated by Lina Montalvo) as well as the English version. Strong ticket sales prompted the BFA to move the production from their regular performance space to a larger downtown facility. In September 1993 the play was produced at the Milwaukee Repertory Theatre with Norma Salvador directing. It was also performed for radio station KCRW at the Los Angeles Theatreworks in June 1992.

*My Visits with MGM* was included in the anthology *Shattering the Myth: Plays by Hispanic Women* (1992); its publication led to more than twenty subsequent productions, including performances at Borderlands Theatre in Arizona, La Compañía de Teatro de Albuquerque in New Mexico, Teatro Vision in California, Teatro del Pueblo in Minnesota, Miracle Theatre Group in Oregon, and Different Stages in Texas. The version published was the fourth or fifth draft; the play has gone through at least eight additional drafts since then, and some of the Spanish has been deleted.

*The Language of Flowers* (1995), Villarreal's adaptation of William Shakespeare's romantic tragedy *Romeo and Juliet* (circa 1595–1596), makes great literature palatable and relevant to Latinos who might be discouraged from perusing the original version because it represents a drastically different cultural reality separated from them by time, geography, and dialect. José Cruz González, who was teaching at California State University, Los Angeles, had approached Villarreal about adapting one of Shakespeare's plays for his students, and *Romeo and Juliet* seemed the perfect choice. Villarreal transformed fifteenth-century Verona, Italy, into twentieth-century Los Angeles; she toned down the family feud to avoid writing another *West Side Story* (1957) and placed the action during the holiday period of *El Día de Los Muertos* (The Day of the Dead) to take advantage of the carnival atmosphere. The young star-crossed lovers, Romeo Martínez and Juliet Bosquet, become secondary to a larger dialogue about the impact of the boundaries created by assimilation and economic status within the Latino community.



In *The Language of Flowers* Julian Bosquet, a wannabe-Anglo banker, has arranged for his non-Spanish-speaking daughter Juliet to marry fully assimilated Ruben Gutierrez, a law school student. An illegal immigrant belonging to the working class, Romeo would normally not have the opportunity to meet someone like Juliet; but Romeo and his American-born cousin, Benny Martinez, plan on crashing Julian's Halloween party. Benny, inspecting a list of guests, notes: "He's inviting the entire United Nations but nobody south of the border." At the party Romeo is captivated by Juliet's beauty; later his life is threatened by Juliet's maladjusted cousin, Tommy Bosquet.

From this point in the play through Juliet's taking the sleeping potion, Villarreal follows Shakespeare's plot fairly faithfully. With the death of Romeo, however, Villarreal's adaptation and Shakespeare's original drama diverge widely. In Villarreal's version, Romeo is killed during a drive-by shooting, witnessed metaphysically by the ghost of his dead American-born cousin, Benny Martinez. After Juliet finds Romeo dead on the street, she kills herself with a knife, similar to Shakespeare's play. Immediately after Juliet's death, though, Villarreal has the star-crossed lovers resurrected and reunited in the tradition of the Day of the Dead. As the young lovers enter an Aztec textured afterlife, they become flowers, echoing the title of the play as well as Mesoamerican imagery. The presence of *calaveras* (skeletal figures) throughout the play foreshadows the untimely deaths of the two young lovers. Their spiritual reunion and ascension into Aztec heaven, however, keeps *The Language of Flowers* from being completely tragic.

*The Language of Flowers*, under an early working title of "R and J," had a public reading during the 1991 Hispanic Playwrights Project. On 19 October 1995 it premiered at A Contemporary Theatre in Seattle under Norma Saldivar's direction and with music by Germaine Franco.

In 1996 Villarreal wrote two plays, both commissioned by major theaters in the Los Angeles area. *Marriage Is Forever*, her return to comedy writing, was commissioned by the Latino Theatre Initiative at The Mark Taper Forum under the leadership of Luis Alfaro and Diane Rodriguez. It was produced at the San Diego Repertory Theatre on 2 April 1999 under the direction of Sam Woodhouse. Another new play, *Chicago Milagro*, was commissioned by the South Coast Repertory Theatre, where it received a staged reading under the title *Tracks* in 1996. *Chicago Milagro* takes place in Chicago from 1905 to 1910 and follows the spiritual journey of Horacio Alvarez, an educated Mexican who travels to Chicago shortly before the Mexican Revolution. He becomes a healer in Back of the Yards, an Irish ghetto in Chicago, and never returns to war-ravaged Mexico. Today, Back of the Yards has a large Mexican population.

In Villarreal's plays the occasional use of Spanish dialogue could have caused problems for mainstream audiences, but she writes in such a way that non-Spanish

speakers are able to grasp the emotional subtext and movement of the drama. She tries to avoid expressing something in Spanish and then repeating it in English, because for a bilingual audience the constant interruptions would soon become wearisome. Instead, when she uses Spanish dialogue, she makes sure that the response in English includes enough hints about what was said to make it understandable. Still, Villarreal readily admits that if audience members understand Spanish they will better appreciate certain moments in the plays, especially the comedy.

Through her writings Villarreal has helped to make Latino culture accessible and understandable to mainstream audiences. She has accomplished this goal without losing her original base of supporters while challenging them to view and interpret the Mexican American experience from different perspectives, as she has.

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