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Chicano Writers

Third Series

Edited by
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and
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Josefina López

(19 March 1969 -)

Kat Avila

BOOKS: *Real Women Have Curves* (Seattle: Rain City Projects, 1992);
Food for the Dead, La Pinta: Two One-Act Plays (Woodstock, Ill.: Dramatic Publishing, 1996);
Simply María, or The American Dream: A One-Act Play (Woodstock, Ill.: Dramatic Publishing, 1996);
Confessions--: A One Woman Show (Woodstock, Ill.: Dramatic Publishing, 1997);
Confessions of Women from East L.A.: A Comedy (Woodstock, Ill.: Dramatic Publishing, 1997);
"My Low Self-Esteem Days" & Other Poetic Thoughts (Los Angeles: Privately printed, 1997);
Unconquered Spirits: A Historical Play (Woodstock, Ill.: Dramatic Publishing, 1997);
Yes! You Too Can Be a Chingona (Los Angeles: Privately printed, 1997).

OTHER: *Simply María, or, The American Dream: A One-Act Play*, in *Shattering the Myth: Plays by Hispanic Women*, edited by Linda Feyder (Houston: Arte Público Press, 1992).

PLAY PRODUCTIONS: *Simply María, or The American Dream*, San Diego, Gaslamp Quarter Theatre Company, 13 January 1988; revised, San Juan Bautista, El Teatro Campesino, 13 October 1989;

Food for the Dead, San Juan Bautista, El Teatro Campesino, 13 October 1989;

Real Women Have Curves, San Francisco, El Teatro de la Esperanza, 25 May 1990;

La Pinta, Los Angeles, Los Angeles Theatre Center, 15 March 1991;

Confessions of Women from East L.A., workshop production, Northridge, California State University, 20 April 1995;

Unconquered Spirit, workshop production, Northridge, California State University, 28 April 1995;

Super Chingona, Northridge, California State University, 6 March 1998.



Josefina López at the time of the 1996 publication of her play Simply María, or The American Dream (1988)

**SELECTED PERIODICAL PUBLICATION—
UNCOLLECTED:** "On Being a Playwright," *Ollantay*,
1 (July 1993): 43-46.

Josefina López, whose first play was produced when she was eighteen, has become one of the most widely produced Latina playwrights in the United States. Her outrageous sense of humor softens the harsh emotional settings of her Chicana-driven plays. In her work she reveals the culturally repressed passions and needs of Chicanas in an effort to achieve healing and transformation.

Born on 19 March 1969 in Cerritos, San Luis Potosí, Mexico, María Josefina López is the sixth of eight children. She moved to the Boyle Heights area of Los Angeles when she was about five years old; her mother, Catalina Perales, had to use the birth certificate of an American-born girl to get López across the border. Her father, Rosendo Z. López, already had his green card, as did her mother. Subsequently, López attended Breed Elementary School, Hollenbeck Junior High School, and Roosevelt High School, graduating from the Los Angeles County High School for the Arts in 1987. Later she received her green card under the amnesty provision in the Simpson-Rodino immigration bill.

Aside from her mother, from whom she inherited her storytelling ability, another influential person in López's life has been the playwright and El Teatro Campesino founder Luis Valdez, whose early plays made her aware of the creative value of her bilingual/bicultural background and experiences. Her ambition was to become an actress, but, inspired by Valdez's groundbreaking work, she began writing, knowing that as a Chicana she would have to create her own parts if she ever wanted to be cast in a production. López developed her craft as a member of the Young Playwrights Lab at the Los Angeles Theatre Center from 1985 to 1988; she also worked with Cuban-born playwright María Irene Fornés in a 1988 workshop at the International Arts Relations (INTAR) Hispanic American Arts Center in New York City. She studied dramatic writing at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts in 1988-1989 and theater at the University of California, San Diego, in 1989-1990. She received a B.A. in film and screenwriting in 1993 from Columbia College in Chicago. She also trained at the Warner Brothers Comedy Writing Workshop in 1993.

López wrote *Simply María, or The American Dream* (published in 1992) at the age of seventeen after seeing Valdez's 1986 play, *I Don't Have to Show You No Stinking Badges*, at the Los Angeles Theatre Center. In Valdez's play Connie and Buddy Villa have created a comfortable middle-class lifestyle for themselves by working as Hollywood extras. They have put a daughter through medical school and have supported a son at Harvard for the past two years. A crisis develops when their son unexpectedly returns and announces he is quitting school; he has not reconciled the ambivalence of being Chicano. The internal struggle of the adolescent protagonist in *Simply María* is similar, but complicated by her gender. María is torn between assuming the traditional, subordinate gender role of a working-class Mexican or the modern, career-oriented feminist role available to her as an ethnically self-hating but upward-bound North American. At times the humor has an extraordi-

narily cruel, blunt edge, exposing the disparate treatment of women in society.

María's parents, Ricardo and Carmen, have forsaken a small Mexican village for greater Los Angeles, not foreseeing that their daughter would grow up with independent qualities including ambition and a questioning of the institution of marriage. At a young age María is told by her father that she can be anything she wants to be in the United States; but later, when she declares she wants to go to college to be an actress, her parents belittle her ambition. Frustrated and emotionally spent, María falls asleep, only to have a nightmare about a marriage in which she fails so abominably at being a good housewife that she is put on trial. Upon awakening from this foreboding dream, she overhears her mother accusing her father of carrying on an affair; the argument provokes her to continue with her college plans.

López sent *Simply María* to the 1987 Young Playwrights Festival of New York; she was a semifinalist, and the play received a reading. On 13 January 1988 the Gaslamp Quarter Theater California Young Playwrights Project in San Diego produced the play with director Luis Torner. In August 1988 José Luis Valenzuela of the Latino Theatre Lab (now the Latino Theatre Company) directed a workshop reading of *Simply María* at South Coast Repertory in Costa Mesa as a part of the annual Hispanic Playwrights Project managed by José Cruz González. The script took second place in the 1989 Chicano/Latino Literary Contest sponsored by the Department of Spanish and Portuguese, University of California, Irvine.

A television production of *Simply María* by the Playwrights Project aired on 17 and 24 September 1989 on KPBS in San Diego. The production won a 1990 Public Television Local Program Award from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting—the Gold Award in the children's category, as well as a Media Award by the National Conference of Christians and Jews and an Emmy for outstanding achievement in an entertainment program.

In October 1989 Valdez's El Teatro Campesino mounted a shorter, touring version of *Simply María* along with López's second play, *Food for the Dead*. Subsequently, El Teatro Campesino toured *Simply María* through 1993 as part of a double bill with such plays as Evelina Fernández's *How Else Am I Supposed to Know I'm Still Alive?* (1989) and Valdez's *Soldado Razo* (Buck Private, 1971) and *El baile de los gigantes* (Dance of the Giants, 1974). *Simply María* was included in *Shattering the Myth: Plays by Hispanic Women* in 1992 and published separately in 1996.

Food for the Dead, a one-act play written in 1989, keeps alive the playwright's questions about a Chi-

cana's place in the community. The play takes place on Halloween night as Candela is concluding a nine-year period of mourning for her late husband, Ruben. His death forced her out of her protective shell: during those nine years she lost weight, went back to school, and finally made the last payment on the house. On this night, as Candela is surrounded by her four children at dinner, Ruben literally climbs out of hell to join her after hearing their son Jesús, with his lover, Fernando, announce his homosexuality. Candela at first meekly obeys the commands of her resurrected, obnoxious husband, a situation that quickly changes after she finds out how Ruben died. Courageously defending her fledgling independence and her son's sexual liberation, recognizing both as natural outgrowths of the same rigorous process of self-examination, Candela finally seizes Ruben's stubborn ghost. A Pandora's box has now been opened, however, and Candela's other children have their own surprises to unveil as the play draws to a close. Besides the 1989 tour, *Food for the Dead* was produced in November 1989 at the Teatro de las Americas at the University of California, San Diego, and in May 1993 by Teatro Visión in San Jose. Both productions were directed by Laura Esparza.

Real Women Have Curves (published in 1992), a play López wrote when she was nineteen, addresses the body as a site where female experience and history are vividly recorded. The action is set in a small sewing factory with a cast of five female characters. Estela is a twenty-four-year-old factory owner who is under great pressure to complete a clothing order before the end of the week: one hundred pink evening dresses must be sewn for the Glitz Company. Upon their delivery, Estela will be able to pay her employees for their past three weeks of work as well as avoid a lawsuit by paying the outstanding balance on her sewing machines. If she has to go to court, the authorities will find out that she does not have a green card; she has not applied for a card because she thinks that she will be denied legal residency if immigration officials discover that she is involved in a lawsuit. Much is at stake, and the women band together in a race against the clock.

Estela's employees are her mother, Doña Carmen; a younger sister, Ana; and two others, Pancha and Rotak. Because the employees are all women, the sewing factory is a space where they can feel relatively free to be themselves and talk about anything they wish. But this liberated sphere is continually threatened by the outside world in the form of *la migra* (the immigration authorities) and possible closure of the factory if the sewing equipment is repossessed.

Within the factory, the structure of the outside world imposes itself through instruments of measurement and related references. An especially large calen-

Simply Maria, Or the American Dream



Satirical Comedy
by
Josefina López



The Dramatic Publishing Company

Cover for the 1996 publication of López's first play, written when she was seventeen

dar and clock are posted; the date and time are indicated at regular intervals in the dialogue to show the progress of the garment workers as the deadline looms. The overall passage of time in the women's lives is marked by Estela's celebration of her birthday and Carmen's discovery that she is going through menopause.

Cultural expectations are another form of intrusion. Carmen is constantly measuring her daughters against social standards of what is appropriate and inappropriate behavior for young Mexican women, and she pushes them to conform. She does not question whether these expectations should be applied to her daughters, though Estela and Ana resist them.

The most damaging intrusion of the outside world into the women's sphere is the propaganda representing the ideal body size for a woman: the size 7 tailor's mannequin, the pictures of anorexic-looking models wearing the latest fashions, and the fact that there is no size 13/14 for the dress style the garment workers are making. The play makes the point that the societal ideal of the female body bears little resemblance



Cover of program for a production of López's 1990 play, which focuses on social and cultural expectations of women (courtesy of López)

to the actual body, which will reflect life experiences: a real body reeks of natural odor, grows for food, aches to be touched, displays stretch marks and scars from Caesarean sections, and goes through biological changes. Real women have bodies that look lived in, López says. In the end, the garment workers triumphantly start on a path of redefining the world to include big women such as themselves.

After some development at INTAR, *Real Women Have Curves* received further work at the 1989 Isadora Aguirre Playwriting Lab led by Mexican playwright Emilio Carballido and sponsored by El Teatro de la Esperanza. In May 1990, El Teatro de la Esperanza presented the world premiere of the play at Mission Cultural Center in San Francisco with director Hector Correa; later, Esperanza director Rodrigo Duarte-Clark took it on tour from spring 1990 through fall 1992. Productions of *Real Women* have collectively grossed more than \$1,000,000 in the 1990s. A Spanish-language ver-

sion titled *Las Mujeres de Verdad Tienen Curvas* premiered in August 1994 at the Repertorio Español in New York City. That same month, López held an assistant director-in-residency position at Borderlands Theater in Tucson, Arizona, where she also performed in their production of *Real Women Have Curves*.

López's next efforts included *Unconquered Spirits* and *Confessions of Women from East L.A.* (both published in 1997). The former is a feminist updating of the popular ghost legend of *La Llorona* (The Wailing Woman). Ten-year-old Xochimilco hears one version of the story from her exasperated mother while packing for a trip to the United States to escape the Mexican Revolution. *La Llorona* is an indigenous woman who dares to love a Spaniard, only to be abandoned when he marries a Spanish woman. To spite her unfaithful lover, the spurned woman murders their children. A river swallows the evidence of her misdeed. The woman then kills herself but discovers that there will be no eternal rest for her until she finds the bodies of her children. To this day *La Llorona* continues to haunt the riverbanks of Mexico looking for her children, mournfully wailing, "Ayyy, mis hijos!" (Ohhh, my children!). The legend of *La Llorona* is reinvented each time *Unconquered Spirits* moves into a different set of historical circumstances, from revolutionary Mexico to the devastation of pre-Christian Tenochtitlán to a labor strike at the worksite of a much older, weathered Xochimilco in San Antonio. The text of the play documents the emotional and physical violence against indigenous women and the courageous, albeit reckless, reactions of those women to the abuse of trust and power by men of the ruling order.

Unconquered Spirits won an honorable mention in the 1992 TENAZ (Teatros Nacionales de Artlán) International Quincentennial Playwriting Competition, sponsored by the Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center, and received a public reading at the TENAZ International Festival of Chicano/Latino Theatre in San Antonio in November 1992. *Unconquered Spirits* also was a finalist in the Arizona Theater Company's First Annual Hispanic Playwriting Contest in 1995. The play had its world premiere in April 1995 at California State University, Northridge, directed by Anamarie García.

Also in April 1995 there was a workshop production of *Confessions of Women from East L.A.*, directed by William Alejandro Virchis. In San Diego, Virchis directed another production of the play, presented by Teatro Máscara Mágica and the Fritz Theater, from 25 April through 12 May 1996. The same production traveled to the University of California, Riverside, for a final performance at a fine arts festival on 29 June 1996. "Awake, my *reza*, awake!" exhorts Valentina, the final character in López's parade of proud and different Chicanas who flaunt their comically bittersweet lives in

Confessions of Women from East L.A. There is Doña Concepcion, who is glad that her husband is dead because she never liked sex—not because he gave her AIDS; she admits that she is a lesbian. Calletana, the corn vendor, was jailed for street-selling. Yoko Martínez is trying to act and look Japanese, even volunteering to tie up her size 36D breasts if she can get a job at Mrs. Ito's restaurant. Tiffany, the Valley Chicana, is unable to concentrate on her speech against Proposition 187 because she just got into a fight with her boyfriend. Finally, Valentina makes everyone feel uncomfortable with her efforts against racism and other social injustices. If, as López says, she herself is the protagonist in all her plays, Valentina most closely approximates the public persona of the playwright.

López is a member of the Dramatists Guild and the Writers Guild of America West. She has written for television as well as for the stage; her television-writing credits include episodes for *Living Single* (June–October 1993) and *Culture Clash* (October 1993–January 1994) on Fox TV; *The Latino Anthology Series* (October 1994) on HBO/TROPIX; *The Chavez Family* (November 1995), an ABC/Norman Lear/Paramount Television production; *Innervity H.S.T.A.* (September 1995) on NBC; and *La Fieita* (February 1996) on UPN. She founded a production company with writer/producer Jon Mercedes III in January 1995 to create, develop, and produce film, television, and theater projects; this partnership was dissolved the following year.

On 16 September 1995 López was awarded a Diosa de Plata (Silver Goddess) award in recognition of her contributions to the field of arts and entertainment; the award was presented by the Chicano Federation of San Diego County at their twenty-fifth annual fundraising gala dinner and anniversary celebration. Fellow honorees were Valdez, actress and Bilingual Foundation of the Arts cofounder Carmen Zapata, actor Mario López, and novelist Victor Villaseñor.

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