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Trevor Boffone

December, 2015

PERFORMING EASTSIDE LATINIDAD: JOSEFINA LÓPEZ AND THEATER FOR  
SOCIAL CHANGE IN BOYLE HEIGHTS

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A Dissertation

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department

of Hispanic Studies

University of Houston

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In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

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## **ABSTRACT**

This dissertation analyzes the impact of theater in Boyle Heights and how the individuals involved, most notably Josefina López, have forged positive expressions of Latin@ identity. This project identifies and analyzes what I call “Eastside Latinidad,” constructions of Latin@ identity that are unique to Los Angeles’s Eastside and are performed through the arts. In this regard, this work explores contemporary moments when a diverse group of Eastside Latin@s come together to express pan-ethnic identity and community-building that is inextricably linked to the sociocultural and physical geography of Boyle Heights and the surrounding areas of Los Angeles. It pays close attention to López’s role as a community leader at CASA 0101 Theater, the company she founded in 2000, and the various acting, directing, mentoring, and playwriting programs that López facilitates in the space. I am invested in documenting the rise of performing arts and cultural activity of Latin@s in Boyle Heights from 1990-2015, made possible through Josefina López’s efforts, as well as arguing for the critical role this work plays in constructing cultural, political, sexual, and social identity in the barrio.

Each chapter explores how Eastside Latinidad is constructed, performed, and theorized in Boyle Heights. This project is divided into two parts. Part one centers on Josefina López’s role as a community leader in Boyle Heights and how this enables her to use theater as a tool of social change. Chapter 1 charts a genealogy of CASA 0101 Theater and, in doing so, argues that Josefina López and CASA 0101 are able to engage with the local community by creating theater that induces critical witnessing from its spectators. In Chapter 2, I argue that Josefina López uses mentorship as the primary tool to empower and engage the community. Part two focuses on López’s role as a playwright and how

she stages Chicana feminist thought to create a critical dialogue among theatergoers. In Chapter 3, I analyze three plays by López—*Boyle Heights*, *Detained in the Desert*, and *Hungry Woman*—to explore how these works theorize the intersections between Chicana identity and space with particular attention to each protagonist's spirit connection to Boyle Heights and the Southwest. Chapter 4 uses two plays by López—*Confessions of Women from East L.A.* and *Unconquered Spirits*—to examine how the playwright rewrites and restages Chican@ cultural paradigms to present Eastside audiences with alternative portrayals of Chicana womanhood.

Ultimately, this dissertation explores the textual and performative strategies of contemporary Latin@ theatermakers based in Boyle Heights that use performance as a tool to expand notions of Latinidad and (re)build a community that reflects this diverse and fluid identity. Therefore, this study, although localized in Los Angeles's Eastside, comprises a model for exploring issues of community, identity, and artistic expression of the United States Latin@ population, well on its way to becoming the country's largest demographic, yet one that remains marginalized and underrepresented in the literary and performing arts.

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## **Dedication**

Doris Dominique Boffone (1931-1996)

Ashley Anne Rickner (1982-2014)

## **Introduction**

### **Performing Eastside Latinidad**

In the most basic way, this project is a story detailing the impact of theater in Boyle Heights and how the individuals involved, most notably Josefina López (1969- ), have forged positive subjectivities of Eastside Latinidad that counter negative representations of Latin@s in society and in the media. These positive subjectivities allow each theater artist the opportunity to author one's own story as a response to socioeconomic conditions and marginalization. In this regard, this work explores contemporary moments when a diverse group of Eastside Latin@s come together to express pan-ethnic identity and community-building that is inextricably linked to the sociocultural and physical geography of Boyle Heights and the surrounding areas of Los Angeles. It pays close attention to López's role as a community leader at CASA 0101 Theater, the company she founded in 2000, and the various acting, directing, mentoring, and playwriting programs being realized in the space. I am invested in documenting the rise of performing arts and cultural activity of Latin@s in Boyle Heights from 1990-2015, made possible through Josefina López's efforts, as well as arguing for the critical role this work plays in constructing cultural, political, sexual, and social identity in the barrio. I argue that the evolution of Latin@ cultural production in Boyle Heights since the 1990s, and specifically 2000, presents a localized case study that demonstrates how theater can be used as a site of collective resistance to hegemony in mainstream Los Angeles. The growth of outlets to express Latinidad in Boyle Heights, I propose, has been primarily facilitated through the arts and theater performance.

In this dissertation, I will explore the symbiotic relationship between theater and community, particularly how new subjectivities are altered and created to sustain collective notions of Latinidad on the Eastside of Los Angeles. Josefina López's role as a community leader and playwright has been paramount to the so-called "Boyle Heights Renaissance" since 2000. With theater, López places creativity in the hands of the numerous theater artists and playwrights she has mentored so that this group of Angelenos has the means to stage positive subjectivities of Latinidad on the Eastside. This cultural renaissance utilizes theater performance as a tool to resist hegemonic depictions of Latinidad in mainstream institutions and the theater space as a site to generate and embody contemporary Latinidades that reflect the local community. An in-depth analysis of theater and performance in the Eastside is fundamental to understanding the past, present, and future of this community because, as Harry Elam proposes, theater allows us to better understand the always changing dynamics of cultural identity while questioning how race functions and interacts with class, culture, gender, and sexuality (98). By focusing on a specific community and group of theater artists in Boyle Heights, this project demonstrates how Latin@s contest and (re)negotiate cultures and spaces to create an inclusive environment that reflects contemporary Latin@ experience and identity.

The goals of this project are as much historical as they are theoretical, and literary as they are performative. I closely read the different ways that community is being created by a *familia* of theater artists. Yet, this *familia* is not a family in the traditional sense, but one that values inclusion and challenges hetero-patriarchal constructs of family. I analyze not only material that is produced at CASA 0101 by this theater *familia*

but also connections between the work and the environment in which it is produced. This includes the mission of the producing organization, the reasons why the work resonates with the audience, the motivations of those creating the work, and the contributions that the work makes to the cultural makeup of the community in which it takes place and for which it was created. Therefore, this study, although localized in Los Angeles's Eastside, comprises a model for exploring issues of community, identity, and artistic expression of the United States Latin@ population, well on its way to becoming the country's largest demographic, yet one that remains marginalized and underrepresented in the literary and performing arts.

The notion of community in its many meanings is essential to this project. On the one hand, community can refer to a group of people living in the same place or, perhaps, having a particular characteristic in common, such as "East Los Angeles's Chican@ community." On the other hand, community can also signal a feeling of fellowship with others that comes as a result of sharing common attitudes, interests, goals, and opinions, such as "the sense of community that CASA 0101 offers." Surely, this project confronts both concepts of community by locating this research within the Boyle Heights community and exploring the ways the individuals in question create social identity and new subjectivities of Latinidad. The "horizontal comradeship"—to use the term Benedict Anderson coined in *Imagined Communities*<sup>1</sup>—allows members of the community to envision themselves as equals which, subsequently, facilitates surmounting and uniting differences in class, ethnicity, gender, and nationality. Horizontal comradeship is a key factor in the CASA 0101 community as it allows those involved to transcend the ordinary

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<sup>1</sup> According to Anderson, "all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined" (6).



community practices seen in other theater companies. Much like the origins of El Teatro Campesino, this grassroots theater movement is entirely ingrained in the sociocultural politics that pertain to the surrounding community. Here, the feeling of community is imperative to the theater's success which, in turn, gives back to those that put time into it.

As a community-focused arts space, CASA 0101 orients its mission and visions toward embracing a collaborative ethos rooted in grassroots feminism and provides countless opportunities that would otherwise be unavailable. This approach respects the diversity of the group's members, while simultaneously building sociocultural connections among them through shared experiences that are facilitated by theatermaking and performance. Speaking of the concept of *comunidad*, or community, Latino social and cultural theorist Juan Flores expresses the notion that the very make-up of the term community is rooted in the positions and perspectives of each individual member:

*Comunidad*: the Spanish word, even more clearly than the English, calls to mind two of the key terms—*común* and *unidad*—in the conceptualization of this notoriously elusive idea. What do we have in “common,” and what makes for our unity? It is important to note that though the two terms point in the same semantic direction they are not synonymous, and their apparent coupling in the same word, *comunidad*, is not a redundancy. For while *común* refers to sharing—that is, those aspects in the cultures of the various constitutive groups that overlap—the sense of *unidad* is that which bonds the groups above and beyond the diverse particular commonalities [sic]. (193)

This connection based on commonality and unity serves as a catalyst in stimulating increased possibilities for collaborative theatre and social change.

In this way, CASA 0101 is a geopolitical space of resistance that is intricately linked to its audience and community, as the theater becomes accountable in a way to both. According to feminist theater scholar Charlotte Canning, “Because the theater was responsible to and for the political agenda and because performers and audience were understood as belonging equally to the same community, the theater was expected to answer to the community for the representations onstage” (114). Given its location on East First Street in the thick of the nascent Boyle Heights Renaissance, the space serves as a key site in fighting oppression and voicing Boyle Heights’ collectivity. Therefore, theaters such as CASA 0101 are key sites for representing community and creating social change. This relationship between community and theater is not mutually exclusive, but a creative sociocultural symbiosis. This reciprocal relationship grants the possibility of the community seeing its concerns represented on stage while the theater benefits from the community’s support and encouragement (Canning 115). This relationship is central to the success of both CASA 0101 and cultural growth and visibility in Boyle Heights.

This study examines the work of Josefina López, but whereas most scholarly work on the playwright focuses on her films and playscripts, the current analysis critically departs from this research by highlighting López’s role as a playwright, mentor, and community leader. The intersecting nature of López’s career with CASA 0101 remains understudied and undervalued. López’s involvement with the theater company, as founder and artistic director, has directly resulted in numerous contributions to Latin@ artistic and cultural expression in Boyle Heights and the greater Eastside community.

Subsequently, this has created a ripple effect in that the work being realized at CASA 0101 has promoted Latin@ arts development in other parts of the country, such as in Houston through the Señorita Cinema Film Festival, led by López mentee Stephanie Saint Sanchez. Furthermore, the CASA familia has found success outside of the Eastside as evidenced in former CASA student and actor Johnny Ortiz's Hollywood success and leading role in the blockbuster film *McFarland, USA* (2015). CASA 0101 gives its familia—the term given to the theater's community—space(s) to cultivate art-making in a safe, low-risk environment that privileges representation(s) of barrio subjectivities. In this regard, López's role as a mentor is as important as her work as a playwright, an often unseen element to the artist's persona. This supportive environment has quickly made the company the most recognized Latin@ theater company on the Eastside as well as one of the more prolific teatros anywhere in the country.

### **In the Heights: “Eastside facultad” and López as Community Leader**

María Josefina López was born on March 19, 1969, in Cerritos, San Luis Potosí, Mexico. At the age of five, López migrated with her parents to the United States to settle in what would become her hometown, Boyle Heights, Los Angeles. According to López, her family lived in a crowded two bedroom house that was more reflective of Mexico than the United States; like many recent immigrants in Boyle Heights, the socioeconomic conditions and structural factors encouraged the family to predominately speak Spanish, eat Mexican food, and justify machismo (“RWHC”). Television offered the young Josefina López an escape and connection to the outside world. Soon after her arrival, she began to understand English and recognize the injustices that surrounded the Latin@

experience in the United States. By never seeing herself represented on television, she felt that she was worthless and, as an undocumented immigrant, she felt invisible. Yet, now in the United States, the sociopolitical climate influenced López to begin her Chicana-ization which was informed by her becoming a temporary resident through the Amnesty Program in 1987. According to López, she fully became a Chicana in 1989 when she no longer feared deportation and recognized her privileges as a citizen of the United States (“RHCW”). Throughout this time, López used writing as a tool to empower and validate herself and other Chicanas. López’s early writings such as *Simply María, or the American Dream* (1989) and *Real Women Have Curves* (1990) were informed by her undocumented status, the traditional Mexican patriarchy that suffocated her family, and her experiences growing up in Boyle Heights. While these themes remain present in López’s later works, what is most telling throughout her career is López’s connection to Boyle Heights.

In the years since her arrival in Boyle Heights, López’s work as an activist, mentor, playwright, and community leader has produced opportunities for Eastside Latin@s to initiate and build artistic expression and careers in the performing arts. López’s most significant contribution has been to provide a stage for others to develop positive agency and self-assessment that empowers the individual to take control of her or his own life. Indeed, even though seemingly all scholarship on López concentrates on her plays and films—predominantly *Simply María, or the American Dream*<sup>2</sup> and *Real*

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<sup>2</sup> López’s first play, *Simply María, or the American Dream* (1989), has received significant scholarly attention. For example, in *Chicano Drama*, Jorge Huerta notes that López’s modern morality play exposes the patriarchy and urges women to reconsider their history of exclusion in Chicano society (130). Elizabeth C. Ramírez notes that María’s “rebellion leads to an assertion of self and the play ends with her determining her own destiny,” a theme which marks the majority of the playwright’s works (116). Luz María Edna Ochoa Fernández’s dissertation *La representación de la mujer en la familia entre dramaturgas mexicanas y chicanas* devotes attention to the representation of the play’s female characters as they explore

*Women Have Curves*<sup>3</sup>—it is impossible to achieve a fully-invested study of the playwright without comprehensively analyzing the intertwining nature of activism, playwriting, theater, and community as it relates to home, place, and space. Therefore, this study is in conversation with Chican@ and Latin@ Studies, Performance Studies, Chicana feminist theory, theories of space and place, Urban Studies, Boyle Heights History, as well as scholarship on Chican@ and Latin@ Teatro from the 1960s to the present. This project highlights the intersectionality of López’s work and the work being realized at CASA 0101 by demonstrating how different facets of one’s identity and theater-making affect how Latinidad is forged and experienced. This research underscores the critical possibilities of using Latin@ theatre and performance to explore themes such as citizenship, community, gender, identity, immigration, place, space, and sexuality, topics that are central to the study of contemporary Latin@ lives and histories.

López’s status as a community leader and key player in Boyle Heights is central to this project. As bell hooks affirms, feminist women of color are always activists within their communities (*Feminism is for Everybody*). She explains how they are always tasked

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and question traditional values of the Mexican family unit in order to redefine the generic role that their culture has imposed on them.

<sup>3</sup> *Real Women Have Curves* continues to be López’s most acclaimed work—no doubt in large part due to its film version featuring America Ferrera and Lupe Ontiveros—in terms of name-value, productions, and scholarship. Primarily, scholarship on the play and film has focused on the text’s representation of the Chicana body: Jorge Huerta, *Chicano Drama: Performance, Society, and Myth*; Elizabeth C. Ramírez, *Chicanas/Latinas in American Theatre: A History of Performance*; M. Teresa Marrero, “*Real Women Have Curves*: The Articulation of Fat as a Cultural/Feminist Issue;” María P. Figueroa, “Resisting ‘Beauty’ and *Real Women Have Curves*;” Jeff Berglund and Monica Brown, “*Sin Vergüenza*: Resisting Body Shame in *Real Women Have Curves*;” Yvonne Tasker, “Bodies and Genres in Transition: *Girlfight* and *Real Women Have Curves*;” Eliza Rodríguez y Gibson, “Crossing Over: Assimilation, Utopia and the *Bildungsroman* on Stage and Screen in *Real Women Have Curves*;” Leticia P. López, “Latinas’ Space in *Real Women Have Curves*;” Marta Fernández Morales, “‘Once You Get the Card You Can Do Anything You Want’: Migrant Identities and Gender Transgression in Chicana Dramatic Literature;” Christie Launius, “*Real Women Have Curves*: A Feminist Narrative of Upward Mobility;” Margo Millet, “Girls Growing Up, Cultural Norms Breaking Down in Two Plays by Josefina López;” Yolanda Godsey, “Reading Los Angeles *costureras* in the Landscape of Josefina López’s *Real Women Have Curves*;” Juanita Heredia, “From the New Heights: The City and Migrating Latinas in *Real Women Have Curves* and *María Full of Grace*; and Gad Guterman, *Performance, Identity, and Immigration Law: A Theatre of Undocumentedness*.

with the responsibility of doing this type of work: academic and social. In light of this feminist leadership community-centered approach, I propose that López possesses an “Eastside facultad.” Building on Gloria Anzaldúa’s notion of “*la facultad*,” I theorize that Eastside facultad facilitates the *conocimientos* (consciousness and knowledge) resultant of Chicana experiences situated and embodied through constructions of identity and knowing connected to the Eastside and, specifically, Boyle Heights. In *Borderlands*, Anzaldúa states that *la facultad* is “the capacity to see in surface phenomena the meaning of deeper realities” (38). Such *conocimientos* and moments of subconscious understanding offer “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” (Anzaldúa 38). These experiences are connected to how one inhabits any given cultural, historical, and/or political situation, furthering the notion that identity and space are inextricably intertwined.

As López has stated, returning in 2000 to Boyle Heights, to the Eastside, has allowed her to unhook herself and be healed (“RWHC”). This spiritual healing parallels her increased productivity in and around CASA 0101. While López certainly found success as a playwright in the late 1980s and 1990s before CASA’s founding in 2000, according to the playwright, she still had an inner void; something was missing (“RWHC”). By returning to Boyle Heights and staking a claim in the present and future of her hometown, López has developed a better understanding of herself and the community. This complex process involved healing the legacy of (internalized) racism and sexism that had thrived in the Eastside community. By recognizing the oppression that her comadres and compadres had experienced and were still experiencing, López

tapped into her subconscious to seek ways to ignite change in the community. As a distinct form of *conocimiento*, López's Eastside facultad grants her a way of knowing and the knowledge to become a community leader in the barrio, using the arts as tools of activist resistance. This tactic serves as a defense mechanism that is given life through the body, the arts, and community engaged activism. Eastside facultad analyzes and validates the *conocimientos* that are unique to Josefina López.

Yet, as we will see, Eastside facultad is not only a way of knowing for López. All aspects of her life, personal and professional—as an activist, artistic director, mentor, mother, playwright, teacher, and wife—are saturated in Eastside facultad. This dissertation explores the various manifestations of this phenomenon. López's journey to the present is marked by (re)awakenings that have guided her on a spiritual and metaphysical path. These moments of *conocimiento* include López's founding of CASA 0101, as evidenced in Chapter 1. Chapter 2 examines how Eastside facultad influences López's style of mentorship. The remaining two chapters explore how López taps into her subconscious ways to forge spaces in dramatic literature and performance that destabilize patriarchy and offer readers and spectators *herstory* ingrained in Chicana feminist thought. In this way, Eastside facultad is central to this study's analysis of Josefina López, CASA 0101, and the Boyle Heights community.

## **Methodology**

This dissertation utilizes Latina theater scholar Tiffany Ana López's theory of "critical witnessing" as the primary theoretical lens from which to build a detailed analysis of the aforementioned connections between identity, experience, and location

alongside Josefina López's work as a community leader and playwright. "Critical witnessing" is more than a focused act of looking and bearing witness to live performance. The theory demands that we look beyond how someone views a performance and, instead, address how the story can force people to actively engage with the work and, thus, become agents in theater for social change. In this way, performance and theater become tools used to educate, elucidate, and (re)construct. T. López's theory is pivotal to understanding Josefina López's work in Boyle Heights, a notion which I will expand on in Chapter 1. "Critical witnessing" allows me to ground my theoretical framework in Chicana feminisms, decolonial theory, theories of place and space, and performance studies while also exploring how the work being accomplished at CASA 0101 theater by Josefina López is able to critically engage with the surrounding community. In this regard, the aim of this project is to always consider how theater holds the power to change people, both on- and offstage. Moreover, each chapter uses critical witnessing to facilitate my analysis of the plays, playwrights, and movements involved from disparate angles so that, as a result, this project demonstrates the many facets of contemporary theater and performance in Boyle Heights.

To build an informed analysis of Josefina López and CASA 0101's unique contributions to Boyle Heights, I witnessed live performances and post-show talk-backs, listened to company members and audience reactions to performances, conducted interviews, studied both López's personal archives and the company's archive at Real Women Have Curves Studio, and performed close-readings of López's playscripts and those of the different playwrights analyzed in this study. I attempted to highlight the collaborative aspect of making theater and art as well as the collective effort that has



supported the theater company since its founding by including a variety of first-person perspectives from actors, director, playwrights, board members, newspaper critics, and audience and community members. The selection of interviews in this dissertation consists of dramaturgical interviews I conducted while in residence at Real Women Have Curves Studio and CASA 0101 and personal interviews conducted for the specific purpose of this dissertation from in August, 2014. Comments and interview excerpts of these individuals are used with permission. Other primary sources include documents in Jorge Huerta's personal archive and the Benson Latin American Collection at the University of Texas at Austin. These materials include press releases, newspaper reviews, programs, dramaturgical essays, production photographs, financial statements, and grant applications. This study engages with ten plays: six written by López and four by her mentees. Three of these plays were written before CASA was founded in 2000, seven afterward at CASA. Five of the ten are published, with the remaining five being unpublished playscripts. Because Josefina López's career is a key part of the history and trajectory of Chican@ and Latin@ theater, my secondary research materials are often fundamental works of Latin@ theater, which include both playscripts and criticism.

### **La terminología**

As this study is localized in Boyle Heights, and to a larger extent the Eastside, it is necessary to understand the geography of this space before proceeding. Throughout this work, I refer to Boyle Heights, the Eastside, and East Los Angeles. I use Boyle Heights to refer exclusively to the neighborhood directly east of Downtown Los Angeles, located in between the Los Angeles River and the city boundary. While only minutes from

downtown, Boyle Heights is an entirely separate community. It is important to note that, despite common misconceptions, Boyle Heights is technically not part of East Los Angeles. Additionally, East Los Angeles (East L.A.) refers to the unincorporated area and census-designated place in Los Angeles County. This area is located immediately east of Boyle Heights. As many of the individuals represented in this project refer to East Los Angeles (even grouping Boyle Heights into this area at times), I use East L.A. to refer to the entire area east of Los Angeles that is predominantly Latin@. Finally, I use Eastside to refer to the geographic region that includes Boyle Heights, El Sereno, Lincoln Heights, and East Los Angeles. As many of the familia at CASA come from other areas, I find that Eastside best represents the work being done by this group.

Moreover, this dissertation discusses various spaces at Josefina López's disposal in Boyle Heights: CASA 0101 Theater, Big Casa, Little Casa, and Real Women Have Curves Studio. The now-called Little Casa, the original home of CASA 0101 Theater, lies on 2009 East First Street. The 1,000 sq. ft. building houses a raised built proscenium style stage and includes 60 seats in a flexible seating format. There is a small amount of wall space to exhibit locally produced visual art. There is also a counter area that functions as the box office, concession area, and workspace. Once the company moved down the street in 2011, the space was rebranded as Little Casa. Big Casa, or the CASA 0101 Main Stage, at 2120 East First Street, is a 5,400 sq. ft. building with a 99 seat theater, which is the maximum size under the current Actors Equity Association contract. The space features a gallery, restrooms that are more accessible to the public,<sup>4</sup> as well as a concessions area and snack bar. Real Women Have Curves Studio, purchased by López

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<sup>4</sup> The addition of accessible bathroom facilitates was much-welcomed. Little Casa houses a single bathroom stall in the backstage area and, thus, creates several inconveniences for both audience members and actors.

in January, 2014, is separate from CASA 0101, but is, nevertheless, part of its infrastructure. This space is a flexible black-box that also houses López's studio and personal archives. The space hosts events such as classes, readings, workshops, open mic nights, and López's monthly paranormal salon. In this project, "CASA" will refer to CASA 0101 Theater. "Big Casa" and "Little Casa" will be used to refer to the specific spaces that are part of the theater company. Real Women Have Curves Studio will be referred to as "RWHC Studio."

Given that the term "Latino/a/@" represents peoples of descent from twenty distinct nationalities, the concept encompasses a wide range of cultural, historical, and social experiences, not to mention the multiple factors that explain how each group arrived in the United States. Therefore, it is important to have a pan-ethnic approach to construct Latinidad since there are many shared characteristics, even as there are important differences. Considering that so much variety exists, it is impossible to think of "Latino/a/@" and "Latinidad" as fixed concepts; one must focus on the similarities while recognizing the differences, something that Frances Aparicio, in "(Re)constructing Latinidad: The Challenge of Latina/o Studies," sustains is one of the most central efforts of Latin@ Studies (39). Furthermore, in "Latina/o Cultural Expressions: A View of U.S. Society Through the Eyes of the Subaltern," Edna Acosta-Belén proposes that Latin@s have the similarity of being "culturally different and grow up in a society that has pushed a white Anglo conformity 'melting pot' assimilation model that tends to undervalue other cultural and linguistic differences" (78). While certain groups continue asserting their respective national identities, there are various social and political powers at work in the United States that promote a sense of homogeneity that does not necessarily reflect the

reality of Latin@s (Acosta-Belén 77). As Aparicio details, since each Latin@ individual will surely come from distinct backgrounds, one cannot generalize and essentialize Latinidad; we always must be aware of the differences while recognizing the intersections (40-1).

In view of Aparicio and Acosta-Belén's work, I use the terms "Latino/a/@" to refer to individuals and movements that identify as such, not privileging a national identity. Although there is some overlap between Latin@ and Chican@ identity, I only refer to someone as "Chicano/a/@" if the individual has taken on that identity and has expressed to be labeled as such. Considering that Josefina López is vocal about her Chicana identity in both her life and work, much of this project uses "Chican@." Still, not all people involved in this project identify as such. Additionally, "Latina," "Latino," and "Latin@" (and, "Chicana," "Chicano," and "Chican@") are used in different instances. The term "Latino" is used when referring only to men and mainstream heteronormative Latino society. Likewise, "Latina" is used when discussing women and women-identified movements such as Latina feminism(s). The term "Latin@" is used to refer to both men and women collectively, heterosexual and homosexual, and everything in between. The use of the "@" denotes equality and does not privilege "a" or "o" as what comes first in a list, nor does it force Latinas to be labeled as Latinos. Given these points, I coin the term "Eastside Latinidad" to capture the construction of Latin@ (and Chican@) identity that is unique to Eastside Latin@ experiences. I do not intend to essentialize Latinidad on the Eastside, but seek to demonstrate the multiple subjectivities that exist as well as how shifting this identity can be. Therefore, I will not provide a simplified definition of Eastside Latinidad, but will allow its meaning to evolve

organically and expand chapter-by-chapter, highlighting the fluidity and inclusivity of this identity.

Finally, this work is most at home in Theater Studies which leads one to question: What is theater? Why is it important? And, what is Chican@/Latin@ theater? Standard definitions posit theater as a structure in which plays and performances are given, the activity of acting in, directing, producing, and/or writing plays, or the play or performance itself. Yet, theater is more than a performance. It is a social force. It is a way to teach. Theater is a tool for sociopolitical change; it is agit-prop as El Teatro Campesino has demonstrated. Theater influences and reflects community and social values. Theater is an art form that reflects how the community sees itself. By focusing on human beings and lived experiences, theater is immediate and, as Jorge Huerta has often stated, theater (particularly Chican@ theater) is *necessary* (*Necessary Theater* 5-9). In *El Teatro de la Esperanza: An Anthology of Chicano Drama*, Huerta adds: “Teatro Chicano is a living, viable weapon in the struggle for social justice” (3).<sup>5</sup> Theater is *Inlakesh* (*In Lak’ech*), eres mi otro yo, the Mayan word meaning “I am another you” or “I am another yourself.” And, as Jorge explains in the introduction to *Zoot Suit*, *Inlakesh* represents the following philosophy:

Tú eres mi otro yo.

Si te hago daño a ti,

Me hago daño a mí mismo.

Si te amo y respeto,

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<sup>5</sup> The same volume includes Huerta’s poem “Teatro is ...”: “Teatro is: / a family / a commitment to / politics / religion / touching / feeling / growing / LIVING / together / an alternative / a collective / understanding / IN LA’ KECH / a mirror of one another / tú eres mi otro yo / respect for / self / and others / y la tierra nuestra madre / but most of all / TEATRO / IS / LOVE” (*El Teatro de la Esperanza* 4).

Me amo y respeto yo. (10)

Theater recognizes the divine within another person that only performance, through embodiment, can manifest.<sup>6</sup> Theater relies on bodies to make other bodies bear witness to it. In this way, there is no detachment. Theater is live in the flesh; it is a living, breathing organism. Theater is where we see ourselves represented. Theater is a mirror of our lives, our joy, our pain, our struggles, our triumphs. It offers a glimpse into people's lives and is honest, personal, and real. It helps us make sense of what it means to be alive right now. It helps us find ourselves and each other.

People leave their world for a few hours and are transported to the world of a play or performance. It delights us, moves us, and touches us.

Still, what does it mean to analyze theater specifically? Theater is able to transcend the static nature of traditional texts—novels, for example—due to the embodiment of live performance. This repertoire, as Diana Taylor calls it, of embodied memory demands presence: “people participate in the production and reproduction of knowledge by being there, being a part of the transmission” (20). Therefore, the viewer or witness is an active agent who must discover the meaning of a given performance. The corporal quality of witnessing live performance in the flesh makes theater more urgent, more necessary.

## **Chapter Organization**

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<sup>6</sup> In the Tomás Ybarra-Frausto Papers at the University of Texas at Austin, the scholar's research notes include the following definition of Chican@ theater: “As an aesthetic credo Teatro Chicano seeks to link lived reality to the imagination. Going against mainstream cultural tradition of theatre as escape and commodity, Teatro Chicano intends that viewers respond both to the dramatic performance and the social reality reflected in it. A prevalent attitude towards the dramatic performance is that it should provide aesthetic pleasure while also seeking to educate and edify. In its various modalities, Teatro Chicano is envisioned as a model for freedom, a call to both conscience and consciousness” (Box 4).

This project is divided into two parts: one focuses on the mutual relationship between theater and community and the other on how Josefina López's works reflect this community-centered focus. Both of these sections work in unison to explore how Eastside Latinidad is constructed, performed, and theorized in Boyle Heights. The work that follows examines how theater and performance can be used as a critical framework to promote positive social change and new subjectivities on the Eastside. With these goals in mind, this project examines the textual and performative strategies of contemporary Latin@ theatermakers based in Boyle Heights that use performance as a tool to expand notions of Latinidad and (re)build a community that reflects this diverse and fluid identity.

Part one, "Josefina López as Community Leader," concentrates on the symbiotic relationship between theater and community. It establishes CASA 0101 as a significant site that creates Latin@ cultural expression and helps to revitalize Boyle Heights. While López began this work in 2000 when she returned to the barrio and founded her theater company, this dissertation primarily focuses on work done from 2011, when the company expanded to Big Casa, to 2015, as this provides the organization more opportunities to extend their community outreach. This part demonstrates how CASA has helped to (re)build Boyle Heights through community outreach, critical witnessing, mentorship, and theater for social change. All of these facets of CASA promote developing and performing Eastside Latinidad and, thus, are able to sustain positive impacts on the Boyle Heights community.

In Chapter 1, my argument explores how CASA 0101 engages with the Boyle Heights community through distinct forms of critical witnessing that transpire in the

space. The theater provides necessary spaces in the neighborhood that promote growth opportunities for community residents. This makes the theater an indispensable space on East First Street that influences Boyle Heights through classes, mentoring, and theatrical productions. The space initiates a dialogue centered on social change that affects the surrounding community. Using Tiffany Ana López's theory of "critical witnessing" as a theoretical framework, this chapter analyzes CASA 0101's role in the community. Indeed, the space promotes its spectators to critically witness and stake a claim in Boyle Heights' future. After charting the trajectories of Boyle Heights' history and the theater company's history, this chapter centers on López as a cultural leader, specifically focusing on her activism. To this end, this chapter devotes space to the voices of Boyle Heights. That is, I present the standpoints of those involved in CASA 0101's theatrical familia to manifest first-hand the power that theater possesses to critically engage and revitalize a community.

Chapter 2 analyzes Josefina López and artistic mentorship. To date, studies of artistic mentorship in Latin@ theater are few and far between. This chapter adds to existing scholarship on artistic mentorship by Anne García-Romero and Caridad Svich by centering on López's work in building new generations of Latin@ playwrights. After exploring the role of mentorship in Latin@ dramatic writing and López's experiences with mentors Luis Valdez and María Irene Fornés, this chapter devotes attention to López's unique pedagogical style and her relationships with several mentees. I argue that López's mentorship style is resultant of her "Eastside facultad," as she uses her spirituality tied to Boyle Heights to help her students tap into their subconscious and initiate the creative process. Aside from mentoring and overseeing collaborative shows



such as *Brown & Out* (2011-2014) and *Chicanas, Cholas, y Chisme* (2013-2015), López is a hands-on mentor to several up-and-coming playwrights such as Mercedes Floresislás, Miguel García, and Patricia Zamorano. This chapter focuses on how López utilizes artistic mentorship to influence new theater makers, a process that coincidentally affects the community in a positive way. Through the spaces that CASA 0101 offers, López critically engages with Boyle Heights to forge a safe and supportive environment for future voices of Chican@ cultural and theatrical production.

The second part, “Josefina López as Playwright,” centers on how home, place, and space affect López’s work as a writer. I argue that López consistently returns to Boyle Heights and the Eastside in her work to theorize her connection to the space. Still, her works are not exclusive to the Eastside; sometimes her plays must leave Southern California so that the playwright can further analyze how identity and experience are inextricably located to space. López’s plays are fundamental to an understanding of CASA 0101 and how Eastside Latinidad is performed on stage. These are shows written and produced at CASA for Eastsiders to witness. While some of these plays do not outwardly portray the Eastside, these works represent how López uses theater as a way to stage Chicana feminist thought and introduce these issues to her audiences. López puts feminist theory on stage as a way to add complexities to Eastside Latinidad and so that Latin@s can see themselves represented in a legitimate space. My argument is that through theater and performance, López’s work promotes a dialogue at CASA about how Chican@s—principally women—can (re)claim their identities and experiences, thus rejecting one-dimensional representations of Chicanismo and Latinidad.

Chapter 3 explores the relationship between Chicana identity and location, patria (homeland), place, and land base in three works by Josefina López—*Boyle Heights* (2004), *Detained in the Desert* (2010), and *Hungry Woman* (2013)—while demonstrating the possible uses of Chicana scholar Cordelia Candelaria's Wild Zone thesis to create female agency and performance directly linked to her location and physical surroundings. These three plays represent works written and produced at CASA for Eastside audiences and offer a glimpse into how Chicana feminist theater engages with spectators who can see themselves represented on stage. The characters and performers, therefore, transcend the text and promote critical witnessing. These pieces, as activist works, protest against the silencing of Chicanas in various spaces while highlighting the link between female experience and space and its expression in dramatic literature and performance. Utilizing the Wild Zone thesis as a point of departure, this chapter focuses on (re)appropriations of home in its multiple meanings, both as a physical and metaphorical space. These female-derived zones of counter performance, a form of oppositional consciousness, develop from women's connections to home and place. The zones of experience, which are inaccessible to patriarchal powers, give subjectivity to women and, thus, are essential to their (re)claiming of home. This chapter examines plays that demonstrate just three examples of different Wild Zone performances that appear in Josefina López's works. In each piece, the protagonist (re)claims home via a distinctly female counter discourse that originates from her associations to physical and metaphorical places and spaces.

Building off of the previous chapter, Chapter 4 tackles López's (re)appropriation of Chican@ cultural paradigms. Utilizing theories of the body as a way to explore how López's work negotiates and (re)appropriates cultural paradigms, this chapter examines

the deconstruction of two Chicana archetypes—La Malinche and La Llorona—to better understand how these figures destabilize patriarchal discourses. Chicana feminists appropriate, subvert, and transforms these icons in such a way as to create discourses of resistance. I argue that the stage grants these artists space to create complex portrayals of previously rigid cultural paradigms that limit the possibilities of Chicana womanhood. This chapter explores how the female body performs cultural paradigms in contemporary Chican@ theater, specifically focusing on the works of Josefina López. By examining López's *Confessions of Women from East L.A.* (1996) and *Unconquered Spirits* (1995), this chapter demonstrates how body and performance work in unison to appropriate and reconfigure cultural paradigms to shape their own re-imagined identities and subjectivities.

The conclusion to the dissertation discusses CASA 0101 Theater's quinceañera, its fifteenth anniversary. Josefina López's achievements with CASA 0101 in the last fifteen years offers a specific case study to theater scholars and artists interested in producing, writing, and creating culturally specific work in a socially responsible fashion. In this way, López's work demonstrates the power that theater and live performance possess when they are culturally specific to a certain community. By presenting new subjectivities that embody Eastside Latinidad in Boyle Heights, Josefina López and CASA 0101 manifest how a community can empower a theater and how a theater can empower a community and, in turn, ignite change.

## **Part One**

### **Josefina López as Community Leader**

## Chapter 1

### Critical Witnessing and (Re)Building Boyle Heights

In the 2003 production of *Confessions of Women from East L.A.*, the show begins with Calletana's (Miriam Moses) monologue, a piece about the street vendor's right to sell *elote* despite City Hall's objections. Rather than simply beginning the production in a traditional way, the director stages the monologue as if the *elote* woman entered from the street in the same way that Boyle Heights' real life neighborhood *pupusa* lady might do. To show that theater is accessible and that the stories on stage are from the barrio *for* the barrio, Calletana interrupted CASA's Executive Director Emmanuel Deleage's pre-show announcement to turn off cell phones, unwrap throat lozenges, etc. She entered, dressed in character complete with food cart, and immediately started yelling "ELOTES! ELOTES!" and despite Deleage's efforts to get her to leave, she insisted on selling her product. When he left to get security, she got on stage saying "Look, I'm just trying to sell corn" and immediately began her monologue. Eventually, the audience understood that *this* was the show. This is the way the woman would normally be treated, the way people like her, such as the real-life *pupusa* lady, get treated on a routine basis. Hence, CASA offers no escape for its patrons. The spectator is forced to bear witness to the injustices that Latina street vendors experience. This is what makes seeing a play at CASA significantly different from seeing the same play at other Latin@ theaters in the greater Los Angeles area. CASA situates itself as an organic part of the neighborhood and, as such, is able to engage with its patrons on a more critical level.

As I stated in this Introduction to the dissertation, Josefina López's artistic and community leadership are what makes engaging the local community a possibility. Yet,

the interconnecting nature of Josefina López's career with the history of CASA is still relatively under-analyzed and underappreciated by theater scholars. The majority of scholarship that analyzes López's plays and films do so without regard to the crucial site of CASA in the development of this work. As this chapter illustrates, it is impossible to conduct a fully-invested study of López without analyzing the intertextual lenses of her work as a playwright, the site of CASA 0101 Theater in this work, and the role of the community to the success of López and CASA. In what follows, I explore how López's involvement with this company has resulted in several significant contributions to Chican@ and Latin@ theater not only in Los Angeles, but to Latin@ theater across the country as well. Rather than struggle to have her plays produced, this space has given López a vehicle to produce her work(s) without hesitation. By producing work in a theater space that she manages, she is able to workshop and mount the world premieres of her shows, and tinker with them as she goes, until they are ready to leave Boyle Heights and potentially be produced by other theaters. Therefore, CASA has played a significant role in helping López to apply the theory of the social impact of her work and hone her craft. What is more, López has helped to develop the company's status as the most recognized Latin@ theater company on the Eastside and arguably in Los Angeles. Her work as both playwright and cultural ambassador has provided innumerable opportunities for many other Latin@ theater practitioners such as Mercedes Floresislas and Miguel García to build not only their careers in theater but more importantly, to gain a better sense of self-worth.

CASA is a professional theater situated within a community. With its mission to use art and theater for social change, the theater's programming speaks to particular

needs of the Eastside community. Scholars Robert H. Leonard and Ann Kilkelly have both noted how theater can serve as a catalyst to bolster positive social change in the community.<sup>7</sup> Building on Leonard and Kilkelly's work in *Performing Communities*, I engage with CASA to examine how the company's organic location on East First Street serves as a community center; this indicates that the company's programming converses with the history and character of the community and racially-based sociocultural identity in Boyle Heights. CASA uses theater arts as a way to engage the community in an ongoing dialogue about the complexity of Chicanism@ and Latinidad in Boyle Heights in the past, present, and future. CASA's programming and productions position the space as culturally specific to the Eastside, privileging self-representation and thus forging a necessary outlet for Latin@ identity formation in Greater Los Angeles.

In this chapter, I lay the groundwork for the study that follows. This chapter analyzes how CASA's spaces encourage critical witnessing to take place. This critical witnessing is a result of the company's mission:

CASA 0101 is dedicated to providing vital arts, cultural, and educational programs—in theater, digital filmmaking, art and dance—to Boyle Heights, thereby nurturing the future storytellers of Los Angeles who will someday transform the world. ([www.casa0101.org](http://www.casa0101.org))

The theater serves as a necessary space in Boyle Heights that offers the community various opportunities for personal growth, which ultimately, leads to a better, more inclusive neighborhood that reflects a diversity of identities and experiences. Be it through engaging with East First Street, classes, mentoring, or theatrical productions, the

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<sup>7</sup> For example, Robert H. Leonard and Ann Kilkelly's *Performing Communities: Grassroots Ensemble Theaters Deeply Rooted in Eight U.S. Communities* (2006) speaks to the different ways that theater companies can create art that empowers communities and induces social change.

space provokes a dialogue about social change that directly affects the surrounding community by creating a space to perform Latinidad.

This chapter is divided into three parts. First, this chapter provides historical context in which to place this study. After understanding the sociohistorical factors that have shaped Boyle Heights's past, one can begin to understand how contemporary community members use theater performance as collective resistance. The second section offers a brief history of CASA 0101, highlighting the impact it has had on the Boyle Heights Renaissance, primarily along the East First Street corridor. Josefina López's role as a cultural ambassador to the barrio will be analyzed to better understand how she facilitates neighborhood activism and critical witnessing in the following sections. The final section focuses on the voices of Boyle Heights, offering a glimpse into how CASA and theater have impacted their lives. In this section, I highlight original interviews from interviews that I conducted with members of the community for the specific purposes of this project. CASA becomes a voice of and for the community by creating a supportive environment to positively experience Eastside Latinidad. By exploring how CASA has shaped Boyle Heights and how the barrio has, in turn, shaped CASA, this chapter lays the ground work for understanding how Josefina López utilizes theater as a space to affect the community, whether it be through artistic or personal mentorship.

In the only study devoted to CASA, "Suturing Las Ramblas to East LA: Transnational Performances of Josefina López's *Real Women Have Curves*,"<sup>8</sup> Tiffany Ana López explores the physical components of the space that enhance the various

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<sup>8</sup> Tiffany López's study is a comparative analysis of a Spanish and a U.S. production of López's play. She examines themes about labor, immigration, and body politics by placing these two productions in conversation with one another. Ultimately, her work uncovers the possibilities and limitations of locating Chicana feminist theatre in a truly transnational connect.



productions of Josefina López's signature play at this theater. CASA is entirely organic to the barrio, becoming a site that constructs what Alicia Gaspar de Alba calls "alter-Native cultures" or Other cultures native to a specific geographic location that have been shaped by a history of colonization, oppression, and struggle (*Chicano Art* 15, 17). As a natural part of the barrio, CASA is an artistic home that not only facilitates developing new alter-Native cultures but actively fosters community building. The space, then, is welcomed and necessary in Boyle Heights. In fact, the space seamlessly fits into the East First Street neighborhood, with no clear boundary between the end of the sidewalk and the beginning of the theater (T. López, "Suturing" 297).

CASA's name literally means "home." Thus, the theater space invokes the theater as a place of comfort and an instructional space. T. López asserts that viewed within the context of Chicana feminism, the space "resonates with fellow playwright and feminist theorist Cherríe Moraga's assertion that home provides the model for how we build community on multiple fronts, from intimate partnerships to artistic projects and political affiliations" ("Suturing" 297-8). In this way, the theatrical space and location of CASA gives audiences a unique opportunity to experience and better understand the cultural and political factors that influence the play(s) they are witnessing.<sup>9</sup> The physical space creates an immersive environment that forces audiences to become part of the play.

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<sup>9</sup> In "Suturing," Tiffany López analyzes how the intimate space of Little Casa underscored the tensions in *Real Women Have Curves*. The intimacy of the space forced the audience to sit close to the stage, with even the last row being uncommonly close. The audible police sirens and other noises from the outside world became part of the production, thus making the audience truly feel part of the sewing factory. These factors, combined with the play's subject matter, gave the audience "the sense that the performance could be fully disrupted at any moment, adding to the pervasive feelings of fear expressed by the characters on stage about being raided by the Immigration and Naturalization Service" ("Suturing" 298).

Building on a theory proposed in “Critical Witnessing in Latina/o and African American Prison Narratives” (2005),<sup>10</sup> T. López maintains that CASA 0101 is a space that requires “critical witnessing” from its patrons. Tiffany López uses the term “critical witnessing” to describe “the process of being so moved by a reading experience as to engage in a specific action intended to forge a path toward change” (“Critical Witnessing” 64). Tiffany López sustains that critical witnessing positions:

the audience in relationship to social change, with the work designed to provoke questions about agency and subjectivity in a way that causes audience members to leave with a sense of responsibility for either participating in the problem or creating a path for changing it. (“Suturing” 302)

Using “critical” as the active word, this process produces understanding which is the base for inner and outer change, both personal and social change (T. López, “Critical Witnessing” 64). As CASA is a space specifically designed to positively impact the Boyle Heights community, it is an ideal site to induce critical witnessing by means of theater and performance. Critical witnessing requires engaging with a story’s influence as much as with its objective to highlight the conditions that affected the story’s creation. In this way, the theory contends that an event is important and must be staged in order to ignite a contextual and critical conversation. Audiences, therefore, are moved by performances which lead them to commit to making social change something attainable (T. López, “Suturing” 302). This work is a central tenet of theater for social change in

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<sup>10</sup> This theory is also seen in López’s “‘Stunned Into Being:’ The Practice of Critical Witnessing in Lorna Dee Cervantes’s *Drive*,” a chapter in Eliza Rodríguez y Gibson’s edited collection *Stunned Into Being: Essays on the Poetry of Lorna Dee Cervantes* (2012).

which the story is meant to inform an audience in order to initiate a rebuilding process of the issue(s) in question.

Josefina López specifically designed CASA 0101 to drive forward the sociopolitical commentary that is trademark of the type of work she presents in this space (T. López, “Suturing” 302). CASA is a space to create a dialogue about issues of social justice by encouraging the audience to question the oppressive systems seen in their everyday lives. Productions frequently tie the issues seen onstage to those of the surrounding community, such as Mercedes Floresislal’s *Tamales de Puerco* (2013) which details the hardships of a homeless mother to a Deaf child in Los Angeles and Patricia Zamorano’s *Locked Up* (2014) which focuses on the issues surrounding teenage incarceration and gang life in Boyle Heights. López’s theater and writing constructs paths that lead to the audience’s engagement with the production. Consequently, the audience takes ownership of their neighborhood, becoming responsible for the future of the problem whether it be through participating in it or trying to change it.

### **Boyle Heights: Space and Place in an Eastside Barrio**

Los Angeles has become an increased site of scholarly attention to understand the relationship between space, place, lived experience, and identity creation in the twenty-first century. In fact, for the first time in its history in 2004, the leading American Studies journal, *American Quarterly*, left its home on the East Coast to take up residence on the West Coast, at the University of Southern California. This move was celebrated by a special issue of the journal that focused exclusively on Los Angeles as an emblematic site through which other cities can also be examined since it is “a city in which the local is

deployed in complex practices of identity and community formation within the broader networks that continue to define and redefine what constitutes America” (Villa and Sánchez 499). In this way, Raúl Villa and George Sánchez posit that given how the city has been shaped by colonization, expansion, and migration (both diasporic and domestic), Los Angeles can be deployed as a lens through which to analyze the significance of place and location in order to fully comprehend the present historical moment as it points toward the future (500). For example, Meiling Cheng’s *In Other Los Angeleses: Multicentric Performance Art* deploys performance art as a critical framework to understand “mainstream” and “marginal” cultures in Los Angeles. Likewise, Chantal Rodríguez’s dissertation *Performing Latinidad in Los Angeles: Pan-ethnic approaches to Contemporary Latina/o Theater and Performance* highlights how Latin@ performing arts have shaped contemporary Los Angeles by focusing on key historic initiatives such as the Latino Theater Initiative at the Mark Taper Forum.

Considering that Los Angeles is perhaps the epitome of North American urban sprawl, frequently mocked as “sixty suburbs in search of a city,” it is necessary to be specific in approach by closely reading the historical, material, and performative formations of specific neighborhoods. In this way, a fully invested study should not essentialize Los Angeles, but should be distinct and localized. Therefore, this project presents a case-specific investigation of contemporary Boyle Heights in order to approximate the ways that artistic expression impact community building. The contemporary theatrical trajectory of this neighborhood cannot be fully analyzed outside of the sociohistorical past that continues to influence this area. I suggest that Boyle Heights’ sociohistorical conditions have influenced how Latin@s continue to cultivate

and experience Latinidad in the present day. With this in mind, the primary aim of Latin@ theater and performance on the Eastside is to establish safe spaces to theorize and perform Latinidad while (re)claiming community spaces. This project explores how Latinidad is performed in Eastside Los Angeles in order to better understand the present moment in the community in question, and to analyze how performativity impacts the future change and growth of the barrio.

Situated just east of downtown Los Angeles, between the Los Angeles River and the city boundary, Boyle Heights has a rich, ethnically diverse history. As Alejandro Morales writes in his novel *River of Angels* (2014), the Eastside is:

... the Chicano capital of the world, the heart of Aztlán, the country of East Los Angeles, where Latinos, mostly Mexicans, have taken over their undeclared city. A Chicano/Mexican barrio has been shaped for about one hundred years by white flight. Like Los Angeles, Montebello and other surrounding cities were abandoned long ago by Anglo residents who ran away, who did not stay to protect their turf, who feared the many brown, yellow, black faces walking around in their once pure-white neighborhoods. (viii)

Throughout the twentieth century, both the population and city limits of Los Angeles grew in all directions, yet oddly enough the city did not grow eastward past present day Boyle Heights. Then, the area known as Paredon Blanco (White Bluffs)—Boyle Heights' original name—according to the 1781 charter remained the city's easternmost community (G. Sánchez 634).<sup>11</sup> Near the end of the twentieth century, Los Angeles officials placed

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<sup>11</sup> For an extensive history of Chican@ Los Angeles, see George Sánchez's *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture, and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900-1945*.

Evergreen Cemetery in this little populated area and renamed it Boyle Heights after Andrew A. Boyle, a wealthy Irish immigrant to the city. Despite its relatively short distance from downtown, the neighborhood remained mostly rural until the late 1910s, due to inadequate public transportation and the lack of bridges over the Los Angeles River (G. Sánchez 634). The city's urban planning worked to fix these issues from the 1880s to the 1920s by constructing and expanding several bridges over the river, as well as by extending the city's interurban railway across the river to the Eastside (Fogelson 93; Romo 78-9). Subsequently after the First World War, Eastside Los Angeles became a site of increased industrial activity, which attracted large numbers of working-class immigrants from Mexico, Asia, and other parts of the United States who took up residence near work opportunities and who eventually made Boyle Heights the most racially integrated Eastside community by the 1940s (Acuña 247). And, although the area originally served as a key Jewish enclave in the city, by 1955 Mexicans formed around half of the neighborhood's residents, numbers that dramatically increased over the next few years. According to George Sánchez, "The Boyle Heights community, once considered the centerpiece of Jewish life in Los Angeles, had collapsed in the postwar period due to out-migration" (634).<sup>12</sup>

Post WWII Boyle Heights grew into a predominantly Mexican migrant community that became the site of increased targeting by government social engineering designed to geographically segregate the city such as the freeway system. Sánchez sustains:

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<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, a select few of the Jewish population remained in Boyle Heights where they collaborated with Mexican-American leaders and from other small ethnic communities in the area to leave a legacy of radical multiculturalism, political interracialism, and commitment to civil rights activism (G. Sánchez 634).

Through applied social science research, fiscal policy, and direct intervention, the federal government reshaped local communities through housing and transportation policies, and in doing so, was an active presence in redefining the terms of racialization. This did not bode well for multiracial Boyle Heights, which would now be consistently and negatively compared to other neighborhoods in Los Angeles in ways that made it a prime target for government-sponsored reform. (636)

Urban planning initiatives from the 1940s to 1970s, such as the freeway system and the redevelopment of Chávez Ravine into Dodgers Stadium (i.e. the displacement of an entire Latin@ community),<sup>13</sup> were watershed moments in Los Angeles history that helped instill and reinforce a racial and spatial order of, to quote Eric Avila, “chocolate cities and vanilla suburbs” that were dominated in terms of urban policy making by “privatized, consumer-oriented subjectivity premised upon patriarchy, whiteness, and suburban home ownership” (4, 7). This period of white flight was accompanied by increased racial segregation as the Eastside quickly became a low-income community (Acuña 300). Indeed, Boyle Heights, much like other multiethnic communities in the greater Los Angeles area, can point its history in the latter half of the twentieth century to lost battles for public housing and the dismantling of the community in favor of urban “renewal” projects specifically developed to benefit the interests of private corporations.

The sociocultural factors that mark Boyle Heights’s history from its time as Paredón Blanco to the end of the twentieth century continue to impact the way life is experienced and how identity is performed in the barrio by the mostly Latin@ population. The barrioization of Boyle Heights after World War I was not met without

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<sup>13</sup> This is the subject of Culture Clash’s play *Chavez Ravine* (2003).

significant response by the Latin@s living within the community and speaking for their quickly-developing social environment. Residents have both intentionally and unintentionally developed resistive strategies to maintain and protect the purity and unity of their cultural identity as it relates to space and place, as these defense mechanisms work against the ever-present regulations of dominant Los Angeles urbanism (Villa 4-5). Thus, the geographical identity of barrio residents has been and remains an essential method of urban Latin@ community survival against hegemonic pressures from outside of the barrio such as gentrification. This identity is transmitted through a mixture of consciousness and sociocultural practices and, subsequently, is a result of the barrio's creation. In this regard, Richard Griswold del Castillo proposes that forming neighborhoods such as Boyle Heights was a positive accomplishment in and of itself in that it provided the barrio with a geographical identity, "a feeling of being at home, to the dispossessed and poor. It was a place, a traditional place, that offered some security in the midst of the city's social and economic turmoil" (*The Los Angeles Barrio* 150). Still, the sense of community and sociocultural *belonging* does not disregard the fact that many feel ambivalent toward the area due to high levels of poverty, crime, and exploitation (R. Castillo, *The Los Angeles Barrio* 140).

Issues such as gang violence, poverty, substandard education, and overcrowding still pose significant threats to the barrio residents. CASA 0101 Theater lies just three miles from the Estrada Courts housing projects, which has been the target of the federal government's crackdown on gang violence and home to the five most violent Latin@ gangs in greater Los Angeles. Boyle Heights residents have the lowest per-capita income (\$12,464) and highest poverty rate (22%) of all Los Angeles areas. The low quality



public school education creates limited options; 40% of students do not graduate and almost none have access to free, quality arts education (*Latino Scorecard*).

Given these points, Eastside Latin@s have practiced certain ways of positive community-building that transform the barrio into a better place to create contemporary depictions of Eastside Latinidad. Villa maintains that barrio residents develop alternative needs and interests from those in the dominant sphere (such as those promoting the construction of the freeways). In this regard, these sociocultural expressions and practices,

... reveal multiple possibilities for re-creating and re-imagining dominant urban *space* as community-enabling *place*. Thus, they contribute to a cumulative “anti-discipline” that subverts the totalizing impulse to the dominant social space containing the barrios. Collectively, these community-sustaining practices constitute a tactical ethos (and aesthetic) of *barriology* ever engaged in counterpoint to external barrioization. (Villa 6)

“Barriology,” first coined in the late 1960s by writers for the East Los Angeles magazine and artist collective *Con Safos*, promoted the development of cultural knowledge and practices specific to the barrio (Ybarra-Frausto 98-100). Effectively, barriology conjures varied knowledge and practices that shape the historical, geographical, and social awareness of urban Latin@ experience and identity (Villa 8). While various strategies exist to create positive associations with home, place, and space, perhaps none have helped shape the current Boyle Heights Renaissance along East First Street more than theater and artistic expression.

The barriology at CASA actively works to (re)shape and (re)appropriate the community as a place to develop and practice Latin@ artistic expression and positive associations of self-worth in reaction to the negative portrayals generated by the media and pop culture. In particular, CASA has created a community that uses art and theater-making to transform not only Boyle Heights, but the theater's *familia* as well. CASA has become a way for Boyle Heights residents to cultivate Latin@ identity specific to the Eastside and manifest solidarities in and around shared lived experience. This relationship is symbiotic in that all parties are able to mutually benefit as both community and *familia* grow and prosper despite persistent threats from the dominant political and social class outside of the barrio.

### **Simply Josefina, or the Boyle Heights Dream**

Despite the coast to coast success of *Real Women Have Curves* in the 1990s, no theater in Los Angeles would produce López's signature work. Several literary managers, mostly Anglo men, rejected the piece, stating that the Chicana feminist thought was too much and that the play portrayed Latinas in a negative light (J. López, "RWHC"). The play had been produced in Sarasota, Florida, for a predominantly conservative, senior citizen audience, but not in a city with such a large Latin@ population like Los Angeles. Additionally, the play had received productions all over California and the American Southwest, but not in the city for which it was written. While difficult, this realization served as a catalyst in López's decision to begin the journey to found her own theater arts space. So, as part of her Self-Expression and Leadership project for a leadership class she was taking in 1998, she produced *Real Women* for one weekend as a fundraiser for

Scholarships for High School Latinas at Self Help Graphics. With soon-to-be frequent collaborator Corky Dominguez as director, López produced the show with practically no budget and succeeded in raising funds for a student at Roosevelt High School in Boyle Heights. This production was remounted at Glaxa Studios for a 6 week run as the Los Angeles premier of the play in the same year. This combination of not being able to get her plays produced in Los Angeles alongside the difficulty of performing in rental spaces and cafes led López to seek a space that would allow her freedom to perform and produce her own repertoire.

In 2000, Josefina López founded CASA 0101 Theater to complete her vision of bringing art and theatre programs to the Boyle Heights community. Returning to the neighborhood has been inextricably connected to her spiritual healing and storytelling. López explains:

All human beings are created to thrive and expand and grow and walk and go toward the light unless we are stopped. So, when you aren't thriving, and growing, and risking, and building, you got stuck somewhere. (...) I think me coming back to Boyle Heights is the way I keep unhooking myself from the internalized racism that I suffered, about the sexism that I suffered, about all these horrible things that were basically dumped on me as a Latina, as a little girl, as an undocumented person. ("RWHC")<sup>14</sup>

López has flipped the traditional narrative in that, instead of having the goal to leave Boyle Heights never to return, as Ana does in *Real Women*, she has come back and declared that she is successful because she came back to the Eastside, doing everything

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<sup>14</sup> López adds: "coming back to Boyle Heights is about me unhooking myself in every which way possible" ("RWHC").

that she always thought she would have to leave in order to do. Rather than harboring feelings of internalized racism, she has decided to create something where everybody is able to succeed. It is not just López having success as a playwright, but it is a movement in which she is a part of something bigger. Still, founding CASA has been beneficial to López as a playwright as well since the space gives her opportunities to develop and produce her work in a safe and supportive environment. At the Latina/o Theatre Commons 2013 National Convening, López credited CASA as a central catalyst behind the latter half of her career as a theater artist: “If I didn’t have my own theater company, I wouldn’t have a career as a playwright” (Qtd. in Herrera 66). This connection should not be undervalued. As a playwright, not to mention a Chicana playwright, López has certain privileges due to founding CASA.<sup>15</sup> These privileges should be recognized while also keeping in mind the tremendous efforts by López to make this dream a reality.

Since being founded in 2000, CASA has become a necessary space in the Boyle Heights community that is a home for theater arts to flourish. Yet, we still must understand López’s motives in naming the theater. Why the name? Why CASA 0101 Theater? López’s vision was clear. Casa is the Spanish word for “house” or, more importantly, “home.” 0’s and 1’s are binary code, the first language of computers and the digital age. As CASA was founded in 2000 at the dawn of the digital age in which digital filmmaking first became accessible to the masses, López intended for the space to become a key home of the digital revolution in East Los Angeles. And, although the company shifted its focus to other forms of creative arts, the name has come to take on many meanings that readily apply to the current space. “0” and “1” can mean nothing and

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<sup>15</sup> While other Chican@ playwrights own theaters, most notably Luis Valdez at El Teatro Campesino, López’s work is rare in that she is a female playwright.

everything, male and female, yin and yang, among many other dualities. In a way, the name predates the now standard use of the “@” symbol when writing “Chican@” or “Latin@” which fosters sociolinguistic cultural inclusivity. CASA promotes exploring both Boyle Heights and the world in the hopes of establishing a space that does not see any borders and “0” and “1” are one. In the same vein, the company’s symbol conjures thoughts of inclusivity. The symbol, at first glance, is a framed house that doubles as a proscenium with a performer in the center. Yet, upon closer look, it is clear that the two sides of the house are people, symbolically supporting the structure. A female performer in a dress is on stage, made possible by the physical support of her fellow theater makers, of ambiguous gender. This image is precisely representative of CASA 0101’s mission as a necessary home in Boyle Heights for inclusivity and community-building through theater arts and education. With all of this in mind, CASA is a decidedly feminist theater that privileges egalitarian and women-focused theater-making and is a space in which every month is Women’s *HerStory* Month.

In February, 2001, López met Emmanuel Deleage, now her husband, while he was a grant writer and doing theater with displaced people in Skid Row through the Los Angeles Poverty Department. Utilizing his experience in non-profit management, Deleage started Courage Productions, a non-profit company that was producing *Public Song*, a 40 actor play by the French poet Armand Gatti. The two merged their mutual interest in forming a theater company in Boyle Heights. Notably, much of the credit is given to López as the sole founder and voice of the company, a contemporary female take on the single male viewpoint of history, but as López affirms, this would be impossible without Deleage’s involvement:

I think a lot of the success, the credit is given to me and I say “no, no, no.”

I get the credit for getting started and getting people excited and inspired, but he’s the one who makes things work. (...) This is not possible without him. Because I tried doing it and there is no way I could do it by myself.

It’s just not possible. (“RWHC”)

Deleage is now the Executive Director of the theater and oversees all operations. While Deleage leads a staff of two full-time and three part-time employees, as well as countless volunteers, he is ultimately responsible that everything gets done.<sup>16</sup> And, in keeping with López’s philosophy, Deleage also is an active theater practitioner, acting, directing, writing, and producing when the opportunity presents itself. Deleage’s involvement at CASA should not be undervalued; his efforts have laid the groundwork to cement CASA as an autonomous 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. Moreover, while further professionalizing CASA’s operations and administrations, Deleage has helped López build CASA’s reputation as a leading cultural arts center on the Eastside. This reputation has not gone unnoticed. In personal interviews, Jorge Huerta, Tiffany Ana López, and Chantal Rodríguez all cited CASA as the only Latin@ theater on the Eastside to attract consistent audiences regardless of the production.<sup>17</sup> In fact, T. López affirms that CASA is the only theater that the community attends without knowing about the production they are about to witness. The audiences come because they know CASA is a key space that presents work that speaks to the Eastside Latin@ experience.

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<sup>16</sup> Some of Deleage’s key responsibilities include ensuring that CASA is in compliance with all laws and regulations, monitoring income and expenses, fundraising for the organization, building maintenance, scheduling, overseeing the arts education program, and board development.

<sup>17</sup> Huerta, T. López, and C. Rodríguez studied Latin@ theater in Los Angeles for a full calendar year (2012-2013) to analyze the state of teatro in the city for the Latina/o Theater Alliance/LA and the Latina/o Theatre Commons. At least one member of the trio (if not all three) attended every production by a Latin@ theater company during the time as well as conducted dramaturgical research.

Aside from the eleven member Board of Directors, directed by president Edward Padilla, the company is primarily led and operated by the CASA “familia,” a team of volunteers whose duties include producing, performing, writing, teaching, fundraising, grant writing, marketing, maintaining the website and social media outlets, selling tickets, overseeing administration, maintaining facilities, and other duties. To quote Deleage, “they are the heart and soul of the organization” (“Deleage”). CASA relies on the collective effort(s) of its familia to bring the arts to the barrio. By maintaining an active group of committed familia, the company ensures that the burden does not fall on López to keep the organization afloat. López provides the energy and motivation behind the operation, continually helping to generate excitement about the renaissance happening in and around the theater. Seemingly every member of the familia will say, “Whatever Josefina’s selling, I’m buying.” In fact, nearly every volunteer interviewed in 2011 for the CASA Strategic Plan cited López as a principal reason for her/his involvement with the organization.

While the *familia*’s involvement at CASA continues to flourish, its roots can be traced back to the very origins of the theater company itself. After over ten years of attempting to get the *Real Women Have Curves* film produced, production finally began in September, 2001. As the film was finding success at the Sundance Film Festival, winning the prestigious Audience Award and a Special Jury Prize for America Ferrera and Lupe Ontiveros, López produced the show at CASA 0101 for an 8 week run, including matinee performances in Spanish. This production was a true collaborative effort with López directing, Deleage doing the tech, Ramona Gonzales stage managing, and Carlos Valdovinos volunteering as an usher. Effectively, they became a four person

theater company. The film brought people to the theater and López quickly gained a loyal following that enabled the continued success of CASA.

After operating for its first 11 years in its original location, a converted former bridal shop and the present Little Casa, CASA opened its new space on September 9, 2011, after 3 years of planning. Given that the space was not only formerly a boxing gym, but also an auto parts store, a Buddhist temple, and a United States post office branch, in keeping with her signature *joie de vivre*, López hired a curandera to drive out any unwarranted spirits that may have remained in the space.

Admittedly, the timing of transitioning to the new space was not ideal given the poor economic climate. However, this demonstrates CASA's resiliency and determination. Speaking of this determination, Edward Padilla, President of the Board, sustains:

The new Casa 0101 project forged ahead because we knew that at a time when everything else in the world can seem bleak and hopeless, our work in the arts and arts education is much more important. It enables everyone to see the world and the human condition differently—a glimmer of hope.  
(*Real Women Program*)

López reiterates this notion that theater and arts education are a necessary addition to the neighborhood to foster both community and personal growth:

Casa 0101 is a home for artists. Anyone can be a part of this familia.

When I was growing up undocumented in this country I wanted to feel like I belonged somewhere. I felt so invisible and insignificant. CASA



0101 is my country, the one space in the world where I matter, I belong and you matter and you belong. (“The ‘Herstory’ of CASA 0101” 6)

Only one block away from the original location, the new space offers more possibilities for community advancement as it not only holds a fully-equipped 99-seat theater (nearly twice the size of the former space), dressing rooms, an art gallery, and a separate studio/classroom space. This expanded space permits the organization to provide more for the community, be it through increased training opportunities and programs designed for future actors, dancers, filmmakers, visual artists, and writers. From the early days of operating out of the converted store front, the new space has helped bolster CASA 0101’s place as one of the premier arts venues for Boyle Heights through its year-round programming of theatrical productions, film festivals, classes, and other unique events.

While this project was ambitious,<sup>18</sup> it falls in line with López’s community-first approach. The belief that art can transform people and communities drove López and Deleage forward into this project. López states:

Because the money that it took, the commitment, the tenacity, all the begging, all the thousand favors, we would've given up, because we're not going to make any money. It's just the fact that we believe art should be accessible to everyone, and there should be other options, and people should have a right to be inspired and to have hope. (Qtd. in Johnson, “Casa 0101”)

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<sup>18</sup> Taking more than three years to complete, the project required hundreds of thousands of dollars in renovation costs. The project was partly supported by the Los Angeles County Arts Commission, the city’s Community Redevelopment Agency, the California Arts Council, and considerable personal investment from López and Deleage.

The possibility of hope is essential to the foundation and mission of CASA. Without hope and inspiration, it is easy to fall into the wrong circles on the Eastside, such as gang violence. López views her theater as a form of community outreach in which youth, not to mention adults, have an alternative environment to cultivate a positive sense of self-being. López sees this as a third option from gangs and teenage pregnancy and the Christian Churches appearing in the barrio: “Hey, we don’t tell you what to believe in as long as you believe in something, and contribute in some way” (Qtd. in Johnson, “Casa 0101”). Instilling a sense of belief in someone who has previously not had such a thing, offers patrons the chance to improve their lives and hopefully use their abilities to further transform the community. Coincidentally, López has brought theater to Boyle Heights, filling a previous void. Her actions, while entirely organic, fall in line with the Manifesto del Teatro Nacional de Aztlán (TENAZ), drafted on June 24, 1973, at the fourth TENAZ festival in San José, CA: “El Teatro debe ir al pueblo y no el pueblo al teatro” (Tomás Ybarra-Frausto Papers, Box 2) as well as Luis Valdez’s thoughts in “Notes on Chicano Theatre” featured in *Early Works*: “If the raza will not come to the theatre, then the theatre must go to the raza” (10). According to research conducted by Emmanuel Deleage for CASA’s Strategic Plan, the organization has been successful fulfilling its mission. The audience is comprised of a high percentage of Latin@s (mostly Latinas), aged 25-55 who live in the Eastside, and are fans of López’s work and life view (which often overlaps with her work). These women return to CASA because the theater relates to their past and present, as its programming promotes Latin@ voices.

And not only has CASA come to the raza, but the company has played an active part in how Latin@ identity is formed on the Eastside. Boyle Heights, given its ideal

location immediately east of Downtown Los Angeles and its rich history as an immigrant community, has been the site of increased transformation since the turn of the millennium. Without a doubt, this community has changed dramatically since Deleage and López met in 2001. While no empirical data exists, Deleage and López believe that CASA has been one of the primary harbingers of the so-called Boyle Heights Renaissance that has been occurring along East First Street. Shortly after the theater opened, Boyle Heights slowly became a destination and a site of increased economic activity. This Boyle Heights Renaissance, as it has come to be known, has seen the barrio experience an unparalleled influx of investments, both public and private, such as a new light rail line, the Gold Line (along East First Street), and a new police station across the street from CASA, not to mention new businesses such as Primera Taza Café, Purgatory Pizza, Eastside Luv Wine Bar y Queso, Guisados Tacos, Libros Schmibros, Espacio 1839, the Boyle Hotel, and Corazon del Pueblo.<sup>19</sup> Additionally, the historic East L.A. arts institution, Self Help Graphics and Art relocated to East First Street in 2011. The newly revitalized Mariachi Plaza serves as the neighborhood's central meeting space, its *zócalo*, from which the arts district emerges. The plaza hosts a weekly farmer's market on Fridays, as well as a flea market on Sundays. Additionally, two community papers have emerged: *Boyle Heights Beat* and *Brooklyn and Boyle*, the latter which Josefina López helped found and features her advice column: "Ask a Wise Latina." Aside from private investments, East First Street has seen increased public funding such as the addition of bike lanes, new sidewalks, new trees that are less damaging to sewer lines, among other

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<sup>19</sup> Despite the renewed interest in community-engaged businesses and organizations, not all have survived. After five years of community outreach, Corazon del Pueblo was forced to close its doors on December 13, 2014 after the landlord raised the rent. They have since been operating out of other sister spaces, but the lack of a home space poses a significant threat to the organization's future.

things. Whereas Deleage believes some of these changes were inevitable, such as the Gold Line, he believes that when the LA County Metropolitan Transportation Authority and City Officials were considering possible routes, the emergence of East First Street as a viable cultural district made it a natural site to extend Los Angeles's light rail ("Deleage").

Yet, arguably the organizations that are the most necessary are those such as CASA, Espacio 1839, Homeboy Industries, and Self Help Graphics and Art that actively seek to change people's lives. These organizations grant Eastside Latin@s opportunities to positively construct and perform Latinidad.<sup>20</sup> Despite the many ways that CASA has impacted the community, perhaps the most crucial is that it instills a sense of belief in those who choose to let the theater enter their souls. People in the community can see a play and gain the belief that they can be an actor and eventually be in a show. The roles can be reversed. López adds:

They see for themselves that it's not a giant leap to go from auditioning to being on the stage. So, a lot of people who took an acting class are on stage and they go "Oh my God. I didn't think I could do this!" It's made theater accessible for the people. (...) I would say that the people who do see their stories on stage, the impact for them is that they realize that their lives matter. That their stories matter and that they have a place to go to that cares about their dreams. ("RWHC")

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<sup>20</sup> For example, Espacio 1839 was founded in 2012 by Marco Amador, Nico Avina, Elisa Garcia, and David Gomez as an artistic and creative collaboration that focuses on media and creative spaces for Boyle Heights communities to be comfortable and have a voice. Primarily, the space serves as the physical location of Radio Sombra, an internet radio station devoted to Boyle Heights. Additionally, Self Help Graphics & Art has undoubtedly impacted the local and national Chican@ movement for over 40 years. For an in-depth look at the organization, see *Self Help Graphics & Art: Art in the Heart of East Los Angeles*, edited by Colin Gunckel (2014, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.).

As a community arts center, CASA fits into this neighborhood seamlessly by offering Boyle Heights residents a theater arts space that grants them quality programming in art, education, film, and theater.

Furthermore, key to CASA's success is the price of tickets. As with all theaters, from East L.A. to Broadway, ticket prices influence accessibility, outreach, and most importantly, *who* is coming to the theater. Whereas the Mark Taper Forum, for instance, charges between \$40 and \$85 depending on which day of the week the performance is and seat location, all tickets at CASA remain under \$20. In fact, Boyle Heights residents can purchase \$15 tickets to all performances. In this way, CASA privileges those living in the surrounding area, not only through its programming but in pricing, too. At \$15 a ticket, seeing live theater is as financially accessible as seeing a film on a Friday or Saturday night, not to mention the neighborhood's lack of cinemas.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, every seat at CASA places the audience several feet from the action taking place on stage.

Given the audience demographics and ticket prices, CASA has become a site to foster diversity both on stage and in the audience. Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Quiara Alegría Hudes comments that smaller theaters are necessary because they focus on the audience as much as the performance: "Small theater companies offer something exciting. They don't feel like stuffy institutions, which means they're more approachable to non-theater-going Latinos. Their ticket price is affordable. I have seen something in small theaters I've never seen in major regional theaters—truly diverse audiences" (Qtd. in Svich 58). With Hudes's thoughts in mind, one can understand how small theaters such

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<sup>21</sup> Before the multiplex era, there were a handful of movie theaters in Boyle Heights: the Aliso Theatre, the Brooklyn Theatre, the Joy Theatre, the National Theatre, the Wabash Theatre, and the Meralta Theatre (Teatro Azteca). The former Meralta Theatre is the only space that still exists and is now Alcance Victoria, a branch of Victory Outreach International.

as CASA are able to not only attract an audience but, more importantly, grow and sustain a dedicated audience base.

Nevertheless, this influx in cultural expansion is not without criticism. Many people see this as gentrification of Boyle Heights. This was the subject of a much-discussed *New York Times* article, “Los Angeles Neighborhood Tries to Change, but Avoid the Pitfalls,” by Jennifer Medina in which the area’s recent development was given national exposure. Medina’s piece sparked an NPR segment on AirTalk that featured callers who discussed positives and negatives of the changes happening in Boyle Heights and the gentrification happening in Santa Ana, Silver Lake, Long Beach, and Echo Park. Medina focuses on the *gentefication* of the barrio, a term coined by Guillermo Uribe, a self-professed “chipster”: a Chican@ hipster. As opposed to gentrification, “*gentefication*,” playing off the Spanish word “gente” meaning “people,” involves young Latin@s moving back to the area to open up small businesses and not-for-profit organizations. In an undated journal entry, Josefina López coins the term “*Razafication*” to describe this same phenomenon (López Archives). As opposed to gentrification replacing communities and enforcing a shift in the make-up of people, *gentefication* is a change from within that favors a sense of continuity and community. There is no loss of the sense of community. Therefore, in Boyle Heights, Latin@s are the ones revitalizing the area instead of middle-class Anglos. Uribe, owner of the pocho bar Eastside Luv, is one of *gentefication*’s more vocal leaders:

I started to see the potential of improving the community from the inside out. If gentrification is happening, it might as well be from people who care about the existing culture. In the case of Boyle Heights, it would be

best if the *gente* decide to invest in improvements because they are more likely to preserve its integrity. (“Guillermo Uribe”)

Marco Amador, of Espacio 1839, echoes Uribe’s thoughts. Amador believes that small-scale entrepreneurship can ignite positive change in Boyle Heights: “We’re not trying to get out of the barrio, we’re trying to bring the barrio up” (Qtd. in J. Medina). Uribe and Amador, like López, aim to create a space that is representative of Eastside Chican@ and Mexican cultural histories *in* the Eastside. As opposed to gentrification pushing out native residents, *gentefication* aims for the area to remain predominantly owned by Latin@s *for* Latin@s. With this in mind, it must be recognized that despite potential criticism from groups such as Unión de Vecinos—who worry about potential inflation and the cost of living—, individuals such as López and Uribe have returned to Boyle Heights to give back to the community and create opportunities to cultivate positive Eastside Latinidades.

### **The Community Speaks**

In addition to the statistics that demonstrate the difference CASA and theater arts are making in Boyle Heights, perhaps the most telling evidence is that of the individuals who have been affected by the arts-focused revitalization of the barrio. These voices demonstrate how López and CASA’s work is reaching its intended audience and finding success in its mission of enriching Boyle Heights and nurturing future storytellers. Despite addressing different things, all of these individuals speak of how López and CASA have bettered not only the barrio, but also their lives. Admittedly, the following interview excerpts only represent a fraction of CASA’s story. Yet, these individuals all

speak to how the arts have changed their lives by providing a space to (re)build, grow, learn, heal, and, ultimately, love who they truly are.

Claudia Durán, who produces the *Chicanas, Cholas y Chisme* Theater Festival alongside Lindsey Haley, first met López in 2006 at a film festival brunch. López invited her to submit a film to the All Latina Film Festival that López was holding at CASA. From this experience, she began acting in shows such as *the Extraordinary Life of Street Sweeper August G*, *Trio Los Machos*, and *Light in the Darkness* as well as writing songs for *Detained in the Desert*, *Trio Los Machos*, and López's band *No Regrets*. For Durán, at CASA:

It's been wonderful to be allowed to spread my wings. Sing, Write, Act, Direct, Produce, the works! So many times I had to hear a lot of "you can't do that" and having to prove myself. While at CASA it was always a part of the process, you should know how to do it all and since you do, let's make use of it. (...) Casa has always encouraged multi-talented Latinos to utilize their creative talents. We don't just want you to be a writer or just a director or just an actor or just a producer or just a designer. (...) But at CASA you're not just a designer; you're a painter, filmmaker, a talent with many layers and unlimited amount of potential. If you think you can't we'll show you how you CAN. It's a philosophy that doesn't pigeonhole a Latino's talent and ability. If you're handsome/pretty you're not just the Latin Lover/Sex Kitten, you have a phenomenal brain and creativity and if you want to get down and dirty in the trenches of building and designing sets - there's a place for you at CASA. I love that. (...) Casa is such a



supportive environment for women. (...) I'm thrilled that a place like Casa exists and encourages hiring and empowering more women to be behind the scenes as well as in the limelight. ("Durán Interview")

Similar to Durán, actor Andrés Ramacho, who played Art in Aaron Higareda's workshop production of *Art's Magic* in August 2014, also came from the film industry as well as more mainstream theater circles in Los Angeles, New York, and San Diego. After seeing a cast breakdown online, Ramacho was surprised to see that the play was a Latin@ story that did not portray the main character in a negative and/or stereotypical light. Ultimately, this experience was cathartic for Ramacho, as he was forced to check his privileges of having worked in professional film and theater at the door when he first arrived for rehearsals. Having worked for much larger productions, regional theaters, film, and television, Ramacho was accustomed to the larger scale of the arts. Yet, these "larger" experiences were ultimately unfulfilling. Ramacho explains:

The chase and the grind of what I thought being an artist was like really chipped away at my heart. So, honestly, when I first started, I felt ashamed. I walked into a small studio that was sandwiched between a local market, apartments, and a taco stand. Then when the work started, everything changed. The passion and the joy with which the team worked really began to open my heart. I had such a blast with my scene partner; the directors were a huge joy. I found myself looking forward to performing again. This show really opened my heart and reminded me of why I fell in love with theatre. The sense of ensemble, being part of something larger than myself, and to see someone's work come to life on

the stage was mesmerizing. I loved every single moment of it; it humbled me as a performer. (...) I fell back into love with theatre because of the experience at Casa 0101.

Even in Ramacho's short time at CASA, he was quickly able to see that the community is significantly different than those in more theater-centric areas, playing in larger venues, regional theaters, to large audiences, and with highly trained professionals. Speaking of the community at CASA, Ramacho adds:

During the first nights of rehearsal, a lovely older woman would knock on the door and sell us pupusas. That experience was unfamiliar to me. I did not know how to react and felt a bit panicked. Shortly after, the production team conversed with her. I came to find out that they all knew each other. However, I mean that in a larger sense, the entire block seemed to know each other. Then, it felt like the entire community knew each other. There was such a sense of family and connectedness that I haven't felt at other theatre communities. The work being done here, the theatres built on this street, and the people all seem to be connected. The art and the community blend together. The art is important to the community, and the community is important to the art. There is a sense of pride and ownership over the work being done. It's beautiful to see a community of people with brown skin fill a theatre that is telling a story that is created by and for the community. It's really different. I've always felt like the outsider in the other venues because I'm always one of the few brown actors. I'm a Filipino actor and there aren't many of us. When I watch television, go to

plays, or go to the movies, there are so few actors on there that look like me. (...) It's disheartening and infuriating. However, to be part of a theatrical community that has brown skinned people that look and sound like me that also tell stories that I can relate to is so inspiring. The community at Casa 0101 made me feel like I existed in the world. The community made me feel that my voice was being heard, and that I, as a Brown Actor, was being seen; truly seen, and fully seen as a human being.

Despite being in his first production, Ramacho's words speak to the importance of the CASA familia. The familia's significance cannot be underestimated. It is a vital part of not only the organization, but the nascent revitalization of the barrio. Frequent director of López's plays, notably *Detained in the Desert* and *A Cat Named Mercy*, Hector Rodriguez reiterates this notion of family: "I know that other companies have their version of 'familia' as well but it seems a little more organic and real at Casa 0101 considering that a few of the core 'familia' members come directly from the Boyle Heights neighborhood" ("Rodriguez Interview"). Honorary Board Member Gabriela López de Dennis, who has been involved with the theater since meeting Josefina López in 2000, discusses how the many people she has met at CASA have become "very dear, life-long friends and professional colleagues. Casa 0101 is truly my second home, my extended family."

López mentee and playwright Margaret Medina's roots trace back to Boyle Heights. Medina, whose father was born in the neighborhood and was not allowed to buy property, feels that her work, and that of CASA, is carrying the torch of previous generations of immigrants. She believes that the central principal of CASA is to give

back to the community; the theater allows people to enter into its spaces, use their talent(s), and give back to the community. This giving back is not solely relegated to the theater arts, but includes giving back to “local businesses” such as the pupusa lady that Ramacho describes above: “There is a pupusería lady that comes and sells pupusas and that’s somebody who didn’t have 30 bucks when she walked into the place and now she does. And they’re pretty damn good” (“Medina Interview”). In a way, the pupusas lady is as much of a neighborhood institution as López or CASA. Her presence outside of the theater, selling pupusa to theatergoers as they wait for the house to open is as welcome as any local business. In fact, her role is essentially a key aspect of López’s barrio revitalization in that CASA is *for Boyle Heights by Boyle Heights*. The pupusas lady is as organic to the street as any theater space.

Furthermore, Margaret Medina discusses what the community has meant to her as a theater artist and writer:

I feel like even though I don’t make a lot of money here or I’m not paid \$1,000 a week, I make millions. I make millions when someone comes in and does my scene exactly the way I wrote it. Or, I get to see somebody grow. (...) It’s important that you surround yourself with people who have the same vision. Sí se puede. Anything’s possible. That’s just it. I want to encourage my students to have their stories, to have authorship of them. To make three-dimensional characters. That’s what Josefina has taught me. We don’t have to be on the fringes of Caucasian entertainment; we can own our own stories. We can write our own stories. We can direct our

stories. We can hope that they are received by the community. (“Medina Interview”)

Medina’s words reinforce the unparalleled community being shaped at CASA. Not only are the stories being staged openly received by the surrounding community, but these stories provide an accessible environment that invites newcomers to join the familia.

For example, Lauren Ballesteros’s thoughts adhere to this open-door policy, accessibility that is uncommon at most theaters. After being inspired by attending a sold-out performance of *Brown & Out: LGBT Latino Theatre Festival* in 2012, Ballesteros enrolled in a playwriting class, “Your Stories for the Stage,” led by Margaret Medina. Witnessing the power of activist theater, Ballesteros was given the spark to take control of her own theater career. Ultimately, this experience coupled with Medina’s workshop proved to be life-changing since Ballesteros rekindled both her relationship with theater and her mother, Elaine Terrazas. Having spent the previous seven years in Hawai’i, Ballesteros invited Terrazas to attend the workshop with her. Aside from learning about writing structures, concept development, and building characters, both women were able to suture their relationship. According to Ballesteros:

We would start each class with writing prompts but by the end of the four hours, each student began bonding over shared struggles, fears, frustrations, love, family, and identity issues. We got closer every week, to one another and to ourselves. It was through this process I not only discovered my ability to write, but I found a community: my CASA familia. (...) Although my mother was hesitant to participate initially, she

attended the class as an “observer” but by the second semester, her newfound familia and I became more aggressive in encouraging one another to “write from the wound,” one of Margarita’s many signature catch phrases. And so we did. It was through this process I recognized the powerful healing that takes place, for both writer and audience, when we share our story. My mother and I shared many hard talks, interviews, and tears. Our bond was being restored and I appreciated our differences and similarities as women as well as mother and daughter. (“Ballesteros”)

A key aspect of their mother-daughter relationship was their mutual bisexuality. Medina’s writing workshop facilitated this discovery. The end result was Ballesteros’s first ten-minute play, *How Did I Get Here*, about their journey discovering and confronting bisexuality, which was produced in *Chicanas, Cholas y Chisme* in 2014. Soon thereafter she began acting in productions at CASA and remains one of the key figures in the theater’s familia. Ballesteros’ explains how she has evolved thanks to her time at CASA:

I will never be afraid to tell my story and recognize that it is connected to others. I am a storyteller. Josefina taught me that as actors, “when we cry, we tell someone in the audience it’s ok to cry and allows for healing to take place.” It is the same for sharing vulnerability in our writing and saying things that some won’t be ready to hear but feels right; that’s how we evolve. I am still discovering myself and what drives me but I have my home and familia at CASA, my sanctuary. (“Ballesteros”)

These voices reinforce the diverse community of actors, artists, educators, parents, students, writers, and theatergoers that have affected how identity is shaped in Boyle Heights through CASA. The recent influx of cultural activity and interest in Boyle Heights has led to a so-called “Boyle Heights Renaissance.” Yet, CASA board president Edward Padilla maintains that the word “renaissance” is problematic in that it implies that the arts did not exist before this period began. According to Padilla, the arts have always been integral part of Boyle Heights and continue to be. The Boyle Heights Renaissance, therefore, can better be described as a “period of time where we begin to celebrate again our artists and highlight the rich diversity of artistic forms and styles at venues like Casa 0101” (“Padilla Interview”). By drawing attention to the arts, the Boyle Heights community can be highlighted as a place for arts and community instead of the typical negative representation of the neighborhood seen in the media. Padilla adds:

Casa 0101 has been identified locally as a leader in this re-celebration or Renaissance as many call it because Casa 0101 inspired other artists and groups of artists to come to First Street to highlight their arts, but it's important to keep in mind that many of these artists have been around, working constantly, producing murals, paintings, silk screens, and there are more that have been getting recognized beyond Boyle Heights, too.

(“Padilla Interview”)

Board member María G. Martínez reiterates these points, saying how the art that is happening is great for the community, “I lived in Boyle Heights in the early 70’s and the pride that places like CASA has brought to the residents, the happiness and pride that I witness in the children and parents participating in the various classes and plays at

CASA is inspiring.” And, as Gabriela López de Dennis affirms, this nascent period of community revitalization is thriving, rich, inspiring, alive, and “only the beginning.”

These voices from Boyles Heights speak to the different ways that Eastside Latin@s can engage with the work being done at CASA and how that impacts the nascent Boyle Heights Renaissance. While each person retains their individuality as to what is important to them or what they critically witness, all point to Josefina López as the spark that drives this movement forward. These voices demonstrate that, just like their opinions, Eastside Latinidad is complex. Yet, this branch of Latinidad is encouraged and fostered by the importance of cultural expression, specifically theater and performance. While this is to be expected in a study of theater, it reveals more than one might imagine. One must remember that before López returned to the barrio in 2000, outlets for theatrical expression and theater-going virtually did not exist. To have created a theater space and grown it organically into the neighborhood, López has established theater, and the arts in general, as the missing link that has made the Boyle Heights Renaissance even more possible.

## **Conclusion**

Josefina López’s work in Boyle Heights and at CASA has generated positive forms of Latin@ self-fashioning and cultural production. This branch of *barriology* uses the arts and theater to address cultural knowledge(s) and specificities to the Boyle Heights community and, ultimately, contest hegemony and external factors at play in urban Los Angeles. As a necessary space in the Eastside, the theater induces critical witnessing to urge its patrons, both theater makers and spectators, to stake a greater claim



in their neighborhood and to actively make it a more viable community. Even though the addition of Big Casa in 2011 and RWHC Studio in 2014 indicate that López's mission in Boyle Heights has been successful, all one has to do is listen to the voices of Boyle Heights to truly comprehend what kind of impact theater can have on a community. By listening to residents of Boyle Heights, it is clear that theater serves as a necessary space to develop positive expressions of Eastside Latinidad. Furthermore, the theater space is an important site to create Latin@ cultural expression. By understanding how CASA organically fits within the milieu of Boyle Heights, one is able to see how critical witnessing drives forward the theater and López's mission that are discussed in the chapters to follow. CASA is not just a theater in an often-overlooked barrio, but it *is* Boyle Heights, *is* home, and *is* what is capable of making this community a better place.

## Chapter 2

### Josefina López and Artistic Mentorship

“A play, a play, a play. I need to write a play. Okay, okay, let’s see, let’s see here ...” proclaims Art in Aaron Higareda’s *We, Myself, & Us*, a one-act play cycle, at Josefina López’s Real Women Have Curves Studio on August 20, 2014, (*Art’s Magic* 2).<sup>22</sup> Higareda is one of López’s more promising up-and-coming playwriting students. The night’s first piece, *Art’s Magic*, presents a young playwright, no doubt Higareda’s alter-ego, who attempts to write a play in a small cubicle at East Los Angeles College. Throughout the comedic piece, Art, played by Andrés Ramacho, performs several fantastical gestures and rituals with the aim of writing a play. He uses his pen as a wand, channeling his energy into elaborate and magical gestures. Each time, Art does the motion with more “PAAAAA-ZZZAAAAAZZZZZZZzzzzzzzz!!!!!!” (Higareda, *Art’s Magic* 3). The audience learns that Art is trying to write a play to succeed and create a better life for himself, possibly outside of East Los Angeles where better socio-economic conditions are perceived to exist. As conveyed by the play, he feels the pressure of being an interlocutor of Chican@ identity and presenting this identity in “the greatest play the world has ever seen” (Higareda, *Art’s Magic* 3). Soon, the ghost of William Shakespeare, played by local actor Julian Vlcán, arrives to guide the young protagonist on his journey of finding his “magic” and, ultimately, self-discovery. Yet, Shakespeare, arguably the most iconic playwright (or writer) of any national tradition, is not the one who can help Art write a play.

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<sup>22</sup> The workshop production of *We, Myself, & Us* included *Art’s Magic*, *Wipes*, and *You Don’t Even Speak Spanish*.

Art's "magic" becomes the artistic mentorship he received from Josefina López's playwriting workshops. He begins to demystify the playwriting process and recounts the advice he learned from López: "Josefina López says every play needs to have conflict, and a sympathetic protagonist, unless of course it's an ensemble, and in that case ... you need ..." (Higareda, *Art's Magic* 5). For Art, Shakespeare can only function as his physical guide. It is López who becomes his spiritual guide who helps him tap into the unconscious and let his words flow.<sup>23</sup> López taught him to "write as fast as you can. Write, write, write, write, write" (Higareda, *Art's Magic* 6). Art does not have to be afraid to write a play based on his experience(s) trying to survive in East L.A., something he learned from López.

While Higareda may appear to include Shakespeare as a physically present character in his piece *Art's Magic* for comedic effect, the character's presence demystifies the legend of the playwright. Shakespeare is just a man, just as Art is. Yet, even though Art performs rituals to tap into Shakespeare's "powers," López is the one who bears more weight in this piece. She is also just a woman, flesh and blood, but she is Boyle Height's equivalent to Shakespeare. She is the Barrio Bard who can make the difference in Art's life that Shakespeare is unqualified to produce. Higareda writes: "If Josefina can do it, then so can I" (*Art's Magic* 12). López presents a model on how playwriting can transform one's life. Art *needs* to write a play so that he can be successful:

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<sup>23</sup> While not physically part of the production, Josefina López, nevertheless, was physically present on the first row of the audience. This added another dimension to the conflict being present given that López was witnessing the production and the audience, surely, was witnessing López's reaction to the conflict on stage.

I need to write a great play so I can take it to my playwriting workshop tomorrow night, show the class, show Josefina López, they tell me they love it, it gets produced at Little Casa, the tickets get sold out, it moves to the Big Casa, the reviews are great, I get discovered, they love me, I make a movie, I make some money, move out of my girlfriend's mom's house, get a decent car, one with working air conditioning and automatic windows, get off of EBT, buy my own damn food, complain about inflation, keep on writing to support my family, get enough money to open my own little theater next to CASA 0101, produce my plays, help the community, give other playwrights a chance, and then retire! SO YOU SEE, I NEED TO WRITE A GREAT PLAY RIGHT NOW OR ELSE NONE OF THAT WILL EVER HAPPEN! (Higareda, *Art's Magic* 9-10)

Writing a great play is not what is most important. Realizing that he is the author of his own life and, therefore, the one to define what success means is essential: "Being successful doesn't mean you have a lot of money, or a big house, or a nice car, or cool clothes, or your play gets produced on Broadway. Being successful means never feeling like a failure!" (Higareda, *Art's Magic* 15).

In López's Boyle Heights, theater and playwriting become the new model. López has created a space where the arts, and Art, can thrive and the model that residents of the Eastside seek to follow. It can be a way to stay and take part in the positive rebuilding of the neighborhood. At the end of the play, Art presents several ideas central to Lópezian thought. In López's model, a new generation of theater-makers can channel their energy

into theater and, in this way, find success in this supportive space. In the playwright's notes for the workshop, Higareda describes what he learned under López's mentorship:

I have grown a lot since the first time I stepped into a playwriting class at Casa 0101. I learned that it's okay to write a horrible first draft, I learned that it is my responsibility to tell the truth, and I learned that I am not only writing for myself, but I am writing for an entire community. (*Art's Magic* Program)<sup>24</sup>

Andrés Ramacho reiterates the young playwright's potential from his perspective as an actor in the workshop production of *Art's Magic*:

He is a young playwright in his early twenties with big dreams, a strong voice, a kind heart, and an imagination as big as the universe. He's a skilled writer that dares to put material up that covers the entire human experience. Aaron doesn't shy away from writing about love, loss, dreams, failures, and hope. (...) This show really opened my heart and reminded me of why I fell in love with theatre. The sense of ensemble, being part of something larger than myself, and to see someone's work come to life on the stage was mesmerizing. (...) It humbled me as a performer, and helped me as a human being. Aaron doesn't know how much he's inspired me. I

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<sup>24</sup> In an interview, Higareda explains his experience writing *Art's Magic*: "The process of including Josefina's playwriting wisdom in *Art's Magic* was a fun one. We had an assignment to bring in copies of a play we had been working on in class and the previous week I was having trouble coming up with something and for some reason as I was staring at the blank page writing nonsense to myself 'A play, a play, a play I need to write a play' I started to recall Josefina's voice, advice, and mannerisms from the class. For one, I allowed myself to be horrible. I didn't judge what I was writing, I kept going, and after many revisions it became one of my favorite pieces. At the time I wrote *Art's Magic* theater and playwriting were new to me, and there seemed to be all these taboos, superstitions, and rules. Without even knowing it I started to show the ridiculousness side of theater and playwriting" ("Higareda Interview").

fell back into love with theatre because of the experience. (“Ramacho Interview”)

Ramacho’s thoughts reinforce the notion that theater can positively impact the community. By granting Higareda the opportunity to workshop his plays, López subsequently gave Ramacho and an entire production team of actors, directors, stage managers, etc. the chance to construct Latin@ identity and add new subjectivities to Los Angeles’s Eastside. These artists, such as Aaron Higareda, come to CASA to take playwriting classes but leave different people. They leave having better understood their own self-worth, something theater allows them to discover. With these tools intact, they can work toward an improved community.

This chapter explores how Josefina López utilizes artistic mentorship to impact new playwrights and theater makers. Through the spaces that CASA 0101 offers, López critically engages with the community to foster a safe environment for future voices of Chican@ cultural and theatrical production. In this chapter, as we will see, Josefina López and CASA 0101 give patrons opportunities to positively perform Eastside Latinidad and in such a way, create dramatic literature, performance, and new generations of actors, directors, producers, and, specifically, playwrights in Boyle Heights. With the opening of Big Casa in 2011 and the addition of Real Women Have Curves Studio in January, 2014, López has three spaces dedicated to developing each playwright’s individual voice. With this in mind, the different spaces allow for various types of productions. For example, Higareda’s *We, Myself, & Us*, benefited from its workshop production being staged at Real Women Have Curves Studio. López handed Higareda the keys and let him control his own show, being not only the writer but lead

producer, too. Higareda, therefore, assembled the production team, from actors and stage managers to directors and head of house. Given the space's relative low-frills environment, Higareda was able to take more risks given that the pressure to generate money was not involved. On the other hand, producing a show at Big Casa is a larger undertaking given the increased production costs and need to fill a bigger theater space. Subsequently, each show is strategically staged between the three spaces—Big Casa, Little Casa, and Real Women Have Curves Studio—maximizing not only the type of production at hand, but, more importantly, the company's budget and physical labor.

In this chapter, I argue that López builds a new generation of playwrights exemplified through her mission in Boyle Heights at CASA. Aside from López's involvement overseeing collaborative shows such as *Brown & Out* and *Chicanas, Cholas y Chisme*, she plays an active role in mentoring several up-and-coming playwrights. While the amount of playwrights that López influences via mentorship is too vast to name, several playwrights demand our critical attention. Among López's mentees, notable productions include: Patricia Zamorano's *You Don't Know Me* (2007) and *Locked Up* (2014), Mercedes Floresislal's *Tamales de Puerco* (2008, 2013), Miguel García's *Brown & Out Theater Festival* (2011-2014), Jaime Mayorquin's *Los Novios* (2013, part of *Brown & Out 3*) and *My Love Life* (2014),<sup>25</sup> Aaron Higareda's *Me, Myself, & Us* (2014), and Margaret Medina's *A Force to Be Reckoned With* (2014). This list excludes the countless staged readings and workshop productions that López has facilitated; listing these would be nearly impossible given their frequency and pop-up tendency. Moreover, López's work as a mentor to aspiring filmmakers is beyond the

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<sup>25</sup> Jaime Mayorquin also produces "Ah...Awkward!" once a month at RWHC Studio. "Ah...Awkward!" is a night of sharing stories about awkward situations or moments which in hindsight shed light on being human, teaching you something or helping bring you to that realization.

scope of this project.<sup>26</sup> Armed with the belief and tools to achieve their goals through mentorship, these individuals have become produced playwrights.

These plays represent works not only born at CASA, but developed in Boyle Heights in large part because other theaters in Southern California were unwilling to take chances on them or take the time and energy to produce playscripts by unknown talent. For López to produce work at other theaters is routine, but for unknown playwrights, the jump from a playwriting workshop to a fully-fledged production is daunting. Thus, these playwrights develop playscripts under the guidance of López and other mentors, test their work during table readings, workshops, and productions, before bringing their polished work to other theater companies in the area.

This chapter is divided into three parts. After offering a brief history of López's involvement in Latin@ playwriting workshops such as the Hispanic Playwrights-in-Residence Laboratory at INTAR, the first section will examine how López brings this legacy of artistic mentorship to Boyle Heights through various platforms—for example, workshops and artistic mentorship—that she supplies the neighborhood with her own form of *barriology* and *Eastside facultad*. After discussing the acting, directing, and playwriting classes at CASA, in the following section, special attention will be given to the 2014 production of *Chicanas, Cholas y Chisme* (CCC), a collective theater piece born out of the work performed by women in classes at CASA. CCC epitomizes the core aspect of critical witnessing by engaging the women in the community to enact change.

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<sup>26</sup> López has primarily impacted Latina filmmakers through the Boyle Heights Latina Independent Film Extravaganza (BHLIFE), which she began in 2002 at Little Casa. Houston filmmaker Stephanie Saint Sanchez credits López as the driving force behind Sanchez's own *Señorita Cinema*, an annual film festival in Houston. After submitting her first short film to BHLIFE, Sanchez traveled to Boyle Heights where she realized that there were other Latinas filmmakers in other parts of the country: "I'm so excited to meet other Latinas with the same goals as me. We all know that it's a struggle, and are just happy to help each other out" (Qtd. in Lopez). This supportive environment was a reaffirming experience for Sanchez that led her to develop her own festival to reach out to Latina filmmakers in Texas ("Sanchez").



This production represents one of the central principals of López's mentorship by adding new voices through performance and dramatic literature that enhances the diversity of Chican@ and Latin@ artistic and cultural expression in the Boyle Heights Renaissance.

### **Bringing Playwriting to Boyle Heights**

At the end of the *Real Women Have Curves* film, Ana (America Ferrera) arrives in New York, emerging from the subway station into Times Square a newly independent woman. The TKTS booth, Broadway marquees, honking taxis, and pedestrians rushing to-and-from work around her only add to her new experience as a Chicana in the Big Apple. Given that *Real Women* is largely autobiographical, Ana is a stand-in for López arriving in New York for college and, perhaps, her residency in María Irene Fornés's playwriting workshop at INTAR which helped further launch the young playwright's career.<sup>27</sup> Understanding López's time at INTAR, as well as at other writing workshops, is crucial for an in-depth study into López's current role as a mentor, playwright, and community arts leader. She has taken the knowledge that she learned from her mentors, specifically Fornés and Luis Valdez, and uses it to influence a new generation of Chican@ and Latin@ playwrights, creating her own Eastside version of the now much-recognized playwriting workshops of the 1980s and 90s, such as the Hispanic Playwrights-in-Residence Laboratory, the Hispanic Playwright's Project, and the Latino Theatre Initiative.

Riding the wave of momentum from the Chicano and Puerto Rican civil rights movements, several significant regional theaters in the United States established outlets

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<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, López's time in New York was difficult; she experienced culture shock and did not find the supportive environment that she had hoped she would find ("Untitled").

to develop Chican@ and Latin@ playwrights. Although more existed, none stand out like INTAR Hispanic Playwrights-in-Residence Laboratory (1978-1991),<sup>28</sup> South Coast Repertory's Hispanic Playwright's Project (1985-2004),<sup>29</sup> and Mark Taper Forum's Latino Theatre Initiative (1992-2005).<sup>30</sup> These became *the* prominent spaces for training, workshops, collaboration, and conversation from 1978 to 2005 and launched the careers of an entire generation of Chican@ and Latin@ playwrights such as Luis Alfaro, Migdalia Cruz, Nilo Cruz, Anne García-Romero, Lisa Loomer, Josefina López, Eduardo Machado, Cherrie Moraga, Elaine Romero, Edwin Sánchez, Milcha Sánchez-Scott, Octavio Solis, Caridad Svich, and Karen Zacarías. Noticeably, Josefina López was one of the few playwrights to hold residencies at each of these workshops, allowing her to build her repertoire as well as continue to refine her signature work, *Real Women Have Curves*. Although these programs elevated Latin@ dramatic production, they no longer exist due to funding being cut; soon after Nilo Cruz's *Ann in the Tropics* won the Pulitzer Prize in

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<sup>28</sup> Founded in 1972 by Max Ferrá, INTAR (International Arts Relations) is one of the oldest companies to consistently produce Latin@ theater in New York. In 1978, Fornés established the INTAR Hispanic Playwrights-in-Residence Laboratory where she would train many of the most widely produced Chican@ and Latin@ playwrights. Fornés's goal was to fill the void of artistic mentorship in Latin@ dramatic writing by establishing a space for training Latin@ playwrights.

<sup>29</sup> In 1985, José Cruz González founded the Hispanic Playwrights Project at South Coast Repertory in Costa Mesa, California. Later directed by Juliette Carrillo, this project held an annual playwriting festival in the summer that celebrated new works written by Latin@ playwrights. During its tenure, the project received over a thousand playscript submissions and workshoped over 50 plays, many of which received full productions at South Coast Repertory and other regional theaters (Cruz González Qtd. in Vaneta Mason 159). Notable works developed and produced at the Hispanic Playwrights Project include Lisa Loomer's *Birds* (1986), José Rivera's *The Promise* (1987), Edit Villarreal's *My Visits with MGM (My Grandmother Marta)* (1989), and Cherrie Moraga's *Shadow of a Man* (1990).

<sup>30</sup> In 1992, Los Angeles's Mark Taper Forum established the Latino Theatre Initiative. The project's aim was twofold: to diversify the audience base by offering programming that reflected the city's Latin@ community and to grant access to young Latin@ playwrights who reflected this diversity. Founded by José Luis Valenzuela and later codirected by Luis Alfaro and Diane Rodriguez, the Latino Theatre Initiative focused on developing new works through festivals, readings, and annual playwrights' retreats. In an interview with Chantal Rodríguez, Diane Rodriguez states that the Initiative was momentous: "We created an archive of hundreds of scripts that were submitted, developed and/or produced by the LTI. (...) A new generation of actors emerged who were very good, better in some ways than actors from my generation who did not receive formal training, I think there was a kind of formality that we offered to writers and to actors that then shaped a generation (...) it had a really significant impact" (Qtd. in C. Rodríguez 145-6).

2003, this landmark moment signified an “arrival” that justified the removal of support for Latin@ theater from within the regional theater model (Svich, “Arrival” 58-63). Nevertheless, several regional theaters and centers continue to provide spaces for artistic development: the Eugene O’Neill National Playwrights Conference, Lark Play Development Center, Denver Center New Play Summit, and the Sundance Theatre Lab.<sup>31</sup> Yet, none of these programs convenes a collective of Latin@ theater practitioners on an annual basis to develop and promote new work.

López’s first mentor was none other than Luis Valdez. Her connection with Valdez has been well documented (Huerta, *Chicano Drama* 122-4). After seeing Valdez’s *I Don’t Have to Show You No Stinking Badges* in 1986 at the Los Angeles Theatre Center while she was a student at the Los Angeles County High School for the Arts, López became inspired. She searched through his works to find monologues to perform, but she soon discovered that the majority of women in his works were one-dimensional, mostly girlfriends and mothers. With this new-found knowledge, López realized that *she* needed to be the one to write multi-dimensional roles for women. In this way, Valdez’s writings motivated her as a young girl. His writings freed her and became a transformational theater for her development as a playwright. While participating in the Los Angeles Theater Center’s Young Playwrights Lab (1985-1988), López wrote her first play: *Simply María, or the American Dream* (1988). This play is undeniably a Valdezian

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<sup>31</sup> For example, artist to participate in these programs include: Nilo Cruz, Irma Mayorga, Anne García-Romero, Quiara Alegría Hudes, and Karen Zacarías at the Eugene O’Neill National Playwrights Conference; Migdalia Cruz, Rogelio Martinez, José Rivera, Adrianna Sevahn-Nichols, and Caridad Svich at the Lark Play Development Center; Cusi Cram, Octavio Solis, and Caridad Svich at the Denver Center New Play Summit; and Quiara Alegría Hudes and Tanya Saracho at the Sundance Theatre Lab (García Romero “Latino/a Theater Commons”).

*acto*, the highly theatrical style employed by El Teatro Campesino.<sup>32</sup> *Simply María* was a life-changing moment for López. The play was produced at the California Young Playwright's Project in San Diego in 1988. After being produced in 1989 for KPBS, the San Diego public broadcasting station, López's career began an upward trajectory that continues into 2015. *Simply María* was monumental as it was the vehicle that led to López being invited to participate in María Irene Fornés's Hispanic Playwrights-in-Residence Laboratory at INTAR in 1988 and Teatro de la Esperanza's Isadora Aguirre Latino Playwriting Lab in San Francisco taught by Emilio Carballido, important workshops where she would begin writing *Real Women Have Curves*.

Consciously or not, López has incorporated many of the methods she learned from Fornés.<sup>33</sup> Fornés, who taught playwriting for over 45 years in New York, did not teach from the more traditional methods of playwriting that focus on Aristotelian principals such as rising action, climax, and resolution (García-Romero, "Fornés"). Fornés utilized her training in the avant-garde as a painter to incorporate fine art techniques into playwriting. Specifically, Fornés continually told students that "nothing is silly" and "always go back to the image." These messages, in particular, are essential to understanding López's signature work, *Real Women*, which she began writing under Fornés's mentorship. In the play's trademark scene, perhaps one of the most iconic in

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<sup>32</sup> On the surface, *actos* are skits, but they transcend the simplicity of a skit due to their social justice message. Valdez affirms: "We could have called them skits, but we lived and talked San Joaquín Spanish so we needed a name that made sense to the Raza" (*Luis Valdez* 12). Given this point, *actos* are for the people by the people to educate and entertain. For the Chican@ Nation, the *acto* was the most efficient way to make a political declaration and demonstrate their growing dissatisfaction with the status quo of the United States. According to Valdez, the *acto* has 5 goals: "Inspire the audience to social action. Illuminate specific points about social problems. Satirize the opposition. Show or hint at a solution. Express what people are thinking" (*Luis Valdez* 12).

<sup>33</sup> Sandoval-Sánchez and Sternbach propose that the most produced playwrights to emerge from Fornés's workshops—Josefina López, Caridad Svich, and Migdalia Cruz—are "those who use her messages but imbue them with their own stories" which "attests to the necessity of a theater that is hybrid in nature" (87).

Chican@ theater, Ana encourages the women to disrobe. Due to the oppressive heat in the sewing factory, Ana takes off her pants and is left wearing only her underwear. Eventually the other women join her and they bond by comparing their bodies, panzas (bellies), stretch marks, and how their bodies affect their relationships with men. Historically, only women with “perfect” bodies have been seen on stage. Therefore, López uses *Real Women*, and this scene in particular, to declare that “fat people exist!” (J. López “Untitled”). Furthermore, as López played the role of Ana in the 1994 production at San Diego Rep, she said that being in her underwear on stage was the most “chingona” (badass) she felt. Not only was it fun but it was empowering to expose herself; it was exhilarating because she always felt hidden behind an actress and, in this case, she was front and center on display (J. López “Untitled”).<sup>34</sup> Through Fornés’s mentorship, López stayed with this image and instead of devaluing the fat Chicana body, she reclaims it as a positive site of female experience and empowerment.

Fornés taught López that theater is visual and does not have to work on page the same way it does on stage. This supportive environment aided López in developing her cinematic style or, what she calls, “cineatro.” Fusing the words “cinema” and “teatro,” cineatro utilizes elements from film on stage. In this regard, López’s works sometimes feel more like screenplays than traditional playscripts. Similar to Fornés, López’s use of the image is essential to understanding her work given that, in the playwright’s words, “an image speaks to me in a thousand ways” (“Untitled”). Furthermore, as will be explained in Chapter 4, López’s unconscious memory and imagery played an important

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<sup>34</sup> During the costume fitting for the San Diego production, López learned that she had been wearing the wrong bra size for 7 years and, therefore, had the wrong body image about herself. She had been selling her body short and not allowing herself to be completely who she was (J. López “Untitled”).

role while she was writing *Unconquered Spirits*. Her image-driven and cinematic-thinking allow her to tap into separate realities to create cineatro.

This creativity is essential as Fornés, like López, encouraged each individual student to cultivate her/his own voice first rather than forcing an agenda: artistic, cultural, and/or political. This approach allows the mentor to privilege the individuality of each playwright and her/his creative process rather than a rigid blueprint for generating artistic expression (García-Romero “Fornés”). In speaking of her time as a mentee under Fornés, Caridad Svich reiterates Anne García-Romero’s notion:

Fornés, leading by example, did not require that the playwrights in the Lab address any ethnically specific subject matter or theme. Through daily visualization exercises, the writers were asked to discover the work within them, to create the forms that suited their visions, and under Fornés’ rigorous, watchful eye, to speak the truth about their worlds. (...) This Lab was not only a place to train and develop your writing muscles under a master’s guidance and supervision, but also a place where you could upset expectations of what a play could be and be part of a community of writers dedicated, in part to the forging of an entirely different theatrical language, one that could borrow equally from Iberian and Latin American traditions, and European and American ones. Fornés would often say, “We are writing for the twenty-first century.” (xxi, xix)

In addition to Svich’s reflections, López states that although she thought Fornés was going to teach structure, “She taught nothing about structure except how to tap into the unconscious. How to be okay with bringing things in. So to me, it was very unstructured

at first and I went with it, but it was wonderful” (“RWHC”). This explains how Fornés’s mentees have such disparate styles; there is virtually no similarity in style between Luis Alfaro, Migdalia Cruz, Nilo Cruz, Josefina López, Cherríe Moraga, and Caridad Svich. According to García-Romero:

Fornes, however, teaches that there are a variety of approaches and each playwright must locate and hone his or her own voice in order to craft a play. (...) Fornes does not privilege one dramatic idea, dramaturgical form or cultural context but lets each exist as an equal influence on the shape of the play. (*Transculturation* 23, 26)

Each playwright is unique, an aspect that Fornés time and again honored through her mentorship.

This same diversity is seen in López’s mentees, whose theatrical voices represent all ends of the spectrum. In speaking of her motivation for developing new playwrights, López discusses how both Valdez and Fornés influenced her as a young writer. At the initial October 2013 Latina/o Theatre Commons National Convening at Emerson College in Boston, responding to a suggestion by Tiffany Ana López, Micha Espinosa and Marcos Nájera led participants in a visual mapping exercise that spatially organized those in attendance around the room to create a visual understanding of the Latin@ theater community. According to T. López, the so-called “Mentorship Tree” exercise created “an embodied mentoring tree that physically illustrated the connections of everyone in the room and their generational passing forward of history through the sharing of knowledge and training” (Qtd. in Herrera 124). Under Espinosa and Nájera’s guidance, Migdalia Cruz (standing in place for Fornés) and Valdez stood on opposite sides of the room.

Then, the playwrights in attendance linked and touched the person who influenced them, thus creating a physical network and visible lineage of Latin@ playwriting and mentorship. Josefina López explains her experience:

Everyone went to Migdalia, but I was one of the ones who was influenced by both. I was unique in that Luis Valdez embraced me and I had the influence of these two, the mother and the father. (...) there were only a few playwrights who could say this (...) in a sense I have this responsibility to carry on these two trees. Let me tell you what I've learned from them and I have enough inspiration to create my own vision of how to teach writing. ("RWHC")

Both Fornés and Valdez's legacies propel López to continue her role as a mentor in Boyle Heights. For this reason, López feels responsible for continuing the long tradition of Latin@ theater in the same manner that Kinan Valdez has continued his father Luis's legacy and Caridad Svich and Anne García-Romero have continued that of Fornés.

In this regard, Josefina López's work in Boyle Heights is rare in its focus on developing new generations of Chican@ and Latin@ dramatists in a community-centered setting. Her community outreach approach allows anyone with interest and commitment the opportunities to develop their voice. Namely, her role as a mentor is to instill confidence in her mentees, reassuring them that, yes, they too can write plays. As Anne García-Romero and Alice Tuan state, "Playwrights need mentors, esteemed and experienced professionals, who can help guide the journey of creation. These mentors teach through the example of their careers as well as their work in classrooms, (...) community outreach and private workshops." Speaking with López, clearly her



pedagogical approach integrates the mentoring she has received. These experiences have molded her into the playwright she is today and have led her to pass along her craft to the future of Latin@ playwriting on the Eastside

I argue that López's mentorship style stems from her "Eastside facultad" and the multiple conocimientos connected to her Boyle Heights Chicanisma. In this way, when López mentors people, she is guided to do so. López adds: "I feel like the divine speaks to me about what the mentee is not hearing from their divine guidance so I tap in their guidance and guide them" ("Mentoring"). As a mentor, López helps her students by articulating what is around them, the things they cannot hear or even refuse to hear. Once she has built a bridge between mentor and mentee, both conscious and subconscious, López assists her mentees in finding their dramatic voice, tapping into their storytelling potential, actually writing the play itself, as well as developing the playscript toward a workshop or a fully realized production. Mentors such as López help playwrights to understand the "craft and notions of artistic innovation in their field. Mentors can build a younger generation by sharing approaches to cultivate their artistic voice" (García-Romero, "Fornes").

Aside from teaching playwriting techniques, López's work in Boyle Heights is best characterized by offering support to developing artists. For example, Mercedes Floresislás's transformation from homeless mother of a Deaf child to produced playwright demonstrates how López uses theater to change people's lives. Floresislás's journey began in January, 2007, when she met López during a playwriting workshop at CASA. López became more than a mentor, but, in Floresislás's words: "She has been my backbone when I was too overwhelmed to even write; my gut when I questioned my

dreams and my visions; my feet when I've felt too small to take a stand; and my shaman when I've gotten lost in self-doubt" ("Floresislal Interview"). Even though Floresislal's initial exploration into playwriting began while she was in graduate school at UCLA—which led her to question her time commitments to school and theater—through mentorship, López was able to keep her focused on the goal at hand. López instilled in her the belief that the lives of the people she was trying to reach were more important than her fears ("Floresislal Interview").

During one of her first playwriting workshops at CASA, López encouraged Floresislal to use theater as a space to reach the masses, repeating one of her teaching mantras: "the most effective way to reach people is through storytelling." López, as usual, urged her to pursue her dream of writing a story based on her and her son's experiences: "Mercedes expressed an interest in writing about her Deaf experience in a play, and I encouraged her to do so, as I felt she could be a voice for the bilingual and bicultural community that didn't have a voice in the theatre" (Qtd. in Hernandez). Oftentimes, López's role in the lives of those she mentors is being the one who "connects the dots between the social struggle and story, and the aspiring writer and her or his inherent gifts" ("Floresislal Interview"). Floresislal's experience culminated in a production at CASA of *Tamales de Puerco* (2013)—a fully trilingual play performed in English, Spanish, and American Sign Language that explores Deaf Latinidad.

López's artistic mentorship arises from her consistent support. As long as her mentees are dedicated to growing as theatermakers, López will give them unconditional support. Aaron Higareda adds:

Josefina mentored me as a writer by being there to listen to the subject matter of my plays, and reassured me when it was too difficult to “go there” that it’s not only okay to write about it, but it is also necessary to write about it for the soul to grow. She believed in me but most importantly she gave me the power to believe in myself. (...) The biggest mentoring help came when she helped guide me to produce my own show. (...) She was like a Mexican fairy godmother, but without the bippity boppity boo. She taught me that I didn’t need validation from others. (“Higareda Interview”)

Besides offering unparalleled support, López helps her mentees understand characters and the subconscious of those characters, which helps her students write and develop their characters more deeply and fully. This technique involves a journey of discovering students’ traumas and how these can impact their theater-making. Regarding the intersections of trauma and theater, Tiffany Ana López argues that overcoming mental and physical wounds is key “to rebuild and reimagine more tolerant and inclusive communities” (“Violent Inscriptions” 66). Moreover, Josefina López believes that every protagonist is either moving toward the light or darkness, which is the struggle that drives all drama. Higareda explains his experiences in López’s workshops:

She would always remind us that a traumatic event happened around the age of seven, and it is this event why our characters commit some of the actions they do. She explained this traumatic event is also one of the main reasons why we write. Another phrase she would repeat constantly was “drama comes from trauma.” She explained to the class we write because

we are trying to heal the open wounds from our childhood. She believed that putting something on stage in front of an audience to see, bringing our traumas into the light, is a way to heal those wounds. (“Higareda Interview”)

For Higareda, López’s approach made him more aware of the power that drama holds. As a playwright, López feels that it is her job to bring traumas to the stage in order to heal herself and others. Subsequently, López’s method relies on a healing and spiritual approach. In addition to raising the stakes, López encourages her students to disregard negative thoughts and continue writing.

The stories of López’s support are endless. Indeed, López gives everyone a fair opportunity to become a playwright. If a student is committed, she will guide them through the process and offer support as needed. Given the accessibility of her courses, no one is turned away for lack of funds, experience, or knowledge. In Higareda’s words, López teaches the “community *how* to fish so we could feed ourselves rather than just giving us fish” (“Higareda Interview”). In López’s model, anyone and everyone can become a playwright, a key aspect of López’s Boyle Heights that will be discussed in the following sections.

### **Theater for Social Change: Classes, Workshops, and *Chicanas, Cholas y Chisme***

López’s mentorship and work in Boyle Heights is best characterized as theater for social change that is deeply ingrained in Chicana feminism(s). Even productions that are not feminist in content utilize feminist theater-making practices that privilege inclusivity and reject rigid hierarchies typical of “mainstream” theaters. As previously stated, this

involves allowing equal access to anyone interested in participating regardless of their background. In López's feminist model, there is always enough room for everyone; no one is turned away because collective groups will always be able to institute social change more so than the individual.

Originating from healing trauma(s) and gendered experience(s), I argue that the classes, workshops, and the *Chicanas, Cholas y Chisme* Theater Festival embody López's artistic mentorship style that is rooted in feminism, theater for social change, and Eastside facultad. In this section, I examine the 2014 production of *CCC* given that this moment was a significant moment in the recent history of CASA. In its second year, *CCC* moved to Big Casa which came with an increased budget, more collaboration, larger audiences, and a sold-out run. To do this, I closely read the playscripts alongside personal interviews with the women involved and production photos. Programs such as *CCC* facilitate healing and personal growth which, as a result, leads to social change in the surrounding Boyle Heights community. Furthermore, *CCC* is organized around tiered mentorship that ensures that all women involved are not only mentored, but also become mentors themselves.

This section explores Chicana theater practice and community-building and demonstrates how collaborate feminist methods are essential to creating and sustaining change. In this way, López and CASA encourage Chican@ playwrights, principally women, to demand that their voices are heard. Their "wild tongues," as Rita Urquijo-Ruiz calls them, will tell these stories despite the potential consequences from both Chican@ culture and the mainstream culture beyond Boyle Heights. These women become *hociconas*, women who speak "without restraints when challenging the exploitation of

her people. (...) defies patriarchal norms of decency, decorum, and language in order to continue to voice her demands” (Urquijo-Ruiz 107). Thus, Urquijo-Ruiz creates a theory of empowerment for women of color whose voices have traditionally been muted by the dominant rings of society.

Given these points, a key aspect of CASA is its year-round classes for youth and adults. The predominantly Latin@ patrons (80%) can take acting, dancing, filmmaking, improv, puppetry, and writing classes (Strategic Plan). All classes are free or donation-based for youth and entirely donation-based for adults; no one is turned away for lack of funds. Therefore, everyone in the community has the chance to grow as an individual and develop their artistic voice. While a cohort of Blanca Araceli, Jenna Delgado, Corky Dominguez, Claudia Durán, Lindsey Haley, Margaret Medina, Edward Padilla, and Juan Carlos Parrilla teach the courses, López herself remains actively involved as a hands-on instructor and mentor. In López’s classes, her primary method is to demystify the playwriting process by making it so simple that anyone can take the class and create play scripts. She rejects the notion that theater is an elitist institution that denies access to people outside of its primary circles. López teaches basic playwriting principles at each workshop so that even if someone missed the previous week(s), they will not feel left behind. Accordingly, López allows and encourages everyone to work at her or his own level. These basics are repeated often so that they become second nature. The classes at CASA offer adults the opportunity to (re)connect with theater and realize that it is never too late to become involved.

Not only does López teach playwriting, but she uses the workshops as platforms to allow students to witness her develop playscripts. For instance, during the fall 2013

playwriting workshop, López used the class to develop and finish *A Cat Named Mercy*.<sup>35</sup> López had to finish the play by October so she brought in her first 20 pages, wrote, and workshopped them. The students witnessed the fully mounted production of the play only months later in January and February. As a result, students saw López making choices and sharing the process. Moreover, López is open and upfront about her experiences, mistakes, and successes so that her students can learn from her. This process demystifies playwriting and encourages them to believe that they can do it as well. López serves as a model to help guide the journey of artistic creation, teaching through the example of her own writing process.

Among the classes devoted to adult education is “Your Stories Adapted for the Stage,” a 15-week course for emerging playwrights, spoken word artists, solo performers, poets, and anyone with interest in developing a stage writing voice. The class explores students’ creativity through engaging exercises that will translate to the stage. For example, playwriting teacher Margaret Medina implements writing prompts based on the scars on students’ bodies. Students must write a scene explaining how the scar occurred. Then, Medina asks them what is the emotional scar it has left behind. The end result can be comedic, sad, or any style that the student deems appropriate (“Medina Interview”). Moreover, a key aspect of this class’s success is in the collective. Playwrights employ group exercises to focus on narrative and structure in performative work. Their material is easily tested out via the “actors” in the class. Comics are granted a space to write new material with a built-in audience to workshop their material on before taking the stage in a public space. The course ends with a staged reading of student work. Thus, this class

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<sup>35</sup> *A Cat Named Mercy* ran January 31–February 23, 2014 at Big Casa. The dark comedy confronts issues of the Affordable Care Act alongside beliefs and behaviors that affect one’s health. The play explores topics of access to health care, aging, and forgiving oneself.

offers students a low-stakes, comfortable environment to develop writing skills before venturing out into the cut-throat Los Angeles arts and entertainment industry.

Additionally, the “Healing through Writing and Theater for Women” class is especially pertinent to this study. This class devises a supportive space where women are given the tools to explore trauma. Theater and writing exercises are utilized as devices to aid healing and reconciliation, fully embodying practices of theater for social change. The course allows patrons to initiate a process of acceptance which helps them to move forward in a positive way. This class is a consciousness-raising group as a therapeutic site to uncover and open up about inner wounds. As bell hooks sustains, the open confessional aspect of these groups serves as a “healing ritual” in which women are capable of gaining the strength “to challenge patriarchal forces at work and at home” (8). Women can share with and learn from each other through this workshop as dialogue. Every voice is heard and no single woman takes center stage. Thus, the group banishes all forms of hierarchy and creates a feminist model.

These safe spaces are foundational elements of theatre for social change as this branch of theater, according to Augusto Boal, aids in exploring the interactions that construct the lives of the individuals involved (xxiii-xxiv). Therefore, the workshop is a space for social experimentation in which individuals can seek more-inclusive possibilities for social connections and well-being (Weems 7). The process of opening up, sharing, risk-taking, and leaving one’s comfort zone is a necessary aspect of creating a collective ensemble, but this process is necessarily a gradual exercise. Therefore, workshops such as these must start at a basic level by first recognizing that all members potentially are vulnerable and have feelings that are difficult to share at times because of



anxiety of being criticized, humiliated, and/or misunderstood due to one's opinions (Solano and Solano 157-8). Given these premises, it is essential to seek the best way to manifest a sense that any and all communication is accepted and welcomed. Once all members are comfortable in the space, it is possible to begin the healing and growth process of collective theater.

### *Chicanas, Cholas y Chisme*

After realizing that CASA had almost entirely hired male directors, Josefina López offered a directing class exclusively for women: "It's so great that we want to tell the stories of women, but it's not right that women don't get to direct those stories and influence the process" ("RWHC"). López decided to give women the chance to create, direct, and enter other spheres of theatrical activity. She created opportunities for these women that López wished she would have had earlier in her career. This process, consequently, creates change in and of itself. In 2012, López taught a basic directing class and supplemented her own knowledge by having guest directors teach the course and speak about being a director. These instructors included all of the directors at CASA, as well as Jorge Huerta and Michael John Garcés from Cornerstone Theater Company—two men who have historically not privileged male-centered theater making. While tackling the entirety of directing in a single semester of coursework is admittedly ambitious, López's course was introductory. She focused on boundaries with actors, blocking, script analysis, and creating vision among other things. This class proved to be fruitful as it led to the 2013 production of the *Chicanas, Cholas y Chisme* (CCC). From the workshops, López found four playwrights and five directors who were featured in the

production.<sup>36</sup> Produced by Claudia Durán and Lindsey Haley, overseeing the directing and writing respectively, the festival demonstrates the importance of preserving Latinas' heritage, humanity, and womanhood. Consequently, this was a significant moment in the short history of CASA. Perhaps due to the wide-reach of such a large cast of women, each iteration of *CCC* (2013-2015) has played to sold-out runs at both Little Casa and Big Casa. Among those I interviewed, *CCC* was frequently mentioned as a favorite production. Ultimately, the festival was empowering to the women involved, giving them the tools to develop new creative works as well as gain experience in co-producing. The festival featured plays and performance pieces with themes about family, breaking tradition, healing internalized racism, awakening during the Vietnam War, betrayal, and, of course, chisme (gossip).

Building off of the success of the 2013 edition, the 2014 production of *CCC* highlighted CASA's celebration of Women's Herstory Month. Through a collaborative effort, the women involved presented a short play festival, featuring new work written and directed by Latinas from the local community. These works represent just one of the many that have developed from acting, directing, and writing workshops at CASA. López offered a second directing class concurrently with a playwriting class. This gave the directors material to direct. Furthermore, there was no disconnect between the play itself and the production; both entities worked together organically, thus empowering all

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<sup>36</sup> The cast included Vanessa Ala, Rafael O. Calderon, Elen Campbell-Martinez, Tina D'Marco, Margie Gutierrez Lara, Lena Marie, Javier Roncerops, and Raquel Salinas. Writers, directors, crew, and producers included Sylvia L. Chavez, Mariana Herrera, Lindsey Haley, Maria G. Martinez, Claudia Duran, April Ibarra, Vilma Villela, Josefina López, Adriana I. Colón, and Nisha Joshi.

involved. The show ran from March 7-30, 2014, at Big Casa and featured the work of over twenty women in acting, directing, and writing capacities.<sup>37</sup>

Women of color's shared experience(s) is potentially powerful, according to Adrienne Rich in *Of Woman Born*. Rich notes: "I believe increasingly that only the willingness to share private and sometimes painful experience can enable women to create a collective description of the world which will be truly ours" (*Of Woman Born* 15-6). Or, to place Rich's thoughts in Boyle Heights, as Ana in *Real Women Have Curves* proclaims: "...Perhaps the greatest thing I learned from them is that women are powerful, especially when working together" (J. López 73). Subsequently, the stage becomes a platform to voice women's mutual concerns: "... feminists argue against their own oppression, seeking a change in their identity as lesser human beings and their subordinate positions in society" (Natalle 5). Effectively, these feminist collective performances give voice to women's struggle for autonomy in an oppressive, sexist society. Given that this is central to the message of CCC, the work is entirely feminist in nature.

The group establishes a safe space in which the members, all Latinas, can stage their stories, express problems associated with their culture and heritage, and respond to sexism and oppression in their everyday lives. For example, Suzanne Linares, whose piece *Baby Talk* details her experience as a premature baby in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit, learned that this was not only an emotional process, but a healing one in which

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<sup>37</sup> Writers included Lauren Ballesteros, Sylvia Chavez, Elena Chavez Dominguez, Andrea Gutierrez, Lindsey Haley, Mariana Herrera, Suzanne Linares, Carmelita Maldonado, Maria G. Martinez, Rosa María Rodríguez, Elvia Rubalcava Taylor, Raquel Salinas and Vilma Villela. Directors included Sylvia Chavez, Claudia Duran, Suzanne Linares, Maria G. Martinez, Elvia Rubalcava Taylor, and Vilma Villela. Actors included Vanessa Alas, Sonia Alcazar, Rafael Calderon, Rachel Gonzalez, Ingrid Oliu, Ray Rios, Raquel Salinas and Katie Ventura. As seen in these lists, some people had a role in multiple areas of the production.

she could patch old wounds associated with being born premature, bullied, and unaccepted. After her mother's death in 2013, one of her mother's friends took her to see López's *Trio Los Machos* to celebrate what would have been her mother's birthday. After enjoying the play, Linares signed up for the email list:

I saw they had writing classes. I had never written before but I thought "Why not?" (...) I started Chicanas workshop the next week. Everyone is so welcoming and it's an amazing supportive environment to grow as a writer and a person. You also learn how to produce your work. We are a sisterhood and we support each other in our writing. (...) The workshop was an invaluable tool in helping me write. Someone reads it for you and the ladies give their feedback. You can hear it out loud. It is an emotional and healing process. Because someone is giving life to your words. You have complete freedom to tell your story and speak your truth. I was bullied and not accepted as a child. At Casa and with Josefina's mentorship I have found my voice and a home. ("Linares Interview")

Accordingly, the ensemble creates a space to (re)present complex identities and experiences beyond the typical male- and/or Anglo-centered portrayals. Alberto Sandoval Sánchez reinforces this notion in *José, Can You See? Latinos On and Off Broadway*: "Consequently, US Latinas have had before them a double task: to deconstruct the Anglo and Latin American representations of gender and to create a space for self-representation and US Latina experience" (152). Having a supportive environment for personal growth and new ideas leads to a more successful outcome, something the production has shown ("Durán Interview"). Given these seemingly closed institutions, building a "Latinas-only"

theater workshop is imperative to unpacking the various forms of oppression and using this new-found knowledge to build a more inclusive Boyle Heights.

CCC is a collaborative effort that centers on commitment, education, and willingness.<sup>38</sup> The cohort begins in the fall with the creative process. Through playwriting and directing classes, consistent opportunities arise for showcasing the women's work. During this process, Durán and Haley hold fundraisers, such as *Tamales, Tequila, y Tonterías*,<sup>39</sup> to encourage the women involved to learn how to bear the responsibility of staging their work and generating audiences.<sup>40</sup> This technique exemplifies López's mentoring style as all writers who see their work produced at CASA are required to become associate producers and take ownership of both their playscript and the production itself. López maintains the necessity to be a self-starter, innovative, and indispensable. It is imperative that those involved in productions at CASA can do everything and be good at everything, as well as have the tools to produce their own work whenever they choose to do so ("Durán Interview").

In Haley's playwriting workshops, she gives students writing prompts to begin the writing process and inspire. During the 14 weeks, each writer brings her plays to the workshop and assigns other writers to read her work in a staged area. In other words, every session includes peer-review and staged readings among the women involved.

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<sup>38</sup> In speaking of collaborative work, José Cruz González states that some strategies and guides should be to never use the word "no" so that "Any idea can come from anyone no matter how insignificant. Exploration, experimentation and risk-taking are crucial. Reflection and rebuilding are vital to the artist and the art piece. Theatre making is like cooking a meal for guests. You have to plan it, shop for what is in season and use what you have at home. Be flexible. Improvisation and patience is key. Believe and trust in the people you have brought together" (Qtd. in Vaneta Mason 164).

<sup>39</sup> *Tamales, Tequila y Tonterías* was a fundraiser held at Little Casa. It featured sample works from the writers of CCC and was followed by an open mic night.

<sup>40</sup> Lindsey Haley affirms that each woman is actively involved in producing the festival: "With the co-producing aspect of the CCC production, all the women are involved in helping with the production of the play. We identify what aspect of production the women would like to get involved with and assign them those tasks" ("Haley Interview").

Haley explains, “After each of the readings, the group will comment on what worked and ask any questions we may have for the writer. In the next week or two, the writer will bring back their further developed play” (“Haley Interview”). Concurrently, Durán leads those interested in directing, teaching them basic staging and format. Specifically, Durán guides them to “learn how to bring words to life through their actors. They learn about protocol and character psychology” (“Durán Interview”). Once material has been created and the women have learned directing skills, the production process begins at the beginning of the year in January so that a March and April production for Women’s Herstory Month is possible. This program continues to expand from five women in 2013, to ten in 2014, and fifteen in 2015. The women return and continue to spread the word while carrying on personal growth in the “off-season” through other theater opportunities. Subsequently, CCC has found success in encouraging more Latina voices. The 2014 production was written, directed, and produced exclusively by Latinas and out of the production team, including designers, stage hands, and stage managers, etc., 22 of 26 were women. All were Latin@.

Featured works of the 2014 production touched on the complexity of contemporary Chicana womanhood. The show was comprised of twelve pieces: Lauren Ballesteros’s *How Did I Get Here*; Maria G. Martinez’s *Yo Soy Joaquina*; Mariana Herrera’s *Nuestra Senora De La Gran Pena*; Carmelita Maldonado’s *Frankenstein is not real he is my brother in law!*; Lindsey Haley’s *An Argument With God*; Vilma Villela’s *Trucha!*; Andrea Gutierrez’s *Las Amigas*; Elena Chavez Dominguez’s *Chicanas, Cholas y sus Chismes*; Sylvia Chavez’s *La Bolita*; Elvia Rublacava Taylor’s *Sala de Amor y*

*Guerra*; Josefina López's *H Male Seeking H Female*; Suzanne Linares's *Baby Talk*; Raquel Salinas's *La Mano de Dios*; and Rosa Rodriguez's *Quarters for Kisses*.

Shows such as CCC are *necessary* because they bring stories about women's experience to wider audiences, while also showcasing an all-Latina collaborative stage production, something rarely seen in mainstream theaters.<sup>41</sup> The works from CCC symbolize the complexity of being Latina. But, perhaps most significant, is the collective nature of shows such as this one. By maintaining complete collaboration, the workshop and production represent the value of group effort. The work of the ensemble transcends each individual's personal goal. Given this point, any hint at a theatrical hierarchy is rejected and each member is equally vital to the show's success. Consequently, through the production, collective shows further engage the audience and promote critical witnessing:

If every member must rely on her own creative output instead of relying passively on the leader/director for inspiration and guidance, then the theatrical forms that the group produces must convey to the women in the audience that they, too, possess untapped potential for artistic creativity.

(Rea 80)

Not only does the theater collective aid in establishing connections to the women (and men) in the audience, it is a microcosm of the larger Women's Movement as it is typically seen as a feminist method. For example, in *Feminist Theaters in the U.S.A.*,

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<sup>41</sup> Chicago-based Teatro Luna is one of the more well-known companies that devises and develops theater centered on Latinas. Founded in 2000, Teatro Luna has created over 24 original devised projects. The group utilizes an ensemble approach to create performances that represent Latina identity and experience in all of its complexity. The company uses the ensemble to create collective shows, solo performances, and single-author plays. The process starts by discussing the lives and experiences of the women involved to conceive performances that represent the diversity of being Latina. Other noteworthy examples of ensemble based and/or collective theaters have included Spiderwoman Theater, Concilio de Mujeres, Teatro Raíces, Valentina Productions, and Women in Teatro (WIT).

Charlotte Canning maintains that collaborative theater is an essential aspect of feminist practices that “the personal was political and that a rejection of hierarchy was a step toward the demolition of the patriarchy” (36). Thus, the collective always has political meaning in its promotion of women’s experience and identity in all of its complexity.

The work follows a tradition of sociopolitical grassroots theater meant to initiate dialogue and action between the audience and the performers, such as with El Teatro Campesino and El Teatro de la Esperanza. Particularly, Luis Valdez was able to find success because he did not dictate El Teatro Campesino but instead facilitated the collective process. This was similar to El Teatro de la Esperanza. Through true collaboration, these groups used devised pieces and performance as a tool to reinforce a mutual commitment to the struggle for change. In this regard, the long-standing tradition of Chican@ theater as a theater committed to sociopolitical change is clearly seen in CCC. In such a way, this collaborative, feminist theater functions as a communication process. By presenting a shared experience, the production reinforces the connections between the audience and the performers, further bolstering a sense of community. Each personal story extends into the larger community (the audience). Echoing these thoughts, in her review for the neighborhood *Boyle Heights Beat*, Maria Arredondo expresses how the play engages with the Eastside and instills a sense of community:

The plays were smart and well-articulated in terms of our way of life in Boyle Heights. Many times as Latinas living in a community like Boyle Heights, we feel alone in our struggles. The play shows how we are not alone, we all struggle, we all have our passions, and we all have our



moments of doubt, but the strength and perseverance of women is unlike any other.

Arredondo's thoughts exemplify critical witnessing. Seeing Chicanas on stage in roles that are not simply mothers, girlfriends, or maids is an empowering experience, especially for women of color. Clearly, women are encouraged to stand up for their beliefs and devote more attention to their own ambitions and complexity.

The collective is a process in which the finished product is not as important as the continuous act of creation (Canning 66). Accordingly, the means is more powerful than the end. Each member's changing consciousness throughout the development of the show is indispensable to understanding the result. The production is the larger, end goal but how each woman grows as an individual throughout the 15-weeks is even more essential. Concerning this, Lindsey Haley maintains that women's collaboration drives the entire process:

The whole process is a team effort and the women come to rely on each other's support. You see the women blossom by the time opening night comes around. Professional alliances have also been made that continue past CCC productions. I have also witnessed more daring plays from women who are returning to another year with CCC. ("Haley Interview")

Additionally, Haley herself grew as a mentor and writer throughout the process:

Having worked intensely in this group environment has made me more patient and sympathetic with others and myself. Writing is a lonely art making profession and until I became part of CCC, as a writer I felt isolated at times. Becoming part of CCC made me aware that I share many

of the same fears and frustrations. As a result, sitting to write comes much easier. (“Haley Interview”)

While the pieces included in *CCC* embody many facets of women’s experience and identity, the festival attempts to (re)write *herstory* and dispel any chismes that may exist about the complexity of Chicana womanhood. With this in mind, the following section will analyze three short plays that tackle themes of women’s involvement in Chican@ History: *Chicanas, Cholas y sus Chismes* by Elena Chavez Dominguez, *Las Amigas* by Andrea Gutierrez, and *Yo Soy Joaquina* by Maria G. Martinez. While not exhaustive, these works offer us a glimpse into work being produced during the festival and the concerns of women living in the Eastside. These playscripts reinforce the notion of writing as a tool to demystify women. Diverse portrayals, shouts of determination, such as these, according to Alicia Arrizón, are tools the Chicana subject can implement to challenge her assigned position and transform and transcend it (xvi).

*Chicanas, Cholas y sus Chismes* by Elena Chavez Dominguez rewrites flawed narratives about Chican@ History. At East Los Angeles College, a 60 year old Chicana teaches a 40 year old Chola how misconceptions have hurt the Chican@ community. The Chola harbors a colonial view of history—typical of hegemonic discourse such as Octavio Paz’s *Labyrinth of Solitude*—that negates the positive aspects of Chican@ history, especially those contributions by women. In the colonial imaginary, women are voiceless; they are spoken for, about, and are labeled as objects who do not hold agency over their own narratives (Pérez, *Decolonial Imaginary* xv). Therefore, Chicanas can use what Emma Pérez calls the “Decolonial Imaginary” to excavate gender and sexuality and recover positive female voices from history. When the Chola decides to drop the course,

the Chicana asks her a series of questions that lead the Chola to reevaluate her culture and the negative opinions she clings to: “What do you know about Malinche? ... What have you heard of the Adelitas? ... What about the Farm Workers in the USA? ... What do you know about the Brown Berets?” (Chavez Dominguez 1). The Chola’s answers demonstrate the internalized racism that Chican@s can feel toward their own community when they misunderstand the structural problems that led to the group’s oppression. Indeed, the community has misconceptions and the play presents the importance of learning about Chican@ history so that change can become a possibility. The Chicana explains to the Chola how the past, even as far back as the conquest of Mexico, affects her position in the present day: “We had great women activists that also stood up for education, women, and children’s rights. They fought for you to be here today” (Chavez Dominguez 2). In the end, the Chola decides to continue taking the course so that she may learn about the struggles that her people have experienced. Despite the play’s short length, Chavez Dominguez points the finger directly at the audience, urging them to reconsider any false notions they may believe about their own community.

Chavez Dominguez’s play sets the stage for others included in the festival—notably *Las Amigas* by Andrea Gutierrez and *Yo Soy Joaquina* by Maria G. Martinez—that rewrite Chican@ history and contribute a female perspective on the past, present, and future of the fight for civil rights in this community. These women, as feminist playwrights, (en)gender History by flipping the traditional male-focused narrative. The previous silences, thus, are measured in a different way that privileges an intersectional approach that considers race, class, and sex (Pérez, “Gendered History” 398). Therefore, the short plays *Chicanas*, *Cholas*, *y sus Chismes*, *Las Amigas*, and *Yo Soy Joaquina* must

be analyzed taking into account how female experience is linked to issues of class, race, sexuality, and time period.

Andrea Gutierrez's ten-minute play, *Las Amigas*, centers on a group of Latinas working in a Los Angeles office in September, 1970. The lights come up in an office break room where the women are discussing the recent death of Rubén Salazar, the Chicano journalist killed by a tear-gas projectile inside the Silver Dollar Café where he was taking refuge from the violence during the National Chicano Moratorium March against the Vietnam War on August 29, 1970. Because of his death, the streets surrounding their office are filled with Chican@s protesting and fighting for their rights. Hence, the play begins with a well-known moment in Chican@ Los Angeles cultural memory. As Salazar has received iconic status in the Mexican-American community, the majority of the audience will surely understand the sociopolitical climate in which these women find themselves.

One of the *Amigas*, Mary, is set to retire and her party is abruptly cancelled by Miss Lear, the Latinas' Anglo boss. While the women debate why the party was cancelled, Emily affirms:

This isn't a time for modesty. Ladies, don't you see what's happening here? Miss Lear thinks that *Las Amigas* are secret revolutionaries. That a friendship club of secretaries and clerks who happen to be Mexican get together over coffee, tea, and pan dulce to plan the next big revolution!

(Gutierrez 2)

The women believe that the protesting Chican@s have given them a bad name in the Anglo gaze, leading Miss Lear to associate their friendship with agit-prop community

organizing. Miss Lear symbolizes the unjustified fear that the White community harbors because they “don’t know what you all do in your free time” (Gutierrez 5).

Nevertheless, the protests and subsequent cancellation of Mary’s retirement party allow her to understand the necessity to join *la causa* and be heard:

...I didn’t go out there this weekend because I don’t like to ruffle feathers.

All of these marches, I thought it just wasn’t our time and maybe we shouldn’t upset anyone. But standing here now, my eyes are wide open.

The police killed a member of our community who was exposing the injustices that my people face. The price he paid was his life. (Gutierrez 6)

Rubén Salazar becomes an example that allows Mary to build self-belief and realize the under-valuing of brown skin that happens all around her. Even though she had worked alongside Miss Lear’s father to build the company for thirty-five years and thought she was part of this family, it is not until this moment that she realizes that, no, she must forfeit equal value because she is a Chicana. Her culture is not respected; it does not hold equal weight given that her economic worth to the company’s success is becoming another body in the capitalist exploitation of people of color.

Building on Gutierrez’s piece, Maria G. Martinez’s *Yo Soy Joaquina* rewrites the socio-historical narrative by concentrating on machismo in the Chicano Movement and the era’s most well-known work: *Yo Soy Joaquin* (1967), the epic poem by Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzales. *Yo Soy Joaquin* tackles the hardships that the Chican@ community has faced in the United States during the fight for equal rights and economic justice, among other issues. Gonzales’s poem presents a veritable history lesson of more than 2,000 years of Mexican and Mexican-American history, highlighting the complexity of

Chican@ heritage. Nevertheless, the poem, similar to the Chicano Movement itself, is male-centered with limited representation of women. By titling her play *Yo Soy Joaquina* after a lesbian, Martinez destabilizes the patriarchal discourse centered around the poem and greater movement. The play presents a new Chican@ Movement that values inclusivity and both women and LGBTQ individuals are bodies that matter.

The play begins with Angela delivering a monologue explaining the machismo she experienced during the Chicano Movement. Although she attempts to be heard, the movement wants to dictate her future. The Chicano Leader tells her:

**You**, and **your** demands for equality, your walkouts from our conferences have created friction between men and women. You took your demands outside of this focus group and damaged the Chicano Movement. This is your opportunity to defend yourself. **We will determine, your future in this group!** (Martinez 1)

However, much like the majority of feminists at the time, she does not feel part of this movement. Her needs are not represented. When she becomes pregnant, the baby's father, Emilio, demands to have a son and name him "Joaquin" after the poem. Even though they do not have a boy, the name sticks, but as Angela proclaims, Joaquina "**will be smart, able to navigate with the powerful and with the proletariat.** (...) Joaquina would go to college, become a professional, independent and caring Chicana. And we would never depend on a man for anything" (Martinez 2-3). Despite Angela's relationship with Emilio, representative of the machista Chicano, she ultimately meets Roberto, who believes in gender equality and, therefore, becomes an appropriate father figure for Joaquina.

After the characters' backstories are established, Emilio enters, seemingly for the first time in years, and quickly destabilizes the environment. Angela is visibly puzzled and does not understand why Emilio thinks he can walk into Joaquina's life now that she is an adult. As Joaquina is a high-profile immigration attorney for wealthy people, Emilio is here to beg for her help in a case involving a child whose parents have been deported. He hopes this will "get her back, on track, you know, working for the people that really need it" (Martinez 4). Little does he know that his daughter is a lesbian. All he cares about is that Joaquina marries a progressive Chicano. In fact, Martinez's playscript highlights his lack of being a father. When Patricia, Joaquina's fiancée, arrives holding a Mexican wedding dress, Emilio pushes Angela aside and embraces her, saying: "Hija. Mi hija querida. I'm here! I will be the one giving you away. Where's the lucky guy? I'll make a Chicano out of him" (Martinez 9). He wants to be involved in his daughter's life, yet does not even know what she looks like.

Shortly thereafter, Joaquina dramatically enters in unisex clothing with her hair combed back and screams: "**Yo Soy Joaquina!**" (Martinez 9). She rejects Emilio's claim to fatherhood, thus emasculating him and taking away his power. Instead of him giving her life, she proclaims that all he gave her was a "stupid name" (Martinez 10). She is upset that her father imposed a "patriarchal heterosexist poem" on Joaquina by adding the "'a' in red all over the stupid poem" (Martinez 11). In this way, he enforced a heterosexual, not to mention sexist, paradigm on his lesbian daughter, an action that has led her to reject him. Joaquina recites a line from the poem: *I look at myself / and see part of me / who rejects my father ...*" (Martinez 11). She not only renounces her father, but

the male-centered Chicano narrative that typified the movement that Emilio holds in such high regard.

While the title character receives more attention due to her flashier role, this story is truly about Angela's experiences during the Chicano Movement as a woman who did not receive the same credit or platform as her husband. Joaquina tells her: "You work so hard, while he, the activist, in the Chicano Movement, receives all the glory. Mom, don't you have any pride? (...) You should have been a leader in the Movimiento" (Martinez 13). In the end, Joaquina agrees to help in the immigration case, representing a change in the guard. During the Chicano Movement, her father was capable of doing more than her mother because maleness was privileged. On the other hand, in contemporary times, the hyper-masculine Chicano Emilio *must* give up his power to his daughter, a lesbian, to make an impact. Martinez flips the gendered narrative of community activism and demonstrates the necessity to recognize the importance of all voices and, in particular, those of women.

In a final act of female empowerment, Angela interrupts Emilio while he is reciting "Yo Soy Joaquin" and offers her own gendered spin on the poem. Angela rewrites the Chicana narrative and demonstrates the crucial role that women played in the movement:

*I am an activist.*

*I am a leader.*

*I am a Chicana.*

*My cause,*

*Like the cause of many Chicana Mothers*



*Became to raise my child to be*

*A strong, independent and caring Chicana.*

*That's my contribution of this Chicano Movement.* (Martinez 17-8)

The play ends in this way, showing that Angela's actions during the Chicano Civil Rights Movement have made *this* Chican@ Movement a possibility. In *Yo Soy Joaquina*, the title character is the only one who holds the power to make change a viable reality, making the fight for civil rights in the twenty-first century an all-inclusive campaign that allows previously marginalized individuals, such as women and LGBTQ, to not only have an active role but a leadership position, too.

Given these examples, the female ensemble of the CCC, entirely feminist in nature, collaborates throughout the creative and production processes to (re)write female experience and identity to establish a more inclusive Eastside. This model is built on various levels of mentorship. While Josefina López oversees the production itself and mentors Claudia Durán and Lindsey Haley, Durán and Haley have a more hands-on role as mentors to the women involved. In some facet, every woman involved gains first-hand experience in all areas of theater making. These women's actions reconceive Chicano historical memory and, as Foucault sustains, "history shows that everything that has been thought will be thought again by a thought that does not yet exist" (*The Order of Things* 372). With this in mind, Emma Pérez questions "How will we choose to describe our past, now, at this moment, as an enunciation in the present?" (*Decolonial Imaginary* 27). The women involved in CCC, from the actors and directors to the playwrights and producers, choose to rethink Chican@ History through a performative decolonial lens

and create a more-inclusive one that empowers Chicana womanhood through collaborative theater and performance.

## **Conclusion**

CASA is more than a theater company and performance space. It is a community. It is the voice of Boyle Heights. It is a vital institution on the Eastside that is creating art, dramatic literature, and performance. CASA gives Josefina López a space to contribute necessary artistic mentorship to the community whether it is through playwriting classes or more hands-on mentorship with producers, such as Claudia Durán and Lindsey Haley, and individual playwrights, such as Aaron Higareda and Mercedes Floresislás. As López affirms, the company invests in Chican@ literature and theater, the result of which will possibly be many Chican@ playwrights who began their careers at CASA:

When I think of all the American writers living on the Left Bank in Paris during the 1920s, I think we are the Chican@ writers on the Left Bank. (...) When you think of Paris and all of those writers during that era, they didn't know what was happening. Well that is exactly what is happening right now. ("RWHC")

CASA is the cultural epicenter of a Chican@/Latin@ artistic, theatrical, and literary renaissance on the Eastside. While measuring the end results twenty, fifty, one hundred years from now is impossible at this time, the immediate impact of the work is undeniable.

In 1998, López taught two semesters of Chican@ literature at California State University, Northridge, but instead of teaching the course as a regular lecture, she taught

the class as though the women enrolled were the future of Chican@ literature, which made the women in the class accountable for creating an environment where self-expression was welcomed. She became more than their professor; instead she was a mentor to these women. Instead of passive learning, she taught the course as active learning in which the students *created* poetry, short stories, plays, etc. She instructed all of the students to come up onto the stage at the front of the classroom and say who they were and what they were proud of in their life. López continues:

And there were two women who broke down crying, saying I hate my life, I don't like my life, I don't like being Latina. (...) And then, at the end of the semester, they had to stand up and say who you are and what you're proud of in your life. These two women blew us all away because they were transformed. They were women who were proud. They could recite poetry. They were doing spoken word. And you look at these two women, they will never be the same again. And what was so beautiful is that the whole class witnessed this incredible growth of these two women doing the assignments and seeing that their lives were important, that their stories matter, and I was blown away. It was great. ("RWHC")

By changing the narrative of how López approached teaching literature and theater, her students placed themselves *in* Chican@ theater. López adds, "Before our eyes we saw Chicana Literature being created with the self-expression and pride these young ladies showed us ... I was really moved to see the transformations" ("Mentorship"). Chican@ literature and theater was not a dead movement that these women studied, but they actively participated in its creation as if they were the next generation. By viewing

themselves and the course through this filter and raising the stakes, these women *created* the future.

Utilizing her role as an artistic mentor and community leader, López has taken these central ideologies and contextualized them within Boyle Heights. López influences how CASA supplies artistic, cultural, and communal spaces that place patrons directly within the current climate of Chican@ cultural expression, whether through acting, directing, playwriting, or producing. As students or spectators, all critically witness this movement and the central themes played out in these spaces.

## **Part Two**

### **Josefina López as Playwright**

### Chapter 3

#### **Negotiations of Home and Space: Locating Chicana Identity and Experience in the Eastside, the Borderlands, and Beyond**

Investigating women's identity and experience as it relates to home and space is a continuing concern within Chicana studies. Indeed, one of the primary aims of Chicana playwriting and performance has been to express and assert the validity of female discourse as well as the zones of women's experience. In "The History of Chicanas: Proposal for a Materialist Perspective," scholar Rosaura Sánchez, plants the seed for a feminist analysis giving value to the Chicana subject's "multiple subjectivities" of gendered, ethnicized, racialized, and classed identity and experience (1-29). Sánchez demonstrates the necessity for gender-specific inquiry in the research and study of Chicanas as well as other women of color. One such theory, the Wild Zone thesis, serves as a useful tool in analyzing the Chicana experience in the United States. Proposed by anthropologists Edwin and Shirley Ardener in their study *Perceiving Women* (1975) and applied to the study of Chicanas by Cordelia Candelaria in "The 'Wild Zone' Thesis as Gloss in Chicana Literary Study" (1993), the Wild Zone signifies the separate cultural and political spaces, or zones, that women inhabit in society, which, coincidentally, are only recognized by women (Ardener 24). While not privileging gender over race, ethnicity, or class, the theory posits that women's lived experience has formulated specific female-identified subcultures marginalized within and outside of the male-centered patriarchy. Accordingly, the patriarchy, in this case traditional Chicano society, has created learned gender differences, which are linked to the acquired stereotypes of femininity and masculinity in Mexican and Mexican-American society. In the case of Chicana womanhood, the age-old triad of La Virgen de Guadalupe, La Llorona, and La

Malinche (or, virgin, mother, and whore) exemplifies this cultural stereotypification. Though being challenged today by Chicana activists, artists, feminists, and writers, these conventional stereotypes of Chicana femininity remain a consequence of the patriarchal values that have marked the Chican@ experience in the United States. Josefina López challenges, decolonizes, and redefines these gendered stereotypes through her work. By empowering her female protagonists with feminist agency, her characters hold the tools to theorize connections between their experience as women in a patriarchal society and their physical and metaphysical location.

This chapter explores the connection between Chicana identity and location, *patria* (homeland), place, and land base in three works by Josefina López—*Boyle Heights* (2004), *Detained in the Desert* (2010), and *Hungry Woman* (2013)—while demonstrating the possible uses of the Wild Zone thesis as a means of creating female agency and performance directly linked to her location and physical surroundings. These pieces, as activist works, protest against the silencing of Chicanas in various spaces while highlighting the link between female experience and space and its expression in dramatic literature and performance. This chapter demonstrates how the Wild Zone is performed and how Chicana feminist theory is put on stage for Eastsiders to witness through performance. These three plays represent works written and produced at CASA for Eastsiders and offer a glimpse into how Chicana feminist theater engages with spectators. As these works are written by the community for the community, spectators can see themselves represented. The characters and performances, therefore, transcend the text and promote critical witnessing, adding new complexities to Eastside Latinidad.

Utilizing the Wild Zone thesis as a point of departure, this chapter focuses on (re)appropriations of home in its multiple meanings, both as a physical and metaphorical space. These female-derived zones of counter performance, a form of oppositional consciousness, develop from women's connections to home and place. The zones of experience, which are inaccessible to the patriarchal powers, give subjectivity to women and, thus, are essential to their (re)claiming of home. This chapter examines several Wild Zone performances that are used by Josefina López to grant subjectivity to women of color.

This chapter is divided into four parts. The first section will examine the Wild Zone thesis and its possible uses for developing strategies for reassessing one's association with home and, ultimately, taking ownership of the space in its many meanings. The following three sections will each focus on a different play. In each section, I closely read the published playscript and analyze archival recordings of the world premiere productions at CASA of each play alongside materials in Josefina López's personal archive and personal interviews with López herself. In *Boyle Heights*, poetry is utilized as a vehicle for Dalia's development of feminist agency and positive associations of home, claiming Boyle Heights as her home regardless of the problems that persist in the neighborhood. In *Detained in the Desert*, the borderlands serve as the site that provokes Sandi's coming-to-consciousness and ultimate development of self-defense tactics, in this case, Anzaldúa's *la facultad*. Finally, *Hungry Woman* demonstrates the use of the French kitchen and cuisine as zones and discourses which allow Canela to decolonize the kitchen and establish positive self-identification in this space that was previously marginalized in her mother's Eastside kitchen. In this chapter,



we will see, these plays demonstrate the different types of Wild Zone performances that appear in Josefina López's works and how they are performed for CASA's audiences. In each piece, the protagonist (re)claims home via a distinctly female counter discourse that originates from her associations to physical and metaphorical places and spaces, both on stage and in the text.

### **The Wild Zone Thesis: Toward a Theory of Home and Space**

Ardener's Wild Zone thesis,<sup>42</sup> from *Perceiving Women* (1975) which focuses on the anthropology of gender and different ethnographic field experiences, contends that the female voice has been entirely muted, both silenced and marginalized, by the patriarchy (Ardener 22-5). Essentially, this authority over women creates disproportionate sociocultural effects, thus producing a larger distance between female desire and actual choice, between female identity and the capacity to actualize that identity (Candelaria 249). The fundamental components of the Wild Zone thesis are that of zone and wild. *Wild* suggests a female identity unrestrained by the mandated definitions and assumptions of traditional patriarchal Chicano society. *Zone*, on the other hand, implies both the physiologically-derived space (social structures limiting women due to biological distinctions) and the stereotypically-derived space.

According to Candelaria, the Wild Zone thesis is pertinent to Chicana studies because it encourages a gender-specific analysis without nullifying the importance of

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<sup>42</sup> Extending the work of anthropologist Clifford Geertz, Elaine Showalter in "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness" utilizes the Wild Zone to signify the space from which women's experience exists separate from male experience (259). Showalter discusses a space that is not occupied by patriarchy: "If we think of the wild zone metaphysically, or in terms of consciousness, it has no corresponding male space since all of male consciousness is within the circle of the dominant structure and thus accessible to or structured by language" (262).

racial, ethnic, or class-related factors (“The ‘Wild Zone’ Thesis” 250). The Wild Zone theory identifies a key paradox of female identity. A distinctly female space, unregulated by pre-conceived definitions of identity, exists. However, this space is situated and defined within a patriarchal system that privileges men (Candelaria, “The ‘Wild Zone’ Thesis” 249). The Wild Zone makes possible the analysis of gender as a discrete characteristic because its creation is linked to the recognition of distinct and plural cultures and modes of experience: race, ethnicity, gender, and class. Candelaria describes this fundamental contradiction of female identity within Chican@ culture:

Women as politically subordinated subjects must, for survival, know and practice the dominant patriarchal discourse and conventions, but equally they must maintain an unmediated, affirmative identity of self and class. They develop an/other culture and discourse—one not required for the survival of, and therefore largely unavailable to, the empowered members of the dominant class. (“The ‘Wild Zone’ Thesis” 249)

This is to say that woman, as an alleged subordinate being, can occupy the interstitial space between the dominant culture and her own self-identity to survive. Chicanas’ compound oppression—being a woman in an ethno-racial underprivileged group—must be recognized, considering that the additional burden of gender is substantial in all patriarchal societies. Nevertheless, one must not privilege gender over race because Chican@s themselves belong to an economically and politically subordinated class in the United States, a country which throughout its History has privileged an Anglo narrative (Candelaria, “The ‘Wild Zone’ Thesis” 250). Still, the Chicana experience cannot be examined outside of the gendered differences she faces simply by being born female.

Through the process of locating womanhood within a zone of experience and power inaccessible to those in the dominating group, the authority of Chicana artistic and literary expression, such as that of playwright Josefina López, is defined within Chicana experience (Candelaria, “The ‘Wild Zone’ Thesis” 251).<sup>43</sup>

Building on Candelaria’s theory, I examine how the Wild Zone is performed in contemporary Chican@ theater. Consequently, formulating female-derived Wild Zone performances cements women’s connection to home and place as depicted in López’s theater and performance works. Her female protagonists use performance to decolonize specific zones—East Los Angeles, the Arizona-Mexico border, and the kitchen—and assert these spaces as home(s). These women stake claim to these spaces, but only after having cultivated specific forms of counter discourse and oppositional consciousness, notably theorized by Chela Sandoval. Sandoval proposes, “The differential mode of consciousness depends upon the ability to read the current situation of power and of self-consciously choosing and adopting the ideological form best suited to push against its configurations” (“U.S. Third World Feminism” 15). Cultivating a differential mode of oppositional consciousness operates as the foundation of concrete actions that can be implemented by the marginalized individual. Even though women may be unwelcomed

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<sup>43</sup> Moreover, the Wild Zone thesis is in conversation with other more well-known theories centered on Latin@ identity formation, most notably José Esteban Muñoz’s notion of disidentification: a theory to explain how racial outsiders mediate the dominant culture by transforming it for their own benefit rather than adhere to the dominant culture’s mandates for appropriate forms of Latino identity. The Wild Zone precedes disidentification through its focus on developing forms of counter discourse inaccessible to the dominant narrative. Muñoz states that disidentification “is about cultural, material, and psychic survival. It is a response to state and global power apparatuses that employ systems of racial, sexual, and national subjugation. (...) Disidentification is about managing and negotiating historical trauma and systemic violence” (161). In this way, the marginalized individual can utilize processes such as disidentification and the Wild Zone to navigate systems of power and enter into the mainstream as a strategy and act of survival.

into these places, developing an oppositional consciousness facilitates the legitimizing of these spaces via the zones of power women innately inhabit.<sup>44</sup>

### **Poeticizing the Barrio: *Boyle Heights***

For Chicana writers, the trope of home and going back home has frequently been used to revisit and rewrite their role in history. Concerning this, the making of homes and other safe spaces is useful to women's identity formation and survival. For example, Gloria Anzaldúa explains how she had to leave home to find herself, yet she carries her home wherever she goes:

To separate from my culture (as from my family) I had to feel competent enough to the outside and secure enough inside to live life on my own. Yet in leaving home I did not lose touch with my origins because *lo mexicano* is in my system. I am a turtle, wherever I go I carry 'home' on my back.  
(21)

Anzaldúa's turtle metaphor illustrates one of the many ways that women have strategically established meaningful home spaces and associations with home.

Following a long line of Chicanas theorizing home,<sup>45</sup> *Boyle Heights*<sup>46</sup> represents

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<sup>44</sup> One's associations with space alongside the processes of producing and reproducing space hold much potential on identity and subject formation, experience, and how one sees him or herself in the world. Mary Pat Brady suggests: "Chicana literature argues for and examines the relevance of race, gender, and sexuality—as well as class—to the making of space. (...) Chicana literature has consistently offered alternative methods of conceptualizing space not only by noting how social change must be spatialized but also by seeing and feeling space as performative and participatory, that is, by refusing a too-rigid binary between the material and the discursive" (6). Space inhabits a distinctly performative realm as it is a highly social process. Producing space, as well as home, affects the formation of identity and subjectivity in many ways since it requires the body to serve as a concrete example of an abstract concept. Hence, the performativity of space and home requires one to consider how categories such as gender, race, and sexuality are influenced by spatiality; particularly, identity and experience are inextricably linked through space.

Josefina López's vision of the importance of home and returning home. Returning to several of the themes seen in *Simply María, or the American Dream* (1989), *Boyle Heights* follows the Rosales family, from a village in Mexico to Boyle Heights. The play is seen through the eyes of Dalia, a struggling writer and actress, who is forced to move back in with her parents after she breaks up with her boyfriend. Essentially, Dalia's family re-creates various conflicts spanning borders and generations, thereby, highlighting the repetitive experiences that people of Mexican descent experience. Criticized for pursuing education and being unmarried, Dalia maneuvers the personalities of her family and barrio as she tries to figure out her own life and maintain her integrity. Through this process, she heals her soul and, subsequently, finds home.

It is no coincidence that López chose to set the largely autobiographical work in Boyle Heights.<sup>47</sup> By doing so, this work embodies Adrienne Rich's idea about "Revision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction ... an act of survival" ("When WE Dead Awaken" 24). Even though López spent the majority of her formative years in the neighborhood, her early opinions and beliefs about this space were associated with negative connotations about her experiences as a woman growing up. López describes what it was like to grow up in Boyle Heights: "I felt invisible because not only was I undocumented and felt there was something wrong with me, but as a young girl I was treated inferior to my brother" ("On

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<sup>45</sup> Home and making home has served many purposes in the artistic expression of notable Chicana writers: Cherrie Moraga, Ana Castillo, Helena María Viramontes, Pat Mora, Norma Cantú, and Anel Flores to name a few.

<sup>46</sup> *Boyle Heights* received its world premiere from September 24-October 24, 2004 at CASA. The show has played two sold-out runs at the theater. López attributes this partly to the play's title, but mostly to the positive aspects of the piece. *Boyle Heights* affirms that the neighborhood has value and is worthy of being portrayed on stage.

<sup>47</sup> Demonstrating the universality of this story of immigrants in the United States, Josefina López adapted her play for Chula Vista's OnStage Playhouse as *Logan Heights* (2013) as a localized version for San Diego audiences.

Being a Playwright” 45). To López, writing offers the opportunity to localize a Chicana experience that more accurately reflects reality while simultaneously validating what it encompasses being a woman in an underprivileged minority group. López writes:

By making myself the protagonist I am saying to the world that my experience, that of a woman and a Latina, is important and valid. I put myself as the protagonist in my writing and in my life because I refuse to allow a “white man” to rescue me. I, like my characters, am in control of my destiny. By writing about myself and Latinos I am reclaiming my humanity that was taken from me not just when the Spaniards raped Mexico, but when the first man raped the first woman. (“On Being a Playwright” 45)

Consequently, her struggle becomes a revisionary one in which she chooses to redefine both herself and her thoughts about her surroundings while (re)appropriating Chicana discourse, performance, and space. López has resisted internalized racism and decided to make a positive impact on the community rather than blame it for the hardships she faced before coming back. While popular opinion revolves around wanting to “get out” of Boyle Heights, López’s return shows that the neighborhood does have value and is worthy of being revitalized.

As previously stated in Chapters One and Two, part of redefining Boyle Heights involves putting herself back into the neighborhood, as manifested in the play, and as artistic director of CASA. Returning to Boyle Heights has been inextricably connected to López’s spiritual healing and story-telling (“RWHC”). Despite the dream—the American Dream of leaving the culture of poverty behind to make oneself in the mainstream where

opportunities abound—of leaving Boyle Heights, López decided to return to the barrio and rewrite the traditional narrative. This contrasts with Ana, the protagonist of *Real Women Have Curves*, who dreams of leaving the Eastside and, in the film, arrives in New York to find her future. Given this point, *Boyle Heights* allows López to make amends and celebrate her return to the barrio. In being successful and choosing to reclaim the neighborhood, she reclaims the neighborhood by creating something where everyone wins (J. López, “RWHC”). The fictional Dalia is reclaiming the neighborhood for herself and other marginalized individuals, calling attention to the play’s graffiti artist Chava who establishes one of the key themes of the play: “...we’re reclaiming it for ourselves – we’re saying ‘This community belongs to us’” (J. López, *Boyle Heights* 188). Dalia’s creative writing and poetry serves as the vehicle, her individual Wild Zone performance, by which she theorizes her connection to Boyle Heights and, on a deeper level, home. By poeticizing and performing her barrio, she can understand what home means to her and, thusly, take ownership of the place.

*Boyle Heights* manifests a heightened interest in writing the protagonist’s self as a simultaneous observer, protagonist, and embodiment of place. Through an intersectional depiction of Dalia’s gender, race, and economic circumstances, López highlights the parallels between her protagonist and Boyle Heights. Dalia’s position as a Chicana in an impoverished neighborhood draws attention to the marginalized location both occupy in relation to Chicano men and greater Los Angeles, respectively. Dalia, as a writer, frequently documents both her current situation and that of the neighborhood through her poetry and journal entries. These works allow her to analyze her individual situation and genuinely, perhaps for the first time, comprehend the profound connection she feels with

Boyle Heights. In this way, the play operates as a “love song to the playwright’s hometown” (Huerta, “A Woman” 9).

López’s use of poetry invokes the oral tradition of her community, which provides the writer with literary authority by legitimizing her stories through writing and performance. Yvonne Yarbrow-Bejarano affirms: “Since this specific experience has been traditionally excluded from literary representation, it is not surprising that writing that explores the Chicana-as-subject is often accompanied by formal and linguistic innovation” (“Chicana Literature” 215). Hence, promoting poetry as oral tradition in *Boyle Heights* is strengthened by López’s desire to push the traditional content and form of Chican@ theater to establish new vehicles to develop one’s poetic voice. Therefore, *Boyle Heights* can be seen as a contemporary take on the *Teatropoesía* movement of the 1970s and 80s that began as an effort to include women’s voices in theater. *Teatropoesía*, a theatrical performance that incorporates theater, poetry, and music, “exploits the beauty and power of words, a dimension often neglected in Chicano Theater, combining directness and lyrical emotion of the poetic text with the physical immediacy of the three-dimensional work of theater” (Yarbrow-Bejarano, “Teatropoesía” 79). Although the majority of women in this new genre were neither actresses nor playwrights, they used their artistic abilities to transmit messages of resistance and social change to the audience via poetry. In all regards, *Teatropoesía* serves as an alternative route for women to begin to implement an “answer to the unsatisfactory portrayal of female-male relationships in most Chicano Theater thus far” (Melville 78).<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Recently, Virginia Grise’s *blu* (2011) has garnered much critical acclaim as a contemporary *Teatropoesía* piece with its heavy use of poetic language, movement, and sounds. Yet, the most exemplary work from this genre still remains early versions of Cherrie Moraga’s *Giving Up the Ghost* (1984), although the final published version still relies heavily on poetry as a narrative device, much like López’s *Boyle Heights*.



While not *Teatropoesía* in the traditional sense of the movement, *Boyle Heights* relies on poetry as a theatrical device as López employs poetry to give her protagonist a vehicle that separates her from her family and the actors on stage. Even though the work is an ensemble piece, Dalia becomes a narrator of sorts, stepping out of the action to recite her poetry as she simultaneously writes it. However, the staging does not seclude Dalia from the action of the play. Even though she is often in the spotlight, which generally implies her monologue is “frozen” from the remainder of the cast, the actors are still witnesses to her poetry. They can see and hear Dalia, reinforcing the importance that poetry holds for the protagonist and her family’s recognizing of this facet of her life. In fact, after she has concluded the poem, she is critiqued for writing and “talking to herself.”

In addition, the poem invokes a communication between Dalia and the audience that is made possible through performance; her poetry is not a silent communication between reader and poem, but a public performance display, experienced as action, sight, and sound. Accordingly, poetry becomes the key narrative technique that allows both protagonist and playwright to produce space as well as articulations of space. With respect to the production of space, Mary Pat Brady contends, “Viewing space as produced , productive, and producing means viewing it as interanimating and dependent in part on narrative for its productive effects rather than as inert and transparent” (7). In this case, poetry not only assists in the production of space, both spatially and mentally, but it also grants greater understanding of the processes that influence how these places

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Other noteworthy examples of *Teatropoesía* include *Chicana* (1974) by Dorinda Moreno and Las Cucarachas, *Cabuliando in Motion* (1979) by Oliva Chumacero and Rogelio “Smiley” Rojas, *Voz de la mujer* (1981) by Valentina Productions of San Jose, *Tongues of Fire* (1981) by a collective led by Lucha Corpi and performed at the Cultural Heritage of Chicana Literature conference in Oakland, and *No me callarán, no me callaré* (1982) by Cara Hill.

are experienced, understood, conceptualized, and represented by the marginalized subject.

The play begins with a poem in which Dalia prepares the audience for what they are about to witness: the protagonist's journey of finding love in both her family and her home neighborhood by developing her poetic voice, her own Wild Zone performance. Furthermore, this poem establishes the circumstances that not only immigrant women face in the Southwestern United States, but also the collective plight of immigrant groups in general. López writes:

My father came to the U.S., he entered not by,  
the island where the lady stands tall,  
but by the dark and cold borders,  
divided by rivers, fences, and wild mountains,  
filled with rats, snakes, coyotes, and border  
patrol officers waiting for you to fail.

...

We left at night trying to stay out of sight.  
We took a bus, then a train, then a bus again.  
The journey took three days and a lot of hours  
Of dreaming, of my father, and the clouds, the  
Angels, the music, and the golden gates,  
I kept staring at the wheels of the bus waiting  
For them to lift us up to the sky.  
I truly believed we were going to heaven.

We had reached Los Angeles, but we were still  
On earth.

This isn't heaven, but it is my home. (*Boyle Heights* 144-5)

From the time of Dalia's arrival in California until the events leading to the start of the play, East Los Angeles held negative implications due to it not being "heaven" on earth. Despite the neighborhood's lack of delivering promise to Dalia, it still remains home. Boyle Heights will catalyze Dalia's transformation in which she looks beyond her pessimistic opinions of the neighborhood and see its true value, using this newly discovered knowledge to form her identity.

When Dalia arrives in Boyle Heights, she identifies her life transition with failure and negativity, but, in time, the neighborhood acts as a mythical homeland that gives Dalia strength. When Dalia's ex-boyfriend begs her to take him back, she utilizes this recently discovered strong mental connection with her physical space, reclaiming it as her own, as well as her feminist agency of the pen to write him a poem titled "My Low Self-Esteem Days." In particular, this poem separates itself from the others in *Boyle Heights* by means of its function as a fully performed piece. Contrary to the other poems, "My Low Self-Esteem Days" is delivered, and thus performed, to Craig to manifest Dalia's identity transformation. After clearing her throat, Dalia recites:

Si te quise fue porque I had low self-esteem.

If I swore I'd always be by your side,

was because I had nothing better to do.

Si te dije you were a great lover,

was because I had nothing to compare it to.

If I said you and me were meant to be,  
was because I thought I couldn't find better.

Si te dije que te amaba con toda mi alma,  
was because I hadn't found myself.

[...]

Time has proved me stronger,  
I don't need your approval any longer.

So today, I ain't even gonna bother...

To let you know how good it's been...

Without you. (J. López, *Boyle Heights* 196-7)

Notwithstanding the poem's code-switching between English and Spanish, thus reinforcing the hybrid identity of the Mexican-American, Dalia's poem draws attention to her own feminist-derived space in which she battles against the monolithic gender expectations and stereotypes associated with a submissive woman. As Jaime tells Dalia earlier in the play, "If you were in Mexico, you'd be married with five kids and pregnant with another" (J. López, *Boyle Heights* 154), essentially making the association between location and cultural expectations according to López. If Dalia's parents had remained in Mexico, the likelihood of cultivating positive agency and a feminist voice would be significantly limited under the patriarchal Mexican society that López frequently criticizes throughout her work. Thus, López negates the existence of liberated women and feminism in Mexico and the evolution of Mexican culture. According to the playwright, only through living in Boyle Heights does the opportunity emerge to renounce dated gender roles; Dalia does not have to be La Virgen de Guadalupe, La Malinche, or La

Llorona, but can instead be herself. As such, this reflects a Chicana feminist revision of the American Dream in which women have the agency to make their own decisions in the United States instead of adhering to the cultural guidelines established by patriarchy in the “old country.” Dalia is given the opportunity to select her own path, a possibility that would remain out of reach if Dalia were to live in Mexico, a discourse that potentially negates the power of Anglo-American patriarchy.

But even so, López not only questions conventional roles for Chicana women, but also provokes a reexamination of what it means to be a man in contemporary times, presenting this to Eastside audiences. Dalia calls to God to answer her prayers for a man who is comfortable with a strong woman. Yet, this man will have to reconstruct traditional gender roles in the same way that Dalia does. López writes:

Send me a man,  
who is not afraid or threatened by my  
sexuality and who doesn't want to tame  
down my originality.

Send me a strong man with a gentle smile,  
who doesn't scream,  
who is not scared of my power,  
...

Well, for once in my life I can say I  
Deserve it.

So send me a man who deserves me! (*Boyle Heights* 165)

Dalia's poetry signals the liberating qualities that writing possesses and, as a result, develops an oppositional consciousness of the repressive nature of male-centered discourse. Her reincarnation as an empowered self-identified Chicana feminist within the patriarchal environment of Boyle Heights is made possible through her writing. Dalia's poetry is important because it permits her to develop an oppositional consciousness in a way which comes natural to her; her writing is not forced, but flows naturally from her consciousness.

Near the end of *Boyle Heights*, after experiencing the ups and downs seen in the play and further understanding her family members' motives, Dalia finally understands what Boyle Heights means to her. She writes:

Poetry is being ...Being here ... Being home ... Boyle Heights.  
My beautiful little barrio.  
Since I can remember I swore I'd leave you like all the rest,  
But when I'm in Paris, Rome or New York I just want to come back.  
Everyone thinks you're East L.A.  
But I know who you really are.  
I know what they say on the five o'clock news isn't true.  
I know you are a beautiful place where families like me loved and lived.  
I know you are located near the L.A. River, somewhere close to my heart.  
(J. López, *Boyle Heights* 199)

Although Dalia previously connected the neighborhood to personal failure, she now understands the significance of the place. Boyle Heights is more than just a mere concept. Similar to the young protagonist, Esperanza, in Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango*

*Street*, Dalia, now more enlightened having understood her spiritual connection to her homeland, is grateful for what the neighborhood has symbolized to her: “Boyle Heights, thank you for the stories. Thank you for the memories. I will return when I have something to give back to you. Goodbye” (J. López, *Boyle Heights* 146). Cognizant of the prospect of developing feminist agency as a writer, Dalia will return one day when she is ready to give something back to the community.

### **Mestiza Consciousness and *la facultad* in the Borderlands: *Detained in the Desert***

Similar to *Boyle Heights*, López’s *Detained in the Desert* (2010),<sup>49</sup> as well as the film version (2013), validates the connection between the cultural and political space that Chicana women inhabit in society. Although not set in the Eastside, *Detained* demonstrates how López brings current issues to CASA. Even though Arizona legislature seems a world away, these issues remain pertinent to Eastside audiences as hate speech and anti-immigration rhetoric surely impacts constructions of Eastside Latinidad. By critically witnessing the performance, spectators leave the theater cognizant that they must make a difference and stake a greater claim in their community. *Detained* is López’s response to Arizona’s Senate Bill 1070, the Support Our Law Enforcement and Safe Neighborhoods Act of 2010.<sup>50</sup> While the law adheres to United States federal law requiring undocumented immigrants over the age of 14 who stay in the country for more than 30 days to register with the United States government, it also inadvertently allows law enforcement officers to try to determine an individual’s immigration or citizenship

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<sup>49</sup> *Detained in the Desert* received its world premiere at CASA 0101 from October 1-November 21, 2010.

<sup>50</sup> Several other Chican@ playwrights have written plays in response to recent border experiences and anti-immigration legislature such as Elaine Romero’s *Wetback* (2010) and *Mother of Exiles* (2014), Milta Ortiz’s “MAS” (2013), and Carlos Morton’s *Frontera sin fin* (2014).

status. In this way, the controversial bill allows police officers to question the citizenship of anyone whom they believe could be undocumented, essentially legalizing racial profiling in the state of Arizona (Koven 18-19).

In the playwright's notes, López discusses her motivation in writing *Detained*:

I was in Arizona on vacation when it was announced that SB 1070 had passed. Quickly I got texts from immigrant rights organizations telling me where the protests would be that night. (...) I wanted to do something more than just protest, so I decided to write this play to show the ridiculousness of this law but also explore the motives of "hate talk" which in the past few years has led to a 40% increase in hate crimes towards Latinos. When I read about the many hate crimes that have happened and the similarities between them, it made me wonder if the men at the forefront of this 'hate talk' and fear of immigrants are aware that they have blood on their hands. They have a right to freedom of speech, but they must realize that spreading hate causes more hate. All of us must realize the power of our words to separate humanity or bring humanity together. (19)

López found inspiration to write *Detained* after having participated in Marcha Migrante led by Enrique Morones, founder of Border Angels.<sup>51</sup> Morones, depicted as the fictional Ernesto Martinez in the play, a role he himself plays in the film, puts out jugs of water at water stations in the desert on a daily basis as a member of Border Angels to

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<sup>51</sup> Marcha Migrante, an event held each February that travels to different regions promoting immigrant rights, was highlighted by visiting a cemetery in Holtville, Arizona, where over 600 unclaimed bodies of immigrants found in the desert are buried, each one with a wooden cross marking its presence. This experience, combined with seeing haunting pictures of those found in the desert, stayed with López, serving as a constant reminder of those that cross the border.



help those crossing the Arizona desert to stay alive. López partly produced the *Detained* film as a means to raise funds for Border Angels to be able to extend their efforts on a larger scale. López's actions with both the play and film versions of *Detained* alongside her activist efforts demonstrate the seamless intersections between art and sociopolitical activism; more often than not, it is impossible to separate the two.

By concentrating on gendered oppression, López engages the United States-Mexico border as a geopolitical site of increased violence, racism, and legislative abuse against brown bodies. It is her effort to better understand the experience of being a woman of color on the border in the current sociopolitical climate. The play exemplifies López's use of writing, theater, and performance as political protest; the playwright seeks to create "some degree of understanding that goes beyond the immigration rhetoric and fear mongering that is happening right now in this country. Hopefully with this play I've shed some light on the darkness of ignorance" (J. López, *Detained* 19). López explores this "darkness of ignorance" through the play's two narratives: one focusing on Sandi Belen, a recent college graduate who is disconnected from her Mexican heritage, and another centering on a radio talk-show host, Lou Becker, who incites anti-immigration propaganda among his audience on the Arizona-Mexico border, an open wound as Gloria Anzaldúa calls it: "*una herida abierta* where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds" (3). As Sandi and Lou question their thinking about immigration and the role they occupy on the geopolitical landscape that is the border, López urges her audience to consider the consequences of anti-immigration laws and rhetoric.

The play presents an appeal to action in which the playwright utilizes, consciously or not, the feminist teachings of Gloria Anzaldúa and the new Mestiza consciousness

toward the development of *la facultad* with the objective of establishing a more active Chicana Feminist Movement that will ignite a new wave of borderlands activism. Sandi experiences racial discrimination because of Arizona SB 1070 and, as a consequence, decides to conceptualize a feminist ideology and a new way of thinking and self-defense: Anzaldúa's notion of *la facultad*.

Mestiza consciousness is based on the demand to develop self-defense tactics, which Anzaldúa calls *la facultad*, a strategy that marginalized people can employ. *La facultad* marks the awakening of the individual in which they begin to exist; it represents the moment when the person loses her innocence and ignorance, producing a change in perception that adds meaning and multiple interpretations to the way she sees the world. Anzaldúa posits:

This shift in perception deepens the way we see concrete objects and people; the senses become so acute and piercing that we can see through things, view events in depth, a piercing that reaches the underworld (the realm of the soul). As we plunge vertically, the break, with its accompanying new seeing, makes us pay attention to the soul, and we are thus carried into awareness – an experiencing of the soul (Self). (39)

By experiencing the soul and, therefore, gaining self-enlightenment, the woman obtains consciousness in order to employ a feminist agency. This consciousness and self-understanding demonstrates the paths that the Chicana takes with respect to the actions, directions, and efforts that she must experience to fight against oppression. Anzaldúa supplies the structural changes that enable the Chicana's liberation (Adams 26).

As this tactic is only accessible to marginalized women, *la facultad* functions as Wild Zone performance that emerges from Sandi's mental and physical location. Sandi only receives this coming-to-consciousness as a consequence of having been oppressed and consciously deciding to fight against the oppressive forces that society imposes on women of color. In *Detained*, Josefina López manifests the need for Chicanas to develop survival tactics and female-derived discourses such as *la facultad* in the face of social oppression. López achieves this by highlighting the transformation of Sandi, who acquires consciousness about her identity from the injustice(s) she faces on the border because of Arizona SB 1070.

*Detained* exemplifies López's political activism and protest by means of her theater and performance work, themes she has consistently staged with titles such as *La Pinta* (1996), *Confessions of Women from East L.A.* (1996), *When Nature Calls* (2009), and *A Cat Named Mercy* (2014).<sup>52</sup> Moreover, *Detained* continues a tradition of Chican@ and Latin@ plays that focus on the many facets of immigration, the immigrant experience, and the borderlands. These plays give voice to the immigrant experience, showing that official documents do not decide one's humanity. Additionally, *Detained* gives subjectivity to not only brown women, but more so to immigrants in general, in this manner, humanizing them. Iliana Sosa, director of the film, states, "One of the most important things that can come from this movie is for people to see immigrants as

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<sup>52</sup> For example, the short play *La Pinta* depicts a UCLA student, Truvi, who naively protests despite the false beliefs she holds about her own people. *La Pinta* demonstrates the misguided and immature side of activism, one in which an oppositional conscious has yet to be fully developed. In contrast to Truvi's ill-advised activism and identity formation, López's *Confessions of Women from East L.A.* and *Detained* feature women who are or become self-identified activist in a more mature fashion as their character arcs follow similar paths to those theorized by Anzaldúa, Moraga, and Sandoval, among other Chicana feminists and activists. In particular, Valentina of *Confessions* is an activist who is trying to organize her people to fight against Proposition 187 in California and ignite a sociocultural movement against the xenophobic treatment of Chican@s and other minority groups.

humans. We want to humanize the immigration debate with this film. It's more complicated than people make it out to be" (Qtd. in Carrasquillo).

Notably, in regards to signature moments in Chican@ theater, López's work serves as the next chapter to *La Víctima* (1976) by El Teatro de la Esperanza, a Santa Barbara, California, based theater collective that utilized the voices of both men and women. *La Víctima* follows the history of Mexican immigration to the United States as it centers on how this issue affects a Mexican immigrant family from 1910 to the 1970s. In this way, the work depicts the family's struggles alongside the history of migration to the United States during the better part of the twentieth century. The play portrays the changing levels of acceptance of immigration which fluctuate based on the United States' need for low-paid workers and xenophobic restrictions on undocumented immigrants and subsequent deportations at times when the economy is weak. Even though the play was first seen in 1976, *La Víctima* remains a timely and necessary piece. In fact, it was produced in 1994 by the Latino Theater Lab in East Los Angeles at Plaza de la Raza as a fundraiser against Proposition 187 and in 2010 at the Latino Theater Company, led by José Luis Valenzuela as artistic director, at the Los Angeles Theatre Center, to show the cyclical nature of the immigration debate as well as remind audiences of the socio-historical antecedents to the current climate. In regards to *La Víctima* remaining as timely in 2010 as it did 40 years ago, Valenzuela highlights the repetitive characteristic of the political debate centering on immigration: "That's the most incredible thing, to think that a work that's nearly 40 years old, that was written for a specific historical moment, is returning now" (Qtd. in Johnson, "Immigration debate"). Moreover, Valenzuela furthers Iliana Sosa's thoughts by equating the undocumented immigrant to an unrecognized hero:

“Imagine the will that each immigrant has to have. Imagine the solitude of the immigrant, to leave your country, to leave your family, to go to a country where you don’t know the language, to try to survive, to contribute to the country however you can. To me, that is heroic” (Qtd. in Johnson, “Immigration debate”). *La Víctima* exemplifies a model that paved the way for Chicana playwrights to question immigration and the border from a female point of view: Milcha Sánchez-Scott’s *Latina* (1980), Evangeline Ordaz’s *Visitor’s Guide to Arivaca (Map Not to Scale)* (2006), Kara Hartzler’s *No Roosters in the Desert* (2010), and Yadira de la Riva’s *One Journey: Stitching Stories Across the Mexican “American” Border* (2013) to name a few.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Milcha Sánchez-Scott’s *Latina*, based on the playwright’s personal experiences, focuses on the intersections between Latina cultural identity and immigration by focusing on a group of immigrant women working for a housekeeping company. Even though the main character Sarita is the only Chicana in the play, all of the other women are immigrants, mostly undocumented, thus demonstrating the collective experience that immigrant women of color go through and showing some of the similarities and differences among this group of women. Recently, with the emergence of immigration as an increasingly pertinent social question, Chicana playwrights, much like López, have taken the call to write plays that humanize undocumented immigrants while focusing on the border itself as key geopolitical zone of increased violence against women of color. Evangeline Ordaz’s *Visitor’s Guide to Arivaca (Map Not to Scale)* presents the story of a Mexican couple crossing the border through the Arizona desert. Ordaz utilizes her time as a lawyer on the border to pen the experiences she witnessed first-hand with fictional stories to depict the confluence of interests in a small border-town, ranging from those of a border guard, a farmer, a pro-bono lawyer, and a Native American tribesman who tries to prevent deaths by setting up water stations, to name a few of the personalities of Ordaz’s work. Similarly, Kara Hartzler’s *No Roosters in the Desert* draws on the fieldwork of Anna Ochoa O’Leary in presenting the stories of four women who cross the U.S.-Mexico border. Hartzler, an immigration attorney at the Florence Immigrant and Refugee Rights Project in Florence, Arizona, utilized 130 interviews of migrant women conducted by O’Leary from 2007-2008. The play provides a dramatized account of the interviews, demonstrating the intersections of mass migrations from Mexico and Central America, United States border enforcement policies, and the experience of women. While not a Chicana playwright herself, Kara Hartzler’s work gives voice to the problems surrounding the silenced undocumented immigrant community. Hartzler also questions immigration and the borderlands in her play *Trash* (2014), which focuses on a female U.S. Detention Center prison guard who controls the destiny of an undocumented male detainee as both see similarities between themselves. Additionally, Yadira de la Riva’s much-acclaimed *One Journey: Stitching Stories Across the Mexican “American” Border* presents a women’s coming-of-age story on the El Paso-Ciudad Juárez border. De la Riva’s one-woman documentary play weaves together interview material with her creative imagination in telling the story of a family separated by border enforcement, reminiscent of *La Víctima*, and the War on Drugs. This performance journey gives a female perspective on borderland identity that is influenced by hybridity and immigration policy, among other things. De la Riva’s work on this piece culminated in her “One Journey U.S./Mexico Border Tour” in the fall of 2013. De la Riva toured the piece to cities across the border from Brownsville, Texas, to Los Angeles, California, visiting key cities along the way to promote borderlands consciousness and activism. Performances were followed by

Similar to *El Teatro de la Esperanza*, Sánchez-Scott, Ordaz, Hartzler, and de la Riva, Josefina López utilizes the border and questions of immigration policy to create a play that promotes an awareness and dialogue about the plight of undocumented immigrants in the borderlands. López incorporates the emblematic use of place, in this case the border, as a source of spiritual energy for Sandi. After being racially profiled and believed to be an undocumented immigrant, Sandi, responding to her boyfriend Matt's lack of understanding, comments on the oppression one faces in a country that privileges being white and having European origins: "... you will never know what it's like to be me. You don't have dark skin. Nobody ever questions your right to exist or succeed. You have no clue how hard it is to be an American when you look like me!" (J. López, *Detained* 43).<sup>54</sup> After recognizing the injustices that she faces in the borderlands, Sandi is capable of tapping into her own experiences with the aim of developing self-defensive tactics and, in such a way, fighting against the discrimination she faces.

Having been racially-profiled by the Arizona police officer, Sandi chooses to cultivate her own Wild Zone performance to navigate this geopolitical space of increased racial and gendered violence, drawing attention to Mary Louise Pratt's theory of the "contact zone" as detailed in *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (1992). The "contact zone" serves as the site where the fusion of inequalities and differences is manifested; concurrently, it pairs with Gloria Anzaldúa's notion of the multiplicity of border crossings, both physical and metaphysical, as seen in *Borderlands/La Frontera* (Pratt 53). In this "contact zone," Sandi is able to cultivate certain tricks, or "tretas"

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"Theater of the Oppressed" workshops that focused on community building through performance and theater.

<sup>54</sup> In an added scene in the film, Matt asks Sandi if her parents had to cross the desert despite her parents having been born in the United States. Matt repeatedly demonstrates white privilege, manifested through his lack of having had to think about these injustices.

according to Josefina Ludmer's theory as established in "Las tretas del débil," and strategies to defend herself from gendered and racial oppression experienced on the border at the hands of white males. Pratt argues: "While subjugated peoples cannot readily control what emanates from the dominant culture, they do determine to varying extents what they absorb into their own, and what they use it for" (6). Pratt suggests the necessity of developing a counter discourse in which subjugated peoples seek ways of developing certain strategies of resistance. For example, Anzaldúa's *la facultad* functions as oppositional discourse for Sandi, a key aspect in cultivating a Mestiza consciousness.<sup>55</sup>

The text serves as a call to action, a process to "uncover our true faces, our dignity, and self-respect" (Anzaldúa 108). By refusing restrictions of one's gender, race, and class, the new Mestiza establishes herself in a more powerful position in which she is capable of balancing multiple cultures and fighting oppressive forces and intolerance. Anzaldúa writes, "I seek our woman's face, our true features, the positive and the negative seen clearly, free of the tainted biases of male dominance. I seek new images of identity, new beliefs about ourselves, our humanity and worth no longer in question" (87). Mestiza consciousness allows the woman to better understand the oppressive forces that surround her, making possible a dialogue about a new history of Chicana subjectivity. The new Mestiza questions the traditional gendered dualities and the relationship that this imposes on women (Anzaldúa 80). This consciousness motivates the

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<sup>55</sup> This awakening of consciousness draws attention to Cherrie Moraga, who also decides to embrace her mestizaje and Chicanisma. This decision to self-identify as a woman of color is precisely what manifests the understanding that one's best tool to create a society truly free of the oppression of women just like the author. Moraga explains the importance of developing a consciousness of her authentic identity. She explains in *Loving in the War Years* what she calls "Conscientización...a consciousness born of a body that has a shade, a language, a sex, a sexuality, a geography and a history. And that sometimes changes everything, including with whom you love and lay" (203).

woman and her search for objective knowledge about herself and her position in the world. Such self-understanding is necessary to cultivate political agency and action.

By situating *Detained* on the border, López illustrates, as Castillo and Tabuenca Córdoba posit, Anzaldúa's "gesturing toward a more heterogeneous transnational space of identity formation" (3). The border highlights a privileged site of operations in which those with light skin are given higher sociopolitical standing. With this in mind, Sandi, as a woman of color, must develop an oppositional consciousness and awareness of the system of oppression in the Arizona-Mexico borderlands. For this reason, the action that drives the *Detained* play is Sandi's psychological transformation and acquisition of consciousness and *la facultad*, thus manifesting López's main goal: the ascent of a continued dialogue toward Chicana consciousness. Through this new form of seeing the world and critical thinking, Sandi intends to renegotiate the traditional power paradigm. She reinforces Anzaldúa's ideology of the political and psychological situation of the Mestiza only changing through the removal of masks and disguises that hide them. It is indispensable that Sandi brings the audience (or reader) to a catharsis with the end result being the comprehension of how López theorizes Chicana experience and identity. The play details the self-exoneration that the protagonist undergoes by recognizing the oppressive dichotomies and how she should alter herself. As a recent university graduate, Sandi is in the process of returning to her community; questions about how she will utilize her education drive the action of the play (T. López 18). With her new vision of the world, she realizes that she must embrace her true identity to make a change become reality.



In such a way, *Detained* portrays a zone of psychological alienation and socio-political subordination. Because Sandi has brown skin, she is racially profiled and believed to be an undocumented immigrant, even though she has rejected her Mexican heritage in an attempt to pass in Anglo-American culture and society. Sandi recognizes as a young girl the privilege that white skin and Anglo-association carries in mainstream United States culture. While she is imprisoned in the detention center, Sandi explains to fellow detainee Milagros the shame that she has carried with her with respect to denying her origin. She tells of the first time she understood discrimination when she attended a primarily Anglo elementary school.<sup>56</sup> A white student had lice and the school examined all of the Latin@ students. Sandi states, “When we were all returned to our classes, everyone laughed at us. Nobody wanted to be our friend because they thought they would get lice from us” (J. López, *Detained* 51).

This event elevated her consciousness, but, showing her need to survive, she decided to change her identity with the goal of integrating into the Anglo community. Sandi learned to pass as white and assimilate to the school’s dominant culture to survive this difficult period of her adolescence; this event represented her acceptance into the dominant ring of society. Her recognition of the school’s existing class system, a microcosm of the United States, functions as the catalyst of her first transformation, the mere intent to survive. This draws attention to Anzaldúa’s thoughts on the violent Othering of Chican@s and other people who do not adhere to dominant Anglo-American culture. Anzaldúa declares:

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<sup>56</sup> In the “Show Bible” for *The Chavez Family*, a show López pitched in vain to several networks in 1995, she discusses the cultural shock she experienced in fifth grade when she was bussed to a predominantly Anglo school in the San Fernando Valley. Since she was always mistaken for white, she was charged for lunch even though she could not pay for it. This was one of her first experiences being exposed to other people besides those of Mexican origin (J. López, “The Chavez Family”).

Gringos in the U.S. Southwest consider the inhabitants of the borderlands transgressors, aliens—whether they possess documents or not, whether they’re Chicanos, Indians or Blacks. Do not enter, trespassers will be raped, maimed, strangled, gassed, shot. The only “legitimate” inhabitants are those in power, the whites and those who align themselves with whites. (3-4)

She understands that race impacts her social position and can utilize her light skin as privilege. Sandi continues assimilating to the oppressor class until her confrontation with the law when she is detained, the moment in which her Chicana consciousness is awakened.

The central encounter with the police marks the first time Sandi experiences discrimination as an adult. She is mistaken for an undocumented immigrant solely due to her skin color and physical location in the borderlands and consequently begins to feel the plight of *la mujer indocumentada*, a woman that Anzaldúa describes as:

...doubly threatened in this country. Not only does she have to contend with sexual violence, but like all women, she is prey to a sense of physical helplessness. As a refugee, she leaves the familiar and safe homeground to venture into unknown and possibly dangerous terrain. (12-13)

Sandi’s experience of the multiplicity of oppression that women of color face in the Arizona borderlands leads to analyzing her own identity. This metaphysical crossroads is the moment in which she starts to question the hierarchy of color and gender. She realizes that the more she transforms, the more realistic the possibility of a fundamental change will become.

Due to her personal struggle, Sandi begins to create the indispensable foundation for a feminist politicization. Above all, it is necessary to examine and question the oppressive restrictions that are a burden to women of color in the United States borderlands, a geopolitical zone in which women, according to Sonia Saldívar-Hull in *Feminism on the Border*, are dehumanized to such a high degree that they fully lose their value (61). To understand the transition that Sandi experiences, one must comprehend her education within the racist structures at work in the United States, a supposedly free nation but, on the other hand, marked by what Rodolfo Acuña has called a legacy of hate, the result of neglecting the various stipulations made law in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848 (56-9). This hierarchically organized world (class, race, gender, etc.) manifests the unjustified fear of a nation saturated in the middle of a fresh wave of nativism and hostility toward (un)documented immigrants. The popular myth in United States history is that the nation has welcomed immigrants, forming the famous “melting pot.” Nevertheless, the cruel reality is that the only immigrants who are truly accepted are those that can pass as WASPs. Nativism is a form of xenophobia that reemerges during difficult times in our history; historically, when the economy prospers, expressions of nativism remain submerged (Acuña 165-6, 208-11). In other words, Arizona SB 1070 is the result of these nativist fears. Arizona blames the current recession on undocumented immigrants; among other things, immigrants serve as an easy scapegoat to justify current governmental problems.

Josefina López further highlights the racist nature of SB 1070 in *Detained* through the character Matt, Sandi’s boyfriend, an undocumented Anglo-Canadian immigrant. The geographical location of Arizona on the border is fundamental to understanding the

injustices directed toward minorities and the free pass that Matt receives thanks to his white skin. Speaking of these injustices, Licona sustains that the borderlands “have historically been spaces of colonization where powerful forces have imposed, (mis)interpreted, and (mis)represented historical truths” (113). Even though these lands were originally part of Mexico, popular opinion is that Mexican-Americans are mostly undocumented immigrants. Because of this, regardless of his undocumented status, Matt does not suffer the discrimination that Sandi is subject to because he does not fit within the culturally accepted model of an undocumented immigrant. López exposes the bias of a law that allows the undocumented to remain in the country as long as their physical appearance is stereotypically North American. The irony of the abduction scene manifests the need to question a system that in reality has found an undocumented immigrant but, due to the government’s codified racism, believes that the person of color is at fault.

When the Arizona police officer pulls over Sandi and Matt, he believes that she is a prostitute because she has been performing oral sex on her boyfriend. Furthermore, after seeing Sandi’s brown skin, he tells her: “You are six miles away from the border and you look – I mean...you have given me reason to suspect that your status” (J. López, *Detained* 32). In the film, this scene is especially telling of Sandi’s criminalization by the State. The officer shines his flashlight on her face throughout the scene. This serves several purposes. While exposing her, she is drowned out in the light and loses all of her features. Thus, she loses her identity and becomes a stand-in for a migrant. Furthermore, the light blinds her and weakens her defense. She cannot see the officer and continually

must move her body to see the forces she is up against. The flashlight, ultimately, is a tool of the oppressor that assists in the Othering of Sandi.

Even though the officer should not question Sandi's citizenship based on her appearance or perceived profession as a prostitute, he does so, thus highlighting the subsequent racial-profiling that SB 1070 allows. Despite her rejection of her true heritage, she is discriminated against due to her connection with the space in which she finds herself. Given that the police officer focuses on Sandi rather than her Anglo boyfriend, it is in this space that she comprehends her subordinate condition as a woman of color in Arizona; her identity as a discriminated minority woman and her geographical location on the border are inextricably connected to her experience.

Sandi understands her differences with privileged Anglo women. Moraga explains in the preface to *This Bridge Called My Back*: "My growing consciousness as a woman of color is surely seeming to transform my experience. How could it be that the more I feel with other women of color, the more I feel myself Chicana, the more susceptible I am to racist attack!" (xv). She must recognize the differences between herself and her Anglo counterparts. Sandi's dispute with the Arizona police serves as the point of departure in her awakening as a woman of color. Instead of showing documentation and continuing her trip, she decides to continue her confrontation with the law. She yells at the police: "No! I am not showing you no stinking badges, cabrón!" (J. López, *Detained* 33).<sup>57</sup> In fact, once in the detainment center she understands that as soon as she shows some form of identification, she will be free, but she realizes that nothing will change unless she initiates it.

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<sup>57</sup> Here, López references Luis Valdez's *I Don't Have to Show You No Stinking Badges!* (1986), the title coming from the film *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* (1948).

Matt tries to convince her to end her fight, but Sandi repeatedly explains to him *why* he fails to understand. As a white male, Matt is not discriminated against and does not recognize how it feels to be objectified or dehumanized even though he is the one in the play that represents the undocumented community. Neither does he understand why nor how the Chicana is seen as equal to an undocumented immigrant according to Arizona legislation. Sandi conceptualizes relationships between power and domination and how it affects her own existence, giving her the opportunity to search for new methods of self-defense and development in addition to her ideologies. Sandi possesses the essential tools that make possible her search to redefine her self-consciousness beginning from the moment in which she realizes the reasons behind the discrimination. Her identity as a double discriminated woman influences her interpretation of the experience. After analyzing, deciphering, and deconstructing the oppressive ideologies, Sandi comprehends the dominant structure that positions women of color as illegitimate citizens.

*Detained* demonstrates, through the police officer's targeting of Sandi, that being a woman is an obstacle in a patriarchal society. Yet, this gendered inequality is what allows Chicana women to tap into the Wild Zone. As seen in the final scene of the play, Sandi demonstrates her newly-found Chicana identity and oppositional consciousness when she calls into the radio program "Take Back America" and presents herself as "Sandra Sánchez" (J. López, *Detained* 65), the use of her real name being the first stage in the process of modifying her identity and image as a woman of color. In addition to her changing her name, she changes her opinion regarding Ranchera-style music. Whereas in the initial scenes of the play she was indifferent to this music, in the final scene she

reevaluates her opinion, ending the play by singing at the top of her lungs. Her final act of positive Chicana identity rests in her decision to dedicate her future toward social change. Sandi tells Ernesto: "... I want to help. Next time you go deliver water, I want to join you" (J. López, *Detained* 64), manifesting her need to participate in the dialogue toward immigrant rights and immigration reform on the Arizona-Mexico border. Through the protagonist Sandi, López demonstrates the need for women of color to cultivate a new consciousness and counter performance. As a new Chicana living without borders and boundaries, she acquires a better perspective to confront the oppressive effects of the racially and socially privileged.

Remarkably, the *Detained* film changes this feminist coming-to-consciousness thread. In the film, Sandi dies in the desert while Lou is saved by Ernesto. In this way, the film insists that white men can survive the extreme conditions of the Arizona desert, while brown women cannot. As a result, the film does not give equal billing to both characters' stories, but privileges that of Lou. The film becomes centered on Lou's journey from hate-speaking radio host to someone who is compassionate to the plight of the Other.<sup>58</sup> The film, in fact, devotes nuanced attention to Lou which, ultimately, humanizes him. Early in the film, Lou is clearly not invested in his work. His boss repeatedly tells him to "stick to the script." Furthermore, Lou battles depression. In a key scene added to the film, Lou breaks down and begins crying while looking at old pictures and memorabilia. While devoting attention to Lou's moral dilemma is not an issue, shifting the focus away from Sandi and changing her fate is indeed problematic.

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<sup>58</sup> In her second book project, *Listening to Latinidad: (Re)Sounding Citizenship in US Latina/o Theater and Performance*, Marci McMahon uses her notion of "sound politics" to examine how *Detained* stages immigration debates by using English and Spanish language radio. McMahon centers on the role of hate speech in English-language radio talk shows in forging public policy.

Ultimately, Sosa's film disregards the Chicana feminist thought that informs López's original playscript. Strong female characters that develop agency and feminist politicization typify López's work; her work cannot be studied outside of their cultural, social, and political contexts. Given these premises, failure to devote attention to Sandi's transformation and development of a feminist ideology creates significant limitations in the film that do not adequately reflect or manifest the Chicana feminism that characterizes the foundation of the play.<sup>59</sup> The film's audience leaves us wondering what the white man will do instead of, more importantly, wondering how the brown woman will use her education to benefit the borderlands communities.

Nevertheless, in producing the film version of *Detained*, Josefina López hoped to reach a wider audience than the usual CASA viewership and urge others to join the current sociopolitical movements that impact not only the Latin@ community, but the country as a whole. In promoting the film before its release, *Detained* was consistently screened across the country, at various film festivals, organizations, college campuses, movie theaters, community centers, etc. In regards to a screening at MiraCosta College in Oceanside, California, on February 21, 2014, as part of their Latino Film Series, Francisco C. Rodriguez, president of the college, stressed the necessity of exposing students to social justice issues such as immigration: "The college seeks to create opportunities for dialogue and greater understanding of societal issues, including the current plight of undocumented immigrants. With the current national debate on

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<sup>59</sup> Notwithstanding, working on the film did prove to be a life-changing coming-to-consciousness moment for Alexandra Lemus, the film's Sandi. Lemus booked the film without any formal training and, in fact, had never acted in a film before this experience. The film served as a catalyst, urging her to pursue an education at the Stella Adler Academy of Acting in Los Angeles. Lemus hopes that her education will allow her to better portray Latina characters; she notes: "...you really have to find your way and transform into these people. People are very complicated, very layered, and have so much inner conflict going on. (...) I want to be able to bring justice to these characters."



immigration reform, presenting this film to the public is educationally purposeful” (Qtd. in Sáinz). Events like this are pertinent to audiences as San Diego County residents are more conscious of the issues surrounding immigration due to the area’s close proximity to the border. This free event included a question and answer session with Josefina López and Enrique Morones, thus, creating a dialogue about the future possibilities of immigration and immigration reform.

*Detained* does not serve as simply a film in this regard, but as a living, breathing testament to the plight of undocumented immigrants, of which many students in attendance at MiraCosta surely know first-hand, given that it is a government designated Hispanic Serving Institution. Nevertheless, the screening at MiraCosta is just one of many across the country. Additionally, Chicano playwright and professor Carlos Morton brought López to the University of California, Santa Barbara, on February 5, 2014, for a discussion and screening. These events are necessary and often serve as a catalyst for the sociopolitical awakening and critical witnessing of those in attendance such as UCSB student Linda Gonzalez:

I took away a great appreciation for people like Josefina López, for making it her responsibility to challenge controversial issues in her art. It’s really difficult to expose oneself to issues like immigration and border-crossing death without feeling devastated and frustrated. After watching this film, I feel more optimistic about this issue. (Qtd. in Yamada)

Given these points, López’s activist work on *Detained in the Desert*, both the play and the film, remains vital to promoting social justice issues along the United States-Mexico border and urging young generations as well as audiences in general to enter into

the discussion about the future of this geopolitical space and, in such a way, (re)claim it as home, in both a literal and metaphorical sense.

### **A Chicana in Paris: *Hungry Woman***

López's *Hungry Woman* (2013),<sup>60</sup> the stage adaptation of her semi-autobiographical debut novel *Hungry Woman in Paris* (2009),<sup>61</sup> foregrounds the intersections between experience and place by removing the Chicana from the Eastside and placing her in Paris, France. *Hungry Woman* follows the story of Canela Guerrero, a struggling writer living on the border between her own interests and the expectations of her family and community. After realizing that she does not want to marry her fiancé, Armando, after an argument over the menu, Canela goes on their already-paid-for honeymoon and ultimately stays in Paris, France, to attend culinary school at the world-famous Le Coq Rouge, a process that reignites her passion for life, thus filling her hunger, both physical and spiritual, for greater meaning in life as she battles depression. The idea of cooking is transformed for the protagonist as she comes to terms with food and what it has meant to her growing up in the Eastside. Food becomes a metaphor for spiritual hunger; traditionally, Chicana wives and mothers dedicate their lives to serving others while simultaneously starving their own individual needs. The French kitchen and

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<sup>60</sup> *Hungry Woman* received its world premiere at Big Casa from June 7-30, 2013. In keeping with the role of CASA 0101 as a critical community performance space, an art exhibition, "La Gourmande," was held during the run of the play in the Jean Deleage Art Gallery at the theater. Speaking of "La Gourmande," curator Margaret Garcia affirms: "These works by women celebrate the appetite and lust for life inherent in their hunger for living" (CASA 0101). It is noteworthy that the artists included in the exhibition were not limited to those living on the Eastside nor the greater Los Angeles metropolitan area, but also included women from New Mexico and Texas, in this way fusing a collective Chicana/Latina identity.

<sup>61</sup> In regards to adapting her novel to the stage, Josefina López maintains it was a challenge, primarily because the novel is written in first person; she adds "For me, *Hungry Woman in Paris* the novel is a seven course meal, while *Hungry Woman* the play is a delicious appetizing meal with an extravagant desert" (CASA 0101). While the stage play contains all of the major plot elements of the novel, the novel, due to the format, expands on the character's emotions and opinions, thus offering a complete picture of Canela's journey to Paris and back again.

food become Wild Zone spaces that advance the protagonist's decolonization of the Eastside kitchen as well as develop her positive sense of self-worth. Under these circumstances, López's *Hungry Woman* questions: What happens when women of color put their own needs in front of those of others? How can Chicanas fill their spiritual hunger? How can women decolonize their relationship with food and the highly-gendered space of the kitchen?

In speaking of her relationship with food as it relates to home,<sup>62</sup> López states that after years of researching the unconscious desire for food, she has uncovered that food was her buffer when she needed comfort ("RWHC"). After her sister was kidnapped and almost raped, López felt unsafe in a thin woman's body. When López was thin, men would grab her on the street or in the pool. Therefore, she gained weight as a defense mechanism to protect her from being violated. Moreover, when she uncovered that her father was having an affair, there was no one to comfort her, so she turned to food. These experiences of using food as a buffer led López to develop a form of magnet therapy, an alternative medicine, in which she releases the unconscious desires to constantly seek comfort through food. As a result, "This constant unconscious desire to seek comfort is gone. (...) I feel finally like I'm at home in my own body and in my soul" (López, "RWHC"). Home is being sealed and whole; nothing can penetrate or take away because there is no longer a hole or a void.

For the playwright herself, an integral part of filling her spiritual hunger is that of staging a performative version of the more static novel, which serves as a healing device in and of itself. By creating a world for her stories and characters to inhabit, López

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<sup>62</sup> In 1995, López attended a playwriting master class at UCLA led by Cherríe Moraga. Moraga asked the students how they defined their sense of home and López responded that home is being comfortable in her own skin (López, "RWHC").

further heals herself while instilling positive representations of Chicana subjectivity on stage for Eastside audiences to witness. In Reed Johnson's positive review of the initial CASA 0101 staging for the *Los Angeles Times*, López discusses the process of staging *Hungry Woman*:

After we did the first reading, I was in tears, I couldn't stop, and I felt so naked. And I'm all for being naked, but it was the most naked I had ever felt. And part of the reason I wrote this was because my greatest fear was to commit suicide. My other great fear was to end up in a mental institute, because my parents didn't understand what I had. Now, by putting it on stage I really I am bringing it into the light, because I don't want to feel that anymore. (Qtd. in Johnson, "In 'Hungry Woman'")

While López's novel *Hungry Woman in Paris* is a valuable healing process in line with other inspirational tales of self-discovery such as the more mainstream *Under the Tuscan Sun* (1997) by Frances Mayes and *Eat, Pray, Love* (2007) by Elizabeth Gilbert,<sup>63</sup> it does not offer the same healing properties that theater and performance allow, a domain in which the audience is able to witness in live flesh the playwright's world. Naturally, this affects the actors as well. For instance, lead actress Rachel González, playing Canela, identifies with the feelings and emotions that the playwright inserts on stage: "I feel like—I was talking about this to Josefina the other day—in terms of the sexuality and being able to express that and some of the secrets and the shame and that kind of stuff,

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<sup>63</sup> In *Hungry Woman*'s press release, López comments that she "wanted to tell the traditional American in France story with a Latina protagonist to bring another perspective to this genre" (CASA 0101). She gives Latinas a story in this genre that has been primarily occupied by Anglo women. Her story compares life in the United States versus France from a decidedly Chicana feminist perspective. Reed Johnson suggests that this narrative is infrequent in Latina literature because, as a minority group, they have had fewer opportunities to travel freely to Europe.

that exists even with me has been part of a healing process for me too” (Qtd. in Johnson, “In ‘Hungry Woman’”).

Accordingly, the performance space is a zone that permits both playwright and actress to have a cathartic experience, not only once, but throughout the process of rehearsing and staging the play. *Hungry Woman* itself functions as a form of counter discourse that demonstrates López’s intuition to produce a story defined and conceptualized by female identity and experience within the traditionally limiting Chicano kitchen. Staging Canela’s battle with depression and self-fulfillment validates her experiences and reassures the audience that this story is universal. Yes, Chicanas can battle with depression and, yes, they can overcome it, too.

In *Hungry Woman*, Canela forges her identity as a Chicana in Paris, a city that misunderstands this particular hybrid identity (she is frequently mistaken for a Middle-Eastern immigrant and, consequently, still discriminated against, albeit in a different manner). In this sense, Paris serves as the principal catalyst to develop positive feminist agency, a power which she takes back to California as a stronger and more self-reliant woman. Only after cultivating her identity in Paris is Canela able to (re)appropriate the space of East Los Angeles as a site of feminist resistance in which she is no longer subjected to rigid definitions of gender. Given these premises, López dramatizes Canela’s personal growth by utilizing the thematic contrast between Parisian and Chican@ cultures and values.<sup>64</sup> Specifically, the glaring disparity between both cultures is

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<sup>64</sup> Apart from the obvious associations with food that the title of the play holds, it is impossible for a Spanish-speaking audience not to recognize the role of the protagonist’s name, Canela, the Spanish word for cinnamon, as she begins her journey. In the opening monologue, in which she breaks the fourth wall and addresses the audience directly, Canela establishes the associations she has had with food since birth: “My mother named me Canela because she loved to make buñuelos and add lots of sugar and cinnamon to them, (...) With my name she spiced me up and made me brown. She gave me a Spanish name so people would ask, “What is Canela?” More importantly, I hope you ask, “Who is Canela?” Who is Canela?” (J.

foregrounded in the kitchen, a decidedly gendered space in Chican@ culture. Food and the kitchen space become the means for building theory about identity and experience, not to mention that “foodmaking itself is fully theoretical” (Abarca and Pascual Soler 2).

In light of the liberating potential of the kitchen, María Claudia André proposes that for contemporary writers the kitchen “is a self-empowering site where gender and sexual identities (or subjectivities) may be explored and transformed” (5-6). Along similar lines, in analyzing the role of the writer as cook, Tey Diana Rebolledo asserts that “one way to express individual subjectivity (...) is by reinforcing this female identity as someone who cooks” (130). By assuming the role of cook, women are given the tools to produce multiple subjectivities through creation and authority of both food and space. In regards to the premises suggested by André and Rebolledo, the kitchen space has the potential to be transformed into a place of not only freedom but also self-gratification. This transformation is frequently seen in contemporary Chicana playwriting and performance with many women diving into the kitchen to write their own form of counter discourse: Diane Rodríguez’s *The Path to Divadom, Or How to Make Fat-Free Tamales in G Minor* (1985); Josefina López’s *Food for the Dead* (1989); Alicia Mena’s *Las Nuevas Tamaras* (1990); Elaine Romero’s *The Fat-Free Chicana and the Snow Cap Queen* (2000).<sup>65</sup> Considering the above works, these Chicana playwrights manifest the

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López, *Hungry Woman* 1). Thus, her name originates from an appropriate female space in patriarchal Chicano culture. Regardless of her personal (dis)connections with food, it always has been present in her life simply through being named after a common food in Chican@ and Mexican cooking: cinnamon. Moreover, the opening monologue presents one of the central themes of the play: that of transforming the protagonist, and Chicanas in general, from an object to a subject. By asking “who” instead of “what,” Canela’s audience grants her autonomy and further helps to exonerate her from the previously oppressive and restricting kitchen.

<sup>65</sup> Josefina López’s *Food for the Dead* centers on a *Día de los muertos* celebration in which the family dines over a traditional Mexican meal to mourn the death of the father, Ruben, for the last time. Subsequently, food serves as the catalyst to further differentiate Jesus’s Anglo boyfriend, Fernando, from his Chican@ family as he is unfamiliar with the food items and mispronounces the Spanish words. Food is

possibilities of the kitchen as a center of female-interpretation where marginality can not only be constructed, but, more importantly, reconstructed. Hence, Josefina López's use of the kitchen space falls into a contemporary tradition of looking toward the kitchen, as well as food itself, as an integral part of Chicana and Mexican identity formation, both positive and negative, both liberating and confining.<sup>66</sup>

For this reason, it is expected that in *Hungry Woman*, as well as the majority of López's works, the Eastside is associated with the traditional Chicano value system in which women are expected to adhere to the virgin/whore dichotomy and other gendered stereotypes. Part of this equation is that of the female serving the men in their lives. Naturally, this expected unwavering servitude to men is a burden that women must overcome. According to Gloria Anzaldúa, cultures such as the one Canela finds herself in expect "women to show greater acceptance of, and commitment to, the value system than men. The culture and the Church insist that women are subservient to males" (17). For this reason, López herself chose to write instead of cook as a form of rebellion; she believed that by getting an education, she could avoid perpetuating the gendered value system ("The Chavez Family").

In this respect, Meredith E. Abarca in *Voices in the Kitchen: Views of Food and the World from Working-class Mexican and Mexican American Women* proposes that the

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a signifier of Mexican-American culture and those on the outside, such as Fernando, do not fully comprehend it. Similarly, Alicia Mena's *Las Nuevas Tamareras* centers on food as it offers us insight into the *tamalada*, an event when women of all ages come together to prepare and cook tamales. Mena's work proposes that traditions are passed along from one generation to the next and, even though each person's individuality influences these traditions, they remain recognizable (Kessler). Each woman can project her own subjectivity and individuality via the tamales while still partaking in the traditional practice, thus perpetuating culture. Diane Rodríguez's performance piece *The Path to Divadom, Or How to Make Fat-Free Tamales in G Minor* also centers on a *tamalada* in which the narrator's cousin, Rachel, tries to alter the family tamale to make it healthier. This work also transmits the central message of *Las Nuevas Tamareras* that culture is alive and always changing and it is important to challenge and question traditions.

<sup>66</sup> Sandoval-Sánchez and Sternbach argue that these women use the kitchen as "a public domain where agency is developed and identity is established, and, most importantly, where hybrid subjectivities result from new historical positionalities, where a new combination of ingredients conflates" (129).

kitchen is an inherent site of female oppression, a key place that is the locus of women's vulnerability:

As a woman's *place* the kitchen can imply a site of mandatory and wifely and motherly duty to her family, culture, and even nation, a servitude that makes her financially dependent on her husband's salary, for her life revolves around mainly performing unpaid domestic labor. In this context many feminists argue that the kitchen represents the locus of women's emotional, physical, spiritual, and economic vulnerability. These concerns address the ideological meanings that produce the notion of *place*. (19)

For López's protagonist, home signifies suppression under the relentless authority of her family and male-identified values, most often, but not limited, to the kitchen.

Regarding the confining nature of conventional Chicano values, the death of Canela's best friend, Luna, drives Canela's decision to call off her wedding and depart for Paris. In delivering a monologue depicting Luna's backstory in front of her casket at the funeral, Canela effectively depicts the gendered reality that she is trying to avoid in East Los Angeles:

In our story, Luna met a guy and I remained single. I was never jealous of him, but he wasn't good enough for her. He was Mr. Now, but Luna was forced to make him Mr. Forever when her parents grew concerned that "the neighbors were talking," they married her off before she "got knocked up," to this poor guy who could barely afford to support her (...) Luna couldn't go to college and had to play the housewife, a role she was never born for. She got so depressed she gained weight and developed



diabetes. When she wanted to get pregnant she couldn't, because the doctors warned her it might kill her. She tried anyway but just had miscarriages, which made her even more depressed. Her world kept shrinking, but her body kept growing. Her dreams were larger than life, too big to exist in this world in a woman's body. (J. López, *Hungry Woman* 4)

Luna's plight demonstrates the reality that Canela attempts to alter throughout her journey of self-discovery. Battling her own demons and bouts of depression, Canela recognizes that she must fully love herself before she can commit to loving another individual. Part of this project involves placing her dreams at the forefront.

Given the smothering quality of East Los Angeles for Canela, her journey to Paris and the culinary world of Le Coq Rouge represents freedom. They serve as worlds in which the protagonist can seek the positive self-identifying powers of her previously suppressed eroticism and independence. In terms of stereotypes, it is noteworthy that Canela decides to go to a cooking school. López does this to decolonize her opinions of the kitchen as a restricting space for the female. In the Parisian kitchen, Canela's teachers are all male, flipping the gendered narrative of the Chicano kitchen as an inherently female-identified space focused on serving men. Effectively, this disrupts the gendered paradigm of the kitchen in which knowledge is passed on from mother to daughter across generations.<sup>67</sup>

Hence, Le Coq Rouge grants Canela the opportunity to develop positive self-identification with the physical space of the kitchen. Her time at the cooking school is a

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<sup>67</sup> Tey Diana Rebolledo affirms that because cooking knowledge is passed down through the female line, cooking allows female writers "to claim that voice of authority found in the cooking or 'recipes' of their mothers and grandmothers" (133).

liberating experience, the antithesis to the patriarchal Chicano kitchen to which her mother is confined. Canela tells us on multiple occasions of her mother's confinement to the kitchen and the bedroom, hence serving as a faithful wife to her philandering husband. According to Tey Diana Rebolledo, writing the Chicana as a cook in the kitchen functions as a strategy of claiming authority over gendered space and self-representation (132-3). Precisely, Canela's restructuring of Chicano gender roles and gendered spaces is made possible through the positive qualities of the French kitchen. In a flashback scene, Canela questions the Chicano male/female dichotomy of this space: "How come the men aren't in the kitchen? How come they're drinking beer and laughing and we are in this hot kitchen doing all the work? ... We are not in Mexico anymore" (J. López, *Hungry Woman* 26). The last words especially hold value to a full understanding of López's work; she identifies Mexico with patriarchy and women's subjugation. According to López's playscript, if Canela's family emigrated from Mexico to the United States, then why are they still adhering to traditional family values that subjugate women? Why does her family acculturate to some aspects of United States culture, but not to others that would inarguably benefit women? Canela, both as a child and an adult, questions why things are the way they are, refusing to accept that they are this way solely because they always have been.

Therefore, as a result of her experience(s), Canela decides to never go into a kitchen to cook for a man: "I swore after that experience that I would not go into a kitchen to cook for a man. I swore I would someday marry a man who would love me for my mind and not for how I reminded him of his mother or for the cooking and cleaning services I provided" (J. López, *Hungry Woman* 27). All of her memories of the kitchen

are associated with female suppression and unwavering faithfulness to men, and when she leaves the kitchen to sit in the living room with the men, they do not acknowledge her presence, their silence serving as a restrained protest to her being in the “wrong” gendered space. These negative associations are reversed in the physical space of Le Coq Rouge, a space that can fill her hunger for a world that allows her to have positive female agency and not be equal to a “piece of meat” (J. López, *Hungry Woman* 28). Canela’s reconstruction of positive associations with food and cooking is symbolically affirmed when Henry, her love interest while in Paris, not only fills her erotic desires, but cooks a meal for her after her graduation from Le Coq Rouge. While Chicano gender roles are flipped in this scene, Henry, an Englishman, is surprised: “You’re joking. None of your lovers ever cooked for you?” (J. López, *Hungry Woman* 53), thus reinforcing the Eastside/Paris dichotomy of gendered experiences and spaces.

As a final test to pass Superior Cuisine at Le Coq Rouge, Canela must create and execute an original dish utilizing the skills that she has learned throughout her culinary training. Canela’s dish, *Agneau à la Mexicaine-Américaine* (Lamb Mexican-American Style), establishes the protagonist as the knower, holding knowledge of how to put together the distinct parts of her identity into one dish that represents her journey. She must transform the traditional French ingredients into a dish that sufficiently represents the convergence of her multiple identities: in the United States and France, and in East L.A. and Paris. She is a Mexican-American in Paris. By naming the dish after her own hybridity, the dish is iconic of her life and journey.

In reference to the symbolic nature of cuisine, Roland Barthes in “Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption” states that food is “not only a

collection of products that can be used for statistical and nutritional studies. It is also, and at the same time, a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations, and behavior” (24). In other words, food is not simply something we eat in order to survive, but a key cultural object which can inform and transform one’s identity. The synthesis of Canela’s *Agneau à la Mexicaine-Américaine* represents all of her cultures in one dish that liberates her from the kitchen and symbolizes the end of her decolonizing the space during her time at culinary school.

Canela’s recipe becomes the central narrative structure which embodies the knowledge she has gained from the Parisian kitchen. The recipe becomes symbolic for knowing and freedom as it is a synthesis of the meaning and authority she has gained alongside their transnational context(s). After finishing her final test at Le Coq Rouge, Henry tells Canela that her “filling was quite original” (J. López, *Hungry Woman* 52), thus reaffirming her advancement as a knower and creator of knowledge (recipes). In fact, Henry affirms that Canela has truly earned her diploma:

CANELA: No, I’m just somebody who has a diploma that says I graduated from Le Coq Rouge. I’m not a chef.

HENRY: Of course you are a chef now. You can cook just like the rest of us.

(...)

CANELA: Hmmm... I don’t know... Maybe...But I’m not a good cook.

HENRY: Of course you are. Now you’re a perfectionist, but you can cook. I know you can. Your sauce and stuffing today were delicious, actually.

(...) Canela, you have the talent to be a chef, and a good one. Now it’s up

to you to decide whether you want to work to be a great one. (J. López, *Hungry Woman* 53-4).

Henry's words reiterate a central tenet of the Parisian kitchen: Canela is granted the ability to become a chef, not just a cook as seen in her mother's Eastside kitchen.

Whereas a cook is someone who cooks and/or prepares meals, the word chef, as the English "chief," refers to the traditional French kitchen hierarchy in which one must work their way up the ranks to achieve the highest title. Chef is a significantly higher ranking than cook and further establishes Canela as a leader in the kitchen and culinary world with the knowledge to create and actualize dishes and menus.

Similar to Canela's decolonizing experience in the kitchen, Josefina Ludmer suggests that even though the kitchen and other domestic and gendered spaces are subjugated places of silence for women, they are also spaces that permit and encourage female creation (53). Canela's ability to not only cook, but to create a sophisticated dish of French cuisine indicates her freshly-acquired power and positive association with the previously-subjugated space. As such, Canela's *Agneau à la Mexicaine-Américaine* functions as counter discourse, her own female-identified Wild Zone performance that challenges the restrictive properties of Chicano-enforced gendered paradigms and spaces.

Ultimately, the fictional Canela, just as López herself did, returns to the United States once she graduates from culinary school. Speaking of her experiences and decision to leave France, López states: "I just didn't feel at home and maybe I'll never feel like I'm at home anywhere" (Qtd. in Johnson, "In 'Hungry Woman'"). Regardless of Canela's intentions to forge a home in Paris, it is not home; she remains hungry and must return to Boyle Heights to satiate her spiritual hunger and need to make peace with both

her family and neighborhood. More importantly, Canela returns home a revitalized woman: “Henry and Le Coq Rouge had revived me and awakened my senses. I was alive again” (J. López, *Hungry Woman* 57). Canela’s positive Wild Zone experiences in Paris allows her to take this newly acquired positive self-association with place and carry that feminine power to East Los Angeles, thus returning with a positive connection with home.

In an empowering act that demonstrates the outward manifestation of her inner change, Canela prepares a French meal for her family, complete with a much-improved version of *Agneau à la Mexicaine-Américaine* alongside tomato confit, bell pepper *tian*, and chocolate soufflé with Chantilly cream, demonstrating mastery of the techniques and skills she has learned. She further gains authority and autonomy when she cooks the fancy French meal for her family; the meal metaphorizes her transformation. In the novel, Canela claims: “I felt like an artist. Like in some small way I had contributed to enriching my family’s life. I danced around victoriously...” (J. López, *Hungry Woman in Paris* 244). Whereas she lacks confidence in her execution of the dish during her final exam, this is the first positive experience she has had in a Chican@ kitchen.

The above indicates that the kitchen is a performative space that women can utilize to transform their identity and create new culture and positive discourse. Viviana Rangil proposes that “even though society’s notion of space and the particularities of the representations assigned to certain places [like the kitchen] are gendered, Latinas use spaces/places in order to subvert traditional representations and thus create new approaches to the process of constituting a space” (112). Thus, when Canela uses the Parisian kitchen as a space to study cuisine and become a chef, she is using it as a

performance space that allows her development of positive feminist agency. When she returns home, Canela appropriates her mother's kitchen and effectively eliminates her bad memories of the space as a negatively gendered space; Canela's performance as a fully-fledged French-trained chef is as much a political statement as it is a social one in which she establishes a new identity for herself as well as a new sociocultural reality for herself and any woman who so chooses to follow her lead. Consequently, when she becomes engaged again to Armando, she now has the power to decide what is best for her; she calls off the wedding, reinforcing her independence. The play ends with Canela at peace with herself, all enabled from occupying the positive spaces of Paris. She creates her own counter discourse, through food, that makes possible the filling of her spiritual hunger.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has explained several of the ways in which Josefina López theorizes home and home making in her creative work. Using the Ardeners' Wild Zone thesis as a point of departure, there exist certain female-derived forms of counter performances, or oppositional consciousness, that originate from women's connections with home and place. These Wild Zone performances are distinct from the hegemonic culture and are inaccessible to the patriarchal powers in question. As depicted in López's *Boyle Heights*, *Detained in the Desert*, and *Hungry Woman*, these counter performances grant subjectivity to women and assist in the process of their decolonization. *Boyle Heights* features the use of poetry to reestablish positive connections to place and home. In *Detained in the Desert*, López questions contemporary borderlands immigration policy,

specifically Arizona SB 1070. After being racially profiled and arrested, Sandi cultivates a survival tactic, reminiscent of Anzaldúa's *la facultad*, to claim the borderlands as home and take ownership of her destiny. Finally, *Hungry Woman* depicts Canela's reassessment of her relationship with food and claiming of the kitchen space, a highly gendered space in Chican@ culture, that are made possible in Paris, France. In regards to these three works, there is, therefore, a definite zone which permits marginalized women the opportunity to develop forms of autonomy and counter discourse which help them to maneuver the dominant, patriarchal culture. These plays present how the Wild Zone—and Chicana feminist theory—is performed, demonstrating how women can (re)claim both space and home.



## Chapter 4

### Performing *malas mujeres*: Re-visiting Chicana Cultural Paradigms

The lives of Chicanas, in particular, are circumscribed by cultural norms and values that try to dictate how they should behave as women and who their role models should be. Although several archetypes exist for women of Mexican origin to follow, none have as much sociocultural relevance as La Malinche and La Llorona.<sup>68</sup> La Llorona, the weeping woman of Mexican lore, is largely considered the mythical form of the historical figure, La Malinche, who was given to Hernán Cortés to serve as his translator during the conquest of Mexico (Pérez, *There Was a Woman* 30-2). Both Llorona and Malinche have been linked since the conquest, often representing the vanquished plight of Mexico and its people, a condition that has permeated Chican@ culture in the United States. By refusing to comply with social norms by which “good women” are constructed, these women become *malas mujeres*, or “bad women,” who are liable for the effects of their “bad” behavior (Gaspar de Alba, *[Un]Framing* 7). Both tales, therefore, have served as sexist cultural paradigms used to strengthen the patriarchy.

Concerning the role of cultural paradigms, Carl Jung theorizes that every community retains a collective unconscious that unites them through universal archetypes. Jung’s theory of the collective unconscious interprets experiential forms of archetypes in modern times:

If we cannot deny the archetypes or otherwise neutralize them, we are confronted, at every new stage in the differentiation of consciousness to which civilization attains, with the task of finding a new interpretation

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<sup>68</sup> Other examples are Coatlicue, La Virgen de Guadalupe, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, La Adelita, and Frida Kahlo.

appropriate to this stage, in order to connect the life of the past that still exists in us with the life of the present, which threatens to slip away from it. (157)

Jung formulates a theoretical framework that helps better understand how archetypes become integrated into contemporary cultures and psyches. He determines how myths impact identity and experience, whether recognized or not. As for cultural paradigms, they are systems of established conventions that determine in large part how individuals perceive the external world and interpret cultural knowledge. In other words, new identities are adjusted to and comprehended by the schemes of thoughts existing in a specific culture. Therefore, cultural paradigms allow us to interpret realities in the past, present, and future.

Given Jung's argument, La Malinche and La Llorona, as *malas mujeres*, are pertinent cultural paradigms for writers such as Josefina López since they are two of the most well-known female figures in Mexican and Chican@ culture. Both figures hold much potential for discussing various issues related to the reality of women, thus allowing for new discourses in contemporary Chican@ artistic expression. Playwrights utilize these identities and experiences to unpack cultural memories, histories, and myths as (re)imagined realms for the theater stage.<sup>69</sup>

Regarding Chicana performativity, Alicia Arrizón proposes that the female body is the ideal site to negotiate these previously fixed cultural paradigms as it can be

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<sup>69</sup> In *Performing Mexicanidad: Vendidas y Cabareteras on the Transnational Stage*, Laura G. Gutiérrez explores how Chicana and Mexican feminist artists have reappropriated and re-imagined feminine icons of Mexican national identity and, in general, Mexicanidad and Chicanismo to both critique and challenge national identity and its relationship with gender roles and female identity and experience. Gutiérrez affirms that these artists “publicly destabilize the manners that these paradigms and structures are produced and reproduced, parting from the premise of which the considerations of sexuality are a primordial element in public cultural debates related with censoring and control or, in more general terms, with politics and economy” (7).

deployed both to create layered subjectivities and give agency that will allow the subject in question to develop autonomy (*Latina* 27, 74). The body functions as the primary site to settle gendered cultural inadequacies. It is a space where women can both explore performative forms of identities and transcend the realm of the subjected. In this sense, as Cherrie Moraga reinforces, performance functions as a site of political activism and resistance in which bodies make testimonies that require other bodies to bear witness to it (*Chicana Codex* 34). Chicana theater artists, by nature, create complex representations of female sexuality that destabilizes the conventional stereotypes that typified the theater created predominantly by men in the 1960s and 70s. In fact, Moraga affirms that female artists become “bodies of revolt, bodies in dissent against oblivion” (*Chicana Codex* 41-2). Moraga continues:

This, the core of the Xicana teatrística’s journey:

The effort to uncover what we don’t remember,

To use the Xicana body as a way to dig up the dirt,

To find something of what is left of us. (*Xicana Codex* 46)<sup>70</sup>

In fact, in an unpublished essay titled “*Nomos*, the Feeding Place, the Dwelling Space,” housed in the Gloria Evangelina Anzaldúa Papers at the Benson Latin American Collection, Anzaldúa conflates the body with La Llorona. Anzaldúa proposes that the body, as both home and the site of all intersections, serves as a shape-shifting and shape-changing entity, reminiscent of La Llorona (GEA Papers, “*Nomos*,” Box 93, Folder 2). La Llorona functions both as the body and a moveable site, a crossroads that enables

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<sup>70</sup> Moraga uses these theories focusing on the Chicana body in *New Fire: To Put Things Right Again* (2011), in which the indigenous body is the location where culture and history are projected, thus establishing an altered version of cultural paradigms.

recovery. Given Arrizón and Moraga's theories on the performativity of the body, Anzaldúa's notion of La Llorona as body reveals possibilities of Chicana subjectivity, attainable through performance. In this way, we can begin to answer questions of identity through understanding how the body occupies space, in this case, the performance stage.

Utilizing theories of the body as a site to negotiate and (re)appropriate cultural paradigms, this chapter examines the deconstruction of "bad woman" archetypes—primarily La Malinche and La Llorona—to better understand how these figures destabilize patriarchal discourses. Chicana feminists appropriate, subvert, and transform these icons in such a way as to create discourses of resistance. Contemporary Chicana theater artists deploy the female body as a tool for cultural and political upheaval, using theater practice as a weapon of sociopolitical resistance. By presenting decolonized versions of these *malas mujeres*, López's stage grants these artists space to create complex portrayals of previously rigid cultural paradigms that limit the possibilities of Chicana womanhood. Therefore, this chapter explores how the female body performs cultural paradigms in contemporary Chican@ theater, specifically focusing on the works of Josefina López.

This chapter is divided into four parts. The first section examines La Malinche, the most well-known *mala mujer*, to understand the various performative manifestations of her legend. Given this overview, the following section focuses on López's *Confessions of Women from East L.A.* (1996) and analyzes women's use of the body as a site to recreate positive subjectivities. In *Confessions*, Lolita and Roxie alter their identities and performances to combat the threat of rape; these transformations paint them as "bad women," comparable to La Malinche, for their disavowal of traditional Chicana

femininity. The third section centers on the Llorona myth as it pertains to Chican@ theater. After a brief overview of the legend, the final section evaluates López's *Unconquered Spirits* (1995) detailing how the myth is performed across time and theater spaces. In this chapter, we will see, these plays demonstrate how body and performance work in unison to appropriate and reconfigure cultural paradigms to shape their own re-imagined identities and subjectivities.

### **Stages of La Malinche, Staging La Malinche**

La Malinche<sup>71</sup> has often been reexamined and transformed since the 1960s as a necessary part of the Chican@ cultural movement. Given her complexity and often negative portrayal both culturally and historically, La Malinche is frequently represented by Chican@ writers, in particular women, as a figure that should be recovered and transformed. As Gloria Anzaldúa proposes, the legends of these figures, in particular La Malinche, are reclaimed and reinterpreted (30). By redeeming La Malinche as a potent figure, Anzaldúa proposes recovering her in a positive light while simultaneously (re)claiming a space for Mexican/Chicana cultural and historical memory.

La Malinche, or Doña Marina, was an historical figure, important in the conquest of Mexico. Even though she appears in more or less every account of this historical period, such as Hernán Cortés's *Cartas de Relación*, Francisco López de Gómara's *La Historia de la Conquista de México*, Fray Bernardino de Sahagún's *Códice Florentino: General History of the Things of New Spain*, and Bernal Díaz del Castillo's *Historia Verdadera de la Conquista de la Nueva España*, these accounts are written by men,

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<sup>71</sup> The woman known as La Malinche is also known as Malintzín, Marina, Malinal, and Ce-Malinalli; the five names are essentially interchangeable.

offering readers a male-centered viewpoint of both conquest and woman. Patriarchal interpretations have painted her in a negative light as a key player in the destruction of the Aztec Empire. Both her body and tongue accepted the foreign, Cortés himself and the Spanish language; this “treachery” represents, under a phallocentric lens, women as naturally evil and open to foreign domination (A. Del Castillo 139). Her role as Cortés’s interpreter has led to a diversity of legends that have penetrated collective Mexican and Chican@ thought and, as a result, authors on both sides of the border have returned to La Malinche to re-read and re-write her legacy.

Given these premises, La Malinche is an often polarizing figure in Mexican and Chican@ culture; she is seen as a traitor similar to the Biblical Eve. Nevertheless, Norma Alarcón sustains:

Unlike Eve whose primeval reality is not historically documentable and who supposedly existed in some past edenic time, Malintzin’s betrayal of our supposed pre-Colombian paradise is recent and hence almost palpable. This almost-within-reach past heightens romantic nostalgia and as a consequence hatred for Malintzin and women becomes as vitriolic as the American Puritans’ loathing of witches-women. (182)

In light of the figure’s recent and documentable role in history, she reaches a level of hatred unattainable to traditional traitor archetypes such as Eve. Therefore, it is no coincidence that in a patriarchal society La Malinche is known as “La Chingada,” or “the fucked one.” In *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, Octavio Paz deconstructs the legend, albeit in a sexist manner, highlighting the verb “chingar” as the verb that best characterizes the gender roles in Mexican and Chicano society:

*Chingar* then is to do violence to another, i.e., rape. The verb is masculine, active, cruel: it stings, wounds, gashes, stains (...) The person who suffers this action is passive, inert, and open in contrast to the active, aggressive, and closed person who inflicts it. The *chingón* is the *macho*, the male; he rips open the *chingada*, the female, who is pure passivity, defenseless against the entire world. (77)

Given Paz's commentary, Chicanas are seen as sexually passive and, for that matter, susceptible to men's use whether by seduction or violence. Paz's account offers insight into how the Nation is constructed based in part on phallocentric interpretations of La Malinche and other female figures. Paz attempts to explain the reasons behind Mexican identity formation, but, coincidentally, excludes women in this process, offering readers a phallocentric account.

Through the Malinche legend, female sexuality is converted into a negative site. The female, according to Paz's account, is always *la chingada*, the fucked one. Paz's take on these cultural paradigms of femininity enclose these icons in "a space/place where they cannot defend themselves against these accusations and where they are constantly 'chingadas'" (Morales 2). The persistent assault on La Malinche leads to the negative image that is also seen in language. Historically and to this day, Chicanas that question conventional gender roles jeopardize their place in society, running the risk of being labeled as a Malinche or *malinchista*. She is a traitor to Chicanismo. Thus, to not be categorized as a Malinche, a Chicana woman must remain loyal to her people by compromise, principally sexual, to the Chicano male in which case he is able to maintain

his elevated social status within cultural and familial patriarchal structures (Yarbro-Bejarano, “The Female Subject” 393).

Focusing on Malinche’s historical roots, not to mention the re-reading and re-writing of other cultural paradigms, Chicana artists and writers translate themselves into subjectivity by forming a distinctly female space that lies outside of patriarchal influence. Rather than allow this stigma to persist, women feel the need to critically engage with La Malinche to decolonize previously male-centered narratives. With respect to the question of women and feminist ideology, Chicana writers do not see Malinche as a victim of rape and conquest, but as a woman who had agency.<sup>72</sup>

Although she frequently appears in poetry and prose, various playwrights have concentrated on the legend, including El Teatro Campesino and Carlos Morton. El Teatro Campesino’s *La conquista de Mexico* (1968), a puppet show that tackles socio-historical issues pertinent to the Chican@ cause, has received much attention. Here, La Malinche is presented by the Narrator as a sell-out, similar to Miss Jimenez of El Teatro Campesino’s *Los Vendidos*.<sup>73</sup>

This woman was to become infamous in the history of Mexico. Not only  
did she turn her back on her own people, she joined the white men and

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<sup>72</sup> Principally, women have concentrated on the legend in their literary production: Lucha Corpi’s “Marina Poems” (1975); Carmen Tafolla’s “Yo soy La Malinche” (1978), Pat Mora’s “Aztec Princess” (1984), Margarita Cota-Cárdenas’ *Puppet* (1985), Erma Gonzales-Berry’s *Paletitas de guayaba* (1991), Graciela Limón’s *Song of the Hummingbird* (1996), Demetria Martínez’s *Mother Tongue* (1997), and Laurie Ann Guerrero’s *A Tongue in the Mouth of the Dying* (2013) to name a few.

<sup>73</sup> *Los Vendidos* (1967) presents a woman with certain malinchista features: Miss Jimenez. At the beginning of the *acto*, she is established as a *vendida*, or sell out, when she stresses the Anglo pronunciation of her name as “JIM-enez”: “My name is Miss JIM-enez. Don’t you speak English? What is wrong with you?” (Valdez, *Early Works* 41). Due to her bad pronunciation, the audience understands that she has assimilated to the hegemony. Given that she is the play’s first *vendido*, it is easy to connect her position as a Malinche. The play is set at “Honest Sancho’s Used Mexican Lot” where Miss Jimenez is buying Mexicans for Ronald Reagan’s political campaign; she conspires with the enemy and, thus, symbolizes La Malinche.



became assimilated, serving as their guide and interpreter and generally assisting in the conquest. She was the first Mexican-American. (Valdez, *Actos* 58).

Valdez's may be interpreted as a challenge to Chicana feminists; like La Malinche, they are adaptable, intelligent, and leaders, characteristics that defy conventional social expectations for women (Candelaria, "La Malinche" 6). Within the feminist framework, La Malinche is active, strong, articulate, and strong. Set against iconic Mexican and Spanish historical figures such as Hernán Cortés, Moctezuma, and Cuauhtémoc, she is commanding and present among these powerful men. In contrast to Valdez's play, Morton's *La Malinche* (1997) fuses the title legend with La Llorona, in a similar way to López's *Unconquered Spirits*. Like feminist writers, Morton rewrites the history of La Malinche; she is redeemed so that she may take her revenge. The figure salvages her legacy and destroys that of the conqueror. But in his earliest play *El jardín*, dating from the mid-1970s but not published until 1983, Morton incorporates La Malinche into a re-interpreted Eva of the Garden of Eden.<sup>74</sup>

Many plays contain characters and/or characteristics that draw attention to La Malinche. While these works do not necessarily focus on the legend itself, they must be examined to realize an in-depth analysis of Chican@ artistic expression. Josefina López regularly criticizes gender norms that predominate in Chican@ culture. Her critique involves a re-analysis of women and the stereotypes associated with them. For example, in *Simply María, or the American Dream* (1989), López invokes the legend to denounce

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<sup>74</sup> In this allegorical drama, the serpent tells Eva that Spain will conquer Mexico. Morton writes: "You live in Paradise, worshipping the Lord who will one day come with the conquistadores of España, the bearded ones, and you will be La Malinche, she who will interpret for the white man and betray your own tribe, tu raza. You will even mate with their leader, Hernán Cortés, and the first of a bastard race will be born in Tenochtitlán-México! (110).

Mexican gender roles and patriarchy, principally for women. The work focuses on the cultural “norms” that María must accept, as much the “American Dream” as her roles as a Mexican mother and wife. In the marriage scene, the priest explains to María the marriage vows that reinforce the privileged status of her husband:

María, do you accept José Juan González García López as your lawfully wedded husband to love, cherish, serve, cook for, clean for, sacrifice for, have his children, keep his house, love him even if he beats you, commits adultery, gets drunk, rapes you lawfully, denies you your identity, money, love his family, service his family, and in return ask for nothing? (J. López, *Simply María* 132).

After the ceremony, María acts like a dog. This emphasizes her second-class status within marriage, a microcosm of her marginalized position within the confines of Chicano nationalism. The dream ends with María on trial for rejecting her obligatory matrimonial duties according to the sexist cultural parameters that privilege men. Likewise, *Detained in the Desert*’s protagonist, Sandi, parallels the Malinche legend in her youth, as was discussed in Chapter 3. By rejecting her Mexican roots to be accepted into the hegemonic Anglo community of her elementary school, Sandi avoids racial discrimination until adulthood, an act that embodies Malinche.

**Misunderstood *chicanas violadas*: *Confessions of Women from East L.A.***

*Confessions of Women from East L.A.* debuted in 1996 in San Diego as a joint production at Teatro Máscara Mágica and the Fritz Theater. The monologue cycle features nine different characters, showing several facets of their identities. As López has

stated in an interview with Jorge Huerta, “I am all these women,” thus the play presents audiences with the complexity of being a woman of color in East Los Angeles (“Untitled”). Building on this concept, in the playwright’s notes from the world premiere production program, López states:

These monologues have been inspired by women that I’ve met in East L.A., seen on the bus, or on the street and they are also autobiographical. Some of them are me or my mother at different stages in our lives. When you put them all together you get to understand the Latina that I am. I am neither a virgin, mother, or whore. I have a little of them all, but we Latinas are much more complex and diverse than those Hollywood stereotypes. (*Confessions* Program)

In this way, the work debunks stereotypes of Chicanas as virgins, mothers, and whores by presenting different women in all of their complexity. The monologues vary from layered character studies to one-note jokes, but, in all regards, these women lay their souls bare to voice women’s plurality and offer insight into this often overlooked community.

This section analyzes the performance of the “bad woman” archetype in response to rape violence as seen in López’s *Confessions*. Although the label “Malinche” or “Malinchista” is never uttered, Gaspar de Alba alludes to the legend of Malinche as the quintessential “bad woman” by demonstrating that in sexist Chicano culture, the “bad woman” becomes synonymous with the ultimate “bad woman,” Malintzín ([*Un*]Framing 7-9). In *Loving in the War Years*, Cherríe Moraga reaffirms this point that even if we do not know the history of La Malinche, all present-day Chicanas suffer under her name (90-5). Given Gaspar de Alba and Moraga’s theories, *Confessions* features two rape victims,

Lolita and Roxie, who alter their appearance and demeanor to perform a decolonized Malinche paradigm. Lolita's performance embodies a hyper sexualized Chicana who uses sexuality to empower herself, exacting revenge on all men, whereas Roxie's performance embraces a masculinized version of her former self in which she teaches self-defense to protect herself and fellow Chicanas from abusive relationships with men. These women's responses, offering alternative paths to deal with the trauma of rape, are powerful and reject the cultural roles traditionally accepted for women in Chican@ society.

Curiously, save the numerous, ad nauseam, depictions of the birth of the Mestiz@ resultant from a Spaniard raping an indigenous woman in Chican@ theater, rape is seldom seen or discussed on the Chican@ stage in a contemporary context, a space in which the subject is more often than not glossed over in a superficial way such, as when Gemini confesses to being raped in Virginia Grise's *blu* (2009). Rarely is the subject brought forward and discussed in a thorough manner. The most notable depiction of rape in Chican@ theater occurs in Cherrie Moraga's *Giving Up the Ghost* (1984), in which Corky, the teenage pachuca, details the violent rape she experienced as a young teenager. Despite Corky's lengthy monologue detailing her assault, she disappears, never to be seen again. Moraga, whether consciously or not, denies her protagonist an alternative method to heal the pain; Corky is forgotten. Perhaps, Moraga is questioning the tools that Latinas have in the real world to deal with gendered trauma. Grise and Moraga's rape victims directly contrast with Roxie and Lolita of *Confessions*, in which López theorizes alternative schemes that embody the empowering transformations Chicanas can undergo to control their bodies and sexuality. Women such as Roxie and Lolita consciously decide to alter their images and performance as a strategy to combat male domination.

Nevertheless, as both women are misunderstood, López insists that Chicano society will always label these women as *malas mujeres* for their disavowal of traditional Chicana femininity.

By creating women that reject accepted cultural truths, López challenges the traditional gendered narrative seen in Chican@ theater. Nevertheless, *Confessions* shows that society will always label these women and continue to marginalize them rather than see them through the powerful characteristics that they embody. López insists that there will always be repercussions for women who perform alternates to cultural archetypes. The play demonstrates that performance, the body, and political economy are inextricably connected. Lolita and Roxie's bodies are the outward signifiers of their performance and their newly-found feminist methodologies to combat rape culture, offering other women alternative paths to take in response to rape.

One of the more notable monologues in *Confessions* is that of Roxie. Through Roxie, a self-defense instructor, López theorizes a masculinized self-defense tactic, one of many survival tactics that women can implement to protect themselves from sexual predators. Roxie falls into a small category of masculine women on the Chican@ stage, alongside Corky of Moraga's *Giving Up the Ghost* as the most noteworthy example. Although, opposite of López's Roxie, Moraga's character presents a lesbian subjectivity while highlighting the individual and cultural problems of openly identifying as a lesbian. Both Corky and Roxie serve as trailblazers for contemporary depictions of masculine womanhood on stage, such as the lesbian couple Soledad and Hailstorm in Grise's *blu*.

Like many of López's female characters, Roxie originates from the playwright's own experiences. After frequently being grabbed on the street, López began taking self-

defense classes to protect herself and feel comfortable in her own skin. The courses bolstered her confidence by giving her the tools to fight back. López states: "...if a man were to enter my space, now that I took self-defense classes (...) you don't invade my space and I'm not afraid to (...) strike back or kill if I had to. (...) This happened to me and it just so invades you" ("The Chavez Family"). Learning how to defend herself both emotionally and physically aided López in transforming her thoughts and not being constantly scared walking around her neighborhood.

Building on the playwright's personal experiences, Roxie's monologue is delivered from jail, where she finds herself due to attacking a man who invaded her personal space. She relates the growing sexism that she experienced growing up and the increased fear that she endured due to the male gaze. To better protect herself, Roxie became a self-defense instructor. Ironically, she explains how she still was raped even after devoting her life to protecting herself and other women. Therefore, when a man asked her for the time one night, Roxie attacked him, having believed him to be a perpetrator. Once in jail, Roxie pleads her case:

I did it out of self-defense. I thought he was going to attack me so I attacked him before he tried it. How was I supposed to know he wasn't going to attack me? So what that he claims he wasn't going to attack me. Of course! What's he going to say? "Yeah I was going to attack her, rape her, and leave her for dead, but she hit me in the balls before I had a chance to throw her on the floor and punch her face"? I'm innocent! Why would I attack a man for no reason? (J. López, *Confessions* 132)

The police, collectively representing authorities' attitudes towards rape, think that Roxie is overreacting, despite her tale following similar models of other rape cases.

Immediately, the audience is struck by the hardened masculinity of Roxie, "*a tough-looking Latina, wearing jeans, cowboy boots with steel heels, and a sleeveless blouse that shows off her tattoos*" (J. López, *Confessions* 132). Her aggressive persona typifies a province normally occupied by men. Roxie's appearance is meant to provoke mistaken opinions about her sexuality. Right away, POLICEWOMAN #1 states what the audience surely has accepted as a fact: "Fuckin' dyke" (J. López, *Confessions* 132). Roxie negates being a lesbian, implying that she regularly defends her sexuality. While she appears to be a butch lesbian due to her masculine appearance, she is entirely feminine at her core.

Due to her fear of being sexually assaulted, Roxie implements a masculinized appearance in concordance with her role of self-defense instructor, one that allows her to better protect herself while also instilling a sense of security in her female students. Roxie declares: "I got harassed so much by men. I got tired of their threatening remarks so I took a self-defense class. I got so good at it I decided to teach it" (J. López, *Confessions* 133). Regarding the prevalence of rape as a natural occurrence in a patriarchal society and the lingering fear that haunts women's experience, Susan Griffith has stated, "I have never been free of the fear of rape. From a very early age I, like most women, have thought of rape as part of my natural environment—something to be feared and prayed against like fire or lightning, I never asked why men raped; I simply thought it one of the many mysteries of human nature" (Qtd. in Canning 148). This strengthens the notion that rape is not an isolated occurrence inflicted upon one woman, but a collective experience

that all women share due to being women. The central burden remains that all women are potential rape victims. This explains why Roxie cultivates her hardened performance and assists other women in her community in developing practical everyday survival tactics such as self-defense.

To better understand Roxie's dilemma, it is necessary to recognize her relationship to anger. Roxie's anger stems from society's male gaze, an accepted norm that objectifies women. Part of Roxie's anger stems from being objectified. She professes an intimate spiritual connection to her breasts and sees unsolicited groping as an act against not only her but against God as well. Being objectified desecrates her relationship with God and her body. After being defiled, Roxie transforms her anger into a positive form of empowerment. Roxie declares: "The last time a jerk grabbed my breast I felt so helpless. I cried for an hour when I got home. Then the next day I went to my first self-defense class... Soon after I was teaching my own self-defense class..." (J. López, *Confessions* 134). It is impossible to overlook the interconnected nature of gendered roles and Roxie's masculinized performance; aggression and violence are inextricably connected to the male experience in a traditional society. Her masculinity, a manifestation of mental and physical fortitude and aggression, contradicts a conventional model of Chicana femininity. By transforming her anger into a survival tactic, Roxie transgresses sexist gender boundaries that have defined women's collective experience in the Southwest, boundaries heightened during the civil rights movement of the 1960s and 70s.

Yet, even with preventative training, Roxie becomes a rape victim, reminding her of her marginalized position. She delivers this section of her monologue out of character



in a sense; the lights fade and she is no longer the self-confident and assured Chicana that we have come to know. Roxie notes:

But even with all the knowledge and training I still got raped... I didn't know that I had gotten raped until I read in a magazine article that said that when a man has sex with a woman when she is not conscious, it is rape. I wasn't drunk, I was just falling asleep. I was so tired. I wanted to spend the night in bed with him just talking and then he was on top of me. I couldn't yell "fire," I couldn't kick or fight back. He kept wanting it and I just submitted. It was so casual that when I woke up I just thought it was unpleasant... (J. López, *Confessions* 134-5)

Immediately after, her performance transitions back to the tough self-defense instructor, highlighting the theatricality of the piece. By changing not only the lighting cues but also her individual performance, Roxie is able to transmit the pain that she carries from being the victim of non-consensual sex. Josefina López forces her audience to reconsider what encompasses rape. Roxie's story exemplifies the type of rape confession that plagues women all across the world in today's rape culture climate in which, by not saying "no," some men feel free to pursue forced sexual encounters with women.

It is essential to remember that Roxie is delivering her monologue from jail. She finds herself there because she defended herself from a possible assault. This reaffirms society's patriarchal views on the parameters of Chicana femininity. With the police questioning her story's validity, Roxie is reminded of the trauma she previously underwent as a rape victim. Trauma is not easy to overcome, not only because the experience is irreversible, but also because the trauma is habitually experienced as a

haunting presence over time (Kilby 217). In this instance, Roxie is forced to relive her previous sexual assault and is unable to move beyond the trauma inflicted upon her. The trauma of rape functions as a double wound in which the mind is wounded as well as the body so that the suffering is not isolated to the original occurrence, but rather continues to haunt the individual (Caruth 4).

Ultimately, Roxie is forced to remember that Chicano society will always impose its norms on women. At the end of her monologue, her attacker drops the charges, but she is forced to apologize to him in order to be released from jail. Society requires her to express remorse for her act of self-defense, further enhancing restricted gender dichotomies and the notion of hysterical women and innocent men. López theorizes the complexities of Chicanas' lives and the gendered paradigms of behavior and body that a sexist society imposes by highlighting the masculine approach that Roxie implements and its ultimate failure to improve her life.

Additionally, López further conceptualizes the gendered paradigms through Lolita's confession in which the hyper-sexualized Chicana body is a site of resistance and female empowerment. Similar to the sexualized body seen in Monica Palacios's *Greetings from a Queer Señorita* (1995) and Adelina Anthony's *La Angry Xicana?! and La Sad Girl...* (2013), Lolita's performance emphasizes how Chicanas can use their bodies to challenge society's norms and overcome the power inflicted upon them by the patriarchy.

Lolita is *Confessions*'s "Hot Señorita type"; she is "*flamboyant, a sexy Latino who is not afraid to express her opinions and doesn't need anybody's approval. She wears her hair high and loose*" (J. López, *Confessions* 124). We meet Lolita in the

pharmacy; her alter-ego, Dolores, is waiting for a prescription and eyes the female condoms. Lolita enters and declares:

Female condoms? Female Condoms! Tsss! The day I start wearing female condoms is the day the Equal Rights Amendment is passed; women are no longer raped and beaten up in this country (...) and young women all over the world have equal opportunity to get an education and get fed properly. 'Til then, shit! The least men can do is wear a condom, know what I mean, prieta? (J. López, *Confessions* 124)

Lolita embodies everything that Dolores does not; while Dolores is passive, Lolita is strong, aggressive, and, in Josefina López's words, a Chingona (badass). She portrays the internalized strength that Dolores hopes to develop to defend herself from her abusive relationship.

Lolita quickly addresses the audience: "I know you think I'm a slut, I know you do so don't deny it (...) Now, do I look like a slut to you? Of course I do, I work at it. But you can be one or just look like one, but I ain't one. I'm a chingona! (...) I'm what some men call a 'tease'" (J. López, *Confessions* 125). López challenges spectators to reconsider women such as Lolita who embrace their sexuality in a society that depreciates such confidence. Lolita details how she uses her sexuality to enact revenge on all men for the one that raped her and took her virginity. After pretending to be promiscuous, she changes her mind, but is raped nevertheless. Still, Lolita does not understand how a man can have "such a beautiful expression while he was doing such an evil thing" (J. López, "The Chavez Family").

Her story epitomizes women who are viewed by men as passive sex objects in which men feel entitled to sexual encounters, consensual or not, with them. Lolita finds solace in her revenge against men and is rewarded with a “redeemable male” that she likes “too much to seriously consider giving it up to him” (J. López, *Confessions* 127). Her words are a call-to-action in which Chicanas, such as Dolores, can take control of their lives by embracing an in-your-face sexuality that nullifies gendered dualities.

Lolita’s sexualized performance protests against sexual violence inflicted on the Chicana body. She vividly describes her tactics against men. She tells Dolores to “Make eye contact. Stare a little longer than you should, then, turn away... You got him. Then the game begins. So have fun. Just don’t touch...” (J. López, *Confessions* 126). She details how she teases men and forces them to masturbate for her, a process that places Lolita in the dominate position. López writes:

They’re so horny they settle for masturbating for me. So I watch. They make these faces. I imagine kinda like the faces they would be making as they were being born. They look like children screaming for their lives. They look so vulnerable, so delicate, like I could take them into my arms and crush the life out of them... Sometimes I touch their faces and hold them while they come. I watch their faces and I get more excited than if I were to have sex with them. (*Confessions* 126)

Through this procedure, Lolita demasculinizes her suitors by subordinating their penetrating ability; she becomes the powerful force in the sexual hierarchy that relegates men to a feminized passivity. Furthermore, in this moment, the man’s defenses are weakened. Lolita can do anything she wants and he cannot stop her.

While empowering to Lolita, her method is a threat to her suitor's masculinity. Social pressure requires that women be loyal at all times to their male counterparts, a concept that Holland et al. sustain:

A young woman is under social pressure (which she may or not resist) to present male sexual partners with her idealized but material body for his pleasure. Any discourse which legitimizes her pleasure, acknowledges her sexual knowledge, values her performance and places it under her control, is potentially threatening to his masculinity. (29-30)

The Chicano male's unearned gender privilege governs women in patriarchal heteronormative relationships. While Lolita manifests a counter culture methodology of navigating Chicano society from becoming a rape victim, she immediately embodies a *mala mujer*, a "bad woman" and a transgressor. Society dictates that the Chicana must remain subordinated by men and maintain her passive femininity and sexuality, which suppresses her own desires. In Lolita's case and that of other overtly sexualized Chicanas, society results to shaming them, whether through labels such as "slut" or "whore."

Over all, Lolita demonstrates an active and powerful femininity. This allows her to use her material body to shape her consciousness and gain autonomy over her own sexuality (Holland et al 22). Still, women who adhere to counter hegemonic gender roles risk being labeled as transgressors and further marginalized by society. Chicanas are further subordinated by their community through rigid social roles, however archaic they are today. Sonia Saldívar-Hull affirms, "Chicanas constantly grapple with the demands that our culture places on us as women (...) when we deviate from Mexican/Chicano

traditions that exploit and oppress women, other Chicanos/as challenge our identity” (34). The threat of additional marginalization deters Chicanas from conceptualizing a confident and “in-your-face” sexuality. Lolita’s reclaiming of her body and sexuality attains freedom from patriarchal values and self-definition against gendered norms and sexism. Her inclusion in *Confessions* permits Josefina López to formulate alternative routes for women to empower themselves after being victims of sexual assault. Lolita, having lost her virginity when a boy she liked raped her, conceptualizes a hyper-sexualized femininity that enables her to gain control over men and invert gendered cultural paradigms. Still, as she notes in the beginning of her monologue, society classifies her as a “slut,” reifying the notion that she will be seen as a “bad woman” for rejecting Chicano cultural norms.

By deconstructing the “bad woman” archetype, López actualizes the possibility for women to replace previous feelings of inadequacy with self-love and solidarity. Both Lolita and Roxie are models to follow to search for a more positive (i.e. more empowering) social position within the Chican@ community. López demonstrates that these women are strong; they are survivors. The women in *Confessions*, not only Lolita and Roxie, present us with strategies that empower both actress and spectator. Nevertheless, López indicates that, although Lolita and Roxie implement varying methods of self-empowerment in response to sexual violence, these women will always be seen as transgressors, as “bad women,” for rejecting traditional Chicana femininity.

### **Myth and Mother: Revising the Llorona Script**

La Llorona's myth, whose roots can be traced back to Aztec mythology and the goddess Cihuacoatl, who wailed for her children that were destined to die, maintains a visible position within present-day Chican@ culture. Notably, in his landmark essay, "The Rise of the Mestizo," Américo Paredes examines both La Malinche and La Llorona through a folklorist lens, elevating the latter to the level of the former in the Chican@ psyche.<sup>75</sup> Paredes's work establishes La Llorona as an archetype of the Mexican nation and its people and, therefore, one of the Chican@ nation as well. The product of both Medea and Pre-Colombian antecedents, the Llorona myth centers around images of women who murder or abandon their children and cannot rest from that moment on, as seen in both Indian and Spanish cultures. These women's restless spirits wander and appear to people walking on deserted streets or streams.<sup>76</sup>

La Llorona takes the blame and becomes a scapegoat to explain conquest, incest, male treachery or infidelity, sexual desire, and the dichotomy between love and hate (Candelaria, "Letting La Llorona Go" 94). In this way, the figure shares several similarities with La Malinche. In some versions, La Llorona is a descendent of La Malinche who, after Cortés threatens to leave her and take their children with him, decides to drown them. The confluence of these two "bad women" permits male-centered viewpoints, such as that of Octavio Paz, to portray them as cultural traitors. The union of these figures originates from their experiences that appear equal, but as Domino Renee Perez argues, "these two women and their attendant narratives are two distinct entities,

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<sup>75</sup> Paredes signals the figure's European roots, but sustains that the myth of Medea "struck deep roots in the Mexican tradition because it was grafted on an Indian legend cycle about the supernatural woman who seduces men when they are out alone on the roads or working in the fields" (103). La Llorona takes many forms—La Malinche, Medea, matlacihua, Madame Butterfly—thus best exemplifying the current synthesis between Spanish and Indigenous (Paredes 103).

<sup>76</sup> In particular, La Llorona is associated with rivers and other bodies of water and, when children drown, often Latin@s blame it on the Weeping Woman.

each representing something very different within criollo, Indigenous Mexican, and Chican@ cultures” (*There Was a Woman* 30).

However, certain roots of their narratives correlate and support the conflating of these different figures. Primarily, the combination emerges from the destiny of La Malinche’s children. Although La Malinche did not murder her children, she did lose them. But, instead of placing the blame on the colonizers, history prefers to blame the woman. The two figures adhere to negative connotations as the failed mother opposite the ideal of maternal goodness that is La Virgen de Guadalupe. Even though La Malinche and La Llorona both experience denigration, they are distinct individuals who share a phallocentric legacy and history that implicate different things for each. This complexity is central to José Limón’s work, “La Llorona, The Third Legend of Greater Mexico: Cultural Symbols, Women, and the Political Unconscious,” in which he argues that La Llorona exists on two levels; she not only appeals to utopic vision of the nation as a rebellious symbol, but also as a “positive, contestative symbol” for women (400).<sup>77</sup>

Taking a feminist position that furthers Limón’s viewpoints, Cherrie Moraga maintains that the myth reinforces the ideology of the woman as inherently sinful, an “aberration, criminal against nature” (*Loving* 145). The myth encourages gendered cultural paradigms that promote male supremacy. For example, it teaches young girls to accept punishment for actions for which men are rewarded and that sexual enjoyment is sinful for women. In fact, female autonomy is conflated with the act of infanticide, painting the woman as a bad and unfit mother who takes revenge on her unfaithful

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<sup>77</sup> Moreover, Limón sustains that La Llorona can be studied as an opposition to the patriarchal forces that control female behavior by extremes such as the virgin/whore dichotomy; in some versions, the blame can even be put on men (416). The actions of the man judge him as the *puta* who is responsible for the subsequent deaths of his murdered children “as a consequence to his prostitution” (Limón 416).



husband. Therefore, it is easy to see how the Weeping Woman, much like La Malinche, symbolizes the “bad woman” and failed mother.

With the myth’s cultural role in mind, it is not unusual that La Llorona surfaces often in Chicana cultural expression. In regard to contemporary portrayals of the myth, in “Crossing Mythological Borders: Revisioning La Llorona in Contemporary Fiction,” Domino Renee Perez maintains that many Chicana authors:

... are constructing new versions that cross the traditional borders of the folktale to celebrate La Llorona’s potential for triumph as well as tragedy. La Llorona storytellers who update the tale maintain many of its traditional elements (a woman, a selfish lover, weeping, and a body of water) that have multiple levels of meaning but revise the focus of the narrative to address such issues as feminism, lesbianism, and economic, political, social, and cultural oppression. In revisioning the legend, writers allow women to act as a protective consciousness to the young female characters in their work, which enables women to escape the mother/whore binary of the traditional tale by providing them with triumphant and empowered roles such as healers, social activists, and professors. (49)

Furthermore, in *There Was a Woman*, Domino Renee Perez offers the most extensive overview of the myth by focusing on the many different interpretations seen in literature, media, and performance, from Latin@s and non-Latin@s alike.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Many female writers have returned to the figure: “The Night Filled With Faint Cries” (1980) by Carrie Castro, “Go ’Way from My Window, La Llorona” (1984) by Cordelia Candelaria, “The Cariboo Café” (1985) by Helena María Viramontes, “My Black Angelos” (1987) by Gloria Anzaldúa, “La Llorona Loca: The Other Side” (1991) by Monica Palacios, “Woman Hollering Creek” (1991) by Sandra Cisneros, *So Far*

Accordingly, the myth has penetrated the domain of Chican@ theater as well with several male playwrights such as Jorge Huerta and Rudolfo Anaya rewriting La Llorona as well.<sup>79</sup> Adding a lesbian twist on the story, Monica Palacios's *La Llorona* (1992), the performative version of her short story "La Llorona Loca: The Other Side," reclaims the figure in her humoristic retelling of the archetype. Palacios presents a relationship between Caliente and La Stranger. La Stranger goes out with Trixie, and even that enrages Caliente, who drowns La Stranger in the river and, subsequently, drowns herself, too. Similar to other versions, La Llorona does not die but must cry for her actions:

A week after the burial, a villager was getting water from the river and was startled by the eerie cry of a woman. At first the man thought it was really loud Carly Simon music, but as he listened closely, he could hear something about a 'stranger.' ... a woman appeared from the bushes ... sobbed to him, 'Have you seen La Stranger?' (Palacios 51).

Palacios's Llorona does not search for her lost children, but her lost lover, thus queering the myth. More traditional in its telling, Silvia Gonzalez S.'s *La Llorona Lloro* (1996) is centered on the question of nationality to emphasize the subjugation of the indigenous

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*from God* (1993) by Ana Castillo, "La Llorona/Weeping Woman" (1994) by Alma Luz Villanueva, and *Llorona on the Longfellow Bridge* (2003) by Alicia Gaspar de Alba.

<sup>79</sup> Jorge Huerta's *La Llorona* (1978), an unpublished play housed in his archives at the University of California, San Diego, begins with a collective scream: "¡La Llorona!" This scream serves as an affirmation, declaration, and invocation of the myth as the actors present the cultural diversity of the varied stories of La Llorona (Perez, *There Was a Woman* 15). Huerta focuses on distinct versions of the myth while demonstrating the ways that the community incorporates it. Although the play is primarily situated in the sixteenth-century, Huerta equates the past and present of the myth by concentrating on the roots of the narrative (Perez, *There Was a Woman* 15-6). Additionally, in "The Season of La Llorona" (2003) by Rudolfo Anaya, one can see the evolution in Anaya's point of view about the figure by examining his cultural and literary production (Perez, *There Was a Woman* 53). Nevertheless, Anaya questions patriarchal representations as he corrects previous ideologies that paint La Llorona in a negative way. Nonetheless, despite Jorge Huerta and Rudolfo Anaya's efforts to decolonize the Llorona myth, their works remain unpublished and largely inaccessible to the public, as they are housed in archives.

population in Mexico after the conquest. Equal to colonialism's legacy, the mother haunts the man and town while the man is exonerated for abandoning her and his children.

Notably, Elaine Romero has tackled the subject matter with both *If Susan Smith Could Talk* (1998) and *Xochi: Jaguar Princess* (2010) focusing on the paradigm in distinct ways. Despite *If Susan Smith Could Talk*'s focus on the real-life Susan Leigh Vaughan Smith, who was sentenced to life in prison for murdering her two children, Romero affirms that the work is an "undercover Latino play" that retells the Llorona tale through a different lens ("Llorona"). Given that Susan Smith's story resonated with Romero after having grown up in the Southwest, the playwright contends that La Llorona was on her mind throughout the playwriting process ("Llorona").

What is more, Romero's *Xochi: Jaguar Princess*, a play for young audiences, is ripe for a Llorona analysis focusing on the body. Romero uncovers Llorona's innocence and who she was before her "crime." In one of several scenes that offers a glimpse into Chican@ culture, the Jaguar tells the young Xochi about the myth of the Mexican Medea. After seeing La Llorona crying by the river, her story is told in flashbacks. At the earliest point in her story, she is getting dressed for a date while her children beg to go with her. She wears a beautiful white dress and carefully applies blood-red lipstick, thus creating a bold persona who outwardly signifies inner confidence and strength. After realizing her children are missing upon returning home, her body becomes the site from which the typical Llorona vision emerges. She emits a silent scream that "resonates throughout her entire body" (Romero, *Xochi* 33). Although the audience does not hear her cry, the actress contorts her body in such a way that invokes a blood-curdling cry for help. Quickly, her beautiful body transforms into the bogeywoman of folklore as she grows

more desperate. She goes to the nearby river and dips her hands into the water, but does not find anything. After her long hair falls into the water, it sticks to her face as she wails aloud, thus transforming before the audience's eyes into the traditional image of La Llorona. Xochi explains her transformation: "La Llorona is no longer beautiful because she has cried her beauty out in her tears" (Romero, *Xochi* 34). But even so, Romero hints at a possible positive ending to the tale; the Jaguar tells Xochi that perhaps an eagle has saved the children.

Despite Romero's rewriting of the myth, the most well-known dramatic version remains Cherrie Moraga's *The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea* (2001). Moraga utilizes mythology to describe the plight of Chican@s, not only in the United States, but in relation to one another. The work is situated in a futuristic world where Aztlán has replaced the United States and all queers have been exiled. Fusing the Greek Medea myth with La Llorona, Moraga presents her as a woman who has gone crazy over her love for another woman and the Indian nation that has rejected her. The work is revolutionary because it rewrites the Medea and La Llorona myths alongside each other using queer relationships and concerns of Chican@ nationalism. In the play, Medea must navigate a custody battle over her child, who is managing his desire to be a man. Medea is scared that she cannot stop her song from acquiring values according to his gender: "He refuses my gifts and turns to my enemies to make a man out of him. I cannot relinquish my son to them, to walk ese camino triste where they will call him by his manly name and he goes deaf to hear it" (Moraga, *Hungry Woman* 88). To change her situation, Medea poisons her son, Chac Mool, thus invoking the myth. By mixing Greek and Mexican/Chican@ myths, Moraga suggests that the plight of the woman is not only

transnational but that certain similarities exist across distinct eras, even the future.

According to *The Hungry Woman*, infanticide prevents the reproduction of the patriarchal system. Throughout the play, Moraga uses the myth to criticize the normative structure of the Chicano family alongside the heterosexism of Chicano nationalism.

Chican@ writers continue redefining the figure and, accordingly, the myth continues evolving. In particular, La Llorona has even entered into the domain of children's theater and theater for young audiences by the following groups and plays: *The Ghost of La Llorona* (1997) by Express Children's Theatre in Houston, *Rice, Frijoles, and Greens* (2003) by ChUSMA in Los Angeles, and "La Llorona Dolorosa"<sup>80</sup> by Magical Rain Theatreworks in Durham, North Carolina. These productions demonstrate the myth's cultural importance and preserve its legacy for future generations. Thusly, the forever changing aspects and details of the myth join a series of Chican@ cultural paradigms that have received much critical and literary attention in the retelling of figure and legacy. These representations manifest that La Llorona is still relevant today and is a figure that should be recovered, studied, and rewritten.

### **López's Lloronas: *Unconquered Spirits***

In light of the premises stated in the previous section, this section centers on the Llorona myth in López's *Unconquered Spirits*. Compared to the playwright's early works, *Unconquered* is more ambitious. As López grew as a writer, she began pushing her boundaries. Although the play was considered magical realism when it premiered, it is now clear that the piece was López's first foray into *cineatro*, her self-coined genre that

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<sup>80</sup> "La Llorona Llorosa" is not a play in the traditional sense, but is an educational theater program that Magical Rain Theatreworks regularly offers.

later became a trademark of her writing style. In this regard, the play encompasses many themes to present several Llorona stories, frequently jumping between countries and time periods. The playwright redeems La Llorona and all “bad women” from their marginalized positions by re-constructing the myth. By combining myth and history, in this case sixteenth-century Mexico and 1938 San Antonio, López equates the present and past conditions of women in Mexico and the United States who are subjugated to patriarchal cultures.<sup>81</sup>

In the play, López’s protagonists perform positive self-agency by invoking La Llorona, recognizing the figure as a viable image of motherhood. In the playwright’s notes, López explains rewriting lore to add female perspectives to traditional Mexican and Chican@ culture:

With this play I hope to give recognition to my “mother,” which is Mexico. I wrote this play for Mexico and for my great-great-great-...”grandmother” who was Aztec and was raped by the Spaniards. I am recognizing her and accepting her because she is just as important as my Spanish great-great-great-...”grandfather.” The Chicano was born out of rape and hatred. This play was born out of love and acceptance...and ‘What if...?’ (*Unconquered Spirits* 176)

In this manner, this section demonstrates how López decolonizes the Llorona myth to subvert the various sexist systems seen in the play and humanize her protagonists by converting them from objects into subjects. In this way, the body performs re-imagined versions of previously restrictive cultural paradigms.

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<sup>81</sup> Nevertheless, while the playwright does liberate La Llorona and other women from their demonized and marginalized social positions, she does not redeem the Church (Huerta, *Chicano Drama* 128).

In speaking about her experiences with the myth, López maintains that she grew up with the story of La Llorona from her mother and heard it as a love story that went wrong.<sup>82</sup> As a young feminist teenager, she began to understand patriarchy and the undeniable impact of “Eve” and other women throughout History and fiction on the subconscious of women. It became clear to López how and why La Llorona was used to reinforce the ideology that women are evil, wicked, bad, etc. (J. López, “Hungry Woman/Unconquered Spirits”). These myths have been utilized to keep women in line with traditional definitions of womanhood. In thinking about the conquest of territory and women, López began to reflect on the history of the Mexican conquest and the subsequent rape of thousands of women. She affirms:

The conquest of one country by another in essence is the rape of all the women, because that’s what they do. Women represent property. So once you rape the women, you tell the other men, ‘Look, look what I’ve done to you. I’ve conquered the most valuable possession you have.’ I wanted to dispel this story, because it romanticized something horrible that happened in our history – this pretty little story. (J. López Qtd. in McCulloh F6)

This is to say, López revises La Llorona from a Chicana feminist perspective and presents audiences and readers with another possibility of what could have happened. López explains:

When I realized that you can never have intimacy with another until you can come to them as an equal or be seen as an equal I saw how this notion

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<sup>82</sup> Additionally, writing *Unconquered Spirits* was a cathartic experience. López claims: “I had a very famous psychic confirm a suspicion I had about having been an Aztec woman a couple of years ago... when she told me this I was surprised, but then when I remember writing *Unconquered Spirits* I remember crying a lot as though I had experienced it first hand - the Aztec Woman sacrificing her children and drowning herself” (“Hungry Woman/Unconquered Spirits”).

of an Indigenous woman falling in love with a Spaniard was ridiculous because at that time she would have been considered inferior and a savage even if she was a cultivated and intelligent woman....More likely she was raped and they called it “love.” (“Hungry Woman/Unconquered Spirits”)

Given López’s words, clearly the playwright rejects traditional accounts that paint La Malinche as Cortés’s unwavering lover, but more so she sees her as a woman in an uncompromising position with no end. La Malinche and La Llorona, not to mention the countless other indigenous women lost to history, have been examined from male perspectives that do not adequately give a reason for their actions. In contrast, depictions such as López’s portray the Weeping Woman as a heroine

In *Unconquered Spirits*, López associates the stories of Xochitl and Xochimilco with the Llorona myth and theorizes their actions from a feminist perspective. López presents two versions in which the protagonists commit infanticide to save their children’s spirits from (neo)colonization. The play presents Xochitl of sixteenth-century Mexico, a native girl who wants to be baptized, but is raped by Fray Francisco, a Spanish missionary, and becomes pregnant with twins. Not wanting to raise her children in Spanish society under the Church’s influence, she throws them into a lake, mirroring Llorona’s mythic infanticide. To escape, Xochitl drowns herself in the lake after sacrificing her children. Furthermore, López equates colonial Mexico with 1938 San Antonio during the real-life pecan sheller strike led by Emma Tenayuca to demonstrate how the plight of Mexican/Chicana women has not changed significantly in four hundred years. López’s twentieth-century Llorona, Xochimilco, is having an affair with her Anglo boss, Chris, and when she threatens to leave him, he rapes her. She becomes pregnant



with twins and has an illegal abortion so that she does not give birth to the white man's children (Mestizos). This parallels with Xochitl and the shared desire for their children to remain unconquered spirits. As a result, Xochimilco ends up in jail for defying the white man, thus reinforcing her subordinate position.

Given these premises, the women must be seen as heroes in their own right. In this regard, Cordelia Candelaria sustains that retellings of the myth (re)present heroes, ...who bravely exercises her active agency in order to will her own destiny by electing a tragic fate rather than passively allowing herself and her children to live under inescapable tyranny. Usually when men do that they're called heroes. (...) It is finally time to let go of a single, narrow, masculinized understanding of the tale and to see La Llorona instead as an always evolving, freshly created emblem of gender, sexuality, and power. ("Letting La Llorona Go" 97)

Rather than allow La Llorona and other cultural paradigms to remain seen through a male-centered discourse and *history*, López flips the script, presenting positive portrayals of these women. López gives her protagonists agency that helps them develop a fighting unconquered spirit: "All these women that you see in the play, they release themselves from the chains of oppression when they realize that they can do something. They can resist. They have a fighting spirit that releases them" (López Qtd. in McCulloh F6).

In regard to the staging, the 1995 world premiere of *Unconquered Spirits* by the Theater Department at California State University, Northridge,<sup>83</sup> directed by Anamarie

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<sup>83</sup> López was an artist-in-residence in the Theater Department at this time, producing the play and teaching playwriting classes.

García, featured a 12-foot tree as the performance's focal point.<sup>84</sup> The tree revolved to demarcate changes in place and time, thus helping audiences to better understand the frequent switches from colonial Mexico to 1938 San Antonio. García's idea, the tree did not appear in López's original stage directions, but was later added to the published version after its success in enhancing the staging and performance. While the tree is largely symbolic, it was used practically to simplify the jump cuts and transitions in López's script as it rotated to denote different spaces and time periods. Garcia's approach was to use the rotations as a performative ritual. By making them visually appealing, the audience helps move the tree with their imagination and, consequently, drive the production further into the storytelling (Kroll 2).

The knotted and tangled tree symbolizes knowledge and, thus, equates womanhood with earthly and spiritual intelligence. As the tree rotates, it offers context to each woman connected to it. Speaking of the tree, López says: "The tree represents nature, nature being sacrificed, and nature lasting forever. You cannot destroy nature. It's the most fragile element, but it's also the strongest. That's also what women are. The tree also represents a phallus, and it's very militaristic, a cannon. There are many sides to it" (Qtd. in McCulloh F6). In this way, the tree functions as the physical and metaphorical anchor of the playscript and production. In fact, the tree's branches emerge as if they were the arms of women reaching toward the audience. While the tree remains on stage throughout the play, it is often highlighted in scenes and situations that invoke La Llorona. Each woman implicated by the myth becomes part of the tree at some point in

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<sup>84</sup> The production's artwork featured a tree with a woman's face on it, one of her eyes framed by the branches. Serving as her hair, the branches intertwine, bleeding off the window card. The woman's body begins on the trunk, but disappears into the ground, rooting her as an organic part of nature.

the piece with a culmination of all four Llorona figures adorning the tree in a theatrical display of unification performed across nations, spaces, and time periods.

In New Spain (Mexico), 1559, the play follows the narrative of Xochitl as she navigates the hardship of being an indigenous woman in colonial Mexico. In the turning point of her plotline, Xochitl is in the mission praying to god because she doubts and misunderstands this new branch of spirituality. When Fray Francisco enters, he confirms her doubts. After questioning why she and her people must suffer, the priest rapes her:

XOCHITL. Then if we are all God's children, why would God let me and my people be enslaved and be treated like animals, and suffer this way?

FRAY FRANCISCO. It is because we are here to suffer. Only when we suffer do we prove to God how worthy we are of his paradise. Your people need to suffer, to repent for all of your sins, for all of your human sacrifices and worship of false gods. Only after you have suffered on earth can you truly deserve to enter through the gates of heaven. Do you want to be save? (*XOCHITL nods 'yes' as she looks sadly to her feet.*) Then you must suffer. (*His hand is now between her legs, rubbing her. XOCHITL holds back her tears. She passively and defenselessly awaits his other hand. He puts his hand in her blouse and she does nothing. Blackout.*) (J. López, *Unconquered* 186)

Fray Francisco reinforces the power of not only the Catholic Church over the native people, but also the male's privilege over the female, permitted due to patriarchal interpretations of the Bible. As a native woman, Xochitl is doubly marginalized and must recognize these aspects. To become saved and accepted, she must literally and

metaphorically allow the Church to penetrate her. Consequently, after this scene, she is hurt, both emotionally and physically. She is crying and can barely stand up, forced to crawl on the ground. Furthermore, during her baptism, Fray Francisco insists that he is the one to perform the ritual, thus reinforcing the oppression by the white man and the Church that Xochitl previously experienced first-hand.

In the dramatic close to Act I, Xochitl runs to the lake, which is marked by the tree on stage. The lake offers her the only possibility of saving her children's spirits as the body of water is "pure enough to cleanse my children of the poison" (J. López, *Unconquered* 196). Xochitl transmits her reasons one last time, thus manifesting the moral of the play itself, and showing her love for her children: "It is because I love you that I've returned you to a better place where you won't be a half-breed, a mestizo, conquered and enslaved, but free souls" (J. López, *Unconquered* 196). After sacrificing her children, one to Tonantzin and the other to Tlaloc, Xochitl dives into the lake, drowning herself in Lake Texcoco's purifying waters. In this moment, La Llorona appears from out of the tree. This is La Llorona of children's nightmares; she is "horrific and monstrous" with a "deformed face" (J. López, *Unconquered* 197). La Llorona's performance in this scene and the one that follows, in 1913 Mexico, transmits the message of a figure to be feared in Mexican culture. While the young Xochimilco is at the lake, La Llorona emerges from downstage, screams "¡¡¡Ayyy mis Hijos!!!" loudly, and slowly walks toward the young girl with her hands stretched out, calling her to come (J. López, *Unconquered* 197). The act culminates with the lights fading as we see La Llorona alone on stage rubbing together her bloody hands.

This moment diverges from other times in which the spectator sees La Llorona because we hear her patented cry of “ay mis hijos” in the dramatic close to the act. The performer wails while approaching the young girl, showing desperation and suffering. Focusing on the performativity of the wail itself, the act of wailing demonstrates an effort to be heard through the power of language; her shouts replace whispers in an act of equal parts resistance, protest, and suffering (Arrizón, *Latina* xvi; Figueredo 237) In fact, at times, this was the only way for indigenous women to protest given their marginalization in society. The silenced individual must find a way to wail in order to be heard. As the performer playing La Llorona in *Unconquered Spirits* is moving toward Xochimilco and, subsequently, the audience, she is wailing to be healed, begging us to respond to her plea. Therefore, the wailing functions as a performative healing procedure that is the antidote to her suffering; by wailing, she is able to release her bottled-up anguish and betrayal through a natural process of purification or, as Anzaldúa proposes, La Llorona’s sensitivity makes her “excruciatingly alive to the world” (38). The performative qualities of the wail dismantle the oppressive structures that have defined, silenced, and marginalized her.

Furthermore, in *Unconquered Spirits*’ twentieth-century plot line, set in 1913, Xochimilco is a young girl when she first hears the Llorona myth from her mother. This version is used to oblige discipline from the young girl, but she immediately questions if she was a “bad woman” and a terrible mother, killing her children out of revenge. Xochimilco questions the accuracy of the myth, asking if it was “an accident” (J. López, *Unconquered* 180). Nevertheless, her mother’s tactics work, as Xochimilco is scared that La Llorona will appear. Later in the play, in 1938, Xochimilco uses the same tactic her

mother used in telling the myth to her daughter before bedtime to help her maintain order and discipline. This reinforces the oral tradition of the myth, passed down from mother to daughter and so on. Even though she questions it as a child, Xochimilco buys into the sociocultural role of La Llorona in her adulthood, demonstrating the cultural longevity of the myth.

Eventually, Xochimilco's life parallels Xochitl and other Lloronas. In 1938, Xochimilco works at a pecan factory in San Antonio. She is in a relationship with her Anglo boss, Chris, but when she decides to leave him, he rapes her. López writes:

XOCHIMILCO. But I don't want you! I don't need you. You're nothing!

CHRIS. I love you!

XOCHIMILCO (*stops fighting him*). You do?

CHRIS. Yes. (*XOCHIMILCO kisses him. He closes his eyes, refreshed by her affection. Then, she kicks him in the groin, grabs her purse, and makes a run for it.*) You stupid bitch! (*CHRIS catches her. He drags her to a table by the hair and "slaps" all the tin cylinders and pecans off the table to clear it. He throws her on the table where he pins her hair down. She fights back with all of her might. CHRIS puts his hand over her mouth and unzips his pants.*)... Let's see how much of a fighter you are after I get through with you... (*Unconquered* 211)

She becomes pregnant with twins and, in a modern take on the form of death, has an illegal abortion so that she does not have to give birth to an Anglo man's children (Mestiz@s). Serafina, who performs the abortion, reflects on this analogy: "We used to throw them in rivers, now we throw them in buckets..." (J. López, *Unconquered* 212).

After her abortion, Xochimilco is alone onstage, only illuminated by the moonlight. La Llorona appears behind her and follows her off stage.

La Llorona's compassion in this scene represents a transition in López's retelling of the myth. Gone is the bogeywoman version of children's nightmares; when La Llorona reappears after Xochimilco's confession before God,<sup>85</sup> thus replacing the Anglo- and male-centric spiritual leader and replacing him with an indigenous female figure, she is merely a woman and no longer the horrific, monstrous figure previously seen on stage. In this way, Xochimilco is no longer afraid of her as she now understands La Llorona's plight. This Llorona is beautiful, with large feathers extending from the mask she wears on her face, presenting a regal costume that distinguishes her from previous tellings. Manipulating body and iconographic image work in unison to perform an alternative of myth and woman. Indeed, the figure is debunked and humanized. She is now the comforting mother who cares for Xochimilco when she needs her most; La Llorona supports her physically and spiritually, serving as her crutch. When they enter Xochimilco's home, La Llorona is holding her lifeless body, carrying her burden. She places her in bed and tucks her in, treating her as a mother would.

After receiving La Llorona's spiritual treatment, Xochimilco returns to work as an empowered woman, ready to lead her pecan factory coworkers. Even though she is ashamed of her abortion, she taps into her newfound strength to stand up to Chris in front of the other factory workers. In her defiant turn, she confronts Chris and outs him for the rapist that he is, threatening him one final time:

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<sup>85</sup> After her abortion, Xochimilco goes to confession to ask forgiveness. Nevertheless, the Church misunderstands and reinforces patriarchal values. This is highlighted by a change from reality when the priest takes out a whip and whips her, forcing her to scream for her lost children, an action symbolizing the conquest.

Do it to me again! Show all these women what happens to a woman with a big mouth. Do it right here!!...See if you can do it without us killing you first! (...) And don't you ever touch any of my hermanas like that! Because one of these nights when you're asleep, I will sneak into your bed, and when you think you're safe, snuggled in your bed like a baby, I will choke you until you reach the hell that you've put me through. And you'll have to beg me to remember that I believe in God! (J. López, *Unconquered* 217).

Xochimilco's triumphant stand against Chris and patriarchal oppression ignites the pecan sheller strike. After Xochimilco leaves the factory, Emma begins chanting "¡Huelga! ¡Huelga!" (J. López, *Unconquered* 217), leading the women out of the factory. As a consequence, at the end of the play, Xochimilco goes to jail because of her role in the strike, but more so for defying Chris, and must leave her child, Malina, by the white man's force (i.e. the justice system). The myth shows that women are punished for showing agency while men are rewarded for similar actions.

At the end of the play, Xochimilco symbolically joins her sisters and mothers on the tree. As the lights fade, the tree is lit and Tonantzin, Xochitl, and La Llorona call out to Xochimilco, who joins them. *Unconquered Spirits* ends with all four women holding hands in a demonstration of solidarity, given possibility by the tree's healing and spiritual powers. Curiously, despite the tree not being López's original idea, she has referred to an image that provoked her to both write and re-write the work ("Untitled"). In this image, a woman is walking and bleeding; she is menstruating or aborting. As she continues walking, trying to escape, she slowly becomes a tree. Consciously or not, López foresaw



the image of Xochimilco becoming part of the tree after her traumatic abortion and, as a result, joining the other Llorona figures, symbolizing their importance in both history and nature. By occupying a space that is phallic and representative of the military, typically a male-centered province, these women claim nation, nature, and space as their own, demonstrating that, just like the tree and nature, these women's bonds are timeless due to their spiritual connection via La Llorona myth.

Josefina López's *Unconquered Spirits* gives women such as La Llorona a voice, thusly, humanizing both myth and woman. Through parallel stories from sixteenth-century Mexico and 1938 San Antonio, López demonstrates certain similarities between the past and present conditions of women in Mexico and in the United States who are subjugated to oppressive circumstances. The Lloronas in *Unconquered Spirits* expand the myth to reveal a wide range of Chicana identities within the performance landscape. In re-constructing the myth through performance, López transforms La Llorona from the feared bogeywoman of children's nightmares to the nurturing mother and spiritual leader for Xochimilco. The symbolic representations of the figure undo women's historic oppression. Furthermore, both Llorona figures in the play, Xochitl and Xochimilco, are given reasons for abandoning and sacrificing their children; thus, the myth is decolonized. López's message is clear; these Lloronas sacrifice their children to save their souls, allowing the children to remain unconquered spirits.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter explores *malas mujeres*, above all the Malinche and Llorona, in Chican@ theater and performance, primarily focusing on the work of Josefina López.

These works illustrate that both figures remain vital cultural paradigms in the present day. Through an analysis of the “bad women,” Malinches, and Lloronas of López’s repertoire, one thing remains certain: these figures have been fused together, standing opposite of La Virgen de Guadalupe, the good mother. In this way, they suffer from generalizations that encompass the characteristics of being a “bad woman.” For this reason, it is imperative to revisit, rewrite, and re-perform these cultural paradigms for the stage so that these figures can be decolonized and better understood in the twenty-first-century. López, alongside other contemporary writers, has dedicated her craft to reevaluating history and myth to (re)write legends and theorize other versions that oppose patriarchal norms to which myths and legends tend to adhere. In these performances, the female body serves as a site of resistance in which the spectator witnesses complex depictions of female identity, forcing them to reconsider the past. By (re)appropriating the past, López unravels Chicana cultural memory and paradigms on stage and creates an archive in flesh and blood in the present. Thus, the body, as an aesthetic for decolonization, becomes a canvas to transmit new cultural paradigms.

## Conclusion

At the 2014 Latina/o Theatre Commons National Convening at the Los Angeles Theatre Center (LATC) Encuentro, I witnessed how Josefina López's journey came full circle. As I sat in between López and Mercedes Floresislal in Theater 1 waiting for Su Teatro's production of *Enrique's Journey* to begin, López leaned over to tell me that this was the same theater where she saw Luis Valdez's *I Don't Have To Show You No Stinking Badges!* as a high school student in 1986, the experience that prompted her to become a playwright. If that was not enough, none other than Luis Valdez was seated two rows in front of us, not to mention that we were surrounded by a virtual who's who of Latin@ theater and performance: Migdalia Cruz, Tony García, Amparo García-Crow, Anne García-Romero, Jorge Huerta, Irma Mayorga, Elaine Romero, Kinan Valdez, and Karen Zacarías, and others. While the teenage López left Theater 1 inspired to write her own material and join the conversation, the adult López left the same space 28 years later an established contributor to that same conversation. The entire experience sitting in LATC's Theater 1 next to López was transcendent for me and became a fitting bookmark to conclude my study.

While the Encuentro featured fifteen productions representing theater companies from across the nation and Puerto Rico, the "Vault" at this event proved to be a haven for the scholars in attendance. Curated by Jorge Huerta and Tiffany Ana López, the Vault was both literally and metaphorically a vault. Not only was their exhibit in an actual vault (the LATC is in a former bank building), but Huerta and T. López created a holy place of sorts filled with powerful knowledge that needed to be kept secure. The Vault featured a book exhibit, a map of the United States showing the places that influenced the Andrew

W. Mellon Fellows,<sup>86</sup> and the much-discussed timeline that was a visual representation of Latin@ theater from its beginnings to the present day. After success at the inaugural 2013 LTC Convening in Boston, Huerta and T. López resurrected the timeline as a living record and working history of Latin@ theater in the United States. To quote Huerta, the timeline is “a visualization of where we have come since 1960,” “our *rebozo*, made of many colors, many textures, many ideas” that shows the “evolution of United States Latina/o theater” (Qtd. in Herrera 31-2). And, like the LTC, the timeline at the Encuentro was open to all who wished to contribute. The timeline was not a “do not touch” museum piece, but an interactive, living and breathing record of where Latin@ theater has been, where it is now, and where it is going. In this way, anyone could add important moments in Latin@ theater for them, as well as add what they and the LTC hope to accomplish going forward.

The timeline as living record began as a blank white space, but evolved during the Encuentro to become a visual manifestation of the past, present, and future of Latin@ theater. While the sections for the 1960s-1990s featured the requisite landmarks such as *Zoot Suit*’s Broadway run, the period of the 2000s and the future was more open to interpretation. The histories about these latter periods have yet to be written. These soon-to-be written legacies were, potentially, featured on the timeline. While looking at these future landmark events such as the day when “A Latino writer or writers will win a Tony, an Emmy, an Oscar, and a Pulitzer (maybe a Nobel),”<sup>87</sup> I saw several neon notecards in

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<sup>86</sup> The Andrew W. Mellon Fellows were a group of emerging arts leaders who were in residence at the LATC from October 1 through November 21 during which they received rigorous training equipping them with the skills to become future Artistic Directors and leaders in the field.

<sup>87</sup> While Latina/o writers have won several Tony Awards, Emmy Awards, and Pulitzer Prizes, I believe the person who wrote this longs for the day when one Latin@ writer will win all of these awards and, that, hopefully, this becomes a trend.

what I recognized as Josefina López's handwriting: "2046: CASA 0101 is the anchor for Theater Row in Boyle Heights with over 20 theaters." López's predictions on the timeline embody the cultural work she is performing on the Eastside. Her prophecy hints at the future and legacy that she is trying to solidify in Boyle Heights.

While López has achieved much for a Chicana playwright and community leader, her goals continue to evolve. She is not satisfied with her accomplishments and always believes that she can achieve more and affect more people. In fact, in her personal archive, an undated entry in one of López's journals contains a list of things she is happy about in the future. Among these achievements, López writes:

I am so happy and grateful now that I won the "Genius" grant.

I am happy now that I have won a Tony and a Pulitzer Prize for my Broadway musical of *Real Women*.

"Statue of Gratitude"

Thank you to all the people who have made America beautiful, powerful, and free.

I am happy now that I have won a Nobel Prize for Literature.

I am happy now that I have won an Oscar for Best Director.

I am happy now that I have won an Oscar for Best Screenwriter.

Additionally, in an undated journal entry (approximately written between 2009 and 2012), López writes that what matters to her is "making a difference, my family, my community" and what she wants is "to be famous for having made a difference" (López Archives). While López's narrative has yet to be finished, surely, as this dissertation

shows, her career *has* made a difference. López's career began quickly and has yet to slow down, constantly building upon itself and improving.

An essential part of understanding López, CASA 0101, and the Boyle Heights community is that there is always room for improvement. In López's feminist model, there is always a seat at the table. There is always a way to change yourself and change your community. By conversing with López and studying her journals, López's dream in Boyle Heights clearly is not yet finished. More work remains to be done to transform East First Street into a "cultural and artistic mecca" complete with multiple theaters, a publishing company, a café, a bookstore, statues, boutiques, etc. (López Archives). While López cannot achieve this alone, my project testifies to the support system—her *familia*—around López that can make this dream a reality.

The goal of this project has been to document Josefina López's role as a playwright, mentor, and cultural worker with regard to the many accomplishments of CASA 0101 and those individuals behind the scenes who have worked to make the theater successful and increasingly more inclusive, equitable, and effective in performing Eastside Latinidad. Despite the challenges of producing Latin@ theater on the Eastside, CASA 0101's 15-year history, its *quinceañera*, serves as a testament to the cultural work Josefina López has been able to accomplish and the possibilities for the future of Latin@ creative arts. Works seen at CASA—both López's and other's—have demonstrated how Latin@ identity is forged and experienced in Boyle Heights. These works, arising out of cultural, historical, and social conditions, have shown how Eastside Latinidades function in relation to class, gender, politics, race, and sexuality. Additionally, CASA has contributed to the careers of many Latin@ (and non-Latin@) theater artists who have

taken López's ideologies and committed themselves to engaging diverse communities in dialogues about Latin@ performance and identity construction.

While localized on the Eastside, this project confirms how theater can promote positive social change and, consequently, mobilize community (re)building. Theater and performance, therefore, can be used as critical frameworks to bolster social change and stimulate new subjectivities of Latinidad. This project demonstrates the power that live theater and performance maintains when they are culturally specific to a certain community. The work being realized in Boyle Heights exemplifies how a community can empower a theater and how a theater can empower a community and, in turn, activate social change.

Despite Josefina López's prolific career spanning back to the 1980s, including stage and screen success as well as success as a community leader and mentor, this work is only just beginning. What heights will López's career reach in another fifteen years? How will the arts in Boyle Heights continue to grow and affect the community? And, what are further possibilities for using theater and the arts as agents in social change?

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