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**(Per)forming the Chicana Identity in**

**Joséfiná López's *Simply María, or The American Dream* (1991), *Confessions of Women from East L.A.* (1996) and *Real Women Have Curves* (1997)**

**MA Thesis**

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## Abstract

This thesis discusses the identity formation and performance theory in Joséfina López's plays *Simply Maria, or the American Dream* (1991), *Confessions of Women from East L.A.* (1996) and *Real Women Have Curves* (1997). It is divided into an introduction, four chapters, and a conclusion. Chapter one summarizes the theoretical framework employed in the thesis. Each of the three successive chapters discusses one of the plays and blends the thematic and technical approaches by using performance studies to highlight the formation of Chicana identity in the USA. Chapter two analyses *Simply Maria* which highlights the character María, a young girl trying to reconcile traditional Mexican values with those of the United States. Chapter three explores *Confessions of Women from East L.A.* which is about a group of women from East L.A. telling their stories and fighting for a life unmarred by social comparison with the American society. Chapter four discusses *Real Women Have Curves*, highlighting the lives of five working women and their challenge to establish an identity of their own. The three plays crystalize the journey of the marginalized Chicanas and their struggle to attain power and change their identities.

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## Contents

Introduction.....	2
<b>Chapter one:</b> Performance and Identity Formation.....	12
<b>Chapter Two:</b> <i>Simply Maria, or the American Dream</i> .....	47
<b>Chapter Three:</b> <i>Confessions of Women from East L.A</i> .....	76
<b>Chapter Four:</b> <i>Real Women Have Curves</i> .....	107
Conclusion.....	130
Works Cited.....	140
Summary.....	151

# Introduction

In an age of technology and media, it is easy to defend your issue using television, media, writing or performance. Writing can depict problems or cases to a certain community; namely, the cultured category or the readers. However, theatre or televisions help anyone transmit their message to every category; the cultivated and the uncultured, the readers and the illiterate. Joséfina López is one of the playwrights who contributed to both writing and performance. She is best known for authoring the play and co-authoring the acclaimed film version of *Real Women Have Curves*. López was undocumented for thirteen years before she received Amnesty in 1987 and eventually became a U.S. Citizen in 1995. This thesis examines three of López's plays which convey her fight against Chicanas' oppression.

This thesis – entitled “(Per)forming the Chicana Identity in Joséfina López's *Simply María, or The American Dream* (1991), *Confessions of Women from East L.A.* (1996) and *Real Women Have Curves* (1997)” – is an attempt to examine both the performance and the formation of the Chicana identity in the above mentioned three plays. It is divided into an introduction, four chapters, and a conclusion. Chapter one summarises the theoretical framework employed in the thesis. Each of the three successive chapters discusses one of the plays and blends the thematic and technical approaches by using performance studies to highlight the distinct process of Chicanas' identity formation in the USA.

Chapter one surveys the various definitions, styles, techniques, and strategies employed both in performance and identity formation theories. It explores the historical details of identity formation in order to bring into sharper focus the contributions of Chicanas from different ethnic, racial and gender backgrounds and with different political orientations, along with referring to the origin of the Chicano/a movement. The chapter focuses on the ways in which Chicana identity gets constructed politically and historically. Accordingly, the Chicano/a

movement is displayed, together with its reasons, history and consequences. This theoretical chapter also tackles the oppressions Chicanas face in the USA, exemplified in racial, gender, and class oppression, the role of language in forming the Chicana identity, the macho culture or the patriarchal society, in addition to myth and religion and their effects on Chicanas. The chapter sheds light on the role of performance in highlighting such oppressions and the effect it has/could have on identity formation.

Understanding Chicana identity formation requires an understanding of the ongoing historical processes of immigration and exile that have formed the Chicana community as a whole. Analyzing Chicana dramatic texts offers a way to explore the identity formation approach in the context of migration and the dominant culture. One of the greatest minorities in the United States is the Chicano/as, who are still perceived as illegal aliens. Due to this, they try to form a powerful Chicana identity. They do not only dream of high wages, but they also need to be recognized, respected and appreciated for who they are. However, they face several barriers and oppressions as they discover that their “American Dream” is a fake and unfulfilled one. They find that they lose their identity in their search for a better life. Consequently, restoring and redefining their identity become a must. It is a challenge for those Chicano/as living in multiple identities to gain a unique identity for themselves.

On a broader level, identity can be divided into positive and negative identity as well as personal and collective identity: Positive identities belong to those who empower themselves. They are able to gain features that help them change their destiny. Negative identity – on the other hand – is the one that creates hatred. It is always static, thus creating hatred and grudge. The person of negative identity is always dominated by a superior group. An individual identity includes social categories such as age, occupation, gender, ethnicity, and race in order for an

individual to categorize himself or herself as a member in a social community. Accordingly, Chicana identity is a positive identity, due to the fact that Chicanas try to find a way to cross the borders and redefine their identity. Hence, this identity has to pass by certain experiences until it becomes a collective identity.

The term “Chicano” or “Chicana” (deriving from the political movement of the 1960s that began with the Voting Rights Act) refers to Mexican American men or women who live within the United States (Christie and Gonzales 3), which demanded that Mexican American citizens enjoy the rights they were granted in the U.S. Constitution under the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, signed after the war between Mexico and the United States. The Chicano term:

Is used only of Mexican Americans, not of Mexicans living in Mexico or working as migrants in the United States. While Chicano is a term of pride for many Mexican Americans, it remains a word with strong political associations stemming from the Chicano literary and civil rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Since these politics are not necessarily espoused by all Mexican Americans, and since usage and acceptance of this word can vary from one region to another, an outsider who is unfamiliar with his or her audience would do well to use Mexican American instead (“Chicano”).

Thus, to identify as Chicano or Chicana means being both Mexican and American.

In their attempt to redefine their identities, Chicanas needed the patriarchal society to see them as more than mute and submissive females. Hence they joined the so called Chicano movement, which formally began in the 1970s when they realized gender inequalities among themselves. They called for redefining the concept of Chicana feminine identity (constructed by



Chicanos) and its subsequent mythical feminine figures, known as La Virgin de Guadalupe, La Malinche and La Llorona.

In their fight, Chicanas mainly face three main oppressions that hinder them from forming their identity; namely, gender oppression, class oppression and racial oppression. In terms of gender oppression, Chicanas are subjugated to many oppressions: macho culture, religious doctrines and mythical beliefs. Chicana mothers are a very symbolic example of gender oppression as they teach their daughters how to be submissive and helpless wives in order to live safely. The Catholic Church also contributes a lot to the way society perceives women. The Church requires that women should be subservient to men, that women renounce themselves in favor of men as obedience and self-denial define the “good” women.

Class oppression is the second type of oppression that Chicanas face. After the war between America and Mexico and the Treaty of Guadalupe that guaranteed Mexicans all the rights to live peacefully and preserve their language, culture, customs and habits, the government breached its agreement. Mexicans who chose to remain in the U.S. were subjected to the power and domination of the Americans and were considered as “Cheap Mexican Labour”.

Racial oppression also defines Chicanas as “suspect aliens”. Americans depend on the Chicanas’ race to justify their discrimination. Mexican American children were being excluded from education because of their looks, their names and may be their Spanish language as well, to an extent that the Anglos excluded girls from education claiming that they were socialized for marriage and child-bearing tasks only. Consequently, In order to fight these oppressions, there are two ways: first, Chicanas could conform to the norms of the American society while keeping their heritage; Second Chicanas should revolte and call for their rights, and this can be done through performing their problems on stage. Here comes the role of performance.

A theatrical performance is defined as “a particular kind of interaction between performers and observers (actors and audience members) in a shared physical space” (Osipovich 461). A performance could help us understand the past and stage it in the present. It thus mixes the past and the present together. The act of performing mixes the experience and the story told together. Performances are found in language. As Erving Goffman accurately puts it, the presentation of self in everyday life is a type of performance. On the other hand, Whitaker believes that: “self is presented through the performance of roles, through acting, or through announcing that this person has undergone some severe transformations”. He adds: “We actually perform different roles at different moments in our community, either consciously or unconsciously”. All what we perform or perceive through our behaviors shape a community outside ourselves (Whitaker).

Dramatis personae are required to handle these several sub-personalities and avail them before the audience. Performance thus focuses on human understanding, on personal or self-presentation and on dramatic presentation as well. For this purpose, the Chicana identity formation theory is accounted for within Manfred Pfister’s systematic and thorough techniques of dramatic characterization. He divides the repertoire of characterization techniques into two main classifications: figural, whereby the information provided on a character is transmitted via one of the dramatic figures; and authorial, or associated with the position of the implied author (184).

Another means of exploring Chicana identity formation through performance is Judith Butler<sup>1</sup>’s theory of performativity through her analysis of sex and gender. In Butler’s view, the

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<sup>1</sup> Judith Butler (born February 24, 1956) is an American philosopher and gender theorist whose work has influenced political philosophy, ethics and the fields of feminism, and literary theory. Academically, Butler is most well known for her books *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* and *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*, which challenge notions of gender and develop her theory of gender performativity.

repeated acts that produce a man or a woman are dependent on cultural habits. Hence, in performative utterances the speaking subject is already spoken for and in language. As fluid ongoing events, performances “mark and bend identities, re-make time, tell stories. The way a performance is enacted describes performative behavior” (Denzin, “*The Call*” 190).

Chapter two deals with Joséfina López’s first play, *Simply María*, which is an autobiographical play about a young girl trying to reconcile traditional Mexican values with those of the United States. The play emphasizes feminism in the context of a patriarchal family structure, as well as the Mexican–American experience in the United States. This comedy follows the character María, a bright child born to Mexican immigrants, and her dream of obtaining a college degree and living a life far different from that of her parents. Tracing María’s life allows for a discovery of the ideas that prevail in most of López’s plays, such as gender oppression (body consciousness), racial oppression and class oppression. The chapter also raises the issues of class-consciousness and how the American Dream represents a high level of education in the eyes of the dominant culture. For Mexican Americans, to reach the American dream is to reach power and change the perspective of the Chicano/as identity in the eyes of others. Finally, the play concludes by revealing that this dream, with all its powers and visions, turns out to be fake and unreal. The chapter is dedicated to the analysis of these themes together with their technical manifestations prevalent in the play.

In this play, machismo and religion are embodied in male characters — the husband, the father and the Priest – who are exhibited as stock, stereotypical characters representing the vicious and tyrant male figures. María is repeatedly ordered by her parents to be submissive and to accept a degrading status, while Carmen, her mother, visualizes the submissive mothers who emphasize the same macho culture. María externalizes her refusal to submit to racial oppression,

in the form of disobedience, in her demand to be treated equally in this patriarchal society, and in seeking a future where she can attain a higher education and independence by working outside her Mexican home. It is also through this education that Maria believes she can prove that Mexican American children are not stupid, and they can be educated and can reach higher positions in society. In this way, María has a future vision, through which she sees herself representing all other Chicanas and forming an identity that merges the best of the two cultures.

Chapter three deals with López's second play *Confessions of Women from East L.A.*, which is a powerful voice for women and immigrants in Mexico and the United States. This play is about liberation from the assumed characteristics of cultural expectations. Through this play, López tries by all means – thematically and technically – to discuss problems she has faced in her life. Such problems include the struggle with her Mexican and American cultural identity, the oppression that Chicanas undergo due to the American culture of the ideal thin body type, the status of the undocumented immigrants in the US, and class-consciousness. Each character in this play is dedicated to a certain theme or a certain problem.

*Confessions of Women from East L.A.* tells the story of nine women who differ from one another: a professor, an old woman suffering from Aids, a complicated girl who enjoys teasing men, a low class woman who sells corn, a Chicana trying to pass for Japanese, a self-defense instructor, a Chicana activist, a soap opera addict and a revolutionary Chicana. Joséfina López uses these characters to shed light on all types of Chicanas living in the United States. The play highlights the redefinitions Chicanas make to change their identity and their perspective in the eyes of the Other. López introduces those Chicanas through using the direct presentation of the character technique by having the characters themselves tell the audience straight out how their identities are built as well as the problems they face. The play actually arouses the major

problems faced by Chicanas, since each character performs the dilemmas she faces in her monologues, interacting with the audience as if her problems were their own.

Chapter four deals with *Real women Have Curves* in an attempt to highlight the complexity of the lives of Chicanas belonging to the working class and to show how those women together can challenge the society they live in and become able to gain power and restore/construct their identities. This two-act autobiographical play is about Joséfina López herself, and her family; as she names her characters after her father's and mother's names. The play depicts a character named Anà, who temporarily works in her sister Estela's tiny sewing factory with three women: Pancha, Rosali, and Anà's mother, Carmen. Throughout the whole play, Joséfina López displays what is really happening to those Chicanas in the American society. She tackles these women's gender oppression and the way their immigrant status has affected their position as a working class and how their racial status disqualifies them from their rights. Hence, this chapter Analyzes the main themes in the play and explores the techniques used to highlight López's viewpoint within the framework of the Chicana's' struggle for empowerment.

López's vision about how oppressed Chicanas are is very much highlighted in this play especially in her frequent usage of Manfred Pfister's explicit technique of characterization with most of the characters, specifically Aná. Most characters resort to such a technique when they speak about their experiences and how they can survive in such a discriminating community. This kind of technique pulls the audience towards the experience and allows for a sort of interaction between the audience and the actresses, as they are involved in the problem as if it was the audience's problem. Hence, López's techniques vary between explicit and implicit

techniques of characterization. She combines the dialogical sentences among the actresses with the locale to create an atmosphere that allows her to visualize her feminist case.

Many Chicanas now, who do not want to accept subordination in this patriarchal atmosphere, have the courage and the ability to speak about the various discriminations or the prejudicial actions they face within the Mexican American culture. It can be asserted that these plays are clearly interested in analyzing the Chicana movement which aims at challenging the notions of identity, transgressing the borders, and redefining the Chicana identity.

# **Chapter One**

*Performance and Identity*

*formation*