

“You Have to Feel It to Heal It”:

Healing Trauma and Finding the Creative Voice with Josefina López

By Trevor Boffone

As Josefina López sat on a table before us, she told us about her journey to find self-acceptance and love, a process which involved her removing all masks, dismissing her ego, and embracing her unconscious desires. Surrounded by Chicana feminist art and Latin@ filmmakers, artists, and allies at East End Studio Gallery in Houston, Texas, López spoke of the joys and challenges of creating with her authentic voice, and ultimately led us on a journey to find our story and better understand our art and life’s work.

In the pages that follow, I explore Chicana playwright, filmmaker, community leader, and mentor Josefina López’s pedagogical methods of teaching creative writing and playwriting. To do this, I engage with López’s two-hour workshop at Señorita Cinema—Houston’s all-Latina film festivalⁱ—on August 29, 2015. I foreground this workshop against ongoing research of López’s career, mentorship, teaching, and community activism that I have been conducting since 2012 when I first met López. This work includes fieldwork at CASA 0101 Theater in Boyle Heights, Los Angeles (the theater that López founded in 2000 and where she serves as Artistic Director), frequent conversations with López, her personal archives, as well as many interviews conducted with individuals in and around López and CASA 0101, among other primary resources. This article analyzes my own experiences and first-hand account of López’s workshop at Señorita Cinema alongside the standpoints and experiences of other people in attendance. Due to the personal nature of each student’s journey, I have chosen to maintain each person’s anonymity; therefore, I have changed their names to Anthony, Carmen, Maria, Paul, and Sancha. In this essay, I tackle several questions: What is López’s approach to playwriting? What are her exercises? How does López tap into the unconscious? How does she connect with the group? And, how does her approach heal and empower people? While many of these questions result in intangible answers, I demonstrate how López uses the workshop setting to aid students to tap into the unconscious, heal trauma, and eventually come to understand the theme of their life’s work.

I begin this essay by exploring Josefina López’s pedagogical style. Then, I shift my focus to the Señorita Cinema workshop to see how López’s methods play out in a workshop setting comprised of participants who are unfamiliar with her distinct teaching style. This is to say, this was not her typical group of students at CASA 0101 Theater who are familiar with her mantras, style, and work. This was a workshop of 16 people (12 women and 4 men, 14 people of color), none of which had taken a writing workshop with López. Thus, as López’s designated scholar and “formal keeper” of her archives (as Latin@ theater scholar Tiffany Ana López has called me), I was afforded a unique standpoint from which to analyze the workshop and experiences of those involved. Yet, as I will show, I did not simply witness the workshop from the outskirts, but became an active participant, willing to bare my soul and become emotionally vulnerable in an effort to tap into my unconscious and embrace my creative powers.

Tapping Into the Unconscious: Josefina López's Pedagogical Approach

In previous work, I have mapped Josefina López's playwriting mentorship, beginning with her experiences with the *padre* and *madre* of Latin@ dramatic writing, Luis Valdez and Maria Irene Fornés respectively, as well as López experiences at the landmark Latin@ dramatic writing workshops of the later 1980s and early 1990s: INTAR Hispanic Playwrights-in-Residence Laboratory, South Coast Repertory's Hispanic Playwright's Project, and Mark Taper Forum's Latino Theatre Initiative.ⁱⁱ And while all of these experiences have shaped López's life, work, and mentorship style, her pedagogical methods are as unique as the playwright herself. Firstly, López's work builds community which allows anyone with interest and commitment the opportunities to develop their artistic voice. This goes beyond creating a safe space, but is directly tied to the cost of having access to an award-winning playwright and "name" who might otherwise be unattainable. At CASA 0101 Theater, all playwriting workshops for adults are a suggested donation of \$10. The workshops for youth are entirely donation-based. Affordability is an often-understated aspect of accessibility. In López's feminist model, there is a seat at the table for anyone and everyone. No one is turned away for lack of funds. Stephanie Saint Sanchez has taken this model to Houston via Señorita Cinema which is an affordable ticket and community-centered event. López's writing workshop at the festival, for instance, cost a mere \$10 for a two hour class with the writer. Such workshops in Houston at Write Space, for example, with far less accomplished writers typically cost anywhere from \$30 to \$60, essentially pricing out potential audiences who may need to witness this work the most.ⁱⁱⁱ

With a group of people who genuinely want to be there, López instills confidence in her students in order to forge resilient bonds of community, reassuring her students that, yes, they too can write plays and screenplays. Just being there physically and mentally offers support in and of itself. Speaking of this, playwrights 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, ("Teaching Playwriting") community outreach and private workshops." García-Romero and Tuan's thoughts ring especially true for López. At Señorita Cinema, for example, López's interest in each participant's story empowered those in attendance. Often, López guided students on a journey to understand what they wrote, what they wanted to write, or why they felt a certain way. She acted as more than a sounding board, but became emotionally invested in ensuring that each participant left the workshop having received quality mentorship and guidance.

When López mentors people, she is guided to do so. In a previous interview with López, she told me: "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").

Besides offering unparalleled support, López helps her students understand characters and the subconscious of those characters, which helps her students write and develop their characters more deeply and fully. Intentional or not, López's pedagogy is informed by Carl Jung's

understanding of the unconscious, believing that the unconscious houses repressed memories which specifically pertain to the individual. While Sigmund Freud saw the unconscious as pertaining more to unacceptable repressed desires, in Jung's view the repressed memories are not necessarily a negative thing (Jung 265). With this in mind, López's technique involves a journey of discovering students' traumas and how these can affect their theater-making. Regarding the intersections of trauma and theater, Tiffany López argues that overcoming mental and physical wounds is necessary in order "to rebuild and reimagine more tolerant and inclusive communities" ("Violent Inscriptions" 66). Tiffany López's thoughts on trauma are essential to understanding how Josefina López approaches playwriting and teaching: we must heal ourselves before we can heal our communities.

López's method works with the thought that everyone experiences a trauma at some point between the age of five and seven in which the brain divides itself into the conscious and the unconscious mind. This event can be anything and the individual in question might not even remember the event. Nevertheless, the event tends to be something bad that happens and you blame yourself for it. As a child, you realize that something is wrong and for the first time in your life you feel separate from your parents, your family. López offered the example of one's parents getting a divorce and the child thinking it is her or his fault. According to López, in this moment, you realize that something is wrong and, subsequently, you lose access to creative powers. As a result of trauma, the conscious mind creates the ego to deal with the pain. According to Jung, the ego symbolizes the conscious mind, which disrupts the emotions, memories, and thoughts that a person is aware of (276). In this way, the ego influences how a person experiences identity and continuity. The ego becomes a mask that we must learn to remove. One must surrender one's ego to be guided to creative places. In playwriting, you must realize that you are the obstacle and you create the obstacles. In this way, López's writing workshops are not entirely about writing, but are more so a way for individuals to heal, find their authentic voices, and tap into themselves holistically. Writing is bigger than writing itself. For instance, one student at the Señorita Cinema workshop, Sancha, told me that López's approach is "soul work." Working closely with students, López's workshops provide aspiring writers with a roadmap of what it looks to heal and be healed.

López's own journey with healing trauma is seen in her essay, "The Unlovable," which became her reaction to trauma. The essay details her healing process while also speaking to one of the central aspects of López's personality: intended emotional vulnerability. She always thought that she simply could not be loved and was not good enough, feelings that led to López invariably giving up her power. For López, it has been a journey to recover her authentic self: "a woman who is lovable in her own right" ("The Unlovable" 33). As a young girl, she wanted to receive a doll from her father and, when she did not receive it, she felt unloved. She came to realize that her father was not the man she thought he was and, subsequently, always harbored feelings of inadequacy that were framed around wanting her father's love (López, "The Unlovable" 34-5). After seeing her mother's pain, she promised that she would do something one day that would make women feel like they were in control of their own destiny: "I wanted to start a revolution so that women didn't have to suffer" (López, "The Unlovable" 36). With regards to the initial trauma, the original wound, every time a man would hurt her, López would return to the original sense of feeling unloved; if her own father could not love her, then how could she expect another man would ("The Unlovable" 50)? Ultimately, through tapping into the unconscious, López came to understand that "unlovable" was so ingrained in her subconscious mind that it hid her own needs and true self. In this instance, López's personal unconscious developed what Jung referred to as a "complex," or feelings and memories that focus on a single concept (Jung 42). In this case, López's

complex was the feeling “unlovable.” Eventually, López learned to heal her wounds to become her true self who “is an authentic person who is brilliant and aspires to develop her genius and express herself in every artistic way possible” (“The Unlovable” 55). López’s writing workshop in Houston spoke to her own healing process as chronicled in “The Unlovable” and helped to initiate a similar process in those in attendance.

López’s writing workshop at Señorita Cinema served as a way to heal and cope with unresolved pain, as according to the playwright, writing is the best way to heal trauma. Writing, therefore, becomes therapy. For many of us, the most powerful message was that of “give yourself permission to be bad,” advice that López gave to us at the beginning of the workshop. In my opinion, this was freeing and allowed me to tap into lobes of creativity that I had previously pushed aside. Years earlier, I had attempted to complete a daily writing prompt, but was anchored down by the pressure (from myself) to create something perfect and worthy of being read, of being published. But as López told us, “whatever you write is perfect,” and I felt comfortable sharing my words, words that I would never have felt comfortable sharing before in a public forum.

In the pages that follow, I detail three writing exercises that Josefina López used to help us tap into our unconscious minds and begin the healing process. Naturally, these exercises represent only a mere fraction of the pedagogical strategies that López is able to employ in her full-length writing workshops which typically meet for 90 minutes once a week over a ten week period at her theater space in Boyle Heights. In addition to summarizing each exercise, I critically engage with students’ responses and experiences throughout the process. I do so in order to foreground the emotional impact that Josefina López’s creative writing pedagogy encompasses while demonstrating that, yes, wounds can be healed through writing, no matter how short the writing interval.

Exercise 1: Dandelion

López’s first exercise consisted of a free write about one word for one minute. She told us to write as fast as we could, never taking the pen off the paper, and, thus, never stopping the writing process. According to López, as soon as someone lifts the pen, they begin engaging with intellect and the conscious mind, “The conscious mind does not create. It only organizes.”^{iv} While thoughts may be conscious at first, the exercise works to tap into the unconscious. Someone shouted, “Dandelion” and we began to write. As basic as this appears, this exercise was not only about writing unconscious thoughts for one minute at a time. López created a safe space where everyone felt comfortable sharing. Once this was established, we began to share our writing and begin the process of analyzing our unconscious thoughts. López continually thanked us for sharing, always viewed our words in a positive light, and encouraged us to go forward with our stories. While these attributes to López teaching style may seem common, they enabled her to create a safe space that made everyone comfortable with sharing. Furthermore, López never asked us to go further than we were willing or ready to go; she was careful not to re-stimulate any trauma.

Afterwards, Sancha told me that, while these exercises seemed simple and obvious, they were difficult and complex at the same time because they helped us to understand, reflect, and analyze ourselves and relationships “to/with others, the world, life.” Carmen reiterated Sancha’s thoughts about the exercises. At first, Carmen thought the first exercise was “light and fun. I expected the rest of the workshop to continue to go along the same lines. Boy, was I surprised!” In line with Jungian thought, this exercise was designed to tap into repressed thoughts and would lay the groundwork for the following two writing exercises.

One man, Anthony, shared how he immediately thought of pulling weeds out of the sidewalk on Saturdays with his father, a thought which transitioned to mentioning that dandelions are the “bastard stepchildren” of the botany world. At this point, López told us that she felt she had picked up on something, but did not want to go too deep this early in the workshop. In reality, we were participating in a process of “plucking dandelions,” or pulling from the unconscious mind, and, naturally, we would unpack this process throughout the two hour period. Carmen said that hearing Anthony’s story was a turning point in the workshop as López’s tone became more serious as she began to dive deeper into the intersections between writing and trauma.

López suggested that we do this exercise when we are experiencing writers block or are stuck on a word or our writing itself. For instance, if someone is writing a story about ducks, then she suggests they do this exercise using the word “duck” and other words associated with it. After freewriting for one minute, then two minutes, then three, and so on and so forth, the mind opens up to allow you to tap into the unconscious and free the writing process. Through this exercise, the writer will eventually figure out what the story is and where the story is going.

Exercise 2: Your Last Dying Breath...

The second exercise consisted of a one minute free write about our last dying breath. López told us to imagine our last day on earth. Where are we? How old are we? Who we are talking to? And, most importantly, what is our final breath, our final life lesson that we will say to that person? Essentially, López challenged us to write “the most powerful thing you can tell a child.” As in the first exercise, we had to write this thought as fast as we could, without taking our pen off the paper. Through sharing, we began to deconstruct our unconscious thoughts with regards to our last dying breath. After talking through what the unconscious mind produced, López asked each of us, “What kind of play, what kind of film, would you write with that theme?” She encouraged us to not be afraid to write our stories as a healing mechanism and as a way to create with our authentic voice. She repeatedly told us, “You have to feel it to heal it.” She offered her own experiences of, after having written over twenty plays, fifteen screenplays, countless TV pilots, sketch comedy, etc. and being a writer since she was 5 years old, she came to realize that all her work was about the exact same message: “I am basically here to teach you that you are more powerful than you think you are and I am here to learn that I am more powerful than I think I am.”

One woman, Carla, wrote “Don’t settle,” to which López countered “Anything is possible.” Another participant, Samantha, said “You’ll make mistakes. That’s how you’ll learn.” López responded, “You are already perfect.” The idea of making mistakes comes from fear, but if someone understands that they are perfect then they will not be afraid to make mistakes. For example, with this theme, stories about being queer and Latin@ will not focus on fear, but will focus on the individual accepting themselves for who they truly are, embracing self-love and autonomy. They will see their perfection.

One man, Paul, shared “Love and do good as you go through life.” López responded to him, “Love.” The man began to share about the trauma that he experienced caring for his sick mother, staying by her side while others didn’t, and losing her. He stuck by her side until the end, but never felt like he received love because he gave too much. López told Paul that “everything starts with love” and that he gave love through service. We are not alone and we are created out of love. She challenged him to love himself first. The unconscious is a site for future development and, as Jung notes, undeveloped elements have the potential to coalesce into a conscious form (97). In this instance, López encouraged Paul to see love and to love himself before all else.

Another woman, Sancha, told me that her last dying breath to a child was, “You are magic.” Through López’s guidance, Sancha began to understand her cultural ties to curandismo and to the power for people to realize that they can achieve much more than they allow themselves to do. Sancha told me,

I have always struggled, as a dark-skinned Chicana, with knowing my worth. I have allowed mainstream ideals of beauty and knowledge to “color” my view of myself. And her workshop and response to this particular writing prompt made me realize that my mission has been to unlearn and undo these social constructions that do not fit nor serve me or my community, and to truly know and love myself and my magic, to get in touch with the spiritual part of myself. From her writing exercise, I learned to just speak.

Having just finished her Ph.D., Sancha had been trained to over-analyze and critique to such an end that she lost her connection to her instinct. Over the course of the writing exercise, López helped Sancha remember how to find her intuition and authentic voice. This was reaffirming for Sancha who found that her intuition and authentic voice are necessary and possible, and that, ultimately, her knowledge, both academic and creative, hold value and should be shared.

Exercise 3: It’s 3 a.m. and Death Greets You at the Door

For the final exercise, López asked us to imagine that it was 3 a.m., we were writing a play at the computer, and we hear a knock at the door. When we open the door, Death is greeting us, ready to take us to the afterlife. The task was as follows: what would you say to Death to try to convince him to let you stay. For this scenario, López gave us two minutes to write as fast as we could, without stopping or lifting our pen from the paper. In this final exercise, the aims of the workshop would come together and help us to understand the central theme of our work, and not just creative work, I should add, but more so a theme of our life’s work. We came to understand that part of finding our creative voices involves us learning to forgive ourselves. López told us, “You can be loved for being just the way you are.” By understanding this, we as writers can overcome the transition from victim to victor and, as a result, become vessels for the light.

During the first two exercises, I didn’t feel entirely comfortable sharing with the group, even as others so openly bared their souls. Yet, when we began to share after our final writing exercise, López looked directly at me and asked me to share. In this moment, the entirety of my relationship with López flashed through my mind. The result? I became comfortable baring myself, being vulnerable, because she had been so vulnerable with me since I first met her and subsequently more and more as our bonds as artists and scholar began to strengthen. How could I not share with her after she had shared so much with me? I began to share with the group what I had written:

Holy Fuck! I’m not ready. I’ve got so much more to do, so much more to give. My voice can’t be silenced, my creativity hasn’t dried up. Let me go and come back later... much later. Let me tell the stories I have to tell, to be a vessel for others, to use my privilege to make the world a better place. To end hate. To end sexism. To end racism. Let me do more. Let me commit deeper, more fully. Let me live so that I can *do*.

López immediately asked me if I could think of a traumatic event that happened to me when I was a young child. I hesitated and then told her—and everyone—what kept coming to my mind during the workshop. When I was young—I don't remember the age, but every other detail seems so clear—I tried to pick up my grandma, lost my balance, and dropped her. It wasn't a big fall, but she fell nevertheless. And while this seems innocent enough—an accident—I always have seen this as a turning point in her life. She was healthy before that. She worked. She went to church. She drove. She was autonomous. And then everything changed. Health problems started to creep in. She started to fall. The Parkinson's got worse. She got cancer (and survived it). She stopped being able to walk. She had to move to a nursing home, the home where she still lives, and barely lives a happy and meaningful life today. Every time I visit her, I inevitably go back to the moment when I tried to pick her up, even if she doesn't always remember who I am. In many ways, I've always carried guilt even though no one else remembers the fall the way I do and, to be honest, no one in my family has ever mentioned it in the years since even though we were all there. It was Easter.

López told me that I had to learn to forgive myself with regards to the trauma that occurred to me as a child. I had interpreted this event as me having done something wrong; I was a bad person and deserved the guilt. And, as López worked through my story, she freed me of the guilt. As a White, cis-male with tons of privilege, I've always harbored guilt over doing something wrong to someone who was weak. According to López, as a result, I've become an academic helping to give voice to Latin@ playwrights. López told me that one of the things my character will learn is to forgive himself and realize the traumatic event was not his fault. I had internalized the belief that everything was my fault, that I had set my grandmother down this path of pain and loss when, in reality, this was not the case. As we were in a public space, López acknowledged that she did not want to expose too much, but before moving on, she encouraged me: "You're a great person. I love you and I love what you do." And, so here, I came to the writing workshop hoping to tap into my creative powers, but did not expect to learn more about my life's mission, or the theme of my work—both creative and scholarly. Once I removed my ego and went beyond the superficial, I was able to find out who I truly was. After the workshop, Anthony—the man who wrote about pulling dandelions with his father—came up to me and told me that my story was his story and that we had practically written the same thing, had experienced the same experiences. The conversation was cathartic as we helped heal each other through our words, through our writing, through our vulnerability.

Concluding Remarks

Once the workshop ended, there was a resilient feeling of community in the room. Even though I only knew four participants beforehand, I left feeling like I could continue the creativity process with anyone else in attendance. I trusted them and I felt their trust in return. When López finished, I told the group that I was interested in talking to participants about their experiences. Now, usually these types of "cold calls" to interview people are met with one or two people being interested. But, at this workshop, I felt the love as half (8) of the participants agreed to speak with me more about their experiences in López's workshop.

One woman, Maria, was originally working the check-in booth by the front door, but became so engrossed by what López was saying and how she was able to connect with the audience that she left the booth to participate in the workshop: "I just knew that being a writer and filmmaker myself I would regret it deeply if I hadn't paid close attention to what Josefina was teaching." The

experience renewed her passion for writing and art-making, and the exercises gave her a clearer way to focus on stories and character progression. Maria was so moved by the experience that, “there were times when I felt on the verge of tears but managed to refrain.” In the end, Maria left the workshop emotionally affected and better able to understand how she can improve her life by harnessing the power of being aware of herself and her life goals, ultimately pushing the ego aside and opening up the unconscious mind.

Carmen, who expected a more structured format, including receiving feedback on previous work such as scenes and to find out what worked and didn’t work, left the workshop with “the freedom to focus on writing” even though she “hadn’t felt motivated to do so before.”

Sancha told me that the workshop was a “transformative experience” for her. Before coming, she did not know what to expect beyond being in a room with the woman who wrote *Real Women Have Curves*, and left the workshop inspired to go forward and create with her authentic voice. Put simply, she felt like an outsider, as someone who was not a writer at a writing workshop. Sancha explained,

It was like she recognized that people were brought to write for bigger reasons and that we needed to connect with those reasons to move forward in our writing, but also in our specific personal journeys. It was very liberating, or at least a taste, an introduction of what a quest for liberation can feel and look like through writing.

Even so, beyond López’s writing exercises, her presence alone was empowering for those in attendance. In Sancha’s opinion, it was empowering and meaningful to see a “strong, confident legit Mexican woman running a workshop, knowing that she has so much to offer, and wanting to make herself useful to others. It was very powerful.”

In the end, the underlying theme of Josefina López’s writing workshop at Señorita Cinema was clear: Art Heals.

Notes

ⁱ In 2004, Houston-based Chicana filmmaker Stephanie Saint Sanchez was accepted into López’s Boyle Heights Latina Independent Film Extravaganza! (BHLIFE) in Los Angeles. The festival proved to be a life-changing moment for Sanchez, “That festival saved my life. I felt like I was a young punk seeing my first Ramones show at CBGB in its heyday. Like something big was happening and that we Latina filmmakers were the future architects of an important chapter in film history” (Website). For Sanchez, Señorita Cinema is her way of paying it forward and continuing the presence of Latina filmmakers in an Anglo male dominated industry.

ⁱⁱ For more on these dramatic writing workshops, see Anne García-Romero’s *The Fornes Frame*, Chantal Rodríguez’s *The Latino Theatre Initiative/Center Theatre Group Papers*, and Jorge Huerta’s *Chicano Drama*. In Trevor Boffone’s dissertation, *Performing Eastside Latinidad: Josefina López and Theater for Social Change in Boyle Heights* (2015), he charts in detail López’s experiences and relationship to these initiatives.

ⁱⁱⁱ I do not mean to be overly critical of Write Space, but would like to draw attention to their prices given that they are one of the more visible spaces for writing workshops in the Houston area.

^{iv} All quotes are from the workshop.

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