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## Staging Gender Troubles: Sabina Berman's "The Mustache"

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Betsy Dahms

**Staging Gender Trouble:**  
Sabina Berman's "The  
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Theater is often a site of social critique. The stage creates a representational distance from reality and at the same time offers a fertile and relatively safe territory for analyzing and deconstructing societal ills. Mexico has seen a resurgence in popularity and support of socially minded theater in the last thirty years. Despite its long history of Catholicism and patriarchy, many of Mexico's most successful recent playwrights have been women. Critics such as Linda Hutcheon have noted that it should not be surprising that Mexican women playwrights have enjoyed such success on stage, and that it is precisely because women have inhabited a marginal position in Mexico, especially in national politics, that they are able to be so daring in their critique (cited in Bixler "Power Plays" 83). In effect, it can be argued that women in their current situation in Mexico have little to lose in speaking up and criticizing national government and other official discourses. According to critic Jacqueline Bixler, these dramatists "have provided a steady stream of postmodern plays that parody, ridicule and otherwise attack Mexico's most sacred heroes, icons, and institutions" ("Power Plays" 83). Within her



generation, which includes such names as Carmen Boulosa (1954-), Jesusa Rodríguez (1955-), and Astrid Hadad (1957-), Sabina Berman (1954-) has been among the most daring and successful playwrights.

Berman has been described by Bixler as "an iconoclast who takes pleasure in destroying the decrepit, but still sacred icons of Mexican culture" ("Power Plays" 97). Throughout her three-decade career, Berman has tackled many forms of "official" Mexican discourse while receiving prestigious awards including Mexico's Premio Nacional de Teatro for *Rompecabezas* in 1981 and for *Herejía* in 1983, and the National Institute of Fine Arts (INBA) National Theatre Prize in 1979, 1981, 1982, and 1983. Her most famous work, later adapted for film, is entitled *Between Villa and a Naked Woman* (*Entre Villa y una mujer desnuda*, 1993). It confronts lingering manifestations of heteronormative masculinity from Mexico's Revolutionary War as personified by General Pancho Villa in a contemporary relationship. Berman critiques this residual machismo as antiquated and proposes that her protagonists be able to sit and have tea instead of having sexual relations upon meeting.

Although Berman is internationally renowned for *Between Villa and a Naked Woman*, she has worked on gender and power dynamics within relationships since the beginning of her career in 1978. I will focus in this essay on a short play in Berman's debut work, a trilogy entitled *El suplicio del placer* (1978), translated as *The Agony of Ecstasy* by Adam Versényi.<sup>1</sup> Berman, who has a history of reworking her texts and titles, initially named this piece *El jardín de las delicias* (*The Garden of Delights*). The work consists of three one-act plays sharing the single theme of relationship dynamics between a male and a female with an absent third person referenced in dialogue. My analysis centers on the first of these plays, which was originally translated into English as "The Mustache" by Versényi in 1992. I will consider the specifically Mexican context of Berman's 1978 play as a reaction to Nobel Prize winner Octavio Paz's 1959 publication of "Sons of Malinche" and as a precursor of Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity (1990) and Judith Halberstam's (1998) notion of female masculinity. My goal is to show that Berman was visionary in her use of the mustache as a prop to signal the theatricality of gender performance and the absurdity of rigid binaries in Mexican society.

The eleven-page play consists entirely of dialogue between the couple, He and She, and their respective uses of a shared portable mustache. Much of the discussion focuses on the exploits of the previous night, when He borrowed the mustache to seduce a woman at the next table in an unspecified location. The couple discusses the open nature of their postmodern relationship. While both agree to non-monogamy, only He acts upon this agreement. This inequality causes tension in the relationship that shows the insecurities of both characters and the contradictory nature of their "independence."

"The Mustache" echoes Octavio Paz's assessment of Mexican character or *mexicanidad*, since the accessory shared by He and She is a

classic symbol of the machismo at the heart of that construct. Through the play, Berman uses theater to adopt a critical vantage point from which to critique Paz's description of Mexican gender relations in "Sons of Malinche." It should be noted that the play debuted at the Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana in Mexico City, where an educated audience would have been well aware of Paz's essay. Subsequent productions in 1985, 1990, and 1992 in the Teatro Rodolfo Usigli (in Coyoacán, Mexico City) and in 1994 in the Foro Ghandi (also in the capital) attest to the play's positive reception in Mexico.

### PAZ'S LASTING INFLUENCE

Theater is perhaps the perfect medium to react to such mainstream discourses as that of Octavio Paz's essay. "Sons of Malinche," though essentialist and problematic, occupies a significant space in the Mexican imaginary and an even more important place amongst the educated elite of Mexico, of which Sabina Berman is a member.<sup>2</sup> Octavio Paz (1914-1998) was considered a leading intellectual in Mexican culture and literature and his work informs daily life in Mexico today. Theatrical performances allow for visual representations of Paz's notion that Mexican identity exists in tension between the binaries of closed/open and *chingón/chingada* (fucker/fucked). The essay to which these dichotomies belong is part of the larger work *The Labyrinth of Solitude* (1959), a key text in the construction of "the Mexican condition" as one of insecurity. In rather essentialist terms, Paz traces Mexican identity to the Spanish conquest and subsequent colonization of indigenous peoples in what is known today as Mexico. He bases his analysis on the much-contested myth of doña Marina, La Malinche, and her role in Hernán Cortés's successful victory over the indigenous. With the rape of doña Marina, Cortés begot the first Mexican, the first *mestizo* of both indigenous and Spanish blood. Subsequent Mexicans, then, must cope with their bastard position of being children of rape and combat feelings of insecurity about their hybrid condition.

In order to survive, according to Paz, the Mexican male must remain closed and be in the aggressive, violent position of the *chingón* (he who fucks). A male who lets down his guard risks being torn open by a *chingón* who will humiliate him, penetrate him, and leave him *chingado* (fucked). Paz considers that for Mexicans, life presents the option to be either the *chingón* or the *chingado*. Mexican identity, much like Mexican ancestry, revolves around the word *chingar* (to fuck):

The verb denotes violence, an emergence from oneself to penetrate another by force...*Chingar*, then, is to do violence to another. The verb is masculine, active, cruel; it stings, it 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 exterior world. (76-77)

Paz describes doña Marina or La Malinche as the representative figure of *la chingada*. She, and by extension all Mexican women, "embody the open, the *chingada*" (86).

Berman addresses the *chingón/chingada* binary with her mobile prop in the "The Mustache." The play establishes the two sides of the binary in the characters He and She, yet Berman's treatment of these two supposed opposites shows the problematic nature of absolutes and undermines Paz's firm distinction.

The two characters are referred to only as He and She, or *Él* and *Ella* in Spanish. By naming the characters using gendered subject pronouns, Berman emphasizes the fact that they represent, at least initially, the opposite poles of Paz's binary. The playwright draws attention to the way linguistic categories available in both Spanish and English establish a dichotomy. Outside the binary, the neuter term *it* is not generally used for humans.

Yet the neutrality of *it* seems relevant to the characters from the outset of Berman's play. According to the stage notes, He and She "look astonishingly alike"—both have short hair dyed a red mahogany color, and both are "svelte, beautiful, and elegant—and they know it" (1). A blurring of the traditionally rigid gender binary is immediately apparent in this androgynous representation. Berman establishes a gendered distinction between He and She only to immediately destroy it through the physical similarities of the characters. The author further blurs Paz's binary by describing He as an effeminate man and She as a masculine woman. Ironically, it is She who owns the mustache, an icon of Mexican virility and manliness.

In reaction to Paz's characterization of Mexican gender rigidity, Berman creates a conceptual space to imagine an alternative *mexicanidad*. Confronting the supposed insecurity of *mestizo* males, the author proposes a Mexican masculinity not rooted in traditional machismo. And in extending the mustache as a cover of insecurity, she also proposes a Mexican femininity not rooted in the virgin/whore dichotomy. For Berman, Mexican women should be able to exercise sexual agency without fear of repercussions.

Berman's exploration of gender fluidity in "The Mustache" appeared over a decade before Judith Butler published her work on the performativity of gender. It builds on Mexican feminist Rosario Castellanos's earlier play *El eterno femenino* (*The Eternal Feminine*, 1975) to show the constructed nature of gender. It is interesting to note that while Castellanos investigated the social construction of femininity as a gender, Berman's play highlights the contingent nature of masculinity. Butler also approaches gender as a social construction that has no original.

Whether compared to the earlier work of Castellanos or to Butler's later philosophy, Berman's treatment of the fluidity of gender is visionary for her historical time and context. Questioning gender roles and performing gender in theater through the exchange of a detachable mustache shows the inherently theatrical quality of all gender distinctions.

Theater critic Roselyn Costantino has argued that the farcical and artificial quality of the mustache negates the symbolic qualities of virility and male sexual power that a "natural" mustache invokes (246). In contrast to this interpretation, I believe that the mobility of the mustache is exactly what constitutes it as a sign of virility. The fact that it is mobile illustrates the constructed nature of male masculinity. Masculinity is a performance that is enacted alternatively by He and She depending on who dons the mustache.

### TROUBLING GENDER ON STAGE

According to Butler's seminal text *Gender Trouble* (1990), "gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (33). Gender is a copy of actions that have no original and that are socially reinforced to perpetuate stable gender identities from generation to generation.<sup>3</sup> In "The Mustache," spectators witness the performativity of both gender and other aspects of the identities of He and She.

Reading Butler into the theater of Berman, it can be suggested that there is also a performativity of insecurity between the two characters in their self-proclaimed open relationship. In two rather lengthy stretches of dialogue, He asks forgiveness of She for seducing another woman, and She states her complex independence. Explaining why she is not taking advantage of their "agreement" to be with others sexually, She states that she is "liberated enough not to want anyone else" as justification for her lack of affairs (7).

Paz considers the root of Mexican insecurity to be the less than ideal beginnings of the *mestizo* race. He introduces an "original" cause of this insecurity, but he does so by employing a myth. Berman exposes insecurity to be as malleable as the foundational myth and questions the very existence of a root or an original. If there is no original to which to attribute this insecurity, the condition of being insecure is a performance, as in the theatrical exchanges between He and She. For the public witnessing "The Mustache," the performative nature of the protagonists' perilous relationship implies that insecurity can be altered. Berman thus uses the theater to liberate Mexicans from the spell cast upon them by Paz's attempt to isolate insecurity as a fundamental characteristic of the so-called Mexican condition.

Berman also complicates the prescribed power division between male and female. In her play, it is She who seems to control the relationship. He is in the position of asking forgiveness, He must serve



himself tea, and He must go to the pharmacy if he wants an aspirin. The critic Kirsten F. Nigro aptly observes that He performs traditionally feminine roles and that She seems to follow a stereotypically masculine script (147). The scene in which He asks forgiveness from She is an exaggerated parody of a conflict between a heteronormative couple.

Curiously, it is also She who narrates He's exploits of the preceding night. She tells He how he asked to borrow the mustache and how he seduced a brunette at the next table. Since He was inebriated, he does not recall the episode. Butler states that her "performative theory of gender acts...disrupts the categories of the body, sex, gender, and sexuality and occasions their subversive resignification and proliferation beyond the binary frame" (x). Berman also represents the complexity of identity while critiquing rigid gender roles in "The Mustache." In the retelling of the previous night's events, Berman's protagonists switch roles. The character She dramatically restages He's every move to seduce the brunette while wearing the mustache She lent him. The audience witnesses a metatheatrical play within a play that detaches "masculine" traits from He and momentarily links them to She, thereby performatively questioning the naturalized links between males/masculinity and females/femininity. The stage notes are explicit; "SHE acts out what she has to say as if she were him and HE were the brunette" (5). In the reenactment, She is the seducer, the *chingón*, and He is the seduced. As She recounts He's approach to the woman—"you stroked her hands, you smiled at her, and you leaned against her naked shoulder"—She performs the actions on him (5). The brunette being seduced appears to conform to stereotypical gender roles made fun of by She. She repeatedly mentions the "black silk lightening bolt" of the brunette's hair, an observation reminiscent of Renaissance love poetry exalting traditional notions of female beauty. This brunette represents the traditional Mexican woman who embodies the *chingada* side of the binary. There is no character development of the brunette apart from her physical description in the seduction reenactment. This woman is an entity to be fucked, nothing more.

Not knowing what He whispered into the brunette's ear, She interrupts her restaging. She becomes angry and falls out of her adopted character. He, eager to hear more about his success, urges She on. She again takes up her rendition of He's performance. As they dance, She leads. An erotic description of the brunette victim follows: "Sweet little girl...she was like a feather in your hands" (4). Upon describing the brunette, She caresses He's back, shoulders, waist, buttocks, and groin. As soon as He speaks, She stops her performance of his actions and sits down to light a cigarette, aroused by her own description of the brunette. She has finished her performance of He as a secure man with sexual agency and has returned to her performance as the ostensibly female member of the relationship.

## SPACE FOR ALTERNATIVE SEXUALITIES?

The failure of He and She to abide by rigid gender roles and by compulsory heterosexuality opens a space in "The Mustache" for alternative sexualities. I agree with Costantino that "the lack of clearly defined characters in regard to their roles allows a space for playful inversion, subversion and creation on stage" (my translation, 246). The character She enjoys her partner's sexual exploits as a voyeur; She imagines herself in He's position, confidently approaching women for sex. He insinuates that She is attracted to women, as demonstrated by her performance of his exploits and the erotic description of the brunette.

She's performance of He and subsequent sexual arousal points to the instability of terms such as man/woman, masculinity/femininity and homo/hetero/bi-sexuality. Berman highlights the socially constituted power of virility by diverting a traditional artifact of masculinity, facial hair, onto a non-male. This is the same technique employed by Judith Halberstam in her 1998 book, *Female Masculinity*. According to Halberstam, "female masculinity actually affords us a glimpse of how masculinity is constructed as masculinity" (1). Witnessing She's performance of female masculinity heightens spectators' sensitivity to He's performance of male masculinity. While Halberstam refuses to define what female masculinity actually is because of its multiple manifestations, she does attempt to divorce masculinity from "maleness and [from] power and domination," asserting that "masculinity is multiple and that far from just being about men, the idea of masculinity engages, inflects and shapes everyone" (2, 14).

The presence and application of the mustache does affect everyone. The presence of only one mustache means that He and She must share it between them. Both of them feel more secure when wearing the mustache, and both enjoy the attention that they receive from women who see them with the facial hair.<sup>4</sup> The security accompanied by the mustache suggests a possible homosexual or bisexual dimension to the female character's identity. She uses the mustache "when her confidence and strength leave her and she needs to ward off unwanted suitors" (Versényi xiii). The fact that She uses the mustache to both close herself off from unwanted suitors and to attract women suggests her transgressive appropriation of the closed male side of Paz's binary and her possible homosexual tendencies. She's refusal to say that she likes He because he is a man also supports this reading. This, coupled with the fact that She becomes sexually aroused when reenacting He's sexual exploits, indicates that rather than being attracted to He as a male person, She is more interested in performing the masculinity that is afforded to him in Mexican society. This Mexican masculinity denotes "social privilege" (Halberstam 2) and sexual agency. As Butler describes, "the libido-as-masculine is the source from which all possible sexuality is presumed to come" (53). Rather than reinforce masculine privilege, Berman opens the possibility of shared privilege, and shared sexual libido.



By performing He's gender role, She is appropriating some of his culturally assigned power. Halberstam notes that female masculinity is most dangerous when it is coupled with lesbian desire (28). Perhaps the character She recognizes this threat and because of this denies her attraction to women. In terms of Paz's binary, She is careful only to perform He's role as a man to a certain extent. A female Mexican voyeur is still a female, she is still open. A Mexican woman who performs a female masculinity or is a lesbian, however, more squarely occupies the closed position of the binary. This role reversal threatens to displace the male into the open, *chingado* category.

Halberstam cautions that "female masculinity is not simply the opposite of female femininity, nor is it a female version of male masculinity" (29). This is where Nigro's otherwise thought-provoking essay over-simplifies Berman's text. In the retelling of He's exploits, Nigro states that "[t]he 'masculine' still seduces here, the 'feminine' is seduced. Women (She as she) still suffer penis envy, and are metaphorically castrated" (147). Nigro forgets that She owns the mustache and fails to see that She performs her masculinity differently than He does when wearing the mustache. In fact, Berman portrays a difference in how each character views his or her respective masculinity. He views his ability to seduce women as the "freedom to be able to take her or leave her" (9). He's use of the mustache and of his masculinity is to consume women. There is no mention of how He would use his masculinity to approach a man. She, on the other hand, states that when "the day comes that [she] want[s] a man to approach [her] and seduce [her], that [she] will approach him and seduce him first" (7). She clearly prefers the active, closed role not afforded to Mexican females. On the subject of women, she states that "just because [she] is a woman...doesn't mean that [she] can't enjoy another woman's beauty" (3). She continues to differentiate herself from He and his treatment of women: "And I don't have to take them home to enjoy them. I contemplate beauty from afar...I let it be...You, on the other hand,...see something admirable and want to possess it, consume it, use it up" (3). Her female masculinity is not an appropriation of his. It is recognition of agency and power and clearly distinguishes itself from He's performance of male masculinity.

## CONCLUSION

By the end of "The Mustache," He and She become so confounded in their performances that they share lines. The characters actually exchange roles through the formal technique of mixing the lines of verse. The binary division that Paz championed has been so undermined that the "lines of gender are indistinguishable," as well as several other binaries (Versényi xiii). For instance, the love in the protagonists' relationship also manifests itself as hate: "I hate you like I've never hated anyone, like only I can hate you" (9). "I love you" and "you are my shame" (10) are both said between the two characters. It is true that there is great confusion here,

but I would disagree with Versényi when he states that "He and She have become one" (xiii). They have not become one, but have so completely destroyed traditional gender dichotomies that each is his/her own complex person.

The goal of this essay has been to show the visionary theoretical underpinnings of Berman's 1978 one-act play. "The Mustache," like much of Berman's work, exemplifies crucial aspects of her production: "a fine flair for dialogue, a predilection for black humor and irony, a distrust of all official discourse, an interest in personal and national identity, a need to transgress sexual and theatrical boundaries, and a profound awareness of the inherently theatrical nature of Mexican history and politics" (Bixler *Sediciosas seducciones* xxi). In presenting the theatricality of gender roles through the displacement of the mustache as a traditionally Mexican masculine icon, Berman succeeds in writing against Octavio Paz's well-established interpretation of Mexican gender binaries, while simultaneously preceding the deconstructionist gender work of Judith Butler and Judith Halberstam. This play questions the gendered social structure of Mexican society and undermines the essentialist discourse that reified the system. The play urges Mexican audiences to further question binary divisions in society as constructions that can be rebuilt along more egalitarian lines.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> All citations from the play come from Versényi's edition.

<sup>2</sup> Additional evidence of Berman's engagement with the works of Octavio Paz can be adduced from the fact that her 1985 play *Aguila o sol* (*Heads or Tails*) recycles a title also used by Paz.

<sup>3</sup> Butler makes a similar argument for biological sex. Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman also agree that what we consider biological sex is actually a socially determined set of criteria for demarking sides of the sexual spectrum.

<sup>4</sup> While the mustache does represent power in the relationship, Nigro errs when she states that the mustache "stands for the almighty penis" (147). The mustache as power may stand in for the phallus, not the penis, as the penis is vulnerable and temperamental while the phallus is omnipotent.

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## Seven Photographs by Andrea Angeli

My interest in art and photography blossomed in college. I took many art classes such as ceramics, art history, sculpture, architecture, photography, and drawing, among others, while earning an MA in Geography at the University of Toledo. Perhaps I'm blessed with a photographer's eye, but these classes in the context of my graduate school training as a cultural geographer shaped me as a critical photographer. I see and photograph every landscape, vast and small, urban and rural, as profound and full of social meaning, begging to be interpreted.

Mannequins and dolls are one of my favorite subjects. One of my part-time jobs was as an artist portrait model. By willing myself to become a mannequin, I momentarily joined their silent circle of immobility and meditation.

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