

The Postmodernization of History in the Theatre of Sabina Berman¹

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Although widely recognized in her own right as one of Mexico's most talented, creative, and productive playwrights, Sabina Berman is still, to a certain extent, viewed as a member of the generational group that Ronald Burgess has identified and labeled as "los nuevos dramaturgos de México."² In *The New Dramatists of Mexico 1967-1985*, Burgess notes that during the 1980s, a time of intense theatrical activity for Berman, "dramatists foraged through Mexico's history, culture, folklore, and myths searching out explanations for the current state of affairs in the country" (78). During the early 1980s alone, Berman created three plays based on Mexican history: *Rompecabezas* (1981), on the assassination of Trotsky on Mexican soil; *Herejía* (1983), on the Inquisition's persecution of the Carbajal family; and *Aguila o sol* (1984), on the conquest of Tenochtitlán. Rather than resurrect these historical episodes simply for "the record," Berman postmodernizes history to foreground its representation and to remind her audience that events from the past acquire not their existence, but their **meaning** thanks to their representation, whether it be on the pages of a text or on the stage. The eschewal of realism, the combination of multiple, often contradictory points of view, and the irreverent portrayal of historical authorities serve Berman's postmodern goal of destabilizing, deconstructing, and decentering historical knowledge. Although these three plays represent only a fraction of a dramatic production that now totals more than fifteen works, they solidly establish Berman's position as Mexico's leading postmodern playwright as well as her reputation as a bold critic of the Mexican tendency to manipulate the "facts."³ From *Rompecabezas* to *Krisis* (1996), Berman has done her part in demystifying the power of historical and political discourse, and thereby of the PRI (Partido Revolucionario Institucional) itself, by exposing the manipulative, capricious, and often contradictory nature of Mexico's master narratives.

A recent issue of *Gestos* offers a rich description of postmodernism and its manifestations in Latin American theatre.⁴ Among the most repeated features ascribed to postmodern theatre are parody, indeterminacy, perspectivist play, refocusing of authority, openness, discontinuity, disjuncture, heterogeneity, marginality, anacronism, generic transgression, contradiction, and pastiche. With regard to the postmodern treatment of history in particular, Anne Cruz and Ana Paula Ferreira explain that “one of the most vital creative *and* interpretative trends associated with postmodernism centers on the deconstruction, the re-invention and the philosophical questioning of received historical ‘truths’” (9), while Kirsten Nigro highlights “la desmitificación del discurso histórico positivista; la ruptura del binomio verdad/ficción; la devaluación y consecuente descentralización de la escritura; el arte como reproducción/deformación de lo ya reproducido y por ende, ya deformado” (31). The purpose of the present essay is to discuss this trio of “historical” plays within the above-mentioned parameters, showing how Berman’s deformation, decentering, and demythification of histories already distorted in prior textual representations reflects the real-life erosion of Mexico’s ruling party and its credibility.⁵

Berman carries out this demystification in a theatrical style that both asserts and subverts the plays’ historicity through the liberal use of self-reflectivity, parody, and discontinuity, all of which self-consciously call attention to the idea of representation. In two seminal books, *The Poetics of Postmodernism* and *The Politics of Postmodernism*, Linda Hutcheon focuses on the ways that postmodern artists defy the conventions of representation through parody and what she calls “historiographic metafiction,” a paradoxical mixture of self-consciousness and historical fact, parody and politics. In particular, postmodern art seeks to deconstruct what Hutcheon calls “the master narratives,” a term that refers to those “histories” that have become dogma through sheer repetition. As Katherine Arens explains, “the postmodernist chooses to reveal the political instability of these master narratives, exposing the ideological dimension of all style or representation” (19). It is no secret that since the 1960s, and particularly since the deadly October of 1968, Mexico’s writers – Berman, Leñero, Ibarguengoitia, and Krauze, among others – have defiantly questioned the “master narrative” of Mexican history.⁶ As Hutcheon notes, the 1960s “left in their wake a specific and historically determined distrust of ideologies of power and a more general suspicion of the power of ideology” (*Politics*, 10). Few have stated this mistrust as boldly as Elena Garro in her play *Felipe Angeles* (1979), wherein one

general states to another “La historia es una puta, general. No hay que fiarse de ella” (19). In this trio of “historical” plays, Berman displays not only the characteristic postmodernist incredulity toward master narratives, but also skepticism toward the institutions and/or systems that live off of them.

Berman ensures that the concept of representation and its ideological implications take center stage by using an openly self-conscious style, which includes an unsettling mixture of historical facts, narration, fragmentation, and parody. The dramatist at once calls attention to both the historicity and the fictivity of her works by presenting an irresolvable polytext composed of multiple histories and contradictory points of view, thus consistently undermining history and calling attention to its representation and concomitant ideology. Her view of ideology is similar to that of Hutcheon, who defines it as “that vast scheme for **showing forth** the world and justifying its dealings” (*Politics*, 31, emphasis mine). Rather than prefer one historical perspective to another, Berman affirms, as does metahistorian Hayden White, the impossibility of knowing a history once it has happened. Historical knowledge may only be attained through history’s textual remnants and any other forms of representation that these texts may have inspired, such as art, photography, and theatrical performance. By distorting the already distorted, Berman repeatedly underscores the ideology, or “scheme,” that each of these textual remnants imparts, thus calling into question all forms of historical knowledge, from legal records of the Spanish Inquisition to the transcribed confession of Trotsky’s assassin.

Rompecabezas casts doubt on a specific aspect of Mexican history, the assassination of Leon Trotsky in Mexico City in 1940 by presenting it as an irresolvable textual/theatrical puzzle. According to official history, or that history widely published and accepted as true, Trotsky died as a result of a blow to the head delivered by Ramón Mercader, a Spanish Stalinist who pretended to be a Belgian supporter of Trotsky by the name of Jacques Mornard. Nonetheless, the homicide itself only constitutes one of many pieces in this puzzle. The rest of the drama consists of multiple, fragmented scenes in which Berman questions the veracity of this official history, underscoring its creation as well as its subsequent representation. Arnold Aronson’s summary of postmodern design as a “multiplicity of competing, often incongruous and conflicting elements and images” describes perfectly Berman’s representation of history as an unsolvable picture puzzle (2).

Rompecabezas also corresponds to Hutcheon’s structural view of the postmodern text as “a vast dialogue composed of multiple voices” (*Poetics*,

126). Each individual piece/scene of *Rompecabezas* contains a dialogue in which multiple voices compete to establish the official history of Trotsky's assassination. Many of the dialogues in this rather extensive drama involve the assassin and Colonel Salazar, who has been assigned the task of finding out Mornard's true identity and motives. In this regard, the play follows the format of a detective story, a style commonly used by postmodern writers in their push to question official history and to uncover alternative "histories." Nonetheless, when the final curtain falls, we know as little as we did at the outset about Mornard's true identity and motives. In fact, we know even **less** at the end, because by then Berman has planted seeds of doubt in whatever we assumed to know about the murder of Trotsky.

From the very beginning, *Rompecabezas* presents history not as a compendium of objective facts but rather as a narrative that is created according to the ideological motives of those who hold power. Her portrayal of history matches the description offered by fellow postmodernist Roberto Ramos-Perea: "eso que llamamos 'la verdad histórica' es un cúmulo de variadísimas lecturas que acomodamos según nos convenga" (22). During Salazar's first interrogation of Mornard, the audience can hear the whirring of a dictaphone, the wires to which the colonel connects and disconnects as he pleases. A secretary enters at various moments in the play to transcribe the testimonies, but once Salazar commands her, "Esto no conviene que quede grabado" (101), it is clear that these transcriptions will be incomplete. Unsatisfied with Mornard's repeated explanation that he killed Trotsky out of disillusionment, Salazar does everything possible, including physical and psychological torture, to obtain a "truth" that includes espionage and betrayal between the two Communist parties.⁷

Although Salazar insists that he only wants to "desentrañar" the truth, he is clearly willing to fill in whatever "facts" might be necessary in order to establish his own preferred version of Mornard as a Stalinist and hired assassin. He aims not to unravel the truth but rather to totalize it, a process that Hutcheon defines as "to unify with an eye to power and control" (*Poetics*, xi). His "direction" of the investigation begins with the testimony of Natalia, Trotsky's widow, whom the defense attorney later describes as "una anciana un tanto histriónica, dada a desplantes heroicos" (116). While Natalia retells the events that led up to the assassination, the assassination itself takes place on stage, thereby creating the impression that the widow directs history in the making. Later, the defense attorney, Esther Cerrojo, organizes at Trotsky's house a reconstruction of the crime, in which the assassin plays his own role while

actors play the parts of the widow and bodyguards. In this case, it is Cerrojo, an avowed Stalinist, who directs the action, thus establishing her own version of the facts. In a complete reversal of the scene directed by Natalia, which portrays Trotsky as an unwitting and defenseless victim of Mornard's icepick, Cerrojo's reconstruction casts a confused Mornard, who defends himself from Trotsky's pistol with a rolled newspaper. The flashes of the reporters' cameras, along with the constant hammering of typewriter keys, appear to capture and record the reconstruction as if it were the real-life assassination of Trotsky. By emphasizing the way in which this "history" is replayed and recorded, Berman suggests that history itself, like a staged play, is a text easily modified to suit the desires and the ideology of the historian/director.

Along with these contradictory enactments of the assassination, the play includes the written and oral confession of Mornard, which should carry a substantial amount of authority. But, because this confession does not contain the truth sought after by Salazar, the colonel nullifies it because it was signed and dated with a pencil. Salazar simply cannot and will not accept the idea that Mornard killed not a martyr of the Russian revolution, but rather an opportunistic hypocrite whose activities were being financed by the United States. Although this view of Trotsky is not at all a part of official history, Berman seems to lend credence to Mornard's version by giving the bodyguards Anglo names such as Charlie and Robins. Finally, as a result of the abundant oral references to acting, plagiarizing, and falsifying, all of the historical versions are ultimately viewed as so many stories, invented and modified to impart one ideology or another. What is important in the end is not the words themselves, but rather the way in which they are created, omitted, used and abused to cast history in a certain light.

Like Emilio Carballido's well-known *Yo también hablo de la rosa*, *Rompecabezas* presents multiple versions of the same crime, without authorizing any single one of the voices, which include a priest, a psychoanalyst, and ambassadors from the United States and Russia. When the final curtain falls, we still do not know who Mornard really was nor why he killed Trotsky. Nonetheless, Salazar defends to the end the need to establish and maintain a master narrative, explaining, "La verdad es una: unifica; la mentira es infinitamente múltiple" (135). Berman's puzzle cannot be pieced together precisely because its many pieces constitute that infinitely multiple lie. Having established once and for all the official story of Trotsky's assassination, Salazar retires from his position and orders a guard to cover his exit. As the curtain falls, the guard carries out these orders, aiming his

pistol at the slightest movement among the spectators. By ending the play in this fashion, Berman suggests that whoever inherits the power must serve as a rearguard for those who established that univocal and unifying history. Under the metaphorical threat of that raised pistol, few will dare to question it.

Berman returns to Mexican history in *Herejía*, in which she portrays the Inquisition's persecution of a Jewish family, the Carbajals, between 1578 and 1590.⁸ She again postmodernizes history by fragmenting, denaturalizing, decentering, and contradicting it, while at the same time emphasizing its textual and ideological nature. As a Mexican of European Jewish descent, Berman could have chosen this painful topic for personal reasons, but a statement included in the performance program explains that her motives extend well beyond the personal. The idea for *Herejía* first came to her ten years ago when someone asked her when the Jews had first come to Mexico. Berman responded with the standard textbook answer that she had learned in secondary school and in History classes: "En la primera mitad de este siglo," whereupon the gentleman corrected her: "No. Bastante antes. En el siglo XVI." The writing of *Herejía* was obviously a learning experience for Berman, who spent a year reading dust-covered books, while the play's publication and staging is obviously intended to enlighten her audiences: "[E]speculamos (paralelamente a algunos historiadores poco difundidos) que la composición de la población de la Nueva España en el siglo XVI era mucho más compleja de lo que se aprende en nuestras secundarias: [...] los españoles no eran ese bloque homogéneo también llamado los cristianos (como le enseñan a uno): los españoles se dividían en cristianos, judíos y musulmanes, y tal vez en partes iguales." Berman speculates that the history surrounding sixteenth-century Mexico has been homogenized much like the population itself was homogenized: "La Santísima Inquisición [...] borró no sólo esa Nueva España diversa, sino hasta su recuerdo." As in *Rompecabezas*, Berman seeks to "heterogenize" history by echoing voices that have remained buried for four hundred years and by underscoring the duplicity and the contradictions that lie within the Inquisition itself.

Herejía presents the history of the Carvajal's, from the moment at which Luis Sr. discovered the territory of Nuevo León to the final demise of his extended family in the flames of the Inquisition. In a short preface to the text, Berman identifies as her primary source a historical text by Alfonso Toro, which in turn was based on the autobiography of Luis de Carbajal Jr. and documents pertaining to the trials conducted by the Santa Inquisición

against the Carbajal family. As Hutcheon explains, such prefaces simultaneously assert and subvert the authority of the text that they precede by reminding us of their latent ideology: “the forewords and afterwords that frame many [...] nonfictional novels remind us that these works, despite their rooting in documentary reality, are still created forms, with a particular perspective that **transforms**” (82). With regard to this particular work, Ronald Burgess confirms this theory when he notes that both the autobiography and the recorded testimony of the trial “grew out of fanaticism and persecution,” thereby suggesting that these documents are more the product of subjective distortion than they are of factual objectivity (86).

Berman further undermines the notion of historical authority by employing a blatantly nonrealistic style, which again calls attention to the representation of history more than to the history itself. As a result, she emphasizes the purposeful distortion of a history that history books had already distorted in order to homogenize and unify Mexican history as well as Mexican society. With only eleven actors playing multiple roles, Berman portrays a wide range of religious beliefs that includes intolerant inquisitioners, doubtful converts, and Jews who risk their lives by openly practicing their beliefs. The few stage objects, which include a holy book and instruments of torture, are functional as well as symbolic in conveying the basic oppositions between liberty and repression, Christianity and Judaism. In a unique blend of past and present, narration and action, the historical events are reenacted while both the accused and their accusers provide oral testimony, a technique that underscores the distance and possible distortion between the actual events and their retelling.

In typical postmodern fashion, Berman gives a voice to those who were silenced by the Inquisition and later sentenced to oblivion by history books. No voice could be more marginal or suppressed than that of the imprisoned Luis Carvajal, Jr., who, according to Berman, used a needle and his own blood to record his impressions and experiences in a “diary” composed of avocado peels. In telling/retelling his particular story as well as that of his extended family, Berman corrects not only her own but also the public’s mis-education regarding the Jewish presence and experience in Mexico long before the current century.

With the exception of Luis Jr., who undergoes a gradual and profound change in faith, these characters are not flesh-and-blood beings but rather puppets whose strings are governed by greed, ambition, and fear. When asked why he follows the Christian faith rather than that of his ancestors, Luis Sr.

explains: "Nací como cualquier otro con manos y pies y deseos de ser y engrandecerme. Y si para que me lo permitan he de rezarle a Jesús, a Jesús le rezo" (175). This response suggests that religious practices are more the result of ambition and/or repression than of one's inner faith. Likewise, those who denounce the Carbajals to the inquisitioners are motivated by greed rather than religious beliefs. Felipe Núñez, don Luis's protegé and friend, denounces them in order to gain the lands and power of his protector, whose daughter has repeatedly spurned his matrimonial proposals. After betraying those who have been like a family to him, Felipe realizes that the viceroy himself has assisted in the persecution of the Carbajal family in order to take over Don Luis's vast landholdings. Nonetheless, as one of the inquisitors tells Felipe, "en los ámbitos inquisitoriales, la palabra de virrey es nula," meaning that the Church will ultimately be the winner of those territories (196). In the final analysis, the entire process has been concocted and carried out to serve personal ambitions rather than religious convictions.

In this trial of history, Berman also presents multiple scenes of torture and execution, which underscore the ultimate irony of a process that pretended to be a form of justice while contradicting the commandments of Catholics, particularly the one that states "Thou shalt not kill." Before committing suicide and thus saving the last shreds of his dignity, the imprisoned don Luis explains "cuando tanto se habla de moralidad, es que apesta en cada casa" (200). This comment, while referring specifically to the Inquisition, could easily be extended to refer to all of those, both past and present, who persecute and kill in the name of morality. Berman corroborates this implication in the playbill when she states, "Sería ingenuo suponer que el teatro puede algo contra una masacre consumada. Acaso sí pretende avisarnos sobre la facilidad con que la intolerancia se imagina a sí misma santa y bendita." Furthermore, this presentation of the Inquisition as yet another form of institutionalized injustice echoes the words of Esther Cerrojo, who in the previous play poses the question, "¿No es la Justicia, en la práctica, la violencia institucionalizada que el Estado se permite a sí mismo ejercer?" (117).

In the last scene, Berman suddenly presents a "vista desquiciada" that expresses visually the concept of distortion, be it the distortion of beliefs or that of history itself: "Los verdugos en el suelo acostados, pero en posturas de estar de pie. La mesa también vertical, los inquisidores sentados en sus sillas, pero de costado al suelo" (203). By turning everything sideways, Berman shows how easily reality can be twisted to change the viewer's

perception of the image. This distorted view of the Inquisition serves as a metaphor of the play at large, whose combination of personal testimonies and inquisitorial records shows history to be composed of multiple voices and points of view, each one possessing its own ideology, its own way of seeing the world, and its own way of representing itself.

In *Aguila o sol*, Berman again applies this notion of the “vista desquiciada” as she re-presents the conquest of Mexico. In this case, however, the blatant distortion of history runs throughout the play. In the kind of pastiche that characterizes postmodern art, Berman combines *mariachis*, chorus, narrators, *corridos*, indigenous dances, and various languages. The openly nonrealistic style of the play combines street theatre and what is known in Mexico as “el género chico,” a subversive and politicized form of theatre popular during the Revolution.⁹ What Berman questions in *Aguila o sol* is the point of view from which the Conquest has been perceived and told in the master narrative of official Mexican history, according to which the Aztec capital was conquered by some three hundred valiant Spaniards. In the preface, she acknowledges her source, Miguel León-Portilla’s *Visión de los vencidos*, which for the first time told the story from the viewpoint of the conquered. Not surprisingly, the history of the Conquest, like most histories, has traditionally been told by the victors. As one general of the Revolution explains in Garro’s *Felipe Angeles*, “Nosotros ganamos la partida. Los vencidos nunca tienen razón. La historia está con nosotros” (19). With regard to Berman, Laurietz Seda rightly notes, “Berman pone de manifiesto el capricho del mexicano de manipular los discursos, especialmente el que tiene que ver con la formación de la identidad nacional” (12). On a similar note, Cypess explains that both *Aguila o sol* and *Herejía* “expose the lie inherent in the concept that Mexican cultural identity is a single, monotone hegemonic voice” (“Ethnic,” 176-77).

Berman again rejects mimesis, describing the work in a prefatory note as an “infel intento de reconstruir los hechos” (225). Her combination of narrative with diverse theatrical styles, both past and present, conforms to what Katherine Arens calls “eclectic historicism, in which old and new modes and styles (used goods, as it were) are retooled and recycled” (14). Unlike the previous two plays, *Aguila o sol* relies heavily on parody to denaturalize Mexican history. Berman simultaneously inscribes and defies the master narrative regarding the Conquest when she adopts a style that is at once narrative and parodic. Instead of acts and scenes, the play is divided into fourteen *cuadros*, which are strikingly similar to the chapters in *Visión de los*

vencidos in their brevity and use of descriptive titles. Each chapter bears a title that serves as a summary of the action, such as “El encuentro,” “La masacre de Cholula,” and “El tesoro.” Nonetheless, the nonrealistic style of the acting, which combines farce and caricature, promptly robs the representation of any authority that might have been lent by this narrative structure. The use of Brechtian distancing techniques exposes the illusion of both reality and factuality. With a small raised platform and an improvised curtain, a group of apparent street actors stages with no attempt whatsoever at realism the historic first encounter between Aztecs and Spaniards. The dialogue is an anachronistic potpourri of tongues, the most prevalent of which, Mexican street-Spanish, clashes not only with the solemnity of the theme, but also with the poetic and impressionistic way in which Berman treats it. For example, begging the gods to intervene and save them from the Spaniards, one Cholulteca exclaims, “Orale mi dios” (247). The cast, which can be reduced to as few as six actors, fulfills Berman’s desire to follow “la tradición mexicana de la representación a base de signos y símbolos” (225). Cortés, a soldier, and a priest, for example, represent Spain, while the remaining actors represent the indigenous population. As in the preceding two plays, the actors at times simply pantomime the historical actions described by the chorus and the narrator. The absolute lack of realism and the frequent use of narration again imply a considerable distance between the historical deeds themselves and their subsequent narration, a distance that affects the representation and, along with it, the understanding of history.

The same narrative structure that creates the pretense of historical veracity at the same time clashes with the parody that Berman creates of the history already reshaped by León-Portilla. A key player in postmodern representation, parody is inherently political in the challenges it presents to the conventional and the authoritative. Its own ideology lies in its duplicity, in the difference between the original historical referent and the parody. As Hutcheon explains, “through a double process of installing and ironizing, parody signals how present representations come from past ones and what ideological consequences derive from both continuity and difference” (*Politics*, 93). In her parodic version of the conquest, Berman pokes fun not only at the master narrative itself but also at the human representatives of authority during the conquest. Moctezuma – naive and superstitious – is as much a victim of her parody as Cortés. As Sandra Cypess observes, “de acuerdo al fin desmitificador de Berman, nada es sagrado y el discurso dramático se burla de todos los que ejercen el poder, sea quien sea”

("Dramaturgia," 297)¹⁰ The verbal nonsense uttered by Hernán Cortés, for example, completely contradicts the official history of his valiant deeds. While the master narrative always refers to the indigenous tongue as the foreign language, in *Aguila o sol* the only unintelligible words are those spoken by Cortés. In his first appearance, the great conquistador, dressed in shining armor, utters gibberish: "¿Gato por liebre, sucios negros trajinantes? ¿Mas cus-cus?" (234).¹¹ Likewise, when they honor him with Quetzalcoatl's plumed cape, his only response is "¡Albóndigas!" (236). Faithful to official history, La Malinche translates all of her lord's statements, but in this case her words do not correspond in the least to his nonsensical utterances. This lack of correspondence between statement and translation not only makes a mockery of Cortés, but also implies a considerable distance between what was actually said during that encounter and how it has been "translated" and represented in history books.

Aguila o sol includes a short metatheatrical *cuadro* that reflects in burlesque fashion the action being acted and narrated in the framing play. In this scene, titled "Teatro callejero," two comics entertain a group of fictional spectators. Although the purported purpose of their presence is to narrate the Tlaxcaltecas' cowardly decision to ally with the Spaniards, their discourse is dominated by *mexicanismos* and vulgarities, with the result that the dialogue becomes reduced to a play on the words "huevos," "pollos," and "arrimarse." As Sandra Cypess observes, "Berman focuses directly on the instability of linguistic signs as a way of demonstrating a lack of reliance on and mistrust of all verbal constructs, historical documents and the patriarchal tradition included" (*La Malinche*, 134). The double-entendres, which produce constant misunderstandings between actors and fictional spectators, underscore the ambiguity of language, in particular that used in historiographical narratives to assert and/or maintain cultural as well as political traditions.

The play ends by casting doubt on an aspect of the master narrative that has rarely before been questioned: the death of Moctezuma at the hands of his former subjects. After one Mexican repeats the well-known history, "La pedrada de un mexicano lo tumbó de la vida," another suggests, "O fue que Cortés le hundió la espada por el culo," whereupon Cortés plunges his sword between Moctezuma's legs (264).¹² Without resolving this contradiction, the twice-killed Moctezuma springs back to life and closes the play with a synthesis of the master narrative: "ellos eran trescientos y nosotros millones" (265). Following Berman's parody and demythification of the conquest and the conquerors, these words no longer impart any certain value

or meaning. Indeed, their ultimate historical meaning is as arbitrary as the popular coin toss, “águila o sol” (“heads or tails”). Hovering in the air, they remain ambiguous words that the spectators, just like past and future historians, can interpret however they like.

The events portrayed in these three works – the assassination of Trotsky, the Inquisition, and the Conquest – are familiar to all Mexicans, as is the use of historical themes in Mexican theatre from Rodolfo Usigli on. The novelty of Berman’s theatre resides not in the thematics, but rather in the way she presents the multiple points of view that compose that puzzle known as “History.” The deliberate destruction of illusion through the use of parody and other distancing techniques forces the audience to concentrate on the representation of history rather than on the history itself. In other words, what is important is not the conquest, but rather how it has been perceived and portrayed by the conquered as well as the conquerors. Through the use of parody and other skewed views, Berman implies that the master narrative could also be a distortion, a parody or a “vista desquiciada” of the actual events. In each play, she juxtaposes multiple points of view, making sure that marginal and unknown voices – of Jews, Aztecs, and Jacques Mornard – have as much, or at times as little authority as those that have always dictated the hegemonic narrative.

Berman further undermines the concept of historical knowledge at large by emphasizing the **textual** nature of these three histories – the records of the Inquisition, the testimonies taken from the Aztecs, the transcribed confession of Mornard. She repeatedly reminds the audience that these written testimonies are not history itself, but a composite of textual remnants. In this sense, her plays dramatically affirm Octavio Paz’s description of history as a fiction, a text that we translate in an endless process of representation: “La historia que vivimos es una escritura... Esa lectura es un desciframiento, la traducción de una traducción: jamás leeremos el original. Cada versión es provisional: el texto cambia sin cesar (aunque quizá siempre dice lo mismo) [...] Cada traducción es una creación: un texto nuevo. . . .” (115).

As a postmodernist par excellence, Berman not only questions official history, but also plays with it, representing it in all of its ironies, contradictions, and craziness, without offering any resolutions whatsoever. Although she underscores the ideological bent to all historical writing, Berman’s own ideology remains unclear. This is, however, typical of postmodernism, whose “politics are ambiguous,” according to Hutcheon (34). If anything, Berman might be described as an “ideological atheist” in the skepticism that she

displays towards all forms of historical representations and their concomitant ideologies. In Mexico, however, where the ruling party is rapidly losing what little credibility remains, skepticism is an ideology, for it implies deep distrust of all political discourse, written and verbal, historical and ahistorical.

Despite the ideological implications of her own representations of history, Berman clearly has fun while making fun of the very notion of historical knowledge. According to fellow dramatist Roberto Ramos-Perea, fun is what it is all about, because postmodernism ultimately leads nowhere: "No creo en el posmodernismo como un punto de partida, sino como un resumen del viaje, un relato de toda la incidencia tragicómica de una excursión hasta las fronteras de ninguna parte" (26). Through contradiction and distortion, Berman bares the multifaceted, narrative, and thereby fictitious nature of all historical "truths" without offering anything in their place other than her own postmodern representation of these so-called "histories." She portrays history not as an absolute truth, but rather as a narrative, created, repeated, and modified to fit the ideological desires and needs of the moment. Finally, as she re-presents Mexico's history, she finds in that puzzle, in that distorted, contradictory, and irresolvable image, the reason for the distrust that Mexicans commonly display toward all official history, from the conquest of Tenochtitlán to the recent self-exile of ex-president Salinas de Gortari.¹³

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Notes

1. Shorter versions of this paper were presented in Puebla, at the Cuartas Jornadas Internacionales de Teatro Latinoamericano (July 1996), and in Buenos Aires, at the V Congreso Internacional de Teatro Iberoamericano y Argentino (August 1996).

2. Born in 1955 in Mexico, Sabina Berman already has a long list of dramatic titles, including: *Esta no es una obra de teatro* (1979; later titled *Un actor se repara*); *Yankee* (1979; also known as *Bill*); *Rompecabezas* (1981; Premio Nacional de Teatro; first titled *Un buen trabajador del piolet*); *La reacción* (1982); *Herejía* (1983; Premio Nacional de Teatro; first titled *Anatema*); *Aguila o sol* (1985); *El suplicio del placer* (1985; first titled *El jardín de las delicias* and staged under that title in 1978); *Muerte súbita* (1988; second version 1991); *Entre Villa y una mujer desnuda* (1993); *El gordo, la pájara y el narco* (1994); and *Krisis* (1996). She has also written children's theatre, including *La maravillosa historia del chiquito Pingüica* (1982), *Caracol* (1991), and *Colibrí* (1991).

3. Although the present essay will focus on these three earlier works, Berman has also reworked and postmodernized Mexican history in *Entre Villa y una mujer desnuda* and *Krisis*.

4. See *Gestos* 9. 17 (1994), which is devoted to Postmodernism and Cultural Criticism.

5. Berman's most recent play, *Krisis*, makes a mockery of the characteristics most commonly associated with Mexico's Partido Revolucionario Institucional: cronyism, "el dedazo," corruption, graft, demagoguery, fraud, elitism, and violent political assassinations followed by cover-up. No one in Mexican

theatre has ever dared to portray the PRI in such a blatant, realistic, and violent fashion as Sabina Berman.

6. A more thorough discussion of the revisionist tendency that has swept through contemporary Mexican theatre may be found in three essays by the present author: "Historia, mito e imaginación constructiva en los dramas históricos de Emilio Carballido." *Literatura Mexicana* 2.2 (1991): 353-368; "Recasting the Past: The Dramatic Debunking of Mexico's 'Official' History." *Revista Hispánica Moderna* 52.2 (1989): 163-172; "Historical (Dis)Authority in Leñero's *Martirio de Morelos*." *Gestos. Teoría y Práctica del Teatro Hispánico* 2 (1986): 87-97 (later published in Spanish as "La (des)autorización de la historia en *Martirio de Morelos*," in *Repertorio* 32 [1994]: 40-46).

7. The history regarding Trotsky's assassination has more to do with Mexican history than one might think. After being expelled by Stalin from the Soviet Union, Trotsky gained asylum in Mexico, where he lived from January 1937 until his death on August 20, 1940. As Jonathan Kandell notes in *La Capital. The Biography of Mexico City*, under the conditions of his asylum, Trotsky was forbidden to meddle in Mexican politics, but "by his very presence in the country, Trotsky had helped Mexico to maintain its revolutionary aura" (484). Many of Mexico's leading intellectuals engaged in the Communist debate, declaring themselves Stalinists or Trotskyites. Diego Rivera, for example, became a staunch supporter of Trotsky, although their relations later deteriorated. Fellow muralist, David Alfaro Siqueiros, was a Stalinist and, in fact, led an attack on Trotsky's house just two months before his assassination. *Rompecabezas* could also be described as "prophetically historical" in the sense that Berman's recreation of Trotsky's assassination and the subsequent investigation/manipulation of the case brings to mind the more recent assassinations of Luis Donaldo Colosio and José Francisco Ruiz Massieu. A joke currently circulating in Mexico states that it is a good thing Christ was not killed in Mexico because, if he had been, we would have never known for certain the name of the assassin. In the case of Massieu, however, the government of current president Ernesto Zedillo, under intense pressure from the public, changed the historical tradition of "la expresidencia impune" by arresting and charging with assassination Raúl Salinas de Gortari, the brother of ex-president Carlos Salinas de Gortari.

8. At the time of this writing (July 1996), *Herejía* was being staged under the title *En el nombre de Dios*. Supported by the Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes and the Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes, the play was performed by the Foro Dramático de México under the direction of Rosenda Monteros. Despite a tremendous *aguacero*, whose thunder provided curiously appropriate sound effects, the large Teatro Jiménez Rueda was nearly full the night I attended. The final applause was long and loud. Other than including quotes from the program that I received in the theatre, I have based my discussion of *Herejía* on the published text, given that one staging of the play may differ entirely from the next. The most significant departures from the written text included the length of the performance (a mere sixty pages of text was "translated" into two hours of performance), the effective incorporation of dancing to convey both tradition and inner torment, and the omission of the metatheatrical "entreacto" that appears in the text.

9. In an unpublished ms. derived from her doctoral dissertation, Laurietz Seda explains that Sabina Berman was commissioned to write *Aguila o sol* by the Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes (INBA). While the INBA was looking for a didactic piece that would represent throughout the provinces an important aspect of Mexican history, Berman delivered a play that ironically dismantles the very foundations of Mexican history. As Seda reports, "después de que varios representantes de dicha agencia vieron el primer ensayo de la obra se negaron absolutamente a cumplir con la gira" (4). Although INBA refused to promote the play, *Aguila o sol* has nonetheless been staged in New York as well as throughout Mexico. I thank Seda for sharing her essay with me and for the insights that it provided regarding this particular play.

10. Cypess makes an interesting and convincing connection between Berman's parody of the conquest and Mexico's current situation when she states "Si este mundo absurdo es el que da a luz el México contemporáneo, concluirá su público, con razón existe la incapacidad de resolver los problemas actuales" (301).

11. Cypess notes that Cortés's language includes words from Latin, German, and English, "idiomas asociados con el imperialismo," which suggests that Cortés comes to be perceived not as a Spanish conqueror but rather as a postmodern pastiche of all the cultures that have imposed themselves upon Mexico since that first conquest (299).

12. In his monumental book, *Conquest*, Hugh Thomas affirms that "There is a contrasting but even stronger rumour, namely that Moctezuma was murdered by the conquistadors" (404), noting that "nearly all the indigenous, or indigenous-based, sources [...] say that Montezuma was stabbed to death or garroted by the Castilians" (732). One source, the *Anales Tepeanacas*, even goes so far as to suggest that the reason for Moctezuma's silence upon being stoned is that he had already been killed by the Spaniards before being taken to the roof of the palace.

13. Although *Krisis* does not refer specifically to ex-President Carlos Salinas de Gortari, it does include indirect references to the assassinations of presidential candidate Luis Donaldo Colosio and Gortari's brother-in-law, José Francisco Ruiz Massieu, and other incidents commonly thought, but never officially reported to be tied to the PRI.

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