

Berman's Pancho Villa versus Neoliberal Desire

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Ey. Y que anda vivo. San Pancho Villa. Cabalgando por ahí. Y bueno, por ahí anda, ¿no?, cabalgando en nuestra imaginación, al menos.

(Adrián, in *Entre Villa y una mujer desnuda*)

La teatralización del patrimonio es el esfuerzo por simular que hay un origen, una sustancia fundante, en relación con la cual deberíamos actuar hoy [. .] El mundo es un escenario, pero lo que hay que actuar ya está prescrito.

(Néstor García Canclini)

Mexico's striking move toward neoliberalism – characterized by privatization, austerity programs, and the “free” market – has, since the early 1980s, changed the face of Mexican politics.¹ The division between neoliberal and statist (revolutionary) ideologies in Mexico, while on the surface sharp, is clouded by contradictions. Jorge Castañeda's assertion that the difference between those who subscribe to these economic ideologies “is not a left-right fissure” helps to explain this dichotomy (260). He affirms that the left may welcome neoliberalism as a breath of political fresh air (because economic liberalization can promote political and social liberalization) “while many free-market right-wingers” fear what they see as the negative influence of US cultural values that seep into Mexico with the increased flow of goods, services, and capital that accompany “free” markets (260).²

Because of this indistinct ideological line, the sweeping changes brought by neoliberalism have forced people on both ends of the political

spectrum to reconsider their values and civic goals. On the political left, the need to focus goals is perhaps more crucial. Tina Rosenberg, in a New York Times editorial, suggests that the position of liberals in Latin America needs to be rethought in the face of neoliberalism: “Now [. . .] the left must fix the flaws of neoliberalism – chiefly that it is not helping the poor [. . .]. The left’s traditional solutions do not apply” (A10). Indeed, there is evidence that the left is adapting to a new political reality. María Lorena Cook offers an explanation:

Whereas the globalization of the economy and regional economic integration have generally been viewed as harmful to popular organizations and national labor, some of the political changes that have accompanied these regional and global tendencies may point to the generation of a new, transitional political arena that could, in turn, broaden the range of strategies that national social movements may adopt. (519)

Specifically, Cook refers to increasing communication “between labor, environmental, human rights, women’s, and other citizens’ groups” in Canada, Mexico, and the United States (519). Neoliberalism, in addition to economic change that is seen as a challenge to the political left, provides opportunities for social change as ideas flow more freely among NAFTA nations. Nevertheless, the adoption of new political stances is a slow process requiring revolutionary thinking.

In *Entre Villa y una mujer desnuda* (1993), Sabina Berman responds to this relatively new, ambiguous political climate in Mexico and to the need for the left to move forward by forming new political alliances. The play, using the myth of Pancho Villa as a starting point from which to question political affiliations, highlights the awkward confusion of conservative economic values and liberal social values. Berman criticizes the way the myth of Pancho Villa is employed (and deployed) not for the promotion of positive social change but rather as part of a hegemonic process which impedes such change and creates a vacuum in which neoliberal economic policies, as well as the status quo of relations between the *macho* and those he subjugates, can continue unchecked. She attacks the myth of Villa in two areas: the official myth, which has claimed Villa, albeit reluctantly, as part of the Revolutionary government; and the popular myth of Villa, which celebrates his sexual escapades as much as his political commitment to the poor. In order to understand better the implications of Berman’s demythification of Villa, it is useful to consider his official and popular postrevolutionary images.

Revolutionary heroes like Pancho Villa in many ways continue to represent the chaotic struggle for social justice in Mexico that began in 1910. Octavio Paz, writing four decades after the beginning of the Revolution, affirms that:

la brutalidad y zafiedad de los caudillos revolucionarios no les han impedido convertirse en mitos populares. Villa cabalga todavía en el norte, en canciones y corridos; Zapata muere en cada feria popular [. . .]. Es la Revolución, la palabra mágica, la palabra que va a cambiarlo todo y que nos va a dar una alegría inmensa y una muerte rápida. (161)

This poetic description of the status of revolutionary leaders explains the importance of mythical heroes in Mexican society, and Paz's words remind us that myths have the power to define, as well as to justify, social systems. In many ways Paz's words seem outdated, and one might think that Revolutionary myths would have, over time, lost their power to persist in the collective conscious. The opposite seems to be true, however, as political change begins to take hold slowly in Mexico. Many people, of course, see the ideals of the Revolution as permanently tainted, out of reach forever. Nonetheless, the heroes of the Revolution still haunt the country: Villa still gallops in the North, and (neo)zapatistas can be seen not only in Chiapas or marching to Mexico City but also at <http://www.ezln.org>.

Paz refers specifically to the popular myths of revolutionaries like Villa, but this does not mean that Villa did not also become part of the postrevolutionary corporatist project; it just took him a while. Ilene O'Malley, in *The Myth of the Revolution*, traces the development and institutionalization of the myth of Villa – as well as those of Carranza, Madero, and Zapata – in the years after the Revolution. Basing her study on Mexico City newspapers, O'Malley determines that Villa was 'spectacularly popular' because the press indeed treated Villa as a spectacle: less than human, more than human, a 'force,' 'the Centaur of the North,' but never just a man" (87). Villa, like Zapata, was truly one of *los de abajo* and seemingly perfect fodder for official mythmakers. But he was also a threat to Mexico's leaders, and his "popularity – which carried in it reminders of the power of the popular classes when mobilized – irritated the obregonistas and symbolically undermined their hegemony just as the living Villa's popularity had undermined the carrancistas back in 1914" (O'Malley 98).

Villa's myth escaped institutionalization in the years after the Revolution because of his powerful, volatile image, which was caught

between the government's desire for authority and his heroic status among poor Mexicans. He was still the enemy, and he was not rewarded with official celebrations or monuments as were many other revolutionaries. Today, of course, it is impossible to miss the public, official monuments to Villa, especially in Mexico City. Why this transformation? O'Malley proposes that Villa's journey to becoming an official myth began during the Cárdenas *sexenio*. Villa was officially ignored, but the Cárdenas administration "created an atmosphere which permitted more positive attention to Villa in the press. That improvement resulted from the administration's condemnation of Villa's enemies, Obregón and Calles, and from the ultra-right's adoption of Villa" (103). Still, it was not until 1965 that Villa was made an official national hero (O'Malley 112).

O'Malley frames a section of her book, "The Obfuscation of History and the Denigration of Politics," with Barthes's well-known concept of "myth as depoliticized speech" in order to explain the partial institutionalization of Villa's mythical image. Barthes writes about bourgeois ideology and myth:

Semiology has taught us that myth has the intent of giving an historical intention a natural justification, and making contingency appear eternal. [. . .] The function of myth is to empty reality [. . .]. Myth does not deny things, on the contrary, its function is to talk about them; simply, it purifies them, it makes them innocent, it gives them a natural and eternal justification, it gives them a clarity which is not that of an explanation but that of a statement of fact. (142-43)

In Mexico, as memories of the Revolution grew distant, as only the elderly had first-hand experience of the years of revolutionary fighting, figures like Villa, although they evoked passionate responses from many, became less politicized as the government attempted to empty the Revolution of history. O'Malley describes this process, which Villa (partially) escaped: "The other important revolutionary figures [besides Villa] had been sanitized, and made into symbols of the regime. Their names were evoked to harness the people's fervent hopes and emotions [. . .] to the regime's program of demobilization of the masses, stabilization and authoritarian centralization" (111). Villa's image, however, was not officially incorporated until the sixties, and it continues to exist in both popular and official domains. The popular myth of Villa, which celebrates the volatile Villa, both in his sexual and political exploits, exists alongside the official myth of Villa, which legitimizes the PRI's claim to the Revolution.

Octavio Paz refers to the popular corridos that revere Villa's heroics. Many times, as these lyrics declare his ability to hide from, to fight, and to trick the federales, they also celebrate his dominion over women:

Corrido de Pancho Villa

La vaquita con el toro
se metió ya a la ladera.

Ya se dirá Pancho Villa
que se mete donde quiera [. . .].

Gallina que no me llevo
la dejo cacaraqueando [. . .].

No hay bocado más sabroso
que el de la mujer ajena.

No hay bocado más sabroso
y aunque la propia esté buena.

(Cowell, side 2, band 4)

The allusions to Villa as a womanizer/rapist are not intended to criticize his actions but rather to add to his metaphoric trophies of war. The myth of Villa is problematic: on one hand, it offers the possibility that a hero will defend the rights of those who are marginalized in society; on the other hand, it reinforces a patriarchal system in which women, as well as men who do not fit the proper masculine stereotype, suffer verbal and physical abuse at the hands of the *macho*.

In *Entre Villa y una mujer desnuda*, Villa is described in the stage directions, but few words are needed to convey to the reader the Villa that Berman imagines for the stage: "es el Villa mítico de las películas mexicanas de los años cincuentas, sesentas, y setentas. Perfectamente viril, con una facilidad portentosa para la violencia o el sentimentalismo" (15). In addition to *machismo*, the name Villa brings the shadows of various other historical figures to the play: revolutionaries such as Zapata, Carranza, Obregón, and, especially, Calles – perhaps the orchestrator of Villa's assassination in 1923. Villa, and his historical friends and enemies, will be immediately known to Mexican actors, directors, and audiences.

The characters come together in Gina's apartment. The two protagonists, Adrián and Gina, are on-and-off lovers at first; however, by the end of the play Gina moves in with Ismael, and Adrián seems tempted by the possibility of replacing his loss with Gina's friend Andrea (although she represents all that he despises), who has taken over Gina's apartment as well as *all* of her possessions. Pancho Villa, whose grave, Adrián affirms, is empty, comes on stage to disrupt, mimic, and coerce the other characters, especially Adrián, who, with the help of Gina, keeps Villa alive through narration.³

Gina's apartment is in the Colonia Condesa, and poverty enters the scene only with Adrián's words about the Revolution or with Villa himself, who speaks with his mother of his impoverished childhood. The rest of the scenes are safely surrounded by the comforts of financial security. The Colonia Condesa is a middle to upper middle-class neighborhood that Leticia de Lozano described to me as a neighborhood in transformation: "No se ha vuelto tan 'in' como Polanco pero ya empieza a tener algunos restaurantes 'elegantillos'." The perfect setting for *Entre Villa y una mujer desnuda*, it serves as a metaphor for the up-and-coming Gina, who transforms her life during the course of the play. Other signs also point to financial stability: Gina's "cigarrillo largo y negro" from the first scene (which connotes more than elegance and wealth, of course), Gina's son who studies at Harvard, and her plans, with Andrea's help, to found a maquiladora in northern Mexico.

I will first consider the way the myth of Villa (as narrated by Adrián), while appearing "revolutionary," supports conservative social values, legitimizing Adrián's treatment of those around him and reinforcing traditional gender roles. In the end, Gina breaks free from her conventional relationship with Adrián (who has a wife and at least one other lover) by aligning herself with her neoliberal friends; ironically, her conservative political/economic alliances are the key to her social liberation. Berman's stage directions explain that Adrián is the type of person who, although not particularly attractive, "cualquier mujer desearía invitarlo a cenar y averiguar si es cierta esa sensualidad que se le entreve por la corteza sobria y áspera" (15). Berman adds that "De pronto el discurso político puede literalmente poseerlo" (15). Adrián, a sophisticated intellectual, with his "elegancia calculadamente descuidada" and his "labia hipnótica," is shaped, even possessed, by the discourses around him. Through this description, Berman relays important information: it is clear that Adrián in his relationships with women recapitulates a discourse that is always already available to him. But these stage directions indicate that Adrián is also governed by political

discourse, and thus he also (re)presents, through this discourse, the political left in Mexico City. His calls for revolution (which, of course, do not involve a gender revolution), as I will argue in the second part of this essay, are as hollow as his feigned desire to marry Gina.

By including Pancho Villa in the cast of characters of a play that takes place in 1993, Berman shows that the present-day dynamics of the relationship between Adrián and Gina has its roots in the revolutionary battlefield. The popular myth of Pancho Villa engenders the traditional paradigm in which the hero, because he dedicates his life to battle and thus to the needs of his people, is forgiven his actions on and off the field of battle. Adrián is writing a biography of Villa, and it quickly becomes clear that he favors passionate, violent emotion over diligent research. He promises that as he writes he will avoid “delicadezas” and “mariconerías lingüísticas” (25). The life work of this historian is clearly driven by personal desire, as his *macho* discourse highlights:

ADRIAN. La verdad llevo las notas sobre Villa a todas partes [. . .]. Pienso en Villa hasta dormido ... Es decir: empecé ya a trazar el esquema del libro. Es lo que menos me gusta. Lo que quisiera es ya estar ... ¿cómo decirlo?, montado en el tema. Concretamente quisiera ya estar cabalgando con el Centauro rumbo a la ciudad de México [. . .]. (24-25)

It seems, although Adrián is impatient to have sex with Gina, that choosing between Villa and a naked woman would not be easy for him at this moment. Narrating the myth of Pancho Villa feeds Adrián’s *macho* image (as well as his sexual drive), legitimizes his subordination of those around him, and validates the belief that through his work he will somehow improve the position of the poor in Mexico. In turn, Adrián reinforces the power of the myth of Villa, reaffirming Villa’s position as a hero in Mexican history.

Adrián is marked by the signs of liberalism; he is a university history professor who writes for *La Jornada*, a left-of-center newspaper in Mexico City. His position as a historian of the Revolution (but not a revolutionary historian) serves to highlight the status of myths as subjective narratives existing in the present, as they are narrated. Berman presents myths as dynamic: if myths are shown to exist as presence, their power, as well as the possibility that they can be (re)narrated from distinct points of view, is exposed. The Pancho Villa that Adrián writes duplicates this hero’s popular mythical image. The alignment of Adrián’s behavior with that of Villa, coupled with Gina’s mechanical compliance, duplicates the traditional roles

of the hero and his “trophies” of war. From the first scene it becomes clear, as Gina explains their amorous ritual, that their actions are predetermined; they only need to follow their social scripts:

GINA. Siempre lo recibo [. . .]. Le abro la puerta. Hay un cierto ritual. Le abro la puerta, se queda en el umbral, me mira. Me mira...Luego se acerca: me besa. [. . .] Tiene que pasar un momento o dos o tres, antes de que algo: el sentimiento, me regrese a la memoria. Entonces subo la mano a su cabello [. . .]. (19)

Gina always awaits her hero, who, instead of being blown through town by the whirlwind of the Mexican Revolution, devotes his time to bringing it to life in the form of a creative biography of Pancho Villa. The first time Adrián comes on the stage, which can simultaneously represent Gina’s house and a revolutionary battlefield, we see almost the exact representation of the ritual that Gina has described, as the stage directions indicate: “Adrián estrecha a Gina por la cintura y la besa en los labios, mientras la encamina al dormitorio. Pasa un instante, dos, tres, antes de que la diestra de ella suba a la melena cana de él, y ahí se hunda” (19-20).

Gina’s attempts to suspend this play within a play are never more than temporary; built into the very ritual of subordination there is a false sense that the act can be rewritten. When the audience sees the scene Gina described earlier take place on stage, with each detailed movement evoking previous dialogue, the actions of Adrián and Gina are made clear to the audience; the characters are shown to be puppets in a play of gender. Gina’s ability to articulate the intricacies of the metaperformance she stages with Adrián allows the spectator, as well as the reader, to recognize the manner in which the past governs the actions of the present. Gina, then, is clearly aware of the ceremonial nature of their relationship. Ironically, however, it is Adrián who best articulates the mechanical nature of human relations:

ADRIAN. No, no, no. No hay nada que sea humano y natural al mismo tiempo. Somos la única raza animal con memoria, por lo tanto con Historia, por lo tanto con acumulación de costumbres. Ergo: natural como natural es una imposibilidad; natural como pautas automatizadas es no sólo posible, es por desgracia un poco menos que inescapable. (27)

Both of the protagonists understand that the roles they play are not natural. Gina tries to change her place in the ritualistic play that is her relationship with Adrián, and Adrián sees that his “pautas automatizadas” are merely learned social roles. These roles are forced – and reinforced – by the power

that myth exercises in everyday life. Sharon Magnarelli explains the situation succinctly: “Berman seems to be suggesting that what is needed is a ‘revolution’ in gender performance. But, she also seems to hold little optimism for that revolution, which may prove to be as disappointing as the Mexican Revolution” (67).

Roland Barthes, in *Mythologies*, suggests that myths, although they appear to confirm intrinsic and natural aspects of human behavior, are actually social products: “Ancient or not, mythology can only have an historical foundation, for myth is a type of speech chosen by history: it cannot possibly evolve from the ‘nature’ of things” (110). By emphasizing the mechanical and ritualistic nature in which the protagonists live, Berman highlights the fact that what seems like natural behavior is naturalized behavior, a product of society. This destabilization of the *macho* myth reminds us that myth is an historical construct and that social systems, which are based on myths, can be changed. Although the audience must come up with their own solution for the political and social future of Mexico, *Entre Villa y una mujer desnuda* takes the first step by identifying the echoes of the past in the script of modern-day romance.

The first time Villa enters the stage is after Gina and Adrián have made love. The action that takes place between Villa and the woman with whom he is speaking is narrated by Adrián. Gina tries to change the story, anticipating the line in which the woman will ask Villa to spend the night. Nevertheless, we see that Adrián is clearly in control of the dialogue. He narrates a scene in which Villa kills the woman after she tries to entice him to stay by offering him a cup of tea. When Gina asks why Villa has murdered his lover, Adrián explains curtly: “Porque tengo que irme” (32). The synchronism between Villa and Adrián emphasizes the idea that the *macho* myth of Villa lives in contemporary men. Both men seek the same thing: to dominate their women without being conquered by emotions. When Gina requests that Adrián stay for dinner, Villa echoes Adrián’s refusal and explains to Gina that for the *macho* there are only two options: to attack or to flee. This description of the male role that places men and women in the heart of a metaphorical battlefield underlines the violent component of sexual relations by verbally presenting men as warriors and women as their prized possessions. In this sense we see the other side of Villa, the man who must dominate on and off the field of battle. Adrián is not presented as a dedicated historian but as a man who duplicates the *machista* actions of his hero. Octavio Paz, in the section of *El laberinto de la soledad* entitled “Los hijos de la Malinche,” comments on the verbal manifestation of this relationship:

Para el mexicano la vida es una posibilidad de chingar o de ser chingado. Es decir, de humillar, castigar y ofender. O a la inversa. Esta concepción de la vida social como combate engendra fatalmente la división de la sociedad en fuertes y débiles [. . .] (86-87)

Paz's summary of Mexican society is drastic. Nonetheless, it affirms the subordination of marginalized groups that Berman presents in *Entre Villa y una mujer desnuda*.

The subordination of women is paralleled in the play by the treatment of Ismael, Gina's friend, employee, and soon-to-be lover. If Villa and Adrián represent the virile and powerful men of the past, Ismael is the exact opposite. Complete with jeans and a ring in his right ear, he is the man of the nineties – a person who can let Gina lead when they dance and who says that what a man truly wants is “Que alguien nos tumba todas – todas – nuestras idiotas defensas” (44). He does not invoke revolutionary narratives, and he was born well after the student protests of 1968 (he is approximately 22 years old); in fact, he is a designer of toy blocks for Gina's *maquiladora*, part of the “vendabal [sic] neoliberal” Adrián despises. He is also friends with Gina's Ivy League son (a student of economics?). But in addition to – and perhaps because of – his neoliberal credentials, Ismael also possesses the ability to help Gina reinvent her life; he represents a future that is not ruled by *macho* myth. He is the liberal in (neo)liberalism. Along with *laissez-faire* capitalism, it seems, comes the possibility of increased personal freedom. Ismael's lack of *machismo* makes him an easy target for Adrián and Villa to affirm their violent masculinity, and his lack of confidence often causes him to stutter, especially in the presence of Gina. However, with the help of Andrea, Gina's conservative business partner, he is strong enough to convince Gina to confront Adrián once and for all.

In the second scene of act 2, Gina's life begins to change, as Andrea and Ismael speak to her about her relationship. Andrea reacts negatively to Adrián, her political rival:

ANDREA. Qué barbaridad, pero qué barbaridad. Mira que ese plan suyo de colgar mi abuelito de sus partes nobles en pleno Zócalo, me ha dejado *perplexed, darling, perplexed*. Pero bueno, es típico; de un historiador típico: vivir en el pasado. (41)

Gina tries to convince Andrea that, at least, Adrián is a talented writer, but Andrea responds: “como escritor me parece notable [. . .] su...su...ortografía. Impresionante cómo pone los puntos y las comas. Con mucha virilidad, ¿no?” (41). While Adrián is presented as an untalented writer who lives in the past,

Ismael has entered with red roses, a gift for Gina, and lightning flashes through the windows, an ominous sign of the changes to come. As Ismael convinces Gina to go to Adrián's apartment to deliver an ultimatum, the contrast between the two men is solidified, especially when Ismael offers Gina complete freedom:

ISMAEL. A mí me encantaría hacerte un hijo. Me encantaría lo que me propusieras. Cómo voy a negarte algo, a ponerte límites, a establecer prohibiciones, digo: si te amo. (43)

Of course, Ismael *is* in love with Gina, and his words convince her to take on a new role. She goes to Adrián's apartment, ready to "tumarle todas sus idiotas defensas" (44). When she finds him with another woman, who, in his words, "No tiene nombre, no existe," she follows the rest of the lines Ismael has scripted, throwing the roses in his face, an act of defiance that takes two tries (44).

Adrián returns to promise Gina a son but then disappears for three months. She almost falls for him again when he affirms he has dedicated his book to her, until she finds it is only her copy that has been dedicated "a mano." Ironically, his inscription reads: "A una querida amiga, apasionada como yo de Pancho Villa" (69). When Gina informs him that she is in love with Ismael and Adrián shows signs of weakness – that is, emotion – Villa is there to haunt him, to remind him that to let his feelings show is a betrayal of the myth. Villa's statement is clear: "No sea joto, cabrón" (68). But, at least for the time being, Adrián is willing to tell Gina how he feels. And each sign of defeat from Adrián results in another bullet hole (literally) in the *macho* myth personified by Villa.

In the end, the tables are turned when Adrián is seduced by Andrea, who is attracted to him in part because he could (re)write her grandfather's history. Manuel Medina explains that the fact that Adrián has published his book (she calls it a *novela*, highlighting the subjective nature of history) leads Andrea to see that "Adrián posee la aprobación de los organismos de poder y por ende goza de la autoridad para redactar noticias que se convierten en la verdad aceptada" (110). He resists her advances until he notices that she has a "bigotito" and bears a striking resemblance to her late father. Andrea, Gina's "socia," is the granddaughter of Plutarco Elías Calles, the postrevolutionary *jefe máximo*. She resembles her grandfather but not, Berman states in the stage directions, because she is ugly: "Si esto parece indicar que no es atractiva, lo primero es invitar al lector revisar las fotografías del guapo Plutarco [. . .]" (15). It appears as though Adrián has indeed found

the “otros brazos hospitalarios” that Villa claims are always available to keep a man from being tied down by one woman (65). However, the damage to the *macho* ego leaves both Villa and Adrián powerless. Instead of continuing their omnipotent rule over those around them, they become impotent, losing their dominant position in a social revolution that devastates patriarchal authority in the microcosm of society that is Gina’s house. Gina, after leaving Adrián, gains independence, but Andrea explains how Gina’s newfound freedom also has its negative aspects:

ANDREA. Mira Adrián, no digo para nada que Ismael sea mejor que tú. Según lo que sé de ambos, no lo es en varios sentidos. Tú eres más maduro, al menos físicamente; más leído, aunque quién sabe para qué sirve eso; eres mejor amante, como amante estás mejor equipado ... dicen ... no te hagas ... En fin, rompes mejor las puertas a patadas ... Pero [...] Ese muchachito es capaz de tenerle devoción. Verdadera devoción, ¿entiendes? (79)

Andrea’s commentary highlights one of the central messages of the play. It is possible to shake the “pautas automatizadas” of a social system governed by myth. However, the solution is complex; it requires the loss of the positive along with the negative. Gina loses a virile lover, but she gains her freedom, as well as the true devotion – and a new social script – that only the (neo)liberal Ismael can offer.

It is clear from the stage directions that Gina will eventually perform this revolution, taking on a new role. Berman’s description of Gina provides an early clue that a lack of equilibrium will eventually rule the stage. Berman writes that “Sus ademanes son suaves y en general tiende a conciliar su entorno. Si en las escenas de esta historia pierde el buen juicio con cierta frecuencia – se vuelve brusca o comete locuras –, es porque circunstancias están desequilibrando su natural gentileza” (15). Berman’s ironic contextualization of social rules that regulate the behavior of women, such as the pressure to maintain “el buen juicio” without being brusque or acting “crazy,” brings to mind Bakhtin’s concept of the dialogic nature of the utterance: the words may be borrowed from dominant Mexican society, but their unique context spells doom for the myths that underpin these social clichés. With the help of Andrea and Ismael (who are Gina’s ties to conservative, neoliberal ideology) she overturns dominant paradigms –she has found freedom in the currents of neoliberalism.

Entre Villa y una mujer desnuda recreates a world in which myths, through repetition, exercise control over the life of the individual, leaving

Gina, until she flees the past, trapped by the power of tradition. However, Berman's sharp criticism extends beyond the realm of individual relationships. Through Adrián's manipulation of the historical Villa, one sees that the myth of Villa, instead of being cultivated to improve the lot of the poor, can in fact serve as an excuse to ignore their plight. In "The Postmodernization of History in the Theatre of Sabina Berman," Jacqueline Bixler examines the way in which Berman questions the official history of Mexico: "[Berman's] irreverent portrayal of historical representatives and authorities [. . .] serves the postmodern goal of deconstructing, decentering, and destabilizing historical knowledge. [. . .] postmodern art seeks to deconstruct what Hutcheon calls 'the master narrative,' a term that refers to the narrative that has come to be accepted as dogma through sheer repetition" (3). The historical myth of Pancho Villa belongs, in addition to its place in popular legend, to the official history of Mexico; it is part of Mexico's "master narrative." Enemies of the new order, such as Villa, were incorporated into the ideology of the postrevolutionary government to create the illusion that it represented all facets of the Mexican population. Although O'Malley suggests that Villa avoided this corporatism at first, she also reminds the reader that "As Mexico gained international prestige, the government probably deemed it unseemly that the most famous Mexican in the world should continue to stand outside and in contradiction of the official Revolution" (144). By employing Villa's mythical image in her play, Berman not only highlights the reality effect of that image and its power over social roles in Mexico, but she also exposes the ideological façade behind which, in the name of Revolution, this hegemonic discourse operates.

In this light, Adrián's text can be seen not as a call to action but rather as a subterfuge behind which he can hide his feelings of personal failure. His work, safely entwined in the past, becomes a token voice of dissent allowed by, and necessary to, the ruling party. During one of Adrián's not-so-frequent visits to Gina, he explains that he has been teaching about the Mexican Revolution in Canada. Her response is ironical: "Fíjate. Así que hasta ahí se interesan por la revolución mexicana" (23). This line can be read as questioning Adrián's social commitment to Mexico (as well as his social commitment to Gina). Berman's choice of Canada, a partner in NAFTA, as the country Adrián visits, leads the spectator/reader to theorize about the students in his Canadian classes. Would his lectures help promote the values of the Revolution or seek to develop ties with the Canadian political left? Or would they help a new group of neoliberals understand the intricacies

of marketing their products in Mexico, a country still getting used to its role in the global marketplace?

Jacqueline Bixler, in "Power Plays and the Mexican Crisis: The Recent Theatre of Sabina Berman," sees Adrián as symbolic of the PRI: Both Adrián and the PRI pretend to have changed and progressed when, in truth, they have not changed at all. In terms of gender relations, this assessment of Adrián is insightful; however, although the PRI remains in many ways unchanged, the economic ideology which rules Mexico could not be more different from the PRI's statist ideology of the past. Adrián's dialogue (re)presents the party's line (by keeping Villa's history in the past) but not its reality: neoliberal technocrats, *salinistas*, continue to control most economic decisions in Mexico.⁴

It is clear that his text will effectively communicate the failures of the Revolution. He states:

ADRIAN. ¿De qué sirvió la Revolución, la lucha del general Villa, si sus nietos están igual de chingados que él de escuincla? A otros les hizo justicia la Revolución [. . .] a los perjumados. Los leídos. Los licenciados. (73)

He passionately criticizes the negative aspects of the Revolution; his diatribe against those he finds responsible for selling out is powerful. He calls Andrea's grandfather a "burgués nepotista corruptor vende patrias jijo de la chingada" (83). Plutarco Elías Calles was indeed, according to Jonathan Kandell, "ruthless toward real or imagined enemies" (462). In this respect, Adrián's criticism of Calles reminds us of Fuentes's characters, like Artemio Cruz, who trade their political ideals for newfound wealth and power. Berman, however, does not emphasize the historical animosity between rivals but rather the need to transcend mythical and temporal boundaries in a search for positive social change.

Adrián's words are moving, but he lacks solutions. And although he is conscious of his failure in the face of a transforming society, he feels as though his chance to effect change has passed him by:

ADRIÁN. Y la revolución de mi generación, ni siquiera la hicimos ... Así que sí, "me agobia la mediocridad." Me agobia voltear y ver la punta de sinvergüenzas que detentan el poder en nuestra época.

Put a madre, no sé dónde saqué que el mundo podía ser justo. (82)

Adrián's reference to the student protests of 1968, and to the politicians, such as Salinas, who, through fraud, held power illegally in Mexico, represents the feelings of many Mexican liberals. Instead of their own revolution, liberals

are faced with easing the social impact of another revolution, that of neoliberal ideology. Adrián feels as though he is the victim of a political ruse, but he has not found a means to promote change.

After Gina has left Adrián, Andrea tells him that a break with the past is necessary (80). Her advice relates to Gina, but the message resonates with the theme of looking to the future that permeates the play. Gina makes this point when she tries to engage Adrián in a conversation about her work:

GINA. O deja que te cuente cómo va la maquiladora.

ADRIÁN. No. No me interesa tu trabajo. Especialmente no, cuando estás montando una maquiladora; es decir, cuando te afilias al vendabal [sic] neoliberal que está desgraciando a este país.

GINA. Estamos dándole trabajo a la gente.

ADRIÁN. No. Están esclavándolos. (26-27)

Gina's solution is problematic; there is no clear path for the future that does not endanger previous alliances and ideals. Adrián's reference to the "vendabal neoliberal" focuses the dialogue on the tension between proponents and opponents of an often costly "free" market economy. Gina's link to neoliberalism is seen in her involvement with the *maquiladora* and in the fact that her son is studying in the United States: he is receiving an Ivy League education just like the "most homogenous superpolitical elite ever" who guided Mexican economic policy under President Salinas (Teichman 78). Yet Gina is linked to the past too. When she shares a bottle of tequila with Villa, history flows through her body.

The tequila Villa drinks embodies the past from which she has, at least temporarily, escaped. It encodes the Revolutionary front-line and the battlefield of present-day relationships mired in tradition. Of the many icons that add to the construction of Villa's character, such as his mustache and pistols, the bottle of tequila best exemplifies his volatile character. But which brand? An obvious choice would be "José Cuervo," but there are many other options among Mexican labels of tequila, all of them connoting Villa's brand of *machismo*, if not the proper historical period: Perhaps a bottle of "Don Maximiliano," taken from the hacienda of a "frenchified" *porfirista*; "Los Azulejos" tequila, signifying Villa's dining, along with his troops, in the elegant Casa de los Azulejos (now a Sanborn's) on Madero Street, a short walk from Bellas Artes; "Conquistador" (of women, of course), "Casta," "Centinela," "Pura Sangre," and "Suave Patria" would all serve to communicate the image of Villa the revolutionary lover. When he shares the bottle with Gina, the spectator senses the anesthetizing aspect of

Revolutionary myth. The tequila Gina drinks makes her character become the battlefield on which the tension between political ideologies is staged, and her choice to leave with Ismael, though problematic, indicates the possibility of social change stemming from influences from the North.

By the end of the play Gina has rejected the mythic past, and it seems that her plans to create a *maquiladora* – and thus embrace neoliberal ideology – will allow her personal freedom. Gina also sees an improvement for Mexico's poor in the creation of an assembly plant. Indeed, there are some benefits to the Mexican *maquila* industry which continues to thrive, especially after the passage of NAFTA. In *Maquila: Assembly Plants in Northern Mexico*, Ellwyn Stoddard addresses the double-edged sword of this industry, affirming that, because of the employment opportunities created by assembly plants, "it is foolhardy to outright condemn the industry" (2-3). According to Stoddard, it is better to tolerate the negative aspects of the industry in order to reap its rewards (3). Jorge Castañeda also confirms the benefits of the industry which provides jobs for "upward of six hundred thousand people" (261). Nonetheless, his description of the industry is sobering: "As is well known, virtually all of the *maquiladoras'* inputs are imported, and 100 percent of their output is sold abroad. Practically no backward linkages have been constructed over the years [. . .]. Their influence on employment and the local economy is thus modest" (262). Berman does not hint at the answer to the *maquila* dilemma; Gina and Adrián are as full of contradictions as the juxtaposition of statist and neoliberal economic policies. Nevertheless, instead of merely glorifying the exploits of the heroes of the past, the text exposes the way in which co-opted revolutionary ideals, in the form of myths, can serve to rule out dialogue about Mexico's economic and political future.

The toy building-blocks designed by Ismael for production in Gina's *maquiladora* symbolize not only Ismael's youth, lack of experience, and neoliberal stance, but also the raw –and no doubt imported – material for Mexico's uncertain neoliberal future. In *Mythologies*, Barthes states that "The merest set of blocks, provided it is not too refined, implies a very different learning of the world [. . .] the actions [a child] performs are not those of a user but those of a demiurge [. . .] he creates life" (54). The blocks Ismael creates (and plays with) bring him motherly praise from Gina and ridicule from Adrián. It is up to the spectator to decide what these toys represent: Are they the foundation of the prosperous neoliberal future? Will they be used by Mexican children to imagine, in Barthes words, "a different meaning to

the world”? Or will they be exported, like other goods in the *maquila* industry, to the hands of North American children?

There are no clear-cut answers to the questions facing Mexico, and the changes brought about by neoliberalism, as I mention in the introduction, cannot be explained in binary terms. *Entre Villa y una mujer desnuda* presents, and subverts, a life governed by “pautas automatizadas” that are based in myth. Gina’s break with the past ends the vicious cycle that trapped her in a traditional relationship. Ismael, the prototype for the man of the nineties, does not reek of virility. However, he does represent a future in which the borders between the sexes (and between countries) become less severely defined. The play also leaves the confines of Gina’s house to criticize the celebration of historical myths that, instead of bettering the lives of the poor, impede social progress. Adrián is seen in a new light; like the revolutionary murals on government walls about which Paz writes, his work serves as an illusion behind which social and political business as usual is maintained. Berman presents a comedy which is ultimately disconcerting: conservatives are (neo)liberal, and liberals maintain the status quo.⁵

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Notes

¹ Although economic policies have varied during the years since the Revolution, what remained relatively unchanged until 1982 was a commitment to a high level of state participation in economic ventures. Judith Teichman confirms that public sector participation in the economy dropped from 25.4 percent of the gross domestic product in 1983 to approximately 7.5 percent in 1993 (4).

² Susan Kaufman Purcell attests to the power of neoliberalism to promote – if only by accident – political change: “In the past, active opposition to a sitting president had been an extremely risky undertaking in Mexico, given the president’s vast power. By 1994, however, the situation had changed significantly. The very economic reforms President Salinas had risked so much to implement, such as the privatization of state enterprises and the reduction of the state’s role in the economy, had deprived him of the tools and resources he needed to keep disgruntled opponents of his reforms in line” (109).

³ Enrique Krauze notes: “Tres años después de su muerte, alguien violó la tumba y extrajo el cráneo de Francisco Villa” (185).

⁴ Despite President Zedillo’s unprecedented criticism of Salinas, the two leaders are in many ways cut from the same cloth, especially when it comes to their commitment to neoliberal reforms. Zedillo is on the same economic course begun by President Miguel de la Madrid (with the help of his Finance Minister, Salinas) and intensified during the Salinas sexenio (Teichman 4).

⁵ A shorter version of this paper was presented at the Latin American Theatre Today conference at the University of Kansas, April 2-5, 1997.

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