Studies in Twentieth and Twenty-First Century Literature

It's My (National) Stage Too: Sabina Berman and Jesusa Rodríguez as Public Intellectuals

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The fissure between past and present is defied by the woman who walks toward Mexico City's *zócalo*, the main meeting place for demonstrators who in this case have come (by foot, on the metro) to listen to Andrés Manuel López Obrador, a man who by millions is considered the "presidente legítimo de México," 'the legitimate president of Mexico,' and who is known as Peje or AMLO ("Te AMLO," a play on 'I love you,' reads a common slogan). The woman is clad as a nun, "suffering" silently in the heat as she plays the role of seventeenth century poet Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz. Her performance of resistance is a combination of word and image: the many depictions of Sor Juana, often seated in her library, are recalled through the habit donned by the performance artist who marches assertively among a sea of yellow AMLO t-shirts, visors, and umbrellas; and the large placard she carries contains a productive parody of Sor Juana's untitled poem known as "Hombres necios," 'foolish men.' The first four verses of the re-inscription read: 'Foolish priests who accuse / Resistance in action / Knowing that it is you / Who are accomplices of corruption.'[1] The ridiculous men of Sor Juana's iconoclastic poem have become present-day priests accused of active complicity in a web of corruption, corruption that relates to the July 2006 presidential election and to the debate over abortion rights, among other key issues in contemporary politics. Taking political performance to the national stage (as exemplified by

Scruton, Roger. "Laughter". *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor.* Ed.John Morreall. Albany: The U of New York P, 1987. 156-71.

Unruh, Vicky. "'It's a Sin to Bring Down an Art Deco': Sabina Berman's Theater among the Ruins." *PMLA* 122.1 (2007): 135-50.

this present-day Sor Juana), and leaving the enclosed spaces where Mexican performers and playwrights often find their public, is the topic of this essay. Specifically, I will look at two socially committed artists, Sabina Berman and Jesusa Rodríguez, and the ways they have claimed, not for the first time, by any means, but much more visibly than in the past, a place on Mexico's national stage. Their contrasting incursions into the 2006 electoral scene point to an invigorated, multifaceted political left in Mexico—regardless of the questions concerning the legitimacy of the designated president, Felipe Calderón[2]—and to the enduring power of artists in Mexico to play a part in, and indeed stimulate, political action and dialogue; that is, to play the role of public intellectuals. According to Agnes Lugo-Ortiz, the roles played on the political stage by artists show no signs of abetting, a phenomenon that can seem foreign to US artists who frequently remain on the periphery of the political arena.

> In 1945, Pedro Henríquez Ureña ... had already noted the ties of singular intimacy between literature and politics that were constitutive of Spanish American processes of cultural modernization. ... he noticed the porosity between these two realms in the formation of a modern public sphere (a process that later was ... analyzed by Angel Rama in ...*The Lettered City.* It could be argued that these ties may very well be in the process of dissolution, partly due to the rise of notions of technocratic intellectual/political authority linked to the neo-liberal projects of the last decades. Yet we only have to look at the recent Mexican electoral crisis to doubt the imminence of such an apocalypse. On the stage, shoulder to shoulder with López Obrador and addressing mass rallies at the Mexico City *zócalo*, we found writers such as Carlos Monsiváis and Elena Poniatowska and performing artist Jesusa Rodríguez... (1).

Berman and Rodríguez, since the July 2, 2006 presidential elections, have gained significant political exposure—as well as changes of venue. Mexicans looking for a good show, not to mention academics who study Mexico City theater and performance, had for many years been able to count on two things: a politically-biting show at Rodríguez's cabaret space (El Hábito) in the posh Coyoacán

district of southern Mexico City, and one or more plays by Sabina Berman on stage, whether at a small independent theater or at the theater complex of the National Auditorium. For years they had offered their public a bitter yet almost always humorous dose of ironic, impertinent commentary that many argued—though Berman and Rodríguez were rarely so arrogant as to do so—made a difference on Mexico's national stage. Rodríguez told Mark and Blanca Kelty, in 1997, that her work in political cabaret is "not an escape; on the contrary, it is confronting what you most wanted to elude, what you didn't want to look at, what you didn't want to notice. Cabaret theater makes you say, 'This is what you are living'" (124); while in 2004 Jacqueline E. Bixler wrote that Berman's theater wavers "between mockery and caustic criticism of the historical, political, cultural, and sexual status quo of her country" (21). As part of the Mexican mosaic their texts and performances contributed to genuine albeit tortuous socio-political change. Mexican audiences—not to mention students in US universities, who often read texts and view performances by these and other Mexican artists—might see in the art of these two women gender politics denaturalized on the page/stage, or experience the power of parody to debunk the mythical morass of official histories that confirm, conform, and deform the nation.

In the 1990s and early 2000s, for example, the public, including academics in search of good material, could turn to their work to see politicians parodied, the role of the Church questioned, the enactment of a same-sex wedding (the stage is of course ideal for rehearsing future reality), or—in my case—a critique of neoliberalism, the conservative economic doctrine that posited the magic of the "free" trade, privatization, and a reduction in social spending. Mexican artists, it turns out, did not buy Francis Fukuyama's assertion that "[w]hile some present-day countries might fail to achieve stable liberal democracy, and others might lapse back into other, more primitive forms of rule like theocracy or military dictatorship, the "ideal" of liberal democracy could not be improved on" (author's emphasis; xi). They made this known through their plays and performances; audiences, including the occasional politician, might find solace (except perhaps for the occasional politician) in the scenes represented, and a community of

like-minded intellectuals, through their work and that of others, was solidified. Berman's 1990 play *La grieta*, or 'the crack,' for instance, depicted the massive crevice of corruption on the part of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) and President Carlos Salinas de Gortari. The seduction of Mexico by neoliberal forces was clear in this brutally comical play that combined documentary theater with the Theatre of the Absurd—a recipe for reality.[3]

During the last few theater seasons, however, Rodríguez bowed out of her political cabaret in the Coyoacán district in southern Mexico City (it is now in the hands of Las Reinas Chulas)[4], and one summer the only Berman plays on the Mexico City theater scene were the adaptation (produced by Berman, anonymously at first) of *Puppetry of the Penis* at the Foro Shakespeare, as well as a play for children. Academics and others perceived that artists like Berman and Rodríguez had abandoned the performance of politics, yet this was hardly the case. In fact, they were rehearsing for their roles on the national stage, and the early years of the twenty-first century were by no means stagnant for the two artists: among many other projects Berman conducted on-site research and wrote her screenplay *Backyard*, on the murders of hundreds of girls and young women in Ciudad Juárez; while one of Rodríguez's multiple political incursions included her wedding to Liliana Felipe on the same day as hundreds of other gay and lesbian couples, in Valentine's Day ceremonies that at once parodied conservative politics and set the stage for sanctioned civil unions.

Notwithstanding significant political participation in the past, the power of these two women—both of whom I have recently interviewed—on the national stage was realized most forcefully in their roles during and after the 2006 presidential elections: Rodríguez through increased political involvement with Andrés Manuel López Obrador (for whom she began to serve, shortly after the election, as stage director for numerous political events) and the Civil Resistance movement; Berman through her initial work with an "independent" United Nations election watch group, and later in her 2006 book on the elections, *Un soplo en el corazón de la patria: instantáneas de la crisis* 'A Murmur in the Heart of the *Patria*: Snapshots of the Crisis,' as well as her television interview show, *Shalalá*, which features co-facilitator Katia D'Artigues. More

than ever before they took the stage (literally, figuratively) as public intellectuals, following trajectories that have been viable, in part, because of the aftershocks of the 1968 massacre of students and others in Mexico City, a massacre that was provoked, we now know, by government snipers (Preston 63-94).

According to Roderic A. Camp "the most important single event affecting intellectual-government relationships in the last twenty years is the government-ordered massacre of student demonstrators at Tlatelolco" (*Intellectuals* 208). Camp adds that "[i]ntellectuals did not have much influence on the state in the aftermath of 1968, which is important as an illustration of their lack of political clout" (209). The events of 1968, however, would lead to political organization (in and beyond the universities) by intellectuals and others: there would not be another major event in Mexico in which Mexican intellectuals did not play a significant role. *Parte de Guerra* includes declassified documents and other information that clarifies some of the events surrounding the government's use of force during the peaceful demonstration on October 2 1968, Carlos Monsiváis indicates that despite easily-encountered views that the events of 1968 destroyed hope "For some, the most cynical, ... nothing was achieved, neither democratic gains nor organizational perspectives," the fight against the official version of events has, in and of itself, been a positive incubator for opposition participation in the political process. Through an avalanche of dissembling, stalling, and manipulation, "abundant evidence was opposed by ... almost the entire Media, the PRI machine, and inhibitions based on fear. For the last thirty years, the social and testimonial truth has come face to face, victoriously, with [official history]" (124).

Perhaps it is this need to provide counter-histories that leads many public figures in Mexico to link their definitions of "intellectual" to a search for truth. Roderic Camp, in *Intellectuals and the State in Twentieth-Century Mexico*, writes of the "five most common characteristics" Mexican intellectuals identify as key to their varied vocations: "the use of the intellect to live, the search for truth, the emphasis on the humanities, the creative bent, and the critical posture" (38-39). Beyond the general definitions of intellectuals and the work they do, Camp, basing his research on numerous interviews, signals ideas that make the term "public intellectual,"

a useful and necessary lexical grouping in the Anglophone world, seem rather redundant: "The most striking feature of the Mexican intellectual's self-appraisal, as differing from that proposed by the North American, is his or her attitude toward the political activity or the involvement of the intellectual." He adds that "several individuals emphasized political activity as essential, and still others suggested that public involvement is necessary" (Camp 42).[5] Thus, while I use the term "public intellectual," for reasons I will address in my conclusion, in Mexico intellectuals are often considered by definition to be political players.

In order to consider the work of Berman and Rodríguez and their "performances" on Mexico's national stage, I will begin on the day in 2006 that they coincided in Parque México, in Mexico City's Condesa district. Rodríguez had begun to speak regularly in this well-known, tree-lined park well before the election, and one day Berman went to listen. She was surprised to find a "humorless" Rodríguez. Berman, while affirming that she and Rodrígiuez both consider themselves leftists, states: "I miss, hearing her that Sunday on the rotunda, as one misses the happiness of an infirm friend, her formidable sense of humor ..." (*Un soplo* 13). Rodríguez had indeed taken on a serious role, a role that proves once again that parody is not her only avenue of resistance. Recently, when asked if her various forms of humor where no longer part of her political repertoire, she commented to me: "No, no. On the contrary. And now, for example, our songs serve millions of people—earlier they were only for a few" ("Interview")[6]. It is true that their trademark dark humor can still be found, including in the songs that Liliana Felipe and Rodríguez create, for example the one that insists: "You have to decide who you prefer to be killed by: poverty, misery, the Free Trade Agreement, or the anti-hunger program." This song, "Tienes que decidir," which until a couple of years ago would have been for sale only at the entry to El Hábito, can now be found in various forms (including video) on the internet, to give one example of their increased visibility. Notwithstanding new avenues for parodic social criticism, however, and the fact that Rodríguez continues to present some cabaret shows in Mexico and abroad, the tenor of her public discourse—and indeed the way she is portrayed by the leftist press—changed dramatically with her involvement in

the 2006 elections and their wake.

One illustration of such a change can be seen in the two "wedding" pictures that *La Jornada* published of Liliana Felipe and Rodríguez: the first, playing up the parody, shows the couple dressed as traditional brides—gowns, veils, roses—in a perfectly-posed embrace, with the "officiating priestess" in the background. The headline reads "Blissful and in Virginal White the Brides Joined their Lives Together: Nuptials of Liliana y Jesusa," and the text, which is itself a parody, continues: "It all started a few hours before with the official photo of the consorts: a chaste kiss for the lenses of Lourdes Almeida y Heriberto Rodríguez. The background of the photography studio—Mexican rose-colored cloth—highlights the dresses of the brides, designed and made-to-measure with India paper by the artist Humberto Spíndola—'the future of fashion is in paper'" (Patricia Vega). Then the "priestess" completes the union of the two members of the "rancid aristocracy": "*Consumatum est.* You may go in peace as soon as the political prisoners are freed, the Army withdraws, and the treaties of San Andrés are signed. Amen" (Vega). Rodríguez and her partner, in their bridal parody, at once embrace and mock nuptial traditions, as did the newspaper account of the event. Years later, at a mass wedding on Valentine's Day 2006, before the July elections, Rodríguez is quoted as saying, "We're a fucking homophobic country, and as long as that's the case we'll be shamefully Mexican" (Alma Muñoz).

Contrast this with the second photo of the couple at their civil union in August 2007: they are dressed in modest attire, with Liliana Felipe wearing an H.I.J.O.S. t-shirt, linking her Argentine past to Mexico's own dirty war of the 1960s-80s, and to the continued disappearance of political activists and others.[7] Rodríguez is wearing simple, elegant indigenous-influenced attire (Ericka Montaño Garfias). The couple had left the cabaret stage, where anything can be imagined, in order to stand firm in a city that recognized officially what previously had been a crime.[8] Their dress rehearsal had become a reality; anything but a farce, the new civil union law in the Federal District, while not allowing adoption or other important rights, did represent an important move toward equality for same-sex couples. Yet Rodríguez puts the law in perspective and subtly signals the federal government, which has been much less progressive than that

of the Federal District: "We see that these small steps are almost symbolic of a justice system that is becoming degraded, brutally, in other areas: in human rights, in everything that we are seeing, the repression of the entire country ..." (qtd. in Montaño Grafias).[9]

The change in emphasis, from parody to gravity, has taken center stage for Rodríguez, especially when she is directing mass demonstrations.[10] Indeed, parody is not the most efficient mode of communication when more direct avenues for political change seem viable; and perhaps the dangers of parody make a more explicit, direct message necessary. Linda Hutcheon, in *A Theory of Parody*, writes that parody "is a form of imitation, but imitation characterized by ironic inversion" (6); and in *Irony's Edge* she reminds the reader that irony is complex precisely because of the possibility that a message will misfire. The major players in the ironic game are the interpreter and the ironist. The interpreter may—or may not—be the intended addressee of the ironist's utterance, but s/he (by definition) is the one who attributes irony and then interprets it ... the one who decides whether the utterance is ironic (or not) and then what particular ironic meaning it might have" (11). On the political stage, where the audience (live, or in the media) may easily surpass a million, a direct message is key—even if that message can be made ironic, as was the case when a direct statement by Elena Poniatowska, in a campaign commercial for López Obrador, was later used by the National Action Party (PAN) in their own advertisement. As was widely reported, her words affirming López Obrador's honesty were ironically inverted through the use of controversial footage (of corruption and Las Vegas gambling) showing people who worked with López Obrador when he was leader of the Federal District.[11]

Parody and its counterpart, irony, are dangerous weapons. In the cabaret space, or even in the pages of *La Jornada*, the spectators or readers are in on the joke. Yet beyond the walls of the theater, where irony is more likely to misfire—or backfire, seeming elitist—Rodríguez presents messages for broad consumption. Cabaret performances are serious business, but without the frame of the traditional stage, a reminder that words are in play (and playful), the rules change. Rodríguez is aware that different venues call for different methods but also that her contribution to López Obrador is based, in addition to her status as an intellectual, on her work in the

theater. When she saw that the people protesting what they assumed would be an official decision in favor of Felipe Calderón, on the part of the Federal Elections Tribunal, her path was clear: "I placed at the disposition of the resistance movement what I could, in particular for the large demonstrations in the *zócalo* that reached two million people. What I proposed to them was that I could oversee the scenic direction of the pavilion because, in general, the pavilion is seen as a political concern, but in the end it follows the same laws as any stage" ("Interview"). From massive demonstrations to the protest where she and thousands of other Mexicans spent many nights camped out on Mexico City's Reforma Avenue, in a protest called the *plantón*, Rodríguez has, as she puts it, "diversified" her work (Interview).

Rodríguez's ability to stage events, and to lead the crowd, was evident when she spoke to an estimated one million people in the center of Mexico City for the National Democratic Convention in September 2006, the massive extra official congress at which López Obrador was declared Mexico's legitimate president. This was a key moment, a key decision for the political left. The main question, to be asked by Rodríguez, was this: Should López Obrador be declared the coordinator of the Peaceful Civil Resistance, or "legitimate president of Mexico"? Shouts of *presidente* drowned out any possible dissent, though the crowd was clearly supportive. Rodríguez, now often pictured in the news alongside intellectuals like Poniatowska, if not López Obrador himself, was in a position to choreograph resistance. As Rodríguez read the lists of candidates for three commissions (with roles ranging from civil resistance to the organization of plebiscites), the members of the crowd, all convention "delegates," raised their hands to vote "yes."

This scene is documented in many sources, including Berman's book *Un soplo en el corazón de la patria: instantáneas de la crisis*, which chronicles the 2006 elections. The book is comprised of Berman's own opinions, some published in periodicals like *Letras libres* and *El Universal*, as well as numerous accounts of the experiences by people (at times anonymous; at times thinly veiled; at times named) with a variety of political positions. Berman's book reminds the reader of Poniatowska's *La noche de Tlatelolco*, a text that has influenced Berman's journalism, which includes

columns in major news magazines, her *Mujeres y poder* series that won the 2000 National Journalism Award, the recent co-authored *Democracia cultural*, and, of course, *Un soplo en el corazón de la patria*. The subtitle of this book, "Snapshots of the Crisis," points to Poniatowska's writing on the 1968 massacre as well as the pieces she wrote on the 1985 earthquake. Berman confirmed to me the importance of Poniatowska's work: "I believe that if I had not read *La noche de Tlatelolco*, possibly it wouldn't have occurred to me [to write this one] ... it's the same type of book. And, curiously, it finds Elena and me, who I have read and admire, on opposite sides" ("Interview"). Poniatowska, widely recognized in Mexico as a prominent public intellectual, paved the way for artists like Berman and Rodríguez. One legacy of Tlatelolco is the power of publishing, the power to document—as Poniatowska did—events as they occur, and to do so in a way that challenges the status quo by presenting myriad viewpoints. She opened up an avenue for public expression, despite censorship, something Berman faces much less than her predecessor. Julia Preston and Sam Dillon explain that:

> [a]bout a week after the quake [Poniatowska] had an experience of déjà vu. Her editor at *Novedades*, the same man who has suppressed her stories in 1968, instructed her to stop writing about the damage and the disarray. Word had come down from President de la Madrid, he said, that it was time for Mexico City to "return to normal." The editor told Poniatowska that her stories about the survivors' struggles were demoralizing the public. ... She had not pressed the issue since 1968, but now she was an older and more accomplished journalist. She decided to take her stories across Calle Balderas to the offices of an upstart newspaper called *La Jornada* .... Poniatowska just left off her latest earthquake story at the front door and went back to *Novedades*. An hour later she got a call asking her for another story for the following day. She wrote reports for *La Jornada* every day for four months. (109)

In the history of public intellectuals in Mexico, the tenacity of this reporter, and the multiple progressive causes she has supported over the years, created a legacy that started the morning after Tlatelolco when she went to see for herself what had happened, and when she

used her skills as a reporter to project what was, at the time, the most reliable public documentation of the massacre. *Un soplo en el corazón de la patria* is at once an exemplar of the literary legacy of Poniatowska (the book itself; the genre of documentary reporting in Mexico) as well as of the legacy of performing on the national stage—Rodríguez's performances are documented in Berman's book, as mentioned above, and Poniatowska also makes an appearance. As the elderly Doctora Hamlet, one of the book's thinly veiled characters, makes her way to one of the demonstrations on the *zócalo* she sees an unsavory character out of Mexican history, "the old PRI member who, in 1988, orchestrated the electoral fraud that brought Salinas de Gortari to the presidency" (*Un soplo* 33). Later that evening, however, she sees a more positive figure: "[S]he saw Elenita Poniatowska pass by, diminutive, white hair and laughing out loud, and became happy when she saw her: in her she does have absolute confidence, she's an angel of God, a dove of peace" (35).

One of many other scenes Berman presents is that of La Actriz; this woman encounters a man who affirms: "Peje [López Obrador] and us, with the intermediation of Jesusa as the announcer, will put everything in order" (*Un soplo* 82). Yet the performances of Rodríguez, and that of López Obrador himself, after a sea of hands elected him "president," strike the actress as a dangerous act: "'What the hell is going to become of us?,' she thinks. 'We'll have to create a theatrical country so that our symbolic 'president' can give orders that will be carried out. A replica of a country.'" The actress also wonders if they can take over the *zócalo* in order to stage, daily, a play called "The Republic" (83). She decides that someone should create a new dictionary for the times: "People (*Pueblo*) of Mexico: Said of those of us who are in agreement with ourselves"; "Enemies of the country (*patria*): The stubborn people who don't agree with the Mexican *pueblo*" (82). The skepticism that Berman relays here and throughout the newspaper articles that make up much of her book leads to her own view of the of López Obrador's political party, of which she has been a supporter: "If the leadership of the PRD does not really believe there was fraud; if [alleging] fraud is their strategy and they are sacrificing their followers and passing by this historic opportunity for the left, it would be unpardonable" (70-71). Berman's preferred route, at the time of publication, would have

been to avoid theater, to form a coalition government with the ruling party, and to prepare the political left to win 2012 elections. Perhaps Berman's views can be summed up in the testimony of one of her acquaintances, who calls himself a "damned reformer": "If you place the causes of the left before democracy, if first and foremost you are a leftist, then join the civil resistance. Not me" (91).

Rodríguez, of course, has done just this. She explains: "A year later, when the electoral fraud occurred, it was completely clear that those who dedicate ourselves to culture had to dedicate our work, or at least part of our work, to the Civil Resistance" ("Interview"). That is, after years of political commitment often characterized (albeit not exclusively) by sharp criticism in the relative safety of her cabaret pieces, she decided to take to the streets—literally. An anecdote Augusto Boal recounts puts into perspective the leap from political play to the national stage into perspective. Jan Cohen-Cruz writes that while "[p]erforming for peasants in rural Brazil, Boal's middle-class actors ended an agit-prop play by lifting their prop rifles over their heads and calling for revolution. The peasant leader invited them all to eat together and then take up arms against the local landowner. Boal was ashamed; he and his actors were not prepared to fight but were telling others to do so" (14). As would Boal, Jesusa has shown that she is willing to take to the streets, in political performances where words and images are peaceful proxies for the rifles of revolution.

While in the work of Berman and Rodríguez one finds the collective legacy of Poniatowska, their political incursions also point to a divide among leftists in Mexico; namely, the position regarding support of López Obrador. Many intellectuals have taken a clear stance on the subject, often making enemies in the process. Through the lens of performance, this difference becomes clearer. To see López Obrador "elected" to the highest office in Mexico is either a fatal farce that will weaken the political left—or a brilliant political play. From photos of López Obrador being sworn in a "president" and riding the subway in full presidential regalia, to videos of his journey to all of Mexico's 3,000 polling districts, which he plans to finish in 2008, the scenes are at once moving and disconcerting (http://www.amlo.org.mx/). As López Obrador stated on Berman and D'Artigues's program *Shalalá*, his campaign has registered

over two million voters who have pledged to join any call to civil disobedience. The current debate in Mexico regarding the national oil company, PEMEX, centers on increased privatization that would generate massive demonstrations, and perhaps interruptions in transportation. While opinions on the parallel government are divided, even on the left, it is clear that the Mexican authorities are threatened: López Obrador and his campaign have been forbidden to use the term "legitimate president." John M. Ackerman, analyzing this decision by the Federal Elections Institute (IFE), notes that "the authority argues that by using the expression 'legitimate president of Mexico' [coalition parties] 'would be transmitting the idea that (López Obrador) is the president-elect in accordance with the law, [the person] to whom the licit designation of president corresponds, the right president, genuine and true, in opposition to someone who is not'" (50).

The anxiety expressed by the IFE, which many see as bending to the will of the PAN, demonstrates an understanding of the power of performance: as with the abovementioned nuptials performed year after year on Valentine's day, the strength of staging future reality is evident in Mexico, and the legacy of seemingly impractical protests—from hunger strikes to silent marches—have over the years produced results for the left, as well as for the right. As Berman expresses in *Un soplo en el corazón de la patria*, the 2006 election is indeed "the stone in the PAN's shoe" (71), and the counter-hegemonic performances of López Obrador, many of which are directed by Rodríguez, can be interpreted as effective performances of power or as self-constructed caricatures. While Rodríguez clearly sees potential in the "legitimate presidency," which she describes as "an act of civil resistance" that is a conscious performance meant to keep pressure on the PAN, Berman wonders if the left is not heading down the path of a previous "legitimate" president under Porfirio Díaz, Don Nicolás Zúñiga y Miranda ("Interview"). This character, according to Rafael Cardona, named himself the legitimate president of Mexico after losing an election to Díaz, perhaps through fraud: "Zúñiga y Miranda, a *señor* who, in his final days as a theatrical attraction in Centenary Mexico, had the custom of presenting himself as a candidate in each one of the successive reelections of [Díaz]. Some celebrated him, others invited him out to show him off

as a curious personage of the Mexican picaresque, and many simply called him crazy.'"

Berman also worries about what she and others see as authoritarian tendencies on the part of López Obrador. The division on the political left is highlighted by Berman's work with TV Azteca, which is seen by many as part of a television "duocracy," along with Televisa. *Shalalá* provides a platform for a variety of artists, politicians, and others. While programming in Mexico is controlled by very few people who have often been accused of bias, corruption, insider trading, and pursuing political vendettas, *Shalalá* is a platform that allows for the exchange of myriad viewpoints.

Such was the case, for example, with the two transsexuals who appeared on the program, a choice on the part of the hosts that at first seems anything but political. Yet in speaking about this program Berman expresses her desire to reach beyond an audience of intellectuals and politicians. The topics covered (the transformation of bodies, the social pressures the guests faced) get at the heart of Berman's political stance: "These are the things I identify with the modern left. I wish López Obrador had won—I voted for him—but he doesn't inspire in me some crazy passion. Because [he represents] a left that is statist, anti-sexual, anti-diversity, and pro-monopoly" (Interview). This openness, censured by some as a lack of social commitment, follows the postmodern edge of Berman's theater, a stance that is also seen in *Un soplo en el Corazón de la patria.* Berman closes the book with a section followed by lines that are to be filled in, literally, by the reader; the last chapter is "Design the adventure of your country" (153). This open ending was, of course, a temporal necessity since the book was published in November—five months after the elections. Yet it also points to Berman's view of the role of intellectuals and to her own view of the position of leftists in Mexico today, which she describes as an uncomfortable situation: "Why do you have to be the artillery of a politician? Isn't that when an intellectual renounces being an intellectual? ... It seems to me that [López Obrador] set a very grave trap for intellectuals: 'If you're not with me, your on the [political] right.' As if he were the Virgin of Guadalupe of the left" (Interview).

As a playwright, Berman had reached an unusually large audience. For example, her adaptation and translation of Marie

Jones's play *Stones in His Pockets*, titled *eXtras*, for example, was seen by almost a million spectators throughout Mexico, and the authors she most admires are those who have wide appeal. With *Shalalá*, however, her work is seen by a million people every week. This surpasses the so-called "*círculo rojo*"—one consisting of informed Mexicans who read the newspapers and follow the news closely—of the Mexican media ("Interview"). Jorge G. Castañeda explains this concept, by the controversial chairperson of TV Azteca, as:

> the thesis—in the end false—of Ricardo Salinas Pliego on the so-called green and red circles. The first is that of the masses who vote and who are defined based on certain basic criteria: employment, prices, security, education, health, housing. One reaches them through the media: television and, on a smaller scale, radio. From this came the tremendous importance that Fox (and indeed Calderón) placed on governmental advertising campaigns and to their direct appearances on television. In contrast, the red circle is made up of informed Mexicans who read the newspapers and follow the news closely. They are politicized and organized in political parties, union leadership, universities, upper management, NGOs, etc. Communication with this group is produced through print media: headlines, editorial columns, photos, etc.

The ability to reach an audience beyond the elite, even if one questions Salinas *Pliego*'s theory, which has been adopted by the PAN, is paramount to an understanding of the current intellectual reach of Berman and Rodríguez. For Berman the change relates to the need to escape the circle of intellectual discourse: "It's important to me not to end up trapped in the elite class" ("Interview"). In the case of Rodríguez, her politics represent a move from theory to practice, or perhaps the interweaving of both—what Paulo Freire would call "praxis." Both Berman and Rodríguez underscore that their current political activities are not theater, and while the latter sees the link between the cabaret space and the national stage, she also emphasizes radical change that her work with López Obrador implies:

> More than an extension, I would say that it's an absolute change to go beyond the cabaret—political farce created in an enclosed stage—and to take this work to its true setting, which is the street and the plaza. Then we can really say that it passes from one plane to another—completely different—where theater has direct political consequences, something that, as much as one tries, is not going to happen in the enclosed space of the cabaret. It's like talking about the map and talking about the land; we have now moved to the land. ("Interview")

The accelerated move from the space of the theater or the cabaret provides for dialogue that, if at times uncomfortable and heated, is productive. While Berman and Rodríguez have been heavily criticized for their political stances, they are representative of a diversity of ideas on the left. For Rodríguez the move from the map provides a grounding that was an intellectual necessity—anything else would make her an intellectual fraud.[12] For Berman, the pressure to support a specific politician, or to take a position on whether or not the election was won through fraud, threatens her position as an intellectual.[13] Both artists are pragmatic, though of course their pragmatism takes different forms. Influenced by the legacies of people like Elena Poniatowska, they are public intellectuals.

One can be an intellectual without taking a political stance, or even attempting to share ideas. Thus, for my purposes the term "public intellectual" seems to offer an important distinction. Public intellectuals reach out to a wide audience, share their opinions and knowledge, and, in questioning the status quo, provide a critical stance that may influence the public and/or government. Public intellectuals are artists, activists, professors, performers, writers, among others, who speak truth to power. Unlike the disenfranchised, however, they generally do so from positions of (relative) strength. To some in Mexico, as mentioned above, the term intellectual by definition includes public involvement. Yet there is something different about the artist who stays in her performance space and one who—through the airwaves, or books, or mass demonstrations—questions the power structures that define, and are at times defined by, intellectuals. Henry Giroux writes that "the best work in ... cultural politics challenges the culture of political

avoidance while demonstrating how intellectuals might live up to the historical responsibility they bear in bridging the relationship between theoretical rigor and social relevance, social criticism and practical politics, individual scholarship and pedagogy, as part of a broader commitment to defending democratic societies" (14).[14] Giroux's ideas about the academy can easily be extended to Berman and Rodríguez, and while professors and others who communicate their ideas through writing are perhaps the most often recognized as intellectuals, it is clear that in Mexico theater practitioners and other artists are included in the equation.

Berman and Rodríguez are exemplary, at once conforming to and informing what it means to be a public intellectual in Mexico. Dwight Conquergood notes that "de Certeau's aphorism that 'what the map cuts up, the story cuts across' ... points to the transgressive travel between two different domains of knowledge: one official, objective, and abstract—'the map'; the other one practical, embodied, and popular—'the story'" (311). Rodríguez's affirmation that she and her business/life/performance partner Liliana Felipe have left the confines of the map, moving closer to embodied experiences (as was the case when Berman and D'Artigues interviewed the two transsexuals on their program, to give one example), points to a way of knowing Mexico and Mexicans that has led to sharp criticism.[15] Indeed, Rodríguez has been classified through numerous and colorful adjectives by those who do not agree with her political stance, her social commitment. These adjectives have, in the end, one meaning: *loca*, the feminine grammatical form of "crazy." The friends and enemies who wanted Berman to take a stand regarding fraud in 2006, shortly after the elections and before she felt she had sufficient information—not to mention the people who question her decision to work for TV Azteca—use similar adjectives. As in the case of López Obrador's use of the term "legitimate president," which has Mexican officials worried, there is no better indication of the presence of effective, counter-hegemonic activity than verbal attacks meant de de-legitimize ideas that cross the line, leaving established territory.

To be a public intellectual in Mexico is to reach beyond the "ivory towers" of a given vocation, to take a political stance (even if that stance is one of relative objectivity), and to face the intellectual, and

potentially physical, dangers of sharing ideas. The division among intellectuals on the political left in Mexico could easily be mapped out based on circles of writers and artists who are aligned with specific media outlets in Mexico, cliques based on alliances created over the years as well as new groupings formed during and after the 2006 elections. Berman and Rodríguez, of course, find themselves on different sides of the issue, and they exemplify a division on the political left. They also offer a glimpse at the variety of legitimate activities that occupy public intellectuals in Mexico. While the work of both artist-intellectuals is in many ways very different than it was in the past, it is true two of the works mentioned above—*La grieta* and *Misa en Los Pinos*—offered blueprints of what was to come. Both were irreverent, but there was a subtle difference: Berman's text, like other plays she had written (e.g., *Entre Villa y una mujer desnuda*, in which the main character is a woman who finds personal freedom by embracing neoliberalism) emphasized the loss of liberty that an authoritarian leader can imply, in this case for a young poet and his wife; while Rodríguez's text presented more clear, direct messages with an anti-imperialist bent. Of the two authors, both unquestionably committed to social progress, one errs on the side of individual liberty (Berman), while the other (Rodríguez) errs on the side of popular power. Each opinion is crucial to a strong left in Mexico, of course, despite opinions to the contrary—and each illustrates a performance of the role of "public intellectual."

In 2007, at one of López Obrador's demonstrations, which consisted of a walk from the *Angel de la Independencia* to the *zócalo* (advertised widely both in the liberal media and, for example, on the back of Mexico City's ubiquitous buses, or *peseros*), I saw the performance artist dressed as Sor Juana, as mentioned above. Also part of the parade—a parade that met approximately 500,000 people on the *zócalo*, where the demonstrators were asked to rehearse the song that would honor López Obrador upon his arrival—was a large yellow bus, with a man sitting on the roof above the driver. He was wearing an AMLO mask and waving to the crowd. The rehearsal to prepare the crowd for López Obrador's arrival, as well as this masked representation of populism, brought to mind the masks of the theater. Somewhere in the interstices between the comedy and tragedy of Mexican politics, between two masks, lie the

public, intellectual performance spaces of Berman and Rodríguez, productive in their contrast and, in the end, inseparable.

Notes

1 All translations are my own. I have attempted to favor original content, opting for cognates that best communicate information even when this results in a lack of fluidity.

2 The documentary film *Fraude* presents numerous cases of irregularities in the election, including many of the same tactics use by the PRI to win the 1988 elections. A review of José Antonio Crespo's book, *2006: Hablan las actas: las debilidades de la autoridad electoral mexicana*, for which the author studied thousands of ballots, indicates that "what [Crespo] considers to be two myths about the 2006 elections have been destroyed: the 'grand electoral fraud,' which the sympathizers of López Obrador maintain, and the 'unquestionable and unequivocal triumph' of Calderón" (Delgado).

3 I saw this play with a dozen other people in 1996 at the diminutive Foro de la Conchita, not far from Jesusa Rodríguez's bar El Hábito, where among many cabaret performances that critiqued the neoliberal order was the piece *Misa en Los Pinos*, which lampooned, through a mass performed on a stage designed to represent the presidential palace, the influence of two fundamental religions: conservative Catholicism and neoliberalism (Fox had recently asked the Mexican people to pray for the US economy). Rodríguez told me at the time, as she has often told others, that her two favorite targets were the church and the state; as of the 2000 elections, the Fox administration offered two for one.

4 In his recent article on contemporary Mexican political cabaret artists, Gastón Alzate contextualizes the work of Las Reinas Chulas: "Disciples as much of Tito Vasconcelos as of Jesusa Rodríguez, and at the same time renovators of the genre, this theater-cabaret company has focused its artistic trajectory on the study and development of a fusion of German cabaret, the Mexican 'teatro de revista' and university acting techniques. For the Reinas Chulas, cabaret means, fundamentally, civil disobedience

and resistance, signaling in this way the close connection between their work and social activism" (57).

5 In his interviews with prominent Mexicans, including politicians of different stripes who may not be considered intellectuals, Camp concludes that "the majority of public figures [argue] that the intellectual can and should be a public actor. Those Mexicans most involved in public life vigorously believe the two roles not only are interchangeable, but are one. They do not believe that all public figures are intellectuals, but rather that all intellectuals "should" be public figures" (author's emphasis; 45). While for Camp "political activity" often refers to government service, this need not be the case, though it is clear that both Berman and Rodríguez are poised for such possibilities: According to Victoria E. Rodríguez, Berman was one of several people a feminist group presented to Vicente Fox, upon his election, to fill cabinet positions (151); and Rodríguez would likely play an important role in any future, official AMLO government.

6 All following "Interview"s refer to "Personal Interview by Stuart Day."

7 For information on H.I.J.O.S. (Hijos por la Identidad y la Justicia contra el Olvido y el Silencio), a human rights group in Argentina, see <www.hijos-capital.org.ar>. Of particular interest are the group's "escraches," performances meant to denounce and expose criminals, often from Argentina's *proceso*, or "Dirty War."

8 In March 2007 Berman acted the role of "Godmother" for another politically sanctioned gay union in Mexico City. She declared on that day that there was a bit more equality (and a bit less hypocrisy) in Mexico, and noted that "they have given a kiss with historical significance ... in front of a multitude of guests and some or other police officer, perhaps perplexed to be, from this moment on, here to protect their kiss and not to imprison it" (Agustín Salgado).

9 The "repression" to which Rodríguez refers concerns Felipe Calderón and his political party, the PAN. The "everything that we are seeing" includes, among many other issues, the PAN's attempts to challenge civil unions for same-sex couples in the Federal District and the state of Coahuila—not

to mention the documented human rights abuses that have come with Calderón's war on narcotraffickers.

10 It must be noted that Rodríguez's prior commitment to social justice, a commitment that went far beyond the walls of El Hábito and includes running workshops for sex workers, among many others activities.

11 The political advertisement was pulled, though not before the message got through. Rodríguez is quoted as defending Poniatowska: "they have made a major mistake. ... It is clear that, as we have seen throughout this sexennial, the *panistas* 'PAN members' look down on intelligence, don't recognize intellectualism, and try to disparage people for their brilliance" (Ana Mónica Rodríguez,et al).

12 Berman is open to the possibility that Calderón was elected by outright fraud, and not simply through illegal campaigning on the part of President Vicente Fox and the PAN.

13 Berman explains in *Un soplo en el corazón de la patria* that, as "independent" observers, she and others were to make a public declaration if the election were too close to call. On election day, when both candidates made victory speeches, the group was unsure of what their role was. When they consulted a UN elections observer from France, it was clear that they needed to improvise. "The Frenchman said: 'Act.'" So Berman changed the text, as seen in one example of the revision process: "Where is said 'don't declare yourselves winners' we should put 'they have declared themselves winners.' Our pretension of neutrality had just gone to Hell; at that moment was there anything that could be neutral?" (17).

14 Edward Said asks "whether writers and intellectuals can ever be what is called non-political or not, and if so, ..., how and in what measure. The difficulty of the tension for the individual writer and intellectual has been paradoxically that the realm of the political and public has expanded so much as to be virtually without borders. We might well ask whether a non-political writer or intellectual is a notion that has much content to it" (20).
15 While not the purpose of this article, at times the work of Rodríguez, especially when she was living in the *plantones*, approaches that of the

Gramscian organic intellectual. Brian W. Alleyne states that "the organic intellectual represents the interests of the subordinate in society, variously defined; it must be noted that organic intellectuals need not have been born into a subordinate social class—what is pivotal is their political alignment with such a class. Such intellectuals counteract the hegemony of the ruling coalition of classes and class fractions. A defining characteristic of the organic intellectual is constant engagement with politics: such intellectuals do not only think and write, but they act" (173).

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Dangerous Spaces, Dangerous Liaisons: Performance Arts on and of the U.S./Mexico Border

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The nearly 2,000-mile border between Mexico and the United States has long been a paradox, experienced as well as imagined by citizens of both countries as a space of desire and revulsion, pleasure and pain, life and death. In the early twenty-first century—the time of NAFTA, illegal immigration and ruthlessly powerful drug cartels—the border is seen by many as a threat to these neighboring countries: to the "homeland security" and economy of the United States, and to the very existence of Mexico as a law-abiding and viable nation-state. The building of walls in an era of globalization is the latest contradiction of this extensive border: it is open and often invisible as an economic passage way, while also increasingly closed and visible as a crossing point for human transit. Given these paradoxes, it is not surprising that artists who personally live this border experience should find it rich material for their work. Although the political and economic challenges of the border are prime features in the news media, the ones that get the most and loudest sound bites, there is another border phenomenon that also merits close attention: the arts, which have so blossomed there that a city as maligned as Tijuana was heralded by *Newsweek* as a cultural mecca for our new century.[1] This essay will consider the performative arts on the border, ranging from script-based plays to performance pieces in urban spaces and public installation pieces. These will be ana-

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