

Sabina Berman's *Backyard* and the Feminization of the Border

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Mija, mamacita, madrecita, ruca, buenota, culote, pinche vieja, chola, naca, lomera, puta, India...las palabras están ahí, en todas las calles y todas las colonias, para nombrar una realidad presente en los ámbitos público y privado: en Ciudad Juárez es socialmente aceptado agredir verbalmente a la mujer y particularmente, a la mujer pobre.
Isabel Velázquez

Sabina Berman's *Backyard*¹ and the Feminization of the Border

In her *Entre Villa y una mujer desnuda* (1993) Sabina Berman touches on issues of work and gender through the story of Gina, a successful professional woman who is sexually liberated as well as economically independent. Because of her privileged socioeconomic status she is able to open up her own *maquiladora* in Ciudad Juárez. Berman's film script *Backyard* (2005), revisits the subject of *maquiladoras* along the Mexico-U.S. border. This time, however, she tells the story not of an affluent woman, but that of a young *maquiladora* worker who becomes yet another victim of the Juárez femicides. Due to the lack of economic opportunities in her native Tabasco, Juanita joins the thousands of *maquiladora* workers on the border and, in the words of the writer, Juanita "se transforma de campesina a postmoderna en cuestión de semanas."² In addition to her new look, the border city also provides her with the possibility of becoming sexually liberated. While she successfully navigates her new life on the border, she cannot avoid being punished for her will and ambition. The resolution to the story (her death) points to the

¹ In a lecture given on November, 2003 at the *Universidad Iberoamericana* in Mexico City, Mexican Ambassador to the UN Adolfo Aguilar Zinser stated that the United States did not treat Mexico with the same respect as their European counterparts. He asserted that the U.S. sought a weekend fling (*noviazgo de fin de semana*) with Mexico and that Mexico was U.S.' backyard (*patio trasero*). Berman's film script title clearly alludes to Aguilar Zinser's remarks.

² Personal conversation with the writer at Miami University, October 2005.

dangers that life in the city poses to women from rural, “traditional” areas. While such assertion would suggest a “romantization” of rural life, Berman’s work, I argue, present Juanita’s punishment as a way to criticize a society that oppresses women regardless of the geographical space in which they live while it calls for attention to the problem of violence against women.

While globalization, via NAFTA, opened up new places of employment for thousands of workers, such change in the local economy also “opened up” the door to serious problems affecting women in particular and the whole community in general. Historically, border cities are thought of as undesirable places (as in the recent *Brokeback Mountain*) where people go to do the things they are not “allowed” to do in their own countries or cities such as hire prostitutes or get drunk in public³. With regards to the representation of the border in texts by Anglo-American writers, Rolando Romero argues in his “Border of Fear, Border of Desire” that:

In these narrations the border fosters disease, rape, prostitution, drugs, and contamination. Contemporary narrations of the border imply that one can buy babies or drugs from the *coyotes* as easily as one can buy entrance into the US. These narrations are constructed in order to justify the “purification” of the nation/self which usually follows. (38)

In the view of Mexican citizens, however, the many new transnational companies that established assembly plants in Juárez brought violence along with their low wages. As Peralta, a local journalist and radio personality in Berman’s *Backyard*, states in his radio show:

PERALTA (V.O.): Así provincia chula nunca fue Juárez. Pero ni qué alegar que ahora sí se nos sobrecomplicó. Llegaron las *maquiladoras* por la mano de obra

³ In this 2005 film a border city is shown as the place where Jack, a homosexual cowboy, goes to drink and to find sexual encounters. The border is presented as a place of vice and excess as Jack freely roams the streets in a clearly drunken state.

barata. Llegaron y siguen llegando las pueblerinas a trabajar en la maquila.

Llegaron los narcos y su violencia, a cruzar por aquí la frontera hacia los United.

...Llegó la prostitución. Y al final, para coronar el desmadre, llegaron las

muertas. Bonito traspatio de dos entradas es Juárez: de los United y de México.

(110)

Maquiladoras are, thus, seen as more of a curse than a blessing. Peralta's statements directed to the masses capture the tone of Berman's text while they expose the harsh reality for the young women workers who come to Juárez in search of better economic opportunities.

Like many young women from rural areas in southern Mexico, Juanita joins the thousands of *maquiladora* workers in the border. Her life changes radically in a very short period of time. Juanita arrives to the city as an obedient peasant and quickly becomes a sexually liberated *maquiladora* worker who enjoys dancing and flirting with men. When Juanita meets Cutberto, a young man from Oaxaca, she quickly starts a relationship with him. For her, however, such relationship is more sexual than emotional as she seeks to fully explore her sexuality and not be tied down to a single man. When Juanita breaks up with Cutberto he reacts in a rather dramatic, but harmless, manner begging her to take him back. Seeing that Juanita will not go back with him, Cutberto follows the advice from the gang "Los nortños" to get Juanita back by force. His decision brings about drastic events that end in Juanita's death and in dramatic changes in his live.

Given the lack of employment opportunities and their role in rural societies, women have limited choices in life. With the growth in the number of *maquiladoras* along the border many families look to the north of the country to solve their economic problems. Working-class young women, on their part, are aware of their limited potential for growth if they decide to stay

in their native communities. Getting a paying job allows them not only to contribute to the families' economy but it also opens up the possibility of working towards improving their future. Because she is aware that her life in the country would be unfulfilling, Juana decides to join her cousins Blanca and Margara (*sic*) in Juárez. The former a successful police officer and the latter a *maquiladora* worker. Juanita looks to work in the city as a way to escape her almost predetermined future in her Tabasco hometown. Nevertheless, far from being the stereotypical young woman from the Mexican country, Juana shows an awareness of her almost non-existent chances for growth when she decides to leave her hometown. A conversation with her father demonstrates Juana's ambition. When her father warns her about the dangers of the city the young woman's reply speaks to the undesirability of life in her town while it points to the progress that, she perceives, work in the border offers:

PADRE: Carajo, Juana, de veras no hay tanta necesidad de que te vayas.

JUANA: Ya sé, papá. Pero quiero alcanzar a Margara. Qué tengo qué esperar aquí en el pueblo. Casarme y tener niños. Y eso si me caso. Con la mitad de los hombres en los Estados Unidos o en la frontera, vamos a tener que compartimos a los tres que quedan. (112)

Juana is aware of the limited possibilities of rural life for her, and it is the life of her cousins, Margara and Blanca, in the border city that she finds appealing. Juana's desire to head for the northern border challenges the notion of passivity of Mexican women from rural settings. Juanita understands that she cannot achieve a better future if she stays in Tabasco forever. She knows that she needs to detach herself from her home community in order for her to grow as an individual.

Once in Juárez, Juana finds herself easily adjusted to her new environment. She moves in with her cousins and quickly finds a job in a *maquiladora*. In just a few weeks Juanita's life is transformed so much that such changes are reflected in her personal appearance. Juanita changes her hairstyle and clothing and soon her image is no longer that of the "traditional" girl from rural Mexico, but rather one that resembles the look of Selena who, as Cherrie Moraga, states: "is the image of sexual liberation for young Tejanas."⁴ Thus, following Selena's dress and hairstyle, Juanita too becomes a woman who is comfortable with her sexuality. Juana's characterization as a young woman from the south that comes to the north to become independent, points to the over-sexualization of the *maquiladora* women. Juanita's self-discovery as a sexual being is accompanied by a re-definition of femininity based on her new life in the city. Once she enters the job market, she is encouraged to change her physical appearance so not to look "Indian."

In addition to her new look, the border city also provides Juana with the possibility of becoming sexually liberated. On a night out with her friends at the *Noa Noa* she meets Cutberto⁵. Like her, Cutberto has come from Southern Mexico, Oaxaca, seeking better employment opportunities. Shortly after meeting, Juanita and Cutberto become romantically and sexually involved. The use of the contraceptives provided by the *maquiladora* management allows Juana to experiment sexually without the concern of an unwanted pregnancy. Because of her independence and newly found sexual curiosity, Juanita wants to date other man. When Juanita tells Cutberto of her decision, he cannot understand her attitude since he wants to have an exclusive relationship with the young woman. He reacts in a sentimental way and even begs her

⁴ Selena Quintanilla-Pérez (1971-1995) was a Tejana singer who was murdered at the height of her fame and just prior to her "crossover" into mainstream American music. She became Mexicana/Tejana icon after her tragic death. Lourdes Portillo's *Corpus* examines Selena's influence in young Tejanas.

⁵ The Noa Noa is a Ciudad Juárez bar made famous by the Mexican singer-songwriter Juan Gabriel. In the national imaginary the Noa Noa is a place where uninhibited behavior happens.

to stay with him. Juanita, however is not persuaded by his tears and starts dating Sebastian, “el norteño.” Juana’s desire for sexual freedom is not something to be taken lightly. Although Cutberto’s intentions are to win Juanita over in a peaceful way, his masculinity is threatened by his ex-lover’s public displays of affection with another man in the same bar where they met. Just like Juana was transformed by the city, Cutberto is easily influenced by the gang “Los norteños” to retaliate against Juana for her “loose” behavior. “Los norteños” convince Cutberto that Juana has humiliated him in public and for that she deserves to be punished. Despite Cutberto’s desperate attempts for the men not to hurt Juana, they not only group rape her while unconscious, but they make him kill her:

NORTEÑO 4: Ahora te toca matarla.

CUTBERTO: No.

NORTEÑO 4: Si no es pregunta. Te toca matarla: si no, ¿cómo sabemos que no vas a traicionarnos cabrón?

CUTBERTO: No.

Dos minutos después. Una navaja corta el pezón izquierdo de Juana que despierta abriendo enormes los ojos.

Cutberto está con una bolsa de plástico chillando y el Norteño 4 tiene una pistola contra la nuca de Cutberto. (165)

Just like Juana cannot escape the punishment for her sexual “deviance,” Cutberto cannot escape the pressure to “act like a man” and becomes himself a victim of violence. Cutberto’s masculinity is questioned when he behaves as a sensitive and considerate man, and he is made to act violently against Juanita to demonstrate that he is “truly” a man. When Juana decides to break up with him, he pleads with her not to do it:

CUTBERTO: Pero en que falle caramba.

JUANA: En nada. Es que... Yo quiero conocer gente Cut.

CUTBERTO: Eso se llama de otra manera Juana.

JUANA: Si me vas a faltar al respeto me voy.

CUTBERTO: No pérate pérate pérate. (156-57)

Far from reacting in a violent way, Cutberto reacts in a sentimental way, trying to make sense of Juana's decision. In this case it is he who wants an exclusive relationship while Juana prefers not to be tied to anyone in particular. In his "The Moon and the Gutter: Border, Women and Migration," Rolando Romero argues that the migrant text emasculates the male migrant subject while it enables women to become independent and accepted since immigration is already "feminized" (99). Moreover, when speaking of his analysis of Puerto Rican migration, Romero states:

My argument regarding Puerto Rican nationalistic rhetoric, which associates castration with cultural identity, thus ties the anxiety of "loss" of culture (a sort of cultural castration) back to the figure of woman. If males understand sexual difference by projecting "lack" into women, male authors also understand cultural difference in a similar process. Authors project their own cultural fears back to the figure of woman as lack. This process explains the "feminization" so common when literature focuses on the contact with the Other. The migrant in effect, comes to "lack" his own masculinity, a crippling state in a patriarchal culture. (102)

While *Backyard* was certainly not written by a male author, Cutberto's emasculation works in a rather similar way. Once he is stripped of his masculinity, he acts violently against the body of

Juanita. To avoid his own “castration” he symbolically “castrates” Juanita when he cuts off her nipple.

Juanita’s work in the *maquiladora* provides her with a way of gaining economic independence as well as sexual liberation. But because of her behavior is considered to be outside the assigned female role in society, and she can access the same type of liberties as men, Juana is criminalized, seen as deviant and ends up paying for her “subversive” conduct with her own life. In her “Public Women, Profit, and Femicide in Northern Mexico,” Melissa Wright discusses the conservative view that women who participate in the public sphere (via work or social activism), are equated to prostitutes (“public women”) and, therefore, the crimes against working women are not only minimized but also justified:

In blaming the victims for provoking the violence that they have suffered and, thereby, for not being “innocent” victims, these leaders reproduce the subject of the public woman as the source of the problem; for this reason, they suggest, no one should be surprised when a prostitute is raped, beaten, or murdered. Indeed, this discourse normalizes such violence by producing the prostitute as the site of normalized rape, torture, and murdered. She is guilty of her own crime. She, not the perpetrator is in fact the criminal. (686)

By placing the blame on the victims, the government frees itself from the responsibility of securing the well-being of all citizens. In *Backyard* the fictional Governor of Chihuahua strongly suggests that the young women are responsible for the use of violence against them because “good citizens” are not out on the street at night. The lives of the young women are, ultimately, irrelevant because more young females arrive at the border city every day. The

thousands of workers are not only performing mechanical work everyday with little or no benefits at all, but they are also regarded as disposable labor.

Backyard actively questions the contradictory way in which paid labor at the *maquiladoras* works for young working-class women whose bodies are physically punished for acting out their desires, and equally criminalized if they dare produce offspring. The young women's bodies, are thus, subjected to inspection, and their workplace becomes a place of total control over their lives. The assembly plant's "inspectors," the doctors, police the young women bodies and enforce their disposable status when they instruct them in the use of contraceptives:

DOCTOR: Aquí las chavas cambian sus costumbres, Juana. Se liberan, como dicen. Tienen su dinero y toman sus decisiones. Sobre todo cuando sus papás no están aquí.

JUANA: Sí, pero yo no voy a embarazarme a lo buey.

DOCTOR: Por eso. Es para no embarazarte a lo buey Juana. Bueno, si decides iniciar tu vida sexual, antes vienes a consultarme. No al día siguiente: antes.

¿Entendiste?

JUANA: ...

DOCTOR: Cada mes te voy a aplicar una pruebita para ver si estas embarazada.

Si estás embarazada pierdes tu trabajo. ¿Entendiste Juana?

Juana no entendió y se esfuerza en entender. (122)

Contraceptives and the close monitoring of her sexual activity work in the text in two levels: on one side they allow Juana to become a sexual subject, but, on the other hand, they act as oppressors as they are imposed on her rather than sought by her. Her sexual "liberation" is a direct result of the policing of her body.

While Berman's portrayal of Juanita as a spirited young rural woman is praise-worthy it also points to the romantization of life in the country. After all, it is because of her "adventurous" behavior that Juanita ends up dead. The writer's resolution to the climax of the story suggests that the passive behavior of rural women will keep them from the dangers of industrialized societies, and that if Juanita would have accepted her future as a wife and mother she would have not fallen victim to violence to her body. Much as Poniatowska idealizes the life of the domestic workers in their native communities and states that they lose their identity once in the city, Berman's text points to the dangers of urban life as it teaches a lesson to ambitious young women⁶. Berman's work, nevertheless, differs from that of Poniatowska's in that she presents Juanita's punishment to criticize a society that still oppresses women regardless of the geographical space in which they live. On one hand, Juanita's options are pretty much non-existent in the country, and, on the other hand, her apparent many possibilities in the city are not real as she is physically abused and murdered as a result of her wanting to assert her independence. Because she is a woman who earns her own money and does not depend on a man, financially or otherwise, she presents a danger to the patriarchal structure of society. If she can take care of herself by working, she becomes a "public woman" therefore "invading" the masculine space and threatening male's privileged position. Her independence endangers his role as a provider, so she must be punished for her defiant behavior.

⁶ *Se necesita muchacha*, by Ana Gutiérrez, looks at the experiences of domestic workers in Peru. Poniatowska writes the introduction to the Mexican edition of the book.

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