

## FROM KERRY TO CHICONCUAC: MARIE JONES'S *STONES IN HIS POCKETS* AND SABINA BERMAN'S *EXTRAS*

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### Abstract

This article focuses on the Mexican play, *eXtras*, Sabina Berman's translation and adaptation of the Irish hit play *Stones in His Pockets* by Marie Jones. Linda Hutcheon, Thomas Leitch, and other contributors to adaptation studies shed light on the process used by Berman to tradapt and glocalize *Stones in His Pockets* for the Mexican stage, where the combined forces of Hollywood and globalization have likewise ravaged the local economy and where Jones's tragicomic story of exploitation and anonymization played every bit as well as it did in Ireland.

**Keywords:** Marie Jones; Sabina Berman; Adaptation; Globalization; Hollywood

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The Irish diaspora is surprisingly large relative to the size of the island. In addition to the 4.9 million who currently live in Ireland, some 70 million people throughout the world claim Irish ancestry (“The 10 Countries”). Very few of them, however, have settled in Mexico. In fact, a recent study reported only 446 Irish living among the nearly 127 million inhabitants of Mexico (“Población”). Nonetheless, when the published text of *Stones in His Pockets* landed in the hands of Mexican playwright Sabina Berman, she quickly realized that Marie Jones’s 1996 hit play speaks not just about Ireland but also about Mexico, where the combined forces of globalization and Hollywood have likewise ravaged the native culture and economy.<sup>1</sup> Teamed with a powerful trio of actors —brothers Demián, Bruno, and Odiseo Bichir— Berman translated, adapted, directed, and co-produced *eXtras* (2003), which became one of the most commercially successful plays in the history of Mexican theatre.<sup>2</sup> Translocated from County Kerry, Ireland, *eXtras* shows what happens when a crew of Hollywood filmmakers invades the impoverished town of Chiconcuac and provides employment as movie extras to locals who have been raised on Hollywood movies and whose dream has long been that of crossing over to the greener pastures that lie north of the Mexico/US border. Furthermore, *eXtras* confirms that adaptations are not necessarily another form of cultural “sell-out” to dominant foreign cultures; good adaptations like this one emphasize commonalities and enable cross-cultural dialogue on critical global issues. Theories proposed by Linda Hutcheon, Thomas Leitch (2017), and other scholars of adaptation shed light on the process used by Berman to translate, adapt, and glocalize *Stones in His Pockets* for the Mexican stage, where Jones’s (2001) tragicomic story of exploitation and anonymization played every bit as well as it did in Ireland.

Novelist, essayist, journalist, poet, filmmaker, cultural commentator, media personality, and television host, Sabina Berman is primarily known as an extraordinarily successful playwright and director. Since the mid 1970s, she has written more than 30 plays as well as several movie scripts. Her first venture into adaptation took place in 1996, when she created a screen version of her hit play *Entre Villa y una mujer desnuda* (1992, *Between Villa and a Naked Woman*). Soon afterwards, in 2000, she translated and adapted Arthur Schnitzler’s play *La Ronde* (1900), which had, exactly one hundred years before, scandalized Viennese audiences with its dramatic round of licit and illicit sexual relationships. Unfortunately, her modernized version of the play, titled *65 contratos para hacer el amor*, was never staged or published. In 2004, following the success of *eXtras*, Berman adapted Australian Simon Worley’s likewise scandalous performance installation *Puppetry of the Penis* to the Mexican stage, where it received more attention for its shock value than critical acclaim. Later, she translated and adapted Nicole Krauss’ 2005 novel, *History of Love*, for a projected Hollywood production, and is now said to be working on a film script titled *Light* with director Alejandro González Iñárritu. In sum, over the course of the past four decades, Berman has proven to be both a brilliant dramatist in her own right and an able adapter of stories and texts from places as remote as Ireland and Australia (see the book

edited by Jacqueline Bixler for a more detailed discussion of Berman; Bixler 2004 and Bixler 2009).<sup>3</sup>

While adaptations of foreign plays are a common feature in Mexican theatres—far too common, in the minds of some—most of these adaptations are based on classical dramas and myths, works by Shakespeare, and plays written in Europe or north of the Mexican border (see Katherine Ford 2017).<sup>4</sup> As a general rule, in Mexico and elsewhere, plays are selected for translation and/or adaptation not simply because they are considered “good” plays or because they have enjoyed commercial success, but rather because they travel well, meaning that the source text is deemed likely to resonate with the target audience. Although Berman never saw *Stones in His Pockets* staged in Ireland or elsewhere, her reading of the text alone was enough to convince her of the play’s ability to survive the journey and adapt to a new culture.<sup>5</sup> Reflecting on Darwin’s theory of natural selection, Richard Dawkins’s (1976) theory of cultural transmission, and the “traveling theory” of Edward Said (1983), Linda Hutcheon (2006) observes that some stories adapt much better than others to a new cultural environment (31-32, 150). Like the orchids in Susan Orlean’s novel *The Orchid Thief*—the adaptation of which provided the gist of the Hollywood movie *Adaptation*—stories undergo a process of mutation, hybridization, and adaptation that allows them to survive and thrive in the foreign culture. While, as Hutcheon explains, “the meaning and impact of stories can change radically” (xvi) as a result of this resettling and recontextualizing, surprisingly little of Jones’s text had to be changed to tell and sell this story of cultural exploitation and appropriation to a Mexican audience (see Bixler 2004; and Seda 2010).<sup>6</sup>

Curiously, Berman herself seems to buy into the process of commercial globalization while at the same time offering a scathing critique of the very same phenomenon when, rather than write an original play, she decides to adapt a European play that has been a box office hit in London, Broadway, and other First-world locations. Nonetheless, she manages to walk the line between cultural *malinchismo* (a term used in Mexico to denigrate those who favor the foreign over the domestic) and cultural critique by underscoring the translatability of not only the original Irish text and its staging, but also its *message* regarding the loss of native cultural identities. Ultimately, Berman’s successful transatlantic relocation of the Irish original does not imply that “foreign is better,” but rather confirms the devastating impact of Hollywood in particular and of globalization in general on impoverished rural areas. Whether Jones’ story of two extras plays out in County Kerry or in Chiconcuac, it epitomizes Richard Schechner’s (2002) definition of globalization as “a Hollywood production full of high tech special effects starring American superheroes who dissolve national, cultural, and economic boundaries as they spread free market capitalism to every corner of the world” (227). Indeed, it is this same dissolution of national boundaries and cultural identities that made it so easy for Berman to adapt Jones’s text to a Mexican setting; so little needed to be changed.

A considerable amount of theory has been written on adaptation since the turn of the century, including not only Hutcheon’s seminal study, *A Theory of Adaptation*

(2006), but also *The Oxford Handbook of Adaptation Studies*, a thick volume of essays published in 2017. While adaptation studies tend to focus on Anglo-American literature-to-film adaptations, an increasing number of theorists are dealing with broader questions that involve translation and transculturation. The growing popular and scholarly interest in the adaptation of texts from one culture and/or one medium to another is hardly surprising given the rampant growth of the film industry and the endless spread of cultural globalization. The increasing respect for adaptation owes in great measure to theorists like Hutcheon, who insists that an adaptation is “a work that is second without being secondary” (9), a statement that implies not only that an adaptation can stand alone, but also that it may actually be better written and received than the source text. Like Hutcheon and other contemporary theorists, Robert Stam (2005) leaves behind the question of fidelity to the source text, privileging instead the process of “reading, rewriting, critique, and translation” (11). Dennis Cutchins (2017) likewise emphasizes the process of interpretation when he notes, “an adaptation is primarily not a *kind of text*, but a *way of looking at texts*” (80). In sum, today’s theorists are less interested in the adaptor’s fidelity to the original text and more concerned with the *process* of adaptation —what Hutcheon calls the “*what, who, why, how, when, and where*” (xiv)— and the reception of the transplanted text by its new host.

While most adaptations involve a change in locale and/or time period, some, like *eXtras*, also require translation from one language to another, which adds yet another level of meaning to the final product. Theorist Ruth Evans (2000), for example, links means and message when she describes translation as a form of metaphor, noting in particular “the value of current metaphorical uses of translation [. . .] as they concern relations of power” (150). Sherry Simon (1996) likewise underscores the use of translation as metaphor to convey “the increasing internationalization of cultural production and [. . .] the fate of those who struggle between two languages” (134). As will be seen in *eXtras*, this “struggle between two languages” concerns not only the translation of the play from English to Spanish, but also the slow but steady eradication of the native dialect under the influence of Hollywood and its ignorance of, blatant lack of respect for, and eventual obliteration of local culture.

Rather than debate as to whether *eXtras* is more of a translation than an adaptation, or vice-versa, I prefer to borrow the term “tradaptation,” coined by French Canadian director Robert Lepage to signify the combined processes of translation and adaptation (qtd in Cameron 17). Derrick Cameron (2000) expands on this concept, defining tradaptation as “a wholesale re-working and re-thinking of the original text, as well as its translation and/or translocation into a new, non-European, aesthetic context” (17). As Lawrence Venuti (2000) explains, this “re-working” inevitably contains a “political agenda,” wherein “the domestic terms of the inscription become the focus of rewriting in the translation” (469). In Berman’s words, the process of tradapting *Stones* was quite simple: “Lo que hice fue trasladar esa realidad a nuestro país, que es muy semejante” (What I did was shift that reality to our country, which is very similar) (Paul 2003; my trans.). In

taking Jones's story to Mexico, Berman shows the political, social, and economic commonalities that exist between two countries seemingly so diverse as Mexico and Ireland and, by extension, all countries currently undergoing the process of globalization, a term universally recognized as a euphemism for Americanization. A prominent and vociferous critic of globalization and its pernicious effects on the economy and culture of her country, Berman found just what she needed in Jones's work to launch her own dramatic attack on this insidious nullification of Mexico's cultural identity.

Berman's tradaptation of *Stones in His Pockets* entails a multilayered process that includes the creation of an entirely different title, the translation of the original dialogue into multiple social and linguistic registers of Spanish, the translocation from Ireland to Mexico, the glocalization of certain cultural elements, and, not to be forgotten, the adaptation of the adapted text itself to the stage. Most discussions of theatrical adaptations focus on the source text; yet, as Hutcheon points out, "performance media present the greatest challenges for adaptations across cultures and not only because of the presence of paying audiences —on site and ready to respond with incomprehension or anger. Adapting across cultures is not simply a matter of translating words.... Cultural and social meaning has to be conveyed and adapted to a new environment through what Pavis (1989) calls the 'language-body' (30). The visual is as important as the aural" (149). Although Berman never saw the Irish production, she knew from photos on the internet that the stage was virtually empty and that all of the roles were played by two highly regarded actors, Conleth Hill and Seán Campion. For *eXtras*, Berman used not two, but three actors, the Bichir brothers, and required that each of them be ready to play movie extras José and Charlie as well as the other fourteen roles. In fact, a coin was flipped before each performance to determine who would play whom, with the result that one of the brothers remained offstage, a superfluous "extra."

Short on paper, *eXtras*, like *Stones*, is long on stage, lasting nearly two hours. The latter is due to the fact that this play, no matter the language, is precisely about acting, about playing roles, both in the performance itself and in the world at large. Indeed, everyone at some point in their lives takes on the role as an extra, including Berman, who once did time as an extra in Mexican soap operas. Both *Stones* and *eXtras* feature an empty stage on which two actors play extras on a Hollywood film set, as well as other roles that include the Hollywood director, his assistant directors, the pampered Hollywood starlet, the male lead, the townspeople, the priest, local farmers, even the cows that were once the bread and butter of the regional economy. The Mexican set, designed by Philippe Amand, consisted of a large backdrop screen, which imitated the silver screen of Hollywood, and three smaller moving screens that changed in color and size according to changes in locale and in the roles being played by the two actors. The sliding screens, the constant changes in lighting colors, the rapid conversion of just one stage object —a trunk— into a bench or table, and the use of bandannas to indicate changes in identity all kept the two-hour performance moving at a blistering pace.

In terms of the adaptation of the text itself, a side-by-side comparison of *eXtras* and *Stones* shows that Berman found little need to deviate from the structure, plot, language, or cultural context of the source text. The fertile yet poor valley of County Kerry finds its equivalent in Chiconcuac, Morelos; Jake and Charlie become José and Charlie; the pub becomes *la cantina*; the starlet Caroline Giovanni is now Karina Santos; gin translates to *cerveza*; egg and onion sandwiches turn into *tacos al pastor*; and Mickey Riordan, the last surviving extra from *The Quiet Man*, is now Don Macario, the last surviving extra from the classic film ¡Viva, Zapata!

Like *Stones*, *eXtras* shows what happens to an impoverished, rural area when Hollywood literally comes to town. Charlie and José are two locals cast as extras in a movie made by and for Hollywood. In both source text and adapted text, Charlie has already fallen victim to the forces of economic globalization; his little video store went bust when Blockbusters moved in and his customers jumped ship. Now, as extras in a Hollywood movie as well as in life itself, Charlie and José reflect on their own luckless lives while at the same time being ordered to appear downtrodden on cue. In the hopes of becoming more than extras, José and Charlie suffer the director's insults, humiliating treatment from the pampered stars, and long waits in the sun. Everything moves along according to the usual Hollywood filming routine until a young extra, Cutberto (a.k.a. El Brad Pit [sic]), is thrown out of the local *cantina* and out of the movie, whereupon he goes to the lake, fills his pockets with stones, and drowns himself.

In the second and final act, and in the wake of this real-life tragedy, the local extras, unable and unwilling to perform their assigned role as euphoric peons in the final celebratory scene of the movie, unite in an act, albeit symbolic, of cultural resistance. Don Macario, drunk and grieving, walks off the set and out of the movie before the directors can throw him out, but not before he reminds them, with dignity, that they can take away everything but his cultural ancestry: "Mira la tierra que estás pisando escuinle, el dueño de esa tierra era mi abuelo y antes mi bisabuelo príncipe nahua y tú me estás ordenando a mí un Pérez y Pérez que me saque de mi tierra..." (45-46). In the original text, Mickey Riordan says, "You see this ground you are standing on ya jumped up gobshite, this belonged to my Grandfather, and you are telling me a Riordan to get off my land" (85), a passage that underscores the translatability of not only the words but more importantly the concept of cultural identity and ownership. The final scene focuses on José and Charlie's unsuccessful attempt to pitch the latter's film script, which is a pastiche of every bad movie ever made, or what José describes as "la mayor cantidad de mamadas que he leído en mi existencia" (42) (It is the biggest load of owl bollics I have ever read in my life [52]). When they pitch their script to the Hollywood director, he says it is not sexy enough, that no one wants to see a film about suicide, and that they should substitute the suicide with a love interest or drug dealers. Undaunted and convinced for once that they are right, Charlie and José perform a final carnivalesque act of cultural resistance when they come up with an idea for a completely different movie. In this one—

to be titled.... *eXtras*—, the screen will be filled with cows, Cutberto/el Brad Pitt will be the protagonist, and the Hollywood producers will serve as extras. José and Charlie are last seen playing the part of cows, mooing and swinging their bandanna “tails” in this proposed triumph of local culture over the anonymizing forces of Hollywood.

While a cow may be just a cow, no matter the location, the meaning of other things can change radically in the move to a new location. As Hutcheon explains, “Almost always, there is an accompanying shift in the political valence from the adapted text to the ‘transculturated’ adaptation. Context conditions meaning” (145). While most of Berman’s tradaptation parallels the source text, there are places in *eXtras* where she deviates significantly from the original and where her own, more localized, political agenda becomes transparent. This agenda can best be gleaned through the careful analysis of those aspects of the source text that have been omitted, those that have been translated word-for-word, and those that have been “glocalized.” Glocalization, according to Albert Moran (2009), “includes a wide variety of cultural proximities, such as language, ethnicity, history, religion, geography, and culture, that allow for the adaptation of the original series into a local version that takes into account communal and national differences” (50). To produce local resonance, “adaptations commonly make use of national identity discourses, which reiterate national stereotypes, clichés, and myths in an endeavor to be recognizable and to create a sense of authenticity and truthfulness” (Joye, et al 2017, 555). Such local “markers” in *eXtras* include the liberal use of Mexican vulgarities, *sombreros*, typical foods such as *tacos*, and national stereotypes like the wetback, the *revolucionario*, and the *macho*. Overall, Berman’s decision to glocalize in certain cases ensures that even those in the audience who do not know the source text or even know that there *is* a source text still appreciate the humor as well as the serious message of the play.

The most notable and meaningful example of “glocalization” is the use of bandannas to indicate changes in roles rather than the multiple pairs of shoes that lined the stage in the Irish production. Claiming that the shoes said absolutely nothing to her, Berman decided to use red *paliacates*, which serve not only as bandannas, but also as identifying objects, such as walkie-talkies, *sombreros*, and cow tails. Moving the bandannas quickly from hand to head to neck to waist, the two actors/extras segue into their various roles as men and women, locals and *gringos*, directors and extras, and finally cows. Nonetheless, given the geographical, political, and economic setting of the play, one cannot help but see beyond this practical use of bandannas and associate them with Mexico’s *Zapatista* rebels, who, on 1 January 1994, the day on which the North American Free Trade Agreement went into effect, launched a massive rebellion that subsequently became a metaphor for native resistance to a globalized economy controlled by the US.

One recurring image in Jones’s play travels exceptionally well and requires little beyond translation from English to Spanish: cows. The repeated reference to cows in *eXtras* could initially be puzzling to the Mexican audience, given that cows are not exactly an icon of Mexican culture. Yet, despite the fact that they do

not travel from Ireland to Mexico as easily as the concept of Hollywoodization does, cows serve perfectly in both source and target text as a metaphor for passive consumption and the “herd effect” of globalized culture, a culture in which everyone is expected to act, dress, speak, think, and consume the same. In a flashback scene, eight-year-old Cutberto expresses his dream to have the best herd of cows in the valley of Morelos, a dream later cut short by his father’s decision to sell their land to foreign investors. In another flashback, Cutberto reads aloud a school essay in which he inadvertently predicts his own fate as a “cow”: “Las vacas son un negocio porque mucha gente vive de ellas y no dan molestias mientras uno les da de comer [...] Si yo fuera una vaca me sentiría muy útil” (37) (Cows are the business because many people live off cows and they give you no bother as long as you feed them and milk them. [. . .] If I were a cow I would feel very useful [65-66]). The film extras are, after all, a herd of placid locals who seem content as long as they have food and water. The cruel irony of Cutberto’s concept of usefulness also plays out on the Hollywood set, when the extras are ordered to play the role of dispossessed farmers and shovel cow manure while they passively await, both on and off the set, the return of their land. At this point in the play, to emphasize the particular and nagging plight of Mexico’s dispossessed, Berman adds lines that do not appear in the source text. Preparing the 350 extras for what she calls “full pueblo escena desposeídos” (whole town dispossessed scene; my trans.), Spaniard and assistant director Fabiola issues the following instructions: “Pueblo. Cara de desposeídos, por favor. Desposeídos, o sea sin posesiones, o sea pobres.” (People. The look of the dispossessed on your faces, please. Dispossessed, in other words, without possessions, in other words, poor; my trans.). The addition of these lines merely underscores the cruel irony implicit in the fact that the Mexican “extras” do not need to pretend to be dispossessed, having lost their native lands for the past five centuries to outsiders ranging from their Spanish conquerors to post-Independence *hacienda* owners and finally to multinational corporations. Significantly, Chiconcuac, setting of *eXtras*, is located in the valley of the state of Morelos, where Emiliano Zapata led his ragged troops of landless peasants with the shout of “Justicia, tierra y libertad!” (Justice, land, and freedom!) (see Noah Schaffer 2003).<sup>7</sup>

The metaphorical collusion of cows and human extras is again implicit in young Cutberto’s prediction that after the new landowners get done replacing all the farm hands with machines, even the cows will have to leave for America. Critic Olga Harmony (2003) interprets this exodus of the cows as “una metáfora de la pérdida de un mundo apacible representado por las vacas (que corren peligro en nuestros campos desde la entrada del Tratado de Libre Comercio de América del Norte en aras de la globalización), y el deseo de conservarlo que se demuestra en el guión imposible ideado por los dos extras al final de la obra” (a metaphor of the loss of a placid world represented by cows [threatened in our fields since the start of the North American Free Trade Agreement in the name of globalization] and the desire to preserve that world that is seen in the impossible movie script conceived by the two extras at the end of the play; my trans.). Just as cows follow



one another in search of greener pastures, millions of Mexicans have crossed the border, as the Irish have crossed the Atlantic, in search of the promised land, only to find that the so-called “Quiet Valley” is merely an illusion, a part of the big silver screen. Even more strikingly translocal than the “translation” from County Kerry to Chiconcuac is the word-for-word translation in Spanish of a friend’s response to Cutberto’s suicide: “This could happen to any kid, any rural kid” (91) / “esto podría pasarle a cualquier chavo, a cualquier chavo rural” (49). Needless to say, this sentence transcends both Ireland and Mexico and translates to any poor, rural culture, as do the shattered dreams of Hollywood stardom that led to Sean/Cutberto’s suicide.

In a somewhat isolated region on the west coast of Ireland, County Kerry has been somewhat less susceptible than other parts of the island to outside culture influences and has managed to preserve to a certain extent the Irish language as well as traditional forms of music, song, and dance. Meanwhile, in the Mexican adaptation, no one in the audience would miss the irony involved in the translocation of this “quiet valley” to Morelos, namesake of martyred Independence fighter José Morelos, the birthplace of Emiliano Zapata, and the cradle of the Mexican Revolution of 1910, where the extras are now being asked to play the “role” of dispossessed farmers on land that once belonged to their ancestors. County Kerry and the state of Morelos share a similar fate as rural areas whose rich cultural heritage has been exploited, commercialized, or, even worse, quashed by Hollywood, tourism, and other forms of globalization.

While the cows and Hollywood journeyed easily from County Kerry to Chiconcuac, Berman took considerable liberty with the title, which she claimed, like the shoes, said nothing to her. While the title of a play may seem like a minor detail, her decision to change *Stones in His Pockets* to *eXtras* was a brilliant marketing ploy. As seen in the program, its graphic configuration catches the eye and teases the mind with multiple meanings. In Spanish, as in English, the word “extra” has many connotations, most of which are negative, if not derogatory. Even as “actors,” extras are denied recognition. To be an extra, on or off stage, is to be at once anonymous and superfluous. An extra is a faceless, replaceable member of the masses. An extra is what is left over when the process, in this case the filming, is complete. The term “extras” easily translates beyond the aspiring locals of Chiconcuac, a small town of 6,500, one of thousands of marginal, easily forgotten or ignored towns of rural Mexico. The lower-case “e” and upper-case “X” further diminish the status of the referents of the title, denying them a proper name and at the same time underscoring their anonymity. Their job as extras is precisely to be anonymous. “Una persona X” is a term often used in Spanish to mean “So-and-So” or “John Doe,” while the X, commonly used as a signature by the illiterate, further precludes individuality. By extension, the extras in this play are not only extras in a Hollywood movie, but extras in the political, economic, and social life of their own country. In sum, Berman’s magnified “X” connotes the anonymous, the nullified, the X’ed-out, which is an accurate description of the perception that many rural Mexicans have of themselves vis-à-vis the global



economy as well as their own government and its neoliberal politics. Meanwhile, Berman's choice of title greatly expands Jones's critique of globalization as a process that results in everyone becoming identical and thereby indistinguishable.

The change in title is significant for another reason and that is the fact that the spectator's awareness of a work as an adaptation depends on an explicit relationship to a source text. As Julie Sanders (2006) explains, "In expectation of this, most formal adaptations carry the same title as their source text" (22). By changing the title to *eXtras*, Berman has removed that most obvious link to *Stones*. In fact, most Mexican spectators would only know from the handbill or from media publicity that *eXtras* is an adaptation of an Irish play. According to Sanders, this leads to the question as "to whether or not knowledge of a source text is required or merely enriching" (23). Hutcheon, for one, believes that it is not required, maintaining that "for an adaptation to be successful in its own right, it must be so for both knowing and unknowing audiences" (121). Given that *Stones in His Pockets* was never staged in Mexico, it is reasonable to assume that most if not all of the spectators were unfamiliar with the source text/performance. Despite this lack of explicit connection to the source text, however, the long run and commercial success of *eXtras* suggest that Berman's adaptation did not depend on the source play to thrive, much less survive.

Even as a free-standing play, *eXtras* is a fascinating *mise-en-abyme* of cultural texts and extra-texts. Adaptation occurs not only in the translation and staging of the text, but also within the play itself, as the Hollywood directors produce the usual distorted, made-for-Hollywood version of local culture. Historical fact and cultural accuracy are thrown to the wind in the interest of producing a movie that will sell to U.S. audiences. At one point, Berman underscores Hollywood's habit of misrepresenting Mexicans by adding a short scene in which the lead actress, a Mexican-American named Karina, butchers her Spanish lines:

KARINA: Ustede han sufrido mucho queridos amigos miosssss

FABIOLA: Dice el director que maravilloso Karina.

SIMON: Divino. Queda.

JOSE: No manches. Si me dices que hablaba en ruso me lo creo.

CHARLIE: Oh ps yo sí le creí. Así hablan los mexicanos en las pelis.

[...] Así hablamos en las que se ven en el mundo. Hasta la vista amigou: Shwartzenegger.

JOSE: No problema: Trafficc.

Bad pronunciation, combined with bad “translation,” provides constant humor as the townspeople and Hollywood crew struggle to communicate with one another despite differences in language and/or social register. Indeed, the translocation of *Stones* to Mexico offers a wider variety of languages and dialects, and thus more linguistic confusion and comic relief. The levels of social register in Spanish include the simple, colloquial Spanish spoken by the townspeople of Chiconcuac, the Spanglish spoken by those who have crossed the border and/or watched too many Hollywood movies; the Castillian Spanish spoken by assistant director Simón, and the hysterically incorrect and horribly pronounced Spanish of the Hollywood starlet. At one point, Charlie sits among the spectators and makes us aware of our own status as extras and members of the same herd, particularly when he turns to us and translates the Hollywood director’s expletive “fucked” as “chingados.”

Since its two-year-long run on the stages of Mexico City and subsequent touring to other cities in Mexico, *eXtras* and its source play continue to travel and adapt. It was reported in 2013 that Marie Jones would adapt the dramatic script to the silver screen. Meanwhile, *eXtras* was translocated to California and translated into Spanglish.<sup>8</sup> All of this raises the question as to where these translations of translations and adaptations of adaptations will stop. For now, the answer seems to be “never.” Since its premiere in 1996, *Stones in His Pockets* has been performed in some 20 countries and 16 languages, a statistic that further corroborates the play’s translatability and adaptability. As Venuti explains, “Because translation traffics in the foreign, in the introduction of linguistic and cultural differences, it is equally capable of crossing or reinforcing the boundaries between domestic audiences and the hierarchies in which they are positioned” (477). In other words, *eXtras*, like the source text, underscores through the act of translation, both on and off the stage, the translatability of the loss or blatant sell-out of local cultures to the forces of globalization. At the same time, while seeming to buy into foreign goods by adapting the Irish play for her own personal gain, Berman delivers a powerful political punch by foregrounding two local extras, who, like the cows around them and, like many of the spectators, eat and ruminate while coveting the greener pastures that lie on the other side of the border. Though some critics continue to underestimate adaptations as a quick route to commercial gain or, even worse, as cheap and easy “sell-outs” to foreign culture, Hutcheon and others see adaptations as a highly effective way of communicating across cultures and languages, of celebrating the universal nature of certain stories, and of engaging in a broader social, cultural and political dialogue on matters that concern all of us. In the words of Hutcheon, adaptations have the potential to “destabilize

both formal and cultural identity and thereby shift power relations. Could that subversive potential also be part of the appeal of adapting for adapters and audience alike?" (174). In the case of Sabina Berman, the answer seems to be "yes." Amidst the pages of *Stones in His Pockets* she found an endearing, humorous story of clashing cultures and at the same time the perfect vehicle for her scathing critique of globalization and its devastating effect on native populations and their culture. In short, Berman's tradaptation of *Stones* is just as entertaining, political, and powerful as the Irish original and shows that, despite the physical distance and the cultural and linguistic differences between Ireland and Mexico, a cow is a cow and Hollywood is Hollywood.

### Notes

1. Following its 1996 premiere in Belfast, *Stones in His Pockets* played at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, had a brief run in Dublin, and then opened the next year in London, where it transferred to the West End and played to packed houses. The play won the Irish Times/ESB Irish Theatre Award for Best Production, two Olivier Awards (Best New Comedy and Best Actor), and was nominated for three Tony Awards. It has been staged in various places in the US, including Broadway and the Kennedy Center, as well as in Israel, Canada, Poland, Australia, Sweden, Iceland, Japan, and Brazil.
2. *eXtras* premiered in Mexico City on February 6, 2003, in the huge Teatro Julio Castillo, where it played to a full house for 32 weeks. It reopened in February of 2004 in the Centro Nacional de las Artes and then played in various other venues for nearly two years. The credits include: original music by Daniel Hidalgo; scenery and lighting by Philippe Amand; choreography by Ruby Tagle, and production by Isabelle Tardán. My discussion of *eXtras* is informed not only by the unpublished text, generously provided to me by the dramatist, but also by the two performances that I saw in the Teatro Julio Castillo. Given the fact that the text has not been published, I do not include page numbers for cited passages. All translations of Berman's text are mine unless otherwise indicated by a page number from Jones's text.
3. See the book edited by Jacqueline Bixler for a more detailed discussion of Berman's dramatic works. Although *eXtras* was Berman's first staged adaptation of a foreign text, this was not the first time she found inspiration beyond the borders of Mexico. Earlier plays such as *Rompecabezas* (Puzzle, 1981) and *Herejía* (Heresy, 1983) offer dramatic reworkings of the ways in which European history has played out on Mexican soil in such events as the assassination of Trotsky and the Inquisition conducted by greedy colonial authorities. Later, in *Molière* (1998), Berman recreates and dramatizes the life and times of Molière and Racine to underscore the "translatability" of the comedy/tragedy dichotomy, the politics of the theatre world, and the forces of envy and ire. Two years later, in *Feliz nuevo siglo, doktor Freud* (Happy New Year, Doctor Freud), she cleverly uses the cultural legacy of Freud and the personal history of his patient Dora to demonstrate how little has changed during the past century in terms of cultural and sexual politics.
4. Adaptation is a long-standing tradition in Latin American theatre. Brazilians even have a term, "antropofagia," that they use to describe the appropriation and "digestion" of existing cultural products. Source texts have often served as vehicles for the critique of social and political issues, particularly during times of repression. The story of *Antigona*, for example, has been a frequent source of inspiration for Argentine Griselda Gambaro and other Latin American playwrights. For more on Latin American, particularly Caribbean adaptations of classical texts and myths,

see Katherine Ford's book, *The Theatre of Revisions in the Hispanic Caribbean*.

5. The story behind the adaptation of *Stones* is quite simple. Berman heard about the play, read the published script, and found the perfect expression of her own preoccupation with globalization. When she tried to purchase the rights to adapt and stage the play, she was surprised to find that they had already been acquired by the Bichir brothers, who were in the process of looking for a translator, an adapter, and a director. The rest is history.
6. See Works Cited for additional studies on *eXtras* by Bixler and Laurietz Seda.
7. Interestingly, critic Noah Schaffer suggests that *Stones* is itself a borrowing: "Jones is said to have written the play after seeing the epic *Far and Away*, filmed in Ireland [...] a story of a long-subjugated people taking a stand." *Far and Away* (1992), starring Tom Cruise and Nicole Kidman, was directed by Ron Howard and partially filmed on the Dingle Peninsula of Ireland, where Irish locals were employed as extras. Like *Far and Away*, the movie being filmed in both County Kerry and Chiconcuac is a ridiculous sentimental big-budget drama in which the aristocratic girl from the big house falls in love with the handsome landless peasant. Without any regard for historical or cultural accuracy, the Hollywood directors instruct the actors as well as the local extras to speak and act as they, the directors, think they should speak and act, which is in turn based on previous Hollywood movies. The same directorial disregard for the local culture and history may well be why *Far and Away* itself was such a flop.
8. At the University of Miami (Oxford, Ohio), in November 2005, Berman explained that she had asked Kirsten Nigro and Cherríe Moraga to translate *eXtras* into Spanglish so that it could be staged in Southern California. The idea had come to her during a recent stay in Los Angeles, where she could not help but notice not only the number of *latinos*, but also the fact that most of them were working in places where they were "invisible" and thus less likely to be discovered and deported. It occurred to her that the exploited, anonymous extras of Chiconcuac become doubly anonymous once they cross the border to the "promised land." In 2016, this translation of the play into Spanglish traveled to Ventura, California, with two of the Bichir brothers, Bruno and Odiseo. For more information regarding the American premiere of the play, see "Bruno and Odiseo Bichir to Make U.S. Stage Debuts in *eXtras* at Rubicon." It is unclear whether the translation done by Nigro and Morraga was used in this production.

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