Becoming "Boss" in *La reina del sur*: Negotiating Gender in a Narcotelenovela

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In the last two decades, Latin American *telenovelas* (soap operas) have been imbued with *narcocultura* or the glamorized manifestations of drug underworlds and their kingpins. *Narco* culture is informed by the very real and tragically violent international drug wars that have afflicted countries such as Mexico and Colombia. These two countries have taken the lead in introducing *narcotelenovelas*, a subgenre of the *telenovela,* made popular in the past decade by documenting the deeds of infamous drug lords. Among the most watched were: *Sin tetas no hay paraíso* (2006), *El capo* (2009)*, Las muñecas de la mafia* (2009), *Rosario Tijeras* (2010), *La reina del sur* (2011), *Escobar, El patrón del mal* (2012) and *El señor de los cielos* (2013) [1]. *Rosario Tijeras* and *La reina del sur* stand apart as the first *narcotelenovelas* with women in the lead roles and serve as products of intertextual play[2].

The drug world that informs both *narco* culture and *narcotelenovelas* is one defined in patriarchal terms by a Mexican *machismo*. This *machismo* manifests in an assortment of cultural practices related to illicit

[1] Translation: Without Breasts There is No Paradise, The King Pin, The Mafia's Dolls, Rosario Tijeras, The Queen of the South, Escobar: The Boss of Evil, and The Lord of the Skies.

[2] Most recently, two new *narcotelenovelas* showcase female protagonists: *La viuda negra* (The Black Widow) (2014) and *Camelia la tejana* (Camelia the Texan) (2014).

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drug commerce, such as flamboyant styles of dress, dance moves, adornment and display of pick-up trucks, firearms, acts of religious devotion as well as a genre of music known as the *narcocorrido*. The narcotrafficker is typically male and his reality reflected in *narcocorridos* and the *narcotelenovelas* is hypermasculine, violent and sexist. According to Bialowas Pobusky, "It is commonly thought that such a blatantly sexist milieu leaves little space for women, limiting their roles to criminals' family members, drug mules, or high-class call girls (*prepagos*)"(274). In this way, women are typically represented as interdependent on the male narcotrafficker, are victimized, or sexually objectified. Women's bodies are symbolically utilized as a space where the drug war is fought, are commodified, and made forbidden pleasures of the drug underworld (Cabañas 82-83). However, a small number of women traffickers have emerged whose notoriety has paralleled that of their male counterparts (i.e. Griselda Blanco in Colombia). These women usually appropriate male characteristics to survive or rise in the male dominated world, such as that of the "mujer brava" (tough woman) (Tatar 84). Female drug lords achieve empowerment vis-à-vis men, which may empower the individual woman but not all women (Campbell 239). The *mujeres bravas* that populate some *narcocorridos* are represented as aggressive in defending their own honor or seeking revenge for sexual exploitation (Tatar 84, 96). *Telenovelas* have remained an important social institution in Latin America and often reinforce these traditional gender roles and patriarchal models of social relations (Acosta-Alzuru 271; Avila-Saavedra 383).

La reina del sur includes these traditional elements while creating a new model of the "*bildungsroman* of a female drug trafficker who inserts herself into larger structures of cultural and economic power, to eventually dominate over most of her male criminal competition" and in so doing "destabilizes the sexist norms of the drug underworld" (Bialowas Pobutsky 273). Such a portrayal seemingly challenges traditional representations of gender and tests the entire genre of the *telenovela*.

Through an analysis of both the novel and *telenovela*, *La reina del sur*, our study focuses specifically on the development of the female protagonist, Teresa Mendoza. We explore how Teresa's evolution from novice to boss is influenced by her gendered characteristics and behaviors and ask the question: does Teresa, as a female boss, challenge traditional gendered representations in *narcotelenovelas*? As her story began in novel form and then was adapted into a *telenovela*, we also consider how her character is affected by the ways her story is re-presented. Before discussing Teresa's evolution, it is first important to trace the traditions of gender representations in *telenovelas* and the importance of considering such portrayals as performed.

Telenovelas

La reina del sur continues the long tradition of the *telenovela*, whose early history paralleled that of the American soap opera. *Telenovelas* emerged in South America in the 1960s when television entered the Latin American market. This form evolved from *radio-novelas* (radio soap operas) and *folletines* (pamphlet-like novels). As a result, *telenovelas* inherited and combined the visual and aural elements of their ancestors to become "one incredibly powerful medium of Latin American popular cultural representation" (Benavides 2). Unlike American soap operas though, *telenovelas* have a finite number of episodes, are broadcast during the day and at night, and are so popular that well-known actors want to appear in these stories, such as the star of *La reina*, Kate del Castillo, an acclaimed actress in Mexico and the U.S.

According to Carolina Acosta-Alzuru, there are two broad categories of *telenovela* types: the *telenovela rosa* (rose-tinted), which focuses on the romance and misfortunes of a heterosexual couple, and the *telenovela de ruptura* (the break-away *telenovela*), which explores social issues perceived as problematic (271). For years, Mexican *telenovelas* used the

love triangle as its central story-telling device to entice its female viewership. A shift from government ownership to private ownership of media in the early 1990s as well as a move to evening timeslots led to significant changes in content. Brazilian and Venezuelen *telenovelas* are an example of this shift as they have introduced such taboo topics as birth control, divorce, and homosexuality and Brazilian *telenovelas* in particular have been noted as at the forefront of the *ruptura* movement (Downie 1; Acosta-Alzuru 194). Additionally, increasing pressure from North American television, especially from the United States, for more explicit sex, less focus on marriage, and inclusion of issues related to political and economic turmoil resulted in these values and behaviors appearing in *telenovelas* south of these borders in the form of the *telenovela de ruptura* (De la Luz Casas Pérez 409). The inclusion of contemporary social issues has led to global success of the format and has led some Latin American theorists to argue that melodrama might be the "most successful and culturally authentic revolution affecting the continent since the 1960s" (Benavides 2; Martín-Barbero 87). Even with this shift in subject matter, the storylines remain rooted in promotion of traditional gender roles and relate more often than not to issues traditionally related to heterosexual women's lives. *La reina*, although a clear example of the recent *narcotelenovela*, straddles between these two categories as it incorporates elements of the traditional genre, with added love triangles and female antagonists, but also stretches its boundaries by presenting a controversial topic and a female protagonist that is virtuous and sinful, compassionate and cold-blooded at once.

Gender Performativity

To become a female leader of a drug cartel, Teresa Mendoza must violate expectations of her gender. Gender binaries construct oppositions between women and men, and correspondingly feminine and masculine.

Characteristics of traditional masculinity are often associated with the mind and culture, and include competitiveness, cause and effect thinking, individualism, and rationality (Buzzanell 344; D'Enbeau & Buzzanell 5; Grosz 4; Rabine 2). As represented in film and television, these characteristics regularly manifest through the individual hero who saves the day all by himself. He usually dominates women, engages in violent behavior, and aims to "win," whether it be a competition, war, or the "girl". Traditional feminine qualities are associated with the body and nature, and include community, integrative thinking, and connections with others. Often this results in female characters being defined in relation to the male hero, which leads to female characters being silent, victimized, passive, or rescued (D'Enbeau and Buzzanell 5; Grosz 4; Powers 3).

Understanding the concept of gender performativity provides a guide for making sense of Teresa's evolution from novice to boss as she embodies the non-traditional *mujer brava*. In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler contends that the body is not a fixed, passive medium through which gender is ascribed from some external source (175-176). Rather gender is "created through sustained social performances" (193). Assuming then that there is some "true" or essential masculinity or femininity related to male or female bodies, respectively, "conceals gender's performative character and the performative possibilities for proliferating gender configurations outside the restricting frames of masculinist dominations and compulsory heterosexuality" (192-193). Judith Halberstam concurs that gender does not belong exclusively to the sex to which it is generally ascribed. Further, she argues that conceptualizing a "female masculinity" allows exploration of a "queer subject position that can successfully challenge hegemonic models of gender conformity" (9). From Halberstam's perspective the most challenging performance is the "excessive masculinity of the dyke" (29), but that "heterosexual female masculinity" (28) has its own potential to challenge gender conformity.

Even so, Butler warns in *Bodies that Matter* that if the materiality of sex is demarcated in discourse, then this demarcation will produce a domain of excluded and delegitimated 'sex.' Hence, it will be as important to think about how and to what end bodies are constructed as it will be to think about how and to what end bodies are *not* constructed and, further, to ask after how bodies which fail to materialize provide the necessary 'outside,' if not the necessary support, for the bodies which, in materializing the norm, qualify as bodies that matter (15-16). In other words, if physical bodies do not match the genders to which they are visibly ascribed, they may not *count* as the bodies they are trying to perform. Given the traditional masculine and feminine characteristics attributed to men and women, respectively, is it any wonder, as Paul Smith concludes, "in terms of cultural and political *power*, it still makes a difference when masculinity coincides with biological maleness" (3). It is useful in seeing how masculinity is constructed, then, as Halberstam contends, "when and where it leaves the white male middle-class body" (15). So, the potential challenge Teresa Mendoza poses as a female head of a drug cartel must consider not only the role she performs, but also the body in which she performs it. Consideration of both of these elements will allow us to explore how Teresa challenges the traditionally male role of the drug lord and the limits her gendered body may pose.

Analysis

Our analysis focuses on how Teresa's evolution from novice to boss in both the novel and *telenovela* appears to correspond with emphasis on her feminine characteristics and body (in her early development) to employment of her masculine characteristics and mind (when she becomes the boss). To explore both her professional and personal development, we will discuss how Teresa is portrayed as a victim of her sex and body at the start of her story. Then we will explore the tensions that arise as she

develops and employs traditionally masculine skills and behaviors while still making use of her female body as she ascends to power in the drug world. While the former earns her respect and power, the latter still gets her what she wants in particular circumstances. Finally, we will conclude this section by demonstrating how once Teresa becomes a boss, she often works to suppress her feminine side while embracing the masculine role she has come to play. Throughout this section, we will also discuss the relationships between fate and choice and gender in Teresa's evolution. We will highlight how the novel emphasizes the role of fate and tensions between fate and choice in her development whereas the *telenovela* appears to make Teresa much more an agent of her own destiny.

As Victim

In the beginning, Teresa unquestionably plays the typical *narcocultura* role for women of "girlfriend of a drug dealer". In this position, her body marks her as female and as a victim of her sex as demonstrated in the opening scene of both the novel and *telenovela*. She is abruptly interrupted by a phone ringing as she lies naked in the bathtub. The call, she knows, signals that her boyfriend is dead and that she must run to avoid the same fate. When subsequently confronted by her would-be assassins, one of them, Gato Fierros, decides to rape her before killing her. Through the omniscient narrator in the novel, the reader also learns that Teresa has been raped before, alluding to a cursed life due to her gender and class status. The protagonist creates a split between her current reality and another consciousness to avoid the pain:

> And suddenly, she wasn't afraid. It isn't happening, she thought. I'm asleep and this is just a nightmare like all the others, the ones I lived through before, something that happens to the other woman I dream about, the one who looks like me but isn't. (Pérez-Reverte 24)

The "other" woman allows Teresa to become desensitized and almost disappear; this latter one accepts her fate, but the former takes action. As she is being raped, "the situation", or fate, changes course and allows Teresa's free arm to fall next to her bag, where she feels a pistol. The second Teresa becomes the strategist and leads the first to grab the gun: "…her and the other woman's fingers had closed around the butt of the pistol…She considered all this with dispassionate calculation: Safety, trigger, hammer. Bullet" (26). Then she acts and shoots him. The dual Teresa functions to highlight the tension between fate and choice, passivity and action. In this moment, the dual Teresa copes with being a victim of fate, which spurs her to act.

Although the rape scene in the premiere episode of the *telenovela* does not mark the split consciousness of the protagonist as meticulously as the novel, it does imply a separation between a passive and active Teresa through camera angles and flashbacks. As Teresa is attacked the camera in the *telenovela* uses close-ups of her face to focus on her upward gaze, toward the ceiling, to indicate a desire to escape and disengage with her current reality. The *telenovela* incorporates extended flashbacks from the protagonist and the aggressor to again mark Teresa's mental escape and also to provide background information regarding her boyfriend's murder.

The introductory telephone call and the rape scene symbolize rites of passage in both the novel and *telenovela* for Teresa's development from novice to boss. In both genres, as readers and viewers, we envision Teresa's fragmentation between the past and present and although fate is a generating force in her life, she makes conscious decisions that break with the traditional role of passive girlfriend that she assumed before her boyfriend, Güero's, death. The novel suggests the dual Teresa, the one being acted on and the one watching the action, develops as a result of the violence she is subjected to as a woman. Maura Grady contends in her analysis of *Kill Bill* that the juxtaposition of scenes of the main female character's rape, bloody body, and live burial with her physical

domination and triumph over her adversaries is a vivid exposition of male power and female defenselessness in one female character. This contrast demonstrates the potentialities of a woman taking on male characteristics (72-73). So too does Teresa's move from passive to active suggest her taking on male characteristics has the potential of transcending the weaknesses of her gendered body. This dual Teresa in the novel emphasizes her passivity during scenes where she is seemingly forced to act, such as when she shoots Gato to facilitate her escape. The *telenovela* suggests her victimage spurs her, beyond her gender, to act.

In both the novel and *telenovela*, the state of Teresa's female body in the opening sequences is highlighted. She goes from being naked in the bathtub to throwing on tight pants, a tank top, and high heels as she prepares to escape Mexico. When she is caught by her would-be assassins and raped, the novel includes a vivid description of the state of her body as she found the gun, shot her rapist, and with "her T-shirt bunched up over her breasts, naked from the waist down, holding her right hand with her left so she could aim more accurately" (Pérez-Reverte 27), made the choice *not* to shoot the second assassin. Interestingly, her decision not to shoot Pote appears to be the most agency driven moment in the scene. She then escapes through a second-story window, bottomless, running through the streets. The appearance of Teresa's naked body stresses that she is a vulnerable woman in the male-dominated drug world. Even so, the action of shooting her rapist to escape her own death is when she is described as watching herself rather than as an active agent. Additionally, her exposed, half naked, female body as she jumps out of the window suggests she is a victim of "the situation" or fate.

Female Body/Male Skills

When Teresa escapes to Spain and first starts working for Dris Larbi at the bar/brothel, Yamila, he expects her to work as a prostitute. Teresa realizes

in both the novel and *telenovela* that, as a woman, using her body in return for favors will allow her new boyfriend, Santiago Fisterra, to work in relative safety in the drug trade between Morocco and Spain. In the novel, it is unclear whether Santiago manipulates Teresa to act on his behalf or whether it is her choice. The *telenovela*'s depiction in "Jealous States" more clearly suggests it is Teresa's choice. She sees that Santiago does not have the contacts he needs. His lack of knowledge motivates her to act. Teresa asks a corrupt Moroccan official, Colonel Chaib, to give Santiago a job.

When Teresa walks in to a party in Morocco, everyone notices her. The colonel tells her she "looks like a queen." Unlike the novel, the *telenovela* includes several explicit references to Teresa as being like a "queen." She charms him as she speaks English to some of the guests and converses with him about religion, culture, and business. She is shown kissing the colonel and waking up in his bed the next morning, an act only implied in the novel. The colonel explicitly refers to them both as "business people" as he asks her what the night they just spent together was going to cost him. Teresa does not play coy or ignorant and asks him to allow Santiago to enter the drug trade. As shown on television, Santiago appears passive as he gets drunk and frustrated at home while she appears active as she sleeps with the colonel and makes the deal.

These scenes in the *telenovela* and Teresa's interactions with Santiago the next day highlight her agency and her gender. She uses her sexuality and body with the colonel in trade for Santiago's business. When Teresa returns home, Santiago demands to know if she slept with the colonel. When she says yes, he hits her. She hits him back. She tells him she wants him to remember what she had to do to get him the job every time he crosses the strait. She then asserts, "I'm a slut, but you're a kept man. My kept man." Teresa does not allow him to demean her by calling her a whore. Instead, she inverts the equation by putting herself in the keeper role, Santiago in the kept role. Suzy D'Enbeau and Patrice Buzzanell

focus on Christina Hendriks' character Joan Harris Holloway in *Mad Men* to support the idea that "gender norms influence what the work should look like, and these expectations vary according to sex. Even if a man and woman hold the same position, gender norms command that they do the work differently, and sexuality is often incorporated into a woman's organizational role" (7). Teresa asserts her agency as a woman through use of her body even as she acts as "one of the working girls". At the same time these scenes suggest she is not like the others as she chooses the man with the intent of making a business deal with him.

Teresa appears even more active in later scenes while she learns the ropes of drug trafficking with Santiago in the *telenovela*. Yet, she is also dressed more provocatively during these sequences, once again emphasizing the role of her body and female sex. In the novel, her dress as indicator of her Mexican ethnicity is often emphasized. Conversely, when working on the boat engines in the *telenovela*, she wears a bikini top and short-shorts, emphasizing her female body. Thus, the filmic strategies of the *telenovela* invite the male gaze (Mulvey 15). For example, the prostitutes' lessons at Yamila lead Teresa to wear a tight black and white mini dress, make-up, and her hair high off her neck at the party in Morocco. Teresa's looks during these sequences direct our gaze to her body and her gender. The juxtaposition of her working on an engine, a typically masculine practice, while wearing the bikini points to the blurring of gender in Teresa's life. Her dress at the party suggests her "passing" as a prostitute for the night and as a "normal" woman. Being naked and under a sheet when making the business deal with the colonel brings her masculine and feminine qualities into play. In this way, Teresa may be said to embody a heterosexual female masculinity or a feminine masculinity. Either way, she poses a challenge to traditional conceptions of what it means to be a woman in *narcocultura*.

The utilitarian power of Teresa's looks and body (and sex) continues to be explored in her relationship with Patricia. "Patty" serves as an agent

of Teresa's development while they are cellmates in prison and beyond the prison walls once the two have become partners and entered the drug underworld:

> Until then, she had dressed one way or another in response to two clear objectives: pleasing men—*her* men—or being comfortable. Viewing clothes as a tool one needed in order to do one's work better, as Patty had put it with a laugh—that was a new one. Getting dressed not just for comfort or seduction - or even elegance, or status. No, it was more subtle than that…Clothes could express a mood, an attitude, a person's power. (Pérez-Reverte 227)

Teresa expresses empowerment and liberation from the knowledge imparted by Patty. Pérez Reverte takes a traditionally gender-coded topic, like fashion, but reinforces it by making it a complex system of semantics which better equips Teresa for her developing role as business woman and ascension in the male-dominated world of narcotics.

This empowerment is undermined by how Teresa and Patty's friendship is visually represented and depicted in the *telenovela*, especially when they are in prison. The teacher-student dynamic is consistent in both genres. However, the prison episodes of the *telenovela* are extended and the plot is developed to include other prison characters and conflicts which add a gendered power struggle within the prison system based on nationalism and sexuality (Latin American versus European women and straight versus lesbian and/or bisexual women). Caught in this struggle, Teresa asserts her autonomy with her tough street knowledge. In this way, she catches Patty's eye and earns her protection.

Patty's romantic interest in Teresa is much more subtle and ambiguous in the novel; the *telenovela*'s treatment of this theme is partially censored but still male-defined. The hinted homoeroticism in the novel is accentuated in the *telenovela* by dressing Teresa and Patty during their prison stay in see-through t-shirts and fitted tank tops. The kiss scene after

Teresa's birthday party is set up in a less disgraceful light than it is in the novel and framed by a male-gaze to function more as a pseudo-male-lesbian fantasy. While the significance of Patty's influence and education remains present in the *telenovela*, the complex, potentially empowering, female-centered relationship created by Pérez Reverte in the novel is diluted by a more explicitly male-defined representation, likely a result of the visual bias of television.

In her last conversation with Patty in the novel, Teresa verifies that what she thought was mere admiration from her friend really was an illusion-filled desire to become her life partner and responds as follows:

> She experienced the absurd impulse to turn toward Patty violently, straddle her, take her by the shoulders and shake her until her teeth rattled, pull off her clothes and say, well, you're going to collect it all right now, once and for all, so we can finally put this to rest. But she knew not to do that. You couldn't pay back anything that way, and they were now too far apart—they'd followed paths that would never cross again. (Pérez-Reverte 345)

Teresa's violent response to Patty's lament is curiously framed in gendered terms, this time the former has fully appropriated a male instinct and is repulsed by her friend's vulnerability. Interestingly, Teresa's instincts mock a sexually dominant pose in which she imagines herself as Patty's aggressor followed by a quick emotional withdrawal. This split instinct resounds of Teresa's emotional separation during the rape scene discussed earlier. Although this is Teresa's survival instinct, it also signals an internal tension between the naïve, feminine, soft and emotional Teresa, with a colder, male, violent, strategist Other. In this moment, Teresa represents the challenge Halberstam contends the "excessive masculinity of the dyke" poses to patriarchy (74). However, her actions do so merely by creating another binary (of which Halberstam warns) where Teresa's masculinity is invoked to represent power over Patty, not to

create a new female masculinity (29). At the same time, her choice *not* to act on her initial impulse signals another shift in Teresa's thinking away from when she could use her body in trade for what she wanted to where her masculine role as boss (ironically, "queen") put her on a different plane than her female, bisexual, ex-partner.

Teresa's arrival in Spain, even before she meets Patty, is when she actually begins learning skills and using natural abilities that are traditionally considered masculine. Although Teresa acts as a prostitute on a couple of occasions, her "head for numbers" allows her to convince her boss that she should not be one of the working girls. At first, she is allowed to be a bartender, which already sets her apart from the other women, but eventually takes over all the bookkeeping. She gains the respect of her boss not for her body, but for her mind. We are never privy to where she learned this and, therefore, the novel suggests it is natural for her. Given the association with logic mathematics holds in society, and therefore its link with men and masculinity, this is one of the first suggestions that Teresa is not a typical feminine woman.

Later, in the *telenovela*, Teresa suggests becoming Santiago's partner. In the novel, it is unclear whether the impetus for their partnership is Teresa or Santiago's idea. In both genres, she nevertheless becomes a fellow trafficker. Despite the dominance of men in the drug world, Teresa learns the skills she needs to function competently as Santiago's partner from riding on the boat between Spain and Morocco and working to perfect the boat's engines to meeting with drug dealers and bribing local authorities. When Teresa goes on her first job with Santiago, she is described in the novel as seeing herself from the outside as if a mirror reflection of herself. This out of body experience Teresa began practicing in Culiacán as a coping mechanism to passively take the violations of her female body is now attributed with giving her the aptitude to be cold and calculating (read: masculine) enough to take the risks involved in trafficking drugs.

Even so, her unique vulnerability as a woman in a man's world cannot be ignored. Reporter, Oscar Lobato, says:

> In the street she started earning respect….First, because the Gallego had a reputation, people respected him. And second, because she was the only one of those girls that went out shoulder to shoulder with her man. Early on, people thought it was a joke … But when word got out that she had the same balls as any man, things changed. (Pérez-Reverte 129)

Her reputation went from being associated with Santiago to being her own and her behavior earned her metaphorical male body parts associated with courage in the face of danger. Her masculine characteristics are also noted by police Commander Juárez as he describes her "tremendous pair of balls" (214). He likewise distinguishes her from other women as having a calculator in her head instead of between her legs (as he says other women do). It was her metaphorical masculinity, in spite of her sex, that gained her respect.

Santiago is described in the novel as instigating Teresa's increasing involvement in all aspects of the business. He takes on the explicit task of teaching her every part of the business from the logistics of boating to business dealings with the various parties involved. Teresa is described as not wanting to go to meetings with the traffickers. However, "Santiago always insisted," explaining:

> You take the same risks I do….You have a right to know what goes down and how it goes down. Don't talk if you don't want to, but it can't hurt to pay attention. And if these guys don't like you being there, fuck 'em....(T)heir women are...not risking their cunts against the Moros five or six times a month. (135)

Santiago instigates her increased involvement and is given credit for her knowledge of the drug trade. Just as Teresa's power is attributed to her masculine characteristics, so too is her female biology given the responsibility for putting her at unique risk. Interestingly, Santiago suggests that the risk her gender puts her in should be her motivation for understanding the business.

To this point in her story, Teresa is subject to her body and her sex and the perceptions others have of her, making her too often a victim of circumstance. Just as *Mad Men*'s Joan poses a threat to patriarchy *because* she "transcends polarities" while taking into consideration "the structural gendered constraints in which her decision making must happen" (D'Enbeau and Buzzanell 14),Teresa's increasing awareness of the strengths and weaknesses of her female/feminine and male/masculine characteristics have the potential to challenge traditional roles for women in *narcocultura*. As a woman she is a victim of rape, but later uses her body to gain advantage. She uses her knowledge of numbers and mechanics to avoid *having* to be a prostitute and to become a partner in the drug trafficking business while at the same time knowing that as a woman the risks she was taking differed than those of her boyfriend.

Becoming a Masculine Queen

Once Santiago dies and Teresa and Patty are released from prison, the novel continues to represent Teresa's life as fraught with tension between fate and choice. Patty is described as the one who leads Teresa to the drugs, who arranges the deal with Russian mob boss, Oleg Yasikov, and who says she will do the talking in the meeting with Oleg. Yet, in his interview with the narrator of the novel, Nino Juárez, former head of an organized crime unit, says it was Teresa who came up with the deal she and Patty presented to Oleg. At the start of the scene with Oleg, he notes that they are both "playing it pretty cool" (Pérez-Reverte 215). But, their tough-girl façade begins to crack when Patty nervously attempts to light a

cigarette with shaking hands. Teresa sees panic in Patty's eyes and believes Oleg is about to reject the deal and kill them both. In the novel, the narrator characterizes the moment Teresa begins to speak as one in which she hears herself speaking as if her voice was not her own. "Then, without thinking, she heard her own voice…" (219). Despite her seemingly uncontrollable fear, Teresa calmly and clearly reintroduces the deal to Oleg and offers not just to sell his drugs back to him, but explains that she can help him get involved in the hash trade. She says, "I know that business. And I know you people don't have hash" (222). Although he tries to deny it, "Teresa shook her head confidently" (222). Outwardly, she appears the agent of her own fate, but the narrator explains: "A door opened, and that silent woman, the one who sometimes resembled her, was watching her from the threshold" (222).

Teresa uses the knowledge she has in the hash trade that she learned from Santiago to turn the tables on both Patty and Oleg. She asserts, "*I* know that business," and "*I* know you people don't have hash." At that moment she suggests to Oleg that she has something to offer that he does not have. She demonstrates her value to him and gives him a reason not only not to kill her (and by extension Patty), but a reason to agree to the deal they offered. As narrated, it was, once again, the second Teresa taking control and seeing the road lay itself out for her, which still implied less agency than the deal itself suggested.

The first meeting with Oleg is nearly identical in the novel as it is in the *telenovela*'s "Death Sentence" episode. In contrast, however, we *see* Patty and Teresa arguing about what to do with the drugs. During this exchange, it is Teresa who says, "If anyone knows this business, it's me." When they find the drugs, we then see and hear Teresa telling Patty how to deal with the drugs and the Russians. Although it is still Patty who makes the call to Oleg, the *telenovela shows* how big a role Teresa plays in their actions. Patty even tells Oleg that it was Teresa's idea to sell him his drugs back. However, when Teresa takes control of the meeting by

offering her knowledge of the hash business to Oleg, there is no second Teresa looking at the first. So, it appears that it is Teresa's actions that lead Oleg not to kill them. Also, the scene ends with Oleg saying they have a deal if Teresa can show him that she knows the hash route. Subsequent scenes again *show* Teresa's expertise in action as she recovers the drugs for the Russians. The visual representation highlights her agency. In her meeting with Oleg, Teresa more fully embraces her masculine characteristics, suppresses the feminine, and becomes "La reina del sur".

The scene that best demonstrates Teresa's transformation from novice to boss and how she negotiates between her feminine and masculine sides, is when her would-be assassins from Mexico come to Europe and are captured by Oleg's men. In the novel, Teresa is described as watching the men being tortured "with a dry, attentive curiosity that appeared to come not from her but rather from the other woman who was stalking around" (Pérez-Reverte 276). As Pérez-Reverte describes it, Teresa appears in total control of herself while seeing herself from the outside, as if she were being directed by this other self. In that moment, she makes a decision and says, "I'll do it" (276). Although the narrator still describes her as being watched by the other Teresa, the first Teresa speaks and decides to take action, just as she did in the first meeting with Oleg. She sees killing them and finishing the business from Mexico as her responsibility.

However, Oleg simply replies, "No" (277). In this moment, Teresa makes a choice and appears ready to take violent action, but Oleg denies her. It is not that she cannot act, but because she should not. As a woman working for her lover, she was considered a "dirty whore." As a boss, she must not get dirty. Teresa allows Oleg to have his men take care of business, but not before she chooses to free Pote as he "played it straight" with her when ordered to kill her, i.e., he did not try to rape her and tried to stop Gato. Her decision leads Pote to become her most loyal bodyguard

who remains with her until the bitter end. In this moment, she appears to make an unemotional, business, and therefore masculine, decision.

In the *telenovela* episode, "An Eye for an Eye", there are three would-be killers, Pote, Gato, and Ratas. Teresa's actions during this scene of the *telenovela* establish her as making conscious choices and being in charge. As she watches the men being tortured, the camera slowly shows Teresa, not looking at herself, but making direct eye contact with each man. Oleg then says, "These men's lives are in your hands." She approaches Gato and says, "Oleg, give me your gun." He replies, "No." She explains to Oleg, "This is a personal score. Give me your gun." He still says no and tells her to let his men take care of it so that she will not get her "hands dirty with this filth." Teresa sees this act as a way to "cleanse" herself of "the memories and anger" from what they did to her.

Teresa tells them to shut up when Pote interrupts asking to die and Gato begs her forgiveness. She says Gato sounds "like a girl" and wonders how he was so "macho" before. Ratas spouts, "As if you didn't like what he did to you, bitch." She slaps him and says he is nothing without a gun. She then pulls off Gato's belt buckle, which converts to the knife he used to cut off her shirt in Mexico. She holds the knife to his genitals and asserts that he "will never rape another woman again." Oleg physically pulls her off. She struggles and screams that she has to get revenge. He indicates they will do whatever she wants them to do with the men but he will not let her lose control. She says, "The worst of me exists because of what they did to me." Ultimately, she grants Pote his freedom and walks out, leaving the job of killing Gato and Ratas to Oleg's men.

This scene shows Teresa ready to take action and needing to be held back by Oleg. Revealing her emotional response to her rapist and would-be killers directs our focus to Teresa as a female boss who was once violated by these men, as does Ratas calling her a "bitch" and saying she enjoyed her rape. Yet, the authority she asserts over them by coldly watching their torture, slapping Ratas, holding the knife to Gato's genitals,

and ordering their deaths (and freedom in Pote's case) demonstrates the power she has achieved in this world. By calling Gato a "girl" when he begs for his life, Teresa also points to the weakness attributed to the female sex. Ultimately, Teresa's rational, unemotional side wins in the end. Once again her actions point toward her achievement of power through the embodiment of these masculine characteristics. These circumstances seem to be leading to Teresa's predetermined response: killing the men who wronged her. However, her choice not to act, not to kill them, clearly marks her as an agent, no longer subject to the forces of fate. By leaving the dirty work to Oleg's men, she also cleanses herself of her violation as a woman and embraces her cold, unemotional side, becoming the masculine "queen".

Conclusions

The irony of Teresa's transformation to a masculine "queen" highlights a central finding of our analysis, that is, the importance of sex, gender and the body in *La reina del sur*. The world of *telenovelas* has traditionally been peopled by women and romance for female audiences. *Narcotelenovelas* bring the drama of the masculine drug world to television for an increasingly diverse, transnational audience. Combining the *telenovela rosa* and the *telenovela de ruptura* makes room for a female protagonist like Teresa Mendoza - a heterosexual woman who gains knowledge from her ill-fated, drug dealing boyfriends and female, bi-sexual friend and partner that allows her to rise above her station to become a leader in the drug worlds of Mexico, Spain, and Morocco. In such a liminal space, theorizing Teresa Mendoza as the embodiment of Halberstam's heterosexual female masculinity seems apropos. Her experiences speak to those involved in illegal drug trafficking worldwide, but also to many women trying to make it and survive in a man's world. On one hand, this means learning valuable lessons from these personal

relationships. On the other, it means continually losing those close to her, which ultimately teaches her that to succeed in business she must sacrifice the personal. While this choice does not usually involve the extreme losses Teresa experiences, the tensions between home and work resonate for many women (and increasingly men).

Teresa begins as a victim of her sex, body, and fate as characterized in both versions of *La reina del sur*. Her seemingly natural mathematical acumen and the skills she learns from boyfriend, Santiago, and cellmate/friend, Patty, demonstrate both her masculine and feminine qualities. As she develops skills that will help her eventually become "la reina del sur," she also struggles with passively taking what comes to her and actively making choices to gain power. As a woman, Teresa's story suggests a new kind of protagonist - one who uses what she has as a woman to her advantage and embodying female masculinity. While this includes her body at times (which is nothing new), the relational nature of her learning and working with partners, including Santiago and Patty, could point to someone who values working with others, whereas traditional male leadership focuses on individuality. The reality, though, suggests she may have had to use her body and sex to get where she is, but that her real power comes from embracing her masculine side. That is, the lessons she learned from her partners contribute to her evolution, but she leaves them all behind and works alone to be the "queen".

The "moments" we included in our analysis support our conclusion about Teresa ending up alone as she reaches power. It is important to note, however, that at the actual end of *La reina del sur*, Teresa has her lover killed for betraying her, without telling him that she is pregnant with his child. She decides to return to Mexico, and her bodyguard (former would-be assassin) Pote accompanies her. Pote gives up his life protecting her. In the end, Teresa gives up her masculine power and her role as "queen" to save her unborn child, goes into hiding, and presumably becomes a mother (from what the conclusions suggest). Grady argues that despite the intent

of the producers and star of *Kill Bill* to make the Bride a male character in a female body, "(b)ecause the Bride is a mother, and rape victim, *Kill Bill* remains a chauvinist fantasy where a woman can play at heroism but is always defeated via her female body. In the end, the Bride becomes defined by her maternity and not her masculine action" (74). So too is any potential threat anti-heroine Teresa poses to *narcocultura* neutralized as soon as she gives up her masculine side for that of the feminine role of mother.

Our analysis further suggests that how Teresa's actions are characterized in the different media forms has implications for her agency. In the novel, her evolution from novice to boss was characterized much more by tensions between the forces of fate and choice, whereas in the *telenovela*, Teresa plays a much more active role in her own life. In both forms, Teresa clearly begins her story in a passive "girlfriend" role and ends as a leader in the drug world. Her escape from her rapist and would-be killers hints that there may be more to her than a victim. In the novel, circumstance and a psychological split are given more credit than she is for why she acts the way she does. Several later instances, including when she becomes partners with Santiago and when she goes into business with Patty, make it unclear whether Teresa has decided to take these actions or if she has merely reacted to circumstances she has been given. Narrative strategies, such as the omniscient narrator and the creation of the second Teresa, create tensions between her ability to act or merely react. In novel form, Teresa's destiny seems more pre-ordained, like she is living out the *corridos* written about her. The novel itself is presented by the narrator/author as one long-winded *corrido* in the end, unable to be reduced to less than 400 pages, but still left with an open ending.

In the *telenovela*, Teresa becomes more of an agent in her own life. The televisual nature of the medium *shows* the audience what Teresa does to escape Mexico, learning to become a trafficker, and taking control of the business. Television has been theorized as a dubious medium for

promoting feminism, especially where sexual women are involved (Arthurs 97). Without a narrator explaining her actions and the narrative ambiguity of her role in decision making, Teresa appears more active in the *telenovela*, and therefore her life appears to be a matter of her choice and action. That Teresa is played by as big a star as Kate del Castillo suggests her role as this female leader could have significant impacts on her audience.

Despite the potentialities of showing rather than telling Teresa's story in the *telenovela*, the visual nature of television also includes the spectacle of female characters' bodies more than in the novel. While the novel repeatedly discusses how Teresa looks, except for the rape scene (where her body is meant to show her as a victim), the purpose of these descriptions is mainly to point to Teresa's ethnicity and her Mexican origins, which highlights the transglobal character of the story (see Benavides). In contrast, the *telenovela* shows Teresa in bikinis and see-through tank tops. The purpose in this context appears more to draw the male gaze than to contribute to the story. Highlighting her female body reminds us she is a woman, while her actions still suggest a masculine character.

Butler contends that the performativity of gender cannot be theorized without taking into consideration the structures that shape and constrain its performance, from informal and formal regulations to material conditions of lived bodies (15). By considering the *narcocultura* represented and potentially challenged in *La reina del sur*, we suggest that Teresa Mendoza's character ultimately reifies the gender binaries she has the potential to transform. Her evolution from novice to boss involves moments where she challenges traditional gender roles and embodies a heterosexual female masculinity. However, ultimately, to become boss, she must transcend her femininity, and when she becomes pregnant she uses her agentic power to renounce her masculinity to become a mother.

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