The Many Lives of Teresa Mendoza: Genre, Gender, and Melodrama in *La Reina del Sur*

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This study considers how reality, fiction, and melodrama intersect so that Teresa Mendoza, protagonist of Arturo Pérez-Reverte's novel, *La Reina del Sur*, escapes into everyday reality and is imagined into existence. The novel and first iteration of the telenovela based on it have become cultural touchstones that employ melodramatic elements that allow audiences to come to terms with an increasingly complex cultural terrain by situating social, political and familial ideas in easily identifiable and comprehendible dramas. The examples discussed here, which include the novel, telenovela, and news accounts about the relationship between Mexican actress Kate del Castillo, who plays Teresa in the telenovela, and drug kingpin Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán, illustrate how melodramatic narratives create the circumstances to question the boundaries between reality and fiction, redefine traditional standards of melodrama, challenge normative femininity, and initiate spaces in which transnational communities can understand and interpret social disruption.

Keywords: melodrama, *La Reina del Sur*, *Queen of the South,* narcoculture, telenovelas, Teresa Mendoza, females in organized crime

Este estudio examina la manera en que la realidad, la ficción y el melodrama se entrecruzan de modo que Teresa Mendoza, protagonista de la novela de Arturo Pérez-Reverte, *La Reina del Sur*, logre escaparse hacia la realidad cotidiana y cobrar existencia mediante la imaginación del público. La novela y la primera serie de la telenovela basada en ella se han convertido en piedras de toque culturales que emplean elementos del género del melodrama que permiten que el público aprenda a navegar un terreno cultural cada vez más complejo al situar sus ideas sociales, políticas y de familia dentro de dramas fácilmente reconocibles y comprensibles. Se ofrecen ejemplos de la novela, la telenovela y reportajes sobre la relación entre la actriz mexicana Kate del Castillo, Teresa Mendoza en la telenovela, y el capo narcotraficante Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán, que ilustran las maneras en que las narrativas melodramáticas crean las circunstancias apropiadas para provocar el cuestionamiento de las fronteras entre la realidad y la ficción, pedir redefiniciones de las normas tradicionales del melodrama, presentar retos a la feminidad normativa e iniciar espacios en los que las comunidades trasnacionales puedan comprender e interpretar las disrupciones sociales.

Palabras clave: melodrama, *La Reina del Sur*, narcocultura, telenovelas, Teresa Mendoza, mujeres en organizaciones criminales

Introducing Teresa Mendoza, Queen of the South

While not the earliest novel about Mexico's drug trade, Spanish author Arturo Pérez-Reverte's *La Reina del Sur* (2002) is the first to gain international, mainstream success.[1] The book inspired a telenovela that was first broadcast on the Telemundo network in 2011. In an unusual upshot for traditional telenovelas, it prompted a "super series," or sequel, of the same name that aired in the summer of 2019. In a clear attempt to capitalize on the original telenovela's enduring popularity, the sequel picks up ten years after its last episode.[2]

Both the novel and the telenovela became popular in more than thirty countries and helped make heroines out of protagonist Teresa Mendoza and other female "queenpins." Over the course of the novel Teresa proves herself to be anything but the typical narco's *morra*—an unobtrusive, devoted, submissive, trusting girlfriend. She leaves behind her naiveté when she flees her home of Sinaloa, Mexico, for the Spanish port city of Melilla in northern Africa. Her ruthlessness, cunning, and financial shrewdness permit her to become La Reina del Sur—"Queen of the South," the most successful drug runner in the Mediterranean with ties to criminal organizations across Europe. The terms "queen" and *reina* suggest her transformation into a monarch who reigns over a business, albeit illicit. Her rags to riches story—a common trope in melodramas—is one element that makes her a sympathetic protagonist. Teresa's development also points to the melodramatic implications of queen and reina, as they are both imbued with intrigue, power, and the fairytale of class mobility.

In this study I trace the ways in which Teresa's character moves from the pages of a novel to the visual realm of a telenovela and finally escapes the confines of fiction via the real-life machinations of actress Kate del Castillo (who portrayed Teresa Mendoza in the telenovela) and revelations of her involvement with notorious drug trafficker Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán, who was arrested and imprisoned in January 2016. I contend that, in much the same way as Teresa escapes from the narrator in the novel, the character has taken on a life of her own beyond the boundaries of the novelistic and telenovela genres. She escapes her fictional confines, and the narrator's point of view, by virtue of Kate del Castillo's parallel-but-real-life story.

Furthermore, I use diverse and compelling examples from the novel, the telenovela, and news accounts about the relationship between Kate del Castillo and Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán to illustrate the ways melodramatic narratives create the circumstances to question the boundaries between reality and fiction, redefine traditional standards of melodrama, highlight social ambivalence about challenges to normative femininity, and open new spaces in which transnational communities can understand and interpret the complex political terrain and narcocultures of Mexico that, in large part due to social media, cultural, social, and legal transgressions, are in constant flux. Melodrama

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[1] Alfaguara first published the novel in 2002, and it quickly became a worldwide bestseller with translations into German, Polish, English, Chinese, and Esperanto. It has also appeared in at least two large print editions and as an audio book. The latest reprint edition in English by Plume coincided with the debut of the English language adaptation showing on the USA Network. In this study, I will be using the 2004 Penguin translation of the novel.

[2] These "super series," as Yeidy M. Rivero observes, are shorter, higher quality, more expensively produced shows with more action and adventure are marketed by the industry (2017, 142).

provides a narrative structure that makes a strange story feel familiar, and, as Matthew Bush suggests, facilitates the understanding of artistic and actual events (2014, 15). By bringing these connections to light, I demonstrate that the melodramatic narrative mode is not confined to novels and the realm of fiction but rather evolves to make complex realities and news events into logical and consumable stories. Reading Teresa Mendoza within the melodramatic mode and looking at her discursive construction in different genres help us understand how she is positioned within gendered social narratives. In this larger context, Teresa continues to fascinate new audiences.

Melodrama is a narrative mode in which the heroic protagonist fights against unethical actions and breaches of social norms on the part of a villain in an effort to restore justice and social stability (Brooks 1995, 12–13). This elementary definition of melodrama belies its multifaceted nature, but its seemingly inherent simplicity allows for it to stretch and transform across historical periods and adapt to particular cultural moments in novels, serialized stories in newspapers and radio, movies, and telenovelas. That is, the definition creates a broader understanding of the genre. Its expansiveness and elasticity allow for characters in the melodramatic narrative to grow and exceed one dimensionality and create space for exploring the boundaries of the genre itself. As such, Teresa Mendoza redefines the roles of villain and hero, while simultaneously expanding the bounds of melodrama. Her fragmented character embodies shifts in a national cultural, social, and political landscape where differentiating between reality and fiction is increasingly difficult. Furthermore, as the examples of the multiple stories written about Kate del Castillo and Joaquín Guzmán illustrate, melodramatic elements emerge in complex media accounts that develop over time, with new chapters shaped by the spectacle of the latest news stories.

Locating Melodrama in Mexico's Cultural History

Melodrama's deep and expansive social resonance and adaptability in a variety of genres and mediated spaces make it culturally influential. Melodrama is woven into Mexican history and culture from the beginnings of Mexico's unification as a nation in the nineteenth century and its consolidation as an imagined community, with particular growth after the Mexican Revolution via state-sponsored narratives, i.e., monuments and buildings, mass media, and cinema (Monsiváis 2017). Melodrama played a central role during the "Golden Age" of Mexican cinema (1936–1959), when it reached its artistic and commercial peak. With the end of the halcyon days of Mexican cinema, melodrama found its most creative, innovative, and provocative home in telenovelas, which O. Hugo Benavides suggests "might be the most successful and culturally authentic revolution affecting the continent since the 1960's" (2008, 2). While many audiences can identify the telenovela's basic melodramatic components, less obvious but no less present is how melodrama "conceptually organizes and works through conflicts embedded in [Mexico's] social fabric" (Bush 2014, 15). Retelling stories through word of mouth and the construction of legends and fantasies are key elements to melodrama and have been repeated and reused by writers, cultural critics, and journalists to explain complex, often unbelievable, real-world political situations. For many, melodrama lives at the center of, and manifests itself in, a wide range of formats throughout Mexico's cultural expressions. Mexican journalist, writer, and

cultural critic Carlos Monsiváis suggests that "el melodrama es el molde sobre el que se imprime la conciencia de América Latina. . . . Por la intercesión del melodrama, el público de los siglos XIX y XX acepta devotamente la justificación del 'fracaso de la vida'" (1997, 8). Monsiváis traces the central role of melodrama through the twentieth century, suggesting that members of the emerging Mexican community of media consumers make sense of increasing urban violence by using "el lenguaje del melodrama [que es] más convincente que las versiones calificadas de frías o falsas por su afán de objetividad" (1997, 8). Melodrama and melodramatic sensibility exist beyond the artistic form. The genre is able to flourish and can be reshaped by its relationship to real-life dramas as played out in the domestic sphere. Through melodrama, life's failures, other challenging situations, and complex news events can be organized into more understandable and palpable stories.

Melodrama as a cultural practice is found everywhere in today's highly integrated, interactive societies and "mov[es] fluidly between the spheres of fictional and actual events" (Bush 2014, 17). The melodramatic narrative mode is no longer limited to fiction. Instead, it operates to make complicated realities legible and understandable. For example, one Mexican newspaper described as "la telenovela mexicana" the many messy crimes and scandals that marked the Salinas de Gortari term (1988–1994). Salinas de Gortari was an enormously unpopular president, and many suspect that he won the office due to fraud. His administration was riven with political corruption, and he currently lives in exile in Ireland for fear of being implicated in the murder of presidential candidate Luis Donaldo Colosio. More recently, in an interview about his book, *Los Salinas, retratos de los cachorros del poder*, Alberto Tavira, Mexican journalist and author, suggests that Salinas de Gortari was the perfect villain in a nationally televised telenovela that lasted for six years (2016). In an interview about the book Tavira asserts that the Gortari brothers "se convirtieron en los villanos favoritos en un país 'telenovelero' como el nuestro, en donde la religión más venerada es la telenovela. Nos tenían pegados de cualquier medio de comunicación que difundiera un capítulo más" (2016). Enrique Peña Nieto's presidential term further blurred the lines between reality and fiction and, more importantly, between politics and melodrama. During his campaign for the presidency and subsequent victory he was described in popular media as "Mexico's telenovela president," at first, because of his marriage to telenovela actress Angélica Rivera, known as *La Gaviota*, but later because of his many blunders and scandals. One article that was published before the election leads with the assertion that: "The personal life of Mexico's next president, Enrique Peña Nieto, reads like a telenovela script" (Puente 2012).

From Melodrama to Narcodrama

Melodramatic elements in *La Reina del Sur* fit into the larger paradigm of a society facing traumatic experiences, in this case, the context of drug violence and a weakened state. Since the novel's initial publication in 2002, Mexico saw the presidency change hands four times. Mexico has also experienced government efforts to eliminate drug organizations, which, many argue, led to significant instability among the groups and exacerbated violence in a way that greatly impacted local communities, particularly those living in regions controlled by the cartels. In 2006, President Felipe Calderón ran an aggressive "war on drugs" campaign against Mexico's drug traffickers that became a

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defining policy of his government and was forcefully resisted by many of the cartels. According to numerous accounts, there were four predominant cartels in 2006, and just a few years later at least eight or nine new organizations were identified by the Mexican government. Some of these were new "startups," while others were considered offshoots of already established groups. As many have critiqued, instead of doing away with the cartels, this "war on drugs" led to the splintering of the larger and more stable organizations into smaller factions, leading to more chaos and violence. British journalist Ioan Grillo notes that during the two-year period between 2006 and 2008, Mexico faced the worst of the drug violence; it is estimated that over 64,000 people lost their lives to the drug violence that gripped Mexico.[3] He reports that at the time, because of the excesses of violence, only the most "sensational atrocities now grab media attention. . . . Mexico reels from massacres comparable to brutal war crimes" (2011, 11).

The term *narco*, moreover, is now shorthand for anything connected to drug cartels, particularly those associated with Latin America. For many audiences, it speaks to the normalization of this subculture and, for many cartel bosses, a "shift in status from mere poppy growers to international drug smugglers" (Grillo 2011, 48). This sentiment is echoed by the narrator of *La Reina del Sur* who makes a similar observation in the first pages of the novel: "drug trafficking had come out from underground a long time ago and become an objective social fact" (Pérez-Reverte 2004, 31). Neologisms—*narcocorridos*, *narconovelas*, *narcopelículas*, and *narcoliteratura*—have been created to define and describe the recent novels, films, music, and other modes of cultural production about the drug trade.[4] Debates about the merits of "mainstreaming" narcoculture suggest that even naming this cultural phenomenon glamorizes a marginal, criminal, and violent subculture, creates heroes of cartel bosses and their minions, and generates a mystique around their lifestyle. As scholars and journalists debate the merits of reporting on drug trade and the use of new *narcovocabulary*, some have critiqued these self-same discussions and how the drug war has been narrated in mainstream media. Diana Palaversich notes that "the use of narco themes and characters in films and soap operas has grown, and the traffickers portrayed tend to be depicted as sinister, but ultimately attractive and likable men who epitomize the figure of the *gran macho* cherished by mainstream Mexican culture" (2006, 86).[5] These representations construct stereotypical images of Mexicans among US audiences. For example,

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[3] Ioan Grillo further suggests that US drug policy is inexorably linked to the Mexican drug war. US intervention has complicated the fight against the drug cartels. For example, in 2011, the "Fast and the Furious" scandal revealed that the ATF in Arizona allowed illegal gun sales to suspected members of Mexican drug cartels. Many of these weapons were used in this war and were responsible for the escalating violence and the 64,000 reported (most likely more) dead (Epatko 2011).

[4] For more information about narconovelas and narcoliterature, see Córdova (2011), Polit Dueñas (2013), and Carey (2014).

[5] Diana Palaversich (2006) details the emergence of narconovelas in Mexico with the publication of works by Mexican authors Elmer Mendoza, Loenides Alfaro, Gerardo Cornejo, Homero Aridjis, and Paul Flores. Regional authors like Sinaloan Elmer Mendoza, whom Palaversich calls the master of the Mexican narconovela, use male protagonists to focus on regional concerns like the changing power relationships between landowners and workers, police corruption, and the unique worship of La Santa Muerte and folk hero Jesús Malverde. These authors, while well known in some circles in Mexico, have not reached the same level of success or international recognition as Spanish author Pérez- Reverte, who acknowledges that his achievement comes as a result of the literary trail forged by his Mexican counterparts; his character named Elmer Mendoza guides the novel's narrator as he attempts to gather information about Teresa.

movies like *Savages* (2012) and *Sicario* (2015), and shows like Netflix's *Narcos* (2015), shape US audience perceptions about masculinity and violence in Mexico by presenting ruthless characters who are involved in illicit activity and, though compelling, pose a danger to the rule of law. Similarly, numerous Spanish language television programs, such as Telemundo's *El señor de los cielos* (2015), shape narratives about the drug trade for Spanish-speaking communities by portraying characters as misunderstood (often handsome) underdogs who challenge more powerful and corrupt institutions. Interestingly, many of these shows are derived from novels and nonfiction books adapted into television melodramas.

Breaking Out of the Novel

In *La Reina del Sur,* Pérez-Reverte, a former war correspondent, now prolific author of "clever" whodunits and "intelligent thrillers" composes a fast-paced and engaging novel.[6] In addition to the media attention the book garnered, scholars have examined the novel's narrative structure (González 2003); the use of language to create an imaginary Mexico (Rodríguez Toro 2007); the interplay of race, gender, and regional identities in *narcodramas* (Benavides 2008); comparisons between Teresa Mendoza and other protagonists of novels of the drug trade (González Flores 2010); and the portrayal of protagonist Teresa Mendoza as embodying a twenty-first century postmetropolis (Routon 2007). The novel begins with an ominous phone call that drives Teresa Mendoza from her oasis—the apartment she shares with her boyfriend, el Güero Dávila, a pilot who smuggles drugs for the Sinaloa cartel. Dávila has prepared her for this particular phone call, which if received, means that he has been murdered and that she must run from hitmen who are being sent to kill her. Epifanio Vargas, the local drug lord and Dávila's employer, magnanimously grants Teresa a way out of Mexico. She finds herself in Melilla, a Spanish enclave in Morocco near the Strait of Gibraltar, where she works in a bar. There, she meets and falls for Santiago Fisterra, an expert smuggler of hashish. She begins to work with him, but after the Spanish Coast Guard chases them down during a hashish run, Fisterra dies, and Teresa is arrested and sent to prison. There, she meets Patty O'Ferrell, her cellmate and later business partner. When they are released, Teresa begins to build the foundations of her drug empire.

The central conflict of the novel is the narrator's attempt to fashion a consistent narrative of Teresa Mendoza's life. His efforts are constantly placed into question because of the different versions he encounters along his journey. The novel brings together two different narrative voices to tell Mendoza's story: an omniscient point of view that follows Teresa's life story and a first-person narrator named after the author himself. The narrator chronicles his search for the "truth" about Teresa based on his own research and interviews with people who knew her in an attempt to flesh out her life story. He reconstructs her development from a narco's *morra* to narcoqueen; he "tracks her across three continents for the last eight months and her long journey out and back again was much more

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[6] A *New York Times* review of the novel describes Pérez-Reverte as "a leading figure in the literary subgenre that might be defined as thrillers for people who don't want to be seen reading thrillers: Pérez-Reverte flatters his reader's sophistication and intelligence while delivering suspenseful stories that don't outstay their welcome" (Dibdin 2004).

interesting to [him] than the books she'd read" (Perez-Reverte 2004, 6). The narrator goes on to describe in detail his only meeting with the inscrutable Mendoza, who after twelve years of absence, returns to Culiacán, Sinaloa. Here, the narrator implies that despite this being the novel's second chapter, it is really the final chapter in his search for the "truth"; this story, like his search for the "real" Teresa Mendoza, is coming to an end: "The only thing lacking was the ending, but I would have that, too, in a few hours. Like her, all I had to do was sit and wait" (10). His understanding of her comes less from this brief, frustrating yet illuminating interaction and more from the dogged search and hundreds of conversations he has had with those who met Teresa over the course of her twelve-year ascent to power. The novel, then, becomes about both Teresa Mendoza and the narrator who reconstructs her life events and creates the character for the reader. He muses: "that rainy morning in Culiacán, I knew that the woman sitting before me would never be the real Teresa Mendoza, but another woman who was taking her place, and who was, at the least in part created by me. This was a woman whose history I had reconstructed piece by piece, incomplete and contradictory, from people who'd known her, hated her and loved her" (6).

The novel begins with the premise that discovering the "truth" and the "real" story is nearly impossible, asking readers to think about storytelling and how memories are remembered by different people. Because Teresa reveals so little, the narrator constructs her based on the memories and judgments of the novel's other characters. He gathers information from many who have also pieced together their own interpretations of Teresa, including a police captain who "became a specialist in 'la Mexicana' [via] surveillance, videotapes, telephone taps" (255). This narrative technique seems to ponder the relationship between memory and reality and also between oral histories and reality. Because the characters recall Teresa based on their own realities, experiences and motives, she is not just one woman, but multiple women. The narrator self-consciously reconstructs Teresa, inserting himself within the story as her flawed "translator" and, more importantly, suggesting that his account is just one fiction (his own) out of multiple fictions.

Slippages between reality and fiction are hallmarks of the novel; the narrator includes fictionalized versions of real people, including Sinaloan authors and journalists Elmer Mendoza and César Güemes, whom he meets on his journey. He uses real news reports, thematizing the critical confrontation of reality and fiction that is the "dual interest of postmodernist notions of fiction and history" (Hutcheon 1989, 19). This literary affinity between fiction and reality is an integral part of the narrator's search for the real Teresa, which he admits is an elusive endeavor even as his and other characters' discursive imaginations reveal their prejudices, assumptions, and judgments. The narrator is the postmodern journalist who is politically and culturally implicated in the history he writes; his work tells us as much about him as it does about the period he investigates and explores. His reading and translation of Teresa also reveal and reproduce class and color consciousness, gender stereotypes, arbitrary violence, and political corruption and decadence related to the drug trade.

In this and in many other stories about women in narcotrafficking stories, physical descriptions are often used to introduce them and construct their characters in public discourse. The female body is narrated as "a surface inscribed by social practices [and] acted upon in discursively constructed

institutional settings" (McDowell 2007, 49). In the novel Teresa seems to transcend her gender and is able to "behave like a man." Near the end of the book Elmer Mendoza exclaims, "There goes a girl with balls!" when Teresa survives an assassination attempt the night before she is to testify against Epifanio Vargas, the reformed drug lord, now senator, and the man who arranged for her escape from Mexico. She even attracts the interest of the press. One of the characters whom the narrator interviews later in the novel comments: "Her rise in that very dangerous world was a surprise to everyone… You've seen the press reports, I presume. The photos in *¡Hola!* and all that… she became powerful. A legend, they say. The Queen of the South. The reporters called her that… To us, she was always just La Mexicana" (257). Characters in the novel are fascinated by her inscrutability, which is sometimes attributed to her national identity and ethnic makeup. Throughout the novel, she is called *La Mexicana*, and much time is spent describing her appearance. One character observes that "her hair [was] parted in the middle and pulled back tight, the way they wore it in Mexico" (81). Later in the novel, Patty O'Ferrell, her friend and unreliable business partner, also comments on Teresa's hair, affectionately saying: "That hair pulled back so tight, with the part down the middle, looks wonderful on you. Very native… very picturesque, like a real Mexican peasant, you look dynamite" (194). Another character, Lobato, recalls his impression of Teresa when she was still a young *morra* in Sinaloa and notes her "indian-looking face" and her "tacky" wardrobe. Racialized and gendered descriptions in the novel are not limited to her physicality. Her quiet demeanor is attributed to her "Sinaloan fatalism" (99) and her "Aztec mask" (322). Characters in the novel underestimate her abilities and talents; her foreignness is one way that they understand her climb up the ladder. They attribute her ability to challenge the existing power structure of the cartels to her identity as *La Mexicana.* This rags-to-riches narrative "adds lower-class and race markers that lead to a more meaningful plot" (Benavides 2008, 167). Teresa Mendoza uses these assumptions to her advantage, capitalizing on a strategic transnational identity as a young woman from Sinaloa living unlawfully on the margins with fake immigration papers. Early in the novel, she is responsible for the accounts in the bar and also of finances associated with the hashish smuggling in which she and her love interest, Santiago, participate. Throughout the novel, she plays up, perhaps by design, her "Mexican" features and characteristics. For example when Teresa confronts Eddie Alvarez, the lawyer who promised to get her out of prison and instead stole her money, she "informed him slowly and in detail of the reason for her visit. She did so in her soft Mexican accent and with that air of a shy girl who seemed to have stumbled into all this by accident" (231). Teresa appears to be just another nonthreatening naïve ingenue of melodramas who has been duped by a shady villain. However, in that same soft voice, she informs Alvarez that he will be the legal representative for her new business, and he, not she, will go to jail if anything goes wrong. Eventually Teresa becomes a prudent, elegantly and discreetly dressed cartel boss who does her best to stay out of the spotlight. Her femininity and Mexican features are reinforced in order to soften the transgressive act of a woman suspected of participating in criminality. She also chooses a well-connected Spanish lawyer, Teo Aljarafe, to give a patina of respectability and legitimacy to her enterprise, Transer Naga. Her business acumen is limited to the bounds of a carefully constructed, gendered and racialized identity that reinforces her outsider status, the dimension of living outside borders, and shows how entering the male-coded world of the drug trade reaffirms but also deconstructs gender roles and hierarchies.

Another way in which reality and fiction come together is that the narrator's observations reinscribe traditional expectations of womanhood and ethnic identity. The narrator accentuates her ethnic makeup as a "mestiza," a term that has deep and complex cultural significance in Mexico, but can be translated as someone of "mixed race," white and Indian. This becomes a positive attribute of how Teresa is imagined: as an attractive young woman who inspires love and protection by others because of her otherness. However, Teresa subverts the narrator's efforts to interpret her within that framework. These assumptions reflect the narrator's discomfort with the ways Mendoza crosses the bounds of traditional womanhood, challenges social norms, and subverts the relationship between authors and their literary creations. Though her identity is repackaged during the course of the novel into "Queen of the South," her identity as female, underprivileged, mestiza, Mexican, and immigrant is trafficked; she is still a colonized subject who slips between borders. For Pérez-Reverte, Teresa Mendoza embodies cultural ideas about Mexico in general and the northern region in particular, and she becomes "a circulating commodity that is quantified, bartered and moved across transnational lines" (Venkatesh 2015, 7). Cultural historian Joanne Hershfield refers to the transnational as a "set of economic socio-political, cultural and interpersonal forces that link states, institutions, and people across geographic and political boundaries" (2010, 172). The novel and the character can be seen as an example of transactional and transnational cultural mestizaje, which, similarly to the drug trade, links countries and markets and foregrounds the deeply complicated histories and realities that bind countries and markets together. It is important to acknowledge how Pérez-Reverte's identity and privilege as a white male Spanish author affect the novel's success and complicate the transnational nature of the text; after all, a male European writer is writing about Mexico, a former colony.

The narrator attempts to contain the character within this narrative frame, but she eludes his efforts to sift through the multiple versions of the character. After an extensive scene in which Patty, in Pygmalion-like fashion, instructs Teresa about clothing choices to highlight her "picturesque… Mexican peasant" look, the narrator muses: "More Teresas kept popping up during this time— strangers, unfamiliar women who had always been there..." (230). He does not recognize these different versions and meets them with resistance. Teresa takes advantage of the many cultural stereotypes that other characters have about her identity as *La Mexicana*. The narrator cannot fully limit her within textual borders and, as he reflects in the novel's final pages, she will exist beyond its confines. His speculation at the end of the novel proves prophetic: multiple songs have been written about the character, and she has spawned television shows and a sequel to the telenovela. Teresa has moved from the novel to alternative versions of the (fictional) original thanks to her being a dynamic and mobile figure that circulates between, within, and, most importantly, *outside* borders. She resists easy categorization and thus can be—and has been—reinterpreted within different genres.

Teresa, Queen of Narcocultura

Miami-based Telemundo, Spain's Antena 3, and Colombia's Caracol produced the telenovela adaptation of *La Reina del Sur*. The telenovela premiered on February 28, 2011, and was the network's highest rated premiere for a telenovela. The program frequently dominated its time slot, even over

English language programming on other major American networks. *La Reina del Sur* completed its 63-episode run on Telemundo and its 13-episode run on Antena 3 simultaneously on May 30, 2011. With 4.2 million viewers, the final episode was the highest rated broadcast in Telemundo's nineteen-year history and beat all the English language American television networks. Episodes were consistently number one in the top time slots, and the first broadcast of the final episode exceeded English language shows (Ng 2011). The telenovela was so popular that it has been rebroadcast on network television and can currently be found on Netflix. Writers and journalists have examined the telenovela's popularity among a broad range of audiences and efforts by Telemundo to "preserve the profitable US Hispanic market" while appealing to other Spanish-speaking communities and global markets. This makes sense, given that the telenovela was coproduced by companies in the US, Colombia, and Spain.

Key changes between the novel and the telenovela adaptation are remarkable, as several writers and scholars have noted (Dunn and Ibarra 2015; Rivero 2017). Plot differences include more time spent exploring the intrigue and macho posturing among the members of the cartels searching for Teresa and more fleshing out of her romantic life with the odd addition of a DEA agent who, from the beginning of the telenovela, is also pursuing Teresa. These depictions are told in short scenes that cut quickly between Sinaloa, the US-Mexico border, and Spain. Another key difference in terms of themes and narrative development includes greater emphasis on cultural differences between Spain and Mexico. For example, Spanish characters comment on Teresa's accent and, in addition to calling her *La Mexicana*, assign her the sobriquet *sudaca*, a derogatory term for someone from South America. They also comment on immigration, sexuality, and gender stereotypes.

This desire to appeal to a broader audience familiar with telenovelas also reconfigures Teresa as a protagonist by making her more sympathetic. As Rivero notes: "One of the most captivating aspects of *La Reina del Sur* and its protagonist is Teresa's strength that allows her to subvert the narco-patriarchal system without losing her humanity and her empathy for others. . . . We empathize and support [her], despite her myriad drug-trafficking-related faults, because she is a melodramatic antiheroine" (2017, 146). In the first ten episodes or so, Teresa faces many moments of peril, some of which are departures from the original source material, including being arrested in San Diego and Melilla and almost deported to Mexico. She encounters the same dangers and obstacles as any other telenovela heroine: jealous rivals, corrupt politicians, businessmen and police, and the patriarchal imperative to protect her honor. The heroine must also help her imperiled friends and negotiate a star-crossed romance. In this televised version, there is no narrator to intervene or construct the story for us or to explain her motivations. She is no longer a character that lives solely within the pages of a novel. Rather, she is embodied in the Mexican actress Kate del Castillo, and the story is told from Teresa's point of view. In contrast to the novel, we see, hear, identify, and understand Teresa's motivations, her loyalty to El Güero, and her modesty. She prefers to work as a waitress and not a prostitute, even if it means earning less money. In one early episode, for example, Teresa discovers Santiago's line of work (smuggling) and rejects his advances because of it. She also has an inherent sense of justice; she confronts a male bartender who is stealing money from the women workers at the bar. In fact, it is not until much later in the series, once the "real" villains are revealed, that we see

Teresa start cooperating with Santiago to smuggle hashish. By delaying Mendoza's entry into the drug trade until approximately the fifteenth episode, there is a deep connection between audiences and the actress fashioned by means of emotional solidarity and a clear code of ethical behavior.

Scholars attribute the success of the novel and the telenovela to the portrayal of a complex, "enigmatic and multifaceted woman who combines fragility and innocence with hardness and the ability to be violent and strike back when necessary" (Palaversich 2006, 97). Like a heroine in a melodrama, "at the same time Teresa conserves innocence and an innate sense of justice" (Palaversich 2006, 97). She is violent and the head of an international drug ring, but she is intensely loyal, judicious with her money, prudent in her public behavior and has simple tastes. In keeping with effective melodrama, the character helps "set up an alternative moral structure to the officializing discourse of the nation" (Benavides 2008, 15). She is a sympathetic character who inspires trust for those who watch the telenovela and read the novel: "the origin of [her] dubious fortune quickly and conveniently forgotten, . . . Teresa becomes a successful capitalist entrepreneur of the kind eulogized by neoliberal capitalism" (Benavides 2008, 96). These simplifications are like maps of a cultural terrain that is used to give direction to complicated melodramatic narratives.

As *La Reina del Sur* grew in popularity, Teresa's story extended beyond the limits of the telenovela. There are multiple *corrido* songs about her, as the novel's narrator predicts, and the stories proliferate via this prefiguration, which helps expand the narrative representation of women in popular media who are involved in the drug trade. *Corridos* are examples of popular melodramatic narratives with romantic elements, simple storylines, clear resolutions. The telenovela's theme song is a *corrido* that was written and performed by Los Cuates de Sinaloa. A second version of the same *corrido* was recorded by the venerable *Norteño* musical group, Los Tigres del Norte. Both versions retell the major plot points while highlighting Teresa's ingenuity and business acumen. These characteristics are attributed to her being born and raised in Culiacán, Sinaloa.

The songs about Teresa by the two musical groups illustrate how Teresa's character is reconstructed in several primary texts in different media. Both songs admirably retell Teresa's many examples of male-coded bravery where she is clearly the hero in compressed recountings of the telenovela and the original novel. Differences between the retelling of her life story, as it moves from genre to genre, highlight how profoundly Teresa and her story have diverged from the original. Crossgenre expressions put to rest the notion of one "real" Teresa; each new iteration is now as real as the next. The songs are clearly capitalizing on her popularity but also point to shifts in cultural, social, and political landscapes in which drug violence continues to plague communities; cartels struggle over the control of plazas and other public spaces; local and national government officials purport to fight against them; and newspaper reports expose collusion between cartels and officials. As a result, the general public questions the credibility of government institutions and representatives.

At the same time as Los Tigres del Norte were winning awards for their song about Teresa Mendoza, authorities in northern Mexico banned the group from performing, claiming that they were glorifying violence and drug cartels. Others in the media critiqued banning songs that reflect the lived experiences of many of the communities impacted by the drug cartel violence affecting the country.

Additionally, because government, police, and military officials have been implicated in the drug trade over the years, many doubt the official versions of arrests, statistics, and news accounts. Howard Campbell, author of *Drug War Zone: Frontline Dispatches from the Streets of El Paso and Juarez,* for example, reports: "The Mexican press prints a luridly detailed description of events, and then later prints a completely contradictory but equally plausible alternative account. The government denies that any incident took place. There is no reconciliation of the distinct versions. Myth, folklore, *chisme*, and unverifiable stories endlessly proliferate" (2009, 14). Banning songs was interpreted as a way to quash people's doubts about official narratives. This contradiction makes evaluating what is true and what is false a challenging and complicated endeavor. Melodramatic narratives like *corridos* can enter this space to help construct consistent accounts. The drug trade became a looming presence over most aspects of Mexican society, and *narcocultura* in the form of music, fashion, art, literature, television, and movies dominated its cultural expressions. *Corridos* can be about fictional or actual events; however, that a song about the fictional Teresa Mendoza was at the center of the controversy speaks to the ways melodrama moves fluidly between them. Debates about Teresa Mendoza are not limited to musical retellings of her adventures. At the intersection of reality, fiction, and melodrama are those stories that attribute Teresa Mendoza's origin story to real women, some accused of being queenpins in their own right. Many credit Sandra Avila Beltrán's story as inspiration for Pérez-Reverte's novel, despite his assertions to the contrary. Also known as *La Reina del Pacífico,* Avila Beltrán was accused of heading the Sinaloa cartel, one of the most powerful in Mexico in the 1990s.[7] In a clear example of how reality and fiction work together to the point that the line between them is hard to define, during one interview Avila Beltrán *herself* criticized Mexican president Felipe Calderón for first abusing his political office, second, for holding her in prison for over ten months without charges filed against her, and finally, for confusing her with the protagonist of the telenovela: "[Calderón's] words felt like an avalanche collapsing over me. He said I'm one of the most dangerous criminals in Latin America and ignorantly called me the Queen of the Pacific or the South, just like that literally mistook one for the other. Everyone knows that the Queen of the South is a fictional character the writer Pérez-Reverte invented and I am not a fictional character; I am real, made of flesh and blood" (quoted in Scherer García 2013). Acknowledging that Teresa Mendoza is fictional, Avila Beltrán strategically uses the character as a way to critique what many already saw as a corrupt government on which to place blame for the exploitation and violence plaguing Mexico during this time. As noted earlier, institutions and authority figures will never simply provide accurate information. Avila Beltrán, then, can capitalize on Calderón's mistake, calling it a lie while she positions herself as an aggrieved, innocent woman who is speaking out against a corrupt politician who has falsely accused her of being a cold-blooded cartel queen.

In the same way that the narrator struggles to fully understand the fictional Teresa and the truth of her story in the popular media, Teresa's origin story, as told in the novel, also becomes part of this news account that pits a Mexican president against a suspected cartel boss who insists she is

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[7] Sandra Avila Beltrán was accused of conspiracy to traffic drugs and of having links to organized crime. The more serious charges were eventually dropped, but she was extradited to the United States and put on trial in a federal court in Florida. Avila Beltrán took a plea deal and was deported to Mexico, where she was incarcerated for seven years in a federal prison.

innocent. The narrator in the book, himself a character, struggles to understand Teresa's character and the truth of her story as depicted in popular media. This is an example of how possible truths, interpretations, and lies in the real world collide with and complement the fictional story. The government's lies overlap with the "lie" of fiction, which, in turn, overlaps with Sandra's manipulations, exaggerations, lies, and/or the part of her story that might be "true" to some degree. So, the narrator/character is depicted as struggling with Teresa's story as written by the author. And this same conflation and confusion manifests in Sandra Avila Beltrán's interview.

Moving Between Fictions to Realities

Events in January 2016 catapulted *La Reina del Sur*, the character Teresa Mendoza, and actress Kate del Castillo back into the international spotlight: the arrest of notorious drug trafficker, Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán and actor Sean Penn's notorious *Rolling Stone* article, "El Chapo Speaks" (2016).[8] It was later revealed that the actress had been in contact with Guzmán for over a year and that she orchestrated the controversial meeting between Guzmán and Penn. In the tradition of melodrama, this story has many parallels to the novel: Teresa is blinded by love, inadvertently involved with a drug lord, exiled from her country, and pursued by a murky band of government officials, news outlets, and a dogged journalist. Melodrama, as discussed earlier, synthesizes the real with the unreal and provides a level of emotional involvement that assures audience participation in the narrative.

Given the events that unfolded and the stories told to explain them, it is evident that not just audiences became emotionally invested in the narrative. In this case, however, the protagonist is not Teresa, but Kate del Castillo, who seemingly believed in the story so much that she began to behave like the fictional character. The novel's protagonist, Teresa Mendoza, repackaged in a telenovela, takes on a new persona; subsequently, a new melodramatic narrative and text come into being. In January 2012, Kate del Castillo—never one to shy away from controversy or strong opinions—took to Twitter to express her mistrust of the Mexican government. She wrote, in Spanish: "Today I believe more in El Chapo Guzmán than I do in the governments that hide truths from me, even if they are painful, who hide the cures for cancer, *AIDS*, etc., for their own benefit. *MR. CHAPO, WOULDN'T IT BE COOL IF YOU STARTED TRAFFICKING WITH THE GOOD? . . . COME ON SEÑOR, YOU WOULD BE THE HERO OF HEROES. LET'S TRAFFIC WITH LOVE, YOU KNOW HOW*" (qtd. in Draper 2016). Her tweets caused an uproar over social media and in the press and, as suggested by journalists, caught Guzmán's attention. However, it appears that the tweets themselves would not have had the same impact in the media or with Guzmán had it not been for the

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[8] The article published by *Rolling Stone* on January 9, 2016, was immediately controversial. For some, it was because of Penn's seemingly sympathetic portrayal of El Chapo, for others it was an embarrassment for the Mexican government because he was able to "find" El Chapo when the Mexican government could not. Many also criticized his cavalier reporting, particularly in light of the real dangers Mexican journalists face as they cover the drug trade. Over one hundred journalists have been killed in the last twenty years, making it one of the most dangerous places for journalists in the world (Ahmed 2017). In the three-part Netflix series, *The Day I Met El Chapo* (2017), Kate del Castillo also criticized Penn for, among other things, lying to her about his intentions and for putting her life in danger.

fact that del Castillo played a cartel boss in the highly popular telenovela. Del Castillo herself sheepishly admitted during her March 2016 interview with Diane Sawyer that Guzmán's fascination had less to do with her and more to do with the character: "It was more that he . . . probably had a crush on Teresa Mendoza in a way [and not me], because he loved that series so much" ("Kate del Castillo Interview" 2016). In response to the controversy, as del Castillo noted in the same interview, her older sister, journalist Verónica del Castillo, angrily reminded her, "You are not Teresa Mendoza."

Both Guzmán and del Castillo seem more enamored with Teresa than with each other. The story monopolized the headlines of both the international and Mexican press because of the revelations (dramatically chronicled in the official press) of the more than a year-long relationship between del Castillo and Guzmán, as disclosed by the extensive text-based correspondence between them. This textual relationship between the two, and the public's fascination with it, continued for months and unfolded like an old-fashioned serialized melodrama with episodes meant to be read as a sequence of interrelated events, albeit one written for the twenty-first century, in which social media helped move the story forward. In what one article calls an "extensive and intense" series of messages in which Guzmán refers to del Castillo as "ermoza" [sic], he constantly urges her to visit him, offers to take care of her, and ends a number of texts with "te quiero" ("'El Chapo' se enamoró de La Reina del Sur: Kate," 2016). Given that he was on the run, this is both jarring and humorous. Some headlines highlight the messages' "flirtatious" tone. Guzmán does seem to be besotted with her; he spends quite a bit of time deciding on the "perfect" cell phone for her, requesting that his associates procure the best one, preferably pink, because it is "a woman's color." In addition to focusing on Guzmán's infatuation with del Castillo, news reports highlighted elements of melodrama—star-crossed romance, an attractive heroine, and heightened emotions—and the connections between a fictional queenpin and her presumptive king. One article, for example, affirmed: "Como si se tratara de un guión de telenovela, la relación entre 'El Chapo' Guzmán y la actriz mexicana Kate del Castillo sigue dando de qué hablar" (Martínez Ahrens 2016). These stories and descriptions position Kate del Castillo as the protagonist of a melodrama of her own making.

Of Memes and Melodrama

Similar to melodrama, social media and use of memes are inventive modes employed to make sense of complicated situations. They sift through truth and fiction and use humor to express frustration about stories that stretch the boundaries of certainty and fabricated reality. According to Bush, "because it is plot-driven and often oriented to storytelling instead of ornate aesthetics, melodrama is very much adaptable to mass media" (2014, 32). Alternative and innovative versions of stories emerge, particularly when attempts to control the flow of information are in conflict. A fascinating article about microblogging practices by Mexican citizens living through the drug war notes: "Social media have emerged as a communication channel people use to connect with others and get information in extraordinary moments of crisis," especially when institutions are weakened or are no longer seen as reliable arbiters of information (Monroy-Hernández et al. 2012). Mendoza has taken us on a journey that moves from a novel, to a song, to news accounts, and to social media as a new form

of mass communication. Memes provide spaces for collective social participation without regard for geography or national identities. Illustrating deep and rich cultural iconography, memes sometimes include short amounts of text that engage with a complicated political story, the latest scandal or cultural event. They are often repurposed for a different story. Memes, then, provide simple to understand, often humorous, visual narratives counter to the reportage of real events in mainstream press outlets. The best of these present information in a fashion that resonates with audiences precisely because they are based on recognizable images.

As the story of del Castillo and Guzmán's relationship unfolded in the media, memes and gifs related to the case multiplied on social media platforms. Some memes about del Castillo and El Chapo portray the film *Casablanca*'s Rick and Ilsa while others depict the two as random potential love interests swiping left on each other's Tinder profiles; both of these visuals are identifiable by most audiences. One in particular situates the story in a uniquely Mexican context and evokes the golden age of Mexican melodrama, indelibly etched in Mexico's cultural history. Similar to films, memes can be popular narrations of particular social and cultural ideals and realities. On its face, the message of the memes speaks to how the public digested the story as a romantic relationship between the two. However, it also speaks to the larger context of how the story was framed: as a lovelorn Guzmán awkwardly expressing his feelings of being smitten with del Castillo while harkening back to a time during which melodrama reigned.

Memes and social media used one specific image from the 1957 Mexican melodrama *Tizoc* to depict El Chapo and Kate as the tragic lovers Tizoc and María, the film's protagonists. The original image is from a pivotal scene in the film in which iconic actor Pedro Infante, as the indigenous Tizoc, sings the song "Te quiero más que mis ojos" to his mestizo love interest, María, portrayed by María Félix. In the memes, the heads of Guzmán and del Castillo are transposed onto bodies of Infante and Félix. They sit across from each other, both dressed in indigenous garb, surrounded by a lake and mountains, implying that their love is as pure and bucolic as the scenery. Tizoc's romantic and humble admission is also a declaration made by Guzmán in one of his many texts to del Castillo.

In the same way that Teresa's story has diverged profoundly from its original source material, the meme is now as real as any another version of Teresa's life and its origin. It shortens the distance between one fictional, melodramatic, star-crossed romance between two icons of Mexican cinema (Félix and Infante) with the real and also seemingly impossible relationship between two ubiquitous public figures (Guzmán and del Castillo) brought together because of a fictional character, Teresa Mendoza.

The End? Or, The Persistence of Melodrama

As with any good melodrama, the saga continues. New chapters are written and stories are retold for a new generation of transnational audiences who employ versions of Teresa to communicate with each other, explain complicated news stories, and filter what is provable and what is probable.

Guzmán now sits in a cell in the US, serving a life sentence for multiple drug-related and financial crimes. As a consequence of her involvement with Guzmán, del Castillo faced investigations for possible money laundering in Mexico. She continued to work on dramatic series, including the successful Netflix series *Ingobernable,* but did not travel to Mexico for over three years from fear of being indicted and having her financial assets frozen. As a way to challenge the avalanche of often contradictory news reports about her involvement with Guzmán, del Castillo starred in a three-part Netflix series *The Day I Met El Chapo* in which she ruefully admits that, had it not been for Teresa Mendoza, events would have unfolded differently. Del Castillo also reprised the role of Teresa Mendoza in the *La Reina del Sur* sequel. During press junkets to promote the series, she was inevitably and repeatedly asked about Guzmán and his fascination with Mendoza.

As the examples above show, melodrama is a malleable cultural expression that creates spaces for communities to make sense of complicated social and political situations. Teresa Mendoza embodies the possibilities of narrating across the borders of melodramatic narratives to distinguish between what is true and what is plausible. Her melodramatic character moves within a simplified universe where good prevails over evil. She can restore justice and stability in times of social uncertainty. In Pérez-Reverte's novel, the fascination with the character is based on her ability to remake herself. As she grows larger than life and is remade by audiences across genres and locations, the more elusive she is and the more diluted her identity becomes. This is also what induces audiences to keep "reading." As "queen" she is able to transcend borders and infiltrate the popular imagination. She inspires songs, television shows, love interests, and a relationship with a real cartel boss. She is no longer bound by the borders of a particular genre, geography, or time. The fictional character Teresa Mendoza has slipped through Pérez Reverte's narrator's fingers once again—just as she did throughout the novel itself—escaping the boundaries of the printed page and morphing into different genres for different audiences, blurring the lines between fiction and reality. These new audiences are embracing Teresa in all genres in both the Mexican and US versions, which then leads to audiences embracing the real-life saga of El Chapo and Kate del Castillo. The countless memes are also increasingly transnational on both sides of the Mexico-US border. Perhaps this also contributes to Teresa's appeal. Her image is malleable and can be understood by different people in different ways. She is elusive, a shape shifter.

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