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Uneasy Lies the Head That Wears a Crown: Narcoqueens, Beauty Queens, and Melodrama in Narconarratives

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The melodramatic narrative mode creates complex realities and news events as logical and consumable stories. This article considers the ways that popular media portray the cases of Sandra Avila Beltrán and Laura Zúñiga, both arrested on drug-related charges in separate incidents that overlap with narconarratives. My analysis demonstrates that Avila Beltrán's and Zúñiga's life stories intrigued audiences because, in the context of melodramas, women as criminals is an attractive trope that counters expected "feminine" behavior and challenges constructions of national ideals and respectable femininity. While Avila Beltrán embodies a femme fatale figure, Zúñiga maps to an ingénue. These tropes of idealized femininity soften the transgressive acts of the two women suspected of participating in criminality associated with the transnational drug trade, which is coded as masculine. Their narratives redefine melodramatic gendered performance in the context of a hypermasculine narcoculture that thrives in an age of globalization and neoliberal policies. Their stories are emblematic of the ways that women in narcoculture are narrated, revealing cultural anxieties about changing gender roles in the context of political instability and excessive violence.

Keywords: melodrama, narcoculture, criminality, Mexico, feminist cultural studies

El modo narrativo melodramático convierte realidades complejas y eventos noticiosos en historias lógicas y consumibles. Este artículo considera las formas en que los medios populares retratan los casos de Sandra Ávila Beltrán y Laura Zúñiga, ambas arrestadas por cargos relacionados con las drogas en incidentes separados que coinciden en parte con las narconarrativas. Mi análisis demuestra que las historias de Ávila Beltrán y Zúñiga intrigaron al público porque, en el contexto de los melodramas, las mujeres como criminales es un tropo atractivo que contrarresta el esperado comportamiento "femenino" y desafía las construcciones de los ideales nacionales y la feminidad respetable. Mientras Ávila Beltrán encarna una figura de la femme fatale, Zúñiga deviene una ingenua. Estos tropos de feminidad idealizada suavizan los actos transgresores de las dos mujeres sospechosas de participar en la criminalidad asociada al tráfico transnacional de drogas, que está codificado como masculino. Sus narrativas redefinen la actuación melodramática de género en el contexto de una narcocultura hipermasculina que prospera en una era de globalización y políticas neoliberales. Sus historias son emblemáticas de las formas en que se les narran a las mujeres en la

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narcocultura, revelando ansiedades culturales sobre el cambio de roles de género en el contexto de inestabilidad política y excesiva violencia.

Palabras clave: melodrama, narcocultura, criminalidad, México, estudios culturales feministas

Introduction: Of Queens and Queendoms

Accused of forging alliances between Mexican and Colombian drug cartels, Sandra Avila Beltrán, dubbed "Queen of the Pacific," was arrested in September 2007 outside a restaurant in Mexico City. Similar to narratives in televised melodramas, Avila Beltrán's life story, arrest, and trials intrigued the Mexican and international press.[1] Avila Beltrán is related to many of Mexico's notorious narcos, including Miguel Angel Félix Gallardo, chief of the Guadalajara cartel, one of the most powerful organizations in the 1980s and early 1990s. She is considered royalty among families associated with international drug trafficking in Mexico, and her regal title also speaks to her ascent to power in the Tijuana Cartel. Laura Zúñiga, the second queen in this story, portrays a different kind of character with melodramatic characteristics: that of the inherently good girl blinded by love. Zúñiga had been active in local and regional beauty pageants while studying to be an elementary school teacher. She won her first royal title of *Nuestra Belleza Sinaloa* in 2008 and was later crowned *Nuestra Belleza Mexico*. Zúñiga was arrested for drug trafficking by the Mexican army and state police in December 2008 in Zapopan, a city near Guadalajara. She was apprehended alongside her boyfriend, Orlando García Urquiza, a suspected member of the Juárez cartel, and a few of his associates. Zúñiga's situation is similar to Avila Beltrán's in that the news accounts focused on her physical appearance and highlighted her femininity.

Using a feminist cultural studies approach, which focuses on the practices of everyday life in different cultural texts in order to call attention to gendered experiences, in this article, I examine televised news reports, newspaper articles, official police interrogation videos, and various interviews to highlight the gendered language used in the construction of the public stories of Avila Beltrán and Zúñiga. I argue that the ways that popular media portray the two cases redefine melodramatic gendered performance in the context of a hypermasculine narcoculture that thrives in an age of globalization and neoliberal policies. Further, I suggest that these two queens embody a never-ending process of aesthetic reconstructions. Their bodies become contested sites of meaning that challenge narratives of national ideals, respectable femininity, and criminal behavior. I conclude that while Sandra Avila Beltrán embodies the femme fatale figure who seduces men and audiences with her appearance and demeanor, Laura Zúñiga maps to the ingénue who is desirable and beautiful precisely because of her apparent innocence. The two represent different public personas; however, they are judged by similar gendered

[1] A *Guardian* article published a week after her arrest purports to be about how she "enthralls" Mexican media. It is interesting to note the detail the reporter gives in describing Avila Beltrán's good looks and charm. The article takes pains to point out her "skin-tight jeans" and "figure-hugging sweater" (Tuckman 2007). Her ability to enchant is therefore international.

expectations. These tropes of idealized femininity soften the transgressive acts of the two women suspected of participating in criminality associated with the transnational drug trade, which has conventionally been coded as masculine. In this way, they reveal certain cultural anxieties about changing gender roles in the context of political instability and excessive violence, while also unwittingly supporting the continued reproduction of gendered social practices, behaviors, and cultural expectations.

As we will see in both these cases, women as criminals is often discussed in terms of how their criminality goes against expected "feminine" behavior. The audience is attracted to the story, revels in the details, but blames the woman for duping them; women are too pretty to be criminals, and when they are, the audience feels betrayed because they may be forced to rethink the ways that they define expected feminine behavior, which cannot include criminal acts. But when it does, as in the cases of Avila Beltrán and Zúñiga, it upends notions of feminine practices and social roles. Anything that challenges these entrenched ideas forces the audience and media to question them, which is not only uncomfortable, but also it goes against social, political, and cultural norms. Therefore, the resistance can be fierce, deeply personal, and institutional.

The individual stories of Avila Beltrán and Zúñiga embody political and social disruption, violate prescribed norms of femininity, and transgress constructed notions of female behavior. Lynne Joyrich in "All that Television Allows: TV Melodrama, Postmodernism and Consumer Culture" (1988) suggests that an excessive concern with domesticity, family, and female behavior is the cornerstone of melodrama. In Mexican melodramatic narratives "good" women are categorized as mothers, caretakers, and noble arbiters of family honor, while "bad" women exemplify loose morals that thrive on scandal and resist existing social norms. These gendered accounts become even more complex when they intersect with representations of the drug trade in popular media. Narcoculture and narconarratives are not new, but they "designate a multiplicity of dramas expressed in antagonistic languages, . . . that expand beyond national borders," and "change over time to reflect shifts in laws, technology, and politically and criminologically infused popular interpretations" (Carey 2014, 4–5).

The audience and media are captivated by the narrative of transgressive "attractive" women like Avila Beltrán in the drug trade precisely because it violates social norms, but at the same time they are offended by it. It is the patriarchal paradox of seduction, blame, and judgement of the "fallen woman," which is a hallmark of melodrama. The conformative beauty that has been inscribed through gender roles is then reinscribed as betrayal of that beauty and of those roles. It is the women's "fault" for beguiling them, and therefore the women must be punished not only for their crimes but for their disobedience and lack of adherence to their role of alluring, pure object. Women may hold power in the domestic realm of melodrama, but never in the highly masculine world of the drug cartels. They can win beauty pageants but not find the same kind of success as their male counterparts in the highly remunerative world of drug money. Like the protagonist in a melodrama, society is put in peril through real and embodied actions, not just through what is perceived to be subversive gendered enactment but through actual criminal behavior by the "feminine." Laws and roles are broken; the woman (the

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feminine) is criminalized and blamed for being a woman. Like Avila Beltrán's, Zúñiga's purported criminality violates acceptable female behavior and characteristics, particularly physical beauty, and makes the supposition of femininity suspect and inauthentic, because it was achieved artificially and with ill-gotten drug trafficking money. What makes their stories different, however, is that in Zúñiga's case, social constructions of innocence and modesty clash with overt displays of her physical body, whereas in Avila Beltrán's situation, notions of innocence and modesty are never evoked.

The Melodramatic Realm

Exaggerated emotional reactivity and excessive sentimentality are easily recognizable and familiar features of melodrama, and they help to explain its popularity and ubiquity. Peter Brooks in *The Melodramatic Imagination* (1976) supports this argument. In his seminal study, he argues that melodrama—usually associated with popular culture—is an important mode of cultural expression with its own logic and reasons for being. From novels, serialized stories in newspapers, and later radio, movies and telenovelas, melodrama crosses genre boundaries and exceeds rote interpretation.[2] In her excellent study, *Mexican Melodrama: Film and Nation from the Golden Age to the New Wave*, Elena Lahr-Vivaz suggests that because melodrama can be embodied in narratives as diverse as stage plays, corridos, film, and television dramas, it transcends narrative genres; it is not just a form, but rather a method, a way of narrating. This shape-shifting mode has been successfully reinvented and is "capable of assuming a variety of guises depending on the environment in which it is encountered" (2016, 11).

Melodrama's malleability creates space for critical explorations of the boundaries of the genre itself and for characters in the melodramatic narrative. Matthew Bush's *Pragmatic Passions: Melodrama and Latin American Social Narrative* (2014) develops the idea that, by expanding the boundaries of melodrama's central role as social narrative in Latin America, melodrama is more than an artistic category or aesthetic endeavor. He suggests that it "functions not only as a mode for comprehending dramatic action in a given text, but also as a modern means of understanding social and historical processes that are too abstract to grasp in any sort of quantitative manner" (14). The melodramatic narrative mode is not confined to novels and the realm of fiction but rather makes complicated realities and news events logical and consumable. Expressed in multiple aesthetic forms, characters embody particular elements of melodrama that turn intricate realities into familiar and accessible narratives.

Sandra Avila Beltrán's and Laura Zúñiga's individual dramas unfold as the shifting political terrain and narcocultures of Mexico become more complex. At the time of Avila Beltrán's arrest in 2007 and Zúñiga's apprehension in December 2008, Mexico faced intensified violence linked to the drug trade, predominantly in northern parts of the country. In 2006, Mexican President Felipe Calderón prompted

[2] Melodrama transcends genres and borders, and due to the large Latinx population, it is gaining ground in US popular culture. After the 2020 Democratic Party Convention, Mexican actor Jaime Camil, best known to US audiences for his role as telenovela star Rogelio de la Vega on *Jane the Virgin*, distilled key events of the convention in melodramatic fashion. His "tele-Joe-vela" analogy highlighted the various heroes and villains of the 2020 US political landscape (cited in Chan 2020).

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a forceful campaign, a defining policy of his government, against Mexico's drug traffickers that was aggressively resisted by many of the cartels. As numerous reporters, activists, and scholars have criticized, instead of doing away with the cartels, this war on drugs led to the splintering of larger and more stable organizations into smaller factions, leading to more chaos and violence. This era also saw the increased public visibility of what began to be called "narcoculture," especially in relationship to corrido songs that were written about and for drug bosses. "Narratives of vice" like corridos, as historian Elaine Carey notes in *Women Traffickers: Mules, Bosses, and Organized Crime* (2014), predate the current focus on narcolanguage and the culture associated with narcotrafficking. She suggests that these narratives were part and parcel of efforts by both Mexican and US governments to control and regulate the flow of drugs in the early 1900s and that they "crossed borders and intersected to construct and reinforce national tales of woeful criminality" (4). Moreover, there are many melodramatic figures and themes found in these cultural expressions related to narcoculture: jealous rivals, corrupt politicians, businessmen, and police, and protecting one's honor.

This highly masculine world has shaped the local and national social fabric of Mexico. Narcodramas present masculine figures as antiheroes who challenge established moral codes while still presenting the patriarchal power structure. Their deeds and misdeeds stir emotions that audiences use to make sense of the drama and often violent events. Matthew Bush explores the connections between melodrama and sociopolitical discourse in narratives from early to mid-twentieth century and affirms: "Artistic and actual events, perceived through the melodramatic cipher, are grasped as emotionally accentuated episodes to be read in a sequence of interrelated occurrences, engaging the public's understanding of social order and the means by which it may be altered and bettered" (2014, 15). The increased visibility of women in narcotraffic and narcodramas constructs narratives that perpetuate an unbalanced division of gender roles and unequal social practices and behaviors. While news accounts make visible women's presence in social spaces traditionally reserved for hypermasculine actions and values, women are also criticized and ultimately circumscribed by these same expectations, thus reproducing gendered assumptions of acceptable behaviors, feelings, and emotions.[3]

This emphasis on emotions and characters as symbols of cultural values is a hallmark of melodrama and can be found in many of the numerous biographies, stories based on true events, and novels about women in narcotraffic published since the 1980s. Some of these include *Rosario Tijeras* (2004), Jorge Franco's exploration of gender, cartels, and violence in 1980s Medellín; Andrés López López's *Las fantásticas: las muñecas de la mafia* (2009), which recounts the complicated and luxury-filled lives of the wives and partners of Colombian drug lords; and Mía Flores's memoir, *Cartel Wives: A True Story of Deadly Decisions, Steadfast Love and Bringing Down El Chapo* (2018), about her and her sister's marriages to two brothers employed by El Chapo Guzmán. As the different book titles suggest, the stories easily

[3] In *The Labyrinth of Solitude* (1950), Octavio Paz diagnoses "Mexican identity" as plagued by a deep sense of inferiority and betrayal. The Mexican's feelings of inferiority arise from the fact that the Mexican (coded as male) is the son of La Malinche, the violated mother. Women become a symbol, the "other" in Paz's analysis of masculinity and femininity. In this rigid paradigm, Mexican women reflect these male dichotomies of power and embody either the violated mother or the saintly virgin. It is important to note the work of Chicanx feminist scholars who contest these archetypes as one-dimensional, patriarchal, and reductive binaries.

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lend themselves to melodrama because they highlight intrigue, themes of betrayal, honor, criminality, and love. Many of these novels and books, including *Rosario Tijeras* and *Las fantásticas: las muñecas de la mafia,* have been adapted into telenovelas. The melodramatic components in the stories facilitate the transformation of their idealized bodies into culturally symbolic objects.

Originating in Colombia in the late 1980s and adapted by US Spanish-language national television networks in the mid-2000s, telenovelas about the drug trade featuring female characters have been increasingly popular in recent years in Spanish-language media markets worldwide. For example, Telemundo, one of the top two Spanish-language broadcast networks in the US, has produced and shown countless telenovelas about the drug trade, including *Dueñas del paraíso* (2015), *Eva la Trailera* (2016), and *Señora Acero* (2014–2018). These shows have been received by audiences and critics alike with enthusiasm and loyalty, as evidenced by high ratings and multiple seasons.[4] In general, the multitude of telenovelas with narcotraffic as a major theme speaks to the current context within which the number of specific shows starring female characters is growing. While some of these melodramatic portrayals of women in the drug trade feature atypical portrayals of femininity across genres, many present female characters as black widows, dolls, and bosses. Traditional narcodramas that feature male drug lords contain similar stereotypes in which "women are secondary characters . . . that seem destined only to be objects of exchange. Men are the ones with public agency to control the flow of goods and commodities, and women are seen as another commodity, but of a sexual nature, to be fought over, won and handled" (Benavides 2008, 125). Many of the telenovelas in which female characters take center stage still highlight the seductive, sensual personalities of female protagonists.

Such depictions of sensuality and beauty are not limited to fiction. Similar portrayals can be found in print journalism as well as television news, the internet, blogs, and social media. Descriptions of narco queens and girlfriends—*narcoreinas* and *narconovias* like Avila Beltrán and Zúñiga—emphasize their physical appearance and their status as "queens" (heads of cartels) and "misses" (girlfriends, often beauty queens, who are romantically involved with cartel members). Their "flirtations" with organized crime construct characters that fit into melodramatic tropes of seductresses, innocent ingénues, and even dignified mothers.

Sandra Avila Beltrán: Queen among Queens

After her initial arrest in 2007, Sandra Avila Beltrán was imprisoned in Mexico until August 2012 and later extradited to the United States to confront charges of drug trafficking and cocaine possession in federal court. There, she took a plea deal and admitted to providing financial assistance from 2002 to 2004 to her then-boyfriend Juan Diego Espinosa Ramírez, a suspected drug trafficker known as "El

[4] Telenovelas are usually limited-run series, consisting of between 120 and 180 episodes; the most popular ones are often remade, but multiple seasons of the same telenovela are relatively new and, as Juan Piñón argues, are a reaction to a changing media landscape in which telenovela predominance is no longer guaranteed, compelling Spanish-language national television networks "not only to rethink their traditional telenovela narratives, but also to rework the genre" (2019, 205).

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Tigre." In August 2013, Avila Beltrán was deported to Mexico by ICE, which boasted about her deportation in a news release on their website: "ICE deports Sandra Avila Beltrán" (2013). The communiqué, in addition to summarizing the crimes for which she was convicted, features numerous pictures of a smiling Avila Beltrán being escorted to a plane by ICE agents. Upon her return to Mexico, she was tried for money-laundering and sentenced to five years in prison. After spending a total of seven years incarcerated after in Mexico after 2007, she was released in 2015 (Franklin 2016).

Her arrest, glamorous life, many love affairs, family ties, and business acumen quickly became the subject of international attention. In many news reports, discussions related to her family ties aimed less to explain how they helped her strategic rise as the suspected head of a cartel than they did to highlight her romantic entanglements with suspected cartel members. She is featured as a character in corridos, including "Reina de reinas," which is a musical tribute to her life and capture by the acclaimed norteño group Los Tigres del Norte. She has also been included in several novels and nonfiction accounts like *La Reina del Pacifico: Es la hora de contar* (2016), a book by renowned Mexican investigative journalist Julio Scherer García based on a series of interviews he conducted with her in prison.[5] While in prison, she was also interviewed by Anderson Cooper for a segment titled "The War Next Door" for *60 Minutes*. Additionally, she is credited with inspiring the best-selling novel *La Reina del Sur* by Spanish author Arturo Pérez-Reverte.[6] Whether fictional or factual, Avila Beltrán's stories contain melodramatic elements, particularly related to descriptions of femininity, physical appearance, and family loyalties.

In traditional melodramas, discourses of respectable femininity include dominant representations of self-sacrifice, over-invested motherhood, and devotion to family and honor. Likewise, in many news accounts it was widely reported that upon her arrest Avila Beltrán, possibly aware that she would be paraded in front of the press by police, requested a few minutes to freshen her makeup before she was taken into custody.[7] She staged her perp walk, which by design is a spectacle where a suspect is paraded through a public place, thus creating an opportunity for the media to take photographs and tape the event. In videos of this performance, she walks confidently toward the police van that will transport her to the station, acknowledging the presence of the camera. Multiple news reports

[5] Founder of the magazine *Proceso,* Scherer García was also the prolific author of over twenty books. He challenged the political stranglehold of political institutions like the PRI, and in his role as investigative journalist helped expose corruption at the highest levels of government in Mexico.

[6] Many, including government officials and journalists, believe that Sandra Avila Beltrán's story inspired Pérez-Reverte's novel. Avila Beltrán herself criticized Mexican president Felipe Calderón for confusing her "real" nickname—"La Reina del Pacífico"—with the title of the novel. She said that 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, mistaking 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 at all; I am real, made of flesh and blood" (qtd. in García Scherer 2015). (My translations from the Spanish throughout unless otherwise noted.)

[7] Sandra Avila Beltrán is not the only suspected drug trafficker to face jail time in style. Pablo Escobar basically lived in a prison paradise while Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán reportedly hosted parties during many of his incarcerations. Gendered aspects are highlighted in many of the news reports about these ideal conditions of imprisonment. As Elaine Carey notes, one early trafficker, Lola la Chata, "maintained her own servants while in prison, including a woman who came once a month to do her hair" (2014, 99).

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interpreted this engagement with the press as her "flirting" with the camera; one male reporter describes her as "strutting in tight jeans and spiked heels, on the arm of an agent" (McKinley 2007).

In her discussion of antiheroines in television series, gender and media studies scholar Milly Buonanno suggests that "disruption of the order of things by badly behaving women is particularly disquieting because [they do] not just break social norms but violate and subvert the natural properties of true womanhood" (2017, 11). While binary and fixed definitions of gender roles have lost some of their cultural force, "female misbehavior comes to be regarded as an indicator of womanhood gone wrong" (11). In other words, criminal behaviors by women still transgress typical gender norms and challenge the patriarchal social order; therefore, they are disciplined and punished as unnatural and unwomanly. These transgressions are, by their very nature, criminal acts. Articles with details such as, "[she] shamelessly flirted and flipped her hair when Mexican agents arrested her in 2007" (Cave 2011), and that she gained power "through a combination of ruthless business sense, a mobster's wiles and her sex appeal" (Contreras 2007), illustrate that Sandra Avila Beltrán is the attractive and seductive foil to the innocent heroine of a melodrama. She embodies danger and temptation. These types of descriptions also suggest that she is a product manufactured out of her obsession with physical appearance. As such, she is deemed untrustworthy by society because of her obsession with physical appearance. Women are expected to both pay and not pay attention to appearance based on context and whether in the public or private sphere. Though she is trying to conform, her effort is through a manipulation or external modification of her body via beauty products and fashion. Therefore, her beauty is not natural or authentic and thus contrary to dominant social norms of female purity. This is the central contradiction: though beauty is the prevailing signifier of femininity, it becomes suspect if it is pejoratively marked by too much interference and too much self-promotion.

Avila Beltrán's public persona is discursively constructed using social markers that highlight her femininity. In one story, she is described as the fetching native of Tijuana whose love of jewelry, fine food, and weekly hair appointments led to her capture. Avila Beltrán eluded police by living under an assumed name but was located "thanks to numerous visits she made to a Thai restaurant and two beauty shops in Mexico City's ritzy Polanco neighborhood," as Assistant Public Secretary for Public Security Patricio Patiño said at the time of her arrest ("'Queen of the Pacific' drug smuggler arrested" 2007). She is described as a "sexy, stylish and female" who wears form-fitting jeans and Jackie-O inspired sunglasses that frame her striking dark hair and eyes. During her incarceration, the many requests she made to prison guards for regular hair appointments and Botox injections were reported as news. Other news accounts emphasized that Avila Beltrán's obsession with her appearance led her to invest in tanning and beauty salons prior to her arrest; they only briefly mentioned that these businesses were sites for money laundering and fronts for the cartels. These stories foreground her investments in female-coded commerce yet reduce her incursion into male dominated economic systems to an obsession with her vanity and consumer culture. Indeed, government officials credit her

physical beauty for her ability to rise through the ranks of a cartel organization.[8] She is also described dismissively by journalist and author Víctor Ronquillo in his 2008 nonfiction account *La Reina del Pacífico y otras mujeres del narco* as a "*character* in a trashy novel... a mature woman, of a sophisticated beauty that is the product of surgeries, dyes and the most expensive primping" (2008a, 35, emphasis mine). Ronquillo considers Avila Beltrán's persona to be false, artificial, and inauthentic, as do others. In *La Reina del Pacífico: Es la hora de contar* (2016), a book published in 2008 based on prison interviews, author Julio Scherer García notes that Avila Beltrán is running late for a meeting with him because she is making herself presentable for the interview. He takes pains to describe her appearance, detailing that her hair is "dyed charcoal" and "flows freely down her back," her bottom lip, "sensual" (21). He also opines that her "natural face" has "suffered" at the hands of a plastic surgeon, who disrupted the "overall harmony" of her face by turning the tip of her nose up just a bit too far (32). He can see through this manufactured artifice and therefore not fall prey to her temptations. This could possibly be her most significant transgression: she is a middle-aged woman who visibly and unapologetically attempts to stem the loss of her beauty, youth, and sexual viability. In other words, women should be worried about their desirability, but they should not be *too* concerned.

Embracing the notion that typical portrayals of femininity are constructed via public narratives, stories about Avila Beltrán strategically employ narratives of respectable femininity while at the same time reifying normative female physical attributes that serve to distance her from the accusations of criminal activity. As one article notes, she possesses "dark Sinaloan beauty" (Ronquillo 2008b), which is a description that highlights her physical attributes while omitting that for many years Sinaloa was home to many of Mexico's most notorious and successful cartels. The *Procaduría General de la República*, Mexico's federal agency responsible for law enforcement, released a video recording of one of her initial interrogations which was featured in national and international news reports and uploaded to YouTube. During this interrogation, as an unidentified male voice off camera asks her questions, Avila Beltrán engages with the camera and smiles charmingly as she answers. Near the end, the voice asks, "What is your profession?" She responds demurely that she is a housewife and, after a brief pause, adds that she is a small business owner. By asserting first her identity as housewife over business person, she might be seen to purposefully attempt to capitalize on social expectations of her gender, perhaps to minimize the alleged crimes and garner public sympathy. Because her business is small—almost an afterthought—the domestic sphere is at the center of her public and private identity. As Lynne Joyrich affirms in her important article "All that Television Allows" (1988), eliciting sympathy is one of the hallmarks of melodrama, as is the way it shapes a complicated narrative into manageable and intensely personal stories. Intense emotions create an intimate connection to the melodramatic narrative, which in this case generates space for a sympathetic protagonist.

Avila Beltrán embraces the stereotypical tropes associated with respectable motherhood, thus challenging the rhetoric associated with female criminality, particularly related to the drug trade.

[8] Mexico's Assistant Secretary for Public Security Patricio Patiño told *Newsweek Magazine* in an exclusive interview: "Sandra's rise basically has to do with two circumstances: her ties to a family that has been involved in drug trafficking over three generations, and a physical beauty that made her stand out as a woman" (qtd. in Contreras, 2007).

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Successful male heads of cartels, "kingpins," are celebrated in popular culture and are also legitimized by publications like *Forbes* magazine. This celebration of free market competition centers illicit business prowess that is imbued with masculinity. Masculinity and success in global capitalist systems go hand in hand. By privileging her identity as a housewife over her entrepreneurship, her business acumen is limited to the bounds of her female identity, situates her in a defined space within local and national borders, and thus does not threaten the socially coded masculine world of drug trafficking. As Elaine Carey notes in *Women Traffickers*, women who sell and traffic drugs "neglect their duties as mothers and wives to acculturate children and maintain a stable home" (2014, 7). This indifference to the domestic sphere is a threat to cultural norms because it challenges the view that women "were 'unfit' to hold positions in the upper hierarchies of the drug economy, just as they were considered 'unfit' to play a role in the upper levels of the formal economy" (Carey 2014, 7). By affirming that she is first and foremost a housewife, Avila Beltrán is no longer the inauthentic woman who transgresses gender norms or threatens the business of crime. After all, who would believe that a proper middle-class Mexican housewife with just a small business could ever be the head of a cartel?

Laura Zúñiga: From Beauty Queen to Narco Queen

While Sandra Avila Beltrán embraces and manipulates public narratives that coded her as dangerous, deviant, and inauthentic, Laura Zúñiga's brush with criminality is framed as a threat to the national ideals of beauty, innocence, and female behavior. As with Avila Beltrán, the melodramatic tropes associated with Zúñiga's account are used to both reward and judge female behavior and ideals, characteristics for which she had been celebrated previously. Police allege that Zúñiga's then-boyfriend, Orlando García Urquiza, bankrolled her frequent shopping trips to Colombia as a cover for his money laundering and drug smuggling. In her official police declaration Zúñiga denied any involvement in drug trafficking and any knowledge of his work for a cartel. She was jailed for a little under two months and in January 2009 released when a judge ruled that there was no evidence of her involvement with narcotraffic ("Miss Sinaola sale de la cárcel" 2009).

Her arrest made international headlines. For example, it was featured in a story as recently as 2016 in the *IndiaTimes* ("Miss Hispanic America Laura Zuniga [sic] Arrested"). After a period of self-imposed anonymity, in late 2018 she was thrust back into the news when, on the heels of the extradition of convicted drug trafficker Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán to the US, multiple media outlets affirmed that she was Guzmán's wife, although she was not. Interestingly, his actual wife, Emma Coronel Aispuro, is also a former teenage pageant winner and currently faces federal drug charges.[9] Comparable to Avila Beltrán's treatment, the arrest of this beauty queen alongside her narco boyfriend intrigued the press and led to creative, comical, and gendered stories that crafted and spread a particular image of Laura

[9] Some news reports attribute this confusion to the fact that both women competed against each other in at least one pageant. Fed up with the confusion, Laura Zúñiga took to social media and gave interviews to decry the use of her image in any stories related to Guzmán. She criticized news reports for promoting false stories that once again linked her to narcotraffic and for putting her livelihood, family, and emotional well-being at risk in order to chase a headline ("Miss Sinaloa 2008 pide no confundir su imagen con Emma Coronel," 2018).

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Zúñiga. For example, Ioan Grillo notes: "Newspapers plastered their front pages with images of Zúñiga in bikinis and high heels. All seemed to be competing for the wittiest headlines. 'Miss Narco,' blared the tabloid *El Metro*. 'Miss Sinaloa and the Seven Narcos,' said the normally high-brow *El Universal*. She was compared to the heroine of *Queen of the South,* a fictional work about a beautiful drug trafficker" (2008).

In additional comparisons to the fictional protagonist of Pérez-Reverte's novel, Laura Zúñiga had a story that loosely inspired the 2011 film *Miss Bala* directed by Gerardo Naranjo. The film chronicles the story of a young woman from Tijuana who enters a beauty contest on a lark and quickly becomes involved in a messy drug heist. News stories described Zúñiga as the "sweetheart" who became a narco's girlfriend and said that during her arrest "her flowing dark hair concealed her face." Her body was transformed into a spectacle, which is defined by Linda McDowell in *Gender, Identity and Place: Understanding Feminist Geographies* as "a surface inscribed by social practices . . . acted upon in discursively constructed institutional settings" (2007, 49). That is to say, the focus on outward appearances and superficiality transformed her body as a site onto which unease about gendered expectations are coded. The performance of idealized notions of the female body are likewise inscribed. Stories like Laura Zúñiga's become sensationalized by the media because they combine the public spectacle of a beauty pageant with the seedy underworld of the cartels. Within the rubric of journalistic authority and interpretation they project the image of a young contestant winner who exudes both innocence and sexuality and the dark, shadowy violence of the drug trade.

Laura Zúñiga's notoriety is not the result of a stumble on the runway caused by a treacherously high pair of heels or a wayward hem, but rather an arrest and a spectacular perp walk. Like Avila Beltrán, upon her arrest Zúñiga was paraded in front of hundreds of reporters' cameras. In contrast to Avila Beltrán, Zúñiga appeared disheveled, wearing nondescript jeans and a hooded sweatshirt that she tried to use to hide her downcast face. Videos of this spectacle posted online are often juxtaposed with visual recordings of Zúñiga striding confidently across a pageant stage. In some news reports posted on YouTube and other online media outlets, she is wearing an elegant pageant gown while in others she is clad in a bikini and sash. Images of her in her pageant finery escalate the velocity of her descent from the height of success and public affirmation to shame and public embarrassment.

Conflicts and struggles over who defines gender ideals, morality, and social expectations are mapped onto the bodies of the competitors in beauty pageants and of other females in the public sphere. No less important is how these ideals are defined. Melodramatic elements inform the discourse, enactment, and interpretation of women in the media. Topics of fashion, beauty, and vanity—central to the spectacle of beauty pageants and melodrama—allow for public and intimate engagement with pathos and heightened emotion. Beauty queens promote certain standards of physical beauty that are performed on the same stage as power and culture (Cohen, Wilk, and Stoeltje 1996, 6). For example, the contest that Zúñiga won, *Nuestra Belleza Mexicana*, expects potential contestants to meet very specific criteria in order to be considered, including: single marital status, respectable social standing, general good health, and minimum height of 5 feet 6 inches. The contests' aesthetic consistency is of

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an "entrenched canon of classical beauty" that in Mexico ignores indigenous populations and privileges mestizo characteristics (López 2002, 291).

The image of a beauty pageant participant is strikingly similar to that of a melodramatic ingénue, both of whom embody culturally engrained, outward expressions of femininity. These two images also engage melodramatic narratives that validate an individual's ability to transcend social class and economic status. Any typical young woman from a lower social class with ambition and good values can attain her ultimate desire and move within a social hierarchy that still proscribes feminized capitalist success and access to wealth. Pageant winners achieve this by winning a scepter and crown, and traditional melodramatic protagonists gain this by marrying into a wealthy family. Laura Zúñiga's story adds an uncomfortable dimension to this paradigm: access to success via criminality shatters the illusion that virtuous behavior is the only path to upward mobility. Laura Zúñiga descends—quite publicly and spectacularly—from an exalted social position to a new status as a danger to the nation.

Through gestures, clothing choices, public sentiment, and interactions with pageant audiences, beauty queens narrate a classed and gendered discourse of emotion and pathos. During a pageant that she eventually won, Zúñiga delivered an apparently heartfelt, impassioned speech about how Mexican society should value women more, especially mothers. By speaking out about motherhood as the solution to better Mexican society, Zúñiga safely engages in a performative display of agency that, because it is limited to rhetoric about motherhood and respect, does not challenge real-world political and social concerns of women facing gender violence generally and drug related violence specifically.[10] In their introduction to the anthology *Beauty Queens on the Global Stage* that addresses the phenomenon of beauty pageants around the world, editors Cohen, Wilk, and Stoeltje argue: "While many scholars fail to take the business of beauty pageants and contests seriously, there is good evidence that assessments of physical beauty play a basic role in the everyday life of most societies" (1996, 6). Pageants raise values about morality, sexuality, femininity, and, particularly in their early years, they strove to "determine a woman's 'proper place,' an unresolved battle that continues to the present day. It is quite telling that the pageant [in the US] was first held the year after women gained the right to vote" (1996, 4).

In Mexico, circumscribing women's place in the public sphere intersects with the cultural expectations of race, ethnicity, and class in melodrama. For example, Rick A. López traces the conflation of the 1921 *Concurso Universal de Belleza* and the *India Bonita* contest, which focused on indigenous contestants. He asserts that both contests, sponsored and promoted by the newspaper *El Universal*, brought together postrevolutionary efforts to form a cohesive national identity predicated on exalting Mexico's noble indigenous past and idealized expectations of feminine beauty, which tended less toward indigenous features and more toward mestizo characteristics. The *India Bonita* contest winner, María Bibiana Uribe, became an instant celebrity, inspiring songs and poems. López argues that "the India

[10] According to the 2012 report "Femicide and Impunity in Mexico: A context of structural and generalized violence," increases in drug-related violence in the country have made gender-based violence invisible. Crimes against women are rarely punished, and very few records are kept to assess the extent of the situation (CDD and CMDPDH 2012).

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Bonita became a popular symbol of the promise of post-revolutionary Mexican society—both the embodiment of Mexico's Indian present, and the image of the ideal rural recipient of post-revolutionary transformation" (2002, 326). To some degree, the winner becomes a trophy; that is, the physical embodiment of national ideals of a modernizing nation with one common identity linked to mestizaje. During the pageants, the body of the eventual winner of the contest was on display, but she and other contestants were also judged for their morals and values. Those selected as winners embody the values and goals of a community in appearance, conduct, and morals. They are rarefied figures that bring together traditionally coded female conduct and honor in a conventionally attractive body.

In his *El culto a las reinas de Sinaloa y el poder de la belleza* Arturo Santamaría Gómez points to the complex and intense relationship between the hyperfeminized world of beauty queens and the highly coded patriarchal universe of the narcos: "Since the 50s, especially in the northern states of the country, there is a long tradition of relationships between Mexican beauty queens and drug traffickers. There is an intimate affair between the power of money and beauty" (1997, 15). As Linda McDowell suggests: "As well as being inscribed by repressive and violent practices to produce productive and subjected bodies, the body is also marked by a range of 'voluntary practices,' habits and lifestyles that distinguish female from male bodies: make-up, stilettos, bras, hairspray, clothing, and underclothing mark women's bodies in ways in which hairstyles, professional training, personal grooming, gait, posture, body-building, and sports may mark men's" (2007, 51). These "voluntary practices" are overt displays of expected female behaviors and the female body couched in propriety. They are not neutral behaviors, but rehearsed performances. Beauty queens do not disrupt these voluntary practices but rather reinforce them. They are in pursuit of beauty, not political or economic power, and thus remain reputable. By attaching themselves to powerful drug dealers who hold considerable economic power, they ascend in status but do not disrupt the existing social order.

Articles and books about the relationship between narcos and beauty queens tend to employ mostly uncritical and celebratory tones. They often praise outward symbols of masculinity—fast, expensive cars, gold chains, a song lauding one's adventures—that go hand in hand with capitalist ideals. Women literally crowned as beautiful can be as easily acquired; they are status symbols. They also serve to legitimize powerful men who may have obtained their status through illegitimate means and who often marry younger women from "good," socially-connected families. Although winning a beauty pageant bestows a particular power on the contestants, it is perhaps the only trajectory of social ascent that has been modeled for many women.

Because of her involvement with the illicit world of drug trafficking, Laura Zúñiga was stripped of her titles by the national organization that holds regional, state, and nationwide beauty contests in Mexico. Its public statements reinforced that beauty contestants are symbols of Mexican womanhood. Lupita Jones, the first Mexican woman to win the title of Miss Universe and currently the national director and spokesperson for the organization, asserted to a Sinaloan newspaper that "*Nuestra Belleza*—Our Country's Beauty—is dedicated exclusively to preparing Mexican women to successfully represent the country at home and abroad" ("Se deslinda" 2008). According to Jones, Laura Zúñiga "does not

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embody these qualities and furthermore, the organization, the contest, denounced any relationship or illicit activity in which Ms. Zúñiga could be involved" ("Se deslinda" 2008). In other interviews, she asserted: "This organization distances itself from any activities, situations or personal relations that Laura Zúñiga had outside of her participation in Miss Sinaloa. . . . We are a serious, respectable organization whose interest has been to heighten the beauty, capacity, and values of the Mexican woman" (qtd. in Cabrera 2008). Ultimately, the organization implied that because Zúñiga was a nominal "representative" of Mexico who was subsequently seen as "tainted," the image of her country could also be seen as corrupted.

Laura Zúñiga attempted to create her own narrative that fashioned her morals, innocence, and virtues into middle-class sensibilities. She repeatedly denied any knowledge of her boyfriend's alleged ties to drug trafficking. She emphasized her innocence in this way and accentuated her affinity for motherhood and family. On many occasions, she referenced her chosen profession as a kindergarten teacher, her love of family, and support of children, particularly those with disabilities. Her parents reinscribed this traditional narrative by attributing her arrest to a youthful indiscretion and stated that her greatest offense was disobeying her father by sneaking out of the house to meet her boyfriend. Days after the arrest, Zúñiga's father contended that he personally escorted his *nena* to the airport, with the understanding that she would be visiting friends and that she would participate in a *posada*, a traditional Christmas holiday party, in Guadalajara (Cabrera 2008). Her parents emphasized to the media that she behaved like a reckless teenager who had disobeyed her parents but was not a criminal. Disobeying the authority of the paterfamilias was her "true" crime. She is still her father's sweet girl who was blinded by love and the flashy lifestyle her boyfriend offered—a boyfriend, Zúñiga alleged, who had lied to her, used multiple aliases, and was married.

The discourse about parental involvement, particularly by the father, reinforces traditional interpretations of women, notably those young and unmarried, who are vulnerable and in need of protection. If a supposed model of idealized Mexican beauty cannot be trusted to uphold ideals about representative behavior and obedience, then, as her father's comments suggest, she should be punished but, more importantly, brought back under familial control. Her image and body need to be managed, contained, and disciplined. In this scenario, her life is no longer under the spotlight of a pageant system, but re-ensconced in a patriarchal family in order to restore harmony.

Perhaps as a way to protect the country's beauty from this supposedly dangerous woman, articles soon appeared casting doubt about her legitimate claim to the pageant crown. Anonymous sources seemed to suggest that her victory in the Miss Sinaloa pageant was ill-gained and, perhaps, only the result of direct intervention by a local drug lord. As one newspaper disdainfully remarked about Zúñiga's performance at her victorious pageant: "the title winner, Laura Zúñiga Huízar, looked awkward when talking, clearly showing the gaps in her academic preparation and above all, her image very artificial, superficial, and she is suspected of having had a breast enhancement" (Veledíaz 2008). Another article states: "The dress given to her to wear was too big and fit her badly, and the cut of the dress did not do her hips any favors," and further describes in great detail the "shock" that resonated through the

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crowd when Zúñiga's name was announced as the pageant winner, before planting the seeds of suspicion that her victory was not legitimate: "upon hearing Laura's name . . . shouts of 'fraud!' could be heard at end of the event, a general grumble of disagreement could be heard. Pearl [the runner up] refused to pose for pictures and instead cried in her dressing room . . . while the winner [Laura] was immediately taken to a van, although she was not saved from hearing shouts of disagreement from the audience" (Castillo and Valdez 2009).

At various points, Laura Zúñiga is delegitimized as a symbol of a Mexican female beauty because of her deceptive appearance and values that are contrary to what is expected of an idealized Mexican woman. Her "inauthentic" body and equally superficial personality are symbols of her duplicitous nature, thus proving her criminal and amoral guilt, despite her insistence otherwise. These criticisms of her body were strategically used to create a narrative that questioned her sincerity and to reaffirm national ideals of true femininity that harken back to the golden age of melodrama and nostalgia for an earlier time.

The stories of both Sandra Avila Beltrán and Laura Zúñiga engage with elements of melodrama, particularly as they relate to portrayals of femininity and spectacle. Their public personas, however, are on opposite ends of the gender expectations of melodrama. While Avila Beltrán is presented as a femme fatale figure who seduces her way to the top of the drug trade, Zúñiga is a defenseless waif who was duped by a two-timing criminal boyfriend. On the surface, then, these two characters would be on opposite sides in a melodrama and in conflict with each other, since one attempts to undermine established social norms via seduction and disruption and the other endeavors to strengthen them. Avila Beltrán appears in news reports as a threat to male authority precisely because of her successful career in drug trafficking. As a symbol of the dangerous woman she has transgressed the bounds of a male-dominated business and is a threat to the established social order that must be contained.

However, as the examples I discuss throughout the article illustrate, both Avila Beltrán and Zúñiga are judged by similar gender expectations, especially regarding their appearance. Their bodies are instrumentalized; their identities could be changed through physical transformation and the consumption of goods, ranging from Botox treatments, sparkly dresses, and makeup to a pageant crown. Beauty and femininity are symbols of stature and power but are ultimately seen as weaknesses, both for the women individually and also for the cultural narratives around femininity and beauty. Nevertheless, these same symbols of spectacle, symbolic success, and performative femininity are also strategically employed to explain their brushes with criminality. As such, they are transformed into signs of vanity and artifice and their duplicitous nature placed on public display.

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