Can the Subaltern Fly? Female Bodies in Molano's and Marston's Narcofiction

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I. From Narcotraffic to Narcofiction

Airports and aircrafts are two increasingly paradigmatic environments of our mobile world. Architecturally characterized by a standardized aesthetic of luxury, fluidity, and acceleration (Iyer), these paradigmatic environments are indicative of recent, wealthy lifestyle patterns specific to our globalized society: hypermobility, fluidity, nomadism, and connectivity. While incentivizing "legal mobilities" (Kloppenburg 56) of people and goods, these travel spaces may also become ideal settings for the illicit trafficking of individuals and commodities on a global scale. One may argue that both in terms of transportation and technology, contemporary "aeromobilities" (Høyer, Cwerner et al.) provide optimal conditions for the proliferation of "transnational organized crime" (Andreas 404), including "trade in prohibited commodities (such as heroin and cocaine)" (Andreas 406). Indeed, among the vast range of "illegal mobilities," drug trafficking ("narcotráfico") deserves particular attention, as it represents the "dominant sector for the illicit global economy" (Andreas 407).

Today's increasing mass aeromobility indubitably facilitates the narcotics trade, offering new possibilities for international expansion and the development of a global market.[1] Thanks to their ability to connect distant locations of the world, airports and aircrafts represent opportunities to rapidly reach remote destinations that are particularly attractive to the international drug market. The speediness of air travel is greatly relevant to the desirability of airports and commercial flights for illegal dealers. Air travel allows quick crossing of multiple national borders, diminishing the risks associated with border control on the ground. Apart from initial security checks prior to boarding, the probability of further searches is relatively random, so that, paradoxically, despite the considerable security machinery in place in today's

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airports, illicit individual activity is less likely to be discovered during air travel than during ground transportation. Aerial transportation also covers longer geographical distances and can potentially spread illicit trade around the world. Moreover, air travel is the best option for human drug couriers, also known, among other names, as *mulas* or *burreras* (drug mules), who ingest narcotics in order to ship the drugs to their destination, given the short-term duration of the capsules they swallow.

In this global context, air travel is not merely a setting, but a structural factor in the progression of the narrative; it also has a strong cultural and economic function. In fact, aeromobility allows migration from the South to the North of a given continent, and of the world. In particularly disadvantaged countries, certain airports, airlines, and flights are especially exposed to these corrupted forms of mobility, and are targeted by organized criminal groups and drug cartels. In order to achieve their goals of exporting forbidden substances and objects, such organizations subvert the common rules and purposes of air travel. Within Latin America, for instance, Bogotá's El Dorado International Airport is one of the most popular hubs for drug trafficking, as are the airports of Mexico City and Buenos Aires, additional crucial stops on transnational drug routes. Outside of Latin America, New York-JFK and Madrid-Barajas Airport are two frequent final destinations for the aforementioned *mulas* and mule drivers (*arrieros*), who provide shipment and delivery of capsules of drugs towards North America, Spain, and broadly Europe.

These "winged messengers" (Serres) of narcotics,[2] or mules, as a specific category of passengers in today's air world, are unique living and mobile luggage, a "cargo vessel for mass-produced commodities" (Davis 61). Once ingested, the narcotics are temporarily stored inside the mules' bodies, making the drugs less easily detectable by superficial security controls. Like a briefcase full of laundered money, the mule's body, now a trope of international drug trafficking, acquires an economic value, depending on the quantity of drugs it is able to contain, transport, and ultimately deliver. This method of feeding human bodies with narcotics in order to export them unlawfully worldwide means that drug trafficking involves an additional illicit transnational activity of human trafficking, consisting of the commodification, exploitation, and smuggling of human bodies through the criminal channels of global narcotics distribution.

Within the vast tradition of Latin American cultural production related to the phenomenon of narcotrafficking, this article focuses on two recent emblematic works of narcofiction that illustrate the connections between air travel and Colombian human courier drug smuggling. The first is "El arriero" ("The Mule Driver"), one of a collection of stories by Colombian journalist and author Alfredo Molano included in his book *Rebusque mayor. Relatos de mulas, traquetos y embarques* (1994). The second is the film *María Full of Grace* (2004), written and directed by American filmmaker Joshua Marston. A comparison of these two cultural productions on drug-muling identifies specific patterns of the transnational illicit drug trade fostered by contemporary global air mobility. These works are also deeply related to gender discrimination

and violence, aggravated by socioeconomic issues specific to Latin America and the Global South. Different forms of gender abuse are, in fact, entrenched in international drug smuggling, from the commodification of women to sexual violation, femicide, and women's criminalization (see Giacomello, "Mujeres", "How the Drug Trade"; Mejía Ochoa et al.). In comparing the male mule driver narrative present in Molano's short story with the female characters of Marston's narcodrama (Benavides), this article delves further into the issue of gender discrimination in the global illegal drug trade (Giacomello). This parallel between a locally produced Colombian short story and a successful American film targeted for an international audience demonstrates how the phenomenon of transnational drug smuggling is critically explored, respectively, by the dominant Western and Southern society, highlighting patterns of subalternity, gender inequality, and distorted mobility.

II. "Mules": The Narco-Exploitation of Women's Wombs[3]

From the title of the film itself, *María Full of Grace* displays a strong gender awareness when it comes to drug-muling. In fact, the reference to the first line of the canonical Catholic prayer *Hail Mary* has a deep symbolic relevance. The Archangel Gabriel's first words addressed to the Virgin Mary refer to her womb, enfolding the blessed fruit, Jesus. In the Gospel of Luke, Gabriel's announcement of Mary's pregnancy focuses on Mary's human body, so as to emphasize Jesus's human birth, and thus mentions the roundness ("fullness") of her womb. That said, the main character of Marston's film, María Álvarez (Catalina Sandino Moreno), a seventeen-year-old Colombian cocaine mule, is fundamentally different from the Virgin Mary. Unlike the latter, she is not "blessed among women" as "blessed is the fruit of [her] womb Jesus," but, like Mary—and here resides the cruel irony of the title—she is twice full. She is actually pregnant, and she carries in her stomach a considerable "load" of encapsulated illicit drugs.[4] María's air travel as a mule from a rural Colombian village to New York City constitutes an important portion of Marston's film. Immediately after the opening scenes, which occur on the ground, the young mule is shown aboard an airplane taking off, after having passed through security. Significantly, airports, airplanes, flight attendants, airsickness, and airport security determine the progression of the narrative throughout the entire film. Even the film's finale takes place in an airport (JFK), as María decides to remain in the US rather than returning to Colombia.

Alfredo Molano's short story "The Mule Driver," narrating the transatlantic travel of Colombian mules towards Madrid, depicts an analogous case of gender exploitation. The experience of aerial drug smuggling is described throughout the story from the viewpoint of a male protagonist, the "arriero," or the mules' manager, whose powerful position consists of surveilling the female smugglers throughout the trip,

from check-in to arrival, and ultimately, the proper delivery of the drugs they carry. Molano's short story is also emblematic of the patterns of illegal mobility experienced by drug smugglers in today's "air world" (Kirn). An experienced narco, the mule driver circulates as a frequent flyer within airports and other "non-places" (Augé) of our globalized world. His narrative is, in this respect, comparable to the memoirs of globetrotters and sailors' chronicles, as it includes a collection of country and city names that the drug trafficker reaches and quickly leaves by plane.[5] The anonymous and standardized patterns of contemporary air travel seem to have deeply penetrated the habits and conditions of his transnational drug smuggling business. The narco can in fact benefit from all the facilities (such as food and assistance) and infrastructure (such as shops and hotels) offered by the airspace, which make his displacements less agonizing, and eventually more successful. Moreover, the mules he supervises use legal passports, take English classes in preparation for their travel, dress in fine clothes, easily make several connecting flights, occasionally "drink champagne throughout the flight" (Molano, "The Mule Driver" 9), and once outside the terminal, take a taxi to reach their destination, a hotel where they will deliver the drugs.[6]

Typically, the stories of the characters involved in air travel narcofiction begin *in medias res*, at the airport terminal. The narrator rapidly mentions several previous circumstances, sketching the general environment in which the characters interact, so as to present the reasons behind their decision to accept the risk of such a journey. The setting of the action then usually moves aboard the plane, without any further transition. Molano's "The Mule Driver" follows this common narrative pattern. The story begins with Lucía, a young college student, in an ordinary cafeteria with a male individual, passing a "test" that will enable her to be appointed as a mule. Three days later, she is sitting on a plane with several other young female students who were also recruited in the cafeteria for the same purpose. The mules do not know each other, and have in common only the fact that they all carry "on average a kilo in their intestines" (Molano, "The Mule Driver" 7).

Lucía's story as a mule starts precisely the moment she enters the airport terminal in Bogotá and passes through security. Progressively, the rhythm of her experience is closely measured by the ensuing stages of the flight: the take-off, the transatlantic flight itself, the landing of the plane, and disembarking and customs operations. In this respect, Lucía's air travel follows the narrative construction of many other flight narratives, even those unrelated to narcotrafficking, which similarly show a strong connection between air travel protocols and character agency. Confirming the close interdependency between the plot and travel procedures, the flight becomes centrally important to the narrative; a critical moment for the mules' concealment and the continuation of the story. As a temporary phase of collective encapsulation, the flight highlights the mules' fears. If, on the one hand, the plane epitomizes a place of respite on the risky path towards the final destination, on the other, it reveals corporal and psychological factors that might not otherwise be relevant, or would appear less suspicious, on the ground.

For example, the mules become especially nervous and frightened during take-off and landing, as pressure and altitude alterations can affect their gastrointestinal system, and thus their ability to safely retain the swallowed pellets, or drug "cookies" (Molano, "The Mule Driver" 8).[7] In this respect, if by definition air, as a medium and a condition of mobility, exposes all passengers to the vulnerability of being suspended in the sky (Adey), in the specific cases of the mules and their drivers, air denotes an additional aggravating element in terms of liability. Even if movement aboard is unavoidably limited due to the size of the passenger cabin, the internal movements that the mules' bodies experience during the flight are incessant and sometimes unmanageable. The drugs contained in their intestines make the common symptoms of airsickness, such as dizziness, nausea, and sweating, unbearable. The flight thus produces prolonged physical torture, whose signs must be hidden at all costs so as to go unnoticed by the vigilant eyes of the crew.

In *María Full of Grace*, Marston portrays in detail the physical inconveniences that mules suffer while in the air. In the cases of María Álvarez and Blanca (Yenny Paola Vega), their drug-carrying experiences also coincide with their first flights. María and Blanca gradually familiarize themselves with airport infrastructure, such as security controls and duty-free, and experience on-board and landing procedures, such as filling out forms and passing through customs. During the flight, they are not allowed "for security reasons" to "know their companions on the trip," and sit far apart from one another on the same airplane (Molano, "The Mule Driver" 10). The two mules, María Álvarez and Lucy Diaz (Guilied López), experience pain and perspiration as they struggle to hold the pellets in their guts. Nevertheless, they endeavour to resist and not show any signs of pain or discomfort.

In such atypical travel circumstances, the airplane may represent a sort of protective space, an "immunological bubble" (Sloterdijk) that surrounds and immunizes passengers, particularly this kind of traveller, at least for the duration of the flight. Once aboard, after having completed all airline pre-boarding procedures, the passengers feel temporarily safe. Their bodies may momentarily rest, and gradually prepare to sustain the increased risk of airsickness due to the quantity of *pepas* (drug capsules) ferried in their stomachs. Molano's mule driver adheres to this pattern, depicting the flight as a relatively quiet and static time during which passengers remain seated while enjoying a film, a meal, or a nap.[8] Conversely, in Marston's film, the flight is a moment of high dramatic tension characterized by an intense feeling of suspense, and decisive in the further development of the narrative. The flight is a nervewracking experience that is made worse by constant trips to the bathroom, including the agonizing wait in front of the door and painful moments once inside.

While trying to behave as innocently as possible, the mules feel increasingly intimidated by their fellow travellers' gaze. For example, the film presents even the typical scene of the flight attendant serving food as a highly stressful moment for the mules, obliged to at least partially consume their meal so as not to arouse suspicion.[9] Additionally, the gloomy atmosphere of the flight emphasizes the clandestine nature

of mule travel. Specifically, Marston uses a dark gradation of the colour blue, typically used in aerial environments such as airports and airplanes,[10] to characterize the entire flight sequence and enhances the illicit dimension. Interestingly, by setting the action during a night flight with closed portholes, Marston converts the cabin into a long, claustrophobic tunnel. Moreover, the camera plays repeatedly with different depths of field and shallow-focus closeups. These shots show María and Lucy in sharp focus, isolating them from the surrounding passengers, stressing the illegal purpose of their travel, emphasizing the necessity of remaining unnoticed, and suggesting their loneliness. While travelling, the mules wear headphones, and engage in a dialogue with their inner body and their ability to safely and successfully achieve the objective of their trip.

In addition to the airplane, the entire airport infrastructure broadly represents a source of threat for the mules. Once they are on the ground, their stressful feelings of vulnerability and physical discomfort resurface, particularly when they have to cross international border controls and are exposed to the mistrustful gaze of the customs agents. In both Molano's story and Marston's film, transit through these areas of the airport becomes a *via dolorosa* along which the body, in its language and overall appearance, may accidentally disclose the illegal shipment, and ultimately invalidate the mules' status as passengers and travellers by fatefully interrupting their journey:

> Hay dos estaciones que son dolorosas. Una es cuando se sale del avión, se pasa por un corredor largo, donde lo miran a uno y lo detallan bien: comportamiento, soltura, miedo, vestido, pinta. De ahí salen los candidatos a la segunda estación, una vez presentan los papeles. En esa estación es donde se acerca un guardia y le dice a uno: "Acompáñeme a una diligencia." (Molano, "El Arriero" 18)[11]

The physical body, because of all its external signs such as "comportment, relaxation, uneasiness, clothes, how [they] look" (Molano, "The Mule Driver" 11), is indeed the most relevant and therefore most inspected component of the mules' illegal transit. Analogously, Marston's film masterfully dramatizes two "steps" along what Molano calls the mules' *via dolorosa*, which connect the plane to the customs area inside the airport. María Álvarez, Marston's mule, barely having landed at JFK International Airport, is almost immediately stopped by a police agent while at the second step because of her old-fashioned wheelless suitcase, which does not go unnoticed amidst the crowd of passengers, including the other mules, whose carry-on luggage is waiting around the baggage carousel.[12] Since it does not fit the fluidity, lightness, and speediness that characterize airport circulation, María's suitcase, which might be considered an extension of the carrying identity that constitutes her own body, raises the suspicions of a police officer who singles her out from among the flow of passengers for a more detailed security check.[13]

Given the relevance of the human body in such strenuous travel circumstances, the nominal identity of the passenger, or the primary data registered at airport security points (Fuller and Harley 44), has a comparatively lesser impact in terms of the surveillance of the traveller. The body emerges as the focal vehicle and purpose of the

journey, as well as "the stable token of identity" (Adey, "Surveillance at the Airport" 1369) in police investigations. It is carefully inspected and x-rayed; its internal organs disclosed. From beginning to end, the mules' bodies are repeatedly humiliated: first when they must endure the challenge of swallowing several dozen latex pellets filled with heroin or cocaine,[14] then during the pre-flight checks, the flight itself, customs controls, and, eventually, in delivering the goods, usually under miserable circumstances.[15] Under such extreme air travel conditions, the human body, and, in the context of this particular film, the female body, is simultaneously assimilated both to the merchandise it carries and to the plane that carries the body itself. The carrying body, the commodities being carried, and the plane transporting the body and the illicit ingested narcotics all form part of the same nested compact structure. They travel simultaneously, sharing the same speed and altitude, crossing the same borders, and constituting a unique mobile (flying) entity.

In the case of this specific category of "threatening travelers" (Adey, "Surveillance at the Airport" 1372), the body thus becomes the pivotal factor in the shift from a condition of fluid transnational mass aeromobility to the opposite phenomenon of *im*mobility. Moreover, this shift must be understood in its socioeconomic dimension as an additional contradiction of globalized society. As mentioned above, the human mules who agree to become drug couriers do so because of discrimination on both local and international scales. Their detention by airport security puts an end to their geographic mobility, representing an additional exclusion from global society. The Global South brands upon them an indelible mark of inequality and powerlessness, and relegates them to permanent exclusion. Having come from the corrupted and criminalized global underworld, they inevitably have no chance of rescue, but remain the *pariah* of globalized society (Agier 84-87).

Marston's film particularly emphasizes the economic gap between the subaltern South and the powerful globalized North.[16] While focusing on mules involved in Colombian smuggling networks, the film also shows an additional underside of the globalized world: the miserable living conditions of many Colombians, and more broadly, Latin-American immigrants to the US. After managing to flee from the smugglers in a suburban area near New York City, María wanders the streets of "Pequeña Colombia" (Little Colombia) in the borough of Queens, particularly the Jackson Heights neighbourhood.[17] In this overpopulated Hispanic area of the city, she interacts exclusively with other Colombian or Latin American immigrants who live in tiny and very modest apartments. Many have humble jobs, similar to her previous work on a rose plantation outside of Bogotá. In these scenes, Marston highlights other problematic outcomes of globalization, such as migration and related issues of poverty, ghettoization, and social inequality, in addition to the more explicit depiction of international drug routes and the human trafficking enterprises sponsored by Latin American drug cartels.

III. Narco-Macho-Culture and Gender Discrimination

Although the phenomenon of drug-muling also affects male mules, as exemplified by Molano's mule driver who was previously a mule himself,[18] there is a sharp distinction in how female and male bodies are involved in the illicit transnational flows of narcotics.[19] Gender differences may historically be driven by two key discriminatory reasons. First, police agents in charge of airport security checks may perceive women as "less likely to draw suspicion and be searched" (Carey 13).[20] Drug smugglers also prefer female over male mules, since the former are believed to be able to seduce "the guards and the police" (Molano, "The Mule Driver" 16), and consequently pass through controls "without a hitch" (16). In addition, non-educated women from poor drug-producing countries, who are dealing with serious financial difficulties, are appealing targets for drug dealers. Previous studies (see Carey; Giacomello; Mejía Ochoa et al. 35-45) have shown that traffickers' preferred recruits are widows with children, "women abandoned by their husbands" (Molano, "The Mule Driver" 10), single mothers in urgent need of resources to sustain their children, and expectant mothers who agree to transport narcotics in order to cover immediate basic necessities, knowing that their pregnancy will exempt them from full-body x-rays.

The mule driver in Molano's story expresses sexist views of the inexperienced mules whom he is charged to watch. They are not aware of his presence and surveillance, which increases the discrepancy between his abusive power and their state of ignorance and submission. His descriptions of the mules' bodies are particularly emblematic of his macho gaze. The mules whom he has recently supervised, and those whom he has monitored during previous travels, warrant his attention both for the monetary value of the drugs they carry and for the sexual favours they may potentially provide him. Hence, the female body becomes twice marketable, and its worth fluctuates depending on the phase of the journey. In fact, once the final destination is reached, the value of the mule's body is primarily measurable in terms of the drugs effectively delivered, and also, depending on the physical attractiveness of each mule, in terms of the satisfaction of masculine sexual desire.

Like a contemporary, grotesque version of Don Juan, throughout the entire short story, Molano's masculine character recalls his glorious past by narcissistically enumerating the mules that he has encountered during his many flights as a mule driver.[21] Through a long and convoluted flashback, in a sort of self-confession monologue, Molano's male protagonist resurrects one by one the women he has met or sometimes only heard about second-hand during previous smuggling expeditions:

> Se llamaba Lucía y estudiaba bachillerato […] (Molano, "El Arriero" 13). […] Entre las mulas hay de todo. […] Conocí a una mula de buena cuna […] (14) Era costeña ella, alta, de ojos grandes y verdes. Muy viciosa (15). […] También conocí a mulas "llevadas" que viajaban por pura necesidad. […] Una, doña Tila, […] había quedado viuda con tres niños (16). […] Aquella vez llegamos a Madrid sin problemas. […] No me aguanté y abordé a

> Lucía saliendo del aeropuerto (18). […] Rumbeamos hasta el alba. Amanecimos juntos. También amanecimos juntos la mañana siguiente y la siguiente (19). […] Yo comencé a trabajar en la línea porque Virginia, mi primera compañera, me había dejado por plata. Ella era hija de una vieja dañada y corrompida que traficaba con mujeres. […] La fui enamorando y cada domicilio que yo hacía, era una disculpa para ir a tocarle la cuquita (20). […] Con Lucía seguí manteniendo amores. Me gustaba su cuerpo menudito y la punta de punta de sus teticas, siempre paradas y listicas, como si tuvieran antenas. Virginia no se daba cuenta porque mis amores con Lucía estaban envueltos en los secretos del traqueteo (23). […] No sé cómo hizo, nunca lo supe, pero un día domingo se me presentó al locutorio Virginia y no Lucía (24). […] El recuerdo de Virginia me atormentaba tanto como el de Lucía. No me dejaba ni de día ni de noche (32). […] Virginia se me fue pudriendo adentro de mí. […] No quería, pero Virginia se me volvió un monstruo que me consumía la poca alma que me quedaba (34). […] Ella, Virginia, es ahora la dueña de los muros y de las puertas de esta cárcel que yo construí con el deseo y las ganas de matarla. (37)[22]

The driver describes these women only in terms of their features—size, height, weight, hair colour, clothes, attitudes, and civil status (Molano, "El Arriero" 15; "The Mule Driver" 9). Moreover, the implicit metaphor in referring to women as "mules" stresses the gender gap within the story. This pejorative metaphor is accompanied by equally degrading verbs commonly used to define animals in humiliating positions and tasks, and offensive adjectives such as "las mulitas" (25), "little mules" (15), or "mulada" (25), or "the old bitch" (16), emphasizing the masculine supremacy of the smuggler over the servile herd of mules.[23]

In the mule driver's own words, the mules "descargan" (Molano, "El Arriero" 14) or "unload" their commodities (Molano, "The Mule Driver" 8) and, as in the colonial epoch, belong to the mule driver and are part of his "encomiendas" (Molano, "El Arriero" 19) or "charges" (Molano, "The Mule Driver" 12). After having monitored them during a "nine-hour flight," the mule driver gives them instructions on how to properly eject the drugs from their bodies, then leaves them resting, like actual mules, while he meets with local customers to notify them of the arrival of the merchandise. Moreover, the mule driver is undoubtedly the only expert and powerful character in the narrative. He proudly describes his ascension from the lowest level, as a mule, up the chain to the elevated position of mule driver. His "prestige" (17) can only be exerted and maintained within the perverted circuits of the narco operation system, designed as a vertical organization in which the "escalerita del poder" (Molano, "El Arriero" 25), or "the stairway of power"[24] (Molano, "The Mule Driver" 16; see also ("El Arriero" 25; "The Mule Driver" 12), allows male smugglers to rise from the lowest ranked and most dangerous position of mule to the highest position of manager of "lines" (16) of mules and their loads.[25]

The abusive power and corruption established by the hierarchy of "the drug economy, from mules to bosses" (Carey 13) shows how illegal drug trafficking shapes new channels of female slavery, prostitution, and gendered drug-related violence. Such are the negative outcomes of globalization, particularly visible and violent in specific areas of the Global South, such as Mexico and Colombia (Polit Dueñas and Rueda 6).

The fate of a mule generally consists of being repeatedly humiliated from the moment of drug ingestion, and possibly being abused as a disposable sexual object. Such discrimination may also include the threat of physical violence or death.

In this respect, Molano's short story must be considered a typical "narcoculture" narrative and thus an emblematic result of the "deep footprint of the narco in the collective imaginary" (Monsiváis 23). Exclusively narrated from the viewpoint of a male mule driver increasingly involved over the years in global drug smuggling, the story recounts horrendous cases of female victims of brutal masculine crimes, eyewitnessed by the mule driver himself. In addition, the mule driver's memories are regularly related to an obsessive anxiety of attaining a wealthy lifestyle, "vivir a lo bien" (Molano, "El Arriero" 21), and the clear necessity of flaunting the "jackpot" (Molano, "The Mule Driver" 8) won after a successful shipment of narcotics.[26] The driver's "desire for money" (Molano, "The Mule Driver" 17), and particularly the need to "flash" (17) the huge amounts he has earned across the world on the backs of mules, become particularly apparent once back in the Colombian context, where the recently acquired profits appear more impressive compared to the average incomes of the local suburban communities where the narcos (drug dealers) grew up. Because of the socioeconomic gap that characterizes Colombian, and more broadly, Latin American societies,[27] the smuggler is finally acknowledged and admired as "a rich guy," and even sparks "jealousy" (17) around him, whereas elsewhere in the world he is aware of remaining a "don Fulano" (27), or a "Mr. Nobody" (17). In this respect, in terms of "stereotyped social roles," compared to the "little mules," the narco gains respect for his performance not only as a powerful, superior macho but also as the self-made patriarch of a new empire.

IV. Beyond Narco-Machismo: Female Agency and Immobility

Despite such displays of hegemonic masculinity,[28] Marston's narcodrama and Molano's short story also provide two examples of feminine denunciations of patriarchal abusive power. In the last segment of "The Mule Driver," the reader ultimately understands that the entire story has been narrated backwards from the prison in which the mule driver is detained, after having been ironically denounced by two former mules with whom he was particularly close, Lucía and Virginia. Hence, the tale ultimately concludes as a story of feminine courage and justice for the innumerable masculine abuses committed by the story's alpha male. Eventually, Virginia and Lucía discover that they have been exploited and cheated by the mule driver, and refuse his request for help to be released from prison. The transcription of Lucía's response over the phone to this regard is extremely choleric and rancorous, as she expresses her indignation over the mule driver's macho behavior and mistreatment. Lucía ultimately reveals to him that she is the one responsible for his imprisonment:

> ¿Te acuerdas de lo que me quitaste, de lo que me robaste? ¿Te acuerdas de cómo me explotaste, de lo hijueputa que has sido conmigo? ¿Te acuerdas del engaño? ¿De cómo me tenías como una mula haciéndote plata y como una moza comiéndome? ¿Te acuerdas de todo? Pues bien. Púdrete porque yo fui quien te entregó y no solo a la justicia, sino a Virginia también. (Molano, "El Arriero" 30)[29]

Emblematically, *María Full of Grace* addresses a similar crucial issue concerning gender oppression and resistance in the context of drug smuggling. Mainly led by female characters, the narrative is animated by a strong sense of complicity and sisterhood. While preparing to travel, during the critical moment of flight, and after having arrived in New York City, the three young mules María, Lucy, and Blanca show solidarity and altruism. In their home country, they have experienced similar miserable and precarious life and work conditions. Likewise, during their flight towards the North, they share an identical clandestine illicit experience, and form a small, cohesive feminine core within the plane. Elsewhere during the film, Marston emphasizes the feminine agency of his characters as a reaction to gender inequality and exploitation. María's family is an example of a matriarchal microsociety, in which the only male is María's sister's unintended baby. The women of the family —the grandmother, the mother, and the sister—are either widows, separated, or unwed mothers, as is María herself, having decided not to get married upon realizing she is pregnant, despite her boyfriend's imprudent insistence. Moreover, as the events of the film become increasingly dramatic, the three mules' feminine solidarity is reinforced. Once in New York, after trying unsuccessfully to rescue Lucy, the victim of a drug capsule burst, María searches for Lucy's sister in Queens to inform her of Lucy's death. Blanca, who has been with María since departing their Colombian village, accompanies María on her trek to find Lucy's sister.

The matriarchal undertones of the film reach their climax in one of the final sequences when, after seeing two women walking out of a gynecologist's office, María decides to set an appointment to check her pregnancy. The feminine and friendly medical environment represents a temporary shelter from the harsh reality of the New York Latino Little Colombia neighbourhood, and ultimately reconciles María with her maternity. Her sonogram allows her to see her womb in another light for the first time: no longer a hostile part of her body, but her baby's cozy environment within her pregnant body. This is indeed the only scene in which María appears smiling and fulfilled. At this climactic point, from the initial reference to the Virgin Mary's belly in the title, the focus on María's womb and its containing function now epitomizes the different potential destinies of the mules. Whereas, for example, María's womb is finally free of drug pellets and occupied only by her fetus, Lucy's womb has been stabbed and profaned by the dealers in their efforts to rescue the heroin capsules that Lucy was unable to excrete on her own.[30] This outrageous and despicable act can, in fact, be compared to an extremely cruel forced abortion, and is also reminiscent of the drug-related femicides that Molano's mule driver describes.[31] In this context, a single internal organ of the human body is in itself sufficient to reveal the economic

complexity and perversity of global human trafficking and the illicit narcotics trade.

Air travel provides María with the unique and unexpected possibility of leaving the squalour of her home country and beginning a new life in the US with her future child. Her journey to the North, begun in Bogotá's El Dorado International Airport, is ultimately a one-way trip. The last sequence of Marston's film emblematically depicts the symbolic frontiers that airports and air travel represent for María. In this segment, María sits with Blanca in a taxi that drives them to JFK International Airport. Silent and thoughtful, she holds the image of her ultrasound and a note given to her by the gynecologist with the date of her next pregnancy appointment. María looks out the window and contemplates the receding skyline as she approaches the airport zone. In order to introduce the viewer to the climactic moment of María's final decision, which takes place in the JFK departure terminal, Marston slowly and progressively shows the typical locations, procedures, and noises of an everyday airport, such as an airplane taking off and crossing the sky, waiting areas surrounded by duty free shops, and flight attendants speaking on the phone. In contrast to the departure scene in the Bogotá airport and that of the arrival at JFK, here Marston circumvents security control, which is no longer relevant at this stage because neither María nor Blanca are carrying drugs.

María is then seen with Blanca in line, in front of the airline boarding desk. During the taxi ride to JFK, these travelling companions do not interact. Then, Blanca shows her travel documents to the flight attendant and crosses over to the gate, whereas María, holding onto her passport and boarding pass, finally decides not to fly back to Colombia with Blanca. Within the airport, on the final threshold before departure, since she is no longer a mule "out of the necessity" (Molano, "The Mule Driver" 10) of carrying and delivering drugs, María renounces the fluidity of the air world by deciding to remain in the US. Where previously she had been picked out of the crowd, her mobility restrained by customs officials, here she ultimately decides to self-exclude herself from the multitude of travellers, deliberately opting for immobility. From the moment she withdraws herself from the global flow of passengers and renounces her travelling status, the entire terminal infrastructure of corridors, signals, commercials, and shops becomes superfluous. Moreover, in an effort to underline María's detachment from the airport environment, Marston opts for a closeup with a shallow focus, and films María from the front as she turns her back on the departure gates and walks forward nonchalantly with downcast eyes, as if she were walking in any other place unrelated to air travel. The choice of Julieta Venegas's song "Lo que venga después" (2004) for the film's finale reinforces the rupture between the main character and her surrounding environment. The lyrics "Aquí queda todo lo que fui / aquí empieza todo lo que soy" ("Here will remain everything that I was / Here begins everything I am") emphasize the crucial role of the airport as a threshold where contemporary individuals, at the crossroads of many possible geographic destinations, make significant decisions that often secure them to the ground rather than take them up into the air.

Both Molano's "The Mule Driver" and Marston's *María Full of Grace* portray the unsolved asymmetries of our globalized world in a humane and aesthetical dimension. The literary and artistic treatment of these issues allows them to critically explore the effects of these contradictions in the daily life of anonymous, marginal individuals. In doing so, they strongly denounce the darker sides of globalization related to narcotrafficking and the equally threatening socioeconomic inequality between the South and the North (US and Europe), the feminization of poverty, and drug-related gender discrimination and violence. In creating fictional worlds, they overcome the blindness and impotence of many governments in the face of globalization, reaffirming the cultural power of story-telling to better understand the complex challenges of our current era.

Notes

1. For an insightful analysis of the role of technology in the spread of the illicit global economy, see Andreas.

2. The reference is to Michel Serres's metaphorical reading of contemporary air travellers in terms of the iconography of angels.

3. The expression "women's wombs" refers to the work of Françoise Vergès, and her hypothesis of how the wombs of women of colour in French colonies have been exploited by imperialistic powers in order to increase the workforce, while maintaining racialization, misogyny, and class inequality in former French overseas territories. Vergès's reading can also be applied to Latin America and the Caribbean, where women have been, and continue to be, exploited and abused. The phenomenon of mules in the context of drug smuggling networks shows yet another form of the perverse capitalization of women's wombs. Pierre Bourdieu's anthropological analysis of social constructions across different cultures of women's bodies, and wombs in particular, has also deeply influenced my understanding of the gender issues examined in this article. Moreover, as implicitly mentioned in the title of this article, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* constitutes a crucial methodological framework for the research hypothesis formulated here.

4. Explicit reference to the Virgin Mary is a relatively frequent feature of narcofiction, for instance Fernando Vallejo's *La virgen de los sicarios* (*Our Lady of the Assassins*) and Arturo Pérez Reverte's *La reina del Sur* (*The Queen of the South*). In his analysis of the main patterns of narcoculture, Carlos Monsiváis highlights the relevancy of religion and, particularly, of Catholicism, in drug traffickers' imaginary and lifestyle. Smugglers are, in fact, often superstitiously attached to Catholic icons and rituals and, more specifically, to veneration of the Virgin Mary. This religious component does not, however, necessarily entail repentance or feelings of guilt. Monsiváis argues that "muchísimos narcos son creyentes sincerísimos, en su gran mayoría católicos, que comulgan con fervor, dan enormes limosnas, buscan la cercanía de algún sacerdote, le rezan a la Virgencita, cumplen con los rituales y las mandas, incluso cargan la cruz de Jerusalén en lo que llaman 'narco-tours'" (27). [Many drug traffickers are very faithful believers, most of them Catholics, who commune with fervor, give large donations, seek closeness with a priest, pray to the Virgin, observe rituals and commandments, and even carry the Jerusalem cross during so-called 'narco-tours' (my translation)].

5. It is important to underline that this condition of hypermobility contrasts with the end of the story, which takes place in one of the most disreputable and claustrophobic places on the ground—a prison cell—where the mule driver finishes his days after being caught by the Spanish criminal authorities.

6. Alfredo Molano's collections of smuggling-related short stories describe the vast spectrum of behav-

ioural patterns of drug-smugglers as passengers in today's air world (see *Loyal Soldiers* 9, 11, 39, 83, 87, 104).

7. See also Molano, "The Mule Driver" 11, 12, 14, 16, 21.

8. In his testimony, Molano's mule driver recounts the air travel experiences of many mules. For several of them, the flight is a new and even pleasant circumstance. This is true, for instance, in the case of Doña Tila, "who ate everything they gave her on the plane and even asked for more. She'd never flown before and she thought that the plastic bags were tucked away who knows where" ("The Mule Driver" 11). He also tells the story of another mule who "traveled in first class. […] Her boyfriend was very elegant as well […]. They drank champagne throughout the flight, and they made a loud, tacky party out of it. They slept for a while and when they woke up they started asking for champagne. It was a flight to Paris" (9).

9. "The hardest parts of the trip are the meals, because you've got to eat a little so that the stewardesses don't catch on to the trick. Almost all of them are spies, although plenty are mules too. Some are spies and mules at the same time, making them spy-mules. The difference is that they don't carry the merchandise the way we do in our stomachs but inside the walls of the cargo containers that carry their bags or in their powder contacts" (Molano, "The Mule Driver" 9).

10. See Ziff for a study of transparency and the persistent use of glass in contemporary airport architecture and design. For an anthropological analysis of the colour blue related to air, see Bachelard.

11. "There are two big steps, which are heavy ones. The first is when you exit the plane and you walk down a long corridor, where they look everyone up and down and take in all the details: comportment, relaxation, uneasiness, your clothes, how you look. From there the candidates go to the second step, where they present their papers. This is the place where the guard comes up to one of the mules and says, 'Come with me to be searched'" (Molano, "The Mule Driver" 11).

12. On the anthropological role of luggage in contemporary aeromobilities, see Durante.

13. Clothes are an additional social feature related to the body that also play a distinctive role in the mules' general appearance. The apparel that María and Blanca wear during their trip represents a considerable upgrade from their usual outfits during the first part of the film. Nevertheless, dressed in their "working wom[e]n's Sunday best" (Molano, "The Mule Driver" 66), their look is still recognizable and their efforts to wear "ropa bonita" during travel are not always recompensed.

14. In her analysis of Marston's film, Silvia Schultermandl underlines the importance attached to the "transfer" of the drugs "inside the women's bodies" in order to overstate the "abuse of the female body" in the activity of drug muling (281). More precisely, Schultermandl notices that "the issue of swallowing the drug pellets comes up several times: twice, the movie shows María practice by swallowing entire grapes, it shows her swallow the pellets, and finally, it shows [during the flight] her rinse, cover with tooth-paste and re-swallow some pellets after they passed through her digestive tract" (281).

15. *María Full of Grace* and "The Mule Driver" both provide abundant scatological details related to the excretion of drug pellets from the human body. This particularly embarrassing situation for the mules is recounted from a male viewpoint, making it even more humiliating and shamefully voyeuristic. In the film, Carlos (Oscar Bejarano), one of the two drug thugs who monitors the mules in the hotel room while awaiting the delivery of the commodities, says disrespectfully: "Make yourselves comfortable. You'll be here until you shit everything out. […] Don't use the toilet. I don't want anything accidentally going down the drain. And don't forget the toothpaste. I don't want to be smelling your shit." Molano's mule driver's narrative is very similar to the latter, even if slightly less inhumane (Molano, "El Arriero" 19; "The Mule Driver" 12). See also Molano, "El Arriero" 14, "The Mule Driver" 9.

16. It should be noted, however, the film has been called the result of Western imperialistic views of Latin American countries. For example, Cortés-Conde and Schultermandl both point out the ideological and financial contradictions of the film. *María Full of Grace* was, in fact, sold to international audi-

ences as a Colombian cinematic production, when it was actually funded and produced by HBO and made by an American filmmaker in Spanish. Both scholars discuss these issues in terms of box office success ($12 million in the United States), media coverage, and award nominations (Audience Award at the Sundance Film Festival in 2004, Silver Bear for best actress at the 2004 Berlin Film Festival, and "Best Performance by an Actress in a Leading Role" for the 2005 Oscars).

17. See Orlando Tobón, *Las crónicas de Jackson Heights*, translated as *Jackson Heights Chronicles*.

18. In referring to Marston's audio commentary included on the DVD of the film, Schultermandl reminds us that while working on *María Full of Grace*, which only involves female drug mules, Marston interweaved information from mostly male informant drug mules (282).

19. Gender discrimination also means that male mules are provided higher compensation than female mules, even in cases of similar smuggling expertise (Giacomello, "Mujeres" 9).

20. Historically, as documented by Elaine Carey, since 1900, in the specific case of the US-Mexico border, women participated in contraband alcohol and drug smuggling because of the "lack of female agents" who could potentially search "under their skirts or in their clothing" (13). In her outstanding monograph, Carey resurrects from the archives eight decades of female drug-traffickers, showing how women who "flourished in the drug trade relied on their abilities to circumnavigate systems of constraint constructed by politicians and civil authorities" (15), and how they surprisingly "embraced stereotypical, gendered rhetoric to avoid imprisonment by exploiting tales of victimization" (16), and instrumentally "adopted certain cultural and gendered roles to construct prominent criminal enterprises and crime families" (17-18).

21. In his analysis of Molano's short story, González del Pozo underscores the "tragic tone" of the mule driver's narrative, characterized by a particular style "halfway between the document and the fiction" (48).

22. "Her name was Lucía and she was studying for her undergraduate degree […] (Molano, "The Mule Driver" 7). Among the mules there's one of every kind. […] I knew a mule from a good family […]. She was from the coast, tall with big green eyes. Really wicked. (9) […] I also got to know "troubled" mules who made the trip simply out of necessity. […] One of them, Doña Tila […] was a widow with three kids. (10) […] That time we arrived in Madrid without a hitch. […] I couldn't restrain myself and went up to Lucía on the way out of the airport. (11) […] We partied until the sun came up and we woke up together. […] I started working in this line because Virginia, my first girlfriend, left me for someone with money. She was the daughter of a spoiled and corrupt old lady who trafficked in women. (12) […] I was in love with her, and for every delivery that I made I made an apology for racing off to feel her pussy. (13) […] I kept my love affair going with Lucía. I loved her tiny body and the nipples on her small breasts, always stiff and alert, as if they were antennas. Virginia didn't realize what was going on because my love affair with Lucía was concealed inside the secret activities of smuggling. […] I don't know how it happened, I never understood it, but one Sunday Virginia showed up at the visitor's room instead of Lucía. (15) […] The memory of Virginia tormented me as much as that of Lucia. It didn't let me alone day or night. (20) […] Virginia was dead and buried inside of me. (21) […] I didn't want it that way, but Virginia became a monster who consumed the little bit of soul I had left. (22) […] She, Virginia, now rules over the walls and doorways of this prison that I built with the desire and the urge to kill her" (23).

23. The mule driver's following comment provides a perfect example of this overly macho sense of power and control: "I returned to the business. I recovered my prestige very quickly, retook the controls, pulled the strings, made contacts, and—the best part—managed the accounts. The little mules brought me all the merchandise I needed" (Molano, "Mule Driver" 15).

24. Molano, "El Arriero" 25; Molano, "The Mule Driver" 12.

25. In her brilliant analysis of recent Latin American narconetworks, Corinna Giacomello argues that women form the bulk of the lowest levels of narcotrafficking activity, while men occupy the "domes of power" ("Mujeres" 10). This relegation of women to the bottom of the criminal pyramid suggests

that they are mostly involved in activities such as drug transportation and sales, which are more likely to be prosecuted by police authorities. This discrimination in part explains how "between 2006 and 2011 the penitentiary population of Latin America almost doubled, going from 40,000 to more than 74,000 detainees" ("Mujeres" 12). In addition, "about 70% of them were imprisoned for drug-related crimes" ("Mujeres" 13) (my translation).

26. As underlined by Carlos Monsiváis in his definition of narcoculture, an obsession with money is a permanent fixture in narco mentality and narratives (26-27). Molano's male character perfectly embodies this obsession, referring repeatedly to money while telling his own story or reporting the experiences of other individuals engaged in the same illicit business. Thanks to a new demand for "periquita," or "parakeet" (a nickname for cocaine) in Spain, Molano's mule driver has been able to upgrade his lifestyle: "Thanks to her [the cocaine], I bought a car and an apartment and spent my vacation in Ibiza" (Molano, "The Mule Driver" 15). This cynical and predatory attitude affects the smuggler's perception of the surrounding world, including other human beings. The mule driver refers to his compulsive need for wealth in these terms: "The problem was how to handle the pile of cash. With such a quantity given in advance, handling the powder, the little bird, ceases to be the problem, leaving that honor to the bill themselves. To count millions of pesetas takes some doing. […] And to move this mountain of bills from one place to another is more difficult than moving the merchandise in powder form. Money is more slippery than powder. […] I myself ended up sinking my earnings into a hotel chain in Bilbao" (12). See also the translator's note (Molano, "The Mule Driver" 155, translator's note 3).

27. Relevant research carried out by the National Directorate of Narcotic Drugs in 2002 in the area of the Coffee Triangle clearly states that "En Colombia, la ideología del éxito inherente al modelo económico, la creciente desigualdad con la ausencia de canales institucionales de promoción social y personal, alimentan, y alimentarán de manera permanente, la vinculación de personas a los campos de la ilegalidad, prohijadas por la corrupción y el patrimonialismo como forma de administración de lo público" (Mejía Ochoa et al. 128). [In Colombia, the ideology of success inherent to the economic model, growing inequality in the absence of institutional channels for social and personal promotion, fuel, and will permanently fuel, the connections of people to areas of illegality, favored by corruption and patrimonialism as a form of public administration (my translation)].

28. In using the concept of "hegemonic masculinities," introduced in the early 1980s in reference to Gramsci's term "hegemony," I highlight the theoretical framework and model of gender hierarchy defined by Australian sociologist Raewyn Connell and addressed by Howson. With more specific regard to men and gender identity in Central and South America see, among others, Gutmann, *Changing Men;* Gutmann and Viveros Vigoya, "Masculinities."

29. "Do you remember how you got rid of me, how you robbed me? Do you remember how you exploited me, the son of a bitch that you were to me? Do you remember the way you tricked me? How you treated me like a mule making money for you and like a girlfriend using me up? Do you remember all of it? OK then. Rot in jail, because I was the one who handed you over and not only to the law but to Virginia as well" (Molano, "The Mule Driver" 19).

30. Regarding the persistent importance of the womb throughout the film, Schultermandl's remark about Marston's initial plan of "a scene in which María had a nightmare in which she is nine months pregnant, gets shot, and drug pellets spill from her body" (278) is relevant.

31. For an example of atrocities carried out on mules, even post-mortem, see Molano, "The Mule Driver" 16-17. In relating this incident, the mule driver describes the body of a Colombian mule mutilated after she had died during her flight back from Spain. The dealers "cut off her fingers so she couldn't be identified, and threw her into the river with her guts open, not only so they could remove what she was carrying but also so the body would sink more rapidly" (16). The similarities to Lucy's cruel assassination are astonishing.

32. From this perspective, I agree with Davis's discussion of Marston's film, especially her reference to Braidotti.

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