A READING OF THE CUBAN *TELENOVELA* *DESTINO PROHIBIDO* AS A FEMINIST INTERVENTION IN POPULAR CULTURE

by

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ABSTRACT

Some veins of feminist theory suggest mimesis as an effective method of challenging the dualistic construction of gendered subjectivities, that is, to expose the discursive site of the production of sexed subjectivities through the intentional and strategic repetition of a gendered enactment with the intent to parody. One problem with this strategy has been the difficulty of carrying through a sustainable re-signification of the meaning(s) of gender due to the entrenched history of dominant understandings of sexual difference. In this project, I examine the possibility of posing a sustainable critique of gendered identities through the use of the historical medium of melodramatic performance: specifically, through the format of *telenovela*. I propose that this popular cultural form has a stability of structure and mechanics that uniquely fit it to mimetic practices that could be used to subvert the gender binary.

This project analyzes one specific *telenovela*, the Cuban serial *Destino Prohibido*. Critical Cuban press reaction to this serial is considered, but the body of this project focuses on the ways that director Xiomara Blanco employs mimetic strategies to invert the ethical valences of the central female characters to the point of undermining dominant notions of gender that must be understood by the viewer for a consistent reading of these characters as representative of their historical niches in the genre. My reading of this serial highlights the liberatory potential of femininity as, more than warning and ideal, a potential tool for its own undoing.

CONTENTS

Introduction

In her generative work The Second Sex, Simone de Beauvoir assures us that, contrary to Freud's assertion, anatomy is not destiny. Beauvoir's systematic deconstruction of the biological, psychological, and social roots of female oppression is cannily replayed for the revolutionary-minded viewer in Cuban writer/director Xiomara Blanco's latest *telenovela* *Destino Prohibido* (Forbidden Destiny). Reminiscent of Beauvoir, Blanco begins with the "facts" of gendered identities, in the form of easily recognizable melodramatic characters, and then proceeds to illuminate these figures from multiple angles in such a way as to radically undermine the gendered meanings that accrue to, and provide the formative ethical valences of, these characters. My analysis of this widely viewed Cuban serial is guided by my reading of this televisual text as a subversive critique of proscriptive gender norms. I will demonstrate multiple strategies used by Blanco that work to destabilize a gender binary and show that, to an audience sufficiently equipped and motivated to read past the superficial plot, this *telenovela* does support Beauvoir's argument. The destinies of the women of *Destino Prohibido* are proscribed by multivalent ideas about the nature of sexual difference, but the ways that these female characters negotiate their destinies opens a space for the critical viewer to question the logic of anatomy as destiny.

I chose the Cuban *telenovela* *Destino Prohibido* as the focus of my research because of my interest in the possibility of effective feminist interventions in popular culture that

reference traditional cultural forms. In contrast to *Salir de Noche*, the only other *telenovela* airing on the website Cubavision at the time, *Destino Prohibido*, with its pseudo-historical settings, costumes, and characters, has no pretensions to contemporary realism and does not address itself to specific, topical issues or social problems. Instead, it sets up a rich, fictional Cuban past where gypsies dance and throw knives in the tavern, men and women ride through lush forest trails on horseback, and lives are strictly organized around the social relations regulated by gender, race, and class. Its adherence to the traditions of the *telenovela* form firmly position this serial as representative of the genre. *Destino Prohibido* is not overtly daring, it does not attempt to redefine or expand the genre, but works through subtle and strategic deviations within the structural parameters of traditional melodrama in ways that can be read as quite radically subversive. *Destino Prohibido's* over-production of feminine characters and reliance on the stereotyped stock characters of the genre, typical of the *telenovela* form, offers a revealing site of the discursive production of femininities as warning and ideal, but ultimately, I will show, as a liberatory device. Although local press reception to this *telenovela* is not the focus of this study, the kinds of problems that the critical press had with *Destino Prohibido* point to the issues at stake in my analysis, therefore I will take some of these criticisms, in turn, as an introduction to the ideas that I will be interrogating.

The storyline of *Destino Prohibido*, broadcast from January to May 2004 in Cuba and on the internet site Cubavision, revolves around the central character Rebecca, and traces her path of lies and deceit to her ultimate insanity and homelessness. Rebecca is something of a rebel, initially motivated simply by the desire to escape the claustrophobia

of confinement to her parents' home and rules. She falls in love with Nicolas, a dashing and handsome villain who carries on a sexual affair with her throughout the serial, but who will never give her the commitment she wants from him. Her loss of virginity and rejection by Nicolas prompt her to look elsewhere for marriage and she settles on Fernando, the son of a wealthy tobacco distributor, who happens to be engaged to the daughter of a large landowner, a young woman named Maria del Pilar. Rebecca forces Fernando to consent to marry her through a series of lies and manipulations, breaking up his engagement to Maria del Pilar. This leaves Maria del Pilar to be consoled by Samuel, a biracial farmhand who turns out to be Maria del Pilar's cousin. Samuel is in love with Maria del Pilar, but he, in turn, is pursued by a gypsy woman named Rosario la Bella. Rosario, as the audience eventually finds out, is not really a Gypsy, but was left as a child at the gypsy camp to avoid a life of servitude, and was raised without this knowledge. In good melodramatic form, all of the women in this *telenovela* receive traditional justice. Maria del Pilar marries Fernando, Rosario la Bella marries Samuel, and Rebecca goes crazy and ends the series homeless.[1]

Somewhat to my surprise, critical Cuban media reaction to *Destino Prohibido* was almost universally negative.[2] Appearing at a time when Cuban *telenovela* was reinventing itself to address contemporary social problems such as HIV/AIDS, teenage promiscuity,

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[1] The resemblance of this type of narrative to fairy tale is striking, and it is worth noting that the fairy tale is one of the foundational genres from which melodrama developed. Jesús Martín-Barbero discusses this evolution in detail in his highly influential collaborative work with scholar Sonia Muñoz, *Televisión Y Melodrama*.

[2] Of the seven articles that I was able to find in the Cuban press relating specifically to *Destino Prohibido*, the only exception to this *telenovela's* generally negative reception was in María del Carmen Mesta's review for the women's section of www.cubaweb.com, an online publication. Carmen Mesta's article was the only one that included an interview with writer/director Xiomara Blanco, although quite brief. As women are a population who have the most to gain from an analysis of sexual difference and femininity, I find Carmen Mesta's enthusiastic review of *Destino Prohibido*, written for a female audience, a provocative counter to the otherwise hostile reaction of the Cuban print media.

alcoholism, and suicide as well as gay, lesbian, and bisexual issues, *Destino Prohibido* deviated strongly from this trend and was widely regarded by the Cuban press as indefensibly retrograde.[3] This criticism stems, not so much from the historical setting and traditional story line, but from a more general perception that the problems that *Destino Prohibido* treats have already been solved, thus it is not salient to the lives of modern viewers. However, from my own feminist perspective, *Destino Prohibido's* treatment of female stereotypes and exaggerated performances of different "femininities," ways of enacting a female identity, offers a very fruitful space to critique some of the ideas about nature, culture, class, race, and gender, that inform certain constructions of sexual difference. Opening up these spaces where the construction of gendered subjectivities is rationalized offers the critical viewer a place to examine and question the ways that sexual difference is informed by particular ideological positions, such as a strict culture/nature divide. The kind of reading that I am advocating works to expose operations of power to critique. This strategy also points to the difficulties inherent in challenging dominant regimes of meaning, as it exposes the multiple linkages and deeply held ideas that work together to limit the options of oppressed groups.

The challenge for feminism(s), for me, is that of eradicating existing constructions of sexual difference as a primary signifier of meaning, a project which implies working beyond a gender binary so that all human subjects are equally and legibly human. This

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[3] Pedro de la Hoz, writing for *Diario Granmá*, explains that *Destino Prohibido's* most serious problem stems from its treatment of the *telenovela* genre as if it were unchangeable, and criticizes its lack of innovation (De la Hoz par 5). Daynet Castañeda Rodríguez, writing for Almamater, accuses *Destino Prohibido* of emphasizing, to the point of abuse, dialogue over presentation, and complains that the ostentatious and solemn recitation of script are inherited from *telenovela* styles of the 1950s (Castañeda Rodríguez pars 8 and 9). Sahily Tabares, writing for Bohemia, states that Blanco does not consider the contemporary audience in her treatment of a story from the twentieth century (Tabares par 6 and 7). And Joel del Río, writing for *Juventud Rebelde*, describes *Destino Prohibido* as, "inexplicably old" *(Reacciones parciales a la telenovela Destino Prohibido* par 2).

project requires a sustainable re-signification of all of the meanings that follow from sexual difference. Analysis of Xiomara Blanco's female characters in *Destino Prohibido* demonstrates the ways that challenges to the system of male primacy, patriarchy, are always already parts of that very system and, therefore, subject at all times to re-inscription and re-signification within this dominant paradigm of meanings. This is most clearly seen in the case of the villainous character Rebecca, whose stubborn attempts to re-define systematic limits to her freedom, using tools and strategies that are historically seen as female, are continually rebuffed, as exposé and warning, as she slides closer and closer to her ultimate punishment of insanity. It is also seen in the exotic and essentialized character Rosario la Bella, a gypsy woman who operates outside the social system of the major characters, but whose life and choices are still constructed from and for the benefit of that system. The character of the innocent victim, Maria del Pilar, is instructive in that she neither challenges nor resists patriarchy, and is rewarded for her compliance, while her complicity with the system is demonstrably damaging to others and presented as so negative that it has the effect of inverting her position as victim at some levels of reading, since it is nearly impossible for any viewer to pity such a horrible person.

Writer/director Xiomara Blanco had enjoyed previous success with the popular *telenovela* *Tierra Brava*, which shared with *Destino Prohibido* a rural setting and many of the same actors. The use of these actors in diametrically opposed roles from the previous *telenovela* was seen as problematic by some of the Cuban press.[4] Joel del Rio, writing for *Juventud Rebelde*, lamented that this choice of actors invited comparisons and

[4] Joel del Rio and Daynet Casteneda Rodriguez specifically voice this criticism.

provoked unnecessary reiterations of intention ("*20 Preguntas"* par 3). The implied criticism, that the viewer must work harder to maintain a consistent reading of the characters, can be seen as part of Blanco's more general strategy of forcing contradictions at many levels in order to create a productive friction that opens a space for a subversive critique of female identity. Blanco's choice of reverse typecasting serves to heighten the disconnection between the actors as people performing their jobs and the roles that they are performing, and helps to complicate viewer acceptance of the Manichean worldview that structures traditional *telenovela* and instantiates problematic constructions of sexual difference.

Another subtle tactic that Blanco uses to prompt alternative readings of the characters is the manipulation of the actors' images on the television screen. Joel del Río complained that the cameras, lights, and costumes presented the actors most unflattering angles and physical images, rather than embellishing their attractiveness ("*20 Preguntas"* par 4). This criticism is suggestive, as Blanco does manipulate the physical appearances of some of the characters, in ways that are at odds with their screen personalities. Rebecca, the villain, is almost always posed and stage-lit at her most flattering angles, while the camera is not so consistently kind to the innocent victim, Maria del Pilar, and the exoticized gypsy, Rosario la Bella, both of whom are frequently portrayed in close-up shots that expose facial hair and wrinkles that belie their narrative positions of youthful innocence. Both presentations, flawless beauty and gritty reality, imbue these women with subtly monstrous and transgressive qualities that echo the transgressive nature of the feminine itself. That Del Río reacts to this enough to find it offensive, rather than recognizing it as an invitation to re-read the characters, testifies to the tenacity of

proscriptive norms that regulate and (re)produce ways of being female, that then must be negotiated by living women.

Blanco's casting choices and visual presentations of her characters accentuate dissonance for the viewer and interrupt consistent readings of the characters. In doing so, *Destino Prohibido* becomes a familiar, but slightly uncomfortable, space in which the central female characters can be read against the grain of their structural positions in the *telenovela* genre. But, Blanco goes much further than production-level manipulations in pushing the viewer to confront the artifice of sexual difference. She works through the familiar mechanics of *telenovela* itself in order to create character situations that lead the viewer, time and again, to question the basis of a continuous and stable judgment of these characters as good or evil. This process ultimately renders legible some of the forces at play in the construction and naturalization of sexual difference, and points to possibilities for feminist interventions at the levels of discursive production. Indeed, because *Destino Prohibido* engages with the attitudes and beliefs about sexual difference that must be maintained for consistent readings of these characters, this *telenovela* functions, in my interpretation, as a feminist intervention.

The fact that Blanco can construct a space that invites such a productive re-evaluation of femininity, is due to the nature of *telenovela* as a genre: specifically, its rigidly structured and highly schematized characters and its limited narrative duration. The t*elenovela* form inherits its dramatic structure from centuries of melodramatic tradition. According to cultural scholar Jesús Martín-Barbero, melodrama operates symbolically by a double operation of schematization and polarization, by which personalities are converted into signs and reduced in value to good or bad. The personalities that form the

nucleus of melodrama, the traitor, the avenger, the victim, and the clown, are personifications of basic feelings (*Televisión Y Melodrama* 45-46). They function as archetypical symbols of ethical values in the central struggle of *telenovela*, that of good against evil. Because good always triumphs in the end, and *telenovelas* are written and produced to end conclusively with satisfactory narrative closure after a few months, this formula sets up and relies upon notions of static identity. The villains must remain evil and the victims must remain good in order to merit their ultimate punishments and rewards. While this structural tradition tends to have a conservative effect on audience values, reinforcing normative gender roles by tying them to universalized concepts of good and evil, it also holds enormous potential for subversion. My resistant reading of *Destino Prohibido* is premised on this potential, as viewer expectations of characters and events, if compromised or undercut, could also call into question the ordering logic of the construction of gendered subjectivities.

The final criticism of *Destino Prohibido* that I will address is the widespread belief on the part of the Cuban press that this *telenovela* fails in its departure from the current trend of realism in Cuban *telenovela*. Anaray Lorenzo, writing for the digital edition of *El Habanero*, explains that Cubans pride themselves on their inclination to change, and lists *Doble Juego*, *El Balcón de los Helechos*, and *Salir de Noche*, as three examples of courageous innovation in Cuban *telenovela*. Lorenzo goes on to say that these unusual *telenovelas* captivated the public through their dynamism and attention to current affairs. She argues, further, that if *telenovela* had continued along those lines, "[…] another rooster would crow. With *Destino Prohibido*, by Xiomara Blanco, the rooster remained silent once again" (Lorenzo par 8, translation mine). Clearly, Lorenzo assesses *Destino*

Prohibido as an embarrassing failure because of its avoidance of a direct engagement with topical issues.

There appears to be a general consensus among the Cuban media elite that *telenovela* has a duty to promote the resolution of social problems toward a greater justice, and a concomitant agreement that to do so, *telenovela* must create at least a partial space of shared reality with the viewer. Sources within the industry, from television producers, to *telenovela* creators, to actors, affirm this position.[5] As Sabily Tabares asserts, "There has to exist a condition of reality in order for communication to be possible" (Tabares par 8, translation mine). That this "shared reality" should include a recognizably and specifically Cuban geo-political or historical setting, is implicit in criticisms from the press. Xiomara Blanco, however, acknowledges that Cuba is ever-present in *Destino Prohibido*: from the ways that the characters speak and carry themselves, to the costumes and the countryside (Carmen Mestas par 4).

Viewer identification with the Cuba presented in *Destino Prohibido*, rather than occurring at the level of shared historical or contemporary landmarks, occurs at a level of fantasy. Fantasy has the effect of collapsing or expanding time, releasing it from a masculinist master-narrative. The viewer cannot have a shared, contemporary experience with the rural, pre-Revolutionary physical spaces it presents: large homes populated by servants and masters, the countryside through which the characters pass on horseback, and the tavern with its performing gypsies. The historical anachronisms, covered tobacco

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[5] Havana TV producer Mirtha Gonzalez acknowledges that many *telenovelas* "have a social purpose" (Eaton par 25). Rafael "Cheto" Gonzalez, creator of the *telenovela La Cara Oculta de la Luna*, explains of his work, "It is *necessary* to treat themes of AIDS and homosexuality. We are trying to reach the sensibilities of everyone with complex themes like AIDS, relationships between couples, alcoholism, bisexuality, etc. Now *it is an obligation to reflect them on screen* […]" (Puyol par 7, translation mine, Italics added for emphasis). And, Nancy González, a star in the *telenovela Salir de Noche*, states, "People do like to see [*telenovelas*] that touch on contemporary themes…on their own problems" (Eaton par 32).

processing stations, glassware for beer in the tavern, and the style of tile-work used in the interiors, among other examples, work to mystify the specifics of the setting; a process that led to criticism by some in the press who viewed this as a reluctance to treat contemporary, nation-specific issues in the hopes of export to other Latin American countries.[6] But fantasy, as Jacqueline Rose describes, "[…] always contains a historical reference in so far as it involves, alongside an attempt to arrest the present, a journey through the past" (5), and it is my contention that *Destino Prohibido's* reference to the past, although fantastical, provides a space for a partial recognition of the network of powers at play in contemporary constructions of gendered, and racialized, subjectivities. Blanco's choice to mystify the specific geographical and historical site of *Destino Prohibido* is, from this perspective, an effective strategy for challenging the discursive tools of power that are too often overlooked in treating contemporary social issues. As fantasy allows time to overlap, the contemporary viewer may experience a catharsis as the limitations of gendered and racialized subjectivities, subjectivities that are certainly mirrored in the viewing audience, play out and individuals suffer and find joy. This strategy, in contrast to the press reaction, has strong precedent in the *telenovela* genre.

Jesús Martín-Barbero identifies this strategy as a widely recognized model of *telenovela* which derives from the Cuban *radio-novela*. This model is characterized by an initial heartbreak or separation that brings into play basic and primordial emotions. This process leads to an "[…] erasure or neutralization of all reference to a place or time […]" (*Televisión y Melodrama* 63-64, translation mine). Blanco's choice of this model propels the drama of *Destino Prohibido* firmly into the realm of fantasy, which allows for a re-

[6] Indeed, according to an archived article from the website www.tvlatina.com, the Mexican television company Televisa acquired the rights to produce a Mexican version of *Destino Prohibido* (http://www.tvlatina.tv/archivenews4.php?filename=xystus6226.htm par 5).

elaboration of the unequal relationships of power of the past as a background for, rather than a frontal attack on, the specific contemporary problems that result from this power dynamic. It is in this respect that the overwhelming press rejection of *Destino Prohibido* points to the problems that adhere to dominant constructions of sexual difference, as none of the major Cuban press critics specifically made the connection between the serial's fantasy past and contemporary Cuban social issues.

My work focuses on Blanco's development of the female characters Rebecca, Maria del Pilar, and Rosario la Bella and the ways that these characters can be read oppositionally, thus allowing a multivalent examination of feminine identity. While, to some extent, I examine critical press reception, this analysis does not take into account the response of viewers in Cuba, although this would certainly be an interesting and provocative project, but concerns the ways that these female characters work with and against each other at the level of the text, as well as with and against their respective narrative positions, to problematize femininity as an essential and uncontested quality. I work from the position that sexual difference, while important to human reproduction, is not a random choice in an infinite field of referential possibilities, but a choice made necessary and naturalized by a logic of identity that relies on the perpetuation of a fiction of stability for its continuation. The realistic, contemporary nation-specific social problems that evidently appeal to the Cuban press as problems worthy of *telenovela* focus, are, at a very real level, created by this totalizing paradigm. For example: rape, sexual identity, teen pregnancy, HIV/AIDS, alcoholism, and child abuse are all intimately connected to the ways that this system of meaning maintains itself. It is precisely because Cuba sees itself, through the eyes and voices of its press, as having fought and won the

battles of sexual, racial, and class equality, that Blanco's work in *Destino Prohibido* is read as hopelessly old fashioned, rather than as an attempt at expanding the discursive boundaries of femininity. Because I read this *telenovela* as a complex and provocative space for thinking about femininity as a fictive category with real consequences, I have chosen to direct my analysis of *Destino Prohibido* toward the ways in which its female characters are useful in exploring the boundaries of this identity category and the (in)coherence of gendered difference such identities propagate.

Chapter one provides a historical and theoretical context for my analysis. In this chapter, I explain my theoretical perspectives and describe how the work of feminist theorists Judith Butler and Luce Irigaray inform my research. I also examine the work of *telenovela* scholar Jesús Martín-Barbero, with attention to his work on the historical roots of *telenovela*, the melodramatic public performances of early modern Europe and the function of the staple personalities that are established at this time. I argue in this chapter that mimesis, as suggested by feminist theorists, is a productive strategy for challenging dominant gender ideologies, but that in order to work, this practice must be recognizable by its audience as more than simple parody. My review of the history of *telenovela* as a genre and its use in Cuba, sets up an analysis of this entertainment form as a potentially potent cultural space for challenging male primacy at the level of discursive production, as the audience should be aware of the historical formula and able to recognize strategic deviations from the expected character types as intentional.

Chapter two provides a detailed analysis of the characters of Rebecca, Maria del Pilar, and Rosario la Bella, focusing on the ways that Blanco fleshes out these stock melodramatic figures to allow for alternative readings. As these characters must

consistently demonstrate the ethical valences of their types, this chapter focuses on the ways that villainy, innocence, and otherness is gendered, and the consequences of this for these characters. This chapter also looks at race and class as interlocking systems that work with sexism in producing these characters and their options. Rebecca's constant struggle to force her own meanings is doomed from the beginning because of her irredeemable position in the *telenovela* structure. Her choice of strategies, however, is useful as a template for an examination of the ways that patriarchy, as the dominant ordering system in Western human experience, has always, already provided and weighted these options.

In my conclusion, I will show that, although dominant discourse is guarded by, and guards, discursive devices that perpetuate and necessitate an unequal social power structure, there are ways that alternative and critical perspectives can be introduced into this discourse. Further, I argue that this insinuation into popular discourse of critical perspectives of sexual difference need not, necessarily, reinforce dominant readings, and could work to expand the ways that femininity can be thought. At the same time, however, any use of identity categories poses some risks to marginalized groups, and I elaborate some of these dangers. As my work in this paper is limited to my own reading of *Destino Prohibido*, I suggest further research strategies that could provide more information about the utility of mimesis in popular entertainment. While re-signifying such a deeply entrenched trope as "woman" is a daunting prospect, I remain convinced that this task is critical to a better future; therefore, any instances of this attempt deserve our best attention.

Chapter 1:

Theory and Masquerade: The Mimetic Potential of Melodrama

My reading of *Destino Prohibido* as a critical feminist intervention in popular discourse, and my analysis of Blanco's uses of femininity in effecting this intervention, is strongly informed by the theoretical work of Judith Butler and Luce Irigaray who both, among many other feminist thinkers, advocate the strategic maneuvering of performances of femininity as a liberatory strategy. Mary Russo states that, "[…] to put on femininity

with a vengeance suggests the possibility of taking it off" (331), and it is my contention that Blanco uses multiple layers of performance and subversions to suggest just such a powerful possibility to her audience. Blanco's positioning of naturalized ideas of female-ness as signifiers of the moral valences of her characters is not a new strategy. Indeed, this is a staple of melodrama. The promise of Blanco's work lies in the ways that she at once uses and destabilizes traditional melodramatic characters by a strategic and unexpected use of femininity. Whether Blanco intends to advocate this position or not, her work appears to reflect a postmodern perspective of sex as a discursive production. That is, that biological sex has no inherent meaning except that which it is given through language and cultural representations, and these representations serve to fix and perpetuate unequal power arrangements in society.

Language, as an ordering communication system, cannot be seen to reflect and represent an objective reality so much as it creates the reality that it pretends to describe. It is not a descriptive system, but a productive one, as it does not simply represent objects or events with words, but invests these words with social meanings. Every person must gain entry into this ordering referential system in order to survive and live as human. Every human entry into this system, what postmodern psychoanalytical-linguistic theorist Jacques Lacan describes as the Symbolic Order, is preceded by a social reality reflective of the relationships of power within that society, that has already established social meanings for, or understandings of, the referents of language and their relationships to each other. Because power is not equally distributed within any society, these meanings, while flexible and multivalent, are strongly weighted to the advantage of the dominant members of society. Thus, objects or events that exist or take place in the physical world

have consequences or meanings for humans only in terms of the meanings that already accrue and correspond to their available language or representational forms, and these meanings are already biased.

It is, therefore, impossible to use words like "woman" or "female" without invoking and instantiating the history of the meanings that have been, in Western thought, elaborated by elite men within a power narrative that has already assumed male primacy and established the male subject as the human standard. Women have been historically excluded from access to institutions that guard the production and distribution of knowledge, and while there have always been female artists, philosophers, poets, writers, and scientists, their voices have been marginalized and isolated by the dominant regime of power. Simone de Beauvoir describes this process as "othering," whereby the identity category described by the term, woman, is produced by and in reference to the male subject. Woman has been defined by men, studied by men, represented by men, and described so thoroughly by men who have had privileged access to these cultural institutions, that the act of taking a subject position as female is difficult because to speak as a woman, in this respect, is to speak from a colonized subject position. And, to speak of women is to coerce a fictively stable identity category that regulates its membership through continual exclusions in a manner that re-duplicates its initial production.

Postmodern psychoanalytic theory narrates this initial production in terms of human development. As the formative work in this field was produced by European men working from a heteronormative paradigm of binary sexual difference, it is necessary to read this as a narrative of human *male* development, to which the contribution of female voices is already relegated, due to the juridical authority of this initial elaboration or

naming, to a position of response or reaction. The importance of this theoretical perspective, however, should not be overlooked, as it offers an accounting of human agency that is more nuanced and workable for feminist goals than previous accounts based on a stable and radically autonomous adult male ego. The human infant, presumed male in the foundational work of psychoanalytic theory, is obliged to successfully differentiate himself from a fluid relationship of dependency on his mother, and must come to view himself as independent of this maternal economy. Jacques Lacan's important contribution to this Freudian model of development was to posit language rather than the successful resolution of the Oedipal Complex, as the point of individuation. Order and structure, a departure from the presumably chaotic and limitless boundaries of the maternal world, are represented by language, which is contrasted in stark polarization to the mother. The mother, the female, becomes the abject, everything that must be rejected and repressed to form an independent (and masculine) identity.[7] This identity is not, however, stable and must be continually fixed with reference to an other. The "I" that speaks, or thinks as an "I," must continually negotiate this recognition.

The inherently unstable ego that forms in this process is presumed to have repressed, but not eliminated, the elements of its pre-Oedipal existence, the time/space before language that Lacan describes as the Imaginary. Signs of the imaginary may erupt at

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[7] Lest this argument be read as purely academic, I offer this example from a current website, http://www.kiltmen.com/, whose author goes to great lengths to "prove" that men are oppressed because they cannot wear skirts:

> Consider this: The first person with whom a baby boy learns to identify is his *mother*. Therefore, at the heart of every boy's personality, there is a *feminine* identity. […] Therefore, the boy must be physically and psychologically torn away from his mother and all things feminine, in order to achieve a new, masculine identity. He must go through repeated ordeals to strengthen his body and desensitize his feelings. He must become mortally ashamed of anything soft or feminine within him. He must literally come to believe that he would rather die - actually *die!* (as in battle) - than to be considered unmasculine or like a woman. (par 31-33, Emphasis in original)

times from the subconscious and emerge in the form of dreams, laughter, music and poetry, rhythms that recall the mother's heartbeat before the violence of individuation. Every separation required for the formation of the individual ego can be seen as a violence, a series of rejections and repressions that lead to the eschewal of the feminine/mother as that which is not-I within conscious thought. That the Symbolic Order, the realm of language, is masculine because it is not the mother, happens because of the always already ideological apparatus of a heteronormative binary sex system that allows no alternative to the mother than the father. Language is masculine because of its position in this process. The historical exclusion of women from, or marginalization within, the process of knowledge production, along with the dominant ideology of a proscriptively heterosexual dual sex system, results in an insinuation into language and its pervasive masculine privilege. The enormity of this bias leads Luce Irigaray to assert that masculine language is, "[…] the only language there is" (Duchen 89).

This accounting of agency, this accounting of the production of sex, this accounting of the gendered subject in language that excludes the possibility of an authentic female subject position, presents a challenge for feminists who would elaborate a positive theory of femininity. Some scholars have taken up this challenge, to re-work the Symbolic Order on different terms, while others advocate a political strategy of working within the system to destabilize it, as, at present, there is no practical alternative.[8] Woman has been produced within this representational system structured by a subject/object dichotomy that has, and continues to define this term according to its own needs and parameters. There is nothing inherently biological about this designation. It is a mythical, male-

[8] While some theoreticians have done spectacular work in this area, notably Christine Battersby and Julia Kristeva, it is important to note that some feminists object to projects of psychoanalysis as falsely universal paradigms that are irretrievably Western biased.

driven, cultural construction. Irigaray describes this double movement of oppression that happens at and follows from our identity in language:

> How can I say it? That we are women from the start. That we don't have to be turned into women by them, labeled by them, made holy and profane by them. That has always already happened, without their efforts […] It's not that we have a territory of our own; but their fatherland, family, home, discourse, imprison us in enclosed spaces where we cannot keep on moving, living, as ourselves. Their properties are our exile. ("When Our Lips Speak Together" quoted in Fuss 61)

While Irigaray, much like Julia Kristeva, sees a possibility of the feminine in language that always hovers under the surface of the Symbolic, Judith Butler sees the feminine Imaginary as irretrievable.[9] Butler argues that the Symbolic Order structures and produces human reality so overwhelmingly that any representational system "outside" this field of meanings may not exist. To think the Imaginary requires the referential tools of the Symbolic, thus any attempt to recoup woman by re-accessing a pre-Oedipal maternal economy could only do so through the masculinist logic that structures conscious thought, re-inscribing the meanings in the terms of this totalizing system. For Butler, "[p]leasure beyond the paternal law can be imagined only together with its inevitable impossibility" (Gender Trouble 112).

Butler reasons that sex/gender is not an expression of any underlying essence, but a performative, a performance of a culturally scripted act that produces its own meaning with the juridical authority of history. This is not to say that thinking human subjects have to fit themselves into available roles, as this would imply a radical autonomy external to discourse. Instead, the implication is that the thinking human subject is produced within a discourse of bodies that compels heterosexuality as it normalizes a binary sex ideology that privileges males. Butler sees this productive structure as the

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[9] See Kristeva's Revolution in Poetic Language. New York: Columbia University Press, 1984.

ground for individual agency and, in this move, denies any claims to a universal female identity. Gender—and, for Butler, gender and sex are basically the same thing—is best understood as a repeating performance that is coerced by the heteronormative master discourse of identity.[10]

The possibilities for re-writing this discourse are circumscribed by the very process necessary for this challenge, as the tools for an alternative articulation are already the province of the Symbolic Order. But, the Symbolic Order can be seen to have produced the vehicle by which it may be challenged, expanded, or destabilized, in the form of the very bodies it produces. Women's bodies are the sites where values converge, and it is women's bodies that, once produced, must be controlled. Femininity, therefore, serves as a set of regulatory practices and presentations that are produced through discourse, through acts of speech, writing, and modeling, that occur within a specific set of power relationships. Any and every (re) articulation of femininity is produced within this matrix and must re-produce it. When femininity is seen from this perspective, certain strategies suggest themselves. Could femininity itself be over-produced, over-acted, over-exaggerated, and could this performance work to destabilize a sexed identity? Could this performance work to de-naturalize the connection between women's bodies and the meanings that produce and define these bodies?

The political and public uses of female imagery in Western history suggest this possibility, but also show the limitations of such a strategy. Public deployments of symbolically transgressive female imagery, while possibly modeling expanded roles for

[10] As my own theoretical perspective is strongly informed by postmodern conceptualizations of sexual difference, I agree with Butler that sex and gender are virtually the same phenomena. Therefore, I will use these terms interchangeably throughout my work, for there is no sex without the social and cultural meanings that shape our understanding of it.

women, routinely hi-jack this possibility by an ultimate re-ascription of femininity to nature.[11] It is precisely the strength of gender ideology, or as Jacqueline Zita calls it, "the historical gravity of the sexed body" (106), that allows these usages to remain symbolic, without upsetting the gender binary. But, is it possible to imagine a staging that could attack this ideology?

Although any such staging would necessarily risk re-naturalizing women, feminists do advocate strategies that make use of the already-given status of Otherness as a site of resistance. Mimesis, the imitation of a gender performance with the intent to parody, holds the potential to disrupt dominant readings of these performances, although this potential is never guaranteed and depends on several variables, not least of which is the ability of the viewer to share in the joke, as it were.

Judith Butler's work on male drag performance addresses this interdependence. While the performance of men performing the performance of femininity does tend to highlight the fraud of femininity, this fraud is too easily reassigned, if these performances make their way into public discourse, to the gender-crossing itself, thus, the process works to temporarily suspend femininity from its identification with women's bodies without displacing heteronormativity. These men are still "being" women and are embodying women as sites of a heterosexualized male desire, as the entire performance is, necessarily, produced within the discursive confines of a hegemonic narrative of desire and power. Nevertheless, Butler sees possibilities for displacing or de-naturalizing the hierarchical sex binary by strategic and parodic repetitions of gender performance, as the signifying practices of gender necessitate the subversive use of what is available. As she

[11] Mary Russo's work on carnival theory describes this danger. Russo's analysis of research and theory on Carnival shows a clear tendency on the part of the public to read symbolically transgressive female imagery as warning rather than ideal.

states, "[t]here is only a taking up of the tools where they lie, where the very 'taking up' is enabled by the tool lying there" (Gender Trouble 185).

In a similar argument, Luce Irigaray advocates intentional performance. As Naomi Schor quotes:

> One must assume the feminine role deliberately. Which means already to convert a form of subordination into an affirmation, and thus to begin to thwart it.…To play with mimesis is thus, for a woman, to try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it. (Schor 50)

This hopefulness in the power of mimesis to create, over time, rearticulations of sexual identities that can be recirculated as signs to challenge male primacy, hinges on a public audience that is equipped, or otherwise enabled, to read these performances as more than simple parody or exaggerated expressions of sexed "natures." It is with this sense of hopefulness that I looked at this *telenovela*.

Telenovela

Telenovela is a global entertainment phenomenon. It is "[…] possibly the number-one form of human entertainment on the planet" (Lazarazburu). Produced in Latin America and the United States, and distributed globally, *telenovela* is a contemporary form of melodrama, an entertainment genre that is an essential part of Latin American history. Nely Selera describes the importance of this history:

> In Latin America, including Cuba, the collective imagination does not exist that Is not permeated by melodrama: the tango in Argentina, all of Mexican theatre, the Cuban bolero, not to mention radio and *telenovelas*. These are the keys through which life in our continent is seen and understood […]. (Selera 142; translation mine)

While *telenovela* is generally not self-critical in ways that would make it useful for liberatory feminist strategies, it is already equipped for these possibilities due to its formulaic structure and its special relationship with its audience(s).

Telenovelas are serialized, melodramatic, fictional, television narratives that air during primetime viewing hours and generally run for six to nine months. They are broadcast in

chapters and, unlike their Anglophone cousin the soap opera, they end with narrative closure. The genre is characterized by its content, heterosexual romantic fantasy and attention to the daily problems associated with trying to achieve family harmony, as well as its form, which includes several stable characteristics: "[…] overdramatization; emphasis on emotions, not logic; use of music to mark key relationships; characters symbolic of ethical values […] (Benavides 115-116). These characteristics of *telenovela*, when seen from feminist perspectives, show promise for strategic and subversive redeployments.[12]

Overdramatization is the hallmark of melodrama. Every character in telenovela is overacted and overproduced to clearly differentiate the good from the evil. The historical presence of this type of schematization allows the viewer seamlessly to identify the ethical valences of the characters, but this also sets up a rigid framework, ripe for subversion. Implicit in the overdramatization of a character or a scene is the idea of a substantive core of truth that orders the interactions and that is repeated with multiple variations for emphasis. When strategically overdone, this practice has the potential to expose itself as masquerade, a potential that opens up further possibilities for the viewer to re-evaluate the ordering logic of the production.

In its emphasis on emotion, *telenovela*, insofar as it engages the awareness of the viewer, temporarily distracts the viewer from access to the logic of the "real" world, involving the viewer in a set of relationships and actions that proceed from deeply held feelings. This does not go so far as to exceed the claims of the Symbolic Order, as the world of *telenovela* is part of this Order, but this process does work to destabilize the

[12] The use of music in *telenovela* is beyond the scope of this research, but would be interesting to address in a separate project, as the use of music to accentuate and punctuate public melodramatic performance has a very long history and the association of music with emotion is itself a complex topic.

coherence of identity for the engaged viewer, as one is invited to forget one's self. *Telenovela* articulates a world that is always slightly more intense than lived reality because of the heightened importance of emotion, a world where the pleasures and pains of everyday life are dramatically intensified to give them a feeling of immediacy and heightened importance. In this way it draws its viewers away from a common-sense reality and into a logic of emotion where challenges to social and economic constraints on social and interpersonal relationships may be articulated.

While *telenovela's* positioning of emotion as the primary logic of the narrative series serves to, at least temporarily, destabilize the ordering logic of patriarchy, it is its overproduced, over-exaggerated, stock characters that provide a critical element for potentially de-naturalizing dominant ideologies of sexual difference. These characters have formed the historical nucleus of the melodramatic drama, and contemporary *telenovela* audiences expect them or their modern equivalents. These staple personalities, identified by Colombian cultural theorist Jesús Martín-Barbero, are the traitor, the victim, the avenger, and the clown. Martín-Barbero explains the dramatic structure of melodrama as a symbolic operation, having as its central axis the four basic feelings of fear, enthusiasm, sadness, and laughter. These feelings correspond to four types of situations that are polarized and schematized to form a matrix of archetypes or signs personified by these four personalities (*Televisión Y Melodrama* 45-46).

Because melodrama, in its currently recognizable form, developed as a public cultural practice during the earliest period of modernization in Europe, when drastic social changes accompanied the changing economy and power structure, these four staple characters accommodated or personified elements of the class system. During this

formative period of melodrama, the traitor was the personification of a secularized evil who often took the form of an evil aristocrat or a corrupt member of the clergy, thus embodying the oppressor class. The victim, almost always female and condemned to suffer injustice until the end of the performance, was seen as the embodiment of the proletariat. The avenger, typically a young heroic man on horseback, brought justice and transcends a class analysis. The clown functioned as the voice of the people and represented the peasantry that, as yet unconsolidated as the proletariat, comprised the rural audiences. The clown brought the discourse to the level of the street by the use of vulgar jokes and irreverent and ironic jabs at the rhetoric of the protagonists (*Televisíon Y Melodrama* 47-49). In their contemporary iterations in current *telenovela*, these personalities have changed somewhat, but their moral valences remain.

The moral valences or ethical symbolism of the protagonists of *telenovela* would seem at a casual glance to correspond to universal values of good and evil. However, in their personifications, they embody dominant class values. That this is so is not symptomatic of *telenovela* or melodrama per se, but results from the necessity of using imagery that can be read accurately by a diverse audience. *Telenovela* cannot create a world that does not exist, free from extant relationships of power that structure and rationalize modern experience. *Telenovela* presents fantasy based on what is presumed to be the lived experiences and desires of its viewers and in this presumption it at once legitimizes these experiences and creates these desires. It is in this sense that *telenovela* compels the complicity of the viewer in what Martín-Barbero describes as a form of "ideological blackmail" (*Televisión Y Melodrama* 46; translation mine). Because the characters are drawn from the imagery of dominant discourse, the characteristics that give them their

ethical symbolism, that mark them as good or evil, are drawn from its constitutive ideology. By being able to recognize, and in that recognition legitimize to some extent, the ethical valences of the characters, the viewer is already strongly positioned for certain readings. The *telenovela* viewer expects to see good and evil compete in the series and expects good to triumph at the very end. The viewer is thus "blackmailed" into an agreement of what constitutes good and evil, as these judgments are coerced by the historical presence of these characters in the genre.

The formulaic structure of *telenovela*, in general practice, does not contest these normative positions. However, to paraphrase Judith Butler, this structure does not foreclose the possibility of contesting these norms. It is the presence of this structure that allows for change, as the structure itself, the terms for articulation of a victim or villain, does not produce the victim or villain so much as regulate or govern the ways that this character is repeated and this repetition is never flawless.[13] The dramatic formula of melodrama requires a villain and it requires a victim. And, it is precisely the fact that audiences expect these requisite characters and understand the conventions that govern their articulations that gives *telenovela* the potential for a subversion of dominant gender norms and ideologies. Of Martín-Barabero's stock personalities of melodrama, the two most strongly gendered are the male traitor and the female victim. This is one area in which my analysis departs from Martín-Barbero's model, as an emphasis on gender is critical to my reading of this text.

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[13] Judith Butler discusses agency in these terms:

> The subject is not *determined* by the rules through which it is generated because signification is *not a founding act, but rather a regulated process of repetition* that both conceals itself and enforces its rules precisely through the production of substantiating effects. In a sense, all signification takes place within the orbit of the compulsion to repeat; "agency," then, is to be located within the possibility of a variation on that repetition. (Gender Trouble 185; Emphasis in original)

Historically, the traitor, or villain, personified the oppressor class. This embodiment of a decadent or corrupt authority figure appears in melodramatic cultural forms at certain points in history and functions discursively at these times to undermine the legitimacy of authority and the distribution of social power. In contemporary *telenovela*, the traitor does not need to be drawn from the ruling classes, although this is often the case, but can be any person who misuses or abuses knowledge or power over others for personal gain or satisfaction. And, while this misuse does not necessarily implicate any particular economic class, the traitor is still made evil in the ways that this character violates strongly held beliefs of naturalness or propriety based on relationships that are assumed to be the products of nature. This is managed by pitting the traitor against "nature" in the form of the central heterosexual romantic couple. It is the job of the traitor to disrupt this courtship; thus, the character is understood to be working against the mechanics of a natural order that is conceptually linked to "goodness." The goodness or naturalness of the heterosexualized couple is the strongest, or perhaps most deeply entrenched structuring element of melodrama and follows directly from a heteronormative, hierarchical and binary conceptualization of sexual difference. The legitimacy of this pair is never questioned, and it is the traitor's interference or acting upon nature that most strongly binds this character, ideologically, with culture; and, it is this conceptual link with culture that most strongly genders this character male.

Feminist anthropologist Sherry B. Ortner's generative 1974 paper "Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?" is useful in elaborating this conceptual association of culture with maleness and nature with femaleness. Ortner's work treats the subject of the "universal devaluation of women" (71). While Ortner's strong claim of a universal

female condition that she attributes to the "absolute physiological fact" (73) of procreative function is problematic in its totalizing identification, her argument that female oppression is rooted in culture's concept of nature still resonates, even in the light of postmodern paradigms of identity. Ortner conflates the female body with the maternal body and works from this body to argue that women are not always symbolic of nature or associated with nature, but that women are pan-culturally "seen as 'merely' being *closer* to nature than men" (73 emphasis in original) on a continuum of value where nature ranks far below culture. It follows from this argument that urban areas, as centers of culture, are conceptually masculine fields, while the countryside, if not quite the wilds of nature, comprises an interstitial area that corresponds to the feminine. The countryside has long been counter-positioned against the urban in melodrama as an analogy of innocence against corruption. It is in this aspect that the traitor is a fundamentally masculine-gendered element of melodrama, although not necessarily personified as male.

Telenovela does not leave this reading to chance, but reinforces it with over-dramatic production. The traitor's presence on the screen is marked by dramatic music and lighting that, to an audience familiar with these conventions, signify the presence of an evil character. This happens before the traitor even needs to speak or act. It is in this way that the formulaic structure sets up the audience to identify the traitor, and coerces a tendency to view the actions of the traitor as violations of natural laws.

The victim in traditional melodrama and contemporary *telenovela* works with the traitor to establish the polarized relationship between good and evil that provides the moral agenda of the presentation. The traitor embodies evil by thwarting, at least temporarily, the workings of justice that are ideologically based on the premise of

nature's innocence. It is no accident, then, that the victim has been and continues to be personified almost exclusively as a woman, as the discourse of the natural has been scripted according to the needs of power.

As woman is associated with nature, this association can only be relevant in a logic of hierarchical binaries where nature is produced discursively as a field of potential to be exploited, shaped, tamed, or defined by its binary opposite, culture.[14] Nature can be unruly and occasionally wreck the plans of men. It is an ever-present threat to carefully cultivated fields or constructed cities if left unattended. Nature must be constantly attended to, to keep this threat at bay. Nature is, in many ways, that which must be repressed in the formation and continuation of culture, just as woman is that which must be repressed in the formation of a masculine self.

As nature is produced in discourse as innocent and good, so long as it is controllable or serves the needs of culture, woman, as produced in discourse, can only be seen as good so long as she is controllable or serves the needs of patriarchy. Thus, the female victim of *telenovela* must embody qualities that do not threaten the arrangement of power within a society. In historical melodrama the victim has usually been a member of the ruling classes whose identity as a member of the aristocracy had been obscured. She may have been raised by peasants or raised as a servant, but her comportment separates her from the working classes, and her laudable comportment is always drawn from ideals of dominant class female behavior. This manipulation coerces value judgments from the audience, as the victim must be perceived as innocent and good in order to merit the

[14] The association of women with nature is not quite as clear-cut as a binary opposition between culture and nature. One of Sherry B. Ortner's most useful ideas is that woman can be seen, from the perspective of culture, as a mediation between culture and nature. This liminal position allows woman to be read as symbolically ambiguous, Ortner gives the example that woman can represent both life and death (85), but always in every human society has a secondary social status.

reward of true love, where innocence and goodness are already assumed to accrue in nature. In this manner, certain types of femininity can be articulated as natural, thus normalizing dominant gender ideologies.

Telenovela research tends to focus on the ways that audiences use these images and performances to negotiate, or re-negotiate, individual and collective identities as part of a nationalistic dialogue. The oral culture of rural communities, of the illiterate or semi-literate masses, finds its voice in *telenovela*. Migration to urban areas due to economic forces and the effects of global capitalism and industrialization on traditional communities produces a friction or destabilization of identity. Martín-Barbero suggests that part of the appeal of *telenovela* to Latin American audiences lies in the genre's characteristic plot device of loss of identity and the gradual re-discovery of identity as the plot progresses, whether this is presented as a case of amnesia, a case of unknown parentage, or simply a case of an imposter. Martín-Barbero sees this device as part of a larger cultural dialogue of alienation and renegotiations of meanings of identity ("Memory and form in the Latin American soap opera" 277). Research on *telenovela* in the United States, where Latina/o identity is complicated by the diverse populations that comprise these communities, also shows this textual engagement with national values and identities.[15]

It is these engagements, the textual engagement with the audience as well as the audience engagement with the text of *telenovela,* which are at once limiting and promising for feminism. *Telenovela* gives its viewers the satisfaction of seeing justice

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[15] In her essay "Our welcomed guests: *Telenovela* in Latin America," for example, Ana M. Lopez analyzes the intentional role of *telenovela* in "making nation" throughout Latin America, and addresses the successes and failures of two *telenovelas*, *Valentina* and *Dos mujeres, un camino*, both of which, she argues, were written and produced to "[…] represent and implicitly address and attempt to appeal to the U.S. Latino community" (268).

meted out at the end of each and every serial. It reassures its viewers of a just world, or at least a world in which acts of evil are punished and innocence is rewarded. Even the most uncritical of viewers is positioned to question and judge the fairness of events, and forced to recognize that circumstances can make the innocent appear guilty. In fact, it is the anticipation of a miscarriage of justice that can prompt audiences to act. In the late 1990s, for example, the townspeople of Kucevo in southeast Serbia wrote to the Venezuelan government regarding the Venezuelan *telenovela* *Kassandra*, "We know Kassandra is innocent and we want her trial stopped" (Ortiz de Urbina and López par 3). Collective audience responses to *telenovela*, while not usually on this scale, testify to the possibility of this genre to motivate political action. Indeed, *telenovela's* treatment of issues that affect women, such as breast cancer, domestic violence, and the power of fathers over daughters, do promote awareness of these issues and offer a possibility for opening some new options for women and expanding female roles in the home and in public. However, the naturalization of the *telenovela* victim as innocent, and the association of this innocence with nature, compels and reinforces essentialized ideas of femininity that are associated with "traditional" values, and continues to promote female behavior based on normative values, as those that should be emulated.[16] Because the traditions of the genre demand a happy ending, appropriate female behavior is rewarded with the carrots of male approval and romantic love, while non-traditional behaviors are routinely punished.

This failure to take advantage of the full potential of *telenovela* to challenge the ideology of sexual difference that props patriarchy is in some ways related to the genre's

[16] Marietta Morrissey describes this potential, along with its limitations, in "*Tres Mujeres*: Reclaiming National Culture in the Post-Colonial *Telenovela*". Morrissey analyzes the Mexican *telenovela* *Tres Mujeres* and concludes that, while the serial does maintain realistic and sympathetic portrayals of women, all of the issues that it addresses such as pre-marital sex, menopause, breast cancer, and women's economic status, ultimately reinscribe traditional morality by the use of conservative solutions.

preoccupation with nationalism. While cultural studies scholar Nelson Hippolyte Ortega notes, "[…] the *telenovela's* mission is to show 'reality' and to teach about the affective, social, and political problems of contemporary society" (Ortega 65), these contemporary problems cannot be resolved at the expense of community identity. One striking feature of *telenovela* analysis is the regularity with which scholars agree that *telenovelas* reflect the values or character of their countries of origin.[17] Despite these differences, the view of *telenovela* as having a "mission" can be seen as a recognition of a larger Latin American strategy of negotiation of its legacy of colonization. O. Hugo Benevides describes traditions of melodrama within this context as "pivotal […] in resolving (or at least stating) the contradictions inherited from centuries of foreign domination, racial discrimination, and slavery" (110). At the same time as Latin American nations negotiate the legacies of the past, they also engage in a resistance to US cultural and economic hegemony, and each nation engages in this process in ways unique to its history and local cultures. From this perspective, *telenovela* can be understood as an element of multiple nationalist projects. As such, to address the oppression of women that adheres to essentialist notions of sexual difference, would be to challenge the ideologies of family life and heterosexual romantic love that are mobilized in *telenovela* to consolidate "authentic" national identities. This limitation has a profound impact on the construction of female characters in *telenovela*, as these characters must occupy certain referential niches in the cast to highlight structural inequalities in society that are assumed by dominant culture to derive from a history of racial and class differences rather than sexual difference. It is for this reason that I looked to Cuba.

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[17] Marietta Morrissey describes these differences (222) as do Ana M. Lopez (261-262) and Nelson Hippolyte Ortega (69). Gertrude Yeager's explanation of how the Brazilian *telenovela* *Angel Malo* was adapted to the values and cultural sensibilities of a Chilean audience highlights these differences.

Cuba

Cuba is uniquely situated for an examination of the discursive production of gender difference in *telenovela*, as it is the only Communist country in the Americas. While Cuba shares with the rest of Latin America a linguistic and cultural heritage shaped by colonial domination, the success of the Revolution and subsequent government policies set it apart from Latin America in areas that are integral to the traditional construction of the stock personalities of *telenovela*. Colonialism left the populations of American nations divided along racial and class lines, with the gap between rich and poor seemingly firmly entrenched. The Cuban government has tried to balance this economic and social legacy through state control of all economic activity and the promotion, through education and constant media attention, of the goals and values of the revolution. The process of eliminating class difference was begun early in the Revolution with the nationalization of industry and a series of agrarian reform acts that ended private ownership of large farms. The massive educational initiatives begun in the early 1960s, boosted Cuba's literacy rate to over 99 percent, while educating the population to the ideals of the revolution and working to instill a sense of solidarity amongst the people.[18]

[18] According to multiple official sources from international agencies such as the United Nations and the World Health Organization, Cuba's adult literacy rate is still over 99%. These statistics, and others, are available online at the UNESCO website:

The Socialist stress on eliminating class oppression has created a nation in which it is impossible to advance ideas of upward class mobility as rewards for the right kinds of feminine behavior in popular fiction. The elimination of class conflict in Cuba that was brought about by the Revolution, ostensibly eliminates the class associations of *telenovela* characters and makes it necessary to use alternative discursive mechanisms to highlight social problems.

The Cuban government has institutionalized many reforms and programs to advance women's political, economic, and social status. Cuban women officially and legally enjoy secure housing, guaranteed access to jobs and childcare, and subsidized food. They have full control over their reproductive status. Thanks to the Family Laws, Cuban women also enjoy legal protection from unfair distributions of household work and have recourse to the law if their husbands or partners do not do their share around the house. As with any legal reforms, however, the attitudes of the people must change at fundamental levels in order for the results of these changes to be sustainable. This concept was well understood by the leaders of the revolution. As Ernesto "Che" Guevara explained:

> To build communism it is necessary, simultaneous with the new material foundations, to build the new man and woman. That is why it is very important to choose the right instrument for mobilizing the masses. Basically, this instrument must be moral in character, without neglecting, however, a correct use of the material incentive–especially of a social character. As I have already said, in moments of great peril it is easy to muster a powerful response with moral incentives. Retaining their effectiveness, however, requires the development of a consciousness in which there is a new scale of values. Society as a whole must be converted into a gigantic school. (155)

Telenovela would seem to be ready-made as an instrument for such an ambitious project in this context. That it was not initially recognized or utilized as such is most

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http://stats.uis.unesco.org/unesco/TableViewer/document.aspx?ReportId=121&IF_Language=eng&BR_Country=1920&BR_Region=40520

likely due to the genre's history in Cuba and its association with bourgeois consumerism. Near the end of the nineteenth century, in the Cuban dockyard *El Arsenal de La Habana*, convicts made cigars while listening to fictionalized, serialized newspaper stories called *folletín* that were read aloud. The practice soon passed to commercial tobacco factories and by 1936 these stories were being broadcast by radio, replacing the live reader. Melodramas were soon being written exclusively for radio broadcast, creating the genre called *radionovela*, which quickly caught on throughout Latin America. In 1937 the first serialized story written in Cuba specifically for radio, *La Serpiente Roja* by Felix B. Caignet, aired and by the end of the 1950s Cuba was the biggest exporter of the genre (Sellera 140). In 1948, Caignet wrote what is considered by many to be the first telenovela, *El Derecho de Nacer*.[19] This program was initially broadcast as a *radionovela*, then made into a *telenovela* and film. As the newer technology of television became available, *telenovela* grew in importance. In 1954, Cuba was the fourth TV nation in the world as well as an active exporter and program innovator (Lopez 264; Eaton par 9). Throughout this process, radio and television were an integral part of expanding a demand for products and promoting the normalization of lifestyles that ran counter to the goals of the eventual revolution.

While the official reasoning is unclear, after the Revolution in 1959, Cuban *telenovela* production gradually dropped to about one per year. One of the first official Cuban critiques of melodrama in 1972 equated the emotional excess of the genre with capitalist

[19] The origin of *telenovela* is a topic of interesting debate. While all sources appear to agree that Cuba was the first country to develop *radionovela* as an industry, there is a theoretical camp that identifies Brazilian street theatre as the forerunner of the *telenovela* genre. At issue appears to be the autonomy of *telenovela* as a purely Latin American cultural product, as *radionovela* in Cuba developed in large part with substantial U.S. commercial backing. This schism in scholarly approaches to the genre would be very interesting to pursue further in a separate project.

consumerist alienation (Lopez 264). The view of *telenovela* as a bourgeois indulgence is a possible explanation of this dramatic reduction in production rates after the Revolution. In the late 1980s, however, this attitude changed, possibly in large part because of the recognition of the potential of this genre from the new discipline of Cultural Studies. In 1989 the Cuban Institute of Radio and Television hosted a seminar on *telenovela* as part of the Havana Film Festival, conducted research on melodrama and *telenovela*, and started investing more in upgrading and producing *telenovelas* (Lopez 264 and 274). This resurgence lasted until the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s. The subsequent loss of economic support, in combination with the U.S. embargo, forced Cuba into an economic "special period" of deprivation where *telenovela* production dropped from about eight per year to one by 2002 (Eaton par 10). Currently, Cuba produces about one *telenovela* per year, but those productions are invested with a renewed vigor and purpose in maximizing the potential of the genre in developing what Guevara described as a new value-scale in the public consciousness.

The first of this series of innovative Cuban *telenovelas* was *Doble Juego*, which aired in 2002 and introduced themes of teen pregnancy, child abuse, body-related self esteem issues of adolescence, and status differences within contemporary Cuban society. This *telenovela* was followed by *El Balcón de los Helechos* and *Salír de Noche*, both of which treated socially relevant, contemporary themes such as lesbianism and suicide. These telenovelas broke with tradition in radical ways and were interpreted by many Cuban media critics as carrying the genre, in the words of the official organ of the central committee of the Cuban Communist Party, the *Diario Granma*, to "[…] the point of widening the discursive possibilities of *telenovela*" (De la Hoz par 8; translation mine).

It is at this point in the recent renaissance of Cuban *telenovela* that I began my research. My initial interest in Cuban *telenovela* was general. I was, and remain, interested in the ways that the stock characters whose positions and ethical valences are historically grounded in social realities that preceded the revolution, would be or could be redeployed in the interests of social justice from a very different political paradigm, and how this adjustment would affect constructions of female characters. I chose to watch *Destino Prohibido* for my research for several reasons, but primarily because I found its romantic appearance appealing. It was a new production, written and directed by a woman, airing at a time when I was able to watch via the Internet webcast on *CubaVisión*. The Internet broadcast was not simultaneous with the television broadcast in Cuba, but was comparable in content to what Cuban viewers saw.[20]

Destino Prohibido, as it turned out, could not have been a better choice for my study. Its deceptively simple, traditional plot offers the expected critique of capitalism from a Cuban production. But this critique is leveled in such unexpected and roundabout ways as to offer a space for re-thinking the relationships and characters that it uses to make this critique. Writer/Director Xiomara Blanco, in effect, over-dramatizes the structuring forms and their corresponding ideological content that make *telenovela* understandable to its vast audiences in a mimetic performance that, because of the presumed sophistication of

[20] As there are no commercial breaks in Cuban television, the programming seems oddly fluid in comparison to U.S. commercial television. The spaces between shows are filled with seemingly random pieces: public service initiatives that encourage adults to make time for children and stimulate their imaginations, video clips of broad assortments of music (from heavy metal to flamenco), short educational clips of historical significance, even cartoons. The programs do not always begin on schedule because of breaking news or President Castro's addresses to the people running overtime. As all of the television theory I have been able to find addresses this medium within a capitalist commercial context, Cuban television, which conveys ideologies but sells nothing overtly, would seem to require a different sort of theoretical approach. This would be interesting to pursue in a different study.

its Cuban audience, may be recognizable as more than parody.[21] *Telenovela* plots always move by disturbing and then re-stabilizing a moral order predicated on Manichean visions of good and evil. Because the Revolutionary government has spent the last half century promoting the value of community service over private greed and fostering an intellectual climate of antipathy toward notions of class or racial hierarchy, the standard reward for the victim, vast wealth or social mobility through marriage, cannot be used in its traditional ways to show the workings of justice in Cuban *telenovela*. That Blanco appears to do just that, to reward the patient victim with the assurance of continued wealth and domestic bliss with the man she loves and punish the villains with death, insanity, and penury, is unexpected. But the workings of justice in *Destino Prohibido* are, in an interesting move, not to be read as Cuban justice, but as the logical consequences of a corrupt economic and social system.

Blanco's genius in re-working a very traditional story line with very traditional character types who meet with very traditional *telenovela* justice, into a critique of the socio-economic and gendered bases of these traditions is equaled only by her trust in the capacity of her audience to understand the inversion of the genre that she develops in this series. Enough instances of blatant abuses of power and appropriate punishments for these abuses are included in this series to satisfy the casual or uncritical viewer. The character of Don Jeremías (played by Enrique Molina) is one such example. The father of Fernando (played by Fernando Echevarría), the male half of the heterosexual romantic couple at the center of the story, Don Jeremías, is a wealthy and corrupt businessman. He

[21] By sophistication, I do not imply that Cuban people are generally more sophisticated than any other people, I simply mean that *telenovela* has been present in Cuba since the advent of television technology, and Cubans have had more access to television since its development than any other Latin American citizens, thus Cuban viewers might be expected to be more thoroughly familiar with the mechanics and history of the genre than other fans.

owns a lucrative tobacco distributing company, but, unsatisfied with this income, he also traffics drugs. His wife died when Fernando was a baby and Don Jeremías never remarried. He is a womanizer who routinely sexually abuses his female domestic servants, emotionally abuses his son, drinks to excess, and is eventually murdered. Don Jeremías is an unambiguously evil character and his eventual, if predictable, murder gives plenty of audience satisfaction.

The case of Don Jeremías, however, is a singular example, as almost every other aspect of the series complicates a straightforward reading. Blanco skillfully invokes audience expectations of traditional *telenovela* by recreating the feeling of the earliest examples of the genre. This is achieved through a combination of several elements: crude lighting and cinematography suggestive of early television technology; an original soundtrack by Sergio Vitier dominated by the voice of a solo guitar that provokes nostalgia; a primary orality whereby information is often communicated directly through speech instead of action, reminiscent of *radionovela*; and a vaguely historical setting for the plot somewhere in mid-century Cuba. Blanco then draws liberally from the elements of Felix B. Caignet's original formula: impossible loves, unknown parentage, love triangles, intrigues, suffering, and villains who appear to have their way until the very end of the story when good triumphs (Ochoa Peña par 6). Thus, *Destino Prohibido* mimics at every level a prototypical *telenovela*. It mimics the appearance and the content, as well as the standard relationships and stereotypes. This is the self-conscious mimicry of mimesis, not simple parody. *Destino Prohibido* does not ridicule the *telenovela* genre. Rather, it reproduces the genre with slight and intentional deviations in such a way as to

allow the critical viewer to question some foundational assumptions, even as these assumptions are mobilized to produce the circumstances that enable these critiques.

Blanco re-creates the traditional personality types of melodrama in *Destino Prohibido*, but with critical differences that undermine their historical functions and traditional ethical valences. The primary victim, Maria del Pilar (played by Tahimí Alvariño), is readable as a victim in every traditional way: her courtship with Fernando is interrupted by the manipulations of a villain, she suffers at length because of this until the end of the serial, and she is rewarded at the end with marriage to her true love. But Maria del Pilar is also selfish, arrogant, and enjoys immense unexamined class privilege, all of which work to challenge the viewer in a consistent reading of her character as natural, innocent, and deserving of reward. The primary traitor, Rebecca (played by Heidy González), is consistent in her villainy. She is vain, cruel, manipulative, and selfish. She lies and deceives to get her way, and she is punished at the end with banishment and insanity. But Rebecca's choices and desires are made legible within economic and social contexts that tend to negate ascriptions of pure evil to her character, a process which tends to cast her in the light of a victim and reverses her traditional traitor position to some degree. The character of the clown is, in *Destino Prohibido*, personified by the gypsy Rosario la Bella (played by Jacquelín Arenal). Rosario is one of the few characters whose social position allows her to "tell it like it is," thus she functions, in a reversal of the historic role of this position, to undermine the legitimacy of Maria del Pilar as victim. The role of the hero is left un-cast, a strategy that, in the case of this telenovela, ultimately divorces fate from nature and allows a critique of justice so that the logic of cause and effect can be seen as the product of the workings of power rather than the natural results of a just universe.

These inversions of traditional character types are paralleled in many of the stock melodramatic relationships that Blanco includes in this serial. The impossible love of the aristocratic Francisco (played by Enrique Almirante), brother of Maria del Pilar, and his maid Jesusa (played by Ariadna Álvarez) is a telling example. These two lovers are eventually allowed to marry as Francisco lies dying and Jesusa is pregnant with his child. The romance of this kind of forbidden love is generally naturalized in *telenovela*, as it is the class difference that separates the two lovers that is positioned as the problem. This happens in *Destino Prohibido*, yet the naturalness of this love is problematized by Francisco's doomed, invalid status. Jesusa has few choices but to care for him, and, as her economic dependence on his family translates to a dependence on his goodwill, her freedom of choice in the relationship is questionable. Jesusa's reward of marriage to Francisco and the legitimization of her unborn child by this marriage would be read as unambiguous *telenovela* justice, were it not for the element of coercion that is insinuated into the relationship by the parallel sub-plot of Don Jeremías' sexual exploitation of the maids in his household. The pleasure that the viewer might expect to get from Jesusa's marriage is undermined by these concerns, as well as her worries about the fate of her child if it should not be white. That the marriage and pregnancy of Jesusa and Francisco are problematized by class and race, undermines the ideology of the naturalness of heterosexual love and calls into question the traditional justice of their marriage as a triumph of good over evil.

This type of reversal or inversion of tradition works throughout *Destino Prohibido*. Blanco does not allow the viewer to judge the characters from a single position, but instead, leads the viewer to multiple and contradictory judgments in such a manner as to

call into question the ideological positions upon which such judgments would be based. This strategy works at many levels, but most generally it works to destabilize the rigid dichotomy of good and evil that informs a Manichean worldview. More specifically, for the purposes of my research, *Destino Prohibido* allows the critical viewer to question the schematization of different kinds of femininities as more or less natural to women. This had the added effect of possibly engaging the viewer in a critical evaluation of the ways that power is institutionalized to produce the effects of gender and point to the discursive production of sex itself. While these possibilities are by no means guaranteed, Blanco appears to have maximized the potential of *telenovela* to subvert the ideologies upon which it stands.

Chapter 2:

Gypsy, Tramp, and Victim? Character Inversion in *Destino Prohibido*

Telenovela, as a formulaic genre, structures its plots and character possibilities in ways that can be thought as parallel to the workings of language as an organizing and productive system. It does this by laying a prior claim to its elements, a claim that is authorized by the history of the form itself. Elements cannot be introduced into *telenovela* from "outside" because there is no "outside," or, if there is, anything from "outside" becomes melodramatic or "telenovelized" with its introduction into the performance. By "telenovelized" I mean that any element or character introduced into a *telenovela* serial is automatically re-articulated within the terms of this genre, investing them with a heightened sense of emotional importance. Anything that could happen in life, from an occurrence as mundane as having a second cup of coffee at breakfast to something as technologically sophisticated as the development of a new polymer for use in space

flight, if included in the plot of any *telenovela*, would take on an added emotionality, overemphasizing its importance to the lives of the characters in the text. Because of this quality of *telenovela*, any issues that are addressed must be addressed by a formulaic manipulation of the nucleic characters of the genre in order to be dealt with legibly. Because *telenovelas* are generally not long-running serials, situations must be resolved decisively for viewer satisfaction. This has the effect of stabilizing the ethical valences of the primary characters so that they can work with and against each other to frame a problem, social or personal, typically within a Manichean discourse of good and evil.

As I described in the previous chapter, this melodramatic polarization of good and evil is always already implicitly gendered. The strong historical association of a certain type of femininity with victimhood results in a schematization of femininities, or ways of enacting a female identity, and forces readings of these performances to be judged as closer to or further from a "natural" female essence. As this ideological position is foundational to the ways that *telenovela* can operate, it cannot be altered at the level of the script. If the structuring gendered associations of the stock characters and their situations were to be rewritten at the point of production, the production would lose all legibility as *telenovela*.

While there are many possible readings of writer/director Xiomara Blanco's most recent *telenovela*, *Destino Prohibido*, Blanco's complex and multivalent inversions of the dramatic forms that leave the narrative structure intact, points to a feminist strategy of subversion.[22] Blanco appears to work from within, using the tools as they lie, to

[22] My reading of *Destino Prohibido* as a feminist text and intervention does not preclude other, equally valid readings. There are as many possible readings as there are viewers, and the arguments I make in this analysis are from my perspective, which is strongly informed by a specific vein of feminist theory. Throughout my work, I suggest certain readings of this *telenovela* that may or may not correspond to actual

destabilize the foundational gender ideologies of this *telenovela.* Insofar as these ideological messages still have currency in the lives of contemporary viewers, this move could have consequences for the power of these discursive mechanisms in maintaining their primacy in controlling the meanings of sexual difference. If, as I will argue, Blanco can engage the viewer in moral judgments that undermine the symbolic ties of femininity to biology and nature, then these oppressive understandings of sexual difference could lose some of their coercive power in structuring ways of being human.

Telenovela tends to differ from its historical antecedents in the live melodramatic performances of early modern Europe, in the functioning of the four staple personalities that Colombian Cultural Studies authority, Jesús Martín-Barbero, lists as the traitor, the victim, the avenger, and the clown. As I demonstrated in Chapter 1 and I will further illustrate, these personalities, particularly the traitor, the victim and the avenger, are strongly gendered. While the traitor and the victim retain many of their historical associations and functions, the roles of the avenger and the clown have become diffuse and fragmented. These personalities are often omitted from *telenovela*, and their functional roles are taken up by other characters, situations, or fate itself. The avenger's personality derives from the hero of epic poetry. He is a protector who loves the victim and untangles the plots of the villains, exposing deceit and bringing about ultimate justice (*Television Y Melodrama* 48). The deferral of this function to fate, or its diffusion onto several other characters who each uncover a piece of the puzzle, is common in *telenovela*. Depersonalizing this function has the effect of investing more meaning in the day to day

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viewer reception. The ways that the Cuban audience responded to this *telenovela* would be interesting to pursue in further studies, but my concern here is simply to show the liberatory possibilities of one type of feminist reading.

activities of the characters, as well as naturalizing the punishment of the corrupt and rewarding the good.

The clown in historical melodrama is described by Martín-Barbero as being, "outside the triad of the protagonist personalities but nevertheless belong[ing] to the melodramatic structure in that he represents the active presence of the comic, the other essential angle of the popular matrix" (*Televisión Y Melodrama* 48; translation mine). The clown had a double function: as comic relief from tense emotional moments, and, as a common voice, to introduce the perspectives of the masses into the discourse of the protagonists. As an insider from the "outside," the clown's voice was vital to the immediacy of the performance for its audiences. Because television allows instantaneous shifts from scene to scene, a cathartic relief for the audience after strong emotional scenes can be effected without the need for comedy, but the function of giving a voice to the audience is still relevant to *telenovela*.

Of these four historical melodramatic personalities, it is the male traitor and the female victim who propel the drama of the narrative and symbolize a polarized evil and good. By personifying both of these characters as women in *Destino Prohibido*, Blanco alters the historically gendered positions of these characters. The traitor, historically associated with urban life, a cruel and calculating cultural sophistication, social decadence, and corrupt power, is symbolically masculinized in its positioning as counter to the rural, naïve, socially unsophisticated and innocent associations of the feminized victim. I do not mean to suggest that women are any closer to nature than men. What I suggest here is that the discourse of the natural is governed by a complimentary set of power relationships as those which govern the discourse of sexual difference, and both

discursive arenas are produced within the male-biased ordering system of language and culture.

The traitor figure of melodrama, as male, is constructed as evil in his abuse of power. Male privilege itself is never questioned at a fundamental level in melodrama, as the traitor and his opposite, the avenger, are both naturalized as belonging to a sexed identity class whose role should be to protect women. Blanco's personification of the traitor as a woman changes the gendered dynamics of what can be judged as evil in this context. To construct a man as evil, in melodramatic terms, is simply a matter of releasing him from the social norms that govern his behavior toward the women who, at an ideologically logical level, are already in his charge. This involves merely a shift in behavior along an already naturalized continuum of male privilege. To construct a woman as evil, within the framework of melodrama, requires a gender crossing of sorts, a process that immediately calls into question the legitimacy of this character's claims to power.

For Blanco's primary traitor character in *Destino Prohibido*, Rebecca (played by Heidy González), power is a central issue. As the youngest daughter of a white, middle class family, Rebecca inhabits a position of considerable social power. She wields enormous amounts of power over her personal maid, Rita, and uses this power to coerce Rita's cooperation in her deviant acts throughout the serial. This type of social, economic, and racial power is conferred to Rebecca by her parents' class position. Her father Leopoldo, a retired judge, is respected by the community for his incorruptible sense of justice, and her mother, Georgina (played by Odalys Fuentes), is a bourgeois housewife whose character reads as a bundle of negative stereotypes. Rebecca's class position leaves her with no economic options for her future other than marriage, thus she is

groomed by her mother to maximize her feminine beauty to aid her pursuit of this goal. Her training is in the private, feminine, sphere that accrues to her class position. Her brother, in contrast, is groomed to apply himself to his studies of law and to eventually occupy a public space associated with masculinity. Rebecca's mistake is to confuse the power of her inherited social position with individual power, as well as to misjudge the quality of power that she achieves by making herself sexually attractive to men. This ephemeral power is generally referred to in feminist literature as perishable power.

Rebecca rebels against the authority of her parents. She considers herself a grown woman and wants to make her own life the only way she legitimately can, through marriage. However, Rebecca's clandestine lover, the dashing villain Nicolas (played by Carlos Ever Fonseca), refuses to marry her. In spite of her class status, she does not have the power to force her own meaning on the relationship she has with Nicolas, a relationship that *she* reads as true love that should automatically be followed by marriage, but that *he* reads as a purely sexual matter of convenience. Rejected as a marriage partner by the man she loves, Rebecca looks elsewhere for a husband and decides to pursue Fernando, the only son of a wealthy industrialist who is unofficially engaged to Maria del Pilar, the young woman whom Rebecca has always seen as her rival in the community. Rebecca uses every possible tool in her arsenal of feminine wiles, and eventually manipulates Fernando into a public engagement by claiming that he had sexual relations with her and promised her marriage. That she is able to mobilize community support to force Fernando to marry her testifies to the power of her class position. Again, however, Rebecca mistakes this operation of power as a reflection of her own power as an attractive woman.

Rebecca eventually receives the traitor's traditional melodramatic punishment. At the end of the serial she heads for Havana, pregnant, divorced, penniless, ostracized by her family and community, and insane, exposing the idea of perishable power. But over the narrative course of *Destino Prohibido*, Rebecca takes on some aspects of heroism as she continually struggles to produce and enforce her own meanings while working against a larger system of meanings that resist this resignification. As the power to name, or to re-name, is of strategic importance to many, dare I say all, feminist projects, Rebecca's position loosely mirrors this challenge. It is for this reason that Rebecca's unreflective use of the kinds of femininities available to her as tools in her struggle to control the meanings of her actions and interactions can be read as a warning of the limitations of uncritical feminine performances as routes to power. As Beauvoir has shown, this is not the path to transcendence. In a grand gesture, subtle and ironic, it is Blanco's destabilization of Rebecca's narrative position within the confines of the over-arching melodramatic structure of telenovela that offers the most promise for feminist strategies of deliberate and mimetic uses of femininities. This destabilization of the ideological positions that make Rebecca legible as a melodramatic traitor occurs at multiple levels of the text. In its broadest articulation, this involves the parallel destabilization of *Destino Prohibido's* melodramatic victim, Maria del Pilar, in a subversive inversion of their character types.

Crossing and Un-Crossing Gender

Maria del Pilar occupies the position of victim in *Destino Prohibido* in the most traditional aspect of this character. She is the female half of the central heterosexual couple whose ultimate connubial bliss is thwarted until the end of the serial by Rebecca's villainous interference. She is powerless to stop the events that follow from the traitor's actions, and suffers patiently until events resolve themselves. In historical melodrama, the victim is the "incarnation of innocence and virtue," (*Televisión Y Melodrama* 47; translation mine) often an aristocrat who has suffered a loss of identity as well as an "impossible" love. She is delicate, never coarse, and should invoke protective feelings from the audience because of her innocent suffering. In *Destino Prohibido*, Maria del Pilar never overtly defies this historical reading, but resists it, primarily due to her childlike ignorance that results in hurtful and arrogant behaviors and stems from her immense unexamined racial and class privilege.

The audience is given many opportunities to observe Maria del Pilar's aristocratic arrogance in dealing with her social subordinates. She is white and is the only daughter of a wealthy landowner. Her mother died when she was a young girl from a genetic disease

that also afflicts her only brother, Francisco. This leaves Maria del Pilar authority over a house full of domestic servants. While she does not treat them with outright cruelty, she exercises an authoritarian paternalism in her interactions with her domestic staff that implicitly demonstrates an unexamined belief in her own superiority. For example, in one scene the villainous Rebecca's older sister Enora (played by Amarilys Nuñez), who is in love with Maria del Pilar's father, Ernesto, visits the house. Maria del Pilar's young Black housemaid, Iluminada (played by Mirtha Lidia Pedro), chats animatedly with the two women as she sets the dinner table. Maria del Pilar scolds Iluminada for failing to pay sufficient attention to her work, and with Iluminada still working in the room, engages in a discussion with Enora about the maid's buoyant personality. Iluminada, aptly named, does illuminate the racist dynamics of the social setting. Maria del Pilar tells Enora that Iluminada is happy because she does not expect much. This comment, made with the emotional force of a deep philosophical truth, clearly demonstrates Maria del Pilar's assumption that her own life is more significant, more complex, and more emotionally rich than that of a servant.

Because *Destino Prohibido* focuses on the problems of wealthy, white families, it does risk normalizing the values of these categories. These characters are central to the plot and take on more narrative importance than the peripheral or supporting characters. The domestic servants, farmhands, and local gypsies, while participating in important ways to the plot development and resolution, are constructed in relation to the dominant families. Because the inequities of the economic and social structure represented in this *telenovela* prompted the Cuban Revolution, these marginalized characters in *Destino Prohibido* can be seen in many ways to speak from the perspective of an imagined

audience that would, presumably, find these class-based, racialized relationships quite repellent. This provides a point of contrast to the "Dynasty mentality" of U. S. television fans who find glamour in these unequal relationships. The fact that it is the victim, Maria del Pilar, more so than the traitor, Rebecca, who opens up the dialogue of the protagonists to the critiques of these Othered voices, is interesting in that this strategy at once disrupts the narrative maneuver that would cover up a normalization of white wealth, and, importantly, allows a destabilization of the foundational gender ideologies that animate and structure the genre itself.

The historical victim, it should be remembered, embodies a class-specific feminine ideal that masquerades as universal. This personality represents the proletariat, but her characteristics come from the normative behaviors appropriate to middle class women. It is the job of the clown to expose this masquerade. Historically, however, this exposure functions to disrupt the hegemonic class norms of dominant society, those norms that are drawn from the ruling classes and produce an opposing solidarity of identity for the audience as proletariat. Martín-Barbero quotes P. Reboul, "Before becoming a propaganda medium, melodrama will be the mirror of a collective conscience" (*Televisión Y Melodrama* 40). This exposure has always worked at the level of class identities and leaves the underlying gender ideology intact. The clown reminds the audience that the protagonists, including the victim, are speaking and acting in ways that mark them as members of the ruling classes and not "of the people." The clown does not, generally, function to remind the audience that this victim's feminine position of helpless innocence is unnatural to women. That the function of the historical melodramatic clown is diffused into multiple marginalized voiced in *Destino Prohibido*, allows Blanco to

expand the function of this stock character type to include a potentially destabilizing critique of dominant ideas of sexual difference. This critique is effected primarily through the characters Samuel (played by Miguel Fonseca) and Rosario la Bella.

In one of the early chapters of the serial, Maria del Pilar overhears a phone call to her father, confirming that the doctor has certified Rebecca as non-virginal. This news means that her boyfriend, Fernando, will have to marry Rebecca since no one except Maria del Pilar questions Rebecca's claims that it was Fernando who seduced her. Maria del Pilar reacts to this information by sequestering herself in her room. She cries and mopes and ignores the problems and successes of everyone around her in her household. She gradually ventures out on horseback to pine for her lost love, Fernando, in the orchards and fields of her family's estate. She eventually seeks comfort and companionship in her grief from Samuel, a biracial farmhand who has had a crush on Maria del Pilar since childhood, and who, it eventually becomes known, is really her biological cousin, the son of her father's brother. Maria del Pilar toys with the idea of loving Samuel and goes so far as to kiss him in one scene. It is this close relationship that allows Samuel to voice some thoughts and criticisms that not only contribute to undermining Maria del Pilar's appeal as a helpless victim, but potentially pose a serious threat to her structural position as the victim.

If Maria del Pilar's action and words are not enough to convince an audience that she is morally corrupt in her unexamined racial and class privilege, Samuel gives explicit voice to this perspective, illuminating the racist dynamics of the society as does Iluminada. Samuel, while infatuated with Maria del Pilar, is romantically pursued by the gypsy Rosario la Bella. At one point in the serial, Samuel is attacked with a knife by a

jealous member of Rosario's gypsy tribe and is bedridden while he recovers. Both Maria del Pilar and Rosario la Bella come to visit Samuel and, in this way, are allowed a personal interaction that is generally precluded by their relative social spheres. On her way back to the gypsy camp after one of these visits to Samuel's sickbed, Rosario is kidnapped and fails to return to Samuel's house. Samuel worries about her disappearance, but Maria del Pilar pronounces that Rosario left because she is a gypsy, and that is what gypsies do. Samuel answers angrily that gypsies are people like themselves, and goes on to accuse Maria del Pilar of thinking that a person's skin color and the house they live in are reasons to judge them.

Rosario la Bella's character functionally collaborates with Samuel in drawing out Maria del Pilar's snobbery in dialogue. Before she is kidnapped, Rosario has a private conversation with Maria del Pilar about Samuel. In a stunning display of privileged ignorance, Maria del Pilar tells Rosario that Samuel is socially above having a relationship with a gypsy. She claims that Samuel grew up with her, studied with her and her brother, ate the same food, wore the same clothes, and was treated as an equal in her household. Samuel had previously told Rosario that his uncle Ernesto (played by Rogelio Blaín), Maria del Pilar's father, had never treated him like a nephew. He was, instead, a servant with some privileges because his father, Ernesto's brother, committed the sin of loving a Black woman. It apparently escapes Maria del Pilar's notice, until that point, that Samuel is not allowed free access to the house and is obliged to perform servant duties in the house and around the estate. Rosario, therefore, is able to remind Maria del Pilar, in no uncertain terms, that Samuel has worked for her family from the day he was born and has never considered himself an equal in Maria del Pilar's household. Maria del Pilar's

class and racial position completely blind her to the reality of Samuel's experience and she is allowed a totally false vision of him. While this example of Maria del Pilar's privilege to remain oblivious to her privilege is not enough, in and of itself, to sever her completely from her narrative role of victim, Blanco's tactic of creating a victim who challenges a consistent reading as virtuous and innocent does tend to partially undermine the ideological understandings of femininity that make her readable as the victim.

Maria del Pilar's status as a victim is undercut somewhat more seriously by Blanco's use of Samuel to call into question the naturalness of the romantic pairing of Maria del Pilar and Fernando, as this victim status depends to a large extent on the audience's agreement that she has been deprived of a "natural" right or expectation. This move also works to destabilize Rebecca's position as the traitor, as both the traitor and the victim positions are produced by the act of the traitor's intentional and villainous interference in the true-love romance of the central heterosexual couple. The audience must accept this romantic relationship as legitimate, and, must accept the traitor's interference in this relationship as morally or ethically wrong, in order for the dramatic movement of the plot to proceed legibly. In *Destino Prohibido*, the romance between Maria del Pilar and Fernando is central to the dramatic structure of the plot, and is presented as a de facto case of true love. The legitimacy of this relationship, and its inviolable status, is presumed and unexamined by all of the characters in the serial with the important exceptions of Rebecca and Samuel.

Samuel, the biracial farmhand/cousin who comforts Maria del Pilar after the breakup of her relationship with Fernando and pursues her romantically, explicitly challenges the legitimacy of this sundered love. He effects this challenge in the form of a poignant

soliloquy, at a point in the serial when he despairs of ever winning her love. Samuel asks himself if he loves Maria del Pilar because she is white and rich. He then goes on to ask himself if Maria del Pilar loves Fernando because he is white and rich, and questions whether she could ever love him since he is poor and "mulatto." While Samuel's speculations speak to the illegitimacy of the distribution of power within his society, his questions hold the potential to engage the critical viewer in a destabilizing critique of the class constraints on romantic love, which could then point to the production of romantic love as an ideological maneuver that coerces heteronormativity in the service of maintaining dominant relationships of power. From Samuel's perspective, the romance between Maria del Pilar and Fernando could as easily be explained by the economic and racial discourses that produce and structure desire, as by recourse to an ideology of true, natural, unfettered love.

If this central romantic relationship can be problematized to the point of bringing the audience to questions its naturalness, Maria del Pilar loses some degree of victim status and Rebecca loses some degree of traitor status, as her interference can then become readable as an -almost- legitimate romantic pursuit. For romantic love to be accepted as legitimate in the world of *telenovela*, as well as in the world of western thought, there must be no appearance or suggestion of constraint or coercion. Samuel's questions suggest the possibility for the viewer to read aspects of economic and social coercion into the romantic relationship of Maria del Pilar and Fernando, and thus, can be seen as Blanco's strongest challenge to the stability of the narrative positions of *Destino Prohibido's* traitor and victim. The mimetic strategies employed in this move occur at the level of the text as representative of the genre. The melodramatic genre requires the

positioning of a symbolically masculinized traitor as a persecutor of a symbolically feminized victim. The reproduction of these polarized characters in *Destino Prohibido* mimics this requirement, but the production of the masculinized traitor as a woman alters the repetition, and the further development of these characters as quite deviant from their respective roles within the moral symbolism can be read as a macro-level subversion of the gendered tenets of the genre.

Blanco also appears to employ mimetic strategies within the text that work to problematize femininity itself as a stable set of characteristics that, while amenable to the demands of racial and class discourse, is nevertheless read in dominant discourse as somehow tied to a female essence, or universalized core identity that underscores or marks all women as collectively different from men. The three primary female characters, Rebecca, Maria del Pilar, and Rosario la Bella, are all, in many ways, parodies of female-ness. They enact female identities in strategically gendered patterns that reproduce specific and recognizable types of femininity, but Blanco manipulates each of these characters individually and in concert with the others in such ways as to highlight the relationships of power that shape, produce, and give meanings to these performances. Illustrative of these strategies are the ways that Blanco visually differentiates the three women.

Blanco physically distinguishes Rebecca and Maria del Pilar in ways that maximize the ethical symbolisms associated with their respective positions as traitor and victim. Because they are both white women, in similar situations of economic privilege, this distinction takes the form of what could be read as opposing versions of normative femininity. Rebecca always wears floral print dresses or blouses with semi-revealing

necklines, and skirts with lace, frills, or ruffles. Her hair is always styled and flowing, and she always wears stylish shoes with heels. In contrast, Maria del Pilar almost always dresses in bluejeans and plaid button-down shirts with her hair pulled back in girlish braids, and prefers cowboy boots to heels. These choices in dress and grooming reflect their class positions to some extent. Maria del Pilar, a member of the capitalist class, is somewhat exempt from the normative rules of dress and presentation that apply to Rebecca, though her options are still produced and coerced within the confines of a dominant heteronormative gender ideology. It is their respective structural positions in the melodramatic narrative, however, that invest their styles of "being" female with morally symbolic qualities.

Because Rebecca is female while occupying a masculine narrative position, and she is already transgressive at this level of reading, her exaggerated feminine qualities, requisite for *telenovela*, take on additional aspects of menace. The gender crossing that she effects as the traitor of the serial tends to frame her performance of femininity as masquerade, while all of the characteristics that mark her as legibly female become, in this sense, monstrous, and emblematic of certain kinds of power. Rebecca's flawless screen presentation lends itself to this reading, as she is consistently filmed in the best possible light and at the most flattering angles. This perfection of appearance, unachievable in reality or, indeed, by any of the other characters in the serial, casts suspicion on Rebecca's overt femininity, lending an element of danger or threat to her character. To a lesser degree, this can be read as a generalized class suspicion of Hollywood type glamour. Seamless perfection in gendered enactment is impossible due to the constituted nature of gender; or, as Judith Butler describes, all gender enactments fail because, "[…]

these ontological locales are fundamentally uninhabitable" (Gender Trouble 186). This reading is magnified by the historical strength of the association of the traitor personality as evil. The viewer is thus strongly positioned to read Rebecca's femininity as less natural than that of the victim, Maria del Pilar, even though Rebecca presents herself in ways that are fairly standard for women of her social position. While it is Maria del Pilar who most thoroughly eschews, by her sartorial choices, a normative role of femininity, it is, ironically, Rebecca's dress style that is made to seem more artificial. Thus, Maria del Pilar's deviance in dressing and presenting herself as child-like, or, more accurately, as un-woman-like, is naturalized in its association with innocence, although this is no more natural than Rebecca's dress style.

Maria del Pilar's position as the innocent victim is reinforced by the apparent lack of artifice in her presentation. But Blanco disrupts any ideological association of this innocence with nature in her use of the character Rosario la Bella. Rosario completes the triad of staple personalities—excluding the avenger, who is not present in this *telenovela*—and carries out the historical duties of the melodramatic clown. Functioning, in concert with several other characters, as the clown figure, although not at all a comic character, Rosario works to remind the audience of the female victim's repulsive and menacing pretensions to superiority, whether these characteristics are due to aristocratic origins, or to aristocratic posturing. Much stronger than this traditional role, however, I argue that Rosario's character, in the role of the clown, works to destabilize a reading of Maria del Pilar's feminine presentation as natural. It is precisely because Blanco positions the feminine performances of the protagonists as moral markers, letting the ways that the characters enact a female identity be seen as emblematic of their moral

valences, that Rosario is able to not only draw attention to the class positions of the protagonists, but also to complicate a reading of Maria del Pilar's femininity as natural. It is my argument that the critical viewer may well be able to use this point of destabilization to critique the naturalness of a binary sex system.

Blanco enables a comparison of Maria del Pilar with Rosario la Bella in many subtle ways. Aside from their rivalry over Samuel, these are the only two characters in the serial that go by a three-part first name. But it is their symbolic association with nature, Maria del Pilar as the traditional *telenovela* victim and Rosario la Bella as a nomadic Gyspsy, that conceptually links these two characters and allows comparisons of their femininities at multiple levels of reading. Maria del Pilar's narrative position as the innocent victim is at times bolstered and a times undermined by Rosario's narrative position as the worldly clown, while at the textual level, these characters frequently invert, as Rosario is presented as alternatively more and then less "naturally" feminine than Maria del Pilar. The multiplicity of readings of these characters works to destabilize a static understanding of femininity as a universal core characteristic.

Beauty, Nature, Power

Rosario is a member of a gypsy tribe that set camp, with Ernesto's permission, on a plot of land owned by Maria del Pilar's family. The tribe is presented as patriarchal and subject to the leadership of the highest status male—in this case, the husband of Rosario's mother, Cruz. The gypsies work in the local tavern. The men throw knives and the women sing, dance, and tell fortunes. Economically, the tribe operates collectively, with all of the individual earnings pooled and distributed by the patriarch for the collective good of the group. The labor appears to be strictly divided by gender with the men collecting and chopping firewood and erecting and mending the tents, while the women cook, wash, and sew. The majority of this work is done in public, in the open spaces of the campsite, framed by trees. The natural setting in which the gypsies carry out their communal lives effects a strong association of these people with nature and freedom from the claims of "civilization" in their daily lives. The tribe is constructed as outside of the social milieu of the protagonists of *Destino Prohibido*, and external to the symbolic relationships that govern the interactions of the townspeople.

Rosario, as a gypsy, is thus already strongly symbolically associated with nature, and her identity as a woman doubles this symbolism. Her character is overproduced as

feminine, even her name, Rosario la Bella, means Rosario the Beautiful. She always wears long, flowing, ruffled dresses and skirts. She wears flowers in her hair and decorates herself with scarves, belts, necklaces, bracelets, bangles, and rings, as do the other female members of her tribe. Rosario, of all the female characters in the serial, has the most facial hair, an attribute that gives her appearance a natural and uncontrived look. Rosario's performance of a feminine identity is consistently presented as unselfconscious and natural. This parallels and reinforces a reading of Maria del Pilar's femininity as innocent of artifice, but it problematizes a polarization of Maria del Pilar and Rebecca's femininities on a value scale of femininity that ranges from masquerade to natural, as both Rosario and Maria del Pilar read as "natural' on this scale, but each enacts a visually different formulation of femininity.

At the formulaic level of the narrative, Maria del Pilar's femininity is positioned as natural due to the logic of the heteronormative paradigm of sexual difference that structures and informs her romantic relationship with Fernando. By the same token, Rosario la Bella's femininity is forced as possibly more "natural" due to her position "outside" the artificial economic system that structures the social relationships and the discourse of the protagonists. Within the narrative logic of the text itself, Rosario as a gypsy, exoticized, Othered, and living in a moveable tent camp in a forest, embodies an unconstrained, "wild" femininity that appears to come from nature itself.

A reading of Rosario's femininity as natural is further complicated when it emerges late in the serial that she is not "really" a gypsy at all. The woman she knows as her mother, the gypsy Cruz, took her in when she was a baby and raised her as her own. Rosario's biological mother was a servant in a sexually and physically abusive situation

who fled with her two young daughters in order to protect them from growing up to share her own fate. In a flashback scene, the viewer watches as, on a dark and rainy night, Rosario's mother tearfully begs Cruz to take her youngest daughter, to protect her and save her from a life of misery. This strategy of disguising and eventually revealing the origins of the victim, common in *telenovela* and fairy tales, and engages the viewer/reader with issues of identity. I argue that Blanco takes this issue even further and, although the identity of her biological father is never made explicit, this covering up and rediscovery of Rosario's origins recasts her femininity as a learned performance. As Rosario's is the most "natural" of the femininities, though relatively untamed, enacted by the central female characters, this is a very destabilizing move, and has the potential to reframe all of the femininities of the serial as performances that are enabled and regulated by and for certain configurations of power.

While Blanco appears to lead the critical viewer to question a natural basis for femininities, she does not present femininity as an option or the individual as radically autonomous from a sexed identity. Rather, the characters are produced as sexed identities and the degree to which they embody the effects of this identity is informed by multiple social factors. Rebecca's aunt, Esperanza (played by Zelma Morales), gives clear voice to this condition when, in a scene with Rosario la Bella, she discusses her own situated-ness. Esperanza is the only economically independent woman in the serial, and one of the few female characters aside from the gypsies who is able to go to the tavern and drink. She acknowledges the limitations placed on her by her sexed identity and explicitly ties this identity to socially produced kinship relations. She states that, in a village, you are never alone. You are always somebody's daughter, somebody's aunt, somebody's female

cousin. Feminist theorist Judith Butler's analysis of sexed identity as an effect that is produced by multiple discursive demands is faintly echoed in Esperanza's claim. And, as Butler suggests, these multiple, and often conflicting demands, produce their own possibilities for alternative configurations of identity (Gender Trouble 185). In the spaces where conflicting demands cause the performances of femininities to break down or fail to repeat, those spaces where femininities cease to be readable as natural or expose themselves as performance, Blanco creates the possibility for an examination of the ways that these performances work, the power they afford their performers, and the limitations of what these performances can accomplish.

The disclosure to the audience of Rosario la Bella's origins offers one such conceptual space, where her femininity becomes readable as performance. This opens up possibilities of re-reading this performance in political terms, that is, in terms of its production by, and utility in, her social existence. Rosario's femininity can be seen from this perspective as far from apolitical. While she never appears to intentionally use femininity to her personal advantage, Rosario makes money from her performance of sexual difference wherein female is overtly produced as subordinate to and in service of masculinity. She dances and sings for a, generally, male audience at the tavern. She embodies for these patrons a fantasy of femininity. And while she does help support her tribe with these performances, her deployment of femininity contrasts sharply with the ways that the traitor figure Rebecca uses femininity. Where Rosario uses femininity in the service of maintaining the lives of her tribe, Rebecca attempts to use it for personal advantage.

Rebecca's femininity reads as performance at every level, but one productive space where Rebecca's feminine performance fails to repeat as natural, revealing Judith Butler's concept of performativity, occurs in the numerous scenes where the audience sees her primping in front of her mirror[23]. These scenes offer a critical counterpoint to the superficial values promoted within capitalist economies, and demonstrates the amount of time and effort that Rebecca spends to achieve beauty. This reinforces the gendering of vanity as a specifically female vice. While the viewer knows from experience that standards of appearance apply to all of the characters in the series, men are never shown combing their hair or flexing and posing in front of mirrors. Even the other female characters, while surely subject to the same beauty standards as Rebecca and who evidently spend time on their appearance, are never shown to be actively engaged in grooming. Rosario la Bella, for example, whose livelihood depends to some extent on a convincing performance of femininity, is never seen by the audience spending time on her appearance. In contrast, Rebecca is frequently shown grooming herself in front of an over-sized, ornately gilded full-length mirror in her bedroom. She brushes her hair, admires her dress, tries on jewelry, and sometimes twirls and spins while considering her looks. Often, these scenes are used to convey dialogue between Rebecca and other people such as her maid Rita, her sister Enora, or her mother Georgina. But the presence of the large mirror and Rebecca's relationship with her reflection, parodies a historical narrative of female vanity that opens the text to an analysis of beauty and power.

[23] Judith Butler distinguishes performance, an intentional and founded act, from performativity, a set of practices that achieve a semblance of "realness."

The use of the mirror to point out the "inherent" human female flaw of vanity is a very old device in the history of western art.[24] The multivalent effect of this device has been to reinforce the reading of women as objects to be looked at, while signifying as transgressive the act of female viewership. The pleasure that Rebecca takes in looking at her own reflection is a usurpation of male privilege. This gender crossing doubles the gender crossing that Rebecca effects by occupying a symbolically masculine narrative position as the traitor of the serial. While there is a parallel or alternative indication of a trivialization of women by ridiculing the time and effort spent on beauty work, Rebecca's evident pleasure and pride in her image taints her with the vice of vanity and strengthens a reading of her character as morally corrupt. I argue also that there are strong elements of drag performance in these scenes that highlight an artificial approach to beauty that, due to its association with capitalist consumerism, would almost surely bee seen as grotesque within a Revolutionary Cuban value system.

Rebecca's beauty work may be trivialized by her numerous mirror scenes, but her attitude toward her image reflects an idea of beauty as power that resonates in dominant discourse. That Rebecca views feminine beauty as a route to power is obvious throughout the serial, and comes across strongly in the scene where she dresses for her wedding to Fernando. On that morning, the audience sees Rebecca twirling and posing in front of her

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[24] In "Learning To Be Looked At: A Portrait of (the Artist as) a Young Woman in Agnes Merlet's Artemisia," Sheila ffolliott discusses the use of the mirror by artists in producing self-portraits and goes on to describe "[…] another painting tradition, that of women simply looking at themselves" (55). Ffolliott lists works by Bellini, Titian, Rubens, Annibale Carracci, and Velázquez to establish the history of paintings of a woman looking at herself in a mirror as an allegory of the vice of vanity. Ffolliott's argument, that Artemisia's use of a mirror to improve her skills as an artist, by which she made her living, is resignified by this dominant historical narrative of vanity so that she becomes an object in the film, rather than a subject, practicing her trade. This observation points to the representational history of women in Western art and cultural practices that makes it difficult to overcome a dominant reading of Rebecca as transgressive for spending time with and enjoying her own reflection. Another interesting point of access to this problem is in the world of Western fairytales, where mirrors are used in similar fashion to warn the public against the dangers of female vanity.

mirror. She admires herself as her maid, Rita, struggles to adjust the buttons of the voluminous wedding gown. Georgina stands to the side murmuring compliments to her daughter and suggesting the pearl earrings. Georgina congratulates Rebecca on her beauty and sobs with joy as she assures her that she will be the most beautiful bride the town has ever seen, much more beautiful than Maria del Pilar. Rebecca keeps her attention on her reflection and agrees with her mother. She smiles cruelly, while she agrees that she is far more beautiful than Maria del Pilar. Rebecca gloats, saying that she cannot wait to see Maria del Pilar's face when she, Rebecca, marries her Fernando.

This scene is telling in many ways. It demonstrates Georgina's hand in shaping Rebecca's character and, in this respect, absolves Rebecca of some culpability by situating her in a social context where competitive femininity is normalized as a route to power. Perhaps, more importantly, Blanco is able to use this scene to demonstrate the power of dominant ideology to mystify the workings of power, and the privilege of the privileged to remain oblivious to their privilege. Rebecca explicitly states that she has triumphed over Maria del Pilar in marrying Fernando and views this as a personal accomplishment, an achievement due solely to her beauty and her strategic use of femininity. That Rebecca is able to maintain an uncritical belief in the legitimacy of her power as a beautiful woman, in spite of the fact that it was her family's social position and the weight of the medical evidence of non-virginity that forced Fernando into this marriage, suggests the strength of the ideology of beauty as power. So powerful is this myth that Rebecca never appears to question her inability to use the same strategies in manipulating her lover Nicolas into marriage.

Because femininity occurs as an effect of the discursive production of women as an identity category in a heteronormative paradigm of sexual difference, there can never be any underlying "reality" to feminine performances. And, as the production of sexual difference occurs in a symbolic network of relationships that already privilege masculinity, normative femininity will always serve to signify this difference as well as this subordination. From this perspective, it follows that any competitive performance of femininity by women is already a capitulation to male dominance. The notion that women are the primary actors in the pursuit of marriage, and have access to the powerful weapon of femininity in this competition for the presumably fickle affection of a high-status male, can be seen as a fiction of appeasement that covers up the actual operation of power. Women are assumed to embody inherently feminine characteristics that will "naturally" attract men, and are expected to deploy every available tool to enhance this "natural femininity," while avoiding the vaguely drawn line of predation. This ideological move, the vilification of the predatory woman, secures femininity in the service of male primacy. But, even more than this, and, as Blanco's female characters demonstrate, the connection between beauty and power in dominant discourse works as a complex mechanism for keeping power in its place(s).

Centuries of gender ideology have forged a very strong connection between women and beauty. Real and imagined women's bodies and faces have been constructed in a metonymic relationship to beauty for so long that this conceptual linkage has become entrenched and highly resistant to challenge. When beauty is examined in its relationship to power, however, this historical connection becomes readable as regulatory rather than empowering. Blanco enables this type of reading in *Destino Prohibido*. Beauty does not

guarantee power, nor does it guarantee access to power. Blanco clearly shows that the power offered by beauty only benefits certain kinds of women, and this benefit is dubious at best. Beauty ideals exclude as they are produced, and by this movement, female beauty continually fixes relationships of power within society. That women of color and poor women are excluded from the competitive use of femininity as a route to power in this *telenovela* is exemplified, with very few exceptions, by the plights of these marginalized women in the serial. This is not to say that these women are not read as beautiful within the text, or by the viewer, but that they consistently fail to benefit from beauty. The examples of Samuel's mother and the maid Jesusa, among several other in the serial, demonstrate this alternative standard.

Samuel's mother, a Black woman who died when he was a baby, is never seen by the viewer, nor is the viewer given much information about her. She is, however, described as so beautiful that Samuel's father, the wealthy white brother of Maria del Pilar's father, gave up his social and economic status to be with her. The maid Jesusa's position as a domestic servant in Maria del Pilar's household puts her in frequent contact with wealthy white men where her general beauty, combined with her social status, make her a target of sexual harassment. Her eventual marriage to Maria del Pilar's brother, Francisco, just before he dies, alters the terms of her servitude in the house, but does not improve her situation. Neither of these women is able to use beauty or femininity to her advantage. In Samuel's mother's case, her beauty is constructed as provoking a romance that forced her to leave the community. In Jesusa's case, her beauty is seen to destroy what little security of place she had as a servant, forcing her into an interstitial position in the household

where she can no longer enjoy the camaraderie of the kitchen staff, but cannot participate in the life of Francisco's family as an equal.

The gypsy women of *Destino Prohibido* make this point somewhat more forcefully. The two primary gypsy women, Rosario la Bella and Carmen (played by Mariela Bejerano), are both presented as exotically and powerfully beautiful. Carmen mobilizes her beauty in pursuit of powerful men and has affairs with the tavern owner and, later, when he breaks off their relationship, with Fernando's rich and powerful father Jeremías. Both of these men use Carmen and she has no power, in spite of her beauty, to influence the terms of these relationships. Angry and vengeful when he ends the relationship, Carmen murders Jeremías and runs away with another gypsy. Rosario, in contrast, does not appear to use her beauty in pursuit of power. Nevertheless, she has no control over the social meaning of her beauty. She attempts to attract the attention and love of Samuel by talking to him rather than seducing him. Unfortunately, the jealous gypsy Lleru (played by Mijail Mulkay) uses her beauty as a justification for throwing a knife at Samuel and kidnapping Rosario. Rosario is ultimately rescued and ends the serial happily married to Samuel, but her beauty is constructed as a force that she cannot control and cannot use to her advantage, thus clearly framing the implication that this perishable power is not a wise or legitimate option for women to improve their condition.

That the women of *Destino Prohibido* have no power to control the social meanings of their femininity, yet some of the more economically privileged of them act with the belief that they have this power, demonstrates the difficulty, if not the impossibility, of an uncritical use of femininity to challenge the symbolic system that has already signified relationships and meanings in masculine terms. Any power that any of these women

manage to access is power by proxy, configured by their relationships with the men in their lives. Femininity emerges as powerless to change the system that creates it and invests it with meanings, even though some of these meanings would suggest this power. While there are many ways to conceptualize power and many types of power, in this *telenovela*, power emerges as the ability to control or influence symbolic meanings.

Rebecca's consistent attempts to control the meanings of her performances of femininity, and thus control the terms of her social existence, are doomed from the start, as the audience well knows. Her struggles are, however, instructive. In her pursuit of Fernando, she manipulates him into a private encounter that the audience gets to see in a flash-back scene, where he does kiss her passionately and tells her that she is beautiful and that he desires her. On Rebecca's terms, and from her perspective, this does establish her matrimonial claims on him as legitimate. But Fernando, although forced to marry Rebecca, retains the power to deny her the legitimacy of her interpretation of this event. As he explains later to Maria del Pilar, he did kiss her, but he does not read this as constitutive of any admission of obligation, nor does he believe that Rebecca has a right to see it that way. He tells Maria del Pilar that it was a moment of weakness, and meaningless in comparison to the depths of his feelings for her. Fernando voices a dominant reading of sexual difference n this scene, in that he concedes that Rebecca, as a beautiful female, has access to some kind of power that rendered him temporarily incapable of resistance to her charms. It is, however, Fernando's power to control the meaning of this event that emerges as dominant due to Rebecca's continued position as traitor.

That Rebecca and her mother prepare for an elaborate church wedding, in spite of their knowledge that Fernando has unconditionally refused to marry Rebecca in the church, is another example of Rebecca's attempts to claim and legitimize her own interpretation of events. Once again, however, Rebecca's plans dissolve. This time in a farcical marriage scene, where Fernando waits at the courthouse while Rebecca and entourage wait impatiently at the church and are finally forced to abandon the wedding guests and drive to the courthouse for the legal act of marriage. This sequence is presented in choppy, segmented footage, with musical accompaniment and no dialogue, reminiscent of an old silent movie. This directorial choice allows Blanco to underscore the farcical quality of Rebecca's claims to power, claims that are further undermined when Fernando presents her with divorce papers as soon as she signs the marriage certificate.

That Rebecca ends the serial homeless and insane after all of her lies are uncovered by others is no surprise to the viewers. The *telenovela* traitor cannot reform and there is no alternative but punishment. Maria del Pilar does get to marry Fernando at the end, in a large church wedding, and all of the other characters get what they deserve, the "good" and the "evil." At the textual and narrative levels, *Destino Prohibido* functions like other *telenovelas* in wrapping up all of the problems that it addresses with socially conservative solutions, but it does so only after critically destabilizing the gender ideologies that give logic to this conclusion.

It is in this way that my reading of *Destino Prohibido* functions as a feminist intervention. All of the elements in this melodramatic text have symbolic meanings they precede and structure their uses in this particular text. These symbolic meanings have

such a stable history that they strongly resist re-signification. Blanco presents the traitor figure Rebecca not as an inexplicably deviant figure of evil, but as a product of her circumstances. While her actions and choices are demonstrated to be circumscribed by her environment, she cannot escape the totalizing logic of the genre. Likewise, Blanco produces the victim, Maria del Pilar, as very unsympathetic and destabilizes the naturalness of her romantic relationship with Fernando, the relationship that establishes her as the victim. This move does not, however, prevent her ultimate reward, as it does not unseat her from her narrative role.

Conclusion:

In my Introduction, I outlined Cuban press reactions to *Destino Prohibido* and one striking thing to emerge from these collective criticisms was the unwillingness or inability on the part of the press to connect the "important" issues of social problems like rape, teen pregnancy, HIV/AIDS, and child abuse, as well as the problems experienced by non-heterosexual individuals and couples, to an essentialist ideology of sexual difference. Class and racial differences are implicated in these issues as well, and in complex ways that often defy parsing, but all of these master narratives, sex, race, and class, are products of discourse that are shaped by economics, politics, and power. Xiomara Blanco's *telenovela* *Destino Prohibido* is an important and potentially powerful

response to the social problems of contemporary Cuban society in that it frames these discourses of power in such a way as to highlight the ideological positions that underlie these problems. Blanco does not specifically address the "hot-topic" concerns of contemporary life, but works more subversively to problematize assumptions about female "natures" that are expressed in stereotypes and regulated by femininities.

The pseudo-historical fantasy setting of *Destino Prohibido* risks displacing issues of sexual difference onto a discretely produced history by explicitly linking gendered abuses of power to the racial and class dynamics that preceded the Cuban Revolution. It might suggest, to the uncritical viewer, that the problems faced by women in the past were all caused by the racialized class system of old, therefore all is well for today's Cuban woman. Indeed, this potential reading appeared to be problematic for many in the critical press. As Joel del Rio explained, "It is as if the past fifty years or so, with their sexual revolutions and battles for social, racial, and sexual equality, had not been learned […]" (*Reacciones* par 2; translation mine). But, as I argue, it is precisely because these lessons had *not* been learned that this same critic, Joel del Rio, was able to complain in an earlier article that the actors' images in this *telenovela*, presumably the female actors' images, were not portrayed so as to maximize their physical beauty (20 *Preguntas* par 4). The problems addressed overtly in *Destino Prohibido*, blatant sexual and racial discrimination and oppression, have been legally and culturally addressed, with varying degrees of failure, in Cuba and elsewhere in the Western world. That Del Rio apparently believes these issues are passé, speaks to the power of dominant ideology to mystify its own operations in producing and naturalizing difference.

But Del Rio and other members of the Cuban media elite are not alone in voicing the

dominant view that struggles for equality have already been won. This perspective is widely found throughout the Western world, particularly in nations where white women and women and men of color have a visible public presence and demonstrable legal rights, and particularly from the mouths and typewriters of individuals who benefit the most from systemic forms of oppression. The perception of equality and justice for all by these dominant voices adds to the difficulties faced by feminist and other critical thinkers in introducing into dominant discourse an analysis of particular instances of inequalities or abuse in terms of larger discursive structures or institutions, even when these instances occur on a massive scale.[25] This difficulty is compounded, for feminism(s), by the political necessity of claiming a female identity for women as an oppressed class, as the identity category itself is, as Judith Butler describes, a culturally and politically constituted identity (Bodies that Matter 118). Because this identity is produced as the de-privileged, and essential, element in a hierarchical binary sex system, this category becomes fictively stable and fictively universal. It is this false universality that makes political claims of "womanhood" so potentially dangerous, as political strategies based on an uncritical use of this category risk reproducing oppressive systems.

The identity category woman cannot be re-claimed and cannot be rejected, but it can be re-worked to show its production. The promise of femininity as a liberatory tool lies in its artifice, and yet this promise, of subverting the ideological basis of gender identity through the intentional and self-critical exaggeration of femininity, is too often limited by the entrenched networks of power that stand to be displaced by such a move. Femininity

[25] For examples, the disproportional incarceration of Black men compared to white men in the U.S. and throughout the world, and the crime of rape perpetrated against women, are most productively analyzed as products of institutionalized racism and sexism. These injustices, however, are too easily dismissed in dominant discourse as resulting from individual criminality.

is a historically fluid constellation of subjective characteristics and overt performances that correspond to dominant notions of heteronormative, racialized, sexed identities. As such, femininity regulates and maintains the power relationships that are expressed in a hierarchical sexual binary, and is clearly the product and tool of this master discourse. At issue in subverting or disrupting this discursive identity category is not simply the critical intention to alter meanings, but the power to carry out a sustainable re-signification. In today's climate of "girl power" feminism, where sex work and pornography are theorized as potentially liberatory in popular discourse as well as in certain facets of academia, the emphasis on agency and intention often appears, at least to me, to ignore or minimize the very real danger that follows from the uncritical reception of these strategies in dominant discourse, a reception that further naturalizes a gender binary that always produces femininity in the service of a masculinized heterosexual framework of power and desire.

In *Destino Prohibido*, however, Blanco appears to anticipate this uncritical reception and makes full use of multiple histories to prime her viewers for a critical reading of her overproduced femininities as intentional and symbolic parodic performances that serve as sites for interrogating femininity as a monolithic discourse and exposing relationships of power. By re-casting many of the actors from her previous *telenovela* *Tierra Brava* in *Destino Prohibido*, but placing them in morally opposite roles from their previous characters, Blanco forces a contradiction and complicates an uncritical reading of all of the characters of *Destino Prohibido* and their moral valences, a tactic that relies on a shared history with her viewers of the experience of both *telenovelas*.

Blanco also relies on the history of *telenovela* itself, and her Cuban audience's presumed familiarity with its structure, in risking deviations from the expected moral

valences of the central characters. As *telenovela* was born in Cuba and has been a staple of the Cuban televisual diet since the advent of television technology, Blanco relies on the audience to maintain, at some level, a reading of the villains as villains and the victims as victims so that her manipulations of these characters never severs them completely from their stock positions. This is very important for an overall project of destabilizing femininities, as it allows for continual moral judgments. If, for example, the traitor Rebecca gained so much audience sympathy as to completely divorce her from the traitor role, her character would lose its ability to provoke judgments about her relationship to power.

By intentionally reminding the viewer of the earliest *telenovelas*, Blanco relies on the history of the genre to set up viewer expectations of the plot. And, by using the character types of historical melodrama, Blanco instantiates a historical narrative of performance that further ties her characters to their ethical symbolisms, thus she can be seen to use the history and pre-history of the *telenovela* genre to set up a very well understood formula that she can then destabilize. This destabilization at multiple levels, that leaves the narrative form intact, works to engage the viewer in multiple and, often, contradictory readings. For example, even the casual viewer knows that Maria del Pilar occupies the space of the innocent victim and is, presumably, aware of the historical gender and class associations of this position with innocence and virtue. The viewer knows that Maria del Pilar, as the victim, will end the serial rewarded with marriage to Fernando. And, the viewer carries this knowledge while watching her character unfold as so unsympathetic as to undermine pleasure from her eventual reward. Blanco repeats this tactic with several characters in the serial, thus positioning the viewer to move continually among multiple

levels of viewing. This fluidity, in itself, serves to impede the ability of *Destino Prohibido* to deliver uncritical ideological positions, and, this fluidity is enabled by Blanco's overt adherence to the generic formula. I propose that the general viewer in Cuba is a politically savvy reader, and that if this *telenovela* is read in a Revolutionary spirit, as I have shown, it should engender a potentially destabilizing critique of a binary sex system by problematizing the ideas of nature and essence that are involved in this dominant iteration of sexual difference.

Telenovela, as a highly formulaic genre, relies heavily on historically entrenched understandings of sexual difference for its dramatic structure and movement. These understandings are fundamental to a moral order, symbolically personified and enacted by repeating characters, that resonates with widely diverse audiences.[26] Blanco's choice of a somewhat ambiguous historical setting for *Destino Prohibido* enables a repetition of these characters that maximizes this history of meanings, allowing the foundational ideologies, or discursive productions, of sex, nature, good, and evil, to mutually implicate themselves as products of a masculinized discourse of power. It is my contention that, by enabling and encouraging an audience reading that takes advantage of the history and traditions of melodrama, Blanco is able to infiltrate dominant discourse in ways that could encourage a destabilizing reading of sexual difference. I have tried to show *Destino Prohibido* as a possible instance where mimetic strategies of over-producing femininities

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[26] That the basic elements of this moral order resonate with widely diverse human audiences is clearly demonstrated by the popularity of *telenovela* in cultures that are, superficially at least, quite different from the Latin American cultures that shape its production. One striking example of this cross-cultural appeal was reported from Cote d'Ivoire in 1999. According to journalists from the UNESCO Courier:

> During Ramadan last January, some of the mosques in Abidjan decided to bring forward prayer time. This thoughtful gesture saved thousands of the faithful from a painful dilemma – whether to do their religious duty or miss the latest episode of *Marimar*, a Mexican TV melodrama […]" (Ortiz de Urbina and López par 1)

Such fandom suggests the strength and ubiquity of the ideological positions that must be understood, if not embraced, in order to understand and appreciate the genre.

can work as liberatory, without re-naturalizing sexual difference, due to the potential of the audience to read these performances as strategic and intentional.

That the Cuban critical press did not share my reading of this *telenovela*, suggests further research projects. While apparently aware of the history and importance of *telenovela*, at least one of these critics voiced an explicit distaste for the genre. Anaray Lorenzo, who delivered a scathing critique of *Destino Prohibido* for the digital edition of *el habañero*, began her article with the disclaimer that *telenovelas* have never "trapped [her] in their net" (Lorenzo par 1; translation mine). That the spokespeople of the press appear to be more concerned with production values and anachronisms than with Blanco's interesting use of the genre is, perhaps, explained by Amado del Pino in a general article about *telenovela*, written for *la jiribilla*. Del Pino claims that, "Until the 1990s, many men did not watch *telenovela* and neither did young or intellectual women," and suggests that the economic crisis of the 1990s caused these individuals to stay home more, a condition that presumably led to their watching *telenovelas* (Del Pino par 2; translation mine). It is possible that these dominant voices of the press may be influenced by an underlying elitist scorn for *telenovela* as a popular genre, as, according to Ana M. Lopez, "In Latin America […] the devaluation of melodrama is explicitly class-based […]" (Lopez 260). It is also possible that these writers may be too privileged to see the ways that sexism and racism affect the rest of the population. It would be interesting to survey these writers to quantify their experiences of oppression, their perceptions of the extent of sexism in Cuba, and their attitudes toward *telenovela* and the people that they assume make up its audiences.

More importantly to my focus, however, would be a follow-up study of the ways that the general viewers of *Destino Prohibido* felt about the serial. As I argue that Blanco takes great care to facilitate the possibility of alternative readings of the femininities enacted by the central characters, it would be important to see how the audience actually read these performances. Open-ended surveys of viewers should generate enough data to gauge viewer's attitudes about femininity and how, and if, *Destino Prohibido* affected their views and feelings. How did they feel and what did they think about Maria del Pilar's eventual marriage to Fernando? What did Samuel mean when he asked himself if he loved Maria del Pilar because she was rich and white? What did they think about Rebecca? Why did she do what she did? Was she a "good" traitor figure? Answers to questions like these from viewers who watched *Destino Prohibido* would demonstrate the effectiveness of Blanc's mimetic strategies in overproducing femininity in order to show, to a popular and Revolutionary audience, the workings of power that femininity masks and unmasks.

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