Commenting on his motivations for his movie Maríá Full of Grace (2004), director and writer Joshua Marston explains that he intended to make an educational movie about the people who are engaged in international drug trafficking and about the dangers that such work entails.¹ His choice to depict Colombia’s drug industry echoes his deep interest in world politics, Colombia’s forty-year civil war and guerilla wars, and the country’s stagnant economy. With Marston’s advocacy of issues in world politics and human rights, HBO, the movie’s US distributor, continues to add diversity to its playbill.² Still, despite these noble intentions of promoting issues of Third World countries, the movie only partly succeeds in its attempt to “humanize the drug mule.”³ This becomes evident from the general response the movie received from American viewers: while many are positively captivated by the movie, the attention of their enamored attachment to the movie almost exclusively focuses on Catalina Sandino Moreno, the young Colombian actress who plays the role of Maríá. While her convincing performance certainly aided in the successful transference of the movie’s intended message about the complicated entanglements that affect the lives of transnational drug mules, the ways in which many movie critics (professional and amateur) see in Moreno a representative of the Colombia she depicts is rather troublesome.

However, as this article argues, such resonance with the audience is not entirely beyond Marston’s control. On the contrary, there are several instances in the movie that invite the audience to see in Moreno a spokesperson for Colombian social realities, and in Maríá a “‘windows[]’ into the presumed alterity of other cultures” (Amireh and Majaj 2). One movie review makes a particularly problematic assumption about the movie when it characterizes Maríá Full of Grace as a portrayal of “the enormous complexity of Hispanic life in America, especially of the illegal variety” (Brunette).
Such is the general tenor in the responses Marston’s movie has received from journalists and online bloggers alike.

While this essay does not endorse such reviews, it addresses a selection of such responses for its investigation of the degree to which Marston’s movie itself suggests an objectified representation of Colombian female drug mules. Such representation, it seems, appears to resonate with the American audience more than the careful crafting and sensitive gaze with which Marston approaches the subject of his film. It is therefore particularly interesting to examine in what way the movie objectifies Colombian women by appropriating Colombia as stereotypical global South. Taking its cue from recent discussions in transnational feminism, this essay analyzes a recurrent dilemma in Western representations of the Third World through images of the “Other” woman to emphasize the difference between the First and the Third World for an ultimate projection of American supremacy.

Third World Women on American TV-Screens

Recent US feminist culture criticism has increasingly shown interest in transnational feminist issues,4 most particularly in the orientalist and essentialist over-generalizations of Third World cultures that US academia, popular culture, and the mass media have produced when attempting representations of Third World women.5 Recognizing the danger of such generalizations, Rey Chow offers two useful concepts for a critical evaluation of Western mass media’s depiction of “the other country.” In her critique of American coverage of the “China crisis” of the late 1980s, Chow refers to a sensationalist interest of Western audiences that manifests itself in what she calls “China watching.” Symptomatic of China watching, specifies Chow, are detailed accounts in which US mass media depicts the Chinese government as controlling and ruthless, and portrays the protesters without respecting their right to anonymity (Third World 83). The second concept, the “King Kong syndrome,” which Chow defines as intricately connected to the sensationalism that is at the center of China watching (Third World 84), echoes Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s contention that the Third World is often depicted as a site of “raw” materials that invoke “monstrosity,” which appears in contrast to the First World both as entertainment and as evidence for the persisting, Western notion of cultural elevation (In Other Worlds 90). In another essay, Chow defines the “fascination with the native, the oppressed, the savage, and all such figures” as “a desire to hold onto an unchanging certainty […] a desire for being ‘nonduped,’ which is a not-too-innocent desire to seize control” (“Where Have All” 141). This fascination with violent and/or sensational spectacles “over there” therefore, deduces Chow, assures Western audiences that, guarded by democracy and political and social freedom, “over here” everybody is safe and everything is in order. Chow asserts: “Locked behind the bars of our television screens, we become repelled by what is happening ‘over there,’ in a way that confirms the customary view, in the US at least, that ideology exists only in the ‘other’ (anti-US) country” (“Violence in the Other” 84). The ubiquity of representations in US mass media that exhibit these two syndromes, concludes Chow, characterizes American media productions as instruments of Orientalism.

Like many film projects before his, Marston’s movie also runs the risk of conflating candor with sensationalism and political interest with Orientalism. Exploring the motivations for drug muling from a Western perspective might make for an empathetic depiction, but the subject of his movie alone cannot succeed in exposing the international commercial and strategic interest the First World has in the Third World. In other words, it is important that the movie addresses issues of international drug trafficking but it is problematic how it frames such issues. In particular, Marston’s movie relies for the most part on
a depiction of Colombia in terms of a single category and thus reinforces Western prejudices of the Third World as site of rawness and monstrosity. The rawness and monstrosity that the film conveys do not stem from overt depiction of violence, dire poverty or the dangers of the drug war onto everyday life; on the contrary, Marston does not depict any of these circumstances which his American audience surely knows from other movies set in the drug milieu.

The problem comes more from the fact that the movie reduces the issue of transnational drug trafficking to a single experience with a happy ending without fully investigating the complexities of the issue. From this distanced and biased perspective, depictions of Colombian drug mules remain a mere “spectacle for the West” (Chow, “Violence in the Other” 83) and are not, as Marston intends, a means to convey, much less entice, political agency for and transnational solidarity with Colombia on the part of the Western audience but. After all, as Susan Sontag affirms, any attempt to regard the pain of others through the mass media, even if by “watching up close—without the meditation of an image—is still just watching” (117). And Marston’s movie at times seems to do mostly that, offer to an American audience an opportunity to indulge themselves in some “Colombia watching.”

Entering the United States through the Drug Business

After seventeen-year-old María Alvarez (Catálina Sandino Moreno) leaves her job trimming flowers on a rose plantation in rural Colombia, she accepts a job as drug mule, which means she has to swallow latex pellets filled with heroin and smuggle them into the United States. Together with three other women, María flies to New York where American-based drug dealers await the mules and the goods they carry. When the customs and immigration officers become suspicious of the eight hundred dollars in cash María carries with her and question the purpose of her trip to the United States, she has to undergo interrogation and possibly an X-ray examination which would show the pellets in her stomach. Once the officers find out that she is pregnant, however, they are unable to perform the X-ray, and they release María.

The plot is a mixture of suspense and careful delineation of the lives of drug mules, primarily that of María’s life. For instance, while the audience gets a good glimpse at the living conditions of each of the three lead female protagonists, María’s plight is depicted in perhaps the most empathetic way. The movie’s opening scene depicts María trimming roses in a factory outside of Bogotá, amidst a large group of women all performing the same job, all looking a bit like María. And already in this opening scene does the audience get a feel for the claustrophobic space that María works in, and perhaps already begins to understand why she “wants out.” But her desire for something higher becomes even more evident from one of the following scenes, where María climbs a high wall with confident stride and determination, leaving her frustrated boyfriend Juan (Wilson Guerrero) standing at the foot of the wall. Such moments in the movie are symptomatic for María’s character, including her refusal to comply with rules and norms that others impose on her. This determination in the end costs her her job in the rose trimming factory, creates constant conflict within her family, and brings about the end of her relationship with Juan.

In contrast to María, two of the other three drug mules appear less determined: María’s friend Blanca (Yenny Paola Vega) seems to get into the drug business simply by copying María, but, as especially the scenes in New York suggest, is much less prepared for a life on her own. Similarly, Lucy (Guilied López), an experienced drug mule whose third trip to New York this is, seems to be driven by her desire to reconnect with her estranged sister, who leads a well-established life in Jackson Heights, Queens. Lucy’s gripping story about her attempts to reconnect with her sister, especially her account
of the sense of alienation she feels toward her sister and the fact that even when in New York on a previous trip as a drug mule, she was too afraid to even contact her sister, certainly move the audience. But since she appears at once haunted and stifled by the prospect of going to the United States, her quest beguiles much less agency than Marı́a’s.

At the same time, the movie positions all the mules in similar measures in relation to the complex power structures of the drug trading business: this becomes most apparent in the scene that depicts the women’s flight to New York. In the claustrophobic space of the airplane, all of them seem equally wary of possibly getting caught. Being the most experienced of the three, Lucy informs Marı́a and Blanca that there is actually a fourth woman on the plane who also carries drugs and tells them about a practice that is known as “shotgunning,” that is, the fact that the drug bosses send several mules on the same flight, and sometimes report one of them to the international police so that the other ones may more easily pass immigration. In Marı́a Full of Grace, the anonymous forth woman indeed does get caught, a fact that the movie plays out much less than the anxieties of the three remaining mules, both their realization that one of them could have got caught instead, and the increasing worries about Lucy’s health.

Such subtle depictions of the general tension of transnational drug trafficking determine the overall mood of Marston’s movie. Unlike other contemporary films on the drug business, it does without expressive depictions of overt violence (Davis 58). Even the depiction of the US-based thugs is in large measures empathetic: Marston’s film suggests that they, too, are ensnared in power structures in which they are vulnerable to orders and punishment, and that this oppression that they feel makes them uneasy and anxious. In one scene set in the sleazy hotel in which the five young adults are literally trapped until the women excrete the drug pellets, one of the thugs kisses the small gold cross he wears on his necklace when he sees news coverage of a fatal accident. And the hotel room itself, although claustrophobic, does not evoke the horror of the business in which they all participate: they eat pizza, watch TV all the time, and all respect each other’s privacy. The verbal abuse at the beginning of the plot sequence in the hotel aside (one of the thugs hands out laxatives to the three women and orders them to clean the passed pellets carefully with toothpaste, threatening them, “I don’t want to be smelling your shit”), the women are not put under additional pressure.

In lieu of spontaneous outbursts of violence, the movie increasingly builds on the tension between the characters, at times even by replacing dialogue with long inquisitive gazes. And contrary to the constant tension that surrounds the depiction of the drug trade, the movie’s climactic moment occurs in a happy resolution, namely the scene where Marı́a sees for the first time a sonogram picture of the baby she carries. This is one of the few scenes in which Marı́a is depicted as smiling, and this positive image also foreshadows the movie’s rather positive ending.

The absence of dialogue in important moments of the movie also enforces a certain enigmatic flair. The character’s actions often are much more telling than their words. For instance, in the above mentioned climactic moment of the film, Marı́a’s smile carries as much momentum about the further development of the plot as her slow counting out of the several twenty dollar bills with which she pays for the sonogram. In such scenes, the audience is supposed to empathize with Marı́a and to imagine her thoughts and feelings. At the same time, Marı́a’s real feelings are left unsaid: there are no scenes that present any interior monologue, no visualization of flashbacks, and no depiction of dreams or nightmares. In fact, Marston initially had planned a scene in which Marı́a has a nightmare in which she is nine months pregnant, gets shot, and drug pellets spill from her body. This scene, however, was cut because it did not “go with the rest of the movie” (Marston). Similarly, there are few scenes in which Marı́a serves as focalizer for the camera and in which the audience sees the world through
her eyes. On the contrary, the movie places María at the center of attention: she is in every scene and because of the absence of a subjective camera view, the audience watches her every move closely, many times even in medium close-up and close-up shots. Furthermore, the linear plot development also places María at the center of attention. In fact, the other female characters in the film seem to serve primarily as foils for María’s character development and as indications of the alternative courses her life could have taken: the women on the assembly lines in the rose-trimming factory as well as her sisters, a single mother who relies on her family’s meager income to support her and her child evoke the life that might await María if she did not accept the lucrative job as drug mule; and the women with whom she travels to New York represent alternative fates that María could have had being a mule: she could have been the one getting caught; she could have been the one dying from a heroin overdose because a pellet broke inside her stomach; or she could have been the one returning to Colombia to support her family with the money she earned.

Through such techniques, Marston offers a compassionate image of the drug business and the intricate entanglement of the people whose everyday lives are affected by it. Thus also argues Emily S. Davis in her comparative analysis of body and border dialectics in contemporary films on global drug and organ trafficking. Davis refers to them as “uncomfortable intimacies” and specifies with regard to Marı́a Full of Grace that

Marston’s script forces U.S. audiences to see how their consumption of drugs such as heroin and cocaine requires the murder of the largely invisible people who produce and transport them inside their bodies. This is the most pressing intimacy, the unrepresented, unspoken relationship between the strangers who will consume the drugs and María and her living and dead companions who carried the drugs inside them. (Davis 61)

Davis’s assertion that Marston confronts US audiences with a side of the drug business they usually do not see makes an important point about the overall concept of the movie, but is perhaps a bit too sanguine in its assumption that American audiences enter with the movie in a nonhierarchical conversation. An analysis of the film’s reception in the United States reveals that Marston does not reach his intended goal of “humanizing the mules.”

**Critical Reception in the United States**

The film’s reception in the United States seems to suggest that Marston’s intentions of depicting the local/global, national/transnational, individual/collective contexts that frame the business of transnational drug muling did not fully elucidate his intended audiences. Both in the United States and in Colombia, Marston feels that his intentions for his fictional portrayal of a drug mule were somewhat misunderstood. In Colombia, for instance, Marı́a Full of Grace has been less received as a fictional story than as an educational documentary to inhibit the local population from participating in the transnational drug business. More compelling than the government-sponsored advertising campaign of “Don’t be a mule” billboards, Marston’s film has become the main antimuling campaign material in Colombia, including the request of the UN office in Bogotá for a print for “educational purposes” and two private screenings in the presidential residence hosted by Colombia’s First Lady Lina Marı́a Moreno Mejı́a (Williams). Such, however, was against Marston’s ambitions for his film, as he confesses in an interview with fellow director Antonio Minghella, reprinted in The Guardian as “Please send us all your 17-year old daughters”: “I hoped we’d go beyond that and not lecture people; I was really against the idea of using the film to try to teach people not to be a mule.”

In the United States as well, Marston’s film received widespread recognition, but perhaps not to the extent in which he initially hoped. Marı́a Full of Grace was a box office success and gained numerous critical awards, including the 2004 audience award at the Sundance Film
Festival; the silver bear for best actress at the 2004 Berlin Film Festival, a best-actress nomination for the role of María at the 2005 Academy Awards. The movie’s great appeal to the audience, as many movie reviews suggest, may stem from the realistic, if not to say anthropological approach the film takes. This approach scrutinizes in particular the lead actress, Catalina Sandino Moreno. As far-fetched as this speculation might sound, some recent reception of the movie in US mass media indicates that American movie audiences see Moreno as the character she plays. For instance, Moreno confronts interview questions such as “And the character that you play, is that very similar to your life or very different from your life?” (Tanzer). Moreno’s performance of María also gave many viewers the impression that María’s experiences are “lived in rather than acted” (Holden). Clearly, the stereotype the actress Moreno is up against is that Colombia is known only for its massive production of heroin and cocaine and its international crime, which somewhat implies that all Colombians must be connected one way or another to the drug trade. This also becomes evident from the need that some reporters feel to highlight the different social realities experienced by Moreno and the character she plays. For instance, Zoe Williams describes “Moreno’s journey to America […] as different as is possible from that of her character María.” The reception of Marston’s movie in the United States in England exemplifies to which degree Third World women and their representation in Western cultures are often restricted to and viewed as “markers of ‘cultural authenticity’ ” (Amireh and Majaj 2).

The movie’s allegedly authentic quality is an interesting aspect among the various positive responses Marston’s project received. As many critics of multi-ethnic studies have pointed out, mainstream Anglo-American culture continues to be full of images that link the Third World with the exotic, an exotic that “is always already known” (Rony 6). In this light, the US market perhaps demands that Moreno be the character she portrays, and that María in the movie be a certain (stereo)type of a Third World woman. Hence, the proposition of viewing Moreno and her character María “as if” she were representative of her culture/country is doomed to produce biased representation of cultures and countries and thus reinforces prevalent stereotypes (Schwarz 15). Perhaps because María Full of Grace entered the American market with the phrase “Based on 1000 true stories” on the cover, but perhaps also because it caters to preconceived notions of Colombia, the general consensus among movie critics (amateur and professional alike) is that Marston offers an authentic perspective into the business of transnational drug trafficking. In this light, it becomes understandable why some audiences see in Marston’s film an accurate representation of Colombia and accept the movie on that basis.

This notion that the character of María substitutes an entire social group in Colombia, and perhaps by extension, represents Colombia at large, also raises issues about the ways in which Marston negotiates María’s agency in the film. The movie’s, in Marston’s words, “loose documentary feel” (audio commentary), achieved by a hand-held camera and “various slices of life” (Brunette), evokes the idea that the character of María is a case study of drug muling. Most of the shots are taken from the perspective of an objective or omniscient camera, which emphasizes the notion of spectacle and voyeurism. At the center of this spectacle is María; she is in every scene and the camera follows her moves closely. For an American audience, the fact that the movie is in Spanish further emphasizes the act of looking (as opposed to listening) and thus might further exoticize María. The narrative construction of María’s story, a story though which Marston reportedly wanted to offer an alternative image to the one usually associated with the drug trade, echoes Spivak’s provocative question as to whether the subaltern can speak at all. In her seminal essay, Spivak argues that because there are always traces of an image of a constructed colonial “Other” in the predominantly homogeneous representations of the Third World in Western discourses, the subaltern
cannot speak (“Can the Subaltern” 308). No matter how sincere its determination to deconstruct the persisting images of the Third World, Western media inevitably, as soon as they attempt to represent or speak for the oppressed, assumes the role of a patronizing agent of colonial power. This patronizing by the dominant society speaking for the subaltern—or any ethnic, sexual, religious or cultural minority for that matter—ultimately reinforces the power division between the dominant and the marginal, which renders the oppressed subject voiceless in the first place. It is based on these very power structures that the film adopts that Marston’s intended project of humanizing the mule failed in its noble attempt.

A Matter of Focus

While zooming in on the lives of the people who are engaged in transnational drug business, María Full of Grace at times seems to put more emphasis on the process of drug trafficking than on the depictions of the political context in which it occurs. Despite the fact that Marston’s movie makes strong political statements about the realities of drug trafficking in Colombia, it hardly addresses the social and economic dimensions of life in Colombia. That is even though there are depictions of the poor living conditions in María’s environment, there are no accounts of the social, demographic and economic development in contemporary South America that would emphasize Colombia’s dependency on global economic structures. The only hint at the socio-political goings-on in contemporary Colombia appears in the form of a radio news report about paramilitary activities and—as Marston points out in his audio commentary—since this report is in Spanish, an American audience is unlikely to “get it.”

Instead, the movie focuses on the activity of drug muling, including the production of the pellets and their transfer inside the women’s bodies. In particular, the issue of swallowing the drug pellets comes up several times: twice, the movie shows María practice by swallowing entire grapes, it shows her swallow the pellets, and finally, it shows her rinse, cover with toothpaste and re-swallow some pellets after they passed through her digestive tract. The movie’s preoccupation with the specific process of drug trafficking creates a spectacle around the women’s bodies. This fascination with the abuse of the female body is apparent from the sensationalist depictions of the pellets’ entrance into and exit out of the organism. The movie’s “meticulous detail used in presenting the process from start to finish” seems to put more emphasis on the mechanics of drug muling than on the social circumstances in which it occurs (Berardinelli). Certainly in Lucy’s case, whose dead body the dealers cut open in order to get at the pellets, the movie makes evident that the women’s bodies transporting the drugs are mere commodities in a well-structured network of international crime. This commodification also becomes apparent when the drug boss presses onto María’s abdomen to realign the pellets so that she can finish swallowing the number of pellets she is supposed to transport. In addition, the scene where the drug boss is feeding her a pellet also paints a compelling picture of male agency over the female body. In fact, the cover picture on the movie’s case shows María devoutly gazing up at the hand over her head that seems to lead a pellet down to her mouth. Thus, although the movie makes visible María’s commodification, its documentary feel objectifies María in a similar manner.

In “Home of the Brave,” an interview with Ali Jafaar, Marston defines the character of María as a protagonist who communicates a universal message: he emphasizes that while the milieu of the movie is set in the realm of transnational drug trading, the narrative itself simply tell “a story about a girl trying to figure out the meaning of her life” (24). Most of the reviews suggest, however, that the movie’s audience seems to be more impressed with Moreno’s beautiful face than with the movie’s compelling message: “What keeps the movie watchable isn’t
its politically, culturally charged material, but something more elemental—the fact that its young star, Catalina Moreno, is strikingly beautiful and photographs like a dream” (Thompson). While it is true that the movie zeros in on Moreno, and especially on her “stunning, serenely revealing face” (Schager), to reduce the movie’s message simply to a story about a “pretty face” not only evokes the implicit sexism of the male gaze, but also fails to recognize that the movie is not just about the life of one drug mule, but about international drug trafficking in broader terms.

Although the movie favors María’s personal quest for a better future, it depicts her as one of many Colombian drug mules. For instance, Marston cast for the roles of María, Lucy, and Blanca three women who look very much alike. And even the fact that all the drug mules depicted in the movie are female is interesting, in particular since Marston in his audio commentary speaks exclusively of male drug mules who where his informants when he worked on the film. As complex as María’s character is based on her determination and rebellion, the movie in part reduces her complexity to a one-dimensional representation that a renders María as a stereotype. Her recklessness and discontent evoke the “Anglo American stereotype of the Latin woman as childlike, pampered, and irresponsible” (King 209), a stereotype which the movie acknowledges readily raising the question on the front cover: “How far will she go before she’s gone too far?” This question isolates María from all political contexts and suggests that the choices she makes are solely based on her capricious character. At the same time, the one-dimensional depiction of María inscribes in her a preconceived cultural idea of Colombia and perhaps of Latin American in general at the expense of a more stratified representation of the local and global power dynamics that affect her life.

In the context of the movie’s attempt to humanize the drug mule, this practice of casting María as representational of an entire Colombian subculture is an example of the form of “Columbia watching” Marston invites his audience to engage in. Instead of humanizing the mule, the movie “others” her in such terms that are relatable to an American audience. This image of the “Other” woman, as Chandra Talpade Mohanty has noted, serves as alternative image to the progressive Western woman. It is an image that “discursively colonizes the material and historical heterogeneity of the lives of women in the third world, thereby producing/re-presenting a composite, singular ‘third world woman”—an image which appears arbitrarily constructed, but nevertheless carries with it the authorizing signature of Western humanist discourse” (Mohanty 19). This form of “Othering” is particularly noteworthy in the part of the movie which is set in Colombia. The part of the movie which is set in the United States adopts a more empathetic approach to María’s choices. What comes across as recklessness and discontent in the scenes in Colombia connotes endurance and mobility in the scenes in the United States. If the first part of the movie is “a plaint against poverty and exploitation before it mutates into a more conventional (but successful) exploitation of a rebellious teenage girl trying to assert her independence in a patriarchal world” (Brunette), the second part is a successful immigrant tale that celebrates María’s survival of the drug trafficking business and introduces her into a world full of possibilities.

**American Exceptionalism**

In contrast to the depiction of María as “Other” in relation to her American audience, her decision to stay in the United States seems to be based on values that her American audience can empathize with. The movie does so by glorifying the United States as land of opportunity for Third World immigrants. First of all, it strategically places María in a well-knit social community of Hispanics in Queens. By comparison, María seems to lack support and empathy from her community in Colombia, as her
secrecy about her pregnancy and her job as drug mule implies. Secondly, María’s decision to stay in the United States coincides with her assuming responsibility for her unborn child. With the cash allowance she got from the drug boss in Colombia, she has a first sonogram taken. It is in the United States that María becomes certain of her pregnancy. Such positioning of María in the United States implies that she “finds in the frightening exile the inner strength and moral fortitude which is reflected in the film’s title” (French) and promotes a positive ending to María’s quest which implies an “old-school New World view of America” (Jaafar, “Madonna of the Mules” 22). The underlying suggestion here is that in the United States María finally finds closure to her identity quest.

This feeling of closure is also maintained by the movie’s ending. The audience sees María walking assuredly toward the camera and, by implication, into her new life. In terms of what the camera articulates in this last shot, the audience sees María as a person who arrives in the United States, and walks farther into the United States. This “happy” ending underscores the image of the United States as offering a positive alternative to the miserable living conditions María seems to have escaped from. The positive feeling which the movie’s last scene conjures stands in stark contrast with the scene earlier in the movie where María is on her way to meet the drug boss in a bar in Bogotá. This scene, which operates with a similar framing, positions María in a different way: she is walking away from the camera, and therefore, in contrast to the scene on the airport, suggests departure. In addition, the scene in the bar implies more tension and uncertainty than the one set at the airport, even despite the fact that the latter one is shot in slow motion. The movie’s happy ending raises hopes that once María is in the United States, all of her problems will vanish although she is a pregnant teenage illegal alien with limited financial assets, education or job training.

In such scenes, the movie constructs María’s upward mobility on the basis of her seemingly easy assimilation to US culture. This is, however, a contradiction to its overall argumentation of an insurmountable divide between the First World and the Third World, especially when it comes to images of women. But while the movie characterizes María as one on many Colombian women by integrating her in a community where almost all women look alike, it also underscores the degree to which María does not fit into Colombia society. In this light, the movie’s ending clearly places its emphasis on arrival rather than departure. For instance, the movie depicts María as never really “at home” in Colombia: she is different from her submissive coworkers on the flower plantation because she quits her job; she is different from her mother and sisters with whom she always gets in to fights about money and responsibilities toward the family; and finally, by refusing her boyfriend Juan’s ‘unromantic’ offer to marry her once she tells him that she is pregnant, María resents having to choose between being dependent on her mother and sister on the one hand or on Juan and his family on the other. Given María’s frustration with her life in Colombia, the movie invites speculations about what would have to happen to make her happy.

Through a depiction of the tensions between María and her social environment, the movie systematically prepares its audience for a successful “homecoming” of the young victimized immigrant to the United States. In suggesting that the answer to all of María’s problems lies in her immigration to the United States, the movie endorses an underlying belief in American exceptionalism. As Henry Schwarz argues, the “fundamental beliefs in justice, democracy, and equal opportunity” that characterize “America’s relations with the rest of the world are deeply enshrined in this American mythology and are considered uniquely (‘exceptional’) American values” (9). Given Lucy’s description of the United States as “too perfect,” as a country where “everything is straight,” the movie certainly adopts this categorization of the United States. And that this American Dream is indeed attainable for Colombian immigrants becomes apparent from Lucy’s sister Carla, who lives her
version of the American Dream in Brooklyn Heights.

Carla, who takes María and Blanca in when they find themselves stranded in New York, serves as model for the upward mobility of Colombian immigrants in the United States. Carla and her husband represent the picture-perfect nuclear family: in contrast to María’s sister, mother and grandmother in Colombia, Carla is financially secure, emotionally fulfilled, with a baby on the way and a working husband who treats her with utmost respect and devotion. Of course, the parallel between María’s pregnancy and Carla’s pregnancy is far from coincidental: it invites María’s identification with Carla’s happy and successful life. In one scene, Carla tells María that her main motivation for staying in the United States was to offer her baby a better life: “I can’t imagine bringing up my child in Colombia. Not with the situation being what it is.” Carla thus foreshadows the possibilities María will have if she stays in the United States. Carla’s success story also indicates how well women in the United States are protected and taken care of by social institutions and the benefits of equal opportunity. After all, as Spivak has noted, “the protection of woman (today ‘third world woman’) becomes a signifier for the establishment of a good society” (“Can the Subaltern” 298; original emphasis). At the same time, the movie juxtaposes María with her older sister to justify María’s choice of staying in the United States. María’s perception of her sister’s life as miserable, wasted, and futile seems to be the impetus for her desire to leave home. In contrast to the well-organized life at Carla’s apartment, the household of María’s family is overcrowded (four adult women), noisy (a bawling baby whose mother cannot afford to see a pediatrician), and leaves little room for privacy (María gets scolded for brushing her hair in the kitchen). One of the few shots where María’s perspective actually dominates the camera is when she looks at her sister who is sharing a bed with her baby son. This scene serves as reference to María’s assertion: “I don’t want to end up like my sister.” From this juxtaposition between the lives of two young mothers, one in the United States, the other in Colombia, the movie empathizes with María’s decision to stay in the United States.

Another indication that María might feel more ‘at home’ in the United States than in Colombia is her distanced perspective on her sister’s life and the sense of superiority she feel toward her family members, even toward Juan. For instance, María’s perception of her sister echoes stereotypical evaluation with which Western feminists regard Third World women. María’s distanced perspective of Colombian women as oppressed and desperate enhances Western standards of feminism and thus further justifies María’s aspirations to a better life in the United States. As Chandra Talpade Mohanty notes:

Universal images of “the third world woman” […], images constructed from adding the “third world difference” to “sexual difference,” are predicated upon (and hence obviously bring into sharper focus) assumptions about Western woman as secular, liberated, and having control over their own lives. (42)

By viewing her sister and female relatives with “western eyes,” María possibly adopts the same vantage point and value system with which the American movie audience viewed María’s life in Colombia. Once in the United States, she manifests herself as iconic figure of the American Dream: she is entrepreneurial, assimilable, and determined and thus represents perfectly the quintessential American national narrative of individualism and self-invention. Hence, the movie presents María’s decision to stay in the United States as climax of the movie’s portrayal of US superiority.

The notion of the successful homecoming also reinforces images of Western/American culture as land of opportunities that grants rights to Third World women. Of course, there is a notable difference between María and Carla, who did not enter the United States illegally, much less through the drug trafficking industry. Nevertheless, by modeling María’s possible future life in the United States after Carla’s success, the movie romanticizes drug muling as viable way to surmount economic hardship and political
turmoil in the Third World. Moreover, returning to Colombia might also mean continuing to work as drug mule, as one dealer suggests by asserting: “You’ve been trained now.” In particular, as the fates of Lucy and the anonymous fourth drug mule on the plane imply, the risk of getting caught or dying of an over-dose induced by leaking drug pellets exemplifies the life-danger drug mules are exposed to. Thus, staying in the United States appears to be not only the only sane choice but also a life-saving decision. The movie supports this idea in the final scene when Marı´a starts walking toward the camera. Right before the camera adopts a slow-motion mode, Marı´a is depicted against a billboard which reads: “It’s what’s inside that counts.” The slogan contextualizes Marı´a’s attempt to build a better future for herself and her child and recalls the Carla’s decision to stay in the United States for the sake of her child. It also reminds the audience that returning to Colombia is out of the question for Marı´a, since it would mean admitting yet another failure to her mother and sister, who do not know that she is involved in drug smuggling. In this context, Blanca embodies the missed opportunities and thus serves as counterpart to the ‘Westernized’ Marı´a. Although Blanca is depicted as rather obnoxious character, the movie suggests that by returning she loses any opportunity for a better life, and thus constructs an immediate juxtaposition between the hopeful and determined Marı´a and the disappointed and disillusioned Blanca.

Perhaps this characterization of Marı´a as assimilable immigrant is a clever way for the movie to get out of acknowledging that Marı´a’s immigrant experience might be overshadowed by poverty, social stigmatization, ethnic marginality and eventually even cultural alienation from her Colombian heritage. It is in this light that Marston’s film assumes agency for rather than promoting agency of Colombian female drug mules. Through the construction of Marı´a’s homecoming into the ‘Land of the Free,’ Marston employs the same objectification that Spivak asserts is a power enactment over the Third World disguised under the benevolent intentions of “White men are saving brown women from brown men” (“Can the Subaltern” 296). María does not return to the father of her child, for instance, which, had she stayed in Colombia, her mother and sister might have expected of her. What is important, moreover, in the context of the judgmental approach with which the West evaluates the Third World, is that María’s entrance in the United States also marks her personal maturity. By constructing Marı´a as icon of American exceptionalism, the movie implies that whoever does not seize the opportunity of coming to or staying in the United States, such as Blanca, lacks determination and motivation. There is also something to be said about the fact that Marı´a is the “object” of the movie’s focus, instead of Blanca, Lucy, or the fourth woman who gets arrested by the immigration officials. In other words, the movie makes a very simplified differentiation between women who stay in the United States and women who do not: the strong and determined woman stays in the United States, the passive and naïve woman returns to Colombia.

**Conclusion**

Among other recent movies which depict drug trafficking, Marı́a Full of Grace offers its audience a depiction of the drug business that is less outwardly violent and turbulent than Steven Soderberg’s Traffick (2000) or Stephen Frears’ Dirty Pretty Things (2002). Through the many close-up shots and chokers as well as by painting an overall intriguing picture of Marı́a, the movie forces the audience to take a close look at transnational drug trafficking and its victims and agents. In Marston’s nonjudgmental portrayal, the drug pellets that the mules carry across continents are moved along a commodity chain in the same manner as are many other products on the global market. They are no different from the roses that Marı́a dethorned in the factory and that she later sees in flower shops in Jackson Heights where are they sold to beautify
American homes. Unlike the roses, however, the drug pellets do not “show up” on the American market. Cynthia Sorrensen points out that “[w]hat is blatantly missing from the commodity chain is the demand side” (121). This may have been an artistic choice that Marston made, given that movies such as *Traffick* and *Dirty Pretty Things* already successfully depicted the complex structure of supply and demand in the drug milieu. But for a movie which places so much emphasis on a linear narrative, to have left out all allusions to the origins of the drugs or their distributions invites speculations.

In Marston’s movie, the drugs do have a cataclysmic effect on the global market dynamics between Colombia and the United States, but are only relevant for the experiences of the Colombian protagonists; they never affect the lives of any American protagonists nor is there any acknowledgement of the demand end of the commodity chain. Despite the reciprocal relationship that abounds between Colombia and the United States through the transnational drug trade, Marston’s movie only depicts the myriad experiences the Colombian protagonists: immigration and exile; death or death of a loved one; losses to the immigrant community; and, of course, the bodily contact with the trade through the act of drug smuggling. Marston’s movie refuses to recognize the participation of the United States in this reciprocal relationship and thus reproduces a biased acknowledgement, which Arjun Appadurai terms as “anxiety” of globalization, namely somebody’s uneasiness to investigate the ways in which a “world without borders” may affect his or her daily practices (1). This notion of anxiety does not necessarily apply to Marston himself, but comes into existence through his aesthetic choices in creating a movie about such a controversial subject. Were Marston’s movie to investigate the participation of the United States in the transnational drug business, he would more forcefully address his audience by raising issues about their ideological complicity. Such a depiction would ultimately offer less of a psychological journey into self and more of an anticapitalist social critique of globalization. By extension, the movie’s appeal to the audience would less be on empathy than on solidarity.

In her book, *Feminism Without Borders* (2003), Chandra Talpade Mohanty proposes an “anticapitalist transnational feminist practice” that promotes “cross-national feminist solidarity and organization against capitalism” (230). Mohanty’s intervention of an anticapitalist resistance, however, might not be made accessible to an American movie audience through the format of a feature film. As the various comments on María’s character in particular or Marston’s movie at large make clear, very few, if any, movie American audiences would see this film as primarily being about them, and not about a Colombian woman. By placing the focus entirely on María, Maston’s movie enforces a dichotomy that places the concepts of safety, prospect and hope together with America into one category and poverty, danger and despair together with the Colombia into another category without highlighting the bias of such a categorization.

The lingering question in this context, “Who’s to blame?” is one that raises issues about the accountability of a fictional work for the responses it may elicit from its readers, a question that may be too philosophical to answer within the scope of this essay. There is, however, room for speculation about the degree to which Marston’s movie can successfully be political without alienating his potential audience. As Marston’s mentions in the audio-commentary to the HBO edition of *María Full of Grace*, his project did not land easily with producers who apparently confronted him with “absurd” suggestions as to how the movie should be. Moreover, he mentions a long editing process before the movie fell into place in its present format. Under the premise “You can’t really make a political movie” (audio commentary), Marston edited out from the script all dialogue that addresses the issues of political warfare and international dependency of Colombia, for instance through the American project “Aid to Colombia,” 90% of whose money, argues Marston in his audio-commentary
included on the home-edition DVD, is being spent on military hardware, some of which is produced in the United States. Marston’s statement that it is impossible to make a political movie might question the creative potential which lies in depictions of the personal as political, but it might also be a comment on the movie industry and the marketability of movie production that purport an outwardly political agenda. Perhaps Marston means by political that in a movie produced in the United States and distributed by one of America’s most influential companies, any overt political content would be perceived by his audience as out of line. If so, then Marston confronts a similar dilemma as Steven Spielberg did with his toned-down movie adaptation (1985) of the radical politics of Alice Walker’s novel, The Color Purple (1982): in order for the movie to be made at all, it had to be “palatable to the mainstream viewer” (Dole 15).

Notes

1. This statement from Marston is taken from the audio commentary that HBO put as special feature on the rental video version of Maria Full of Grace.

2. The “diversity factor” is especially prevalent in depictions of Mexican American sweat shops in Real Women Have Curves (2002) and prostitution in India in the Academy Award winning documentary Born Into Brothels (2004).

3. Marston, audio commentary; all quotes from Marston, unless indicated otherwise, refer to this audio commentary.

4. It is by no means possible to offer an exhaustive list, which portrays adequately the diverse interests within feminist scholarship in and outside the United States to contemporary discussions of Women’s Rights. However, I would like to mention in particular the works by Jacqui M. Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1997), Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan (1994), Amal Amireh and Lisa Suhair Majaj (2000), Uma Narayan and Sandra Harding (2000), and Carole R. McCann and Seung-Kyung Kim (2003).


6. Cf. Brian Brooks’ Review “Maria Full of Grace’ Gets Box office Blessing; Focus’ ‘The Door in the Floor’ Opens up Well.”

7. See also Margy Rochlin’s interview for The New York Times.


Works Cited


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