Article

The "Narco-stories" of Kate del Castillo: Stardom, Gender, and Entrepreneurship in a Transnational Context

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Abstract

This article analyzes the transnational persona of actress Kate del Castillo across her portrayals of female narcotraffickers, her transmedia interactions with audiences, and her pursuit of a film project on the life of Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán, former leader of the Sinaloa Cartel. Through discourse and textual analysis of news coverage, popular media, and first-person testimonials, this article argues that del Castillo's persona of a rogue entrepreneur on-screen and off-screen shaped her success and made her a target for state and media organizations. Del Castillo's narrative struggles across media and languages countered longstanding conceptions of women's roles in narcotrafficking and in narco-cultural productions. The article illuminates the continued appeal that the cultural grammar of narcotrafficking holds as a way to articulate power in North America.

In September 2014, actress Kate del Castillo traveled to Mexico City and met with the lawyers of then leader of the Sinaloa Cartel, Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán, to discuss the possibility of acquiring access to the infamous drug kingpin and the rights to produce a film about his life. A day later, del Castillo was back in Miami on the set of Telemundo's *Dueños del Paraíso* (*Owners of Paradise*) shooting a

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scene where her character smuggles drugs into the United States. "I have never felt so 'in character'," she admits. "I couldn't believe how reality and fiction can become so intertwined" (del Castillo 2016).[1] It was not the first time, nor the last, that reality and fiction clashed in del Castillo's life. In fact, El Chapo had only considered entrusting her with the film project about his life because she had once publicly addressed him over social media, exhorting him to provide for the people of Mexico what their government could not. That public exhortátion garnered substantial attention in Spanish-language news media across the United States and Mexico in part because of the actress's history of playing narcotraffickers on television. When she and El Chapo finally met, details of this meeting appeared in Sean Penn's (2016) article for *Rolling Stone*, "El Chapo Speaks." Among other things, the article propelled del Castillo into the global spotlight as "the actress who connected Sean Penn to El Chapo." Within two years of her first meeting with El Chapo's lawyers in Mexico City, Kate del Castillo had come to center a number of media polemics surrounding the Sinaloa Cartel, the Mexican government, and Spanish-language media in the United States.

This article is an exploration of these polemics and an analysis of their implication for the study of media about gender dynamics within the cultural phenomenon of narcotrafficking. It centers on Kate del Castillo's television portrayals of female narcotraffickers, her transmedia interactions with supporters and critics, and her pursuit of the film project on El Chapo, as well as the backlash these endeavors elicited. The following analysis builds on theories of media publics, star studies, and Chicana feminism and relies on close readings of social media postings, audiovisual texts, and publications about and by the actress. In retelling a well-known scandal as a struggle over media narratives and publics, this analysis demonstrates the multifaceted, intrinsic role of media in the formation of transnational celebrity phenomena.

My analysis follows on and extends previous scholarly arguments about contemporary narcotrafficking and the cultural mediation of practices surrounding drug trafficking in the Americas. Mexican cultural critic Carlos Monsiváis once famously proclaimed that "movie actors invented narcos," arguing that media shapes the public perception of narcotrafficking such that the "reality of narcotrafficking" cannot be understood apart from the phenomenon's cinematic and televisual representations (Vargas 2014). Similarly, Colombian scholar Omar Rincón (2013) writes that expressions of narco-culture do not come from narcotraffickers themselves but rather from those who narrate and give audiovisual life to their stories. Media such as telenovelas, straight-to-video films, and narcocorridos (popular songs about the drug trade) all contribute, circulate, and contest the icons and tropes that build up narcotrafficking as a distinct cultural phenomenon (Amaya 2014; Jaramillo 2014; Rashotte 2015). Scholars focusing on these media illustrate how representations of the phenomenon reflect complex aesthetic and ideological negotiations. Building on those insights, this article examines how a star persona built around narcotrafficking travels and thrives across media forms, including music, television, and social media, and how such articulations across media also influence popular discourse about narcotrafficking itself.

Until recently, popular culture representations of narcotrafficking showcased men most prominently, sidelining not only the women who participated in the drug trade but also those who have stories to tell about the impact this phenomenon has on the American continent (Edberg 2009, 114). Recent scholarly work in anthropology, sociology, and history seeks to counter those disciplines' previous lack of focus on the roles that women took in the drug trade (H. Campbell 2008; Carey 2014; Fleetwood 2015). Del Castillo's involvement in narco-related scandals suggests that media and cultural studies must also contend with the tendency to construct narcotrafficking as a masculine space. The following analysis illustrates some approaches to gender issues in further scholarly analyses of this transnational phenomenon.

The narco-related scandals that del Castillo centered adhered to many traditional tropes in the public construction of celebrity notoriety. Celebrity studies scholars have demonstrated the disparate, disproportionate responses that characterize male and female celebrity scandals: men tend to be addressed in somber terms, whereas women endure harsh criticisms and shaming (Edwards 2013; Turner 2014; Wilson 2010). Del Castillo's story played out in similar terms, but her case proves distinct because of the translinguistic and illicit aspects of these scandals. Being a bilingual transnational celebrity and associating with illicit agents only exacerbated the gender troubles inherent in female celebrity scandals. For del Castillo, embodying the roles of bilingual star, celebrity entrepreneur, and budding media producer would be complicated by gendered scripts regarding who is allowed to translate, to speak back to power, and to skirt the boundaries between licit and illicit.

Del Castillo's celebrity scandal-turned-media representation struggle reveals the irreducible effects of mediation on the understanding of a transnational cultural phenomenon like narcotrafficking. My title's neologism "narco-stories" suggests this entanglement between fictional and nonfictional figurations: the narratives about del Castillo's characters on-screen and about her star persona off-screen functioned as part of one networked identity. At stake is not whether this identity constituted the "true" Kate del Castillo but the extent to which various stakeholders, including del Castillo herself, mobilized this persona in the creation of warring narratives. In short, what follows is not simply a retelling of the "narco-stories" of Kate del Castillo but rather a critique of the political stakes in the cultural mediation of narcotrafficking as explained through one of its notorious performers.

Kate del Castillo as Female Narcotrafficker

Like many other Mexican actors, Kate del Castillo began her career working for the television giant Televisa in the 1990s. As the daughter of famous actor Eric del Castillo, she was all but guaranteed access to the world of Televisa telenovelas and, through them, national recognition. Unlike most Mexican actors, Kate del Castillo managed to springboard early television roles into a transnational career within a decade. She landed supporting roles in films such as *Bordertown* (2007) and the Germany-U.S. coproduction *Trade* (2007). After starring in the Sundance hit film *La Misma Luna* (2007), she found guest roles in American television shows such as *American Family*

(2002–2004), *The Cleaner* (2008–2009), *CSI: Miami* (2002–2012), *Grimm* (2011–2017), and *Dallas* (2012–2014). Her popularity skyrocketed when she was cast as the protagonist of *La Reina del Sur* (2011–2019), the Telemundo telenovela adaptation of the widely popular novel of the same name. *La Reina del Sur* was an instant transnational phenomenon. At the time, it was Telemundo's most ambitious and expensive telenovela, a coproduction between the U.S.-based network, the Colombian RTI Producciones, and the Antena 3 network in Spain (Guthrie 2011). During its airing on prime time, it consistently set ratings records for Telemundo and even beat the ratings share of both rival network Univision and English-language channels a few times in the coveted advertising demographic of men aged 18 to 34 (Edgecliffe-Johnson 2011). The profitable international market sales that soon followed included a deal with Mexico's own Televisa.

La Reina del Sur remains del Castillo's most successful portrayal of a female narcotrafficker, but she has played this type of role multiple times on television. In the fifth season of the popular Showtime series *Weeds* (2005–2012), she played Pilar Zuazo, a powerful Mexican crime boss and nemesis to Mary-Louise Parker's Nancy Botwin. In the short-lived series *Killer Women* (2014), del Castillo played Esmeralda Montero, the leader of a Texas cartel who was positioned to become the show's main antagonist before its cancellation. Each of these portrayals reveals a different facet of the character of a female narcotrafficker, and del Castillo's deft depictions trace the evolution of the iconic figure across multiple roles. Her appearances in *Weeds* and *Killer Women* also allowed her to cross over to English-language television, a move many Latin American actors in the United States attempt but in which few succeed. Del Castillo's ease in moving across different industries parallels the flexibility with which the character of the female narcotrafficker itself traverses genres, languages, and media.

Mexican women involved in the drug trade have acquired fame and fortune before. Throughout the twentieth century, savvy operatives with nicknames such as "La Nacha" or "Lola la Chata" mobilized their family and social connections to build lasting trafficking operations. These women were famous within political circles at the local and national levels (Carey 2014, 11–12). As a character in popular culture, however, the female narcotrafficker acquired a newfound notoriety at the turn of the twenty-first century. Aldona Pobutsky (2005) describes this character as a hybrid figure, one that manages to embody the female archetypes of the femme fatale, the action babe, and the girl next door all at once. Her hybrid nature allows the female narcotrafficker to transcend the local specificity of her narco-narrative and emerge as a leading woman within a global cultural mythology (Pobutsky 2005). The textual hybridity of the female narcotrafficker also lends itself to transmedia representations. Over the last decade, this character has surfaced not only in telenovelas and television series but also in Hollywood films, straight-to-video movies, and comic books.[2]

The proliferation of this character in transmedial storytelling, however, has led several cultural and television critics to bemoan its increasing prevalence as a negative stereotype for Latin American women. Critics insist that these portrayals contribute to the "victimization of the narco-hero," a process that portrays characters that are, in

reality, highly violent and destructive as merely victims of their situations. While necessary and important, these critical interventions nevertheless ignore the negotiated readings of the audience, especially when the antiheroes are women. By contrast, Jennifer McClearen explains the mechanisms behind this negotiated reading in her analysis of female audience's reception of action heroines in film. She finds that women spectators do not believe that female action bodies are physically capable of the grueling actions they perform. These narratives are not necessarily interpreted at face value. Female audiences are instead likely to interpret action heroines as visual metaphors for the professional and academic success of women in real life and derive pleasure from watching women succeed despite adversity (McClearen 2015).

Narco-heroines thus belong to a broader cultural shift toward complex female characters across a variety of media in genres previously deemed masculine. When popular film remakes or serious television dramas depict women in nuanced ways that avoid the tropes of victimhood and the traps of supporting characters, the reception of such representations has tended to be positive (Menta 2017; Tolentino 2017). Similar spectatorial dynamics are in play for narco-series. Audiences may not interpret female narcotraffickers as unambiguously bad but as women forced to do whatever it takes to survive under harsh conditions. In this regard, anthropologists have shown that for communities that feel disenfranchised by the state, narcotraffickers' crimes are less important than the fact that they stand up to those in power (H. Campbell 2008). The slippage between overcoming adversity on- and off-screen through extralegal means remains central to the popular imaginary of female narcotraffickers and has come to define del Castillo's persona over the years.

The parallels between the figure of the female narcotrafficker as a popular avatar and del Castillo's career development across U.S. television therefore illustrate the stakes of and background for how her meeting with El Chapo would play out in public discourse. It was not merely that the actress had become known for playing a particular type of figure. Rather, her success in crossing industrial and linguistic boundaries to benefit her career was tantamount to the aspirational draw of the fictional figure she embodied. Del Castillo's persona foregrounded *boundary crossing*, both as a practice distinct from border subjectivities and as a rebuke to establish orthodoxies and legal restrictions. She was less the hybrid citizen of the Global South than the cosmopolitan translator at ease within fairly distinct milieus. Early in her career, this meant working across languages and national media industries, but eventually such boundary crossing was also shaded by the entrepreneurial dimension of her pursuit of the Chapo film project. Like the rogue heroines she played on television, del Castillo set out to pursue a business venture that many deemed illicit and was persecuted for her transgression.

The Subcultural Star as Networked Entrepreneur

The character of the female narcotrafficker embodied by del Castillo first transcended the television screen when she published a Twitter essay about notorious Mexican narcotrafficker Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán in early 2012. In this series of tweets, the Mexican actress called on the cartel leader to "traffic with good," to mobilize the

resources of his illicit network for social betterment. Del Castillo declared she did not trust the standing institutions and societal norms of Mexican culture, and then exhorted Guzmán to take on a role of social responsibility in their stead, providing goods for the community at large. Del Castillo's turn to Twitter for this lengthy exegesis on social legitimacy speaks to her networked star persona. As a "subcultural star," she attracted popularity from a niche public formed by her participation in various media texts of a specific genre. Publics then read the other texts and social interchanges in which she participates through that generic lens (Ellcessor 2012, 53). In this instance, she activates her renown as a fictional female narcotrafficker to bolster and give credence to the role she performs in her Twitter exhortation to El Chapo. Del Castillo's use of social media thus functioned as a performative practice, one that involved not only an appeal to her television audience but also the production of authenticity and, in turn, the construction of a recognizable persona.

In an age of constant digital connectivity, subcultural stardom foregrounds the role of agency, medium, and publics in the construction of a star persona. For Kate del Castillo, her persona as a female narcotrafficker emerged from the convergence of her on-screen performances, her social media interactions, and her off-screen dealings. Del Castillo's own agency has also been essential to the construction of this persona: not only did audiences recognize her from her on-screen performances, but she also harkened back to these roles to deliver her societal critique. The female narcotrafficker persona stemmed from the connections across distinct medium iterations as mobilized by her networked star persona. The connections to other narco-themed media texts granted the Twitter essay a higher standing than any regular social media exchange. Moreover, the frankness and bellicosity of del Castillo's tweets, qualities that were relatively rare on the social media platform in 2012, fostered a seemingly authentic persona that audiences could relate both to the actress and to her portrayal of the feisty Teresa Mendoza.

Del Castillo's assertion that she could more confidently rely on El Chapo than on "governments that hide hurtful truths" became the center of controversy, yet the entire corpus of tweets leading to this statement evidences the ramifications of the worldview that she advances.[3] Del Castillo notes flaws in existing social and governmental structures, echoing a popular dissatisfaction with the status quo prevalent across Mexican and U.S. society, yet her solution is to call on the agents traditionally deemed illicit as forces for change. Crucially, she positions herself not as a leader, but as an instigator for those already in power, illicit or otherwise, to take a more humane approach to their social roles.

In this way, del Castillo is also performing a mediating role between the illicit activities of narcotrafficking and late capitalism. "Life is a business; the only thing that changes is the merchandise, right?" she asks El Chapo in one of her tweets.[4] In her writing, she comes across as a mediator who does not question the existing economic structures that shape social relations. The worldview espoused is therefore neither emancipatory nor destructive, but linked to an effort to transform certain tenets of capitalist exploitation into less oppressive modes, albeit ones that are not altogether outside existing organizational and regulatory mechanisms. Calling on an outlaw

figure to bring about these changes is both symptomatic of the liberatory imaginaries that narcotraffickers represent for disenfranchised communities and emblematic of the limitations that such imaginaries already hold. In her Twitter essay, the cultural capital from her popular media portrayals of narcotraffickers positions del Castillo as a mediator who can appeal to real-life narcotraffickers and possibly effect change. Questioned by news reporters shortly after the publication of the tweets, she claims that the specific exhortations to El Chapo were merely "ironic [or] sarcastic" and concedes that "now [she] knew what a bad writer [she] was because most people did not understand them as such" (quoted in Cacelin 2016). Regardless of her intentions at the time or the explanations provided thereafter, the effects of such a polemical public exhortation would shade del Castillo's image over the subsequent five years.

The commitment to capitalist principles despite the rejection of the legal institutions undergirding them also pointed toward another aspect of Del Castillo's star persona: entrepreneurship. In particular, she embodies the media entrepreneur of the early twenty-first century, one who, in contrast to the tycoons of yesteryear, is interested in small enterprises, structural autonomy, and "coolness" (Lobato and Thomas 2015). The modern entrepreneur distinguishes herself by disowning the established orthodoxies of economic development. The entrepreneur's success lies in the ease with which she manages the formal-informal boundary, "moving activities and transactions from one zone to the other," deploying this in-between state for maximal opportunity and profit-making (Lobato and Thomas 2015, 45). Beyond fashioning herself as an entrepreneur like many other female celebrities, del Castillo's exhortation to El Chapo over Twitter promotes entrepreneurship in the ethos of boundary crossing. Given the entrepreneur's liminal state of legality, the actress's self-identification as one thus contributed to the tighter resonance between her star persona and the character of the female narcotrafficker.

In her version of the events that led to the in-person meeting with El Chapo, del Castillo emphasizes her own entrepreneurial spirit in pursuing the biographical film as a passion project, at great personal and professional risk. Thrice she explains that her multiple meetings with the narcotrafficker's operatives were "self-financed" and that she did not even consider whether the cost was worth it because "like a good Scorpio, [she] likes when things are under [her] control" (del Castillo 2016, 10). Throughout her account of the film's development talks, del Castillo situates herself by invoking the entrepreneurial language of structural autonomy and individual success. In some ways, she was uniquely positioned to develop a media project on El Chapo's life given the unusual amount of access that he afforded her as well as her own connections and experience in multiple media industry settings. Embedded in this entrepreneurial persona is also the flouting of legal prohibitions. After her first meeting with El Chapo's lawyers, del Castillo returned to Miami via private plane. While Customs and Border Protection agents searched the plane and asked about her trip, she admits to acting her way out of the ordeal (del Castillo 2016, 11). Aware of the paralegal nature of her ventures, she relies on her trade—acting—to pursue them without interference.

Entrepreneurship remains highly gendered in the social imaginary. The self-interest and bravura demanded by this social role are traits celebrated for men but decried for

women. Del Castillo reaffirms this charged gendered distinction. The actress's commitment to ideals of entrepreneurship shaped her dealings with the Sinaloa Cartel: first, informing the ideology behind her Twitter essay, and, second, fueling her drive to finance and organize the project about El Chapo herself. The rogue aspects of her Twitter piece shaded the public perception of her intentions in the latter project. In addition to being an ambitious entrepreneur searching for a compelling project, del Castillo was presumed culpable for associating with known criminals. Yet, fashioning herself as a self-driven risk-taker benefited del Castillo in the aftermath of the infamous meeting with El Chapo. By casting her pursuit of the cartel leader in personal, idealistic terms rather than business ones, she could not only respond to narratives about her involvement in the ordeal but also produce an alternative narrative where she was the protagonist of, rather than mediator for, such illicit ventures.

The Woman as Mediator of Publics

Despite her numerous appearances in English-language TV shows and films, no other event catapulted Kate del Castillo into the U.S. mainstream more than her inclusion in the Sean Penn (2016) article on El Chapo in *Rolling Stone*. In his account, Penn claims he learned of the film project being planned by del Castillo and reached out to accompany her to the in-person meeting with the drug cartel leader. Penn's account positions the actress as the facilitator and de facto translator of the encounter, but focuses on his own interest in and takeaways from the meeting (Penn 2016). Del Castillo's account, in contrast, states that Penn misled her and occluded his intentions. She claims to have had no knowledge of Penn's plan to write about said meeting for *Rolling Stone* until late in their trip (del Castillo 2016). As noted in the *New Yorker* report discussed in detail below, the two actors agree on the basic premise of what transpired—they met with El Chapo—but "their memories differ" on the details of how this meeting unfolded (Draper 2016).

   The *Rolling Stone* article was published on January 9, 2016, and it would be months before del Castillo published her version of the events. News coverage in the early part of the year centered on the American actor and the Mexican drug leader, while del Castillo remained merely an accomplice and facilitator. Newspapers around the world ran features on "the actress who connected Sean Penn to El Chapo" (Agren 2016; *Der Spiegel* 2016). Even the news coverage that provided context on del Castillo relied mostly on Penn's account of the events and concluded that any legal troubles she might encounter would be well worth it to "firm up her stardom in Mexico [and] her ascending career in the U.S." (Ansorena 2016). The Mexican government launched its investigation into del Castillo on the supposition that the recent launch of her tequila brand could be tied to drug funds. In January 2016, Guzmán was recaptured by Mexican authorities, prompting speculation that the meeting with Penn and del Castillo played a crucial role in revealing his whereabouts. Soon thereafter, the personal text messages between del Castillo and El Chapo were leaked to the press (Jimenez Jaramillo 2016). Gossip sites obsessed over the intimate details in these texts, labeling them "steamy" and characterizing del Castillo as El Chapo's "femme fatale" (Rex

Brown 2016). In short, del Castillo was defined by her relationship to these two men for months. Her role in facilitating and translating between them marked her as complicit in El Chapo's dealings and Penn's apologist depiction of them.

While del Castillo became defined by the public perceptions of El Chapo and Sean Penn partly because of Anglophone audiences' familiarity with these two men, her positioning as facilitator recalls a long history of framing women as merely points of connection between men under heteropatriarchal cultures (Rubin 1975). Particular to Mexican and Chicana traditions, the translator role participates in longstanding figurations of women as treacherous cultural mediators, as symbolized by the Malinche figure. As Norma Alarcón (1989) notes, traditional Chicano writings take their default subject as male, while the roles for women are either as the Virgen de Guadalupe, the "silent mediator" who intercedes without commenting, or her "monstrous double," La Malinche, who dares to speak back. By foregrounding her subjectivity in the process of mediation, La Malinche inflicts on her community the "indignities" of the process of translation between sometimes irreconcilable cultures (Hong 2015). From the patriarchal viewpoint, La Malinche stands for treason against the male-coded image of the nation.

In contrast, Chicana artists and scholars have recuperated La Malinche to articulate a liberationist politics and foreground the crucial role of women in supporting social struggle. For instance, Chicana scholar Alicia Gaspar de Alba (2014) locates the figure within a series of "bad women" who were punished for rebelling against the capitalist, patriarchal structures of their time. Gaspar de Alba (2014) calls these bad women "rebels with a cause" and argues that their acts of resistance are akin to de Alba's and other Chicana feminist scholars' own intellectual work. Similarly, Mexican novelist Laura Esquivel's (2006) *Malinche* reimagined the famous legend from the perspective of the female protagonist to popular acclaim. Within this tradition, La Malinche thus becomes a subversive feminine figure because she acts as an imperfect mediator, a "wild tongue" that dares to speak despite and against patriarchal structures (Anzaldua 2012).

The female narcotrafficker character acts, in many ways, as a late modern Malinche figure. Emerging from the social exile prompted by her thwarted role as mediator, this figure mobilizes the knowledge of oppressive structures to create a space for her own articulation. Indeed, the analysis of the female narcotrafficker in the first section of this article explains how the character allows audiences to relate to an assertive, powerful female protagonist. A similar disidentification, or projecting oneself into a representation that is not meant to represent one accurately or positively, emerges when scholars and activists turn to the Malinche to articulate ambivalent positions of female empowerment in neoliberal times (Muñoz 1999). "A woman who is conscious of being perceived as [a] pawn is much superior," concludes Alarcón (1981) in her reading of Chicana artists who adopt the Malinche as a speaking subject for a politics of difference. This conclusion implies that the counter-reading of a maligned figure such as the Malinche or the female narcotrafficker elucidates for the disenfranchised subject the structural forces that contribute to their oppression. In the case of Kate del Castillo, the actress's response to the scandal produced by the *Rolling Stone* article

reveals a keen awareness of the indignities that a woman as translator is subjected to as well as a set of strategies for how to counteract these.

In her responses, del Castillo proved to be highly attuned to the different cultural scripts the El Chapo narrative was playing out. Though similarly inflected by the notion of the woman as treacherous mediator, retellings of del Castillo's involvement in the story varied across language and medium. In her own responses to the backlash, del Castillo's approach demonstrates an understanding of the variety of publics she had to speak to, the modes of address each public would require, and the medium affordances needed for each instance. First, there was a profile in the *New Yorker*, which contraposed Kate del Castillo's account with Sean Penn's version of the meeting with El Chapo. The writer of the profile, Robert Draper (2016), weaves together the competing accounts of the story, noting repeatedly that the two actors differ on most of the details of what occurred. Titled "The Go-Between," the article departs from the assumption that readers would only know del Castillo from her involvement in the *Rolling Stone* interview and proceeds to explore her career prior to that news story. In this way, it functions as an introduction to the actress for an Anglophone readership who may not have been familiar with her before the El Chapo scandal. Concurrent with this profile, del Castillo participated in an interview with Diane Sawyer for the television news program *20/20* on ABC. In this instance, the focus of the interview was on the events subsequent to the meeting with El Chapo and his capture, including the media and government backlash. Del Castillo speaks frankly with Sawyer, admitting to fearing for her safety at times but never expressing remorse for what she considered a worthwhile artistic enterprise. In tandem, these two profiles work to counter, or at least nuance, the story that had launched Kate del Castillo from a recognizable Mexican American actress to a global person of interest. Choosing the *New Yorker* and *20/20* as outlets for these profiles signals an attempt to reach an Anglophone middle- and upper-middle-class audience in the United States and perhaps around the world.

This outreach to English-language news outlets was not without its critics, particularly from Spanish-language media. *Noticiero Univision*, the flagship prime-time news show for the network, included a segment in its March 18, 2016, newscast about the interview del Castillo granted to Diane Sawyer. The journalist from *Noticiero Univision* opens the segment by saying, "Curiously, Kate del Castillo appeared on television but not in her native country or mother tongue. [Instead], she did so in English for ABC News" (Tarazona 2016). On one level, using this loaded remark as a way of setting up the context for the interview speaks to the antagonistic coverage of a Telemundo actress by the rival network Univision. Without explicitly stating whether del Castillo has committed any wrongdoing, the introductory remarks nonetheless prime the news audience to view the actress's actions (both her meeting with El Chapo and her interview for ABC) with an air of suspicion. Such framing also bespeaks the pervasiveness of the Malinche social script that undermines women who speak out in unorthodox ways or in unacceptable languages.

Del Castillo (2016) eventually spoke out in Spanish in a first-person account published in the Mexican political magazine *Proceso*. The bulk of this article focuses on

del Castillo's version of the meeting with El Chapo, a reprise of what she told the *New Yorker* for a Spanish-speaking readership. Two noteworthy aspects that emerge from del Castillo's telling of the story are a focus on her own entrepreneurial spirit and an emphasis on self-reflexivity. Both the English third-person account and the Spanish first-person testimonial mention that, when El Chapo's lawyers first contacted del Castillo, they cited her outspokenness and determination as characteristics that had drawn the cartel leader to her. The actress further pushes this aspect in the first-person account, drawing attention to the toll on her, both in terms of economic expense and safety risk, in contacting El Chapo and pursuing the artistic project that she had been entrusted with. "Was the price worth it? I didn't think twice," she writes (del Castillo 2016, 10). In her account, the fact that she booked private planes and last-minute day trips across countries to make the different meetings happen, and that she paid for everything out of her own funds, becomes a marker of her commitment to pursuing a venture she believed in.

The first-person voice also allows del Castillo to become self-reflexive about the personal and professional circumstances that led her to the fateful meeting and international exposure. "I wonder if my tweets would have had the same impact had I not interpreted Teresa Mendoza," she muses. "Or, if the series had not had the success it did, would I had been attacked/applauded [sic] in the same way?" (del Castillo 2016, 9). It seems she is aware that the character of the female narcotrafficker, which has granted her such fame and recognition, is ineluctably tied to the treacherous translator role she was unwittingly assigned when the news of the meeting broke. Once again, del Castillo never sounds regretful about her actions, yet sometimes she comes across as wistful for what might have been. Given her predilection for using the word "passion" in relation to herself, her projects, and her actions, the first-person testimonial retells the story of the infamous Sean Penn-El Chapo meeting as the inevitable unfolding of Kate del Castillo's own will.

Based on this first-person account, del Castillo partnered with the online video streaming service Netflix for a special three-episode series *The Day I Met El Chapo* that premiered in October 2017. Although these episodes offer little new information over and above the *Proceso* or the *New Yorker* article content, the audiovisual recreations and the new distribution platform suggest newfound global aspirations for her story. The streaming service had audiences in 190 countries around the world as of December 2017, and its original content includes subtitles for local languages, effectively translating del Castillo's story into each one of those. Furthermore, given that Netflix's recommendation algorithm is based on content preferences, the special series is likely to show up as a suggestion whenever users watch other similarly themed content. Del Castillo's personal story becomes part of the larger discursive web of narco-media that includes her Telemundo telenovelas, Colombian narco-series, Western European crime action films, and Netflix's own series *Narcos*.

More broadly, and perhaps unwittingly, del Castillo had also sought to redefine the terms on which stories about women associated with famous narcotraffickers would take shape. Such discursive redefinition was not an individual undertaking, but rather

a strategic one aligning del Castillo and other powerful women who had long spoken out against the misogynist trappings of state and media narratives about narcotrafficking. The following section traces the contours of this strategic coalition as well as the contributions it makes toward a media critique of narcotrafficking.

The Feminist Defense as Media Critique

Long before del Castillo offered her account of the story, Lydia Cacho, a Mexican journalist and friend of del Castillo, had already mounted a defense of the actress's actions. An outspoken feminist, Cacho has been widely recognized for covering stories related to corruption and gender-based violence, often at great personal expense. After the publication of her book *Los demonios del Edén* in 2005, which exposed child pornography and sex-trafficking rings in the tourist town of Cancún, Cacho reported that she was picked up by police officers at her home and threatened with rape (M. Campbell 2008). Such was only one among many instances where Cacho has rattled powerful figures in the ranks of the Mexican government and corporate elites. "When we talk about 'femicides'—the way women are being killed, and how these killings are not being investigated," she explains, "you always hit the same rock, which is a misogynist, sexist society that doesn't really care about women" (Scott 2007). The drive to expose the masculinist undercurrents in Mexico's justice system and cultural milieu reverberates across her work.

Lydia Cacho came to del Castillo's defense in a feature-length article in the Mexican magazine *Proceso* and appeared on the prime-time newscast *Noticiero Univision* on January 23, 2016, where she was interviewed via Skype by anchor Jorge Ramos. In her accounts, Cacho noted the influence that del Castillo's on-screen performances have on the public's perception of the actress's off-screen life. "Kate del Castillo is clearly a great actress because she has convinced the world she is a ruthless narcotrafficker," she stated. Noting that "the [Mexican] Attorney General's office is [merely] mining the collective imaginary of Teresa Mendoza," she argued that the state was fueling its investigation with the character's popular recognition in lieu of any actual evidence. Furthermore, Cacho mobilizes the cultural significance of cinema in del Castillo's defense. The second paragraph in the *Proceso* article builds on del Castillo's career successes to explain her interest in associating with someone like El Chapo:

> What we know for sure is what matters most: Kate del Castillo the actress has participated in twenty-three films, as well as some telenovelas and American television shows, and took a risk moving to Los Angeles fourteen years ago to bolster her career. . . . She has been involved in the world of cinema in one way or another for years. Therefore, it is not a coincidence that she, like other film people such as Oliver Stone, Sean Penn, and Leonardo DiCaprio, has sought to tell the life story of the leader of the Sinaloa Cartel . . . (Cacho 2016)

In Cacho's view, Kate del Castillo's dealings with El Chapo emerge out of a purely artistic drive, mirroring the explanation put forth by the actress in her own

first-person account. Cacho emphasizes del Castillo's involvement in film over television, particularly telenovelas, to reinforce the argument that the actress's ordeal was in pursuit of art—respectable art. Still, this part of Cacho's argument is tenuous. She pursues this line of thought to make an analogy between del Castillo and a journalist once harassed by the Mexican government for interviewing the Sinaloa Cartel's second-in-command. Although the Mexican government's attacks against del Castillo resemble those leveled against local journalists, her case is not defensible on the same terms because her aims differed from those of the persecuted journalists. In her own words, "[her] intention was always to make a movie" (del Castillo 2016, 8).

More persuasive is Lydia Cacho's other argument about the impact of media portrayals on the state's response to del Castillo and El Chapo's interactions. For one, she dissects the Mexican Attorney General's weak case against the actress by noting the lack of evidence regarding del Castillo's involvement with the Sinaloa Cartel and naming countless other people the government could plausibly investigate yet refuses to. Cacho also takes offense at the fragmented and diffractive releases from the Attorney General's office, whose highly edited excerpts from El Chapo's texts to del Castillo constituted "a satire of a telenovela." Moreover, Cacho calls out the latent sexism in mainstream news coverage of del Castillo's role in the affair. Univision in particular, Cacho (2016) notes, adopted language that recast the real-life meetings as del Castillo's attempt to play out her on-screen persona. In doing so, the network's coverage quickly dismissed Sean Penn's involvement as an infatuation with the infamous drug kingpin at the same time that it dwelled on the issue of del Castillo's culpability (Cacho 2016).

Cacho's defense of del Castillo's meetings with El Chapo is thus incisive about the implications of mediation for the public understanding of illicit activities. Her account describes how the mobilization of fictional narratives about narcotrafficking serves to deflect from the facticity of nonfictional events. In the case of Mexico, mainstream media also has economic incentives to avoid holding state institutions and agents accountable because of the inordinate amount of money the state spends on advertising in these venues (Ahmed 2017). Astutely critiquing the sexist implications of such deflections, Cacho (2016) illustrates how the state itself relies on news organizations to follow simple, salacious threads to obfuscate more complex networks of causality and corruption.

Cacho's (2016) diagnosis of the dominant narrative in mainstream news coverage of del Castillo's story is further corroborated by the contrasting tone of the interview the actress gives to Mexican journalist Carmen Aristegui. Having faced professional retaliation after reporting on state corruption and abuses of power, Aristegui was not unfamiliar with unfounded persecution from the Mexican government. She therefore proved more empathetic to, and less judgmental about, del Castillo's actions. Similarly, Aristegui's independence from the major media networks allows her the freedom to break away from sensationalist narratives and TV network antagonisms. Aligning herself with rogue, internationally renowned journalists like Cacho and Aristegui has proven to be a strategic move for del Castillo. She positions herself within a cohort of

Mexican women known for speaking back to power amid the corrupt networks of the masculinist state.

The case of del Castillo remains notable insofar as it has shed light on the continued silencing of women's voices within popular culture as narcotrafficking becomes a dominant practice in articulating power in North America. Melissa Wright (2011) refers to the "war of interpretation" as a discursive conflict where women victims of state- and narco-violence struggle first to include their stories in public discourse before being able to make a claim to reparations. Deconstructing narcotrafficking as an exclusively male sphere facilitates the emergence of alternative interpretations about who benefits and who suffers from drug violence. In Wright's (2011) research, this war of interpretation takes place when activists counter the state's politically expedient notion that women who fall victims to narco-violence are deserving of such violence. However, del Castillo's story speaks to a different kind of erasure: the effacing of women's agency even when they participate in narcotrafficking or media representations about it. The manner in which the actress framed her dealings with agents of the drug trade reveals how state agencies and media networks have been unable to move beyond the frame of victim when accounting for women's roles within this phenomenon.

Whether through the infamous femicides of Ciudad Juarez or the continued erasure of women's roles in trafficking enterprises across journalistic and scholarly writings, women not only constitute the foremost victims of the violence underpinning the phenomenon of narcotrafficking but also remain a footnote in its political and cultural theorization. Including women's voices means exposing the work of gender difference in the construction of narcotrafficking as a cultural phenomenon. Del Castillo's considered comments across multiple media outlets serve to counter the state's and mainstream news' stories about her involvement with El Chapo *and* to foreground the sexist trappings of these stories. This case also exposes the culturally mediated elements that shape public understanding of narcotrafficking as well as the need to situate its various players beyond reductive villain and hero divisions. Narcotrafficking, as both a media and a political-economic phenomenon, thrives on the resistance to change from corrupt governance institutions and social structures of gender oppression. It will remain a powerful sociocultural force without a critique and reform of such structures.

In the end, Kate del Castillo's journey from fictional narcotrafficker to presumed accomplice-turned-staunch critic may not be a straightforward story of redemption. Following the female narcotrafficker script featured both advantages and pitfalls: it allowed the actress the aura of a rogue entrepreneur at the same time that it permitted news organizations to frame her culpability as given. Similarly, her media travels— the ease with which she moves across media, languages, and nations—placed her in a unique position to pursue her projects while also reinforcing the fact that this specific narrative is about a particularly privileged transnational agent.[5] Del Castillo presents herself as unequivocally "cosmopolitan" throughout, remaining uncritical of broader economic structures and perpetuating the entrepreneur figure and the capitalist tenets inherent therein (Cheah 2006). Nonetheless, the *narco-life* of Kate del Castillo is instructive for thinking through the mediation of public personae and

of transnational phenomena such as narcotrafficking. Her orchestrated responses to those narratives propagated about her, including the mobilization of different venues and symbolic frameworks, become tactical rejoinders to the sidelining of women's voices in the dominant narratives about narcotrafficking. Ultimately, the case of del Castillo reveals the extent to which managing a star persona in an age of constant interconnectivity unavoidably includes politically charged struggles over media narratives and their publics.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Notes

1. Translations of all texts originally in Spanish are mine. Purposely, such translations evidence the tension inherent in foregrounding others' voices while addressing various linguistic publics. I hope that such productive tension supports the article's argument about the importance of sketching power differentials in the process of translation.
2. An incomplete list includes the U.S. television shows *Weeds* (2005–2012), *Queen of the South* (2016–), and *Killer Women* (2014); telenovelas *La Reina del Sur* (2011–2019), *Camelia la Texana* (2014–), *Señora Acero* (2014–), *Sin Senos No Hay Paraíso* (2008–), *Dueños del Paraíso* (2015–), and *La Viuda Negra* (2014–); straight-to-video movies *La Güera Mendoza* (2005), *La Reyna del Pacífico* (2009), and *El Chrysler 300* (2008); and comic books *Blue Beetle* Vol. 8–9 and *Caustic Soda*.
3. These and other instances where I draw conclusions regarding del Castillo's motives should not be taken as factual assertions. They are close readings of her public remarks and thus inflected by critical analysis and speculation. At stake is not discovering the inner motives of del Castillo as a person but the effects of her actions on the creation of a networked star persona.
4. Direct quotes from these tweets are translated from the transcript included in *El Economista*, "Kate del Castillo Manda Mensaje al Chapo," January 10, 2012.
5. This central tension in del Castillo's star persona persists, for instance, in her starring in the one-woman Off-Broadway show *The Way She Spoke* during summer 2019. Although the script demands the actress to play several characters to "give voice to the silenced women of Juárez," the reviews emphasized how often these voices would get lost in the flashiness of the production and the actress's own persona. See Nicole Serratore, "Off Broadway Review: 'The Way She Spoke' With Kate del Castillo," *Variety*, July 18, 2019; and Laura Collins-Hughes, "Review: 'The Way She Spoke' Is a Trip to Ciudad Juárez," *The New York Times*, July 19, 2019, C2.

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