ABSTRACT: The protagonist in Carmen Boullosa’s *Duerme* (1994) willfully defies and undermines strict legal and social sartorial regulations of Colonial Mexico by cross-dressing in an effort to survive, and as such has been considered representative of a hybrid identity breaking binaristic categories of class, race, and gender. Although many critics note the enigma of the ending of the novel, in which the protagonist finds herself isolated and dormant outside the borders of Mexico City—a striking transformation from a decidedly active protagonist—, there is little else offered in terms of a critique. In an effort to explain the paradox, this essay focuses instead on the process whereby her identities are stripped away and she is forcibly re-dressed into accepted colonial codes. Because the identities that made her a hybrid are re-appropriated, the protagonist is presented as a failed hybrid.

Key words: Carmen Boullosa, Mexican Literature, race, gender, class, identity, post-nation.

Resumen: La protagonista en *Duerme* (1994) de Carmen Boullosa obstinadamente desafía y socaba las estrictas regulaciones legales y sociales sobre el vestir del México Colonial, travestiéndose en un esfuerzo para sobrevivir, y como tal ha sido considerada representativa de una identidad híbrida, que rompe las categorías binarias de clase, raza y género. A pesar de que muchos críticos señalan el enigma del final de la novela, en el que la protagonista se encuentra aislada e inactiva fuera de la frontera de Ciudad de México -una transformación llamativa de una protagonista sin duda activa-, poco más ha sido criticado de esta novela. En un esfuerzo para explicar esta paradoja, este ensayo se centra en el proceso a través del cual sus identidades le son extraídas y es re-vestida forzosamente a la manera aceptada según los códigos coloniales. Al haber sido re-apropiadas las identidades que la hacían híbrida, la protagonista se presenta como un híbrido fallido.

Palabras clave: Carmen Boullosa, literatura mexicana, raza, género, clase, identidad, post-nación.
The notion of the hybrid has been used to represent heterogeneity in modern cultures and identities, of two or more elements represented within one body or entity. Homi Bhabha classifies cultural hybridity as a process that “gives rise to something different, something new and unrecognizable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation” (211). In the geopolitical space of Latin America, an example of hybridity is the term “mestizaje” referring to the confluence of various racial ethnicities and cultures present in one person. However, this term is problematic as Laura Pirott-Quintero points out that “the language of mixture and hybridity is not easily disentangled from a history that imbued it with negative connotations” (n.p.). Yet, in Carmen Boullosa’s Duerme (1994) the concept of the hybrid has been applied to analyze the protagonist, Claire, as she is a cross-dressing French pirate who later dresses as an indigenous woman and Spanish Count. Claire successfully passes in each costume and in doing so weaves each identity into her own, creating a hybrid identity that has been negotiated within interstitial spaces thereby opening up the binaristic categories of gender, class, and race that limit marginalized bodies in Colonial Mexico. This form of hybridity has been read as an opening up of “some of the lacunae created by the dictates of nationalism and invites heterogeneity, difference, and alternative articulations of Mexican history and identity” (Pirott-Quintero). While the reader is complicit with the continual evolution of the protagonist, the enigma of the passive beginning and ending calls for a rereading of this hybridity. Rather than read Claire as an active agent in creating a hybrid identity, by focusing on the process of passivity though which her body is stripped of these identities, and consequently loses her ability to negotiate, she is instead interpreted in this essay as a failed hybrid.

CLOTHING AND IDENTITY IN NEW SPAIN

In Colonial New Spain, dress marked not only gender, but also class and race, and strict rules were in place to inhibit transgressions of these categories. In the colonial period, white skin color conferred power and mobility within a caste social structure, but processes of miscegenation resulted a person’s skin color becoming a less reliable indicator of race, thereby threatening European reifications that controlled social mobility in the colonial space. Mariselle Meléndez underscores, “In a time when color had become an equivocal and misleading sign of differentiation, colonial authorities struggled to legally establish transparent practices of differentiation” (24). Because miscegenation resulted in “misleading sign[s]” of differentiation, such legal documents and decrees as the Real Pragmática emerged in order to regulate which social classes and races could marry which, and included the punishments for breaking these laws, to maintain outward signifiers of race thereby easing the process of conferral, or limitation, of power. These colonial laws and social codes move beyond marriage into what Elizabeth Dore considers “elaborate systems of race-gender segregation […] that detailed which peoples could occupy positions in the church, the guilds, and the professions, which paid tribute and had labor obligations, and even which could wear jewelry and imported cloth” (10). Laws in Colonial New Spain attempted to control not only racial lineage, but also outward distinctions of class, race and gender through clothing. The State had a clear agenda in delineating these categories through sartorial regulations to “secure the colonizers’ superiority” (Pirott-Quintero).

As miscegenation was a difficult process to control by the State and Church, clothing becomes an effective outward indicator of class, race, and gender, and as such, is used by the upper echelons of society to mark their difference in social status from the lower classes, comprised predominantly of people of color. Clothing as a social (and racial) codifier is present
throughout Boullosa’s novel; the protagonist observes, “Los invitados están vestidos de fastuosa manera. El que no trae botas de seda abotonadas, las trae de terciopelo, y en las ropas sobran bordados y piedras, y joyas en sus cabezas, sus brazos y sus cuellos, cuando no van cubiertos con cuellos y encajes” (Boullosa 61). According to Dore’s assessment of clothing regulations, it is clear that this is a gathering of the upper classes, but there is a critique of the styles as fatuous from the protagonist’s perspective. Claire is keenly clearly aware of the sartorial social dynamics in this space since she can distinguish between which clothes grant her mobility and power, while she simultaneously assesses the dress code as foolish. She continues judging the style of dress in this colonial space that, in her opinion, has become grotesque:

Claire’s perspective accurately describes the situation in which instead of skin color granting power, the excesses of fine and imported cloth re-dresses the body within the power dynamic that was lost in race. Additionally, it is not only one layer of covering, but layers upon layers (“el terciopelo se usa con prodigalidad en la elaboración de ropones, cueras, calzas, zapatos y gorras, las medias son de seda, las prendas llevan forros de raso, cuando los jubones se hacen de raso se forran con tafetán, con damasco se hacen capas, sayos, ropillas comunes y ropillas de levantar; jubones de Holanda, damasco, ruán), en parte porque cada español tiene varios vestidos, y también porque las formas de las prendas se han vuelto grotescamente exageradas, los cuellos son gigantes, las mangas arrastran al piso, y es común sean cuatro en los jubones, nadie dirá que porque aquí sean cuatro los brazos de las personas. (78-79)

State-mandated clothing regulations classify racial and class distinctions, and these regulations also sought to control female mobility in the public spheres (Meléndez 27). Generally, at this moment in New Spain women were not allowed in public spaces, except for markets and the Church, and a body dressed in a code recognizable as a woman was thereby limited from accessing spaces that would allow social or economic mobility. Recalling Dore’s comment, professions and access to guilds were monitored by those who had access to imported cloth and jewelry, or those who were allowed to dress as European men. However, Claire glaringly undermines these regulations by dressing as a male pirate, and due to her chosen code of dress, she is allowed to participate in public spaces “to make her fortune in a new identity by crossdressing and skillfully wielding a rapier, which affords her rights and privileges since in the colonial gaze her dress encodes the masculine identity” (Kroll 108). By manipulating her dress code, Claire accesses the masculine public domain in the colony in which she can exercise autonomy and what Maria Dolores Bolívar, referencing Mary Louise Pratt, considers liberty in the text: “Al referirse a la ropa bajo la cual se oculta la feminidad para mantener su espacio privilegiado de autonomía, Pratt muestra como esas mujeres logran modificar la atención que sobre ellas y sus cuerpos ejercen quienes las observan; su vestimenta se convierte en el instrumento de su libertad” (49). Claire observes her surroundings and breaks the sartorial codes to manipulate them, which modifies the colonial gaze upon her body when dressed as male, thereby allowing her freedom and autonomy to cross physical and social borders.
Claire’s manipulation of the colonial dress code has evoked multiple analyses referencing her body, i.e., cross-dressing and clothing used to pass as male, ii Claire’s similarity to the “monja alférez,” iii while other articles have emphasized her as mythical personas such as Iphis or Iztaccíhuatl. iv The very fact that Claire breaks with these colonial norms that reify class, race, and gender, makes Claire into “a site for the re-mapping and re-ordering of binaristic difference” (Kroll 106). Her manipulation of clothing hides racial, gendered and class categories in the text, but it can also be used to reveal. Clothing may cover up, but it is also “[a] bold revelation, a cover turning inside out: it reveals the category (male or female) of the person’s genitals it purports to cover. On ‘every woman’s’ sweater, a vaginal wound” (Stockton 271). Clothing, in this sense, is used to uncover her gender making her body visible and available to the male gaze when dressed as female. In Claire’s case, her autonomous identity created in and through her choice of sartorial code that protects her and has led to reading her as a hybrid, is stripped from her body and she is forcibly re-dressed into categories that uphold the colonial social norms.

THE FAILED HYBRID

The protagonist successfully crosses borders, physical and geographical, and borders of race, gender, and class allowing for fluid mobility and her identification as a hybrid. In reference to gender, Judith Butler posits that the continued presence of “incoherent” or “discontinuous gendered beings […] provide critical opportunities to expose the limits and regulatory aims of that domain of intelligibility and, hence, to open up within the very terms of that matrix of intelligibility rival and subversive matrices” (23-34). And Claire has been analyzed in this manner. Nevertheless, when the reader localizes Claire in Colonial Mexico she is devoid of freedom and choice to the point she disappears from the text, therefore, she is no longer a continued presence that allows for exposing limits or regulatory intentions through subversion. Instead, her body is punished for transgressing sartorial regulations and she is re-dressed into approved categories of dress—the limits are not subverted, but re-imposed on her transgressive body. By the end of the text, she is no longer the “new and unrecognizable” space of “a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation” (Bhabha 211). This begins in the opening scene when her drugged body is carried to be stripped and re-dressed to die in the marketplace.

Blood is perhaps the most intimate and clearest marker of identity; it carries our DNA, it marks us as diseased or healthy, as alive. Before her faked death in the marketplace, the “india de manos tibias” unclothes Claire’s body, the outer most signifier of identity. When she discovers that Claire is a female, the woman pours water into the body, not over it, replacing her blood: “Ahora con sus dedeos abre la herida, jalando cada uno de sus bordes a extremos opuestos, vuelca agua en ella, y a pesar de forzar los bordes de la profunda herida a una posición que la debiera hacer sangrar más, la sangre deja de brotar” (Boullosa 20). When the woman removes Claire’s blood, she loses a symbol of life—of identity, which foreshadows Claire’s symbolic and narrative death first in the market and points to her living death at the end of the text when she is left outside the city in a kind of coma or trance. Her European blood is washed away and emptied from her body, and she is filled with a new fluid, a new identity, that flows between the torn borders of her body. Claire’s opened body filled with water should be the liminal space of a new creation, a third space. Paradoxically though, Claire’s “baptism” with the magical waters, which liberate her from death, leave her inextricably bound to the physical borders of the Valley of Mexico.
Symbolically baptized and dressed as a Spanish Conde, Claire is put to death in the marketplace, a consumer space symbolic of the religious and political-economic structures of New Spain. In the majority of Latin American colonies, a plaza market is typical, and as a physically centralized place, the State (government buildings) and religious (Church building) institutions are often represented. Referencing Claire Taylor’s essay, the plaza is a space of public punishment and symbolically reinforces traditional gender, class, and racial reifications as monitored by the Church and State (234). Although mistaken for the Conde and being punished for his crimes, we might also read this as Claire’s body being publicly punished for breaking the traditional categories, or sartorial sins, against the Church and State that are being rectified. As she hangs from the gallows, there is no change in those busy conducting business in the marketplace, contrasting with the profound change that takes place within her:

Todos alzan sus caras para mirar mi muerte, pero el que detiene una canasta en su mano no la suelta, el que come el mamey no deja de hacerlo, la madre que sujeta el brazo al hijo sigue idéntica, el que palpa el jitomate no le retira los dedos, como si nada pudiera arrebatarles el orden y el concierto del mercado. El único que cambia soy yo, cuando desaparecen las tablas que piso. (33)

In the consumer space there is organized movement as people participate in the day-to-day activities in the patriarchal place of the market, accepting the public punishment as a cultural and societal norm, but Claire’s “execution” completes a ritual whereby she is now linked eternally to the physical borders of Mexico City. She is re-woven into the local fabric of this society and is relegated to live eternally within this society’s norms, or if she crosses the border—the metaphorical line between the binaries—she will be made inactive. Now fully removed from her previous home at sea, where she felt whole, Claire articulates, “el mar es donde el mundo se mira completo. En él hay de todo . . . cuanto hay se encuentra entero. Fuera de él, en tierra firme, todo se mira dividido . . . En tierra firme todo viene roto, partido, fragmentado, dividido . . . Nunca hay nada completo” (46). In the ocean, her body was a utopic image in which all binaristic identities were represented, reinforcing the fluidity of gender, class and race. On land, however, once her sanguine identity is removed, the ritual complete, her whole identity becomes fragmented, and each transgressing fragment will be re-appropriated.

Following her “death” and burial, Claire emerges from the coffin dressed as an indigenous woman covered with earth. Previously baptized through water giving her eternal life, she is now baptized in earth; the soil creates a mask on her face as the dirt mixes with her tears, and her mud mask makes obvious the layers of masks will continue to wear, although the choice is no longer hers. The reader recognizes that Claire did not choose this identity or clothing, but it was Inés, “la de manos tibias,” who forced this indigenous female clothing onto Claire’s body. On the one hand, this may be read as a way to protect her identity, similar to how her mother clothed her to protect her. On the other, Norat explains that this is a way for Inés to seek vengeance on the European body that has taken her land and history (69). This is the sacrificed European body turned indigenous, a sartorial re-claiming and appropriation of what was lost. While she hangs, she sees a re-constructed Aztecan city in place of the colonial structures, which further advocates this idea of re-appropriation of the body as symbolic land. Additionally, the water forced into her body was a geographical liquid that also represents Inés reclaiming “territoriality and a discursive space” through Claire’s body (Kroll 111). An indigenous woman reclaims Claire’s European identity.
Dressed as an indigenous woman, Claire’s European identity has been figuratively and literally stripped from her. Her masculine identity is also taken, and this process is just as violent as cutting open her chest, tearing her skin apart to pour in magical waters, and being hung from the gallows. The process of re-claiming her masculine identity begins with her baptism in which her chest was cut and ripped open as Kroll points out that this symbolizes the violence and rape of Colonial Mexico and the female body (111). Filled with magical waters, her swollen chest reveals her femaleness and becomes harder to hide even when clothed. Her body is now visible in the public space, recognizably feminine and othered. She expresses her desire to leave this place to escape her body and what others can see: “Debo irme . . . donde otra vez nadie sepa que bajo las ropas tengo cuerpo de mujer, que he vuelto a él por suplantar a un muerto, que vestida con él lo he perdido todo” (Boullosa 47). She reiterates her disdain for being dressed as a woman—of being a woman—which means she has lost everything she was before she arrived to New Spain. Her clothing also clearly affects her conceptualization of self when she admits that dressed as a woman she lacks thought, “Caminamos cada quien absorto en sus pensamientos y yo en ninguno, […] sabiéndome prisionera, humillada en esta vestimenta” (54). Whereas before while wearing her disguises she could clearly speak about herself, typically using masculine pronouns, now she recognizes she has been condemned and imprisoned in clothing, an identity forced upon her, and she can no longer understand or enunciate herself.

Claire’s new feminine clothing and engorged breast allows others to unveil her body, with negative consequences. If as Bolívar suggests, Claire’s preferred dress code as a male allows her liberty within the colonial masculine spaces, then when dressed as an indigenous woman, Claire’s body is now subject to the masculine gaze and she is objectified as a sexual object. The Conde who she replaced on the gallows, and wears her pirate disguise, gazes upon her female form focusing on her enlarged breast: “Pone su bota (ésa si es de él, que no mía) sobre mi camisa blanca. Pone la punta del pie bajo mi pecho izquierdo mostrando su tamaño voluminoso. Baja la punta de la bota por mi cintura. Gírate—me dice” (Boullosa 53). Her clothing no longer protects her or gives her power. Just as his boot reveals her chest under her shirt, clothing reveals her as an object to be possessed.

The process of destroying Claire’s hybrid identity does not stop at the gaze or reclaiming her transgressing clothing. Her whole body is re-defined as female through force. Once she has been objectified through the male gaze, the Conde rapes her:

By raping Claire, the Conde (representative of the European institutional patriarchy) re-defines her body as female; her sartorial “vaginal wound” is exposed in the literal sense. His complicity in the act demonstrates a bureaucratic attitude in which the State punishes and re-defines the transgressive body, similarly to how those who witnesses her hanging observe nonchalantly. At this point, all vestiges of her past identity have been stripped from her and taken by the Conde, except for his boots that he uses to trace her feminine body. Despite Claire’s desire to seek vengeance—“¡Que la herida estuviera abierta, y lo mordiera, y me vengara!”—
dressed as an indigenous woman she has lost the capacity to take revenge. Furthermore, comparable to the shoppers in the market who witness her punishment passively as an accepted norm, the Conde’s servants actively participate in her punishment as they hold her while he rapes her. She is forcibly categorized into the accepted biological category as designated by the patriarchal institutions, and all parts of society actively or passively contribute to her body being punished for breaking away from the binaristic categories and re-categorized into the status quo.

The process of reclaiming her previous identities that transgressed patriarchal norms ends when her friend imposes his voice over her narrative voice. Forced back into the feminine categorization, others treat Claire differently; she is treated as an indigenous woman. “La de manos tibias” treats her with no respect: “Verme vestida de mujer india la hace creerme un ser sin ninguna importancia. Si volviera a mi traje de varón blanco me hablaría con respeto, sería mi fiel criada, daría por mi su vida. Y ni pensar que con el carácter que tiene sea capaz de traerme alguna alegría en mi situación” (Boullosa 86). Again, Claire demonstrates her awareness of how clothing in the colonial space bestows or limits power to the wearer, but she can no longer participate freely in choosing her garments or manipulating the sartorial codes. To complete the process of eliminating her transgressing body, she is silenced and cut off by Pedro, “Don Pedro me arrebata la palabra” (86). Even her attempts to take back a sense of authority and agency are denied when she tries to fight the soldier who threatened her earlier. She ties up her dress into makeshift pants and takes a sword (“Me regresa la alegría al cuerpo” (84)), but Pedro intervenes, takes her (s)word, and gives her a new name. Henceforth she is Clara, who, “a la vez de hacerle labores de mujer, de encargarse de la ropa y la comida, era un buen compañero de armas” (85). The sword is an accessory that refers to her past identity as a soldier and pirate, and her attempt to claim it again for herself is rejected as Pedro speaks over her and renames her. Although Pedro tries to clear her name of transgressions (make her “clara” or pure), her new name also symbolically defines her new self; she is “clara” or clear like the water in her veins, her identity is completely erased. Not only does Pedro re-name her, but disarmed, raped, and re-dressed, her voice is overpowered by his at the end of the novel. In a supposed effort to save her, he takes her to the border of the city where she falls asleep meaning she cannot finish narrating her story, so he does refashioning himself the hero and thereby reestablishes his masculine narrative agency over hers.

Although her transvestism has frequently been viewed as an attempt to deconstruct binaries, the text points to other possibilities. Prior to her arrival in Mexico, Claire enjoyed some measure of success in using clothing to create or modify her identity, but once she arrives in the geopolitical space of New Spain she finds herself constrained. The white, European masculine identity that protected her is stripped away, and by exposing her body, the fragments of her identity are also exposed and subsequently re-appropriated. The process of erasing the transgressing fragments occurs as what she was is reclaimed piece by piece represented in the pieces of clothing taken from her body: her European identity is reclaimed by Inés; her masculinity is reclaimed by the Conde; her (s)words are reclaimed by Pedro. Instead of myriad identities breaking down binaristic groupings in her corporeal space, those who adhere to and perpetuate the colonial reifications of gender, class, and race systemically force her back into the corresponding categories.

Claire’s body never becomes a utopic landscape; the fragments of her transgressive identity are re-domesticated by the patriarchal underpinnings of society and by the end of the text her hybridity is a failure. The exaggerated clothing and decoration used to mark bodies with power in the colonial space, exaggerate the extreme polarities between race, gender and class,
which are not rectified in her torn and fragmented body. Rather clothing is put on her body to inscribe and reinforce cultural norms. In accordance with these norms, as an indigenous woman, she is left in the margins, at the literal border of the city, isolated and silent. The promises of a new nation and the possibilities of a new mestizaje woven together out of the many identities in the geopolitical space are not met. Instead, her body, like the New Spain, is cloaked in restrictions and regulations that limit and isolate. Freedom and mobility are reserved and maintained for the few, namely white affluent men. Thus, her body and transgressing sartorial expressions are punished and she is re-dressed within these limitations.

Notas

i With those critics in this study, see also Jill Kuhnheim’s “Postmodern Feminist Nomadism in Carmen Boullosa’s Duerme” and Elizabeth Montes Garcés’ “La escritura con el cuerpo en Son vacas, somos puercos y Duerme de Carmen Boullosa.”

ii Other critiques that elucidate Claire’s transvestism include: Laura Pirott-Quintero’s “El cuerpo en la narrativa de Carmen Boullosa.” and Oscar Robles’ “Hacia el tercer sexo: Travestismo y transgresión en Duerme de Carmen Boullosa.”

iii The famous cross-dressing nun during the colonization of New Spain who was so successful at passing she was engaged to marry a woman. Although she was discovered, she was allowed to continue to dress as a man, despite the strict clothing regulations, due to her chastity and religious fervor.

iv In Ovid’s Metamorphoses Iphis is born female, but presented as male to her father. Eventually she is transformed into a male before her wedding. Iztaccíhautl is a mountain formation whose name means “white woman” in Nahuatl, and is sometimes referred to as “La mujer dormida.” The legend says that upon hearing that her lover has died in battle, she died. However, her lover returns and kneels by her grave, at which point the gods turned them into mountains and covered them with snow.

Bibliografía


