

## LITERATURE AND CULTURAL STUDIES

# The Most Desired Positions: Brazilian Female Drug Traffickers in *Inferno* and *Falcão: Mulheres e o tráfico*

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In order to analyze the gender performance and empowerment of Brazilian female drug traffickers, this article compares the character of Marta in Patrícia Melo's novel *Inferno* (2000) with the testimonies of four real female drug traffickers collected in MV Bill and Celso Athayde's book *Falcão: Mulheres e o tráfico* (2007). It argues that while female drug traffickers highlight their experience and use their kinship relations, Marta's access to power and gender transgression are temporary because her community and other drug traffickers do not support her. The article also proposes the term "the most desired positions" to replace "hegemonic masculinities" because of the prominence that cisgender and trans women have begun to have in the world of drug trade.

Com o propósito de analisar a performance de gênero e o empoderamento de mulheres traficantes brasileiras, este ensaio compara a personagem de Marta no romance *Inferno* (2000) da autora Patrícia Melo com os testemunhos de quatro mulheres traficantes que foram recolhidos no livro *Falcão: Mulheres e o tráfico* (2007) de MV Bill e Celso Athayde. O ensaio argumenta que, enquanto as mulheres traficantes salientam sua experiência e uso de relações de parentesco, o acesso de Marta ao poder e sua transgressão de gênero são temporários porque sua comunidade e outros traficantes não a apoiam. O ensaio também propõe usar o termo "posições mais desejadas" para substituir a expressão "masculinidades hegemônicas" devido à prominência que as mulheres trans e cisgênero começaram a ter no mundo do tráfico de narcóticos.

Across the world and throughout history, statistics have shown that men commit more crimes than women. As a matter of fact, most of the offenses committed by female criminals involve minor and petty crimes (Steffensmeier and Allan 1996, 462; Steffensmeier and Allan 2002, 728). In criminality studies, male criminality has been the main focus of researchers. Crimes committed by women have been analyzed overall under the same parameters as male criminality. However, in recent decades scholars have begun to research criminal women and the particularities of gender dynamics in the crime world (Steffensmeier and Allan 1996). In Brazil, which this article focuses on, scholars have commenced to study female criminality further because of the increased number of female offenders in previous years. According to the Center for Justice and International Law's (CEJIL) report, between 2000 and 2006 women's incarcerations increased more than men's incarcerations in Brazil (CEJIL 2007, 10–17). As a matter of fact, Brazilian National Prison Department (DEPEN) reports show that female prison population grew 260 percent between 2000 and 2010 (Macedo 2011, 27).

One of the main explanations for this increased number of female imprisonment is that of women's involvement with drug trafficking. In CEJIL's report, 40 percent of female arrests were related to drug trafficking.<sup>1</sup> In DEPEN's 2009 report, 59 percent of women were imprisoned because of narcotics-related crimes (Macedo 2011, 34). The concern with this large number has triggered studies analyzing women's involvement with drug trafficking (Barcinski 2008; Moura 2005; Salmasso 2004; Wilding 2010), although

<sup>1</sup> These numbers do not reflect the impact of the antidrug law passed in Brazil in 2006.

research on male drug traffickers and masculinities is still most prominent (Cecchetto 2004; Penglase 2010; Zaluar 2004).

In addition to their increasing visibility in statistics and criminality studies, female drug traffickers have appeared at other levels of Brazilian society and in other cultural manifestations. Criminal records, news, movies, TV shows, novels, and testimonies have documented their presence. Two important texts that portray female drug traffickers' presence in Brazil are Patrícia Melo's novel *Inferno* (2000), awarded the famous Prêmio Jabuti in 2001, and MV Bill and Celso Athayde's book *Falcão: Mulheres e o tráfico* (Falcon: Women and Drug Trafficking) (2007), a compilation of testimonies by women directly and indirectly related to the drug-trafficking world in different cities throughout Brazil. This article analyzes the representation of the character Marta in *Inferno* and compares it with four testimonies from *Falcão: Mulheres e o tráfico* in order to understand how traditional discourses on gender still mediate the portrayal of criminal women in Brazil.<sup>2</sup> With this comparison, I aim to analyze the differences between the depiction of real female drug traffickers and literary characters. Are they portrayed as feminine or masculine? Are they empowered drug lords or do they depend on a male relative? How are fictional and/or real women reconfiguring aspects of hegemonic masculinity when they act in male-dominated spheres and become leaders?

To answer these questions, this article follows Judith Butler's theory of gender performance, Raewyn Connell's study of masculinities, and Darrell Steffensmeier and Emilie Allan's research on gender and crime. I also consider the particularities of Brazilian drug trafficking by integrating Mariana Barcinski's, Luke Dowdney's, and Alba Zaluar's research. I argue that Marta's gender performance is superficial because her physical masculinization is not necessary to hold power, as the testimonies of real traffickers make evident. The rules of the crime world supersede hegemonic rules on gender.

### The Performance of the Fictional Female Drug Trafficker

*Inferno* narrates the rise of José Luís as the major drug lord of a favela called Berimbau in Rio de Janeiro.<sup>3</sup> Marta, the female drug trafficker I analyze, has a relevant role throughout the narration as the daughter of a major drug lord whom José Luís kills to rise to power, as José Luís's wife, and as the "owner" (*dono*) or major drug dealer of Berimbau.<sup>4</sup> When José Luís meets Marta, he thinks she is the perfect woman for him but ignores who she is. Eventually he learns she is the daughter of Zequinha, the king of the hill next to Berimbau.<sup>5</sup> Marta is aware of her father's business and is even interested in it and in the violence that comes from it. For example, her father says that once she asked him for a gun as a birthday present (2000, 215). Because of this request Marta is different from other female characters in the novel, who survive or empower themselves by working, having children, stealing, and marrying. Marta sets a different path for herself, thus highlighting that women are also interested in holding positions of power in drug trafficking.

Her access to power and powerful positions originates in her desire to own phallic elements (guns), in being José Luís's wife, and in her interaction with him. Although they are not legally married, Marta is placed in the position of wife and, later on, becomes the manager of the trafficking operation. She achieves this position because José Luís decides to live outside Berimbau; to make Marta agree with this plan he makes her part of the "structure" and considers her his right arm (2000, 340). She is then involved in the business because of her kinship relationship with him and because José Luís wants to keep her happy. However, I must emphasize that Marta agrees on the condition that she is not to obey orders because she has ideas and methods of her own (2000, 340). In this sense, Marta officially becomes a part of the drug dealer's group, stressing that she is in a position of power and can contribute with originality to the trafficking. She even complains to José Luís when he undermines her authority, and she reminds him that she is, after all, Zequinha's daughter (2000, 341). Although Marta is placed in a position of power, she challenges the person who holds the most powerful position on the hill and thinks that her privilege comes from recalling her relationship with the important and powerful Zequinha, and not from being José Luís's wife. Her idea of kinship and position is related to blood.

<sup>2</sup> I do not use Mariana Barcinski's collected testimonies because they belong to reformed female drug traffickers. These oral stories introduce an ethos of reformation that does not pertain to my study.

<sup>3</sup> Favelas are low-income neighborhoods that exemplify deep socioeconomic inequalities in Brazil. Because of a poor government presence, since the late 1970s drug traffickers have controlled favelas.

<sup>4</sup> Because the drug lord Zequinha opposes the relationship between his daughter Marta and José Luís, he unleashes a war in which José Luís murders him. Afterward, Marta has José Luís jailed and, once she is in power, decides to murder him to take over the drug trade. He escapes from prison and, two weeks later, the same people who had supported Marta murder her.

<sup>5</sup> Because of Rio de Janeiro's topography, favelas developed on hills. "Hill" (*morro*), as "community," is used to displace negative connotations embedded in the word "favela."

Besides this positioning, she adds, “Don’t raise your voice with me . . . like I was one of those toothless types you hire to steal cars, I finished the eighth grade, I’ve got brain power coming out my ears” (2002, 269).<sup>6</sup> Marta establishes a distance from the other members of the trafficking group and José Luís’s employees by emphasizing her educational level and intelligence. She wants to be more important than José Luís and underscores that which makes her different and valuable for the business. When she is the head of the business, she shows herself to be an efficient manager; she increases the profits considerably, buys powerful police officers, and invests the earnings better (2000, 362). José Luís admires the fact that she has people killed and behaves professionally (2000, 341). This professionalism is complemented by the fact that Marta treats José Luís very well while he is in prison and reminds him that she is his wife (2000, 341). In a way, Marta is a “true woman” to José Luís.

Zaluar (1993, 181) and Barcinski (2011, 152–153) suggest that the “true” or “loyal” (*fiel*) woman is the woman who has to help her man while he is in jail and who cannot refuse to do this. Marta is loyal because she confirms her attachment to José Luís and emphasizes her role as an object of belonging—his wife. With this attitude, it seems she learns to consider her relationship with her husband as the root of her position of power, and she stops being Zequinha’s daughter. Nevertheless, because in fact Marta instigates José Luís’s arrest and plans to murder him in order to be in charge of the business, her acknowledgment of her relationship to him is superficial. She uses the discourses of belonging, of being a loyal wife, as tools of empowerment and distraction. As the manager of the drug trafficking ring, she continues to be Zequinha’s daughter and seeks revenge for her father’s death; she is a true daughter.

Marta’s power and positioning as the head of the hill, according to Lúcia Osana Zolin (2006, 84–85), makes her equal to other criminals because she kills, snitches, corrupts, intimidates, tortures, threatens, and plots to kill José Luís. While Marta is similar to other criminals in many aspects, I argue that her desire for power differentiates her. She might be as cruel or violent as they are, but she still acts differently. On the one hand, Marta thinks that, unlike men involved in the business, she is intelligent, efficient, and organized (2000, 276–277, 339, 341). On the other hand, she introduces a major change in her appearance and performance. During a negotiation with an arms dealer, the novel’s extradiegetic narrator emphasizes how the dealer’s comments are sexist and even racist, and that Marta “was sick of you-don’t-understand-shit-because-you’re-a-woman jokes. . . . There was always somebody or other ready to criticize the fact that she was a woman” (2002, 282). Even in a powerful position in the world of drug trafficking, Marta, as a young black woman, faces sexism and racism. This discrimination leads her to modify her physical appearance.

Marta’s clothes change because she stops wearing bikinis, shorts, and sandals and begins to wear military pants, tennis shoes, long T-shirts, and a cap, and she even gets a short haircut (2000, 356). In this way, Marta attempts to project an image that distances her from the image of femininity she had up to that point. Additionally, by masculinizing her image—she wears the same clothes male drug dealers wear—she aims to pass as another member of the group, that is, to somehow conceal or blur her female sex and previous feminine appearance, behavior, and performance. She appeals to the transformative power of clothes to subvert sartorial rules that determine the binary division of gender.

In addition to modifying her clothing, Marta alters her behavior: “She made an effort to talk like a man, walk like a man. I’m a fair guy, she would say in negotiations” (2002, 282). In order to pass as a man, Marta changes her voice, her walking style, and refers to herself as “himself.” In this sense, she intentionally performs a masculine image to avoid biases and comments because of her female sex and gender. In addition to imitating her peers in order to invoke an image that does not differentiate her, Marta uses her father as role model: “She dealt with ‘those people’ by looking them straight in the eye, hardened, menacing, exactly as her father had done” (2002, 282). By following Zequinha’s techniques, classism, and success, she aims to impose herself over “those” people. Once again, Marta uses her father—and not her husband—to display an image of power, although José Luís is the official “owner” of the hill. She does not see that young José Luís rose to power by killing Zequinha. Marta’s idea of owning the hill is therefore old, dead, and devoid of success, just like Zequinha. After all, her father represents an unsuccessful form of managing the business. Furthermore, she undoes her previous work—emphasizing her difference from other employees and traffickers—because she becomes one of the men.

Marta changes her appearance and behavior because she thinks the community does not know how to deal with a woman outside the kitchen and the bedroom (2000, 357). For Zolin, Marta’s actions are a feminist answer to those who do not tolerate orders from a woman (2006, 83). However, Marta’s masculinization of her appearance and behavior is not necessarily a feminist answer. Using clothes in a transgressive

<sup>6</sup> All quotations are taken from the 2002 English translation of the novel (Melo 2002).

way—opposing traditional sartorial rules—and adopting a masculine behavior and personal pronouns are attempts made by Marta to empower herself in her context. She manipulates the rules of her society in order to be accepted, yet she adopts these strategies because she thinks she is rejected for her gender and sex. In fact, Marta is not rejected for being a woman, but because she has two major flaws in her performance and access to power.

The first flaw is her poor relationship with the community of Berimbau. As Ben Penglase (2010, 318) argues, the power of drug traffickers in Rio de Janeiro's favelas also depends on their ability to manipulate local discourses and social relations. In Melo's novel, Onofre, the owner of the bar, says that he does not like Marta because she is skinny, mistreats José Luís's lovers, and talks on the phone with monosyllables (2000, 368–369). Onofre's comments highlight that Marta does not perform the traditional role of the feminine and even *gostosa* (voluptuous) mulatta who is tender, protective, maternal—even with her husband's lovers—and has a good *bunda* (butt). Marta, like every other woman in the drug business, is expected to be the voluptuous mulatta who is docile, good, submissive, and tolerant of her husband's lovers. In this sense, even empowered black female drug traffickers still have to reproduce racist and sexist stereotypes. By transgressing this image and being autonomous, the community—as represented by Onofre—dislikes Marta. It does not matter how masculine and powerful she is because she does not manage to be respected for her power. She does not know how to interact with the people in Berimbau's community according to their patriarchal rules, which dictate black women's figure, performance, and behavior. The community deals with women outside the kitchen and the bedroom but does not accept Marta's noncompliance with the stereotypical mulatta image and traditional feminine role.

The second flaw in Marta's gender performance and access to power is that her major ally, Gavião, only supports her because he believes it will be easy to remove her from the position of owner (2000, 377). In fact, he ends up ambushing her (2000, 384). This lack of endorsement from other traffickers and suppliers highlights that her gender performance does not contribute to sustain her position of power. According to Butler's theory of gender performance, gender is a repetitive performance that projects a stable image of one of the two "accepted" genders in hegemonic society. That is, gender is based on the construction of recurring acts and gestures associated with one of two specific genders. This repetitive feature of gender does not impede agency, subversion, and questioning because, as Butler (2006, 187) argues, certain repetitions end up highlighting the rules imposed by the hegemonic culture.

Performance that underscores the artificiality of hegemonic norms is called "performativity." Butler differentiates successful types of performances from others because they have the possibility of showing the unnaturalness of hegemonic gender rules. Nonetheless, Butler (1993, 2) emphasizes that performativity is not a conscious tool that can be used willingly, and it is not successful all the time. In terms of this theory, Marta does not display a performativity. That is, she does not highlight the artificiality of the binary gender system because her performance reifies traditional ideas about masculinity and femininity. Because she only imitates male traffickers, she cannot critically reappropriate their image. By intentionally following the system's rules and ignoring their falseness, she neither challenges binaries nor perceives the hierarchies among different masculinities. In doing so, her performance simplifies gender constructions and downplays the power of cross-dressing.

Marta can resemble a male drug trafficker but, because she disregards gender dynamics, her performance is incoherent for her society, and she is never accepted as the person in charge of the drug business. Her performance as a young black man also portrays the intersection of race and gender as simple. Young black men face many demands regarding their masculinity in favelas and drug trafficking in patriarchal Brazil. Being a young black man in drug trafficking involves issues of age, social space, and social class, not just using specific garments, voice tone, and male pronouns.<sup>7</sup>

Marta's performance of masculinity also implies being the "owner" of the drug trade in Berimbau, which means representing the hegemonic masculinity of that context. According to Connell, masculinities function as a pyramid, in which hegemonic masculinity occupies the top place. This structure imposes roles and ideals and establishes a hierarchy, because below hegemonic masculinity reside other roles that are subordinated, marginalized, or function as accomplice (1995, 76–81). I use the term "hegemonic" to stress structures of dominance and oppression as well as the most desired position—the "owner"—in the Brazilian drug-trafficking world. I am aware that the use of the word "hegemonic" for a hill and the drug business in Brazil can be problematic, but, as Fátima Cecchetto reminds us, Connell views masculinities as configurations of practices (Cecchetto 2004, 64). That is, hegemonic masculinity exists in relation to

<sup>7</sup> Penglase (2010, 323) explains that being a father and a real man are important roles in the hill.

other types of masculinities and desired positions; it is linked to its context, and it can be held/performed regardless of age and gender. In Marta's case, performing the most desired masculinity of her context not only implies all of the tensions that Connell indicates, it also means deviating from her assigned role as a black woman—feminine, kind, and sensual. Transgressing the heteronormative image given to women like Marta does not allow her to consolidate her position of power in Berimbau.

Zolin (2006, 80) suggests that with Marta's decision to modify her gender without any concern for gender barriers, she is "colaborando com a edificação de um novo estatuto da personagem feminina na literatura brasileira escrita por mulheres" (contributing to the edification of a new bylaw of female characters in Brazilian literature written by women).<sup>8</sup> Zolin's comment ignores that Brazilian literature has more characters like Marta, and even characters written by women, such as Maria Moura in Rachel de Queiroz's *Memorial de Maria Moura* (1992). However, when comparing Marta with female drug traffickers in *Falcão*, it is possible to see that *Inferno* does not expand the representation of criminal female characters in Brazilian literature. Unlike female drug traffickers in Bill and Athayde's book, who do not conceal their feminine appearance, the novel still invokes the idea that female drug traffickers must cross-dress in order to empower themselves in that world. As Marta Peixoto (2007, 174) indicates, Melo did not carry out ethnographic research on the favelas of Rio to write the novel. It is a narrative mainly based on fiction and newspaper coverage, which means that it ignores that masculinities and gender performances have been changing in the crime world. While female cross-dressing has historical roots and is still valid in historical novels that illustrate how women entered male-dominated spaces, it does not have the same connotations in contemporary urban spaces. As I discuss in the next section, in drug trafficking the most desired positions can be achieved regardless of gender, sex, and desires.

### The Performances of Real Female Drug Traffickers

Alex Pereira Barbosa, aka MV Bill, is a well-known Brazilian rapper from the community "Cidade de Deus" (City of God) in Rio de Janeiro. Bill and Celso Athayde (Bill's manager), along with other people from this community, have denounced the social problems created by the drug trade and have helped young people leave drug trafficking. In 2006, Bill and Athayde released *Falcão: Meninos do tráfico* (*Falcon: Drug Trafficking's Boys*), a documentary that shows how *falcões*—young men who enter the drug-trafficking business—are dying at a rather young age. That same year they transcribed some of the interviews from the documentary and published a book with the same title.<sup>9</sup> Their second book, *Falcão: Mulheres e o tráfico*, also originates from the documentary and aims to bring attention to women affected by drug trafficking or those who depend on it as a source of income. While their denunciation is of the utmost importance, I use the oral histories they collected to analyze the empowerment of women in the drug world and to highlight how gender dynamics have changed, since men are not the only participants in privileged positions.

In this second book, the narration alternates between both authors and their interviews with women in various communities in Brazil. They interviewed young and old women—mothers, sisters, and girlfriends of young men involved in the drug trafficking world. Some of the interviewees do not belong to the criminal world, and others are bandits, drug traffickers, and owners of drop-off places or "favela owners." Of all of the interviews, I am interested in those about women with power or with access to power associated with drug trafficking. I observe dynamics of femininity and kinship in four cases: Leandra, Cristina, Dona Leda, and Ritinha. I focus on femininity/masculinity and kinship because they are discourses that appear in Marta's gender performance. While the interviews are not placed in the order that I refer to them, I have chosen this organization in order to underscore a variety of positions and access to power in the drug-trade world.

Leandra is a young trafficker, seventeen years old, who entered the business because money was needed at home after her father's death. She also became a dealer because her brother and a friend were already trafficking. Here, it is evident that kinship relationships and the need for money are explanations for entering the trafficking world among young Brazilians living in urban low-income communities. As Steffensmeier and Allan (1996, 467) argue, lack of social control and initiation by criminal male partners facilitate the entrance of women into the crime world. However, Leandra does highlight that she is the one who chose to enter the trafficking world (2007, 243). While a family member might have facilitated her entrance, she

<sup>8</sup> All translations my own unless noted otherwise.

<sup>9</sup> Both authors collaborated with anthropologist Luiz Eduardo Soares in *Cabeça de porco* (Celso, Bill, and Soares 2005) and wrote about their experiences with drug trafficking. Their work in *Falcão* does not have a scholarly goal. Testimonies collected by scholars can be found in Barcinski's (2008) and Robert Gay's (2005) books.

underscores her decision as autonomous. She clarifies that she entered the business willingly so that her brother would not feel guilty (243–244).

In addition to kinship, Leandra's gender is connected to her career in the trafficking world. When she began working, she was not located in the drop-off place because she was dealing on her own (244). Later on, she began to work at the drop-off and carried a gun; she had to convince other people, including her brother, to accept her working in that location (244). She says that her brother did not agree to it, but "accepted" it (244). Leandra's oral history shows how her brother and other traffickers are apprehensive, which seems to impede her from working like everyone else or from following the same professional path. She is still fighting for a space and the possibility of a career in the drug-trafficking world. This fight is related to what Steffensmeier and Allan (1996) discuss regarding female criminals, because they are less frequently in higher positions. Lucrative and dangerous positions still seem to be male-dominated spaces and roles.

Leandra's gender is visible in the interview not only because of her power struggle but also through Athayde's questions and transcription of his interview with her. First, he explains that when Leandra's brother mentioned having a sister in the business, he and Bill thought it was "interesting" and decided to interview her (243). Women in drug trafficking are noteworthy. Second, Leandra's gender also becomes evident through Athayde's questions. By asking her how she learned to shoot, his question clearly indicates the newness of associating women, and young women, with using guns. Leandra answers that "todo dia vendo os amigos limpar, trocar as peças, dar tiro, eu fui aprendendo" (every day seeing my friends cleaning, changing pieces, shooting, I was learning) (248). Access to guns and learning how to use them depend on Leandra's familiarity with the business and with a self-teaching process.

Although her brother helped her to enter that world, he does not help her with any particular training, which is another issue that Leandra stresses when describing her own experience. As a matter of fact, her oral history regarding the use of guns resembles the ones made by two *falcões* in the first book by Bill and Athayde. They told Athayde they learned to shoot by watching (2006, 75, 156). These testimonies, then, show that gender does not seem to play a differentiating role in learning how to use guns. Learning by imitating, in this context, is genderless; it is a strategy of survival and of advancing within that environment. While kinship relations can play a role in introducing women to the crime world, they do not necessarily sustain them in that sphere.

Despite Leandra's autonomy, Athayde's emphasis on gender continues when he asks her how she interacts with the community. She says that the women in the favela call her daughter (*filha*), and they do not seem to care about her carrying a gun (244). While Leandra's comment indicates her familiarity with the community and her almost chameleonlike position, the name used to refer to her marks her as part of a family. That is, her position is still perceived through a marker of kinship (*filha*) that diminishes her transgressive position and dangerousness. This gendered domestication of her danger also appears when Athayde asks her if she wants to have kids (249). His comment, while indicating a future or the intention of having a family, points to the fact that maternity and motherhood are not Leandra's priority. In a way, this question differentiates her from other women who live in low-income Brazilian neighborhoods.<sup>10</sup>

While Athayde's questions attempt to explain Leandra according to patriarchal roles and stereotypes, her life and gender performance signal a new path for women in drug-dominated favelas. Athayde even asks Leandra if she thinks that someday she will be the owner of the drop-off. While this question suggests the path to follow in the drug-trafficking hierarchy, it also implies that Leandra's future is not clearly delineated because women are not owners. Leandra's answer in fact makes this future possible because she has thought about it. She answers that she is not ready to be the owner but could have the job of a manager (248). As Luke Dowdney explains, the hierarchy in the drug trafficking goes from being an *olheiro/fogueteiro* (spotter), who warns if the police or enemies are attacking, to being a *vapor* (steam/intoxication), who sells drugs at drop-offs, and then being the *gerente* (manager) of the drop-off (2004, 144–146).<sup>11</sup> Leandra's answer indicates her potential future, but at the same time she clarifies that she needs more experience in order to climb from *vapor* to *gerente* in the hierarchy. While experience and training are vital, gender is not.

Bill and Athayde's second book indicates that women are occupying positions that they did not have before or, at the very least, that these women have more visibility. As Barcinski (2008, 10) explains, the incarceration of women has increased in the past fifteen years in Brazil. By exposing this major social

<sup>10</sup> According to the Observatorio de Igualdad de Género de América Latina y el Caribe report (2013), in 2000 in Brazil, 14.8 percent of women between the ages of fifteen and nineteen were mothers. This percentage is larger if only low-income areas are considered.

<sup>11</sup> The *soldado* (soldier) contributes to the manager's security, but she or he follows a different promotional path because this person is hired by the general manager or by the manager of soldiers (Dowdney 2004, 146).

problem, both Bill and Athayde hope to “questionar ainda mais os mitos que cercam este submundo sob o ponto de vista fundamental das mulheres” (further question the myths that surround this underworld according to women’s crucial point of view) (8). This questioning is somewhat similar to my perspective as a scholar, as I research gender performances in the criminal world. The traditional association of power only with masculine males is challenged. Females can achieve positions considered masculine.

This challenge is of special importance considering that female bandits and soldiers in Brazil have had a long tradition of gender defiance, performance of masculinities, and access to power. One can think, for instance, of Maria Quitéria, Bárbara de Alencar, *cangaceiras* (female bandits) in the Brazilian backlands (sertão), and female guerrillas during the 1960s and 1970s. In this sense, Leandra is an example of a woman working outside the household—and the law—in a traditionally masculine area. The difference is that she does not resort to cross-dressing. That is, she does not have to conceal her image, as many women did during previous years and centuries in Brazil in order to fight alongside men, or as Marta did in Melo’s novel. Leandra’s performance is, therefore, closer to the performances of female guerrillas and bandits during the sixties and seventies in Brazil, who did not don male clothing, and this difference already implies that rules have changed.

Leandra’s position as a young woman dealing drugs takes on other dimensions and possibilities when considering that women actually own and run drop-offs. These women demonstrate that Leandra can achieve her career goals. This is the case of Cristina in Macaé, a city in the state of Rio de Janeiro. Cristina is white, twenty-three years old at most, and about four months pregnant but thinking of having an abortion (181). She is also petite, does not have family, thinks of coups constantly, and has a girl around her at all times (181). Bill, who interviewed Cristina, was introduced to her through a friend of his who plans parties, but on the phone he did not want to tell Bill about Cristina’s professional position. While Bill thinks his friend wants to hook him up with a woman, his friend clarifies, referring to Cristina, that “ela é mais simpática do que gostosa” (she is nice rather than hot) (179), and explains that she is very dangerous. Through Bill’s and his friend’s descriptions, an image of the female trafficker appears that was not visible with Leandra.

Differences between Leandra and Cristina are key because, although Athayde is not the narrator, Cristina’s gender performance and physical appearance are more prominent in Bill’s narration. Additionally, Cristina is an adult and Leandra is a “*menina*” (girl) and, legally speaking, still a minor. Another key point to consider is that while Cristina is white, Leandra’s race or skin color is not mentioned. This fact is important because Marta is discriminated against for being a black woman. The lack of mention of Leandra’s skin color in a way refers to the “*cor padrão*” (standard skin color) (Ramos and Musumeci 2005, 80). As Silvia Ramos and Leonarda Musumeci explain, in police radio transmissions and procedures in Rio de Janeiro, Afro-descendants are always already associated with crime (2005, 80). This association has institutionalized the racist idea of *cor padrão* in crime (80–82). By not referring to Leandra’s skin color, Bill and Athayde, who are Afro-descendants, seem to perpetuate the stereotype that black women are the ones who always commit crimes.

Cristina is also different from Leandra because Bill’s comments emphasize her age and femininity. He says that she talks about the “neuroses” that women discuss at such an age, such as getting fat and being ugly (182). Overall, in Bill’s transcription, Cristina has a feminine appearance, is related to what Bill considers the world of women, and acts according to her gender and generation.<sup>12</sup> Still, Cristina is similar to Leandra in that neither of them hides markers of their female gender. I emphasize Bill’s comments to clarify not only their misogynous and objectifying tone, but also their contrast with his first image of Cristina: surrounded by armed men.

Cristina, unlike Leandra, is a powerful player who inherited her position and power from her husband when he died. Cristina’s positioning and history led Bill to ask her to explain how it is to have a leadership position in a male-dominated world. With this question, and in a similar manner as Athayde, Bill indicates the sense of novelty of Cristina’s position even for people familiar with the drug trade. In Bill’s words, Cristina explains that she was already working in drug trafficking when her husband was alive, and because of this “já tinha então um vasto conhecimento daquilo e sabia como lidar com as coisas. Além disso, era conhecida como a mulher do dono da boca, por tanto já tinha um puta respeito na área.” (She already had a vast knowledge thereof and knew how to deal with things. Beyond that, she was known as the wife of the drug-selling place’s owner. Therefore, she already had fucking respect in the area) (181–182). Therefore, unlike Leandra, Cristina is a manager with experience, and she underscores that. She knows the business

<sup>12</sup> Zaluar (1993) emphasizes that women involved with drug-trafficking gangs in Rio de Janeiro can easily be raped or even gang raped. Male members dispose of their bodies as objects, especially if they are physically beautiful. The theme of rape is absent from Bill and Athayde’s selected interviews.

because she had firsthand experience and is successful because she does not trust anyone (181). Because she is the owner's wife, she also has the respect of her subordinates even after his death. A similar situation is portrayed by Melo's *Inferno* through Marta when José Luís leaves her in charge. This relationship reveals issues of confidence, trust, and kinship in the drug-trafficking business. Apparently, kinship relations, in the sense of loyalty to the family, are valid even for higher positions.<sup>13</sup>

Bill also mentions that in addition to knowing about the business, Cristina stamps her own style on the favela, by giving it a new face and organizing it. For Bill this was “bem coisa de mulher mesmo” (a real woman's thing) (182). Once again, it is the interviewer's comments that introduce the discourses of femininity and gender difference. Nonetheless, it is evident that the fragility of Cristina's position does not necessarily reflect her gender but rather her location and position. She is conscious that she can be betrayed anytime because that is exactly what happened to her husband (182). Her position is highly coveted, and her femininity is not as foreign or peculiar as could be thought. According to Connell (1995, 183), by definition the hegemonic position of any place constantly interacts with other masculinities and even with femininities. In this sense, in the criminal world of drug trafficking, female masculinities and femininities can interact with other masculinities and even occupy the most desired position among masculinities. Cristina's public feminine gender performance confirms that Marta's masculinization was not required to sustain her in power.

Regarding the hegemonic position in drug trafficking, in *Falcão: Meninos do tráfico* Bill writes that he and Athayde never heard the word “king,” but because the men with whom he interacted were the only ones producing and distributing drugs, it was feasible to think of them as the kings of the area (2006, 83). Nonetheless, in an interview, one of the falcões refers to the owner of the drug trade as the “king” (2006, 154). Thus, in the drug-dealing world the “hegemonic” position and the most desired masculinity is to be in charge of the drug traffic and “own” the community, a position which is very patriarchal and traditional, that of “king.” What is worth underscoring in Cristina's case is that her location is transgressive because she occupies a place associated with traditional masculinities and with empowered males.<sup>14</sup> Peter Stallybrass and Allon White (1986, 17) define “transgression” as an act that inverts, contradicts, annuls, or presents an alternative to codes, values, and cultural norms. In this sense, Cristina's presence demonstrates alternatives to traditional views and performances. Unlike Marta, Cristina gained experience and power in the drug-dealing world while conducting a traditional feminine gender performance and even having the potential for motherhood.

Another aspect of Cristina's femininity and role is evident in Bill's ending of her story. Three years after interviewing Cristina, he finds out that she has been murdered during a fight in jail, and the little girl who was always with her is in charge of the business (183). He also assumes that Cristina had an abortion. Bill's comments confirm the fragility of traffickers' position because the criminal structure holds by substitutions; what is new is that women replace men and even other women—the girl replaced Cristina. His observations also convey that Cristina had no maternal instincts, as if running the business would have a negative consequence for her development of motherhood. Bill's comments, like Onofre's in Melo's novel, underscore an urge for a traditional feminization of female drug traffickers.

The longing for traditional female performances can better be seen with the third testimony of female trafficker Dona Leda, a hill owner. She is around fifty-five years old, white with dyed blonde hair, and a mother (83). She “owns” the favela and has a proud air of being from a different status (90). Both Athayde and Bill interacted with her, and the account of meeting her alternates between both narrators. The discourse of being a mother, which neither Cristina nor Leandra reproduces, is strong from the beginning with Dona Leda, as both narrators meet her on Mother's Day. The figure of Dona Leda is linked to being a mother, being surrounded by her family, and owning the community. Similar to Cristina, Dona Leda's family also plays an important role, although her kinship relationships are different. Dona Leda's son, involved in drug trafficking, incriminated himself in order to spare his mother from imprisonment (97–98). As a matter of fact, according to her own son, “a mãe é quem era o cérebro e o pai era o executor das ações” (Mom was the brains and Dad was the action executor) (89). Dona Leda, unlike Cristina, did not inherit the business and the power that comes with it. Rather than accessing power through kinship relations, she uses her kinship relations to run her business while she remains the brains, almost like the power behind the throne. The appellation “Dona” in and of itself indicates her position, age, and experience. It also reflects her possessions and authority. It clarifies that she is in charge and “owns” the business and the community.

<sup>13</sup> This kinship is not respected in Lucia's testimony collected by Robert Gay (2005), although Lucia does clarify that she did not work in the drug business.

<sup>14</sup> The word “queen” is not used to refer to empowered female drug traffickers, as in Mexico.



Regarding the business, Dona Leda not only traffics cocaine and crack but also produces these drugs. She created a self-supporting company, as Athayde clarifies: “Era uma espécie de fábrica de fundo de quintal bem-sucedida, e a Dona Leda parecia realmente uma empresária daquelas competentes, com mão de ferro” (It was a type of successful factory in the backyard of a house, and Dona Leda really resembled one of those competitive businesswomen with an iron hand) (95). The quote shows that Dona Leda has the business skills that Marta in Melo’s novels begins to develop. Unlike Marta, armed people surround Dona Leda, and if anyone betrays her or takes advantage of the people in the community, she has that person killed. This level of security is something that Marta did not achieve because she lends her men to Gavião, and, while unprotected, she is assassinated (2000, 384). Dona Leda is also different because she does not live in the community, and when she does visit, according to rumors (*más línguas*), it was a “dia de morrer gente” (day of people dying) (97). She represents the law and the supreme power.

Unlike Cristina, Dona Leda has occupied the most desired masculinity of her context for a longer period of time and has created a business and a guard system to sustain her access to the hegemonic position. With Dona Leda’s case it is evident that a woman can be a successful and consolidated drug lord. This position is key because out of Zaluar’s research (1993, 178), conducted in the 1980s and 1990s in the community City of God in Rio de Janeiro, only two women had become famous for their involvement in drug trafficking. One owned the drop-off place and the other managed her son’s gang. Dona Leda’s case also calls for the need to revise the field of female criminality, as her power and position make evident women’s participation in powerful positions in the drug trade.

Despite her transgression and empowerment, an image associated with this trafficker that comes out of Bill and Athayde’s comments is that of the benevolent matriarch. The matriarchal discourse is evident when Bill wants to save a young man from being executed and notices that Dona Leda treats her people poorly, “aliás, ela não tratava nenhum deles bem” (as a matter of fact, she didn’t treat any of them well) (116). Still, Bill is conscious that in order to avoid thinking of a coup, her subordinates have to be treated poorly so that they remain obedient and sufficiently oppressed (116). Dona Leda thus retains her power thanks to continued oppression, which, as Bill says, comes from her attitude as well as from sustained armed oppression and terror. In fact, any drug trafficker can use this technique because there are no gender differences; it is the technique Marta thinks her father used.

The benevolent matriarch, then, appears not in Dona Leda’s behavior but in Bill’s comments that Dona Leda is not the nurturing mother of the community who treats people well. She is a matriarch who is more concerned with running a business than with nurturing her offspring. She is different from Cristina because she does not talk about women’s “neuroses” and has not organized the community in the same way. Bill’s comments once again resemble Onofre’s observations regarding Marta’s lack of femininity. He wishes for a woman who runs the business and the community in a “feminine” way—more like a maternal Cristina. It is not that Dona Leda has to be masculine, but that people in the community, not in the crime world, demand of her a familiar performance.

Bill finishes the account with Dona Leda by elaborating on her power, arguing, “[O] fato é que, seja homem ou mulher quem controla uma favela, o que prevalece é a história pessoal de cada um, pois o crime não admite falhas” (The fact is that, whether it is man or a woman who controls the favela, what prevails is the personal story of each, as crime does not admit flaws) (119). This comment brings to the forefront that the rules of the crime world are more important than the gendered rules of the hegemonic society. As long as the rules are followed, gender seems to be stripped of most meanings, categories, and binarisms. In these three female traffickers’ cases, an intersection of gender and power is evident, and it is an intersection in which they are not at odds. The nostalgia for a traditional feminine performance persists in female traffickers’ immediate context, while the crime world demands a crime performance that abides by rules informed by power struggles.

In order to better understand the performance of female traffickers, I next make a stronger comparison between the testimonies of these three real female traffickers with Marta. Subsequently, I will present a fourth case of the female trafficker in Bill and Athayde’s book to develop further my argument on gender and crime.

## The Performance of Criminality

By looking into similarities between the three female traffickers and Marta, two major parallels arise that are worth analyzing. The first one is that family plays an important role. The family can be the reason to enter the drug business (Leandra); it provides support to continue in the crime world (Cristina); or it helps the empowered woman to run the business (Dona Leda). As demonstrated by these examples, family—as in

kinship relations—plays a role that links female traffickers to traditional performances and spaces but does not lead these women to crime involuntarily. As a matter of fact, in the case of Dona Leda, a career criminal, kinship relationships can be subverted. Regarding the character of Marta, her relationship with her father, Zequinha, makes her familiar with drug trafficking, but José Luís is the reason she enters the business and accesses a position of power. Because she holds on to the idea that her dead father allows her to have a position of power, the novel portrays part of the reality of female traffickers in Brazil regarding kinship relations and their importance. But by showing how Marta does not use them successfully, it offers reasons for her failure.

The second major parallel between the three female traffickers and Marta is experience, because all of the female traffickers in their testimonies indicated it as a key factor in the business. That is, their successful performance does not solely depend on their gender or kinship relationships, but also on how they demonstrate their ability to run the business and/or to deal. Leandra, Cristina, and Dona Leda show this to be true, whereas Marta claims that her eighth-grade education and her brains are what allow her to be an excellent businesswoman. She does not gain the experience of any of the real female drug traffickers, and, while she arrived at her position in a similar manner as Cristina, she did not have comparable firsthand experience. She did not really learn from her father, as he had kept her out of business dealings.

This lack of experience and Marta's rapid empowerment suggest that, in the novel, drug traffickers are not able to run an organized business; someone with a little bit more education can bring a radical change. This image is a rather superficial view of the trafficking world, as it leaves the impression that such a big operation is conducted carelessly and that rules and hierarchy are not relevant.<sup>15</sup> Considering that Peixoto argues that the novel "avoids disturbing preconceived notions about favelas and the kind of people who live in them" (2007, 174), it is evident that the drug-trafficking world represented in the novel does not reflect the acceptance of women and of feminine women in positions of power.

The contemporary criminal world is highly complex, and its implied power struggle is embedded in the context of patriarchal Brazil. On one side, this world conforms to a culture that breaks away from hegemonic gender rules by allowing women a space of power. On the other, it is still ruled by some patriarchal norms, such as kinship relationships. As Steffensmeier and Allen (1996, 466) explain, female criminals tend to reproduce traditional roles in the crime world; Zaluar (1993, 177) argues that women play a secondary role in delinquent activities. Therefore, a tension arises between the traditional (kinship relationships) and the transgressive (empowered women). It is this tension that Marta, in Melo's novel, attempts to conciliate, but she forgets that her "husband" murdering her father represents a new form of power. In addition, she does not behave as her community demands. Because of her age, race, lack of children, and superficial performance of masculinity she cannot project herself as the expected matriarch. In a way, and for some of the members of the community, the empowered woman exists in this atmosphere as long as she fulfills the role given to empowered women in patriarchal societies: the (white) matriarch who takes care of her family in the absence of a patriarch or a strong male figure.

Nonetheless, I must emphasize that, even in the contemporary drug trafficking ring of patriarchal Brazil, obtaining and retaining the hegemonic position depends on empowerment strategies and power, not necessarily on performing and obeying hegemonic gender rules. This is confirmed by the testimony of a fourth female trafficker in Bill and Athayde's book. Ritinha (Little Rita) is the openly transgender, gay manager of a drop-off (219–226). Although Ritinha is not the owner (the owner is in jail), her position is one of the most desired. Ritinha, Robson/Rita de Cássia, is twenty-two years old, white, tall, and thin (220). Bill, who interviews her, is shocked when he meets her for the first time because Ritinha kisses Manifestada—the woman who introduces them and turns out to be Ritinha's sister—on the mouth (219). Bill is also stunned because Ritinha wants to greet Bill by kissing him on the cheeks; Bill wants to stop Ritinha, but Manifestada signals to him that he has to accept it. His surprise goes even further because Ritinha insists that it has to be three kisses (219). It is a common tradition for single Brazilian women who want to marry to kiss not one or two, but three times. By reacting according to his compulsory heterosexuality and homophobia, Bill's comments highlight Ritinha's public feminine performance.

Bill has an ample knowledge of drug trafficking in favelas because of his own experience and from interviewing people since 1996. As a result, for him, the nickname "Ritinha" was unusual: "Ritinha definitivamente não combina com o que eu conheço sobre crime e criminalidade" (219). (Ritinha definitely does not match what I know about crime and criminality.) Ritinha's position is transgressive because of not only her gender orientation but also her trans identity and public feminine image. Bill admits his bias and

<sup>15</sup> For more information on hierarchies, please refer to Luke Dowdney's book (2004).

adds that he had known of only one other case of a gay manager (220). While Ritinha is only one interviewee and cannot represent a large portion of managers, Bill writes that when the owner of the hill designates a manager who happens to be gay, no one is going to challenge that (220). Once again, it is evident that the rules of the criminal world overpower hegemonic and heteronormative rules on gender.

I must emphasize that Bill begins his comments on Ritinha using male personal pronouns to refer to her but changes them to female ones. In doing so, he confirms Ritinha's female gender and identity. Nonetheless, according to Bill, Ritinha's clothes were slightly *aviadadas* and he seems a happy *viadão* (220).<sup>16</sup> In addition to being homophobic, Bill's vocabulary reveals his lack of trans awareness. His language and tone demonstrate the distance between the rules of crime and Bill's society. His language focuses on describing Ritinha as well shaved, with nails done, long hair, a strapless black dress, a lot of jewelry, and silicone breasts (226). Bill's rich description underscores his interest in Ritinha's figure; none of the other women were so thoroughly described, not even Cristina. He even adds that Ritinha admits to being simple and stylish (226). Ritinha's presence, image, and trans identity, then, emphasize that the drug-trafficking world permits access to power and hegemonic positions by people whose sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender performance do not subscribe to heteronormative conventions.

If the femininity of the female traffickers plays a role—and it is missing in Marta's case—Ritinha's sexual orientation and gender performance and identity confirm that an emphasized masculinity is not necessary to survive and succeed in the drug-trafficking business. Moreover, the community members are the ones invoking traditional discourses, such as femininity. In Ritinha's case, she was expelled from the favela due to her transgressive gender orientation and sexuality, but her friendship with the owner allowed her to return, and she is respected for being an efficient administrator (222–223). Bill's narration emphasizes that Ritinha was concerned with social programs because, unlike other communities, hers had three places in which people could take classes, access the Internet for free, look for employment, and find recreation (225).<sup>17</sup> Ritinha thus seems to be a better administrator than other managers and owners. Her history, position of power, and success ratify that, in drug trafficking, power overcomes any reprehension or bias against gender defiance and transgression. For this reason, I argue that the word “masculinity” cannot be used to refer to hegemonic positions in the environment of drug trafficking.

### The Most Desired Positions

Leandra, Cristina, Dona Leda, and Ritinha are known as women, and, in this sense, their gender performances are part of their access to power. Their experiences also show that, while female traffickers challenge traditional gender structures, they do not change those structures in their societies. In their contexts, their priority is to continuously reaffirm their access to power, not to change the rules of the game. If they do not reaffirm their place, they are replaced, because they live in a business/world where power is perpetually contested. In fact, this continuous challenging opens spaces for transgression and diverse gender performances. As previously stated, the crime world supersedes societal rules. Brazilian female traffickers, in Bill and Athayde's book, take advantage of the traditional mentality that permeates the crime world—the law of the hill “owner” is the supreme law—to have a space there. In comparison, Marta's depiction in the novel speaks of a masculinization that is not necessary in the current drug-trafficking world in Rio de Janeiro. It reflects a traditional view of gender performances in the crime world.

The presence of empowered women in the drug-trafficking hierarchy is also related to the fact that in recent decades women have occupied prominent positions outside the household and at different levels of society; members of the LGBTIQ community have similarly been able to increase their participation in society. In a way, the increasing presence of these groups in society also involves acquiring positions of power in crime. Nonetheless, because gender and sex inequalities still run deeply in Brazil, female drug traffickers are still stigmatized, an aspect the novel represents with Marta. While female drug traffickers are able to empower themselves, they still have to represent traditional roles, such as the Angel in the House or the matriarch. Community members, who hold traditional gender values, have the potential to make vulnerable female drug traffickers' public image and power. At the same time, they determine female drug traffickers' recognition of holding the most desired positions.

Because of this struggle between traditional opinions and female drug traffickers' empowerment, it is impossible to continue associating the most desired positions with masculinity only. Considering that

<sup>16</sup> *Viado* is a pejorative and offensive term used in Brazil to refer to gay men. “*Aviadadas*” is a derivative of *viado*.

<sup>17</sup> Ritinha's “innovative spirit” changed the use of fireworks to notify of the enemy's presence to the use of alarm bells triggered by remote control (225).

femininity and trans identities can be located in places that represent hegemonic masculinity in drug trafficking, the most desired place in terms of power and gender configurations is no longer merely masculine. This acknowledgment implies that the term “hegemonic masculinity,” along with its masculinist essence, cannot describe accurately the top of the gender relations pyramid or suggest gender dynamics and hierarchies. I propose, then, to use the expression “most desired position” or “most desired positions” to replace “hegemonic masculinity.” While crime is still a patriarchal space, my term challenges the perception of its structure as hypermasculine by acknowledging that heterosexual male masculinities are no longer required to achieve privileged positions of power. My term thus downplays masculinist discourses, because power configuration in the crime world cannot continue to be perceived as abiding by traditional gender structures and rules. At the same time, it justifies Connell’s argument that masculinities interact with femininities. Women and trans women have achieved diverse positions in a male-dominated world. By demasculinizing the language used to refer to the most desired positions, my term ultimately reflects the changes in drug traffic without erasing or homogenizing the gender orientations, sexualities, and desires of its participants.

### Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank David William Foster, her colleagues in the research colloquium sponsored by Latin American, Latino & Caribbean Studies at Dickinson, and the three anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments. This research was supported by the 2013 NEH Summer Seminar “Brazilian Literature: Twentieth-Century Urban Fiction.” An earlier draft of this article won the second place prize in the Best Paper of 2014 Elsa Chaney Competition, awarded by the Gender and Feminist Section of the Latin American Studies Association.

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**How to cite this article:** Castellanos Gonella, C. The Most Desired Positions: Brazilian Female Drug Traffickers in *Inferno* and *Falcão: Mulheres e o tráfico*. *Latin American Research Review*. 2017; 52(3), pp. 405–417. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25222/larr.37>

**Submitted:** 24 October 2014

**Accepted:** 11 January 2016

**Published:** 22 September 2017

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