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## ***Mar de plástico*: Masculinity, Whiteness, and Eastern European Migrants in Spanish Prime Time Television**

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### **Abstract**

The following essay analyzes representations of whiteness and its imbrication with both masculinity and the construction of Eastern European migrants in the Spanish TV drama *Mar de plástico* (2015). The violent, white masculinity of the protagonist, Héctor Aguirre, frames him as a protector of the weak and victimized, and the type of man needed to resolve the many problems plaguing Spanish society. By contrast, the whiteness of Eastern European migrants is portrayed as insidious and threatening to the safety and social structure of the community. Both of these engagements with whiteness stem from feelings of uncertainty and anger in broader Spanish society with entrenched economic and class hierarchies, as well a reaction to changing demographics and new influxes of immigrants. The innovative aspects of the show: a desire to create a well-produced, cinematic experience as well as engage with socially-relevant topics, unfortunately are only skin deep, because the narrative falls back on stereotyped portrayals of immigrants and a white, warrior-hero masculinity.

**Keywords:** Spain, masculinity, whiteness, Prestige TV, Eastern European migrants, interracial couples, *Mar de plástico*, race relations, Spanish Television

Produced by Boomerang TV/Atresmedia, *Mar de plástico* is set in the liminal, unstable space of the “Plastic Sea:” the dry, windswept plateaus of Almería that, in the last forty years, have gone from poverty-stricken to an economic boom due to the greenhouse agriculture. The fictional town Campoamargo, a silent protagonist in the show, is a *lugar de encuentro* for characters and events which represent various preoccupations of contemporary Spanish society, such as *gitanos*, Eastern European and African migrants, burgeoning right-wing extremism, young people's uncertain economic future, and mixed couples. The conflicts and tensions portray Spain as struggling to adapt to the challenges of the twenty-first century, failing to articulate new models of family, masculinity, and femininity in the face of an exploitative and corrupt system. In *Mar de plástico*, immigrants are portrayed as both victims and perpetrators of crime, always instigators of instability and chaos. As the individual responsible for the murders in Campoamargo is revealed to be the secret offspring of an Eastern European migrant, societal unrest is ultimately traced back to a problem of paternity and an unstable masculinity—of dead or absent fathers, legitimate and illegitimate offspring, and fears of incest. The chaos unleashed by the immigrant “return of the repressed” must be resolved, the series suggests, by a violent masculinity, represented by the detective, sergeant Héctor Aguirre (Rodolfo Sancho).

In what follows, I will analyze representations of whiteness and its imbrication with both masculinity and the construction of Eastern European migrants.<sup>1</sup> The violent, white masculinity of the protagonist, Héctor Aguirre, frames him as a protector of the weak and victimized, and the type of man needed to resolve the many problems plaguing Spanish society. By contrast, the whiteness of Eastern European migrants is portrayed as insidious and threatening to the safety and social structure of the community. Both of these engagements with whiteness stem from feelings of uncertainty and anger in broader Spanish society with entrenched economic and class hierarchies, as well a reaction to changing demographics and new influxes of immigrants. The innovative aspects of the show: a desire to create a well-produced, cinematic experience as well as engage with socially-relevant topics, unfortunately are only skin deep, because the narrative falls back on stereotyped portrayals of immigrants and a warrior-hero masculinity.

### **American Prestige TV and Spanish Prime Time Drama: Sharing the White Gaze**

Spanish television has been experiencing a renaissance in response to the convergence era of television, and the exports of the current “Golden Age” of American TV. Recent examples include Atresmedia's *Gran Hotel* (2011), *Bajo sospecha* (2015) and *La casa de papel* (2017), and TVE's international sensation *El Ministerio del Tiempo* (2015), among a handful of others. All four series are carried by Netflix streaming in an example of their international appeal, with *El Ministerio del Tiempo* currently produced by Netflix as well. *Mar de plástico* is a police procedural which has adopted many of the trappings of Prestige TV, such as high production values, heavy themes, and a desire for more narrative complexity.

Both the aesthetic and thematic goals of “Prestige,” or “Quality,” television, have a significant impact on the performances of masculinity and overall framework of the show.<sup>2</sup> A result of the “Third Golden Age” of American television, this new movement—and market—came about during the late 1990s, reaching a defining moment by the mid to late 2000s (Albrecht 4). New devices such as TiVo, the prevalence of DVD sales and rentals, OnDemand, and Netflix, allowed consumers to watch television in different ways (Leslie 4). In the past, most television viewing was episodic and interspersed with frequent commercials. In the convergence era, the digital medium and new technologies have encouraged the growth of a serialized format, which has allowed programs to develop a more “novelistic, multi-layered” style of show (Leslie 6). The subscription cable network HBO's hits such as *The Sopranos*, *Sex and the City*, *Deadwood*, and *The Wire* were defining products of the new Prestige era, though other networks such as FX,

Showtime, and streaming services on Netflix and Amazon are participants in the new Golden Age.

Historically, television was disdained as a mass-produced, unrefined, even “debased” medium. Part of television's lack of cultural prestige was due to its association with lower-status individuals in society: women, the elderly, and children (Newman and Levine 5). Cable and some of the larger broadcast networks now seek to cultivate a more serious, “high art” aesthetic, with a cinematic look and a determination to tackle more complex social and cultural issues (Albrecht 6).<sup>3</sup> These programs, like *Mar de plástico*, overwhelmingly foreground the experiences of white men and tend to showcase aspects of hegemonic masculinity. While traditionally television was a more feminized medium, particularly daytime television, the “masculinization” of the medium corresponds with an elevated discourse around TV production: it is “cinematic,” “novelistic,” and analyzed as an art form (Newman and Levine 10). While the kingmakers of Prestige TV overwhelmingly foreground white masculinity, some authors do argue that the shows also destabilize these discourses through the development of complex, damaged characters.<sup>4</sup> However, it is difficult to ascertain whether the performance of tortured male anti-heroes such as Don Draper (Jon Hamm) Tony Soprano (James Gandolfini), or Walter White (Bryan Cranston) translate to the audience as critical representations of masculinity, or, by presenting them as tragic protagonists on an almost operatic scale, function to fetishize the white male hero even more.

*Mar de plástico* features many of the characteristics of Prestige television, superimposed on what is essentially a police procedural. The production values are notably more cinematic than run-of-the-mill prime time fare: the wide shots of the landscape, evocative of the Western genre, as well as more contemplative close-ups and medium shots of characters, some without the intrusion of dialog. The yellowish-brown filters or sepia-tinted tones of the show give it a gritty and desolate feel, and the music is filled with angst, often featuring either sharp, unsettling percussion or whining, tortured-sounded vocalizations. These production qualities convey a sense of danger, anger and tension, alluding to the fact that the show is tackling serious and complex issues that are troubling Spanish society. While *Mar de plástico* is serialized, it is at heart a cop drama, and as such the mystery must be kept spinning for so long that almost the entire main cast is set up as possible suspects. The occasionally unconvincing level of suspense and unrelenting severity tend to weigh it down. And, while it does confront some of the most complex issues in recent Spanish society, the manner in which the series portrays these issues is ultimately damaging to migrants and their representation. Further, it fails to allow for an

expression of masculinity that is not conservative and violent. On the contrary, in the face of societal change and capitalist economic structures, the show posits the need for a violent, alpha masculinity to assert control and restore order.

### **Masculinity and Whiteness in the Police Procedural**

As a police procedural, the discourses of hegemonic masculinity, even hypermasculinity, are an integral part of the construction of the male characters, both “good guys” and “bad.” To quote Philippa Gates: “The detective film is concerned with a hero who triumphs over injustice and evil,” and most of those heroes are white (20). It is a critical commonplace that masculinity is not fixed, but rather a flexible discursive and performative construction.<sup>5</sup> When entwined with other identity markers such as class, race, and sexuality, its manifestation may be altered.

Erica Scharrer, a scholar of gender and violence in the media, has published extensively on portrayals of masculinity in American police and detective dramas. She notes that in cop dramas and detective shows, a mixture of portrayals and representations may be found, but very often it is common to find a representation of hypermasculinity, although the “good guys (namely police officers and detectives)” exhibit more of a range of masculine traits (93, 99). Significantly, though not surprisingly, her research demonstrates that white characters are the most prevalent, and that the police procedural as a genre has “been a largely White phenomenon” (104). While the “good guys” may have exhibited more nuanced or less hypermasculine traits over time, the villains have not evolved. Scharrer has categorized “physical aggression,” a “calloused attitude towards sex,” negative behaviors towards women, “stoicism” and “thrill seeking” as some key hypermasculine traits that are displayed in the genre (91-93, 99). Héctor Aguirre, while cast as the hero and good guy of the franchise, displays many of the characteristics of hypermasculinity, a fact that aligns him more closely with his nemesis, Juan Rueda (Pedro Casablanc) and with the other bad guys of the series.

*Mar de plástico* mounts a critique that reflects Spanish society's overall frustration with corruption and predatory market capitalism in part through the negative portrayal of Juan Rueda. He is the older cacique owner of Rueda greenhouses, and the richest and most powerful man in Campoamargo. Lola (Nya de la Rubia), Aguirre's partner, describes Rueda: “Todo empieza y acaba en su bolsillo. . . . es una especie de terrateniente a la antigua.” His performance as a kingpin or mafioso type coincides with many of the hypermasculine and patriarchal qualities outlined by Scharrer in her studies. While he is not portrayed as physically violent, he has the

power to order acts of violence and intimidation. He frequents a strip club, and is married to Agneska (Lisi Linder), a Russian trophy wife, with whom he is portrayed as intimidating and having rough sex. He also is the secret father of Ainhoa (Mara López), the young woman whose unsolved murder serves as the impetus for the entire show.

Rueda, like almost all of the main cast, is posited as Ainhoa's killer for a time. Before his innocence of the crime comes to light, there is an "incest scare" in which, as a noted philanderer, he is suspected of sleeping with his daughter (while ignorant of his paternity). The inclusion of the incest theme underscores the repercussions of secrets and the consequences of the sexual exploitation of women—both key plot and thematic points of *Mar de plástico* (Sheffer 3). Both Rueda and the other main entrepreneur in town, don Francisco, who owns the gas stations and the strip club "Kassandra," made much of their initial money in human trafficking, specifically transporting Romanian women to Spain. Juan's connections with his former supplier of women, Borislav, are in fact how he met Agneska.

The consequences of treating humans as merchandise fall disproportionately on women in this series, thus reinforcing the heteronormativity displayed throughout the First Season. The first example of this is Ainhoa, murdered during the pilot and revealed to be Juan Rueda's natural daughter. Her body is drained of blood, which is then piped into the sprinkler system, raining down on the workers and the crops, in a very vivid dramatization of the human costs of business. In addition, the deaths of seventeen Romanian prostitutes by asphyxiation during their transport to Campoamargo are discovered. This horrific incident has bound Rueda, don Francisco, the chief of police, as well as others in Campoamargo in a pact of silence and corruption for twenty years.

While Rueda and Francisco are powerful characters, they are portrayed as toxic due to their complicity in murder and exploitation. Furthermore, they are failures as fathers, a quality that symbolizes a damaged or insufficient masculinity. *Mar de plástico* is rife with paternity issues and critiques of weak or outdated masculinities. These include patriarchs like don Francisco, who have abandoned their families for Russian trophy wives, or fathers who are dead or rendered incompetent due to addiction. The illegitimacy and impotence of Rueda, and thus the consequences of the traditional political and social structures of Spanish society, are particularly shown in the representation of his children. Sergio Rueda embodies Juan's metaphorical impotence, because he has a mental disability and (in a stereotypical and problematic portrayal of mental impairment) is thus rejected by his father and portrayed as an unviable heir to carry out

the Rueda legacy. Juan Rueda's other son, Fernando, is blonde and pale, and does not resemble Rueda at all. In the end his true identity is revealed; Fernando is actually Boris, the son of one of the Romanian migrants who died twenty years earlier, and the only one who was intentionally murdered to ensure her silence.

The failures of these paternal figures are a failure of societal systems and mores, which, particularly since the economic crash of 2008, have left the youth in Spain, much like the youth in Campoamargo, with an unstable reality and uncertain future, in which many feel they have few options except to leave. The young people in *Mar de plástico* are bitter and disaffected, turning to violence, vandalism and racism in the absence of other models and opportunities. But while the show critiques, it does not put forth any new system to replace the old. The solution, in the form of maverick Héctor Aguirre, is in many ways merely an extension of the very systems of power, privilege and masculinity that the show castigates.

### **Whiteness and the Warrior Hero**

Spain's historically complex access to European identity or even "whiteness" is circumvented and treated as unproblematic in *Mar de plástico*. In large part, this is because the two main male characters, Juan Rueda and Héctor Aguirre, correspond with rather set, archetypal frames of a white male hero, popular in film and television. Aguirre, for example, is essentially a Hollywood "man of action," who embodies a heroic masculinity that allows him to take the law into his own hands, but only because his use of violence and "rugged individualism" are tempered by a concern for the greater good (Holt and Thompson 428). Though he is an outsider, he is easily ceded power and authority, a role that he comfortably inhabits as both white and male.

Much like masculinity, whiteness maintains its discursive power by its virtual invisibility, its role as an unquestioned standard of normality.<sup>6</sup> As both Dyer and Gates have asserted, "whiteness secures its dominance by seeming to be nothing in particular . . . only when the experience presented on the screen belongs to a racial 'other' do we note that race is an issue" (Gates 20). In Campoamargo, whites are in positions of power. They are members of the military, entrepreneurs and business owners, the mayor, police officers, and forensic pathologists. Their positions are unquestioned and unremarkable, whereas migrants and *gitanos*, cast as phenotypically different, are noted both for these distinctions and the fact that they operate on the margins of society.

Though Aguirre is in many ways a typical “good guy” of a cop or detective show, his character is lent nuance and depth in a similar fashion to the recent anti-heroes showcased by Prestige TV. Characters such as Tony Soprano or Don Draper portray a troubled, damaged white masculinity. They are men who, while they may present a façade of stoicism and power to the outside world, demonstrate to the viewer that they may not be entirely under control, and may suffer from loneliness, panic attacks, and even need therapy. Aguirre certainly exhibits many of the standard features of a hegemonic masculinity, particularly as a former soldier in Afghanistan. Privera and Howard, in a discussion of the “Warrior Hero,” note that “Military archetypes themselves operate in a hierarchy with the ‘warrior hero’” at the top. He is independent, disciplined, strong, sexually potent, and above all masculine” (31). These features are highlighted in the first episode, in which Aguirre, new to town, defends a humble African migrant who is being verbally and physically threatened. Aguirre takes on several locals in a bar fight and dispenses with them in swift hand-to-hand combat. His strength and speed, as well as his refusal to be cowed by local authority figures, are features of his warrior hero persona. He is protective of Marta (Belén López) and her son Nacho (Máximo Pastor), acting as a surrogate father at different moments in the series. Aguirre is, in fact, the only positive father figure seen in Season One, a circumstance that shores up his heroic image. Yet his “super” hero persona is disrupted by the post-traumatic stress he suffers due to his deployment in Afghanistan.<sup>7</sup>

While Aguirre is strong in hand-to-hand combat, he visibly shakes when holding a firearm; he is prone to sudden aggression with suspects and loses physical and emotional control. While he is not an anti-hero (he is firmly in the category of “good guy”), Aguirre's struggles make him a more sympathetic, darker, and vulnerable character, imbuing the performance of “warrior” masculinity with more complexity. In particular, his anxiety with wielding a gun is a nuance rarely, if ever, seen in a police procedural. Yet, for all that the writers of *Mar de plástico* attempt to infuse Héctor Aguirre with nuance, his character does not stray very far from the key features of hypermasculinity delineated by Scharer as typical of police procedurals. While Aguirre is not violent towards women, he is aggressive and maintains a remote bearing. Thus, violence, and the capacity to enact it—whether or not one does—is the key symbolic element to behaving like a “real man,” in the construction of hegemonic masculinity (Persánch 12). He deals with his PTSD and volatile emotions by hitting a boxing bag and by resorting to workaholicism, never resorting to “feminine” or “weak” behaviors like talking about his feelings. His weakness and discomfort holding a gun and his difficulties managing his PTSD indicate a damaged and troubled



masculinity. But at the end of the First Season, Héctor saves Nacho, shooting Fernando when he holds Nacho hostage in the final standoff of the series. Thus, in successfully apprehending and injuring the killer, Héctor has recovered his masculinity as a warrior hero who enacts violence and wields a gun in the service of protecting both the greater good and “his” woman and child.

### **Racism, Migrants, and Marginalized Whiteness in *Mar de Plástico***

Midway through the pilot episode, Lola, Aguirre’s partner, gives him a tour of Campoamargo, the better to acquaint him and thus, the viewer, with the locale. Lola describes the people who built the greenhouse industry in Almería as humble and hardworking, “gente currante,” though we never see those individuals. Rather, the tour presents Campoamargo as a space filled with Others: “Como ve, es un pueblo muy pequeño, pero tenemos un poco de todo. Tenemos gitanos, marroquíes, morenos... y rusas, también tenemos rusas.” The Others must be explained and commented upon because, as Dyer has asserted, “This assumption that white people are just people, which is not far off saying that whites are people whereas other colours are something else, is endemic to white culture” (2). During the tour, Lola mostly points out groups categorized as foreign (and racial) others. However, as they drive by a group of young Spaniards Lola says: “Mira esos. Esos se las dan de malotes.” This group of young adults are the neo-Nazis, or racists. They are violent towards the migrants (in particular black migrants) throughout the show, even going so far as to douse Khaled (Will Shephard) with gasoline, threatening to burn him alive, when he becomes the prime suspect in Ainhoa’s murder investigation.

It is significant that this group is relegated to the list of Others or “non-Spanish” outsiders that Lola enumerates, given that they *are* Spanish and white. However, I argue that they manifest a damaged, or “deficient” whiteness (Wayne 210). In American cinematic culture, and in Prestige TV, this role is usually filled by characters who represent a form of “white trash,” corresponding with a “marginalized class status” and openly racist behaviors (Wayne 210). This relegates race as a problem for only certain groups and thus, the mainstream viewer, who identifies with the hero (in this case Aguirre), is not branded as racist. Aguirre is never depicted as holding racist views nor commenting on racial matters. This limits racism to the beliefs and actions of a minor group within the community, isolating the hero and other main characters from having to engage in more complicated racial interactions and negotiations—for example, Héctor’s lack of comment on Lola’s status as “gitana y guardia civil,” and his general silence on all things migration or race related. This further hides the structural elements of racism, distilling

it down to a series of interpersonal choices and actions, and giving the impression that it's "only a few extreme, dangerous whites who are really racist" (Hartigan 324). The mainstream viewer, of course, is not expected to identify with these extremists, but rather only with the heroic and non-racist good guys.

Interestingly, Lola others herself, humorously remarking on the fact that, indeed, she is both "gitana y guardia civil," at which Aguirre only chuckles, amused. Though Lola is Aguirre's subordinate, she functions more as a sidekick or partner. Her role echoes that of the African-American or biracial partner of the Hollywood buddy cop films of the 80s and 90s. Lola, estranged from her family, is made more familiar to a mainstream audience by being isolated from her community (who are portrayed as having strong criminal elements), similar to the ways in which African-American sidekicks were made to appear less threatening to white, middle-class viewers (Gates 21, 27). Again, those portrayed as white do not have to explain or justify their roles, but Lola's ethnic identity and her profession are incongruous and in need of contextualization for the viewer. "Gypsy" is an identity and a community in Western discourse that is the antithesis of law and order, nation, and whiteness. Thus, the writers of *Mar de plástico* incorporate a framework for the viewer that includes both an explanation by Lola herself, as well as a portrayal of physical and emotional distance from her family and community.

Though immigrants are overall associated with crime, *Mar de plástico* generally portrays African migrants sympathetically, as workers, victims of violence or, in the case of Fara (Yaima Ramos), a love interest. The majority of African migrants portrayed on the show are black, and the show steers firmly away from engagement with North Africans, who are seen only briefly. This avoids any explicitly negative portrayal of Moroccans or Muslims, which could leave the show open to obvious critiques. However, the issue of terrorism plays a key role, as Héctor Aguirre's past military service in Afghanistan and the possible involvement of his best friend with Al Qaeda become a plot point.

Racism as matter of personal choice, versus a structural and societal problem is brought to bear in the rehabilitation of the character Lucas (Jesús Castro) through his relationship with Fara, a Guinean migrant. Lucas begins the series as a violent, disaffected neo-Nazi, who participates in mob violence and tries to murder Fara's brother Khaled by almost lighting him on fire. Later, however, Lucas saves Fara's life, and the two rather improbably fall in love. Lucas's rehabilitation through love is a personal and sentimental transformation, in which he rejects his former ideology and has his swastika tattoo removed.

Like relegating racism to something only “deficient whites” do, interracial relationships “situate the problem of race in personal and emotional terms, suggesting that whites’ positive feelings towards blacks’ mark the end of racism” (Thornton 227). The program, thus, frames integration and racism in the private and emotional realm, not in a public or political one. Indeed, the plot line of the interracial or mixed couple is a common trope used to represent unification (or lack thereof) between disparate racial, cultural or religious groups within a nation or community. However, in *Mar de plástico* the mixed union is not employed as a fully-realized, structural conceit. Instead, the metaphor functions as an easy solution and avoids treatment of racism as a broad and complex theme. Typically, once the relationship is solidified through marriage, the characters disappear, and indeed, Lucas and Fara leave by the end of the First Season. The “disappearance” of the mixed couple is also a fate met by many black characters in Spanish television, who usually exist to serve the plot points of the white characters and fade away once that goal is achieved (Santaolalla 159). Thus, the complexities of integration and cultural negotiation are not yet of overwhelming interest to contemporary Spanish cultural production.<sup>8</sup>

Fara acts as Lucas’s emotional savior, and their wedding is a cheerful, if melodramatic highlight in what is otherwise quite a dark television show. Spanish mixed-race romance often portrays a black (usually foreign) female as an acceptable partner to a Spanish male if she embodies a more traditional femininity, which Fara certainly does.<sup>9</sup> Her submissive, more traditional demeanor contrasts with that of Agneska and Pilar, Lucas’s former girlfriend, who is confrontational and violent, not characteristics associated with femininity. Pilar is also racist and a member of the neo-Nazi group.

Fara is constructed as closely as possible, culturally, to “Spanish” identity. She is portrayed as a Guinean migrant, and the Cuban-born actress Yaima Ramos has emphasized that the creation of a Guinean identity and an authentic Guinean accent—a Northern Castilian dialect—were a major part of her preparation for the role (Rosado). Thus *Mar de plástico* extends aspects of Hispanotropicalism into the post-colonial era; Guineans, as former colonial subjects, are “brothers” in la Hispanidad (Nerín 11-16).<sup>10</sup> This historical and cultural connection, albeit from a subaltern position, allows Fara to be comfortably assimilated into Spanish identity, as both her femininity and close linguistic dialect compensate for her racial otherness. This contrasts starkly with the other “foreign wife” character, Agneska, who is marked as irrevocably other and antagonistic to Spanish identity.

### **Insidious Whiteness: Eastern Europeans on Spanish Television**

In contrast to the representations of Africans, Eastern European migrants are portrayed with clear negativity. They are highly dangerous, sly, conniving, and used throughout the show in sex scenes and sexual situations. As a geographical group, Eastern European migrants are a newer population in Spain as compared to Latin Americans or North Africans. However, as of 2016, Romanians comprised the largest group of foreigners in Spain, followed closely by Moroccans. In the same year, Bulgarians, Romanians and Ukrainians made up roughly 2.1 percent of the population, constituting almost 22 percent of the foreign population in Spain, based on preliminary data (“Cifras”).

The suspicion and unease with which they are viewed in Campoamargo reflects the ambivalent welcome of Slavic countries into the European Union. The incorporation of Central and Eastern European nations in the 2004 and 2007 enlargements of the EU was accompanied by a moratorium on the movement of individuals from certain countries, though not goods. The imposition of “conditionality,” or prerequisites to entry was not required of countries in earlier extensions of the European Union (Nikolova 394). The official story was that restrictions were a necessary part of reforming rampantly corrupt, formerly communist countries. In reality, Eastern Europe’s image as a marginalized, even Orientalized space is a centuries-old construction. The term itself, “Eastern” Europe, qualifies the geographical space as “inferior and in need of a civilizational remake” because the states and individuals are subaltern (Ivasiuc 5).<sup>11</sup>

More acutely, Bulgaria and particularly Romania, have been the focus of a marginalizing rhetoric because of the status of the Roma, or “Gypsies” as an inferior race that threatens Western identity and infrastructures. Ruth Ferrero Turrión argues that the negative perception of Romanians and Bulgarians influenced the impediments and stricter controls placed on many Eastern Bloc countries. This includes stereotypes such as “son más proclives al crimen organizado, a la corrupción, a asaltar casas de forma violenta, a la mendicidad o a la explotación de niños” (54). Access to white, European identity for citizens of the former Soviet Bloc is problematized and claims they may have assumed were automatic regarding phenotypic, ethnic, or cultural similarities may be invalidated in Western European countries.

The negative perceptions of individuals from the former Soviet Bloc extends throughout Western Europe. Studies of Russian-speaking migrants in Finland document their struggles to be recognized as “white” and “legitimate” due to their lower social class and status. These migrants,

much like Romanians in Spain and the UK, are often cast as shifty “welfare abusers” (Krivonos 1). These immigrants are stigmatized due to working low-paying or lower-skilled jobs, along with language barriers and cultural stereotypes, all of which complicate their reception as “white,” though their actual phenotype remains unchanged (Fox 1882). In Spain, Romanians have been specifically targeted as a problem, such as in Xavier Garcia Albiol’s 2015 mayorial campaign, in which he took out a billboard with his photo next to the phrase “Limpiando Badalona.” This was part of his anti-immigrant stance that openly targeted Moroccans and Romanians, particularly Romanian gypsies (Roger). In the case of Albiol’s billboard, the act of cleansing Badalona signifies expelling those groups perceived as contaminating the purity of the national community.

The Eastern Europeans on *Mar de plástico* are disqualified as legitimate national subjects. Like the disaffected youth, Russians and Romanians are cast as possessing a deficient whiteness, which endangers Spaniards. In fact, the show presents their capacity to insinuate themselves into the Spanish “family” and a high socioeconomic status as insidious and dangerous. There’s a sinister quality to the characters “from the East” because although they are not Spanish, they are incorporated into the fabric of Spanish society, passing more easily than, for example, African migrants. They are adopted sons, like Fernando; second wives, like Agneska; and trusted foremen, like Eric; but they are not authentic, and they are portrayed as unstable, greedy, and untrustworthy. In the case of Fernando Rueda (whose “true” identity is revealed to be Boris) even when raised as Spanish, he turns his back his adopted father, which may entail a symbolic conflict with his adopted nation.

The casting of Eastern Europeans for *Mar de plástico* involved stock Hollywood characterizations of Russians as individuals with high cheekbones, often blonde, who speak with heavy accents. The producers auditioned Russians for the part of Agneska, but ended up choosing the actress Lisi Linder, originally from Cádiz, because she was “más rusa que las rusas” (Linder). I interpret the epithet “más rusa que las rusas” to mean that Linder can correctly perform the stereotype of what a Spanish audience thinks of as “a Russian,” and embody what that Otherness should mean to the audience. Robert Thompson, the founding director of the Bleier Center for Television and Popular Culture at Syracuse University, has remarked upon some of the stereotypes of Russians found in Hollywood and television portrayals: “Humorless, cold. Overly, ruthlessly logical. Robotic. A really thick accent. We know that Russian villain” (Goldstein). Agneska, true to type, is cruel to her Moroccan maid and she and her group of friends prance around Campoamargo, lunching, shopping, and generally being haughty.

Fernando Rueda's revelation as Boris, and his subsequent betrayal of his family and friends, is a variation on the theme of the Russian double-agent. In the American media and thus in Hollywood, the Russians have been an enemy who could pretend to be exactly like "us." Examples abound, but the most recent is FX's award-winning *The Americans*, about a family of integrated Russian spies living in the United States, set during the waning years of the Cold War. The title of the show is ironic, pointing to the fact that the two Russian agents appear to be wholesome and successful American business owners and parents. This speaks to the portability in both the U.S. and Europe of the stereotype of the "untrustworthy" Slavs, who insinuate themselves into the nation or home while maintaining an agenda contrary to those of the greater community. This is reflected as well in attitudes towards Eastern European women employed as in-home caregivers in the EU. These women, although doing essential tasks for the well-being of their employers and working in an intimate capacity, continue to be seen as untrustworthy and capable of abuse (Ivasiuc 7).

The sexualization of Russian women also informs the construction of Agneska in *Mar de plástico*. In Spain, there has been an increase in mixed marriages not only due to the rising migrant influx, but also because of a spike in Spanish men searching for a younger partner in the style of the "mail order bride." Russia, Ukraine, and other Eastern European countries, together with Latin America (especially Brazil), are the main destinations for these international searches. The anthropologist Jordi Roca Girona has demonstrated, through extensive interviews, that among the many reasons given, preconceptions or stereotypes about Slavic women's sexuality are a significant motivator for choosing them as partners, and that international trips to meet a potential wife are also opportunities for sexual tourism ("Rebuscando" 494-501, "El color," 391). Agneska's blonde pallor, heavy accent, and cold, callous demeanor are also part of her characterization as a Russian *femme fatale*, a feature used by the writers to create sexual tension. She relates to the male characters primarily through her sexuality and uses it to attempt to manipulate them, a ploy that does not work on Aguirre, who turns the tables on her more than once. Agneska's status as the fatal woman and her Otherness work as an alibi to objectify her body; it "allows" the writers to represent Agneska as a sexual object. As a callous woman, she "deserves" rough treatment, and as such, she has the most graphic and rough sex scenes in the show. She and her Eastern European friends, also trophy wives, are viewed as interlopers and home wreckers, as opposed to Fara and the other Spanish women in the program.

Agneska also has a series of awkward scenes with Fernando, her step-son, laced with a mixture of loathing and sexual tension, which, like Juan's suspected liaison with Ainhoa, plays on the incest theme and its personification of the consequences of secrets, betrayal, and female exploitation.<sup>12</sup> In this instance, the allusion to incest further pathologizes Agneska and Francisco's sexuality and represents them as degraded and untrustworthy individuals "from the East."

In one interview, Linder was asked how she thought audiences would react to seeing such stereotyped characters on screen. Her response, in line with the goals of Prestige TV, circumvented the issue of stereotypes in favor of cultural diversity, as she defended the characterizations in the program:

lo que va a generar es mucho interés, mucho interés porque es una realidad que la vemos de todas las ciudades de España, que hoy tú te montas en el metro y en el metro pues te ves a un chino hablando madrileño, te ves al negro . . . y hay tantas culturas hoy en día integradas en España que. . . a mí como espectador . . . a mí eso me genera curiosidad de verlo . . . porque creo que es hora de hablar de eso porque es España hoy en día también. (Linder 2015)

However, while the series does show a variety of different cultures in one geographical location, it does not overall demonstrate integration but rather an Othering of liminal communities. While the conflicts between characters of different races and nationalities certainly generate drama (and thus "interest"), they merely reinforce negative preconceptions about the Roma, Africans and Eastern Europeans. And so, Season One comes full circle, beginning and ending with the murders of Spanish women, first Ainhoa, then Marta. While it is true that Spain is more multicultural, within *Mar de plástico*, that signifies chaos, crime, and death.

## Conclusion

For all its faults—heavy-handed melodrama, uneven or unconvincing plot lines—*Mar de plástico* has truly taken the pulse of Spanish society, which is beating in anger and frustration. The series demonstrates the apparent failure of old heteronormative models of masculinity, metaphors for a predatory market capitalism that has enriched some, but excluded many more, and has not provided for a strong future for the youth. The deep distrust in the government, the police, the military, and the economic system, is very clearly portrayed. Certainly, it would be satisfying, as a Spanish viewer, to watch Héctor Aguirre blow into town and tersely tell off all representatives of

higher authority, refusing to play their corrupt power games. But for all of that, the show is deeply ambivalent, because it presents no new solution. Steamrolling old, overblown *mafiosos* and replacing one form of entrenched corruption with the actions of a military-trained maverick isn't really a viable alternative, though it may feel good to watch (and write) in the moment. Moreover, this ambivalence ultimately protects white, patriarchal, heteronormative identities, by continuing to reproduce them as heroic, via the figure of Aguirre.

In recent years, there has been a rise of far-right nationalism and white supremacist movements all over Europe and the United States. The hypermasculine, military-trained hero who bucks the system when it suits him reflects the more conservative and violent ideologies of these right-wing groups, who may find the idea of taking the law into one's own hands acceptable. Further, while the cultural diversity of Spanish society is rehearsed on screen, in fact the series represents Spanish identity in a closed circle of local, white protagonists, who are surrounded by encroaching others—some benign, but mostly threatening. Efforts are made on the part of the writers and producers to distance the hero, and thus the mainstream viewers, from racism, or even engaging with race very much at all. The young neo-Nazis enact such virulent behaviors that the other white characters, who are contrasted favorably, are further isolated from dealing with race or racial hierarchies. Interestingly, these racist characters, as well as the Eastern European migrants, are portrayed as possessing a deficient whiteness. This degradation others them and distances them from the heroic, masculine whiteness of Aguirre.

This leads us to ask: how can Spanish television meet the expectations of a newer, more demanding market, weaned on the style of Prestige TV, yet also demonstrate innovation and creativity in the representation of race? The full answer exceeds the capacities of this article, but I believe that my essay demonstrates that in large part, it would involve the development of less hegemonic portrayals of masculinity, and a mode of representation that does not utilize racial others as placeholders for multiculturalism, but which instead also considers the negotiations and privileges of whiteness.



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> My analysis will focus on the First Season, which premiered in 2015.

<sup>2</sup> "Quality television" is the term used most often by media scholars. Michael Newman explains that, since the 1970s and 80s, "Quality" referred to the efforts made by the major networks to court a more upscale audience, among other characteristics ("Re: Quality"). I prefer the newer term, "Prestige TV," which is associated with the rhetoric of the new Golden Age of television. I find the moniker of "Prestige" to be a more accurate term for my purposes. To possess or lack quality is a subjective evaluation, while "prestige" speaks to the aspirational designs of the writers, producers, and networks. I will use the term "Prestige TV" throughout this article to refer to what might otherwise be known as "Quality television."

<sup>3</sup> Television has certainly become more legitimized, as evidenced by "Canneseries," the first Cannes television festival, inaugurated in 2018. That same year also witnessed, at the Cannes film festival, the controversy over Netflix's participation, with Pedro Almodóvar stating that the Palme d'Or should not be awarded to a film that did not have a theatrical release (Keegan).

<sup>4</sup> See Albrecht 2015, Lotz 2014, Martin 2013, and Newman 2016.

<sup>5</sup> See Connell 1995 and Horlacher, "Configuring Masculinities," pp. 3-5.

<sup>6</sup> See "White Privilege and Male Privilege," by Peggy McIntosh, in *Oppression, Privilege and Resistance*. The author also briefly applies her methodology to heterosexual privilege in the article.

<sup>7</sup> I interpret both the PTSD and the specter of ISIS terrorism as an influence (partly) of the Showtime series *Homeland* and its antihero, Nicholas Brody (Damian Lewis). These similarities reinforce the connection between newer Spanish television fare and the products of the so-called "Golden Age," with its international influence, due in part to the digital medium and satellite broadcasting.

<sup>8</sup> Fara and her brother, Khaled, are Guinean migrants, yet neither has a Guinean name. Many Guineans have both traditional or autochthonous names as well as Spanish ones, reflecting the influence of Spain and Spanish as the language of colonization. However, both the names Fara and Khaled are derived from Arabic, which does not reflect either the current or historical heritage of Guinea. This is yet another example of non-white characters' identities existing as placeholders for the dominant culture, the result of which is a representation that has nothing to do with, in this instance, Guinea.

<sup>9</sup> See Kim 188-89; Flesler 146-46, and Martin-Márquez, "A World" 268.

<sup>10</sup> See also Martin-Márquez, *Disorientations* 49.

<sup>11</sup> This idea of Eastern Europe as a space "between Europe and Asia," with a culture that vacillated between civilization and barbarism, extends further back into history than the concept of the Iron Curtain, and begins with the construction of a civilized "Western" Europe in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century (Wolff 3, 357).

<sup>12</sup> Agneska's overt sexualization also panders to viewers in an attempt to garner higher ratings, which is a common practice for programs produced by premium networks such as HBO. This has led to an occasional over-reliance on graphic sex or nudity as a focal point. For example, the international sensation *Game of Thrones* was critically lampooned when it repeatedly employed what critics dubbed "sexposition," a portmanteau of sex and exposition that exposes the tendency to rely on nudity and sex to keep viewers engaged during scenes with heavy dialogue (Hann 2012).

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