

Melodrama and the Production of Empathy in Manuel Puig's *El beso de la mujer araña*

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ABSTRACT: Manuel Puig's 1974 novel, *El beso de la mujer araña*, investigates how empathy can be incrementally learned through a melodramatic storytelling practice and, eventually, mobilized to effect political and social change. As Molina and Valentín, the two protagonists, coinhabit the same jail cell in Buenos Aires, Puig uses the sentimental, aesthetic, and formal qualities of nineteenth-century melodrama, seen primarily through the Hollywood B-film, *Cat People*, to structure the reader's understanding of how political, sexual, and class-based empathy is constructed inside Argentina's first "Dirty War novel." Puig employs the structure of melodrama as a means of mobilizing empathy vis-à-vis the psychological and physical body of the other. What develops in *El beso* is a model for narrative empathy centering on the body as a vehicle for empathetic connection. Empathy, therefore, becomes a space for political action. This empathy is constructed through reading and the excess of identification, which in turn diminishes the self/other divide, and enables the surrender to touch and desire which subsequently shapes a new identity.

KEYWORDS: Manuel Puig, empathy, melodrama, gender, Argentina, identity

Manuel Puig's 1976 novel, *El beso de la mujer araña*, demonstrates how the mobilization of empathy between individuals can transform political ideology, the structure of desire, and the rigid gender norms framing Argentine masculinity. The novel focuses on the relationship and discourse between two strikingly different individuals sharing a jail cell in Buenos Aires in 1975, months before the formal establishment of Argentina's military regime. One of the prisoners, Molina, relies on the sentimental framework of nineteenth-century melodrama to narrate and describe twentieth-century Hollywood B movies to "his" cell mate Valentín, a prototypical leftist guerilla embedded in a masculine moral code.¹ Molina's storytelling practice uncovers Valentín's dormant sensibility by initiating a process of empathetic recognition between the two prisoners, juxtaposing Valentín's Marxist political agenda and the entrenched homophobia of Argentina's revolutionary armed organizations during the 1970's.

The prison cell is a fruitful setting for generating new ideologies and desires, as it exists both inside (as a product of) and outside (away from) the sociopolitical landscape. In this space, the ideological, cultural, and sexual differences preventing Molina and Valentín from ever encountering one another in the outside world lose traction as the two are forced into intimate proximity. The novel maps the eventual contact of their bodies, both mentally and physically, as both prisoners learn how to empathize with each other. This empathy is constructed in three interconnecting ways: (1) through the excess of identification that the melodramatic telling process enables, (2) through the diminishing of the self/other divide by learn-

ing how to identify with the other, (3) and through a final surrender to touch and desire which subsequently shapes a new understanding of one's identity, ideology, and sexuality.

As the empathetic recognition between Valentín and Molina develops, the two prisoners begin overcoming political, sexual, and class differences. Valentín begins reconsidering the models of rigid masculinity and heterosexual normativity held up by both the conservative military and the leftist guerillas, who believed only these rigid norms could form Argentine masculinity. The initial struggle between the two prisoners is transformed as Valentín begins accepting Molina's sexual identity as well as restructuring his own matrix of desire and empathy. Furthermore, through Molina's melodramatic storytelling practice Valentín recognizes that gender and desire can be fluid, slowly changing the structures of his own masculinity.

Intersections of "Revolutionary" Homophobia, Melodrama, and Empathy

El beso articulates a new discourse of masculinity and desire by allowing sexuality, and especially homosexuality, to intersect with the political (Peralta 10). This discourse is developed by the two prisoners as they learn to negotiate both the prison space and their own prescribed gender codes and sexual morals. This is especially prevalent as Valentín's newfound empathy begins dismantling the borders between gender, desire, and identity. These rigid gendered

morals, continuously promoted by the military dictatorship and the Catholic Church during the 1970's, sought to center national morality on the heterosexual nuclear family, which was defined as the basic cell of a functioning society (D'Antonio 136). Puig's novel undermines these moral codes by demonstrating how the intersections between sexuality and empathy can generate new ideologies for two drastically different individuals.

In a groundbreaking work on the cultural emergence of melodrama as a genre, Michael Hays and Anastasia Nikolopoulou posit that "the capacity of melodrama to simultaneously incorporate the discourse of imperialism, nationalism, and class and gender conflict points not only to the genre's structural malleability but to the role it played in approaching and 'resolving' the historical complexities that lie behind its interesting horizons" (X). If we take 1975 Argentina, the setting of Puig's novel, as time in need of "resolving" particular historical complexities we begin witnessing how the nation's control of gender discourse served to eradicate difference, thus limiting what qualified as "the right kind" of national identity or "the right kind" of citizen. Similar to how "fears of 'deviant sexuality'" in the U.S. during the Cold War led "to a politics of both containment and sexual liberation", the Argentine army created an image of "the enemy within Argentina" that encompassed "youth, sexual deviancy and subversion" (Manzano 2). Through descriptions of Irena's and Molina's sexual identity in the first two chapters of the novel, Puig illustrates how Valentín develops his own version of "deviant" *machismo*. The promotion of "deviant" sexuality in the novel starts to exist as a plausible alternative to the dangerous (in the case of Irena) state-mandated sexualities which imprison the body and, in effect, endanger the lives of others.

Valentín's characterization as a leftist militant recalls what Jean Franco determines is the "character of the guerilla," a "new man who must be ready to sacrifice his own life" (120). The character of the guerilla as defined by Puig, furthermore, is deeply entrenched within homophobic beliefs during and even before the 1970's in Argentina. Even the initial conflict between Molina and Valentín showcases the well-established homophobia guiding most armed organizations during the 1970's. The fact that Valentín does not initially take Molina seriously as a peer, even as they are in the same prison together, is accompanied by his own prevalent assumptions of Molina, ones which get recalibrated as his sensibility grows. "Yo ya sé todo de vos, aunque no me hayas contado nada," Valentín tells him early in the novel (Puig 21). Valentín's "knowledge" of Molina is one grounded upon visible stereotypes, not lived reality. In order to provoke a change in his sensibility, Molina employs the melodramatic narrative mode, such as the one employed within "his" retelling of *Cat People*.

The melodrama fostering empathy between the prisoners, while also initiating a restructuring of masculine desire, first occurs inside the films Molina narrates. Soon after the melodramatic mode gains traction, Molina and Valentín engage in more intimate dialogues and even bodily expressions. Their closeness is especially

important in a country whose moral structures had severe impacts on considerations of gender and sexuality, as heteronormativity and the nuclear family-unit became engrained ideologies for both the military government and leftist leaders and organizations. Even after the dictatorship was over, these moral structures impacted how LGBTQ+ victims were represented within human rights reports such as *Nunca Más. They were not*. In fact, the report does not "name a single person detained or disappeared because of his or her sexual orientation. This glaring omission prompted Carlos Jáuregui, a prominent gay activist exiled in France during the military dictatorship and future leader of Argentina's post-transition gay rights movement, to complain that 'the gays are the disappeared among the disappeared'" (Encarnación 92).

Strong emotionalism is necessary to overcome these engrained moral structures which led to such incomprehensible historical omissions. In fact, the connotations of the word melodrama include: "the indulgence of strong emotionalism; moral polarization and schematization; extreme states of being, situations, actions; overt villainy, persecution of the good and final reward of virtue; inflated and extravagant expression; dark plottings, suspense, breathtaking periphery" (Brooks 12). As such, Puig uses melodrama as a tool to forge a new set of ethical categories for the understanding of sexuality – ones founded upon melodrama's ability to promote empathy. Melodrama is the mold upon which the consciousness of Latin America is forged, a foundational building block supporting national construction in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Sadler 45). If melodrama is used effectively, it has the power to reshape public consciousness. Through Valentín, the reader witnesses how the melodramatic process can restructure the connections between political ideology and the rigid structures of masculinity that ideology often superimposes on its subject.

The origins of melodrama, Peter Brooks argues, are located within the context of the French Revolution and its aftermath, thus binding melodrama not only to human rights discourse, but also to the construction of empathy that Lynn Hunt connects to the burgeoning novelistic form of the late eighteenth century (15). Brooks claims that the melodramatic form appeared as an alternative discourse combatting the invalid literary forms, such as tragedy and the comedy of manners, fostered by pre-revolutionary society (15). Likewise, Puig turns to melodrama in the midst of a collapsing society, marked by the fall of Peronism and the subsequent rise of the military dictatorship. In turning to melodrama, Puig turns back to nineteenth-century literary models, questioning the very foundation of Latin American nation-formation and political identity. In directly addressing the nineteenth-century literary sphere that, according to Doris Sommer, combined eroticism and politics together in order to foster a stable domestic space, which could then extend itself to the nation-space, *El beso* relies on the formal qualities of melodrama to question the steadfast versions of both nation and the national subject portrayed by its two protagonists (Sommer 4). Molina's melodramatic film narration becomes the primary means

of reconstructing the relationship between "himself" and Valentín, refashioning the repressive cell-space into something bodily, performative, theatrical, and visually stimulating.

Historians continue investigating the cemented connections between melodramatic mass culture in Argentina (in both film and radio) and Peronism, suggesting that Argentina's tie to melodrama extended beyond its nineteenth-century origin. In *The New Cultural History of Peronism*, Matthew Karush discusses how melodramatic narrative structures were developed to empower the poor, creating the moral categories which reigned over Perón's first presidency and which continued for decades. Tango, for example, joined the melodramatic discourse by establishing itself as an artistic medium which was: (1) located in the past, (2) situated within the world of melancholy and (3) rooted in popular rather than elite culture (Karush and Chamosa 35). Similarly, the films (and *bolero*) narrated in *El beso* employ analogous melodramatic structures determined to generate new ethical categories, where a leftist militant and a homosexual who self-identifies as a woman can discover a common ground within the national space constructed to exclude them: the prison.

Jorge José Masetti, an Argentine journalist and the leader of one of Argentina's first guerrilla organizations in the 1960's, issued a code of conduct for his guerrilla army which stated that "betrayal, cowardice toward the enemy, insubordination, [torture], murder, theft, banditry, desertion, and the crime *contra natura*, in other words, homosexuality," were all crimes punishable by death (Franco 123). Throughout his writing and particularly in *El beso*, Puig exposes how the guerrilla and the conservative military officers share one thing in common: resolute anti-gay sentiments. In fact, even Juan Perón viewed homosexuals as amoral deviations, emphasizing that the nuclear family, one grounded inside inflexible gender norms, was necessary for the nation's success (Encarnación 84). Thus, the expansion of Valentín's sensibility through melodrama is necessary for his ideological reinvention as a leftist guerrilla who *can* break away from these prevailing homophobic beliefs. Puig signals that the mold of masculinity, as inhabited by the guerrilla, is defective since it is founded upon the standards of a moralizing campaign focused on sexuality's regulation. Struggles to decouple morality from sexuality were ever-present during the late 1960's in Argentina and culminated in the 1971 creation of the FLH (Frente de Liberación Homosexual), which many consider to be the point of departure for the LGBTQ movement in Argentina. Puig's novel, which takes place around 1975, is a product of this movement, and as such seeks to transform the rigid outlines of masculinity by developing a new mold, a new consciousness for conceptualizing sexual identity, particularly masculinity.

Becoming Empathetic, Transforming Desire: Teaching Valentín to "Read" Melodrama

Melodrama's intimate connection to the physical body and desire

is one the novel explicitly portrays with the narration of the first film, *Cat People*. The desire to express *everything* is a fundamental characteristic of the melodramatic mode, and it is with this desire in mind that Molina, the novel's first voice, pieces together the body of Irena, the principal character of the 1942 horror film *Cat People*, directed by Jacques Tourneur (Brooks 4). *El beso* begins with Molina's disembodied voice, in an unknown setting, narrating to an unknown audience, anxiously describing an unknown and rather strange woman:

"A ella se le ve que algo raro tiene, que no es una mujer como todas. Parece muy joven, de unos veinticinco años cuanto más, una carita un poco de gata, la nariz chica, respingada, el corte de cara es...más redondo que ovalado, la frente ancha, los cachetes también grandes pero que después se van para en punta, como los gatos" (Puig 9).

This initial description focuses on the woman's facial characteristics, which Molina traces from memory. Soon after this physical description, a question interrupts, alerting the reader to another presence, a disembodied voice demanding more physical description, which Molina provides:

"Claros, casi seguro que verdes, los entrecierra para dibujar mejor. Mira al modelo, la pantera negra del zoológico, que primero estaba quieta en la jaula, echada. Pero cuando la chica hizo ruido con el atril y la silla, la pantera la vió y empezó a pasearse por la jaula y a rugirle a la chica, que hasta entonces no encontraba bien el sombrero que le iba a dar el dibujo" (Puig 9).

The bodies of the two speakers remain unknown, unnamed, lacking a concrete physical presence at the novel's onset, a lack extending to the woman being described above: while her face gains some semblance of description, no mention is made of her body as a whole. As soon as the attempt is made towards a more full-bodied description, the second speaker (Valentín) abruptly interrupts the first (Molina):

"—Sí, es cierto, ella esta ensimismada, metida en el mundo que tiene adentro de ella misma, y que apenas si lo está empezando a descubrir. Las piernas las tiene entrelazadas, los zapatos son negros, de taco alto y grueso, sin puntera, se asoman las uñas pintadas de oscuro. Las medias son brillosas, es tipo de malla cristal de seda, no se sabe si es rosada la carne o a la media.

—Perdón pero acordate de lo que te dije, no hagas descripciones eróticas. Sabés que no conviene" (Puig 10).

As Molina's desire to "express all" unravels it is immediately reined in, interrupted by Valentín at the precise moment that Molina begins describing Irena's physical body, "la carne." Valentín's interjection demands that erotic descriptions be eliminated from Molina's narration thus mediating the onset of all melodramatic telling, while seeking to curtail his own desire as arising through excessive bodily descriptions. Moreover, Valentín refuses to get close to the narrative by refusing to allow Irena to gain visibility in his mind's eye.

If narrative empathy can be construed as an act of reading and coming to terms with the other through a description which makes that other recognizable, then Valentín's initial response acts as an antidote to empathy. "Ya en la segunda página," remarks Roberto Echavarrén when reading this scene, "la observación: 'no hagas descripciones eróticas, sabes que no conviene', alude a la separación entre un eventual placer y las necesidades del momento, las circunstancias del encierro y el régimen de poder y verdad que los retiene allí" (87). Valentín's initial mediation of melodramatic desire, stimulated through bodily descriptions that subsequently provoke pleasure, separates the film world from the world of the cell.

As Stephanie Merrim argues, *El beso* forces a confrontation between "high" culture and the culture of sentiment. The "B" films are uncomplicated texts that, in appealing to a mass audience through their delineation of extreme human actions and emotions, use melodrama as a means of fulfilling "the classical function of catharsis by articulating –furnishing a set of images for– emotions that otherwise might have remained repressed (Merrim 307). The confrontation between "high" and "low" culture in the novel demarcates the line between melodrama and the sentimental arts on the one hand, and intellectual, political philosophies grounded in "reality" on the other. Valentín is effectively a good representative of the culture of the bourgeoisie, embodying the typical leftist intellectual who is only interested in serious things such as politics. He considers the products of popular culture to be the *macanas* (nonsense) of women. Molina's lower-middle-class status as a manual laborer, however, provides "him" with a cultural sensibility akin to the petite bourgeoisie: the housewife with artistic inclinations and sensibilities, an avid radio listener and romance-magazine and movie buff (Ezquerro and Clark 649). Valentín's constant interruptions seek to limit the excess Molina's melodrama promotes, setting unconscious limits on his own catharsis and ability to process societal repressions. In refusing description, Valentín also mediates his own empathy, a mediation that begins collapsing by the end of *Cat People*.

Although Valentín limits Molina's excessive bodily description, Molina continues describing the woman's hands, her fingernails, her heavy coat, and the man who enters behind her. When Molina describes her curly hair, Valentín interrupts once more. However, this interruption differs greatly from the previous one: "Yo me la imagino morocha, no muy alta, redondita, y que se mueve como una gata. Lo más rico que hay" (Puig 11). As he begins imagining the woman on his own terms, he permits a desire for physicality to enter his thoughts, the same desire he deemed too sensual and

forcefully put an end to only a few moments earlier. While Molina's narration paints Irena's physical features a space opens inside Valentín's imagination, allowing the melodrama to evoke pleasure and desire within him, thus making demands on his stubborn political consciousness. Where he previously rejected pleasure and sentiment as too subjective, not appropriate vehicles for contemplation inside the political realm he encompasses, Molina's melodramatic narrative tempts him with a forbidden alternative: desire. Valentín's desire to imagine Irena's physical features demonstrates the slow progression of his newfound sensibility, an opening of desire beyond ideology.

Through melodrama, Molina constructs an unconventional world within the cell, making Valentín's conscious need for precise details and ordered thoughts unnecessary hindrances to more unconscious desires. As Molina continues narrating Irena's story, Valentín's interruptions become less concerned with the prevention of eroticism and more concerned with Molina's ability to accurately *remember* the film in its entirety. "Hacé memoria," Valentín insists as Molina's detailed memory falters while recalling what happened at an art show Irena attended with her architect boyfriend (Puig 12). "Ay, no me exijas tanta precisión", Molina snaps at Valentín's continual questioning the details (Puig 12). This initial interaction, before we are even privy to the men's names, setting, and their relationship to one another, marks their fundamental difference as readers and interpreters. Molina's melodramatic vision, unlike Valentín's, is a combination of his own imagination and the films he remembers. This provides Molina with a means of escaping the cell's imaginary limits through melodramatic invention, where he can narrate his own desires and experience pleasure even within the cell. Valentín's desire for clarity and precision contrast with Molina's desire for a more unconscious telling, enabling him to both momentarily escape the cell while also reinventing the interpersonal dynamic within the cell (Balderston and Masiello 96-97).

When the prisoner's basic bodily needs emerge, these needs are ultimately juxtaposed against the melodramatic, desire-centered narration of Irena and her architect. The melodramatic fantasy quite literally meets reality as the prison guard's presence interrupts Molina's narration. Furthermore, the basic need for water and bathroom use are instances of what Giorgio Agamben refers to as "bare life," in which the centrality of the body and its processes become central to understanding the stripping away of basic human rights under the State (1). The language of the nation-state is pinned against the language of melodrama in this scene:

"–Perdoná....¿hay agua en la garrafa?

–Sí, la llené yo cuando me abrieron para ir al baño.

–¿Querés un poco?, está linda, fresquita.

–No, así mañana no hay problema con el mate. Seguí.

–Pero no exageres. Nos alcanza para todo el día.

–Pero vos no me acostumbres mal. Yo me olvidé de traer cuando nos abrieron la puerta para la ducha, si no era por

vos que te acordaste después estábamos sin agua" (Puig 14).

The state's presence, an entity preventing thirsty men from drinking water, controlling their bathroom access, exposes a bare dialogue lacking the ability to form human connection. The Argentine state, in other words, is the antithesis of melodrama and therefore the antithesis of empathy and recognition. This bareness contrasts with Molina's initial unrestrained description of Irena's strange features, where time and setting are uninhibited.

Although we receive little to no description of their physical appearance throughout the novel, their bodies ironically gain visibility here through their reduction to bare life. Puig consistently refuses the reader access to their corporality through an absence of physical depiction throughout the novel. This absence, however, is filled by descriptions which focus on their basic bodily needs (water, bathroom use, food, sex) as well as bodily excesses (waste, vomit, fluids). This, in turn, creates a new kind of body, one gaining visibility through its existence as bare biological entity; an unadorned body, a body that is just a body. Much like the cell which Santiago Colás suggests "appears only negatively.... that is, there are no descriptions of the cell and the characters mention it only in projecting their desire to transcend it," the bodies of the prisoners materialize through a similar void (85). While the cell is representative of this void, it also becomes a blank slate—one evoking new possibilities for empathetic recognition and ideological reframing.

This void is also connected to the many silences penetrating the novel. The first instance of silence occurs in the middle of Chapter One, as Molina tells Valentín he is a bit tired and forgetful, preferring to continue his narration in the morning. Valentín responds with: "No, mejor a la noche, durante el día no quiero pensar en esas macanas. Hay cosas más importantes en que pensar" (Puig 15). Molina's response is marked with "...", a silence reverberating loudly especially since, up until this point, Molina's voice predominates. "El silencio, en la novela de Puig," writes Julia Cuervo Hewitt, "señala que la palabra, el significante, ha sido falsificado por una retórica detrás de la cual se esconden otros significados. Y la cual, en vez de revelar, pospone o desplaza el momento de la revelación" (Hewitt 54). The hidden realm described by Hewitt determines that silence operates both to hide and to reveal. In fact, Valentín's depreciating remarks are met with the end of Molina's description.

If we take Molina's narrative as an instance of escapism, enabling both men's imaginations to wander outside the cell, then it is no wonder Molina's silence forces Valentín to readdress his statement and immediately revise his distaste: "Si yo no estoy leyendo y me quedo callado es porqué estoy pensando. Pero no me vayas a interpretar mal" (Puig 15). The "no me vayas a interpretar mal" directly responds to Molina's silence, one beckoning Valentín to correct the rashness of his first comment and react in a more empathetic manner while still maintaining, kindly, that he did not wish to be bothered. Valentín not only gains awareness that Molina's feelings were

hurt, he starts to feel bad upon realization that his cellmate's silence was provoked by his deriding comment. In other words, he reads Molina's bodily demeanor, and subsequently changes his reaction based on that reading. The effects of the melodramatic narration of *Cat People* begin changing the way that Valentín understands, views, and responds to his cellmate. A new consciousness is slowly being molded. This phenomenon is further supported by an early instance of naming within the novel. Molina's is the first name to appear in the novel, as Valentín speaks Molina's name aloud, thus providing Molina with a direct marker of identification as he urges "him" to continue with the story (Puig 21). This moment of naming illuminates how the intersection between a newfound desire (Valentín's desire for storytelling) and recognition of the other (naming) starts leading to Valentín's transformation of consciousness.

The novel dramatically distinguishes between art and politics, furnishing images of sexuality, politics, gender, and sex which, when repositioned inside the cell, generate new meanings. Valentín's masculine urges to control the situation are unmade by his new desire to enter into the melodramatic space of Molina's narration where catharsis becomes possible. Valentín's political agenda is not abandoned here, but his desire for the sentimental art world enables him to rethink his own political identity (Zimmerman 109). The *macanas* of popular culture that Valentín attempts to steer clear of begin stimulating him. In one revelatory moment he curiously asks Molina what a particular hairpiece is ("¿Que es banana?"), a question signaling his craving for *more* description as the novel progresses, even if that description positions him inside the "nonsensical" world of women's hairpieces (Puig 16). His budding interest in the world of minute narrative description demonstrates the initial change circulating around his newfound desire for excess, as led by sensual desire.

However, Valentín's constant interruptions also are subconscious attempts to rein in Molina's melodramatic narration, regulating the excess. During one of these interruptions, Valentín seeks to mock Irena's sexuality: "Bueno," he interrupts, "yo creo que ella es frígida, que tiene miedo al hombre, o tiene una idea del sexo muy violenta, y por eso inventa cosas" (Puig 21). As he attempts to take control of the narrative, Molina ceases "his" own narration angrily. This struggle for narrative control around Irena's sexual nature reveals how rigidly structured Valentín's understanding of sexuality truly is. When he asks Molina to continue with the narration of *Cat People*, he finally gives in to his own desire for excess. At this moment, his sensibility shifts, and those structures begin to misalign, allowing his emotional response and willingness to understand the other to become a new possible alternative for his self-fashioning.

Melodramatic Embroidering: Gender, Identification, and the Rise of the Empathetic Body

El beso demonstrates how ambiguity marks all forms of narrative, weaving multiple meanings together in hopes of creating a par-

ticular type of narrative telling. In melodrama this weaving is especially important since melodramatic narratives aim to engage the emotions through sentimental portrayals. "No," says Molina, "yo no invento, te lo juro, pero hay cosas que para redondeártelas, que las veas como las estoy viendo yo, bueno, de algún modo te las tengo que explicar" (Puig 18). Here, Molina signals that "his" own discourse is one based on "embroidering." Within the novel, embroidering is best defined as a conscious act of narrative telling which seeks to eliminate the difference between the two prisoners' way of seeing the world. Molina, for example, admits that "he" consciously weaves a world of multiplicity in order to better survive the cell. Embroidering, for both of the prisoners, also becomes a type of freedom. Freedom from the cell, yes, yet also freedom from the world composed and standardized outside the cell. The structures of masculinity itself are manipulated through Molina's embroidering vis-à-vis Puig. Puig uses Molina's narrative tactics to suggest that the transformation of masculinity can occur inside the melodramatic realm—a masculinity transformed through the emergence of sensibility and emotionalism. Puig structures a new space for alternative identities to develop in moments of national turmoil and distress. The emergence of the dictatorship, like the cell itself, becomes a moment where new possibilities for self-creation emerge to contrast the previous models of identity by uprooting both the traditions that the military and the guerrillas used to define masculine identity.

The cell world relies on the excesses provided by Molina's melodramatic embroidering to transform the brutal political climate entrapping the prisoners. *Cat People* outlines two excesses that Valentín himself struggles with as a political activist: desire and empathy. It does so by positioning Irena's desire as dangerous and life threatening. Her sexuality is cursed as she is fated to turn into a panther woman right after she kisses a man, most likely killing him in the process. In connecting her sexuality to an animalistic transformation, an excess of uncontrollable sexual desire emerges, and this uncontrolled excess of sexuality has damaging consequences as it erupts. Along a similar vein, Valentín's desire for Marta, his "true" love, must be forsaken so as not to clash with his political identity. Valentín's ability to empathize with the other is also curtailed, especially as he gains more understanding of Molina's own sexuality, one he mocks at the novel's onset. Consequently, Valentín's ability to empathize is deeply connected to a freeing of his own sexual desire illuminated through his willingness to enter into the world of excessive description and encounter his own "deviant" machismo.

Puig's use of metaphors of excess inside the novel manifest on a material level through the footnotes, yet no footnotes occur in the first two chapters, leaving the entire narration of *Cat People* uninterrupted. Why is *Cat People* allowed free rein? Why do the footnotes appear only in Chapter Three, right after *Cat People* has been narrated in its entirety? *Cat People* is the only film that remains within the cell completely, unadulterated by outside sources narrating the psychoanalytic history of homosexuality. If the footnotes draw our

attention away from the cell, the narration of *Cat People* demands that our attention be maintained entirely within the cell. The only interruptions within the first two chapters occur when Molina forgets, when "he" goes to sleep or, most importantly, when "he" is interrupted by Valentín. What *Cat People* enables, and perhaps this is why the novel begins with its narration, is a production of empathy paralleling Valentín's comprehension of Molina's melodramatic telling of the film. This rise of empathy subsequently promotes a transformation of individual sensibility and desire, as Valentín, so bent on controlling his desires and limiting any and all moments of excess, begins to question and abandon the model of political and sexual identity he unquestionably follows.

When Molina reveals to Valentín that "he" identifies with Irena at the end of the first chapter, this revelation is immediately followed by Molina's naming of Valentín: "¿Y vos Valentín, con quién?" (Puig 31) Whereas Molina's naming by Valentín occurred quite early in the novel and was directly associated with Valentín's desire to hear more, Valentín's name is associated with second-hand identification, permitted to him only through Molina's embroidering. In other words, at the novel's onset, Valentín lacks a clear self-constructed identity but rather holds on to an identity that others have prescribed him. Molina does not assign any control to Valentín. In fact, when Valentín attempts to reimagine, or embroider, on his own terms, asking Molina "si vos también pones de tu cosecha, ¿por qué no yo?" (Puig 39) Molina ignores the question, continuing on with *Cat People's* narration. If we extend the meaning of embroidering to also be the desire to get others to see as you see, as Molina suggests, then it seems quite significant that Molina is allotted that power while Valentín is denied that power. Perhaps this is Puig's way of condemning both the military government and the leftist guerrillas, the two groups struggling against each other to control the national narrative and what they deemed to be "appropriate" constructions of masculinity at the time. What happens if an apolitical homosexual male, or perhaps given the opportunity, a transgender subject, could take control of that narrative? What would happen to the frameworks of sexuality then?

Embroidering can also be defined as a type of alternative narration, grounded in the kind of empathy promoted by the melodramatic medium. Within this medium, empathy becomes a process of identification, a "feeling with" or "thinking with" another, a phenomenon Molina exploits (Hammon and Kim 1-4). Since the process of identifying with a character relies on empathy, it is quite significant that Valentín interrupts Molina in order to ask "him" who "he" identifies with and not the other way around. *Cat People's* melodramatic mode has signaled an initial change in Valentín: he begins thinking that the process of identification is a legitimate avenue for self-exploration. In a recent study, Julia Kushigian discusses the relationship between Molina and Valentín as demonstrating the process necessary in overcoming sexual and political prejudices: "The relationship is based on an innate trusting of the other, rather than on spontaneous and revelatory conversation. The novel as-

sumes, significantly, the exposing of prejudices and stereotypes to the point that a reversal of roles or a politicization through revolution of the homosexual figure and the feminization of the revolutionary figure takes place" (187). However, the focus on demasculinizing male prisoners was one the military government employed as a torture tactic to create vulnerable subjects who could then turn over information (D'Antonio 51-52). What Puig does so ingeniously is to set the novel's focus not on "the feminization" or even demasculinization of Valentín and the "politicization" of Molina, but the promotion of empathy *between* the characters—a newfound ability for both individuals to identify with one another much like they do with the characters in the movies related by Molina.

During the narration of *Cat People*, sexual identity is re-dressed, and desire (and the excess of desire) becomes a productive means of re-conceptualizing identity. Irena's sexuality is excessive in that, when let loose, she transforms into a murderous animal. However, in sidestepping her heterosexual nature (she turns into a panther only if she enters into a heterosexual relationship, kissing a man, assumedly) she will live on as a human. Puig directs the reader's attention to how traditional female behavior (marriage, sex) is not always what is best for society at large. This directly undermines and serves to critique the heteronormative beliefs shared by both the military government and the leftist groups. Molina's desire to become a woman, which occurs in Chapter One as "he" exclaims that "las mujeres son lo mejor que hay....yo quiero ser mujer" only to be interrupted by Valentín's lack of understanding, marks the beginning of both their transformations (Puig 19).

Cat People defamiliarizes the structure of a heterosexual relationship by having the woman's sexuality linked to a curse, making room for Molina's self-acclaimed femininity to flourish in this alternative space where heterosexual normativity is dangerous and life-threatening. Furthermore, the cell world enables a new sexual interaction between the prisoners, one that promotes a new discourse on homosexuality where sexual desires and acts define the space of homoeroticism (Peralta 11). The ideological destruction of the subject was the goal of the military regime, which used torture inflicted on the physical body to destroy the subject's mind (D'Antonio 54). The version of ideological destruction through homoerotic desire that Puig emphasizes in *El beso* suggests that any kind of transition to democracy, any escape from the military regime by the left, required a radical readjustment of masculinity and masculine desire. Furthermore, it is notable to add that it was against the backdrop of dictatorial rule that gay men in Argentina began to organize in the first place (Santiago Insausti 320).

Chapter Two opens on the two prisoners sharing a meal together, a domestic moment deconstructing the traditional familial dinner scene. Valentín discusses his political views with Molina, positioning those views against Molina's melodramatic imagination: "No, no te lo podés imaginar...Bueno, todo me lo aguanto....porque hay una planificación. Está lo importante, que es la revolución social, y lo secundario que son los placeres de los sentidos" (Puig 29).

His attack on sentimentalism is combatted by Molina's belief that "pero si todos los hombres fueran como mujeres no habría torturadores" (Puig 31). In connecting the world of sentimentalism to the world of women and the world of political action to the world of men, this scene at first follows the gendered guidelines underlining Argentine society at the time (Puig 29). Notably, however, Valentín does not abandon melodramatic sentimentalism completely; he merely positions it in second place after political struggle. He even agrees with Molina that if men acted more like women there probably *would not* be any more torturers: "Molina....pero vos decís que si todos fueran como mujeres no habría torturadores. Ahí tenés un planteo siquiera, irreal pero planteo al fin" (Puig 29). In accepting the possibility that torture is incompatible with this particular female sensibility, Valentín stages a debate between politics and the cultivation of sense gratification or desire. In other words, Puig draws a line between politics, men, and torture on one hand, and sentiment, desire, women, and the lack of torture on the other. Valentín's sensibility continues to flourish as he asks Molina not to "punish" him ("no me castigues") with his remarks. This discussion of punishment and torture with respect to the so-called masculine world of politics and the feminine world of the senses reveals that Valentín's defense against the sensibilities of women is one that he begins to adopt right after the discussion of torture. This showcases an initial breaking down of the very categories of "men" and "women" as distinct, which becomes ever more visible as the novel continues.

During Molina's narration of *Cat People*, Valentín's empathy surfaces more concretely as he directly identifies with the female assistant (stalked by Irena), by connecting her with his own "girl." This is the first time we get any emotional response from Valentín and the first time we peek into his own personal world outside the cell, gaining identity beyond his prisoner-status. Molina's embroidered melodramatic narration of *Cat People* allows for Valentín's moment of identification to arise as he connects a character inside the film to a real person from his own life. The association enables him to reveal previously undivulged personal information to Molina while also unveiling his emotions and fears, gratifying his senses for the first time. Peter Brooks posits that "melodrama starts from and expresses the anxiety brought by a frightening new world in which the traditional patterns of moral order no longer provide the necessary social glue" (Brooks 20). Soon after Valentín discusses his "girl" with Molina, he is renamed by Molina as "niña Valentina," a label Valentín rebukes: "Y no me llares Valentina, que no soy mujer" (Puig 43-44). This particular exchange reveals how Molina pushes the boundaries of "his" own melodrama onto the real world of the cell by playfully skewing Valentín's sexuality, renaming him with a woman's name in an attempt to layer his masculinity with femininity. Valentín's stern yet seemingly calm response, "no soy mujer," holds Molina's power to embroider inside the cell-world in check. Yet the question remains: why doesn't Valentín define himself as a man? Why, in other words, is the statement "no soy mujer" not "soy hombre"?

Through the melodramatic narration of *Cat People*, Valentín's masculinity undergoes a subtle change: he does not identify as a man or as a woman, as these categories become less and less stable. "De película en película," writes Roberto Echavarren, "la subjetividad de los personajes va siendo modulada según un conjunto abierto de permutaciones que enriquecen continuamente las posibilidades de interpretación de su circunstancia concreta" (Echavarren 82). *Cat People* sets up an initial space for these permutations to take place, as Puig forces the reader to witness how Valentín's masculinity transforms before our eyes as he becomes more empathetic and learns, through melodrama, to identify and connect with those unlike him. When Molina finally finishes narrating the movie, Valentín responds with: "que me da lástima porque me encariñé con los personajes. Y ahora se terminó y es como si estuvieran muertos" (Puig 41). This moment of identification becomes a profound moment of empathy, one produced through Molina's initial choice of film-narration, a choice that strategically dealt with a woman on the verge of losing her human sensibility. *Valentín finds his sensibility as Irena loses hers*.

The strong emotional response produced by the movie not only enables Valentín to reveal personal information to Molina about his own life, he also begins moving inward, to his own body, comparing affective emotions to bodily digestion:

—Al final Valentín, vos también tenés tu corazoncito. Por algún lado tiene que salir...la debilidad, quiero decir.
 —No es debilidad, che.
 —Es curioso que uno no puede estar sin encariñarse con algo...Es...como si la mente segregara sentimiento, sin parar...
 —¿Vos crees?
 —...lo mismo que el estómago segrega jugo para digerir.
 —¿Te parece?
 —Sí, como una canilla mal cerrada. Y esas gotas van cayendo sobre cualquier cosa, no se las puede atajar.
 —¿Por qué?
 —Qué se yo...porque están rebalsando ya el vaso que las contiene" (Puig 47).

Valentín's empathetic identification is deeply intertwined with the body; empathy, according to Puig, works through the body and impacts bodily functions. Valentín's emotions, his "weakness" as he calls them, are activated by Molina's melodramatic embroidering, leaving Valentín to mourn the loss of the characters as his cellmate finishes narrating the film. In associating his emotional response and attachment to a concrete bodily process such as digestion, he overlaps the mind and body divide, emphasizing that emotional response and empathetic attachments, are in fact innate and unavoidable. Affective, empathetic identification, like the juices secreted for digestion, is a necessary component for making sure the body functions as it should; turning this identification off would

mean a literal shutting down of the body.

Melodrama builds Valentín's empathetic response by triggering his emotional response to character, activating his ability to identify with the other. Valentín's subsequent conception of affection as a necessary bodily process which keeps the body functioning further illustrates the extent to which Molina's narration has brought Valentín closer into the world of reading and identification. He is so close, in fact, that the proper functioning of his body depends on the empathetic response. Yet the empathetic response is, according to Valentín, emotional excess, much like the secretions of bodily excesses during digestion. Excess, however, is necessary for the proper functioning of the body and also allows for the development of empathy. Through his ability to identify with Molina, and the alternative version of himself, Valentín converts the cell into a space where "deviant" sexualities gain political potential.

Empathetic Surrender: Valentín's Final Transformation

Valentín's sexuality becomes ever more visible towards the end of the novel. His body appears, as a body revived, refurbished, and one described as an "exceso de energías." As he awakens, he finds himself fully recuperated, with newly heightened spirit:

—¿Por qué no probas a caminar, a ver qué pasa?
 —No porque te vas a reír.
 —¿De qué?
 —Me pasa una cosa.
 —¿Qué?
 —Algo que le pasa a un hombre sano, nada más. Cuando se despierta a la mañana y tiene exceso de energías.
 —¿Se te para?, que genial..." (Puig 187).

Ironically, this excess occurs right after his body has been quite literally voided of its own excess. His masculinity "rises," if you will, only after his body undergoes the process of extreme emptying, or voiding, a process mended by Molina's empathetic and nurturing touch as he helps Valentín heal from his intense stomach troubles. Empathy and closeness enable Valentín to recuperate his masculinity, yet this masculinity is no longer the same. The veiled cleansing scene previously mentioned, allows for a literal unveiling of Valentín's recuperated, now "deviant," masculinity, where his newly energized body enables him to regain the language he had abandoned for the silent ellipsis in the previous chapter. Additionally, his inability to read his political books (he is too dizzy to read as the letters dance in front of his eyes) requires that Molina continue "his" narration of a new film, the zombie film, demonstrating that Valentín now willingly chooses the world of melodramatic excess over his politically contained world.

The shift from linguistic scarcity to excess gains momentum in the last few chapters of the novel through the use of the ellipsis. In her reading of Molina and Valentín's first sexual encounter,

Masiello remarks that the absence of language, marked textually by the ellipsis, "obliges us to reflect on the universal projects of language. Ironically, then, the scene of sexual encounter is almost devoid of words; the space of the text filled with ellipses and silence. Speech is thinned to the point of disappearance in order to express the paradoxical density and revelation of this dramatic encounter" (91). Valentín's abandonment of language appears once more as he angrily demonstrates that he no longer needs Molina's nurture and empathy after his morning erection bolsters his masculinity:

"-...
 -Pero mirá lo que hiciste...
 -...
 -Sí nos quedamos sin calentador, estamos listos. Y el platito...
 -...
 -Y el té...
 -Perdoname.
 -...
 -Perdí el control. De veras, te pido perdón...
 -...
 -El calentador no se rompió. Pero se volcó todo el kerosén.
 -...
 -Lo principal es que la hornalla no se quebró.
 -...
 -Molina, perdoname el arrebató.
 -..." (Puig, 1976, p. 198).

This scene demonstrates the visible switch between Valentín and Molina's speech-roles: Valentín's silence *becomes* Molina's as soon as the former apologizes for his misdeeds. Valentín tempers his anger by turning to language as a means of remedying his reaction in order to gain control over his emotions. Molina's incessant offering of marble cake provokes his anger, as a now healthy Valentín no longer understands the empathetic cake offering. Furthermore, his own deviance from the standardized norm of gender relations marks a newfound instability in Valentín's sense of identity, which he must learn to synchronize. Molina's kind actions and offerings are no longer *read* by Valentín in the same way, as he steps out of the world of abjection, regaining control over the divide between himself and the other. Empathy no longer makes sense and kindness seems dubious and perplexing to him after his erection.

The marble-cake scene also enacts a change in Molina, forcing "him" inside a linguistic void, as "he" abandons language entirely for the first time in the novel. This void constructs an alternative system of discourse, where linguistic scarcity prevails over narrative excess; our talkative narrator has simply stopped speaking. Molina's silence is interrupted, not by a voice within the cell, but by a lengthy footnote detailing several theories of bisexuality. The footnote's lengthy meta-text takes the place of the silent narrator. Unlike many of the

other footnotes in the novel classifying homosexuality, this one focuses on sexual liberation by claiming that each man has a woman he keeps deep within him: "es la mujer que cada hombre lleva encerrada en los calabozos de su propia psiquis" (Puig 200). Although this "mujer adentro" gains visibility through Valentín's experience with abjection, this same woman is placed under lock and key as he is reminded of his unyielding biology upon waking. In order for empathy to prosper once again, Valentín must access the new version of masculinity he has built within the cell.

Soon Valentín begins envisioning the cell as a space of freedom:

"En cierto modo estamos perfectamente libres de actuar como queremos en un respecto al otro, ¿me explico? Es como si estuviéramos en una isla desierta. Una isla en la que tal vez estemos solos años. Porque, sí, fuera de la celda están nuestros opresores, pero adentro no. Aquí nadie oprime a nadie. Lo único que hay, de perturbador, para mi mente...cansada, o condicionada o deformada... es que alguien me quiere tratar bien, sin pedir nada a cambio" (Puig 206).

The idea that one person would want to be kind to another just for the sake of kindness, with no ulterior motives, frightens Valentín. Empathy disturbs through its selflessness and by allowing individuals to engage with another in a way that requires their own abandonment. After Molina finds out "he" will be moved to another cell "he" returns, crestfallen, and Valentín, for the first time in the novel, begins nurturing Molina through touch, giving in to the very empathetic response he found disturbing only moments prior. Valentín begins touching Molina, massaging "him," undoubtedly demonstrating his concern vis-à-vis his newfound ability to physically and emotionally comfort his anxious cellmate. Valentín's empathy arises during this moment of nurture, established as he massages away the knot in Molina's neck. This is reflected by his own verbal acknowledgment, in which he surrenders to the fact that he no longer thinks about himself: "debe ser porque no pienso en mí" (Puig 220). Furthermore, not only does Valentín not think about himself, he reveals that touching Molina makes him feel better as well ["a mí también me hace bien"], demonstrating how the bodies of both have in fact, even before the sexual act occurs, become one. Valentín's own wellbeing is now attached to the wellbeing of his cellmate, a phenomenon representing his complete surrender to empathy (Puig 220).

The following scene is wrought by Valentín's silence, a silence he breaks only occasionally, mainly to ask Molina to be quiet as their sexual act unravels. In one revelatory break of silence, however, he admits the following: "No sé... no me preguntes...porque no sé nada" (Puig 221). His world has been turned inside out and upside down, so much so that he loses the knowledge he firmly held, both as a man and as a political being. Similar to the blurry words on the

page of political philosophy he attempts to read after his illness, Valentín's entire physical and mental foundation is called into question in this scene of sexual intimacy. His mind, like his speech earlier, has been voided and refurbished by the absence of previously held knowledge and identity constructs. Later on, as Molina requests a kiss, asking if Valentín is repulsed by the idea, intimacy and repulsion come together. Valentín tells "him" he is not repulsed, only scared that Molina will turn into a panther, a fear suggesting that Molina's desire, like Irena's, holds transformative powers.

As he surrenders to his own desires, he renames Molina as "la mujer araña que atrapa los hombres en su tela," proving that he now sees Molina as *she* wants to be seen (Puig 265). This shift in perception is further demonstrated as Valentín calls Molina "Molinita" a few moments later, using the diminutive form to concretize Molina as a woman. Valentín finally learns how to read and identify with the other. This empathetic transformation occurs as soon as he allows Molina to become Molinita, or "la mujer araña," suggesting that his previously held beliefs surrounding gender, desire, and identity have indeed transformed. Puig crystalizes this through Valentín's physical and emotional surrender to touching, being touched, and accepting alternative desires as he surrenders to his own empathetic sensibility, one requiring both emotional and bodily identification.

Conclusion

The connection between history and melodrama is one which *El beso* unveils throughout its pages, both through Molina's carefully selected film retellings, his death-sacrifice at the end of the novel and, most importantly, through the burgeoning empathetic relationship between the two prisoners. The melodramatic storytelling mode provokes the development of an uncharted physical and emotional relationship between the two prisoners, as both learn to navigate between two distinct ideological and physical worlds. Puig uses the structures of melodrama to draw attention to the need for change in the traditional orders of morality and ethics guiding outdated constructions of sexuality and masculinity in Argentina during the 1970's. These constructions were promoted both by leftist guerilla organizations and leaders, as well as the military regime and the Catholic Church. Through Molina's narration of *Cat People*, Valentín begins to unconsciously witness the repressive moral structures that both the military and armed leftist organizations held steady, enabling him to redefine the parameters of his own masculinity and access a version of masculinity that his country would then have termed "deviant."

NOTES

¹ Molina's desire to be/become a woman complicates the pronouns used to describe "him." Since "he" does not refer to "himself" using the female pronouns, and since "his" desire for femininity could potentially be collapsed with "his" homosexuality, I will use quotes to refer to Molina as

"him" throughout this article. I realize that today the "they" pronoun would perhaps serve best for Molina; however, I do not mean to assume that is what Puig intended.

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