

Queering Argentina: the repatriation of the *platero maricón* in Manuel Puig's *El beso de la mujer araña*

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The publication of *The Buenos Aires Affair* in 1973 caused a furor among right-wing extremists in Argentina. A political allegory replete with anti-Fascist criticism, the novel caused Puig's eventual exile at the hands of powerful *políticos* supported by Isabel Perón. Puig sought more liberal intellectual climates in the Western hemisphere (Greenwich Village, Mexico, Brazil) and never returned to Argentina (Puig, *LRA* 56). While much extant research has concentrated on Puig's later works as exile literature (*Maldición eterna a quien lea estas páginas* and *Pubis Angelical* in particular), Puig scholars have written little on the subject of *El beso de la mujer araña* and Puig's intellectual confrontations with Argentina as an involuntarily displaced person. However, given that this novel was the first that Puig wrote as an expatriate, given its placement in Puig's canon and the fact that its composition coincides with his expulsion from Argentina, Puig's dialogical narrative about two men who confront a dyad of exiles from mainstream society themselves begs for interpretation in the context of Puig's own banishment.

On one level, the protagonists Molina and Valentín experience exile since they are prisoners and thus legally separated from community against their will. On another, both characters encounter different sorts of exile: in Molina's case, alienation from the mainstream as the result of his sexual orientation; Valentín becomes an outcast because of his radical political views. Like his characters, Puig undergoes ostracism because of his gayness and because of his politics, but in his case, in addition to these dividing social forces, the ousting agent is his homeland itself. Suzanne Jill Levine writes:

The notion of his place of origin as a place of exile might seem surprising, but it is native to Argentina. Like many Argentines confronted by their geographic isolation, Manuel became a relentless traveler, though he would never be able to shed completely the condition of exile. For a while, the new home would be paradise, but sooner or later, paradise would crumble. “He suffered the cities he settled in as one who suffers the setbacks of a house, on a private scale, the same way a sick person reduces the horrors of the world to the portable, idiosyncratic format that the symptoms of his own illness take on.” Exile and home would always be two sides of the same coin for him. (Levine 10)

Notwithstanding, there exists compelling evidence that Puig creates in *El beso de la mujer araña* an extratextual Argentina into which the author ultimately repatriates himself and obtains closure with his homeland.

Molina is a gay man who is jailed for having sexual relations with a minor, and Valentín is a political activist whose complicity in the activities of rebel forces has resulted in his incarceration. With issues of sexual orientation and politics established immediately as thematic elements of *El beso de la mujer araña*, Puig creates movement in the novel from the interplay of these seemingly disparate individuals, carried out by the recounting of old movies and the protagonists’ identification with the characters in the films.

Although constructs of the imagination, the movies function as a desirable “reality” for the two imprisoned men. Through the process of submerging themselves in the plots, they achieve mental escape from the “harsh necropolis” (Boccia 421) of the prison. As they participate collectively in active fantasy, Molina and Valentín both travel in their minds to the same imaginary locale, and this proximity in the realm of dreams enables an eventual ideological

bonding between the protagonists that transpires in the realm of the cell. Ultimately, Molina will be stirred to political action, and Valentín will be altered through homoerotic and homosocial engagement.

The films play an important role in converting *El beso de la mujer araña* into allegory. The structural presentation of the movies in the novel serve as a compass that points directly towards Puig's fictionalized Argentina. As Molina tells them, the films are fiction within fiction within fiction, a trebly layered arrangement that divides the fictive space of the novel into three discrete components. In other words, *El beso de la mujer araña* is a novel (a work of fiction) that contains synopses of plots of real films that are other works of fiction (*I Walked with a Zombie* (1935), *Enchanted Cottage* (1940), *Cat People* (1940), etc. (with the exception of the German propaganda film that Puig wrote himself) that are in turn fictionalized when Molina embellishes them. These components correspond to narrative spaces that can be loosely defined as "cell-space" (what transpires between the protagonists in prison), "fiction-space" (what occurs in the movies), and "fictive-real space" (what corresponds to the stories vamped by Molina *la loca* narrating beyond the cell and the films into an idealized Argentina the author builds for himself).

Rosa Perelmuter writes that in *El beso de la mujer araña*, "reality and fiction are...commingled, acquiring a similar rhythm and sharing the same narrative conventions" (Perelmuter 43). This observation is particularly significant in comprehending Puig's effort to forge an ideal *Río de la Plata* through fiction. In the Nazi movie, the French songstress Leni is forced by members of the French Resistance to conduct acts of espionage against her paramour Werner, a prominent figure in the Nazi party. Swaddled in women's clothing and jewelry, Molina states that he identifies most with beautiful Leni, creating a particularly vivid parallel

between cell-space and fiction-space given that drag involves cross-dressing and mimicking through lip-synching the pop songs of female entertainers. On the other hand, political Valentín empathizes most with political Werner. Members of the resistance murder Leni after they learn that she is working as a double agent, a scenario that is exactly replicated in the relationship between Molina and Valentín. Through deceit and betrayal, Molina attempts to pry rebel secrets from Valentín, and he conveys this information to the prison authorities in exchange for his freedom.

Given these coincidences in cell and fiction space, the existence of the fictionalized Argentina in fictive-real space becomes more defined. In the movie, a powerful political figure is coupled with a beautiful singer who dies a martyr's death for the Nazi cause. In the cell, a weakened activist mates with an aging drag queen, who also dies as a result of his love. In the history of real Argentina, Juan Perón marries the beautiful performer Eva, who dies and is in turn deified by the populace. This analogue suggests that Puig is pointing to an extratextual Argentina through the allegories of cell-space and fiction-space.

Given that such parallels exist, it is possible to postulate that this trichotomy permeates the entire novel on other subtler levels. In fiction-space, the Spider Woman inhabits an island, a topos mirrored in cell-space when Valentín describes the setting of the cell as an island: "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." (Puig, *BMA* 206). Additionally, both protagonists possess traits that suggest ontological "isla"-tion: Molina is hedonistic and apathetic, and Valentín, an activist "trained at the University level in political science, practiced in the art of Marxian dialectic and tempered in the forge of physical torture..." (Tittler 603), is distant and removed. It is therefore appropriate to assert that the third

counterpart, Puig's imagined Argentina, is also an island, constructed within a symbolic parallel limbo by Puig.

This same spatial division by three can be applied again to the protagonists Molina and Valentín. On one level, they are simply imprisoned characters in a novel, the inhabitants of cell-space. On the fiction-space level, they are, as an activist and a homosexual, immured by the general interpretations of mainstream literature and film and "narrated" by a collective litany of stereotype rhetoric: Beatriz Sarlo aptly summarizes the narration of Molina and Valentín as "...un mercado de discursos donde los personajes son invariablemente hablados por mitologías colectivas que definen la dirección y el carácter de sus trayectos ficcionales" (Sarlo 51). Taken collectively, these two aspects point strongly towards a fictive-real interpretation of Molina and Valentín as Puig's autobiographical presence in the novel. Since Puig is imprisoned within the confines of a country not his own and excluded from his native land, his exile is clearly an allegory for Molina and Valentín's cell-island, and vice versa. Furthermore, the politics of The Buenos Aires Affair can easily demonstrate an activist parallel that links Valentín to Puig; the similarities between Molina and Puig (they are both gay, they are both film aficionados) offer further corroboration of linkage between the author and his protagonists: "El estudio de los géneros cinematográficos incorporados en la novela da muestra de que éstos funcionan como un compendio de la cinefilia del mismo Puig. Molina es así el doble más perfecto del autor de *El beso de la mujer araña*; ha aprendido en el cine el arte de la seducción narrativa y, cautivado por la ilusión realista de la pantalla, reduce la distancia entre ficción y realidad" (Laaouina NP).

With the existence of an extratextual Argentina thus implied and Puig's autobiographical presence in the novel suggested, it is possible to demonstrate how *El beso de la mujer araña* is a vehicle through which Puig implants an idealized sociopolitical structure into a construction of

his former homeland. Puig “queers” Argentina by unraveling the dangerous dictates of Peronist Argentina and common homophobia and subsequently reconstituting his mother country as a queer utopia. Shari Zimmerman writes:

Clearly disturbing to Puig for his entire life, these “unnatural and hideous” roles have as their inevitable corollary a repressive and naturalized heterosexuality that does not allow for varied and alternative expressions of desire, either within the confines of heterosexual choices or outside of them in homosexual desire. Here, religious, popular and political ideologies intersect, together authorizing *reproductive genital* heterosexuality as the only appropriate model of conduct. In this context, homosexual desire becomes an important liberating movement that radically disrupts repressive conventional practice....Danger exists when alternative voices and perspectives are shut out, when dialogue stops.

(Zimmerman, 210-211, 214-215)

Heterosexism thus sullies the environment of Puig’s Argentina, leading him to advocate vehemently against narrow systems of thought in which the negative perception of difference foments homophobia:

I believe gays shouldn’t imitate the mistakes of heterosexual people, who are so frightened by their latent homosexuality and have to think of themselves as totally different from gays. Segregation is wrong...

(Christ 211)

There should not be such a thing as a heterosexual or a homosexual...

There are no homosexuals...there are only persons who practice homosexual acts, but that banal aspect of their lives shouldn’t

establish their identity. (Puig, *LRA* 57)

Puig resolves this antilogy between gays and straights through a convergence that takes place between Valentín and Molina. The protagonists gradually gravitate towards each other along both ideological and ontological axes, and friendship facilitates the transformation of both characters (Mujica 4): “Molina’s indirect seduction of Valentín through his movie-stories in *Spider Woman* achieves a mutual conversion of revolutionary to bisexuality and the bourgeois homosexual to political action” (Merrim 154). As aspects of each protagonist’s personalities (Molina’s homosexuality, Valentín’s penchant for social justice) slough off and attach themselves to the other, Molina and Valentín replicate themselves in the other and clone themselves, both ultimately becoming politically engaged males who participate in same-sex liaisons both within the cell-space of *El beso de la mujer araña*. Thus, one may suspect that Puig will populate (in fictive-real space) his fictionalized country with individuals who, like his protagonists Molina and Valentín, ultimately resolve the problems of homophobia and political apathy that have besmirched the history of the real Argentina.

Puig prefigures this ontological convergence in the very names the protagonists use to address each other. Their full names are Luis Alberto Molina and Valentín Arregui Paz, two names that fuse dominance and submission, masculinity and femininity. Immediately, “Valentín” foreshadows the obvious: each time Molina speaks his cellmate’s name, he invokes love and emasculates the revolutionary by indirectly calling him his valentine. However, as Norman Lavers observes divergently, “Valentín’s name suggests the stereotypical macho hero, Valentino” (Lavers 39). Similarly, “Molina” is a name that conjures notions of grinding, of rough conversion (molino, molina): when Valentín speaks Molina’s name, its deployment calls for violent transformation, for a literal “milling” of essence. In contrast, Juan Pablo Neyret also

deciphers “Molina” as a “denominación que no es casual porque, por una parte, evita la del nombre de pila necesariamente masculino – “Luis Alberto” [...] y por otra, finaliza tanto con la “a” femenina como con la desinencia “-ina” que caracteriza a muchos nombres de mujer” (Neyret NP). Even though, as Ross Chambers notes, “the novel adopts what is at first sight the peculiar usage of referring to the queen by his (patriarchal) last name and to the tough young resistance fighter by his (affectionate) first name” (Chambers 215), this device has subversive psychological function that stimulates convergence. As Mary Lorenzo Alcalá demonstrates, through their interaction “Valentín is humanized, and Molina takes a courageous role, the masculine role par excellence” (Lorenzo Alcalá 651).

However, populating a fictionalized Argentina with characters who are politically engaged, amorphous in terms of their gender identity, and who engage in same-sex intimacy is not Puig’s only project in *El beso de la mujer araña*. He also reworks the ideological soil of Argentina, valorizing gayness by denying archaic psychoanalytic explanations of homosexuality and reinterpreting Freud: he refuses to accept the homophobic notion that gayness equals weakness. In fact, the opposite is suggested: Molina actually discovers power in effeminacy and drag. At first glance, it appears that Molina’s character only perpetuates the stereotype of the “limp wrist” - and it is for this reason that Hector Babenco’s film version of the novel was initially unpopular in the gay community - but a queer reading reveals that this characteristic joins with Molina’s masculine identity in order to create a syncretism of gender, a collision of the forces of femininity and masculinity which function as a source of power for him.

Molina embraces his feminine side: he applies feminine endings to the adjectives that he uses to describe himself, he dresses in women’s clothing, he takes care of Valentín and feeds him. This voluntary alliance with the maternal stereotype enables his identification with

“powerful, archetypal women who, although victimized, rise above the victimization, are even capable of destroying the existing oppressive structure... Molina identifies each time with the mysterious, dangerous, cursed woman, the mythic female who is oppressed but also potentially powerful” (Pinet 24). As such, Molina’s feminine side embodies the essence of the Latin American stereotype of *marianismo*, the woman’s counterpart to *machismo* that “American feminists dismiss as a position of the passive woman, but Latin American feminists see [...] as a source of power and strength” (Pinet 22-23). On the other hand, Molina is genetically a male, hunting and killing in order to survive, manifested in his sexual pursuit of and eventual poisoning of Valentín.

Defined lines of sexuality are thus blurred in Molina’s character. The manner in which the presence of masculine aggression (evoked by his work as a spy) is hidden behind the guise of the nurturing, storytelling woman suggests powerful subversive potential. To obtain his pardon, Molina witnesses the abuse to which Valentín is subjected and tries to extract revolutionary secrets from his companion while still maintaining his friendship and role of protector. As Jonathan Tittler notes, “He converts himself into the Spider Woman, the seductive spinner of webs who devours her mate after coupling with him. Each film segment Molina narrates constitutes a strand designed to trap him (Valentín) into revealing the identity of his comrades in arms, data the informant hopes to pass on to the warden” (Tittler 49). This amiable betrayal in cell-space communicates the extent of Molina’s power, transmitting outwardly, in fictive-real space, an ominous and coded warning to the heterosexists of Puig’s Argentina of the latent danger and lethality lurking within swishing, feather-laden queens.

The story of the panther woman is an allegory for the eventual relationship that takes place between Valentín and Molina. Molina aligns himself with the principal character in the *Cat People* film:

-¿Con quién te identificás?, ¿con Irena o la arquitecta?

-Con Irena, qué te creés. Es la protagonista, pedazo de pavo. Yo siempre con la heroína (*BMA* 31).

Irena, the main character in this film, comes from Transylvania, a strange kingdom in which the tradition of the nebulous unknown gives rise to myths of horror and the macabre. She is accosted by a woman from her homeland in a restaurant, and then becomes aware of the potential of her mystical genealogy. Irena believes that she is a panther woman, and she begins to suspect that the active expression of her erotic desires will induce the egress of the panther. For this reason, she prevents herself from consummating her marriage. As her obsession grows, she recommences visits to a psychiatrist, a beautiful man who ultimately invades the sanctity of her abstinence by giving her a kiss. This symbolic defloration brings out her latent power: she loses her fragility and transforms into a panther, killing the psychiatrist and saving herself.

Similarly, Molina also comes from a mysterious realm, from “the love that dare not say its name,” encircled by the prejudices and fears which are the results of bigotry towards homosexuals. This story’s foreshadowing of the accumulation of power in Molina’s character establishes grounds for the statement that *El beso de la mujer araña* can be read as a sign of queer resistance. In this particular treatment of homosexuality, Puig succeeds in writing a subtext that subtly reflects the plot that unfolds between the two protagonists. As soon as the sexual act takes place between Molina and Valentín, a metamorphosis similar to Irena’s occurs in Molina’s character: he transforms into a political agent. The denouement of the novel begins

after Molina and Valentín sleep together, and Molina is eventually liberated from the prison thanks to his complicity in the plot against Valentín. Sex must occur in order for Molina to be freed (the prison authorities become aware that he has fallen in love with Valentín, and release him under the supposition that he will act as a rebel agent out of amorous homage to Valentín). Like the panther woman, Molina dies after sex. As the end of the novel, as Molina charges forward in pursuit of Valentín's political causes, confronting danger and mortality and acquiring bravery, he demonstrates how the expression of homosexuality can result not in stereotypical weakness and disempowerment, but rather as a source of power: "En contraste con la heroicidad guerrillera, se construye un nuevo tipo de heroicidad que puede incluir tanto el deseo erótico como la subversión política" (Aguilar NP). The inhabitants of Puig's fictionalized Argentina are therefore individuals who are not debilitated by that "banal aspect" (Puig, *LRA* 57) of their lives; instead, homosexual activity emancipates and strengthens.

Puig places a series of footnotes in *El beso de la mujer araña* that constitute a story themselves. These are passages that come principally from psychological studies and from plot summaries of the Nazi propaganda film. Written by Puig himself, these footnotes address developments in studies on the origins of homosexuality. This presentation calls into question the behaviorist and psychoanalytic arguments that have attempted to trace the reasons for which individuals are predisposed towards other individuals of the same gender, and the scholar cited most frequently is Sigmund Freud.

An analysis of the juxtaposition of the novel's plot to its accompanying Freudian footnotes lends itself to queer interpretation. The footnote that deals with Freud's stages of psychosexual development is found in the same chapter in which Valentín begins to suffer from the effects of the poison. He has to defecate because of the toxic rice, and Molina begins taking

care of Valentín immediately. Molina cleans Valentín and takes away the sheet that contains his excrement. It is just after this event that the intimacy between the two men becomes an enterprise of tenderness. Later, the sexual act that occurs between Molina and Valentín is anal sex.

The treatment of excrement in the novel furnishes a metaphor that goes back to Freud. The poisoning produces a change in Molina that confers the role of parent upon him and creates an infantile Valentín to whom Molina must attend: Valentín's infirmity prevents him from performing his own toiletries. Valentín must depend on Molina in order to remain clean and to survive: he ceases to be self-sufficient, and his fierce macho independence dissipates. Developmentally, the adult and helpless Valentín thus arrives at a *tabula rasa*. However, Valentín does not subsequently follow the steps of traditional Freudian psychosexual formation. When Molina cleans Valentín's ass, he symbolically actuates a system of psychosexual development that inverts Freud's order. In Puig's arrangement, the process culminates in same-sex sexual orientation (or at least bisexual orientation). Mary Lorenzo Alcalá maintains that "the justification given for their (the theories about homosexuality that Freud interpolates in the form of footnotes in the third chapter) inclusion is that little is known about the topic of homosexuality (Alcalá 652)," but it is possible to theorize that Puig had in mind a completely different strategy: to expose these theories in order to "queer" them and thus repopulate his idealized, fictionalized Argentina with individuals whose psychosexual formation defies the heterocentric process outlined by Freud. As Suzanne Jill Levine demonstrates,

...Manuel inserted footnotes – explaining to the average reader the theories, controversies, and misconceptions surrounding homosexuality to date (1975) – which grow and grow until at one point they nearly take over the whole page,

at the same time pushing the (didactic) author down to the bottom of the page. By exposing the kitsch of scientific rhetoric by way of the footnote...Manuel would reduce Freud to an almost Hitchcockian simplicity... Manuel did have a political mission: to educate both the victims and the perpetrator of homophobia in Latin America (Levine 258).

Puig begins his attack on Freud's theories of psychosexual development by dismantling the oral stage, in which children obtain sexual gratification through sucking or by placing objects in their mouths. In contrast, to Freud, Puig's oral stage causes displeasure. When Valentín initially arrives at the prison, he refuses to eat. Later, when the contaminated food is brought to him, he no longer wishes to eat because the provisions make him ill. Instead of oral satisfaction, Valentín receives pain from what he ingests, and thus is inclined to shun oral desire. His mouth brings about suffering.

Puig next inverts Freud's second stage, the anal stage, in which children obtain gratification by retaining their stool or by excreting. Valentín passes through a similar stage when he begins to defecate in front of Molina. Like the oral stage, the anal stage is also filled with torment for him. Since his gastrointestinal products come from the poison, he cannot obtain pleasure from this experience. In contrast to the common practice of toilet training in modern parenting, Molina does not attempt to correct Valentín's scatology. He permits it without trying to control Valentín.

The third prepubescent stage in Freud's theory is the phallic stage, in which pleasure is derived from the child's own sexual organs, and after a latency period (stage four), the child's fascination with his own genitalia eventually is transformed into an interest in the reproductive apparatus of the opposite sex in the genital stage (stage five). Continuing the inversion of Freud,

Valentín's passage through the phallic stage is reversed. Instead of exhibiting interest in his own organs, Valentín discusses his girlfriend at length and focuses on her physiognomy instead of on his own.

The most prominent characteristic of the phallic stage is the Oedipal complex, a childhood conflict in which the male child recognizes that there exists a relationship between the father and mother from which he is excluded. The child wants to eliminate his paternal competitor so that he may possess the mother completely (Stoudemire 60-74). In the novel, after Valentín goes through the anal stage, a segue into the phallic stage is expected, in which he will seek his mother's tenderness. Yet again, Puig subverts this process. Instead of venerating his mother, Valentín admits his apathy and even hatred for this woman, who has caused him "anguish [...] and depends on him more and more and [...] has betrayed his father by conspiring with her lover against him" (Pinet 25). Valentín's relationship with Molina deepens, and he shows affection for the male character who plays the role of his mother. The reversal of gender is significant because Valentín rejects the feminine mother in order to obtain the masculine maternity evoked by Molina. Valentín therefore does the contrary of what Freud predicts: he puts himself in conflict with his real mother in order to win a maternal father or a masculine mother, and denies woman instead of seeking her. He also protests against the erotic depiction of women in the films that Molina recounts and finishes his psychosexual development by discovering a latent same-sex orientation (in Molina) after having first displayed a vaginal predilection.

Valentín avoids the greatest dangers of the prison by allowing his intimacy with Molina to deepen. His association with Molina assures that he does not die, and this relationship contrasts starkly with his relationships with heterosexual women like his mother and his

girlfriend who have not been able to get him out of prison. One can therefore claim that it is necessary that Valentín be gay in order to endure, and that the recognition of his desires for men saves him. As Lucille Kerr observes, the final footnote about homosexuality in *El beso de la mujer araña* “elaborates a political theory of homosexuality – that is, homosexuality is posited as a revolutionary practice” (Kerr 221). Through this outcome, Puig succeeds in removing the heterosexist elements that have plagued academic psychology in the twentieth century, riddles Freud’s theory with questions about its absoluteness and develops within his characters an improbable yet seamless ontological syncretism. Extending this observation from cell-space into fictive-real space, with homophobic psychology expelled from science, Argentineans in Puig’s utopian country may prosper instead of suffering from its deleterious consequences.

When Molina leaves the prison, he undertakes an active part in the resistance movement by attempting to carry messages from Valentín to other members of the rebel forces. Brian Conniff maintains that Molina’s excessive identification with the heroines of the movies obscures his understanding of his political actions, seeing himself as a starlet rather than as an agent of freedom (Conniff 234), but the final moments of Molina’s life suggest a different reading. Surrounded by government spies, Molina is shot by Valentín’s cohorts who mistake him for a traitor. During the moments that transpire between when the bullets enter his body and the time of his death, Molina keeps his silence and does not betray any of Valentín’s secrets, thereby dying with nobility. If indeed Molina’s character is part of Puig’s autobiographical presence in *El beso de la mujer araña* (both are Argentinean, both are gay, both adore films), by allowing Molina re-entry into Rioplatense society and letting him die with dignity and respect, the author forcefully combats the repressive ideologies and phobias of 20th century Argentina. Additionally, by reinterpreting Freud homo-affirmatively, by creating a male protagonist who

achieves power through femininity, and by valorizing gay male intimacy as an instrument of freedom and love, Manuel Puig thwarts obstacles to the struggle for gay sexual and political liberation. According to Valeria Badano, Puig creates in *El beso de la mujer araña* “un corpus discursivo propio donde ‘su’ cuerpo tenga una existencia, aunque sea ficcional. Esto implica recuperar y recuperarse como agente de poder (Badano 460). In so doing, the author obtains closure with his oppressive homeland, repatriating himself vicariously within an Argentina of his own design.

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