

# Manuel Puig's *El beso de la mujer araña* (1976): Gender Performativity, Recognition, and the Performative Nature of Dialogue

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This article provides new readings of Manuel Puig's novel *El beso de la mujer araña* (1976) based on gender theories. Judith Butler's concepts of recognition and gender performativity help us demonstrate how Molina's performance of the "spider woman" allows him to be recognized as a valid interlocutor by his cellmate, Valentín. Through this communicative interaction, a process of self-transformation occurs in Valentín, and he is able to abandon his sexual misconceptions and the heteronormative standards with which he was raised.

**Keywords:** Manuel Puig, Judith Butler, gender studies, performativity, recognition

Este artículo ofrece nuevas lecturas de la novela de Manuel Puig *El beso de la mujer araña* (1976) basadas en teorías de género. Los conceptos de reconocimiento y performatividad de género de Judith Butler nos ayudan a demostrar cómo la actuación de Molina de la "mujer araña" le permite ser reconocido como un interlocutor válido por su compañero de celda, Valentín. A través de esta interacción comunicativa, se produce un proceso de autotransformación en Valentín, quien es capaz de dejar atrás sus conceptos sexuales erróneos y los estándares heteronormativos con los que se crió.

**Palabras clave:** Manuel Puig, Judith Butler, estudios de género, performatividad, reconocimiento

## Introduction

The purpose of this article is to analyze how, in Manuel Puig's novel *El beso de la mujer araña* (1976), Luis Alberto Molina, one of the two characters, makes an appropriation of the symbolic resources of cinema to construct an alternative sexual identity—the "spider woman"—that challenges heteropatriarchal order. At the same

time, Molina's performance of the spider woman is the vehicle to establish a dialogue with his cellmate, Valentín. By means of this communication and his recognition of Molina as a valuable *other*, Valentín transforms himself through a process of self-knowledge, allowing their dialogue to become transformative and, therefore, performative.

In *El beso de la mujer araña* Puig calls attention to the performative nature of language and demonstrates how dialogue can prompt a transformation in the characters. Luis Alberto Molina and Valentín Arregui Paz share a cell in prison yet have very dissimilar social backgrounds: Valentín is a young, educated, political prisoner, while Molina is a middle-aged, uneducated gay man. Even though they are distanced by their life circumstances, the cell works as a sort of metaphoric island that allows them to escape from the impositions of the real world. The communication between the characters happens by means of a dynamic where Molina, as a way of killing time, recounts to Valentín the plots of his favorite movies. Even though the narration of these films could be considered as a vehicle to escape from their oppressive situation, it is also a tool to introduce themes into their conversation that they might not otherwise be able to discuss. As Puig himself states: "They can't face certain subjects directly. Slowly, and unconsciously, they reveal themselves" (Puig and Christ 1991, 572). While retelling the films, Molina also makes an "appropriation"<sup>1</sup> of the gender stereotypes these films provide and constructs an alternative sexual identity—the spider woman—to seduce Valentín.

To support my analyses I will focus on three concepts. First, "gender performativity," as coined by Judith Butler, a concept that she constructs from John Langshaw Austin's theories of language<sup>2</sup> and describes as "the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names" (2011b, 153). Butler argues that sexual and gender identities are constructed within language and discourse, therefore gender performativity is the language and bodily acts that the subject does to become intelligible as "man" or "woman." Butler highlights the importance that heteronormative rules play in gender performativity because to become intelligible—i.e., human—it is necessary to become gendered "in conformity with recognizable standards of gender intelligibility" (2011b, 22). She affirms that sex is a social construction, because the subject is not "there" but is instituted in specific contexts and times by means of bodily and language performative acts that are highly regulated by heteronormative order.

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<sup>1</sup> I want to acknowledge that the term "appropriation" is problematic, but in this case, I use it in the same sense as Néstor García Canclini and Judith Butler. García Canclini, when explaining how the process of cultural consumption takes place in Latin American countries, argues that Latin American people make an appropriation of the elements of EU/US cultures and adapt them to their own background, since the cultural reality of Latin America is heterogeneous, and, consequently, messages spread by dominant cultures are not always decoded in a way that reinforces the ideology of the metropolis. See: García Canclini 1989 (45). Judith Butler also uses the term in a very similar way, when she claims that subjects can appropriate the codes of heterosexuality in order to subvert them. See: Butler 1997 (23).

<sup>2</sup> See: Austin 1975 (7): "The name [performativity] is derived, of course, from 'perform,' the usual verb with the noun 'action': it indicates that the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action, is not normally thought of as just saying something."

Secondly, I use the concept of "appropriation" (within the cultural consumption process) as it was described by Néstor García Canclini in *Culturas híbridas* (1989): the process through which Latin American people have assimilated the influence of dominant European and American cultures, adapting and interpreting messages according to their own social and personal experiences.

Finally, I utilize the concept of "recognition," which Butler defines as a process within interpersonal communication, where the subject recognizes itself in the *other* and recognizes the *other* as a valuable *other*. By means of this process of recognition the subject becomes self-aware and, furthermore, acquires self-knowledge: "one comes to 'exist' by virtue of this fundamental dependency on the address of the Other" (1997, 5).

In the following sections, I will bring together the concepts of appropriation (of cinematographic resources) and gender performativity while introducing a new gender approach by addressing the concept of recognition and stressing the role that the *other* places in the self-awareness process.

### ***El beso de la mujer araña* (1976): Background**

Valentín and Molina are cellmates in an Argentine prison during the 1970s. Valentín is part of a leftist guerrilla group and a political prisoner; Molina is a gay man who has been sentenced for the corruption of minors. They are intellectually and culturally very dissimilar: Valentín is an educated twenty-six-year-old man, politically committed, interested in Marxist theories and psychoanalysis and says he comes from a wealthy family. Molina is an uneducated, middle-aged gay man, who is not interested in politics and is unaware of the Argentine social and political situation. It is crucial to understand that the 1970s were very turbulent years in the country. Its last coup d'état took place in 1976, and the novel was published in that same year. The novel makes explicit that Molina was transferred to Valentín's cell on the 4th of April 1975, so we know the exact period of time in which the action takes place.

For the interaction between Molina and Valentín to occur, the narrative frame is of the utmost importance.<sup>3</sup> Molina and Valentín are presented in what José Amícola describes as a *situación del umbral*, that is, a "verge" or "threshold" situation (1992, 100). He compares Molina and Valentín to Dostoevsky's characters: "Presentaba Dostoevski a su héroe en la situación que Bajtín ha denominado *del umbral*, es decir, de crisis, pues ello permitía mostrar procesos en los que los personajes desnudaban su alma sin escapatoria posible" (100). The characters in *El beso de la mujer araña*

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<sup>3</sup> There has been some discussion about how to consider the theme of space in this novel. Some authors see the prison as a metaphor for the world itself (see: Østergaard 1985). Others consider the cell to be an intermediate space; Jorge Medel-Bao calls it an "oxymoronic space" where the concepts of freedom and surveillance are in conflict, but where freedom predominates over oppression (2016, 336). I propose that the spatial frame be interpreted from the Foucauldian concept of "heterotopia of deviation": time in this space is put on pause and realities that are incompatible in the real world can emerge. See: Foucault 1986.

are confined and deprived of their freedom, and the only two possibilities they have to escape from that situation are either to alienate or to transform themselves. Molina was put in Valentín's cell on purpose: the director of the prison wants him to become friends with Valentín in order to get information regarding his guerrilla activity. What the director did not foresee was that Molina would fall in love with Valentín and that the two men were going to engage in a romantic affair. Molina takes advantage of the confinement to seduce Valentín, and his narration of movies works as a pretext to facilitate communication between them and open up the dialogue to more personal issues.

## **Appropriation of Cinematic Resources and Gender Performativity**

García Canclini argues that within the process of cultural consumption, the appropriation of the messages that EU/US dominant cultures spread is not homogeneous because it clashes with the hybrid nature of Latin American cultures, and consumers can either reinforce or subvert those messages (1989, 44–45). The process of interpretation of cultural messages is complex and responds to multiple factors including social class and all types of personal conditionings, such as gender and race.

To fully understand the way in which Molina makes an appropriation of cinematic resources, it is essential to consider his popular social class as well as his sexual orientation. Molina is not only a homosexual man but also a man who would like to be a woman: "yo quisiera casarme con un hombre para toda la vida. –¿Sos un señor burgués en el fondo, entonces? –Una señora burguesa" (Puig 1994, 50). Molina's frustration at not being a woman and marrying a straight man plays a decisive role in the way in which he makes the appropriation of cinematic resources. Molina uses gender stereotypes conveyed by cinema to construct two alternative sexual identities that help him to overcome his disappointing romantic life: the "subjugated woman" and the spider woman. These identities are paradoxical: while Molina's performance of the subjugated woman reinforces heteronormativity, the spider woman challenges it.

## **The Subjugated Woman: Caretaker, Heroine**

In *Gender Trouble* (1990), Judith Butler describes gender performativity as those bodily and language practices that construct the subject's sexual identity, allowing it to become intelligible within the power structures of heteropatriarchal law. Like language, sex and sexuality are cultural, not natural, structures, that is, discursively constructed over time and differently from culture to culture (Butler 2011a, 4). She draws the analogy of a wardrobe: we can choose certain clothes to construct our sexual identity, but the availability of those clothes is limited. She argues that all genders are artificial, parodic, and, because they depart from pre-given stereotypes imposed by heteronormativity, unnatural. Butler also affirms that not all parodies are subversive per se, as some of them can actually reinforce heteronormativity. What happens, then, when a man performs a female gender identity? An analysis certainly

depends on the purpose of that parody, because moving against heteropatriarchal expectations does not automatically challenge patriarchal order.<sup>4</sup>

Luis Alberto Molina constructs his identity of the subjugated woman using the gender stereotypes that cinema provides. Popular culture is the foundation on which he models his queer identity. A close look at the movies introduced in *El beso de la mujer araña* gives the following panorama: they are all movies set in the 1940s; their portrayal of women responds to the sexist stereotypes common in those times, when women were subjugated to patriarchal power. Elías Miguel Muñoz affirms that: “Molina ha copiado los modales, actitudes, gustos y preferencias de la mujer burguesa. Su objeto no es sólo el hombre, sino una relación hombre-mujer tal como esta ha sido formulada por la sociedad occidental judeocristiana” (1987, 63).<sup>5</sup> Molina’s gender parody of the subdued woman does not challenge but instead reinforces heteropatriarchal power. Molina has bought into the idea of romantic love, as he shows while commenting on the movies: “-Bueno, . . . pero tené bien claro que la película era divina por las partes de amor, que eran un verdadero sueño, lo de la película se lo habrán impuesto al director los del gobierno, ¿o no sabés cómo son esas cosas?” (98). He wants to live a romantic story, like those in the films, as he confesses to Valentín: “-Pero qué lindo cuando una pareja se quiere toda la vida. -¿A vos te gustaría eso? -Es mi sueño” (50).

When they share their thoughts about sexuality, Molina stresses that what he likes best in a man is his superiority—a concept he borrows from the heteronormative narrative, as Butler explains (2011a, 202), that established a hierarchical gender binarism:

-Mirá, yo no entiendo nada de esto, pero quiero explicarte algo, aunque sea a los tropezones, no sé... -Te escucho. -Quiero decir que si te gusta ser mujer... no te sientas que por eso sos menos. -. . . . -No sé si me entendés, ¿qué te parece a vos? -. . . . -Quiero decir que no tenés que pagar con algo, con favores, pedir perdón, porque te guste eso. No te tenés que... someter. -Pero si un hombre... es mi marido, él tiene que

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<sup>4</sup> I want to acknowledge the discussion around Molina and his staging of a female gender role, as some authors consider Molina to be a transgender woman (Teorey 2010), and others consider Molina a homosexual man (Echavarren and Kopple 1991, 581). I agree with the second position because I think that Molina stages a highly normativized female identity that he constructs from the also highly stereotyped cultural goods he consumes; it is not an authentic construction of a female identity. Also, I agree with Bella Smith’s argument: considering Molina a transgender woman would be reinforcing the sexual binarism that the novel challenges (2015, 22).

<sup>5</sup> Puig supports this idea himself and refers to Molina’s construction of his sexual identity in an interview: “I knew that type very well, and I wanted to work with an unsophisticated type, a reactionary, in a certain way. The type of homosexual who rejects all experimentation, all new trends. They’ve accepted the models of behavior from the 40’s—you know: the subdued woman and the dashing male—and they have, of course, identified with the subdued though heroic woman, and they don’t want to change that fantasy, or they can’t” (Puig and Christ 1991, 572).

mandar, para que se sienta bien. Eso es lo normal, porque él entonces... es el hombre de la casa. (246)

Molina's performance of the subjugated woman mainly takes two forms: the caretaker and the heroine. He plays the role of Valentín's caretaker, not only by sharing his food and cooking for him, but also by behaving as his nurse after he gets food poisoning: "–Aguantá un segundito... que ya... –Ay... ay... no, no llames... –No te aflijas, ahora te doy para limpiarte. –Ay... ay... no sabés qué fuerte que es, un dolor como si me clavarán un alambre en las tripas... –Aflojate bien, largá todo que después yo lavo la sábana" (144). Molina's staging of the caretaker role is the way he accomplishes his dream of becoming the *señora de la casa* who cares for her man:

Pero hubo un momento en que parecía que se iban a separar, y ahí me ilusioné, ilas ilusiones que me hice!, ni te imaginás.... –¿Qué tipo de ilusiones? –De que viniera a vivir conmigo, con mi mamá y yo. Y ayudarlo, y hacerlo estudiar. Y no ocuparme más que de él, todo el santo día nada más que pendiente de que tenga todo listo, su ropa, comprarle los libros, inscribirlo en los cursos, y poco a poco convencerlo de que lo que tiene que hacer es una cosa: no trabajar más. (76)

Cinema was not Molina's only source of gender stereotypes. As he recognizes, his upbringing played a major role in his sexual elections: "–Sí, claro. Y ahora te tengo que aguantar que me digas lo que dicen todos. –A ver... ¿qué te voy a decir? –Todos igual, me vienen con lo mismo, isiempre! –¿Qué? –Que de chico me mimaron demasiado, y por eso soy así, que me quedé pegado a las polleras de mi mamá y soy así, pero que siempre se puede uno enderezar y que lo que me conviene es una mujer, porque la mujer es lo mejor que hay" (25).

Part of Molina's gender role models come from popular culture and cinema, then, but he is also copying the example of his mother, a subjugated woman herself. Being a gay man, he recognizes himself as a *loca*—a woman who likes straight men: "–¿Y todos los homosexuales son así? –No, hay otros que se enamoran entre ellos. Yo y mis amigas somos mu–jer. Esos jueguitos no nos gustan, esas son cosas de homosexuales. Nosotras somos mujeres normales que nos acostamos con hombres" (207). This is how Molina consciously performs the role of the subjugated woman in front of Valentín.

Molina's submissive attitude becomes part of his seduction strategy, as a way to control Valentín, making himself indispensable to him. But instead, Valentín feels uncomfortable with Molina's controlling attitude: "–Y ahora... abrimos el paquetito secreto... que te tenía escondido... con una cosa muy rica... para acompañar el té... ¡budín inglés! –No, gracias, no quiero. –Que no vas a querer... y el agua ya hierve. Pedí puerta y volví rápido, que ya está el agua. –No me digas lo que tengo que hacer, por favor... –Pero, che, dejáme que te mime un poco... –¡Basta!... carajo!!!" (197).

Valentín's excuse to reject Molina's help is that he does not want to get used to superficial pleasures because they might interfere with his political commitment. But deep inside he also feels repudiation for the type of woman that Molina is staging.

This is the reason why Molina cannot seduce him while performing this gender role, because Valentín is repulsed. However, Valentín's physical recovery takes place thanks to Molina's care, which helps him eat better and rest and eventually develop the capacity to reflect on his prejudices and transform himself. Even though Valentín does not feel seduced by Molina's performance of the caretaker, he acknowledges the importance of his help: "–¿Se te paró?, qué genial... –Mirá para otro lado, que me da no sé qué... –De acuerdo, cierro los ojos. –Es gracias a tu comida, si no nunca me hubiese repuesto" (187). After Valentín's sickness, the sexual relationship between them takes place, and here Molina once again plays the role of the subjugated woman by being the passive subject of the intercourse: "–Valentín... si querés, podés hacerme lo que quieras... porque yo sí quiero" (121). In the sexual relationship, Molina repeats the cliché of the languid female who gives herself to her man. As Puig explained: "There's this cliché among women, women of the '40s or '50s, who'd always say, it hurts! It was part of the act. A frail romantic woman had to be equipped with a very narrow vagina. But in the novel it's part of the female act by the gay character" (Puig and Christ 1991, 576).

Molina also performs another role of the subjugated woman, that of the heroine—a woman capable of sacrificing herself for love. Some examples of this stereotype can be found in his films, such as Leni, the protagonist of *Destino*, the Nazi propaganda movie. However, even though the heroine is a woman subjected to patriarchal law, she has a romantic dimension that mirrors Molina's idealization of romance and his faith in the "power of love," another cliché in which he decides to believe as a survival strategy to face his disappointing romantic life. Molina assumes the role of heroine on two occasions: when he decides to fool the director of the prison by lying about Valentín in order to protect him, and when he agrees to collaborate with the guerrillas to prove to Valentín his loyalty, though this results in him being killed by Valentín's militant contacts. The heroine stereotype here is a subdued woman that does not redeem the female character, in fact, it reinforces the barbarism and violence of patriarchal power and women's subjugation to it.

The subdued woman, then, is not appealing to Valentín. The aspect he most admired in his sweetheart Marta was precisely her strong personality: "–Lo bueno es que ella me hacía frente, teníamos una verdadera relación, ella nunca se sometió, ¿cómo te podría decir?, nunca se dejó manejar, como una hembra cualquiera" (143). Molina realizes that he needs to put into practice another strategy to attract his cellmate, as Valentín's heterosexist thoughts could not be challenged by "una hembra cualquiera." Only when Molina turns into the spider woman does Valentín fully recognize him as a valuable *other* and accept delegating to him the lead voice in the narration. It is the spider woman and the performative nature of dialogue that open in Valentín the possibility of a real transformation.

## **The Spider Woman: Molina, a Gay Scheherezade**

In *Gender Trouble*, Butler asks: "If gender is constructed, could it be constructed differently?" (2011a, 10). We have examined how Molina does an appropriation of cinematic resources and gender stereotypes to construct his subdued woman identity, which reinforces heteropatriarchal power structures. Valentín rejects

Molina's performance of the caretaker, and it creates a distance between them. Both Butler and García Canclini affirm that the subject/consumer can make an appropriation of the symbolic capital of heteronormativity/dominant culture to subvert it. And this is precisely what Molina does when he becomes the spider woman.

Molina feeds his performance of the caretaker by absorbing the sexist stereotype of the subjugated woman and supporting the also-sexist misconception of male superiority. At night, however, he transforms himself into the spider woman in two ways: he adopts the stereotype of the femme fatale present in some of his movies and the example of panther woman Irena. His appropriation/seduction strategy has these two aspects: he adopts the femme fatale stereotype as a model to perform an alternative sexual identity and simultaneously uses the stories as a vehicle to perpetrate the seduction. In this way Molina becomes a gay Scheherazade whose mission is to entertain his man during the nights to avoid falling into boredom and routine, and to transform the prison cell into a utopian space where gender binarism and political violence are overcome, in contrast to the outside world. Juan Manuel García-Ramos argues that: "El encierro compartido en una misma celda, durante veintidós días, por el homosexual Luis Alberto Molina y el activista político Valentín Arregui Paz, durante el cual uno de los personajes (Molina) va contándole al otro, en diversas sesiones, los argumentos de seis películas, no puede dejar de relacionarse con las arquitecturas de obras como *Las mil y una noches* y *El Decamerón* de Giovanni Boccaccio" (1991, 70).

From a gender perspective, it is interesting to note that the one who assumes the leading voice in the narration is Molina, the gay man, the subject who is frequently dismissed and relegated from heteropatriarchal society. Butler states that "women, lesbians and gay men cannot assume the position of the speaking subject within the linguistic system of compulsory heterosexuality" (2011a, 157). Molina assuming the narrative voice most of the time constitutes a subversion of heteronormative rules, and his positioning is deeply related to Valentín's process of transformation.

At the beginning of the novel, Valentín does not take Molina's recounting very seriously and questions or makes fun of it: "-Bueno, él la quiere besar. Y ella no se le deja acercar. -Y tendrá mal aliento, que no se lavó los dientes. -Si te vas a burlar no tiene gracia que te cuente más" (20). Valentín adopts a patriarchal attitude, as he finds it difficult to accept that Molina is capable of assuming the leading voice. That is why, at first, he constantly interferes with Molina's narrations: "-No me gusta la película, pero es que vos te divertís contándola y por ahí también yo quiero intervenir un poco, ¿te das cuenta? No soy un tipo que sepa escuchar demasiado, ¿sabés, no?, y de golpe me tengo que estarte escuchando callado horas" (21). But Valentín's attitude changes as he starts enjoying the stories without judgement. Afterwards, his comments about the movies are not to question or make fun of them but instead to make his own interpretations, which shows that he is engaging in the dialogue: "-Bueno, vuelvo a la película. Pero una cosa, ¿por qué entonces él ahora se queda a gusto con la colega? -Y, porque se supone que siendo casado no puede pasar nada, la colega ya no es una posibilidad sexual, porque aparentemente él ya está copado por la esposa. -Es todo imaginación tuya. -Si vos también ponés de tu cosecha, ¿por qué yo no?" (29).

Once Valentín validates these stories by his own enjoyment, he also starts to recognize Molina as a valuable *other*, which demonstrates how dialogue and language can acquire a performative nature and challenge heteronormativity. Butler's idea that the law allows its own subversion again is evident: the narrative of the gay man becomes valid because of the straight man's acceptance of that narrative. "In its ideal sense, speaking is a potent act, an assertion of sovereignty that simultaneously implies a relationship of equality with other speaking subjects" (Butler 2011a, 163). Valentín's validation of Molina's narrations also implies his acceptance of Molina as an equal, and he feels the need to stop making fun of his movies and his "sentimental" attitudes: "-Sabés una cosa... yo me reía de tu bolero, y la carta que recibí por ahí dice lo mismo que el bolero. -¿Te parece? -Sí, me parece que no tengo derecho a reírme de tu bolero" (140). Valentín allows Molina to assume the leading voice and is unconsciously discarding the patriarchal attitude that he normalized throughout his life: that of thinking that sensitivity is reserved only for women.

The first step taken by Molina to challenge heteropatriarchal rules is assuming the leading voice of the narration. He makes an appropriation of the resources of the movies that he knows very well but are completely unknown to Valentín. While assuming the leading voice, he is also assuming the power to manipulate the narration to seduce Valentín. One way in which Molina manipulates the plots is the manner in which he delivers the story to Valentín by controlling the suspense: "-Después lo comentamos si querés, o mañana. -Sí, pero seguí un poco más. -Un poquito no más, me gusta sacarte el dulce en lo mejor, así te gusta más la película. Al público hay que hacerle así, si no no está contento. En la radio antes te hacían siempre eso. Y ahora en las telenovelas" (32).

Molina's manipulation of cinematic materials happens also in the way in which he manipulates the contents, highlighting those aspects he likes the most: the appearance of the costumes, the characters' makeup or hairstyles. These remarks also respond to the stereotypical way in which he has constructed his sexual identity. He ignores any political or social implications in the plots, focusing his attention only on the movies' romantic stories, for instance, when he narrates the Nazi propaganda film, *Destino*: "-¿Vos sabés lo que eran los maquis? -Sí, ya sé que eran los patriotas, pero en la película no. Vos dejáme seguir. Entonces... ¿qué era lo que seguía? -Yo no te entiendo. -Es que la película era divina, y para mí la película es lo que importa, porque total mientras estoy acá encerrado no puedo hacer otra cosa que pensar en cosas lindas, para no volverme loco, ¿no?... Contestame" (85).

By managing the suspense of the plots or highlighting only certain aspects of them, Molina manipulates the recounting and openly recognizes that his stories are not completely accurate:

-Yo qué sé si la casa era de la madre, yo te dije eso porque me gustó mucho ese departamento y como era de decoración antigua dije que podía ser de la madre, pero nada más. A lo mejor él lo alquila amueblado. -Entonces me estás inventando la mitad de la película. - No, 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. La casa, por ejemplo. (25)

Molina warns Valentín of this manipulation and distortion, yet Valentín still chooses to validate Molina's speech. García Canclini affirms that everyday consumption practices escape from the control of the hegemonic system, allowing consumers to have a certain amount of freedom in their consuming practices, therefore they can make an appropriation that challenges hegemonic messages. Molina certainly makes a subversive appropriation of these movies, not only in the way in which he manipulates their contents, but also because all these films reinforce heteronormativity and gender stereotyping, while Molina's inversion of the female stereotype leads to the romance with Valentín, which certainly challenges compulsory heterosexuality.

Through his recounting of the films Molina becomes the spider woman. By performing this role he seduces Valentín, challenging heteronormativity, and also achieves his approval, becoming Valentín's unexpected confidant and allowing him to reflect about personal issues he had wanted to hide:

–Sí, no sabés cuanto te lo agradezco. Y te pido perdón, porque yo a veces soy muy brusco, ...y hiero a la gente sin ninguna razón. –Acabala. –Como cuando estabas vos descompuesto. Y no te atendí, nada. –Callate un poco. –En serio, y no con vos sólo, herí mucho a otra gente. Yo no te he contado, pero yo en vez de contarte una película te voy a contar una cosa real. Te macanié de lo de mi compañera. De la que te hablé es otra, que yo quise mucho, de mi compañera no te dije la verdad, y vos la querrías, porque es una chica muy simple y muy buena y muy corajuda. (135)

Only when Molina turns into the spider woman, does Valentín's transformation become possible and the dialogue performative. Molina's appropriation of the symbolic possibilities of the femme fatale stereotype turns him into the spider woman, and this sexual performance has concrete consequences in his and Valentín's lives. Molina goes through the contradictions revealed by his gender enactments, materialized in the staging of the subdued woman and the femme fatale. The role of femme fatale also navigates its own paradox: it challenges patriarchal norms but cannot transcend the spatiality of the prison: in the end, Molina dies as a consequence of patriarchal violence.

Important questions arise from Molina's performance of the spider woman, first, regarding the resemblance between the movie plots and the characters' situation. To what extent does Puig portray Molina's choice of the movies as intentional? Molina seems unaware of the parallelism, which would suggest a metafictional authorial strategy. Puig, as a postmodern author, constantly revisits paraliterary strategies, converting them into places of debate, intersection, and quotation. As Linda Hutcheon argues: "the intended framework of fiction is fiction" (2003, 155). The intentional introduction of mirroring movies has the effect of exploring literary self-reflexivity and also turning literature into a tool to consider other aspects of reality.

Another question arises: to what extent is Molina's staging of the spider woman a conscious act, and to what extent is his behavior subversive if it is not intentional? As explored above, Molina's subversive behavior is not conscious, and his performance of the spider woman is just another gender role he has adopted from popular culture and that he uses as a survival strategy to deal with his disappointing romantic life. However, Molina's performance has undeniable real consequences in his and Valentín's lives, thus he jeopardizes heteronormative rules as he effectively seduces his cellmate. But there are no major transformations in Molina as a result of his interaction with Valentín. Valentín is the real subject of transformation in this novel.

## **On Butler's "Recognition" and Its Relationship to Gender Performativity**

*El beso de la mujer araña* is not Puig's first attempt to use dialogue as the main narrative device, as it has functioned as such in much of his work.<sup>6</sup> In this novel, however, dialogue is not just a means of communication and interaction between characters, but it also has a performative dimension. Dialogue has the power to produce a real transformation in the characters, and its performative nature in *El beso* is intrinsically related to Butler's elaboration of the concept of "recognition." Butler's subject is a subject "in progress" that configures itself by means of performative practices. During the subject's constitution as a subject, the relationship established with alterity is essential. The subject needs to recognize the *other* in order to acquire self-knowledge: "Recognition is a process that is engaged when the subject and *other* understand themselves to be reflected in one another, but where this reflection does not result in a collapse of the one into the *other* or a projection that annihilates the alterity of the *other*" (Butler 2011b, 131). Butler also argues that to achieve psychic self-understanding and acceptance as subjects, we need to be recognized by *others* and, moreover, that the *other* recognizes in me shared psychic structures that make me intelligible: "Recognition is possible and it is the condition under which the human subject achieves psychic self-understanding and acceptance" (2000, 272).

Butler thus affirms that communication becomes both the vehicle and the example of recognition and that subjects are transformed by virtue of the communicative practice in which they are engaged. This means that for a transformation to happen by means of dialogue, that is, for it to become performative, the subject needs to acknowledge the value of the *other*, the value of the *other's* speech, and it needs to recognize the *other* as a valid interlocutor and be open to the *other's* influence.

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<sup>6</sup> This dialogical strategy operates at different levels: as a confrontation between characters, such as the dialogue between Larry and Mr. Ramírez in Puig's *Maldición eterna a quien lea estas páginas*; as empty chitchat, such as the dialogue between Mita and Choli in *La traición de Rita Hayworth*; or as interior monologue or a confrontation of ideas, like Toto's daydreaming in *La traición*. Dialogue can also be understood in a broader sense, as the relationship between the textual layers of a novel, as happens in *Boquitas pintadas*, which is constructed by the juxtaposition of different texts.

*Otherness* becomes a central part in the process of recognition, but also the *other* acquires an outstanding role in the performative dimension of dialogue.

In this novel there is a close interaction between the concept of recognition and gender problematics. Puig stages a society where heteronormative rules and patriarchal power structures establish the parameters in which recognition is to take place. Becoming recognizable within patriarchy implies that the subject needs to display features in accordance with heteronormative rules in order to be intelligible to others, therefore, "recognition becomes a problem for those who have been excluded from the structures and vocabularies of political representation" (Butler 2012, 140). Subjects are expected to perform their sexual identity in compliance with compulsory heterosexuality. Therefore, Molina as a gay man openly performing female roles becomes problematic, because he is outside heteronormative standards for recognition. This is why, at the beginning of their relationship, Valentín feels uncomfortable sharing the cell with Molina, because he cannot recognize him within those patriarchal standards: "-Te voy a explicar. -Sí, pero mañana, porque ahora me vino toda la mufa encima, mañana la seguís... Por qué no me habrá tocado de compañero el novio de la mujer pantera, en vez de vos. -Ah, esa es otra historia y no me interesa. -¿Tenés miedo de hablar de esas cosas? -No, miedo no. Es que no me interesa. Yo ya sé todo de vos, aunque no me hayas contado nada" (23).

This conversation is extremely revealing because it demonstrates to what extent Valentín transforms himself throughout the novel. He starts by dismissing the voice of his cellmate, because he cannot label him as worthy within the heteronormative parameters with which he was raised. As long as he does not recognize Molina as a valid interlocutor, his chances of transformation remain locked. Even though the characters are communicating with each other, there is no recognition in Butler's sense, and, therefore, the dialogue has not yet acquired the power to be performative.

Valentín says he supports the "Marxist revolution," fighting to liberate those oppressed by society, but, paradoxically, he does not realize that by dismissing Molina, he becomes an oppressor himself. The recognition of Molina as a valuable *other* is the first step that leads Valentín toward a real transformation.

## **Valentín's Transformation and the Performative Nature of Dialogue**

In *How to Do Things with Words* (1975), Austin affirms that "performative utterances" describe something, but also "the issuing of that utterance is the performing of that action" (7). The dialogue between Valentín and Molina is performative because it operates a change. Throughout the novel, there is a clear evolution in Valentín's thoughts and behaviors. From the beginning Valentín shows an inherent contradiction in his thinking because, even though he is committed to the Marxist revolution, he has been raised with patriarchal standards and has prejudices and misconceptions regarding sexual issues. However, a real change is possible in him because his will

to fight against political authoritarianism makes him understand that he first needs to fight authoritarianism within himself.

Valentín has no previous experience interacting with men like Molina and feels suspicious of him because of his sexual choices, and that is why, at first, he constantly tries to diminish or contradict his opinions. Valentín makes remarks on Molina's most minimal mistakes: "–¿Y ella no tiene frío? –No, no se acuerda del frío, está como en otro mundo, ensimismada dibujando a la pantera. –Si está ensimismada no está en otro mundo. Ésa es una contradicción" (10). This also shows a very important aspect of Valentín's personality: he always tries to find the rational side of things. The cellmates' attitudes reinforce the dualism of men/rationality, women/sensitivity, which is one of the foundations of patriarchal order. This question has been underlined by Butler, who asserts masculinity and femininity are concepts shaped within an heteronormative frame, and within that frame, "there is a social consensus that associates men with rationality and women with nature" (2011a, 50).

Valentín is completely locked into his political speech and appears disconnected from his emotions. Moreover, he thinks that showing his emotions is a weakness: "–¿Por qué la rompés? –No hablemos más del asunto. –Como quieras. –Está mal dejarse llevar por la desesperación. –Pero está bien desahogarse. Vos me lo decías a mí. –Pero a mí me hace mal. Yo tengo que aguantarme" (185). Assuming the clichés of patriarchal standards, Valentín thinks that rationality and sensitivity are incompatible and that a "real man" has to be rational. He says that Molina is too sentimental and cannot follow the arguments of a logical conversation: "–Con vos no se puede hablar, si no es dejarte que cuentes una película. –¿Por qué no se puede hablar conmigo, a ver? –Porque no tenés ningún rigor para discutir, no seguís una línea, salís con cualquier macana. –No es cierto, Valentín. –Como quieras. –Sos un pedante" (70). Valentín does not recognize Molina as a valuable interlocutor and thereby avoids the possibility of change in himself; he does not want to open up to Molina because he assumes he has nothing to learn from him.

Having sacrificed his youth and freedom for a political ideal, Valentín thinks it necessary to stay committed to the struggle, even inside the prison, where he rigorously studies political sciences and psychoanalysis and keeps his emotions and physical pleasures in check. As Mariela Peller observes: "El vínculo que Valentín establece con su cuerpo es de control y disciplinamiento" (2009, 402). This attitude includes: (1) control over sexual activities, which is why he asks Molina not to make any sexual references in his movie narrations: "–Perdón pero acordate de lo que te dije, no hagas descripciones eróticas. Sabés que no conviene" (10); (2) control over his emotions: "–¿Y tu mina? –Eso también tiene que ser secundario. Para ella también soy yo secundario. Porque también ella sabe qué es lo más importante" (34); and (3) control over any type of physical pleasure: "Mientras dure la lucha, que durará tal vez toda mi vida, no me conviene cultivar los placeres de los sentidos, ¿te das cuenta?" (33).

Furthermore, Valentín associates a lack of control with femininity. Molina jeopardizes Valentín's prejudices by opening him up to the pleasures of life: sex, entertainment, emotions, and food. Gradually, in the interactions sparked by the recounting of the

films, Valentín starts to reveal his feelings. The first hint of his transformation occurs when the narration about the panther woman finishes: “–Me da lástima que se terminó. –Pasamos un buen rato, ¿no es cierto? –Sí, claro. –Me alegro. –Yo estoy loco. –¿Qué te pasa? –Me da lástima que se terminó. –Y bueno, te cuento otra. –No, no es eso. Te vas a reír de lo que te voy a decir –Dale. –Que me da lástima porque me encariñé con los personajes. Y ahora se terminó, y es como si estuvieran muertos” (47).

After this confession, Valentín opens up to Molina and tells him about his former girlfriend. The movie has awakened Valentín's old feelings that he shares with Molina because he starts trusting him, despite his original suspicion. Puig himself explains the importance of the movies as mediators between the characters: “That was the very first idea I had for the novel: that these two guys would meet through a mediator, films; that otherwise they couldn't talk to each other. They can't face certain subjects directly. Slowly, and unconsciously, they reveal themselves. In a repressive society some people only dare discuss matters metaphorically” (Puig and Christ 1991, 572).

Food also plays a very important role in their relationship. Valentín's refusal to enjoy food is tied to his will to become a martyr, to avoid enjoying life: “–Cocinás bien. –Gracias, Valentín. –Pero me vas a acostumar mal. Eso me puede perjudicar” (33). This attitude toward food also changes later, as Valentín starts to transform himself. A cornerstone in Valentín's self-knowledge corresponds to the moment when he gets food poisoning and literally “lets go”: he throws up the prison food and defecates in his bed. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler makes reference to the importance that body regulations play in the construction of a sexual identity. When a body is functional to the social system, any kind of unregulated permeability constitutes a site of pollution and endangerment: “the rites of passage that govern various bodily orifices presuppose a heterosexual construction of gendered exchange positions and erotic possibilities. The deregulation of such exchanges accordingly disrupts the very boundaries that determine what it is to be a body at all” (2011a, 181). Valentín defecating and vomiting in front of his cellmate become symbolic acts that open a path to challenge his heteronormative prejudices.

This moment of physical illness is very significant from the perspective of sexual prejudices; after this episode, the sexual affair between them takes place. As a consequence, in the second part of the novel, Valentín is different, no longer showing a macho, pedantic attitude, but allowing himself to learn from Molina, transforming himself, and understanding the importance of enjoying life. This whole change of perspective also provokes a questioning of his commitment to the Marxist cause. When he is dictating to Molina a letter for his former girlfriend Marta, he confesses: “y yo como vos no me conformo a ser un mártir, Marta, me da rabia ser mártir, no soy un buen mártir, y en este momento pienso si no me equivoqué en todo...” (182). Valentín acknowledges that he has learned from his friendship with Molina: “–El que no sabe recibir... es un mezquino. Es porque tampoco le gusta dar nada. –¿Te parece?... –Sí, lo estuve pensando, y es eso. Si me ponía nervioso que vos fueras... generoso, conmigo... es porque no me quería ver obligado a ser igual yo con vos” (205).

The culminant moment of their relationship is the sexual affair, when Valentín is able to overcome his sexist posture, and Molina accomplishes his dream of seducing the straight man. After being sick and releasing his old prejudices, materialized in vomit and feces, Valentín understands that his sexual behavior was greatly conditioned by society: “–No sé si me entendés... pero aquí estamos los dos solos, y nuestra relación, ¿cómo podría decirte?, la podemos moldear como queremos, nuestra relación no está presionada por nadie” (206). Butler highlights how homosexual intercourse is defiant of heteronormative order: “Since anal and oral sex among men clearly establishes certain kinds of bodily permeability unsanctioned by the hegemonic order, male homosexuality would, within such a hegemonic point of view, constitute a site of danger and pollution” (2011a, 180).

When a rumor is spread that Molina might be moved to another cell, Valentín realizes that Molina's departure is emotionally affecting him: “–Sí... pero esperá un poco. La verdad es que... no sé qué me pasa, Molina, de golpe... tengo un lío en la cabeza. –¿Por qué? ¿Te duele algo? ¿la barriga? –No, es en la cabeza que tengo un lío. –¿Lío de qué? –No sé, debe ser porque te podrías ir, no sé bien” (209). When they finally confirm the news, that Molina is actually going to be released, Valentín openly recognizes that he has learned a great deal from their relationship: “–¿Y vos te vas a acordar bien de mí? –Aprendí mucho con vos, Molinita... –Estás loco, si yo soy un burro... –Y quiero que te vayas contento, y tengas buen recuerdo de mí, como yo tengo de vos. –¿Y qué es lo que aprendiste de mí? –Es muy difícil de explicar. Pero me has hecho pensar mucho, esto te lo aseguro...” (265).

Valentín has revisited his closeminded opinions about sexuality and learned to think beyond his political statements and clichés, understanding that challenging heteronormative practices is also a revolutionary way of doing politics. José Amícola argues that there is a politicization in Molina's attitude, and that the interaction with Valentín has transformed him also: “El homosexual se politiza y el guerrillero se sensualiza” (1992, 100). However, this is only partially the case, as Molina has no commitment to Valentín's cause or even to his own cause as a homosexual man: he becomes neither a revolutionary nor a spokesperson for gay men. Molina continues to be judgmental of gay men who have relationships with each other: “–Pero vos... ¿no has tenido buenos amigos, que también te importaron mucho? –Sí, pero mirá, mis amigos han sido siempre... putazos, como yo, y nosotros entre nosotros, ¿cómo decirte?, no nos tenemos demasiada confianza, porque nos sabemos muy... miedosos, flojos. Y siempre lo que estamos esperando... es la amistad, o lo que sea, de alguien más serio, de un hombre, claro. Y eso nunca puede ser, porque un hombre... lo que quiere es una mujer” (207).

Molina challenges heteronormativity, in spite of his own intentions. His transformation remains unclear. At one moment Valentín tries to make him understand that the role of the subjugated woman is not going to make him happy, as it supposes an uneven, oppressive relationship with a partner:

–Bueno, esto es muy íntimo, pero ya que querés saber... La gracia está en que cuando un hombre te abraza... le tengas un poco de miedo. –No,

eso está mal. Quién te habrá puesto esa idea en la cabeza, está muy mal eso. –Pero yo lo siento así. –Vos no lo sentís así, te hicieron el cuento del tío los que te llenaron la cabeza con esas macanas. Para ser mujer no hay que ser... qué se yo... mártir. Mirá... si no fuera porque debe doler mucho te pediría que me lo hicieras vos a mí, para demostrarte que eso, ser macho, no da derecho a nada. –No hablemos más de esto, porque es una conversación que no conduce a nada. (247)

The same happens when Molina is about to be released, and Valentín suggests to him that a way of dealing with his loneliness could be to get involved in politics, joining a group that could share his interests: “–Vos escucháme, que en algo te podré ayudar. Es cuestión de hablar. Ante todo tenés que pensar en agruparte, en no quedarte solo, eso seguro te va a ayudar. –¿Agruparme con quién? Yo no entiendo nada de esas cosas, y tampoco creo mucho” (218). Molina rejects the idea of political participation, reinforcing the also-sexist stereotype that “women do not understand about politics.” He challenges heteronormative rules when putting his seduction strategy into practice. However, he does not do it at a conscious level and does think of himself as standing against heteronormative oppression. He might transform himself at some point, but he refuses to take Valentín’s advice:

–Te prometo una cosa, Valentín... que siempre que me acuerde de vos, va a ser con alegría, como vos me enseñaste. –Y prometéme otra cosa... que vas a hacer que te respeten, que no vas a permitir que nadie te trate mal, ni te explote. Porque nadie tiene derecho a explotar a nadie. Perdonáme que te lo repita, porque una vez te lo dije y no te gustó. –. . . . –Molina, prometéme que no te vas a dejar basurear por nadie. –Te lo prometo. (265)

Molina is not convinced by Valentín’s argument because he has not changed his own sexist opinions, nor does he get politicized. His acceptance of Valentín’s “mission” has more to do with his will to become a heroine. This is what Valentín also suggests in his last monologue, when he already knows that Molina has been killed by the guerrilla:

*¿qué le contaste?, que fue culpa mía, y que estoy muy triste, pero que no hay que ponerse triste porque el único que sabe es él, si estaba triste o estaba contento de morirse así, sacrificándose por una causa buena, eso solamente lo habrá sabido él, y ojalá, Marta, de veras le deseo con toda mi alma, ojalá se haya muerto contento, ¿por una causa buena? uhmm... yo creo que se dejó matar porque así se moría como la heroína de una película, y nada de eso de una causa buena. (285)*

Molina’s appropriation of the symbolic capital of cinema plays a prominent role in Valentín’s transformation, as Molina’s recounting of the movies is the vehicle to establish a conversation between them and allows Valentín to gain confidence to open up to his inner feelings, thoughts, and contradictions. At the same time, Molina’s performance of the spider woman allows him to attract his cellmate’s attention,

prompting a dialogue between them and Valentín's recognition of Molina as a valuable *other*.

## Conclusion

This article demonstrates how Luis Alberto Molina makes an appropriation of cinema's symbolic resources to construct the alternative sexual identity of the spider woman, and this establishes a performative dialogue between him and his cellmate, Valentín, who undergoes a process of transformation through self-knowledge.

This performative dialogue takes place when Molina assumes the leading voice of the narration and appropriates the plots of movies to perform the role of the spider woman. At the same time, Valentín's recognition of Molina as a valuable *other* occurs precisely when Molina becomes the spider woman and gains Valentín's confidence. As Valentín talks about personal issues, he acquires self-knowledge and understands that he has supported the sexual misconceptions with which he was raised. Valentín ultimately acknowledges that he cannot be a revolutionary man in the broader sense of the term, if he continues being so judgmental about sexual issues. Language can be seen as a vehicle for self-awareness as Valentín overcomes his prejudices by means of the performative nature of dialogue.

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