

Kissing the Spiderwoman and Loving the Awful Grandmother: Popular Culture in Manuel Puig's *El beso de la mujer araña* and Sandra Cisneros's *Caramelo*

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Manuel Puig's *El beso de la mujer araña* [*The Kiss of the Spiderwoman*] (1976) and Sandra Cisneros's *Caramelo* [*Caramel*] (2002) would initially appear to have little in common. Puig's novel is set against the backdrop of the violently repressive military dictatorship of the late 1970s and early 1980s in Argentina. Its protagonists, Marxist Valentín Arregui and gay window dresser Luis Alberto Molina, are diametrically opposed characters forced to share a prison cell. *Caramelo* is a sprawling multigenerational family drama that spans the era from the Mexican Revolution to 2002 and is set in Mexico, Spain, and the United States. The novel's main protagonists are women, including the narrator Celaya 'Lala' Reyes and the Awful Grandmother, a character revered by Lala's father, but feared or hated by the rest of the family. Despite their differences, the novels have a great deal in common, however, including a condemnation of patriarchal repression, a re-inscribing of stories often left out of official histories, and, most notably—the theme that will be addressed in this chapter—a shared love of popular culture.

Before discussing the role of popular culture in the novels in more detail, we should pause to consider that comparing work by a Chicana/o author to that of a Latin American writer is something of a fraught endeavor. There is little agreement about the extent to which Chicana/o literature can be regarded as part of Latin American rather than North American literature. Clear influences from Latin American literature can be seen in early works written in Spanish, such as Aristeo Brito's *El diablo en Texas*, which recalls Juan Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo* in its evocation of the tyrannical cacique Ben Lynch and its portrayal of the town of Presidio, like Rulfo's Comala, as a hell on Earth. Salvador Rodríguez del Pino, in a study of early Chicano novels written in Spanish, notes that there was a marked tendency to situate these writers within the Latin American literary canon:

Se criticaba lo obvio, lo que resaltaba en diferencia: Elementos culturales y nacionalistas, símbolos prestados de la Revolución Mexicana y de la América indígena; todo ello explicado en términos de Rulfo y García Márquez y sicoanalizado a través de Octavio Paz.

[Critics focused on the obvious, what stood out as different: cultural and nationalistic elements, symbols borrowed from the Mexican Revolution and the indigenous cultures of the Americas; all of this was explained in relation to Rulfo and García Márquez and psychoanalyzed with reference to Octavio Paz]. (Rodríguez del Pino 2)

However, he goes on, to point out that even though works by pioneering writers like Tomás Rivera certainly owed a debt to the Mexican authors Carlos Fuentes and Juan Rulfo, the influence of William Faulkner and James Joyce was also evident (Rodríguez del Pino 14).

If early novels by Chicana/o writers, and particularly those written in Spanish, had clear links to Mexican and Latin American literature, in more contemporary times, international publishers and critics have often overstated the similarities between Latina/o and Latin American literature. This tendency has been called into question by Ellen McCracken, who observed that various reviews of Cuban American writer Cristina García's novel *Dreaming in Cuban* drew parallels with "the work of Gabriel García Márquez and Latin American magical realism, two of the most common reductive modes by which the U.S. cultural mainstream has appropriated Latin American fiction of recent decades as a palatable Third World commodity" (22). Manuel Martín-Rodríguez, meanwhile, asserts that these constant comparisons between Chicana or Latina literature and magical realism could lead readers to the conclusion that the work of these authors is a subgenre entirely beholden to the work of García Márquez:

The critical affiliation of Chicano/a and Latino/a books to magical realism and to García Márquez's wake has become such a major burden for Chicano/a and Latino/a literature that it would give to a reader only exposed to mass-marketed texts the false impression that all valuable literature produced by Latinos/as is nothing but a continuation or imitation of that particular writer's work. (126)

He cites one review in the *San Francisco Chronicle* of Ana Castillo's *So Far From God* that tells readers to "Give it to people who always wanted to read 'One Hundred Years of Solitude' but couldn't quite get through it as a particularly insulting example of this tendency to not only compare Castillo to García Márquez but also to consign her work to the category of 'magical realism lite'" (126).

While these kinds of reviews are undoubtedly frustrating for Chicana/o writers, some of these writers have acknowledged their connections with Latin American authors, among them Sandra Cisneros. Although Cisneros has suggested that she has more in common with Asian American writers than with Latin American writers, because they are "living simultaneously with two cultures many times in conflict with each other" (Torres 234). She has also mentioned numerous affinities with Latin American writers. In the introduction to the 25th anniversary edition of the *House on Mango Street*, she mentions *Dream Tigers* by Jorge Luis Borges as an influence on her work (Cisneros, *House on Mango Street* xvi). The fact that she named her writers' workshop Macondo after the fictional village where Gabriel García Márquez's *Cien años de soledad* is set also suggests a kinship with the Colombian author. *The House on Mango Street* was translated into Spanish by the renowned Mexican writer Elena Powniatowska, and in an interview in 1992, Cisneros listed Juan Rulfo and Manuel Puig

as two of her favorite writers (Jussawalla and Dasenbrock 290). Elsewhere, Cisneros has cited Puig more directly as an influence on her work, explaining that it was he who helped her to confront her history: “Manuel Puig says that you first have to extirpate your past before you can write about the present” (Torres 233).

Both *El beso de la mujer araña* and *Caramelo* are intensely focused on the past and its relationship with the present. Although Puig’s novel is set against the backdrop of the brutal dictatorship that ruled Argentina from 1976 to 1983, he communicates relatively little direct information about the period, focusing instead on the film stories told by the protagonist Molina, which themselves reflect a history of political, social and sexual divisions that affect every aspect of his characters’ lives. *Caramelo*, meanwhile, is a coming of age story told through the eyes of Celaya ‘Lala’ Reyes. Its narrative moves through time and space from the contemporary setting in the United States back to when Lala’s grandmother Soledad, the Awful Grandmother, was a young woman struggling to find a place in the Mexican society of the Revolutionary period.

Moreover, Puig’s *El beso de la mujer araña* has also had a significant influence on the formal aspects of *Caramelo*. Both are fragmented narratives that feature shifting perspectives, footnotes, and strong female characters with extraordinary and even supernatural attributes. The main narrators are adept at drawing their listeners into their stories, with the motifs of the Spiderwoman in *El beso de la mujer araña* and the Mexican shawl known as the *rebozo* in *Caramelo* symbolizing their deft weaving together of the diverse strands of the narratives. The style of narration in both novels is highly self-conscious, moreover, with Molina and Lala admitting that they shape their stories to correspond with their own versions of events. When Valentín accuses Molina of making up half of the first film story he tells, Molina replies:

“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.”

[“No, I’m not making it up, I swear, but there are things that I have to flesh out, so that you see them as I see them, and, well, I have to explain them somehow.”]. (Puig 25)

Similarly, the Awful Grandmother objects to the way in which Lala tells her story, but Lala defends her position, insisting that it is her perspective that shapes the story:

“Why do you constantly have to impose your filthy politics? Can’t you just tell the facts?”

“And what kind of story would this be with just the facts?”

“The truth!”

“It depends on whose truth you’re talking about. The same story becomes a different story depending on who is telling it.” (Cisneros, *Caramelo* 156)

The most notable tendency that connects the novels, however, is the use of popular culture. Puig is a writer whose work is intimately associated with the use of popular culture and film in particular. Pamela Bacarisse observes that in his work Puig provided the same kind of pleasure as pulp fiction, photo-novels, and televised soap operas do, a pleasure that a large number of ordinary readers and viewers in so many countries relish and even consider an essential part of their lives (2). This blending of popular culture

with literature was a very radical style in the 1970s, given that the literature of the so-called boom period and before was replete with 'high cultural' references. Chilean author José Donoso, an author whose own work was representative of this previous style, linked the preference of younger writers like Puig for popular culture to a more democratic and colloquial literature that, nevertheless, continued to hold the specificity of literary language in high esteem' (Gutiérrez Mouat, qtd. in Bell et al. 164).

Puig's first novel *La traición de Rita Hayworth* [*Betrayed by Rita Hayworth*] integrates the Hollywood icon into a satire of the provincial town of Colonel Vallejos, a thinly disguised version of the town in the province of Buenos Aires, General Villegas, where Puig grew up. As a young boy who felt alienated by this harshly macho world, where gender roles were rigidly imposed, Puig related more to the narratives in the films that he regularly saw with his mother than with the reality that surrounded him:

I understood ... the moral world of movies where goodness, patience, and sacrifice were rewarded. In real life nothing like that happened. Mamá would take me to the movies in the afternoons to entertain me, and herself, and I, at a certain moment, decided that reality was what was on the screen and that my fate—to live in that town—was a bad impromptu movie that was about to end. What was real was what happened for an hour and a half every day at the movies. (Levine 36)

Cisneros's first novel, *The House on Mango Street*, also presents popular stories, in this case fairy tales and songs, as a refuge. The adolescent narrator Esperanza longs to escape her impoverished *barrio*, where the possibilities for women are so limited that her only hope to live as a writer is to leave. In *Caramelo*, another young female narrator called Lala navigates the process of becoming a woman while telling the inextricably intertwined stories of her family members north and south of the U.S.-Mexican border. The novel is divided into three main sections. "Recuerdo de Acapulco" recounts Lala's annual family trips to Mexico to visit her father Inocencio's mother, the Awful Grandmother. Part Two, "When I Was Dirt" moves the action to Mexico during the Revolution. Part Three, "The Eagle and the Serpent," returns to contemporary times after the family, along with the Awful Grandmother, moved from Chicago to San Antonio, Texas. It concludes with an extraordinary chronology that treats with equal weight everything from the Conquest of Mexico to the filming of Elvis's *Fun In Acapulco* in 1963 to Pope John Paul II's visit to Mexico City in 2002 with equal weight. Throughout this sprawling border-crossing narrative, Cisneros celebrates popular culture from both Mexico and the United States through forms and figures as varied as the famous comic book *La familia Burrón* [*The Burrón Family*], the classic Mexican film *Nosotros los pobres* [*We the Poor*], Betty Boop, and The Jackson Five. The novel's central motif, the elaborately woven Mexican shawl known as the *rebozo*, simultaneously pays tribute to the richness of Mexican craft traditions and reflects on the complex interconnection between the different strands of the narrative. As Socolovsky has noted, Cisneros's genre-defying range of reference make her text idiosyncratic and even iconoclastic: "The novel's very movement between different types of fiction and its comic, lighthearted presentation of serious events give it a troubling presence, as it challenges the *status quo* and disrupts and opposes authority"

(80). Both *Caramelo* and *El beso de la mujer araña*, as we shall see, celebrate popular culture above all for its affective quality, its ability to provoke strong feelings across borders or class and political divisions in a manner that recalls Pierre Bourdieu's theory that:

If circus and melodrama ... are more 'popular' than entertainments like dance and theatre, this is not merely because, being less formalized ... and less euphemized, they offer more direct, more immediate satisfactions. It is also because ... they satisfy the taste for and sense of revelry, the plain speaking and hearty laughter which liberate by setting the social world head over heels, overturning conventions and proprieties. (Bourdieu 34)

Popular culture, mainly in the form of films, functions as a leitmotif in *El beso de la mujer araña*. Molina and Valentín pass the long hours in their prison cell discussing the stories of the films that Molina recounts. The opening lines of the novel plunge us into the first film, the story of Irena, an artist from a remote region of Transylvania, where the women are cursed and turn into wild beasts if they have sexual contact with men. Irena marries a young architect in New York who tries to help her to overcome her past, but she is doomed to repeat it. When the womanizing psychoanalyst, who attempts to cure her of what he believes is a phobia, makes a sexual advance towards her, she turns into a panther and kills him, dying soon after herself. If the plot of the film, which is generally believed to be based on Jacques Tourner's *Cat People* (1942), demands considerable suspension of belief on behalf of the reader, the discussions the characters have about it, and the plot of the film itself, reveal much about how the films will function in the novel.

The insistent logical Valentín interprets the film in an analytical manner, attributing Irena's fear to sexual repression:

“Bueno, yo creo que ella es frígida, que tiene miedo al hombre, o tiene una idea del sexo muy violenta, y por eso inventa cosas.”

[“Well, I think she's frigid, she's afraid of men or thinks that sex is something violent, so that's why she makes things up.”]. (Puig 21)

The romantic Molina, meanwhile, presents the film as a story of star-crossed lovers that ends in tragedy, and when asked by Valentín which character he identifies with, without hesitation he says Irena, because he always identifies with the heroine. Valentín, predictably, replies that he identifies with the psychoanalyst. While charged with much humor and irony, this dialogue seems to establish Molina as a romantic dreamer and Valentín as a hard-headed rationalist. Yet, even at this early stage, there are signs that Valentín is not as impervious to romance as he seems. He admits early on to liking the film (36) and as Molina proceeds with the film story, it reminds him of the woman he loves, who is also his comrade in the struggle to unseat the military dictatorship. He tells Molina about his fears that she is in danger and his sense of helplessness at not being able to do anything to protect her (40-41). At the film's conclusion it is he who is moved by it and admits that he is sorry that it's ended. Valentín's rather unexpected response to the film reminds us of Puig's awareness of the power of popular cultural productions to touch people across sociopolitical divisions: “He understood how movies, soap

operas, and popular songs seductively manipulate our hearts and minds, how the language of the melodramas on radio in films programmed intellectuals and housemaids alike” (Levine xv-xvi).

As Molina concludes the first film story, Valentín begins to talk more about his comrade, though he is reluctant to tell Molina her name. Molina jokingly responds that they could call her after the actress who played one of the lead roles in the film, Jane Randolph, and suggests that she could also star in an invented film based on the prisoners’ situation: Jane Randolph en ... *El misterio de la celda siete* [Jane Randolph in ... *The Mystery of Cell Seven*] (Puig 49).

Up to this point, at the end of chapter two, it is clear that the films reflect on the prisoners’ very different characters and ideologies. Valentín, who represents the archetypal revolutionary, is a stoic, rather cold character who softens somewhat as he is drawn into the stories that Molina tells him. Molina appears to be a much open character, who seeks to establish some common ground between himself and Valentín by recounting the stories of the films he holds so dearly. In sharp contrast to his cellmate, he appears to be entirely apolitical, particularly when he declares that his favorite film story is the one he tells next, which follows the love affair between Leni Lamaison, a Parisian singer, and Werner, a Nazi officer, during the Occupation of Paris. Having been persuaded of the nobility of the Nazi cause, Leni renounces her country to become a heroine of the Third Reich.

Molina’s love of this film provokes anger in Valentín, who upsets Molina greatly by pronouncing it Nazi filth. Through his tears, Molina defends the film and explains why he is so upset by Valentín’s dismissal of it: “Me ofendés porque te ... te creés que no ... no me doy cuenta que es de propaganda na ... nazi, pero si a mí me gusta es porque está bien hecha aparte de eso es una obra de arte.” [“I’m offended because you think that I don’t... don’t realize that it’s Na... Nazi propaganda, but I like it because it’s well made and a work of art.”] (Puig 63).

At this point, Molina reveals himself to be a more sophisticated consumer of popular culture than had previously appeared to be the case—he is capable, unlike Valentín, of separating the film’s aesthetic qualities from its political content without being blind to its propaganda.

This exchange anticipates the revelation that comes much later in the novel, in chapter eight, that Molina is in fact using the film stories to establish a rapport with Valentín so that he will give him information about his political activities that he can pass on to the prison authorities, who have promised him an early release if his spying is successful. Although Molina’s seeming betrayal of Valentín is mitigated by the fact that he does not, in fact, pass on any information that could harm Valentín and he is seeking an early release in order to care for his sick mother, it does not change the fact that the seemingly innocent is actually a shrewd political operator who is in possession of the full facts of the situation. Valentín, the seemingly political astute character, is the real innocent here. The relevance of the film stories to the reality of the prisoners’ situation takes on a sinister note, as Molina’s ability to ensnare Valentín will have a

decisive impact on both their futures and the film stories themselves, which all tell of doomed love, take on a darker significance.

Caramelo, like *El beso de la mujer araña*, opens with the first of many popular cultural references. Lala's recollection of a family holiday in Acapulco is preceded by a citation from Agustín Lara's song "María bonita," which opens with Lara asking his beloved, whose beauty he celebrates, to remember the joyful time they spent in Acapulco when they were still together (3). This love song has a strong cinematic connection, as Lara wrote it for his former wife, the movie star María Félix, and its nostalgic tone is entirely appropriate as the introduction to an episode that looks back at the family when they were still young and full of hope for the future. The sad conclusion of Lara's relationship with Félix provides an ironic counterpart to the family story, much as the films in *El beso de la mujer araña* constantly parallel the stories of Valentín and Molina. In her analysis of the use of popular culture in *Caramelo*, María Herrera-Sobek has observed that there is a "discrepancy between the discourse of love inscribed in songs and the reality of women's lives in patriarchal societies" (157). This is certainly the case here, as the family holiday, which begins with Lara's wistful song, ends with the Awful Grandmother, in a revelation worthy of any soap opera, telling her daughter-in-law Zoila, whom she has always deemed unworthy of her son, that he has a secret daughter who works in the Grandmother's house as a maid.

In both novels, the stories associated with popular culture anticipate and reflect on one another, so that the distinction between the fantasy represented by films, songs or telenovelas and the lives the characters lead is blurred. Molina makes it clear when he recounts the Nazi film that he loves the film stories partly because of their elaborate, kitsch staging:

Y ése es el principio del romance entre Leni y el oficial. Se empiezan a querer con locura. Ella todas las noches le dedica sus canciones, desde el escenario, sobre todo una. Es una habanera ... entre las palmeras hechas de papel plateado ... se ve la luna llena bordeada en lentejuelas que se refleja en una tela sedosa, el reflejo de la luna también en lentejuelas.

[And that's the start of the romance between Leni and the officer. They fall madly in love. She dedicates her songs to him every night, from the stage, especially one number. It's a habanera ... between the palm trees made of silver paper ... we see the full moon rendered in sequins reflected on a silk cloth, the reflection of the moon is done in sequins too].
(Puig 79)

This extremely detailed account of the film's mise-en-scene is strikingly similar to a scene in *Caramelo* that strongly foregrounds the power of popular cultural figures and stories to shape people's lives. Lala's Aunt Lightskin, the Awful Grandmother's glamorous and rebellious daughter, tells her niece that she met her future husband at a theatre in Mexico City where the Mexican actress Tongolele was performing. Lala is enthralled by her aunt's descriptions of nightclubs, music, dancing, and films. Even though her aunt dismisses Tongolele's films as *churros* [B-movies], Lala re-creates them in her mind and finds them enthralling:

I imagine a Mexican fifties musical like the one we just saw, a good thirty minutes devoted to Tongolele's cabaret scene, lots of smoke rising through the silver spotlight ...

Cardboard palm trees on a big blank stage with dancers in silhouette, the stage too huge to be believable ... and the tropical nightclub decorated with bamboo wallpaper, sparkly beaded curtains, tables with soft little lamps, and here and there African masks, even though this is supposed to be Polynesian, because that's just how movies are. (Cisneros, *Caramelo* 266)

The focus on the non-realistic setting of the performances in both accounts underlines the fact that the narrators are acutely aware that the films are elaborately staged fantasies, but it is precisely this artifice, which further distances them from reality, that appeals to them.

Towards the end of *Caramelo*, Lala compares the many strands in the family's saga to the patterns of the *rebozo*: "Plotlines convolute and spiral, lives intertwine, coincidences collide, seemingly random happenings are laced with knots, figure eights, and double loops, designs more intricate than the fringe of a silk *rebozo*" (428-429).

The concluding passage of *El beso de la mujer araña* also points to the interdependency and interrelation between the stories told by introducing the figure of the Spiderwoman, who is a composite of the many women in the film stories, but who also refers to Molina and to Valentín's lover, Marta. The Spiderwoman, like Irena, is a very strange woman, and the web in which she is trapped evokes both Molina's storytelling and his isolation as a gay man in a tyrannically machista society. Her tragic demeanor and the fact that she both repels and attracts Valentín also recall the relationship between the men, as Molina is doomed to have unrequited love affairs with straight men, and it is clear that even though he and Valentín have a physical relationship, they would not be lovers outside their prison cell.

Aunty Lightskin's love story, in which she is forced to elope because her family would not approve of her husband, is as captivating and romantic as any fictional drama, as Lala notes: "Stolen! Like kidnapped? All for love, that's too cool, Aunty. Your life would make a terrific telenovela" (Cisneros, *Caramelo* 271). It is this adventure that subsequently prompts Lala to re-create this drama for herself, by forcing her less than dashing boyfriend Ernesto to 'steal' her and take her to Mexico. Lala's attempt to re-create her aunt's exotic past and to emulate the racy example of Tongolele by losing her virginity to Ernesto in a Mexican hotel room is also inspired by a Mexican calendar:

That's been hanging on the kitchen door since 1965. A *charro* carrying off his true love, a woman as limp as if she's sleeping, a sky-blue *rebozo* draped round her shoulders, the *charro* wearing a beautiful woolen red serape, the horse golden, the light glowing from behind his sombrero as if he's a holy man. (Cisneros, *Caramelo* 363)

Ernesto's crisis of conscience after their lovemaking means that Lala's rapture ends in disaster, as he decides to join the priesthood and she is left alone in a hotel room in Mexico City. The scenario, far from resembling the romantic songs and film stories that pervade the novel, descends into the clichés of advertising: "We sleep twisting and turning all night, like a bad mattress commercial" (Cisneros, *Caramelo* 387).

To return to Herrera-Sobek's reflection on the uses of popular culture in the novel, she makes the important point that the different pop culture references in the novel operate differently, as the telenovelas that Lala's adventure closely resembles are seen

as female-centered entertainments that “narrate women’s stories” (158). As Lala’s rebellious friend Viva Ozuna memorably notes: “You’re the author of the *telenovela* of your life” (Cisneros, *Caramelo* 345). Thus, although Lala’s adventure with Ernesto does not work out, it marks her ability to transcend the patriarchal oppression encoded in the songs filtered through her family’s memory and her own, and suggests her desire to move from a passive to an active role, just as her behavior has transformed from the Cinderella she was as a child in Mexico to a path more commonly taken by the fairytale prince. Despite her father’s warnings that she will be cast out if she leaves the family home before she is married, she is welcomed back with relief and has gained a new maturity and ability to negotiate the family’s history while learning to live independently.

In Puig’s novel, Molina similarly shows an ability to negotiate the contradictions and repressions of the conservative society depicted in the films he loves, so that he ultimately becomes the protagonist of his own drama. Although critics such as Jonathan Tittler (49) and Norman Lavers (39) suggest that Molina is ultimately caught in his own web, as Swanson suggests, Molina makes a deliberate choice and he “causes his own seduction and his own death” (24). Despite the fact that the films take us through glamorous locations such as New York and Paris, the only real journey that takes place in the novel is Molina’s return to his everyday life after his release from prison. It is at this point that he, like Lala, decides to take drastic action to re-create the romantic popular cultural stories that he so loves. By agreeing to take a message Valentín’s guerrilla comrades, he is aware that he will be killed. As Valentín suggests at the novel’s conclusion, however, this was a conscious decision and one that finally allowed Molina to assume the role of a film heroine: “ojalá se haya muerto contento, ¿por una causa buena? Ummm . . . yo creo que se dejó matar porque así se moría como la heroína de una película” [“I hope he died happy. For a good cause? Hmm . . . I think he let himself die because that way he could die like a film heroine”] (Puig 285).

As Valentín notes, the fact that Molina’s death is reported as a sacrifice for a revolutionary cause is ironic, and yet, as the novel’s final footnote on the subject of homosexuality explicitly suggests that Molina’s courage in living openly as a gay man in a repressive and extremely closed society is just as revolutionary as Valentín’s political activism. In a similar vein, Lala, while trying to emulate her aunt, actually acts more like the men in her family by exploring her sexuality and defying convention, thus taking her first steps towards autonomy and adulthood. In both instances, the narrators move from consuming popular culture to being the authors of the films or *telenovelas* of their lives, even if, in the case of Molina, this leads to death.

To return to the question of the relationship between Latin American literature and Chicana/o writing, perhaps the most problematic aspect of such comparisons is that, as Fernández de Pinedo puts it “there is no doubt that Latin American literature has a great influence on Chicano writing, but unfortunately the former tends to operate as the model to which the latter should submit.” (Herrera-Sobek et al. 97-98). The recently produced *Norton Anthology of Latino Literature* certainly situates Latina/o writing in relation to Latin American literature, as it includes works by Chilean, Colombian, Cuban,

Dominican Republic, Guatemalan, Mexican, Peruvian, and Puerto Rican authors. In the introduction, however, Ilan Stavans takes pains to situate contemporary Latina/o literature in a multicultural, transnational environment: “The Latino writer now resides at a unique junction of traditions: Latin American literature, Anglo American literature, and minority literature. The writer no longer develops in a monolithic culture, but absorbs many cultures during the course of a life” (lxv).

El beso de la mujer araña broke with the conventions of modernist Latin American literature, and its openness, its presentation of popular culture as a worthy medium for exploring identity politics, and its celebration of difference are also found in Cisneros’s writing. *Caramelo* develops these elements of Puig’s novel to embrace a wide spectrum of cultural artefacts as reflections of identity, and her novel’s negotiation of physical, generational, and gender borders expands and further complicates Puig’s literary experiments. In many ways she can be seen to re-write *El beso de la mujer araña*, using it as a palimpsest to explore her family history and the complex interactions between Mexicans north and south of the border. If her ambition when writing *The House on Mango Street* was to “write stories that ignore borders between genres, between written and spoken, between highbrow literature and children’s nursery rhymes, between New York and the imaginary village of Macondo, between the U.S. and Mexico” (Cisneros, *House* xvi-xvii), with *Caramelo* she has achieved a multifaceted and deeply affecting exploration of not only these borders, but also those between her writing and the work of Puig. What is perhaps most notable is the development from the use of international popular culture to comment on a national situation to her use of popular culture from Mexico to claim a space for Chicanas/os in the United States. Cisneros has noted that the mixture of popular culture and history in her novel was very deliberate:

One of the reasons I included so much history in the footnotes is because I feel we are living in a very imperialistic society, and South Texans, Tejanos, are not going to get their history because it would empower them. I think that women are also colonized. I felt that the book was like a Mexican baúl, those lacquered trunks that store rebozos, but also store important papers. (Mermann-Jozwiak and Sullivan 68)

Following Socolovsky, I would assert that Cisneros’s “multiple storytelling strategies and voices create a collective mestizaje that blends the United States’ identity with Mexico” (77). Yet, Socolovsky sees her engagement with the popular images of Mexico as stereotypical and as a reflection of her alienation from her home country (84). In fact, the opposite is true: It is through the evocative power of this popular Mexico that the family continues to connect with their home. Even in the United States, the Awful Grandmother and Inocencio bond over the Mexican movies they watch, which are shown on television in Texas (Cisneros, *Caramelo* 333), while the *Familia Burrón* comics that the Grandmother saves for her son’s trips to Mexico are also sold “in Mexican grocery stores throughout the U.S.” (Cisneros, *Caramelo* 247). In this subtle way, Cisneros suggests that the Mexican culture has always been an integral part of life in the United States, especially in states such as Texas which were originally Mexican territory. Whether the Mexico portrayed in such cultural productions is realistic or not is irrelevant, what matters is the emotion they evoke. The novel comes to a close with a

reference to another of Lara's ballads, "Farolito," a fitting conclusion to a novel that captures the transnational lives of people who live between nations and cultures and who constantly redefine their identity.

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