

Letras Hispanas

Volume 11, 2015

SPECIAL SECTION: On Masculinities, Latin America, and the Global Age

TITLE: ¡...es tu madre!: Pedro Infante and Melodramatic Masculinity

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ABSTRACT: This essay references and echoes a culminating moment in two films starring Pedro Infante: *Nosotros los pobres* (1947) and *Angelitos Negros* (1948). Filmed and released just one year apart, these films by the renowned Rodríguez brothers—*Nosotros los pobres* directed by Ismael Rodríguez and *Angelitos Negros* by Joselito Rodríguez—make use of a classic melodramatic device or speech act, that is, naming and attributing motherhood: ¡...es tu madre! In this essay, I reflect on these paradigmatic scenes of identifying the mother, yet more specifically and significantly consider the role that Pedro Infante as male hero plays as the one who supplies that missing knowledge that resolves the melodramatic crisis in each film. I am interested in understanding how Infante's characters—Pepe el Toro in *Nosotros* and cabaret singer José Carlos in *Angelitos*—embody a figure that contains a melodramatic archive of the nation. I examine what can be called Infante's melodramatic masculinity. Classically, melodrama has been framed or understood as a woman's narrative—the very narrative excess would suggest that melodrama as an *écriture féminine* avant la lettre. However, it is my contention that in Latin America melodrama circulates more widely and produces different cultural meanings than in Hollywood.

KEYWORDS: Masculinity, Globalization, Transnationalism, Gender Theory

RESUMEN: Este ensayo hace eco de un momento culminante en dos películas protagonizadas por Pedro Infante: *Nosotros los pobres* (1947) y *Angelitos Negros* (1948). Rodadas y estrenadas con un año de separación, estas películas dirigidas por los conocidos hermanos Rodríguez hacen uso de un recurso melodramático clásico, esto es, el de nombrar y atribuir la maternidad: ¡... es tu madre! En este ensayo, reflexiono sobre las escenas paradigmáticas en las que se identifica a la madre y de forma más específica exploro el papel de Pedro Infante—héroe masculino—como personaje que revela la información perdida y resuelve la crisis melodramática en cada una de las películas. Estoy interesado en entender la manera en que los personajes representados por Infante—Pepe el Toro en *Nosotros* y el cantante de cabaret José Carlos en *Angelitos*—encarnan una figura que contiene un archivo melodramático de la nación. Examinó, por consiguiente, lo que podría llamarse la “masculinidad melodramática de Infante.” Desde un punto de vista clásico, el melodrama ha sido enmarcado o entendido como una narrativa para mujer—el mismo exceso narrativo sugeriría que el melodrama es una “*écriture féminine* avant la lettre.” Yo arguyo, sin embargo, que en Latinoamérica el melodrama circula de una manera más amplia y produce significados culturales diferentes a los del melodramade Hollywood.

PALABRAS CLAVE: masculinidad, globalización, transnacionalismo, teorías de género

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¡...es tu madre!: Pedro Infante and Melodramatic Masculinity

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*Quis est homo qui non fleret Matri Christi si
videret in tanto supplicio?
—“Stabat Mater”*

*Cette résorption de la féminité dans le Maternel,
résorption proper à de nombreuses civilisations
mais que le christianisme conduit, à sa façon, à
la apogée, serait-elle simplement l'appropriation
masculine du Maternel lequel, selon l'hypothèse que
nous adopton, n'est donc qu'un fantasme recourant
le narcissisme primaire?¹*

The title of this essay references and echoes a culminating moment in two films starring Pedro Infante: *Nosotros los pobres* (1947) and *Angelitos Negros* (1948). Filmed and released just one year apart, these films by the renowned Rodríguez brothers—*Nosotros los pobres* directed by Ismael Rodríguez and *Angelitos Negros* by Joselito Rodríguez—make use of a classic melodramatic device or speech act, that is, naming and attributing motherhood: ¡...es tu madre! In this essay, I would like to reflect on these paradigmatic scenes of identifying the mother, yet more specifically and significantly consider the role that Pedro Infante as male hero plays as the one who supplies that missing knowledge that resolves the melodramatic crisis in each film. I am interested in understanding how Infante's characters—Pepe el Toro in *Nosotros* and cabaret singer José Carlos in *Angelitos*—embody a figure that contains a melodramatic archive of the nation. I am particularly drawn to examine what can be called Infante's melodramatic masculinity. Classically, melodrama has been framed or understood as a woman's narrative—the very narrative excess would suggest that melodrama as an écriture féminine avant la lettre.² However, it is my contention that in Latin America melodrama

circulates more widely and produces different cultural meanings than, say, in Hollywood, and that the work of melodrama encompasses and takes on broader—or better, different—gender fashionings and significances.

1. Situating melodrama

What is the place of melodrama in Latin American culture? What ideological templates does melodrama offer in the figuration of a Latin American subject? I hope to argue that melodrama functions as a particular form of hegemonic discourse in Latin America; it is a narrative that often gets displaced as supplementary or superfluous, yet it is my contention that such supplementarity and excess are precisely what make melodrama so attractive in its potentiality for subject formation—culturally, socially and politically.³ In this essay, I would like to sketch out a different narrative or genealogy of the textual as well as cultural workings of melodrama. I hope to sketch out what is still an impressionistic picture of melodrama—from literature to film—that engages classical readings in melodrama, but also offers some alternatives to read it in and across Latin America.

It would only make sense to begin with Federico Gamboa's 1903 best-seller, *Santa*, which inaugurates literary melodrama in twentieth-century Mexico. The text starts off with the anxious arrival of the young Santa to her new home. Her first words upon coming face-to-face with the whorehouse would be "—¡Aquí!... ¿En dónde?" Thus, she calls into question her arrival and her new place in society and culture. We know that this arrival is also linked with a departure: Santa had to leave her home in the Edenic town of Chimalistac after her virginity was "assassinated" by a rogue soldier. This critical hinge—arrival and departure—influences greatly the self-figuration of Santa. For the young woman, her subjectivity stems out of this double movement of loss and invention; the loss of her virginity leads her metonymically to other losses—her lost family, her way of living, her town, and so on. These losses force her to discover a new place (to uncover herself in another place), a dark and unknown place, a cipher for that initial question, "Where?" In other words, while the "I" narrates its past with nostalgia (literally, pain for the home), her future "I" is constituted through the trauma of not knowing one's place in society. I would suggest that in this conjunction of a nostalgic past and an uncertain future we can locate the modernity of Santa—both as a subject and a melodramatic text. Moreover, this idea is central to *Nosotros los pobres*: the film represents that moment in 1940s Mexican society when there is a huge movement from the rural to the urban space. *Nosotros los pobres* would seem to index the modern crises brought about by this mass migration to the city.⁴

I would like to stay a few more moments with *Santa* to try to understand the values that take a melodramatic stronghold in the young girl, but also to open up a critical conversation to examine the hegemonic place of melodrama in Mexican literature and culture. Shortly after her arrival to the house of prostitution, Santa meets Pepa, an old whore.

Santa starts telling her how and why she had come to this place—this is of course the first of many retellings of her story, told with different degrees of detail throughout the novel. What becomes important is not so much what Santa tells us, but rather how Pepa responds to the young girl's story:

Ocupada en pasarse la esponja por el cuello y las mejillas, Pepa asentía sin formular palabra, reconociendo para sus adentros de hembra vulgar y práctica, una víctima más en aquella muchacha quejosa e iracunda, a la que sin duda debía doler algún abandono reciente. ¡La eterna y cruel historia de los sexos en su alternativo e inevitable acercamiento y alejamiento, que se aproximan con un beso, la caricia y la promesa, para separarse, a poco la ingratitud, el despecho y el llanto...! Pepa conocía esta historia, habíala leído; no siempre había sido así—y señalaba sus muertos encantos... (23)

What is absolutely fascinating in this scene is that Pepa already knows beforehand a *version* of Santa's story. This is a strange aspect of melodrama: there always seems to be a prior—and, by extension, excessive—knowledge of the melodramatic story line. If the melodramatic text is always already known or recognizable, why the need to narrate it again and again? What is the novelty and function in retelling the same story one more time? Consider the commonplaces in Pepa's words, "a kiss, the caress and the promise," later "the ungratefulness, the anger and the tears." Resorting to these commonplaces suggests that melodrama provides the subject a possibility of inserting her *petite histoire* into a *grand récit*. Might not this be the appeal of melodrama for the Latin American subject, that she may imagine herself a part of a larger narrative, wherein she can align her particular experience with a greater cultural unconscious? Like the Freudian game of *fort/da* that allows the subject to refunction through repetition her or his place and agency from

passive to active, melodrama also gives the Latin American subject such pleasure. In effect, what we see here is identification. Carlos Monsiváis asks,

¿A quién arrebató y a quién regocija la defensa sangrienta de la virginidad? ¿Quiénes se obstinan en las recomendaciones celestiales de la familia monolítica? A Todos los integrantes de la sociedad que se reconoce como tal y así procede. A la novela naturalista iberoamericana o a los melodramas franceses o hispanos, se llega con el ánimo dispuesto: lo pasaremos mal o tristemente, pero vamos a aprender, y volveremos a casa reconfortados. (9)

There is a rapture (*arrebato*) that entraps readers and viewers of the melodramatic text; moreover, this rapture leads to a (self) disciplining that has powerful pedagogical implications, and that takes the consumer of melodrama back to his home, comforted. I would add one more dimension to this identificatory moment before the melodramatic work, and it has to do with the creation of a private scene of individuation. For this reason, despite Pepa's initial indifference to Santa's words, the old woman will remember and repeat her own melodramatic story: "Fui guapa, no te creas, tanto o más que tú [...]" (23). Certainly at the end of her story, Pepa warns the young girl never to repeat to anyone what the old woman had just told her. She demands silence because it is what gives her melodramatic account an amount of originality and control. The relationship between melodrama and silence would direct us to appreciate that behind every melodramatic narrative always rests another voice waiting to emerge and be heard.

2. Disposable bodies

Another particular element of the melodramatic text that I would like to underscore here is the use of the body. In *Santa*, the prostitute's body gets elevated as a repository

for the other's desires. In Monsiváis's perspicacious reading of melodrama as a site (and sight) of investment, he notes: "En el período que va de fines del siglo XIX a la primera mitad del siglo XX, el melodrama ("Se sufre" 9). Thus it makes complete sense that the prostitute's body and figure become the most faithful display case to contain the most conflicting desires. Bodies circulate for purchase, but also for exchanging and containing certain narratives of the self. In melodrama, bodies carry meaning, and their circulation and gestures not only give coherence to the self, yet bodies come to symbolize more than the self. That is, bodies become allegories, abstractions of feelings, social and cultural values, as well as universal ideals. Indeed, the entire novel can be seen as a vindication and eventual apotheosis of Santa to call herself and indeed become "una santa." In other words, melodrama generates the production and scripting of archetypes, which as Monsiváis notes, "con la idealidad que concretarán gritos y sollozos, el Alma (la Familia, la Mujer, el Hombre) se enfrenta a sus enemigos: Mundo, Demonio y Carne" ("Se sufre" 8). Nevertheless, as we saw with Pepa, these archetypes are not necessarily final goals, but rather starting points (or points of departure) for individuation and individual subject formations.

If melodrama provides readers with a critical template in which they may couch their *petite histoire* into a larger history, this insertion requires a certain level of identification. It makes sense to consider the body as the most obvious surface for the self to recognize itself *in* and *as* the other. The national imaginary sees and repeats itself in some bodies—and not in others. In other words, the melodramatic compulsion to allow the self to become part of a larger liberal national subject gets arrested and displaced when that idealized body is other. I would argue that in Mexico, during the "Edad de oro del cine mexicano," the national imaginary will consume a very specific national, cultural, and racial body—and none was so spectacular as Pedro Infante. More precisely, following

the Porfiriato, then the Revolutionary period, continuing through multiple Mexican modernities of the mid- to late 20th century, such a body would necessarily have to be male and white (or at least, mestizo). In what follows, I would like to show how this masculinity performs and disidentifies melodramatically in *Nosotros los pobres* and *Angelitos negros*, particularly gauging the roles the gender, race, and loss (in the moral and economic senses) contribute to the figuration of a particular masculinity, a melodramatic one at that.

3. *Nosotros los pobres: arrabal and abjection*

Like most melodramatic works, *Nosotros los pobres* would require an Olympian job of reconstructing a linear storyline. Monsiváis characterizes "*Nosotros los pobres* [as] the pinnacle of the *arrabal* [ghetto] genre [of melodrama], produced by combining the neighborhoods of survival and marginality. In the mythology of the Mexican cinema, the *arrabal* was the zone of reconciliation between heaven and hell, between extreme purity and degradation" ("Mythologies" 124). Briefly, Pepe el Toro (played by Infante) is a poor carpenter, taking care of his paraplegic mother "La Parálitica" and his orphaned niece Chachita. The text introduces us to a catalog of characters—from Pepe's love interest, Celia, "La Chorreada," a mysterious woman who appears asking for his help, Yolanda "La Tísica" to a couple of drunken women "La Guayaba" and "La Tostada," who play the role of a chorus in the classical Greek tradition, and many others. In effect, these urban dwellers come to represent more than themselves as individuals, but rather become social or cultural types, each owning a particular set of values and ideals that they inhabit, perform, and embody.⁵

Pepe is victim of a series of misfortunes, and lands in jail accused of murdering a usurer. While in prison, he discovers that

his mother is dying at the hospital. Wanting to see her before she dies, he escapes and goes to her side. There at the same hospital, the mysterious Yolanda, "La Tísica" also lies dying in another ward. She is confessing to a priest about how she became pregnant, and had a daughter, but "antes de hundir[se] en la desvergüenza y el vicio, deposit[ó] en casa de [su] hermano Pepe a [su] hijita." Now she wants to see Chachita before she "goes away."

As Chachita is by her grandmother's deathbed, she asks for help—"¡Mi abuelita se muere!" However, a nurse calls the situation a lost case; moreover, when she goes to get the doctor, he says that "La Parálitica" will not make it through the night. In a desperate attempt to get some attention and care for her grandmother, Chachita herself goes to get the doctor. At that moment, he is taking care of "La Tísica" who immediately recognizes her daughter, but is unable to say anything. The girl sees the woman and goes on to blame her, arguing that, because of her, the doctor is ignoring her grandmother. She yells at her: "¡Muérase! ¡No quiero volver a verla en mi vida!" Then, "¡La odio! ¡La odio! ¡Muérase!..." At that exact moment, Pepe comes into the room, and tries to stop Chachita. Crying in his arms, Chachita finally learns the secret from Pepe: "Esa mujer ... es tu madre." In an agonizing last breath, "La Tísica" asks Chachita that at least once she wants to hear her call her "mamá." Here in a reversal of fortune, the girl runs to the Yolanda's side, and begs for forgiveness and that implores her not to die.

I would like to propose that "La Tísica's" story rewrites Santa's own. "La Tísica" is literally the tuberculosis-afflicted one—starting at the turn-of-the-last-century, the link between TB (along with venereal diseases) and prostitution was tautological. Her story is kept in the dark until the very end of the film—we only learn details of Yolanda's history during her final confession to a priest, and her brother has been guarding her secret. In other words, the story of prostitution can only be framed by the sanctity of the last

rites—her story can only be spoken openly to a priest, who will then “forgive” any transgressions and vices. The story is then repeated by Pepe: “Esa mujer... es tu madre.” If in fact the priest (el padre) is the first to handle the truth of Yolanda’s prostitution, Pepe (whom Chachita has referred to throughout as “papá”) now utters the melodramatic truth. Stated differently, the story of prostitution is told to one “father” and uttered by another “father” each time otherwise. Furthermore, the syntactical symmetry of Pepe’s speech act is inescapable. First, “esa mujer”—literally “that woman,” socially “that whore”—becomes a “mother.” The prostitute, that figure of consumption and modernity, becomes registered at the end as one of maternity. Maternity becomes a neat compact of normative desire and passionlessness. Most notably, the notion of an unruly femininity, here prostitution, gets circumscribed and regulated under the sign of the maternal—and this disciplining can be achieved through a masculinist act. If we consider that the prostitute (and her story) occupies a place of exteriority and abjection, then it can only be brought into the fold of society, into the heart of the family, by recasting her body and rewriting her story *in other words*—not as a story of womanhood or femininity, but a story of motherhood. Or, as Kristeva reminds us: “Cette résorption de la féminité dans le Maternel, résorption propre à de nombreuses civilisations mais que le christianisme conduit, à sa façon, à la apogée, serait-elle simplement l’appropriation masculine du Maternel...” (227) Even marked by the accusation of criminality, Pepe is able to dictate the terms of the family romance, and incite the reintegration of Yolanda into normativity—not just into femininity, but into the realm of the maternal.

As Chachita tries to make amends with Yolanda, a nurse comes in and whispers something into Pepe’s ear. In the next scene, he is also by his dying mother’s side. As he closes her eyes and cries over her body, the

music swells. The two scenes of Chachita and Pepe crying over the dead bodies of their respective mothers accentuate the melodramatic trope. Chachita now has a mother’s body to mourn. Pepe also mourns over his mother’s body; however, we can add that the framing of this scene of melodramatic masculinity takes on another meaning for his mourning. He is mourning for his dead mother, but might he not also be mourning a lost masculinity? The figure of a crying man in a world where “los hombres no lloran” brings together masculinity and melodrama, thus his status or version of masculinity is transformed by his melodramatic performance.

It is at this precise moment that two detectives come and bring him back to prison, where he will not stay long. It so happens that upon his return, he discovers that Ledo, the real killer in the murder of which he is accused, has landed in jail. Ledo wants to entrap and then get rid of him. In the final fight sequence of masculine bravado, which prefigures Pepe’s future career as a boxer, Pepe manages to overcome Ledo and his two buddies, and submits him to confess that he had killed the usurer, and that Pepe is innocent. Pepe manages to get the truth out, and he is freed. One year later, he is married to Celia, and they have a son, “El Torito.”

What is revealed in the rather rushed final minutes of the film is that Pepe needs to establish that he has been telling the truth—by any means necessary, even by gouging another man’s eye out, and forcing him to confess. This recognition of his innocence accomplishes two things—first it proves Pepe’s masculinity, which rehabilitates him from that melodramatic breakdown over the death of his mother, as well as it guarantees him as the moral center and compass of the film.

I would like to end this section with a small detail: when Pepe is fighting Ledo and the other two men, his shirt is ripped off, revealing his body. I would argue that Infantes’s strong, healthy body becomes an ideal—not

necessarily as an object of desire (although it may be one), but rather as a body that symbolizes a melodramatic ideal of the nation. The viewer identifies himself with Pepe defending his reputation and honor, a defense which paradigmatically trumps all other possessions the poor man may have.

The status of the body in the melodramatic text is quite important because, as I am suggesting here, it allows an identification with normative gender ideals—from maternal love to masculine bravery—and by extension with ideas of the body politic and the nation. As we saw in the end, Pepe's body becomes a linchpin that secures and stabilizes the meanings of masculinity as well as femininity (in this case, as motherhood).⁶ His body also introduces a caveat in the definition of the body politic of the nation—that is, which bodies are allowed to represent the national—and which are not? Also, how are those transgressive (or unruly or criminal) bodies rendered normal again? As I have tried to argue, Pepe's privileged masculinity rescues femininity from loss and perdition, he brings his sister (into the) home. What other bodies are excluded from the home or the national project? In the next section, I would like to look at Joselito Rodríguez's monumental *Angelitos negros* to explore another kind of family and national romance.

4. Racialized bodies

Considered the first racial melodrama in Mexico, *Angelitos negros* premiered in 1948. Already in 1946, Joselito Rodríguez had begun working together with Rogelio A. González on the screenplay for *Angelitos negros*. Although often compared to Fannie Hurst's *Imitation of Life* and its filmic adaptations, the storylines could not be any different.⁷ One strand of Hurst's novel (as well as the 1934 version of the film) tells the poignant story of Delilah as the selfless mother who tries to educate and warn her fair-skinned mulatta daughter Peola about

the risks of "passing." This aspect of the novel and film might have inspired the central storyline of *Angelitos*. However, racial passing is not the central theme of *Angelitos*, rather the black nanny Mercé (played by Rita Montaner) hides the truth from Ana Luisa that she is her mother, that Ana Luisa is mixed-race. Mercé's secret is described by herself as an act of ethical masochism, that is, giving up a part of herself for some greater good. We could argue that, in *Imitation of Life*, racial *disavowal* creates those moments of disquiet and tension that move the melodrama forward, however, racial *unknowing* becomes the secret that holds the *Angelitos negros* together until its very climactic ending. Racial disavowal and racial unknowing mark the central difference in how racial formations unfold in each text. Passing puts the racialized subject in the uneasy position of being discovered for whom or what he or she is not, in the surveilled position of having one's body read in a manner that is different from how the self wishes to appear or represent. As Lauren Berlant has argued about the mulatta body and passing, "the mulatta figure is the most abstract and 'artificial' citizen. She gives the lie to the dominant code of juridical representation by repressing the 'evidence' the law would seek—a parent, usually a mother—to determine whether the light-skinned body claimed a fraudulent relation to the privileges of whiteness" (111). In this way, "passing" makes the subject overly aware that he or she has a body and a history. In *Imitation*, Peola is always sensitive of her body, at times painfully so, whereas in *Angelitos*, Ana Luisa inhabits the privilege of whiteness throughout most of the film, and sees herself as racially superior to the blacks and mulattoes in the drama. Her true racial self is only discovered at the very end—and it is left unexplained.

5. The sexual body

Interestingly, in *Angelitos*, Ana Luisa will become aware of her body, but not as a

racial body, but rather as a sexual one, when she discusses with Nana Mercé her initial attraction for José Carlos. The scene opens up with Mercé complaining that “Mira, te mandó flores otra vez, sanky-panky ese.” Ana Luisa calls her a “negra metiche”; nonetheless, Mercé argues that she is a “metiche” because she wants to protect Ana Luisa’s reputation. Ana Luisa talks about being flattered by José Carlos’s flirtations, how her friends will envy her, and then Mercé brings up, “¿Qué dirían en el colegio, mi niña?” to which, Ana Luisa bursts out, “¡El colegio!... etc.” I would argue that Mercé’s initial characterization of José Carlos as a “sanky-panky”—in other words, as some kind of sex worker—sets the terms of the debate right away. She sees him as only trying to get to Ana Luisa, so that he may get to her money, her class status, or social standing. Structurally, the scene is a shot-reverse shot sequence, from which we may consider that both women’s positions are mirrored and might even be seen as equal—Mercé presenting her desire to protect certain social values and a sense of female respectability, while Ana Luisa expressing her desire to be freer from any social conventions and constraints. In this scene la Nana is the purveyor of very traditional class values and certain ideals of femininity, and the young woman wants to tear away from those values.

In *The Melodramatic Imagination*, Peter Brooks argues that “[in analyzing melodramatic texts,] we have in fact been witnesses to the creation of drama—an exciting, *excessive*, *parabolic* story—from the banal stuff of reality. States of being beyond the immediate context of the narrative, and *in excess* of it, have been brought to bear on it, to charge it with *intenser* significances” (2, my emphasis). We could apply his insights to Ana Luisa’s rather excessive and parabolic response to Nana Mercé’s question. In repudiating the “colegio,” and wanting to be more “like her *amigas*,” Ana Luisa is saying that she desires a sexual life. Again, the shot-reverse shot sequence is a play of mirrors that puts mother and daughter face-to-face. It is a narcissistic

scene of physical and social contrasts. I call it “narcissistic” because it contains a series of reflections and relationalities that are worth discussing. First, this scene reveals Mercé’s care for the other—literally and figuratively, her *niñita*—she returns to Ana Luisa a primary narcissism, that is, the discourse of self-preservation, when she introduces *el qué dirán*. Ana Luisa’s refusal of that *qué dirán*, is the best example of secondary narcissism, indeed she withdraws from any object-relation outside the self, above all the mother, producing a relationship to social reality that verges on egotism—she wants the banal stuff: “Vestir bien, lucir joyas, sentirme halagada, alternar con los muchachos, vivir mi vida, enamorarme.” But these things are already being invested with other greater, more intense significances. It is just at this moment when Ana Luisa steps to the foreground of the scene, breaking the mirroring sequence, and leaves Nana Mercé behind; she complains about how her pain is that much greater, “Déjame, quiero estar sola”—and she runs away taking the flowers that José Carlos had sent her. It is no surprise that in the very next scene, we discover Ana Luisa sitting in front of a mirror, loosening up her hair, and taking off her glasses, that is, she is playing with a new look outside the mother’s gaze. In other words, she begins experiencing and assuming a sexual subjectivity heretofore unbeknownst to her.

I want to continue and extend the analysis of the shot-reverse shot as a mirroring scene, and suggest that this scene *formally* leaks out a secret, *the* secret of Ana Luisa’s mulatta identity. The very structuration of the scene places Ana Luisa as her mother’s reflection—and through her luminous whiteness becomes the “negative” of her mother’s image.

6. Identification

Ana Luisa’s luminosity is most evident when she attends José Carlos’s musical review, and he performs in blackface. At one point the shine from her sequined dress shines on

Juan Carlos's own face; at another moment he calls her "sol." Throughout his performance, she remains stoic, barely smiling; this is in stark contrast with the bodily excesses of Pedro Infante's song and dance. After the show, she meets Fernando Valdés, José Carlos's best friend, "casi un hermano," and refuses even to shake his hand. His comment, "Reconózcame como un amigo" is only met with her cold shoulder. She cannot acknowledge him, much less recognize him as a friend. In other words, there is no identification in the psychoanalytic sense of the word. Ana Luisa is both unable and unwilling to recognize—to identify—any part of Fernando in her; thus, she rejects him completely. Later on, when José Carlos announces that Fernando will be one of his *padrinos*, Ana Luisa cynically wonders whether Fernando would feel comfortable at the wedding. Then she comes out as a racist stating that she would prefer "una persona de más calidad." As a last resort, she tries to convince José Carlos using murky aesthetics terms: "Todo va a ser tan bello como yo lo había soñado: No hagas que alguna sombra opaque nuestra felicidad." When all fails, she goes behind José Carlos's back to disinvite Fernando as a witness of their wedding. We might go further with this issue and argue that Ana Luisa obviously feels that the black man cannot form part of Juan Carlos and her legal and social contract. To summarize this issue, Ana Luisa cannot—will not—recognize the black man, nor acknowledge him as a subject at any level: psychically, socially, legally. Fernando is then reduced to the status of an abject body. This reduction is seen most powerfully when Fernando has to disinvite himself, making-up an excuse to José Carlos that he and Isabel have to work. It is quite ironic that Fernando would use such a Mexican expression, "hay que buscarse los frijoles," in the very instance when he withdraws as a witness or as a legal subject from body politic that is symbolized by his friend's wedding. When Isabel later asks Fernando why he lied, he can no longer speak—he shows her his black hands. The black body is offered as

evidence—both Fernando and Isabel recognize that they are only seen and read through their excessive bodies.

7. Disidentification

Going back to the musical review, that Afro-Caribbean extravaganza with all the dancers in blackface, let us look at how Pedro Infante's black body circulates differently. The singer takes Ana Luisa home, where Nana Mercé is up waiting for her. The fact that she is up goes back to this idea of *el qué dirán*—it would be considered inappropriate for a young single woman to be seen coming home at 1am.

As José Carlos and Ana Luisa get out of the car, he asks how she enjoyed the show. She says she liked it, but wonders why an artist like him would "lower himself dancing with a mulatta." He does not read this question as racist, rather as a sign of jealousy. She retorts: "Sería hacerme muy poco favor comparándome con una mujer como esa." Here we see how in Ana Luisa's mind her sense of self (and her body) are not the same as Isabel's, either racially or sexually. Ana Luisa basically conflates race and sexuality into one and the same body. We might even suspect that she sees the black female body both as immoral and perhaps even as overly sexual, when she refers to Isabel as "una mujer *como esa*." In other words, Ana Luisa disidentifies with Isabel—this disidentification becomes a strategy to restore and insist on her privilege as a white woman. José Carlos brings the conversation back to Isabel's race, that she is a mulatta because that's how God made her. Ana Luisa agrees, but then asks him why it is necessary for him to paint himself black: "¿No sería mejor que saliera Usted así, tal como es?" He argues that performing in blackface is an aesthetic choice, little more. In this exchange, José Carlos's discourse about race gets cast as traditionally liberal—"todos somos iguales"—yet also as an act of God. He even goes as far as thinking about race

as an aesthetic, or if you prefer a prosthetic, that can be worn and taken off to please others. Ana Luisa's insistence reveals that, for her, race or racialization is something that is threatening and dangerous even. Race must be negated or at least disavowed so that the self does not get implicated or marked by it; to echo her own words: "Ella no quiere que ninguna sombra opaque su identidad." She later adds, "Pero se me antoja que a todas las mujeres les gustaría verlo más así como lo veo yo." In other words, she wants him as a white man. Not only that but she situates her gaze as the perspective of "todas las mujeres." More strangely, she uses an unusual expression—"se me antoja." I would argue that this is her way of identifying with him, literally craving and psychically and sexually consuming him. Yet, she becomes quite angry when he suggests that she should be quite happy that two men are after her affections: a white man by day, and a black one by night. What would it mean if José Carlos came to her as a black man at night? Both socially and sexually this is a terrifying thought to her.

There is a critical blindness here. Ana Luisa does not want to be seen as "esa mujer," a mulatta—and José Carlos appearing as a black man might mean that identificatorily that would be her role. Ironically, she had expressed earlier that she *did* want to be seen as a sex object or if you prefer, "una mujer de esas." I am playing with the signifier "esa mujer" to show how it points in two directions—on the one hand it signifies race, and on the other, an excessive sexuality (or prostitute-like behavior). She recognizes herself as a sexual subject, but she rejects any recognition as a racialized subject. We encounter here a perfectly symmetrical figure of disavowal: she as a "mulatta" acknowledges the existence of a gendered and racial self, however, she saves the one, and rejects the other. Ana Luisa wants to be a white Santa of sorts.

Up to now I have tried to show the kinds of mirroring and relationalities that inform Ana Luisa's own self-figuration. Principally, she projects her luminous whiteness

as a marker of privilege, yet there is a vestige that unconsciously moves her to desire a more sensual and sexual self that she links with a black other.

We might ask ourselves to consider why the racialized body is so threatening to Ana Luisa, however, the same is not true for José Carlos. Why is the female body marked by race, whereas his body is not. After his performances, he can just wash blackness off, hence he remains unmarked. What kind of vulnerability does the woman's body have—or what kind of privilege does a man's body hold—when it comes to questions of race? It is inevitable to recall here the foundational legends that traverse Mexico; of course, I am referring to "la chingada"—and the ways her body has been manhandled and re-written throughout the nation's history. Nonetheless, unknowingly, *Angelitos negros* introduces us to a different foundational fiction. From the very start, Ana Luisa's body was always already marked—the whiteness of her body was a fiction. And José Carlos's body—really, I mean Pedro Infante's body—was legendary. He embodied perfection—he was not traversed by history. He was History. If we posit "la edad de oro del cine mexicano" as a new ideological template for the nation, this asymmetrical understanding of the actors' and characters' bodies reveals a surprising tale. Allow me to be schematic for a bit: the male lead is able to do what he pleases—*hacer lo que le dé su chingada gana*—in other words, he occupies the place of the neoliberal subject. The female "lead" submits to the male lead's every whim. And the *actores de reparto* are just that, secondary, and they just lend their bodies intermittently and fragmentarily. I did not intend to get all melodramatic, but I think it is important to consider how this new cast(e) system helps organize and educate the nation's senses of representation and self.

Going back to *Angelitos*: of course, all that is repressed, or rather all that is *Verdrängung* (pressed into invisibility), eventually becomes visible again. We recall that moment of Belén's birth, when Ana Luisa

discovers that she has given birth to a black child. When José Carlos comes to see his child, Nana Mercé tells him the truth that Ana Luisa is her daughter. It is here that we learn that Ana Luisa does not want her child, and that she blames José Carlos for her being black. Ana Luisa will deny her maternal role. Together with the priest José Carlos and Mercé all agree to keep the secret of whose “fault” it is that Belén is black, so as to protect Ana Luisa’s health and wellbeing. It is through this folding together—this complex—of a series of veiling lies that propels the melodrama forward.

8. Melodramatic Latin America

The contours and critiques of melodrama are many, constantly crossing different disciplines and cultural practices—drama, literature, and cinema. I would like to take up again that characteristic of melodramatic representation that springs up again and again in literary criticism, that is, excess. Brooks argues that “[in melodramatic representation,] we can observe the narrator pressuring the surface of reality (the surface of his text) in order to make it yield the full, true terms of his story” (1-2). We can see this, for instance, when Nana Mercé almost reveals and then holds back the truth about Ana Luisa’s origin. At those moments, Mercé in fact is interpreting for us as viewers how we should understand the story. In her reluctance, she makes us consider whether blackness must be repressed and kept out of sight. Or, that no matter what the liberal view of Pedro Infante or the Church might be, is the position that Mercé is made to keep one that argues that blackness (or race) does not have a place in the construction of the nation? In inheriting this repressive position, she promotes a particular moral metatext that both reduces and enables the narrative action.

Narrative and affective excess create forms of knowing that put pressure and transform the melodramatic work. Significantly, in

Angelitos negros, race gets posited *in excess* of the context of the narrative—as I suggested earlier, in the Mexican context, race has traditionally figured as extraneous and excessive, and now it impinges on what might otherwise have a simple mother-daughter drama. Introducing the highly-charged question of race into the storyline allows for the ironic turn of events whereby Ana Luisa blames José Carlos for giving her a black child. She blames him directly for her misfortune. In her racist logic, he is robbing her the ability to be real mother; according to her, his (af)iliation with blackness deprives her the role of mother.

In his work, Brooks highlights some important qualities about melodrama. He begins by noticing that the narrative voice and its authorial positioning put a metatextual pressure on the text, ultimately, this narrative voice interprets the text for readers. In other words, Brooks is pointing to a reflexive or self-conscious nature of the melodramatic text, insofar as it guides the reader through a moral labyrinth, and shows her or him the “right way.” This unfolding of the narrator brings another level of discourse to the text, one that Brooks categorizes as a claim to and the articulation of a “moral occult” (5). This parallel drama of the moral occult is necessarily Manichean, a battle between “good” and “evil,” and it propels the action in the “surface” narrative. However, for Brooks, melodrama is not about making a single right choice; instead he argues the melodramatic text struggles to articulate the very possibility of representational plenitude—contradictory or not. This desire of wanting to express it all might be viewed as melodramatic democracy. We witnessed that desire to have it all when Ana Luisa insists on owning the privileges of whiteness, while at the same time desiring desire, unconsciously acting out the very sexuality she attributes to and condemns in the mulatta Isabel.

Christine Gledhill extends Brooks ideas and she argues that melodrama does not respond to “realism”; melodrama is about the refusal to even engage with verisimilitudinal

practices. She proposes that the logic of melodrama is more like saying “so what!” and in so doing finding pleasure in the contradictions of “saying it all” that melodrama seeks to represent (5-39; 33). Melodrama’s disregard for representational singularity as noted in that utterance “so what!”—or better yet, in good Mexican “¡qué chingados importa!”—champions the refusal to make a singular choice and celebrates the pleasure of narrative contradiction. It is a mode of refusal and abandonment, as well as an embrace, an endless double bind. It is for this reason alone that in the final scene, Ana Luisa slaps Mercé, calling her a “maldita negra,” and José Carlos trying to stop her yells out the truth, “Eso no. Que es tu madre.” The entire tension of *Angelitos negros* is wrapped up in this passionate and furious moment—all contradictions and resolutions are caught up in this scene: “...es tu madre.” Again, we witness a child crying over her mother’s deathbed, and immediately resolving any prejudices she or he may have held up to then. Again, Infante emerges as the melodramatic hero that returns everything “back to normal.” Here he manages another important task: beginning the reincorporation the missing black body into the national imaginary, perhaps not socially or politically, but to some degree aesthetically.

9. Melodrama Bound

I would like to return at the inherent question of ethical masochism suggested by Nana Mercé’s silence—but also Yolanda’s silence and Santa’s. I would venture to add that masochism is a central feature in all melodramatic representation.

Occupying the place of the masochist often leads to a higher social, gendered, or moral state. The masochistic narrative of melodrama produces a subject through his or her very debasement and erasure; that is, paradoxically, “I” exist because “I” don’t. This logic necessarily adapts neatly to the dichotomous and contradictory demands of melodrama’s “so what!”; it is important to remember, however, that ultimately masochism

is about *articulating a subject, not erasing or destroying the subject*. In masochism, the disciple sees herself as a subject through erasure, and is willing to transform herself into his/her own master or mistress. Nana Mercé manages this transformation *in being resigned*—also, in being resignified—to accept the only brutal option that Society offers her. Within the world of melodrama, such vicissitudes or slippages between resignation and resignification are part of its very claims of representation. These vicissitudes signify powerfully on the ludic and contradictory nature of race, gender and class, which are always present in the melodramatic text. These transformations of subjectivity tell us a deeper story: it is not the subject bound to a particular idea or object, but rather to melodramatic discourse itself. Melodrama is a bound narrative that is so attractive because it promises an intimate link between subject and objects. This is why the literary charm of melodrama is so powerful and cannot be broken, just displaced over and over again. In the end Mercé, Ana Luisa, José Carlos and the others were all centripetally caught in the bounds of melodramatic textualities, unable, unwilling, or unready to escape.

Studies on melodrama consistently set up an oppositional binarism between melodrama and realism. Judith Butler, of instance, argues that American (U.S.) melodrama “calls into question its own claims to reality and even works, in spite of itself (or... in spite of one version of its identity), to erode the very belief in its reality that it seeks to engender” (3). In other words, melodrama undoes itself. I would argue the exact opposite for Latin America: Mexican and Latin American melodramas do not respond to a tradition of realism (in fact, I would have a hard time claiming that such a tradition exists in twentieth-century Latin America), rather melodrama works alongside other cultural and aesthetic traditions, like *modernismo* or *realismo mágico*. So rather than being oppositional, Latin American melodrama is continuous with *modernismo*, magical realism, and other movements. Certainly the narrative and ideological formulas of melodrama

have been parodied in Latin America, but never fully displaced.

To conclude, how do we explain the logic of melodrama, which has been traditionally framed as “feminine” with the possibility of a masculine melodrama. What kind of work does masculine melodrama perform? Again, I turn back to Gledhill’s proposal that melodramatic logic hinges on an attitude of total disregard for a cause-and-effect logic itself, most notably articulated by the idea of “so what!”—or what I suggested “¡qué chingados importa!” For Gledhill, this logic as speech act signifies the possibility accounting for all contradictions caught up into the act of telling a story in its absolute totality. I would like to suggest that this melodramatic logic makes masculine and masculinist discourse possible; in other words, total disregard for sequential logic inaugurates another tradition in Latin American discourse to represent the unrepresentable. I do not make this claim to displace the productive potential of melodrama as woman’s discourse, but rather try to begin exploring and understanding what it means to expand the implications of (the) masculine (in) melodrama.

Simply put, melodrama makes contradiction bearable. If melodrama is continuous with magical realism in Latin America, melodrama becomes the discourse of “faith” to evoke Alejo Carpentier’s understanding of magical realism; melodrama also makes sense of that “realidad descomunal” which is how Gabriel García Márquez calls the thing that magical realism aims to reconcile. Thus, as a discourse that makes contradiction bearable, melodrama has anchored itself in a whole series of cultural forms—from literature to *radionovelas* and *telenovelas*, from cinema to the political arena in Latin America. It is a powerful discourse that has yet to be grasped fully not only for its literary and artistic impact, but for its social and political promise.

Notes

¹Kristeva, Julia. 1983. “Stabat Mater” in *Histoires d’amour*. Paris: Éditions Denoël. 227.

²For an extensive presentation of melodrama as women’s film, see Gledhill.

³For a comprehensive overview of how melodrama develops in Mexico, see Carlos Monsiváis’s “Se sufre, pero se aprende. (El melodrama y las reglas de la falta de límites).” Therein he traces how Latin American melodramatic forms borrow from the mid-19th century Spanish and French drama and unfolds in the novel to film and *telenovela*.

⁴After the Revolutionary and agrarian reform period, the 1940s mark a scene of mass urbanization in Mexico. Like in the Porfiriato 50 years earlier, the post-1940s also becomes a period of increased industrialization and more importantly of foreign investments. There would almost seem to be a continuity between *Santa* to *Nosotros los pobres* in terms of how each text unfolds at a moment of urbanization, industrialization, as well as the social and cultural problems that arise in the penumbra of modernity and modernization.

⁵As an aside, *Nosotros los pobres* is the first of a trilogy, all directed by Ismael Rodríguez; it is followed by *Ustedes los ricos* (1948) and *Pepe el Toro* (1953). In the overarching trajectory of the trilogy, one is able to trace a particular process of individuation for Pepe—we the poor goes against you the other, and it is in the third film where Pepe as a boxer lays claims to a more individualized self and fortune. In other words, the three films might be thought of as a movement from “we” to “you” to “I”—with each film, Pepe comes into being from the archetype of “los pobres” to a fashioning of aggressive masculinity that is prized (a prized fighter) above all others.

⁶The dichotomy masculine/feminine is replaced by another, masculine/maternal. The latter dichotomy reduces and limits the possibilities of feminine gender ideals and potentials.

⁷It is here that the film’s history becomes a scholar’s nightmare—and I apologize that I cannot give you more information at this time. Some sources have credited the original idea for the story to Cuban writer Félix B. Caignet, who apparently based it on the novel *Imitation of Life*.

Anyhow, other than the fact that both texts deal with a black mother and her light-skinned daughter, the stories do not match. I suspect that this relationship between both films could be initially attributed to film historian Emilio García Riera, who writes in his monumental *Historia documental del cine mexicano* that “*Angelitos negros* estaba bastante inspirada en la novela de Fannie Hurst, *Imitation of Life...*” (284). The detail about Caig-net’s involvement is still one that I have to research further: I have asked film scholars for any information about this, but have come up empty-handed so far. Also see Delgadillo’s discussion of *Angelitos* and its precursors.

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