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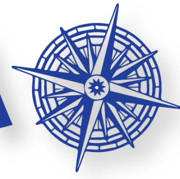
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Lifting the Curtain on the Nation: The Theater and Nation-Building in *El ideal de un calavera*

Cody Hanson

Alberto Blest Gana, in his 1863 novel *El ideal de un calavera,* organizes and presents crafted images of *chilenidad* that are so pervasive they assume intrinsic value and take precedence over the plot narrative. Blest Gana (1830-1920) is well known for his realistic accounts of Chilean celebrations, customs, and pastimes. He consistently integrates detailed expository accounts into his writing that emphasize Chile's unique culture. In *El ideal de un calavera*, for example, rather than organize themselves in an orderly line at the entrance of the theater, Chileans form an *apretura*, a practice in which patrons jockey for preferential positions around the door in order to gain entrance ahead of others. The resulting chaos, filled with unique and varied expressions, movements, and actions, enrich this scene with what the narrator terms "ese sello peculiar de nacionalidad" (140). This opening image of the theater scene is captivating because it concentrates the Portilian notion of an organized and stable political system with a highly authoritarian and aggressive popular culture (Encina 445-453). Fernando Unzueta notes that *costumbrista* descriptions cultivate a "communal identity construction" by offering glimpses into the national way of life (145). These descriptions allow Blest Gana, and his readers, to explore a lettered conception of Chilean identity (Fuenzalida Grandón 200). Indeed, it is widely accepted that nineteenth-century Latin American literature is didactic in nature and is written with the purpose of promoting values, customs, and processes that cultivate nation-building (Anderson 25; Sommer 7).

Blest Gana's life and literary production have been the subject of numerous studies. His detailed accounts of national customs, and the fact that he was lauded for the Chilean content of his writing as early as 1860 has led many critics to regard him as the father of the Chilean novel (Díaz Arrieta 143; Lillo 132; Poblete Varas 75; Silva Castro x, 112-14). While scholarship has elucidated many of his works, *Martín Rivas* (1862), has received the most attention (Araya 22; Concha XXXVIII; Goic 90). Even the short novel *Mariluán* (1862), which one critic dubbed Blest Gana's forgotten novel, has enjoyed renewed critical attention in recent years (Ballard 2; Hosiasson, "Siete" 241). However, scholarly interest in *El ideal de un calavera*, published the year after *Martín Rivas* and *Mariluán*, is surprisingly scarce. Raúl Silva Castro recognizes, for example, that the novel's blending of *costumbrista* observations and narrative has largely been overlooked (120). Although the novel is regularly cited in Blest Gana scholarship, few studies examine it in detail. First and foremost among them is the

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study by Guillermo Gotschlich Reyes. He contends that Blest Gana uses comedic and grotesque representations in *El ideal de un calavera* to mock reality and reveal multiple dimensions of society (148). Patricia Vilches further postulates that the chivalric, materialistic, and grotesque aspects of this novel are the result of Quixotic and Cervantesque influences (17). On the other hand, Laura Janina Hosiasson juxtaposes the protagonists of *Martín Rivas* and *El ideal de un calavera* in order to develop a reading that enlightens Blest Gana's work in general ("Blest Gana" 261). In a later study, she expands on this premise by establishing continuity between the seven novels Blest Gana published between 1860 and 1864 ("Siete" 236). In a similar vein, Horacio Simunovic Díaz et al. take a structuralist approach to *Martín Rivas* and *El ideal de un calavera* to show that the speech style of literary realism orders the narrated world and reveals an ideological aesthetic (9). The present study offers an approach to *El ideal de un calavera* that neither compares it to *Martín Rivas* nor focuses on the grotesque. Instead, it examines the novel's use of theater as a unique space that combines and questions both public and private social interaction.

In *El ideal de un calavera*, Blest Gana's technique of dressing realistic descriptions in national significance takes center stage in the episode depicting the popular theater. The theater scene occurs roughly in the middle of the novel in between several other significant and lengthy *costumbrista* accounts, including, among others, the rodeo, the nativity scene, the dance, and evening social gatherings in various parlors. The author connects these quintessential scenes of Chilean life through the storyline of Abelardo Manríquez, a young, middle-class, low-ranking, military official within the historical context of the failed Quillota rebellion of 1837, which led to the assassination of Diego Portales, Chile's influential Minister of War. The novel follows a defined historical-spatial structure, which includes rural and urban settings of the 1830s, and through them Blest Gana opens a window into popular national customs (Goic 91-92). These spaces serve both as national markers that contrast public and private life and where class and gender distinctions emerge. Mikhail Bakhtin argues that historical and temporal events in literature dialogically interact with the space in which they occur: "Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history" (84). In Blest Gana's novel, the dramatic space of the theater consists of public and private social interaction. The theater promotes patriotic devotion through song and dance, but it also challenges whether patriotism is possible given the upper classes' patronizing and abusive behavior. While all the cultural scenes in the novel are important, the action that occurs in the theater proves key: the theater is emblematic in *El ideal de un calavera* because it combines public and private spaces into one scene in order to question social practices. Indeed, the theater stands out from other *costumbrista* accounts in the novel because time and space take on added significance and mark a change in the novel's realism.

The rodeo scene at the beginning of the novel is indicative of the unifying patriotic message the theater imparts as a public space. The narrator celebrates the rodeo as a symbolic space that blurs individual differences to create a shared national identity. Moreover, he contextualizes the rodeo episode in theatrical and educational terms: "Las escenas propias del campo, teatro de los primeros sucesos de la presente historia, debían influir en el desarrollo de los acontecimientos que forman la vida de Manríquez" (Blest Gana, *El ideal* 33). As a country setting, the rodeo corral serves as the stage for the scenes that immediately

follow and influences the main character's development. As the concourses arrive at the rodeo, the narrator recognizes that the dust they kick up conceals their individual identity: "Difícil era distinguir las facciones de los vaqueros ni las de los inquilinos, cubiertas del espeso polvo que en densas nubes levantaban los cascos de los animales…" (33). The dust and the multitude eliminate personal features and abscond individuality, which foreshadow a liberally inclusive national discourse. The mask of dust obliges the narrator to concentrate on the rodeo participants' unique costumes and to describe them as universal character types that represent a unique place and historical time (Bakhtin 250). The scene emphasizes the variety of rural Chileans and it shows that the ranks of provincial hierarchy participate in a common experience. Like the theater, the rodeo brings Chileans together in a space that communicates patriotism and *chilenidad*; however, unlike the theater, it does not question the limits of the established social order.

In keeping with nineteenth-century realism, Blest Gana employs the private domestic space of the salon or parlor to give a behind-the-scenes view of private Chilean life that is later questioned in the theater scene. Cedomil Goic points out that Latin American *costumbrista* authors imitate the parlors found in the works of nineteenth-century French realists (85). In fact, Blest Gana admits he was inspired to become a novelist while reading Balzac ("Dos cartas" 134). The space features frequent encounters and abundant dialogue that reveal the character and passions of the protagonists. Bakhtin observes that the parlors of the great French realists combine public and private desires by intertwining historical, biographical, and everyday time into a united emblem of the era:

> Most important in all of this is the weaving of historical and socio-public events together with the personal and even deeply private side of life, with the secret of the boudoir; the interweaving of petty, private intrigues with political and financial intrigues, the interpenetration of state with boudoir secrets, of historical sequences with the everyday and biographical sequences. (247)

The parlor is a loaded space filled with voices that link different strains of space and time. Even though it is a private setting, the family room serves as the hub for financial, historical, political, and public events. Indeed, Cristián Jara affirms that social gatherings in Chilean parlors "comenzaron a dedicarse a la discusión de temas de interés político y cultural" (186). The conversations that occur in the parlor invest external affairs with private significance. Indeed, the beauty of this space is its ability to take external sociopolitical concerns and intertwine them with the personal and private (Vicuña 65). The value of the parlor in realist literature comes from its ability to internalize public matters and connect them to private intrigue in order to make statements about the nation's future. The private intrigue of the parlor highlights gender differences and power structures, but they are not revealed publicly nor called into question as they are in the theater scene. While parlor scenes combine public life with private passions, the theater flips this trope by turning a private gathering into an overtly public affair.

The theater in *El ideal de un calavera* is a symbolic space where people from diverse social spheres assemble and, like the rodeo, it is a public venue that constructs a façade of national unity. The physical structure of the theater is composed of old rammed earth walls, rough-

hewn wooden benches and unstable box seats, and is located in a popular neighborhood (Blest Gana, *El ideal* 138-39). Spectators from various social groups throughout Santiago attend the theater, including Manríquez and his friends. However, the design of the space implies it is primarily aimed at attracting the lower echelons of society. The narrator celebrates the fact that those who attend the public theater hail from a range of circumstances: "Variadas eran las condiciones de las personas que componían la concurrencia que llenaban las lunetas y las graderías..." (139). These people, who interact in a variety of ways, include non-paying street children, maids, soldiers, families of various temperaments, and the gentrified class. This convergence and mixing of people can be understood in carnivalesque terms, but it also harkens back to the Bahktinian idea of heteroglossia and how speech types combine to orchestrate the context and theme of the novel (263). Thus, the variety of people arriving at the theater represents different segments of Chilean society that will be explored throughout the scene. Their inclusion stresses that the theater space voices a more expansive view of democratic participation.

In Blest Gana's novel, the introduction to the theater scene makes clear that the importance of the theater lies in the events that unfold in the symbolic theatrical space rather than in the dramatic performance. The narrator's introduction at the beginning of the scene concedes that the specific programmed play is inconsequential: "No ha conservado la crónica el título de la pieza que debió ponerse en escena esta noche que vamos a discutir, ni mucho menos los nombres de los actores que la representaron" (Blest Gana, *El ideal* 139). The narrator fails to identify the performance and its actors because they are of low quality and do not feature portrayals of Chilean life. Throughout the scene, the narrator does not linger on the scheduled play because it is a stock performance designed to promote religious faith rather than to teach national customs (143). Instead, he emphasizes the programed demonstration of the national dance and the description of the physical space (139). The narrator's omission of the title of the play, and of an in-depth description of the work, suggests that the theater space is what is central to the scene, not the scheduled performance.

Blest Gana furthers the notion of collective national pride in the theater space through the use of Chilean colloquialisms. The scene recounts the propensity for taking advantage of others through the spirited rejoinders exchanged between theatergoers vying for seats. Those who take temporarily unoccupied seats declare, "Quien fue a Portugal, perdió su lugar." While those who seek to reclaim their seats retort, "Y el que fue y volvió, de las mechas lo sacó" (141; *sic*). As a scene repeated in everyday life, the image of people contending for seats is common and timeless. Yet, the popular sayings also lend the novel a strong local flavor and firmly locate the action within a specific time and place. In fact, as Fernando Alegría admits, "[e]l lector chileno entra a las novelas de Blest Gana como a un museo histórico donde las figuras, al verse reconocidas, comienzan a agitarse en la sombra y a revivir una curiosa parodia de gestos y actitudes que aún pueden identificarse en el Chile de hoy" (54). The sayings open a window into popular nineteenth-century Chilean culture and that culture is still recognizable today. In his book, *Refranes y moralejas de Chile,* Alberto Cardemil Herrera defines the contemporary Chileanized version of these witty sayings as, "Lo reemplazó, cogió su oportunidad," and classifies them as, "Expresiones de desafío rebelde" (156, 153). The repartee carries with it the admirable determination and stubbornness Chileans display in the face of challenge, but it also implies that they will not

hesitate to take advantage of others if given the chance. In his musings on dialogic language in the novel, Bakhtin points out that speech has the flavor of a particular person or generation and is the product of the "contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life" (293). The expressions offer a national ideology that overcomes individual differences, which is why the tension created by audience members competing for seats is resolved only when the orchestra begins to play the national anthem (Blest Gana, *El ideal* 141). The music quiets discord between those with seats and those without, causing them to put aside dissonance for the sake of national harmony. The theatergoers adopt a double-voiced discourse that blends and supersedes individual language with patriotic and authorial overtones (Bakhtin 324). Colloquial language creates the illusion of a shared national experience and invites the audience to imagine themselves as members of one nation. The national anthem points to a space that blurs the divisions of a tiered society in order to maintain national stability.

The equalizing effects of patriotism are obvious when the theater reverberates with the lyrics of the national anthem prior to the theatrical performance and contributes to the nation-building project by proposing a national identity solution that rethinks social class. Blest Gana stages nationalism in this scene through the relatively new concept of the national anthem ("National Anthems"). The novel details events that occur in 1836 and 1837 and, while the chorus cited in the novel dates back to 1819, Chile did not adopt the final version of its national hymn until 1847 (Canales Toro 21; Nettl 184). Hernán Díaz Arrieta, in his critical study of Blest Gana's work, observes: "Cuando juzgaban perdida la batalla y en su contra al auditorio, los cómicos acudían a un recurso infalible: mandaban tocar la Canción Nacional y todo concluía a golpes de bombo, entre una tempestad de aplausos. La fraternidad vivía" (169). While the crowd enthusiastically sings the national anthem with one voice, a few of the more privileged patrons attempt to hold a conversation. They are unable to hear each other due to the audience's fervent rendition and, as a result, they abandon their efforts to converse and instead add their voices to the singing (Blest Gana, *El ideal* 141). Singing as a group creates a united harmony out of a polyphony of voices. It creates a unitary patriotic language that displaces other discourses (Bakhtin 270). Joining one's voice to the national anthem mixes and combines it with other voices to create one united sound. The harmonious intonation of the anthem envelops the voices of those who have traditionally held power, suggesting the modern nation must be inclusive and not simply governed by the elite.

The theater space addresses social differences by inviting audience members to consider themselves as participants in a common, shared, public experience. In the novel, Felipe Solama, a dandy of the enriched middle class, observes that delaying the start of the theatrical performance cultivates interest and anticipation in the audience: "Parece que los empresarios de este democrático coliseo conocen la máxima de que la expectativa del placer vale más que el placer mismo, y por eso prolongan esa expectativa, deleitándonos con la sinfonía del Maicito" (Blest Gana, *El ideal* 142). The audience's heightened expectations create a bond between individual theatergoers because impatience unites them in the shared desire for the show to begin. The theater space has a democratizing effect because it offers the same performance to all in attendance and unites them through displays of culture and music. The audience's shared anticipation may be considered a metaphor of hope for a future that includes a new era of popular participation. Wealth procures a better seat and more

refreshment, which questions the limits of the common experience; but it does not secure a more elaborate, timely, or meaningful show. The scene emphasizes the collective and hopeful anticipation the audience has for the nation's future.

The unity of the audience is present during the intermission when, in unison, they demand the promised demonstration of what will become the Chilean national dance.[1] During the prolonged and tiresome interlude, members of the audience join their voices as one to call for the *zamacueca*, the dance performance that serves as the catalyst for the impromptu parlor performance that will be discussed later: "Las palabras con que expresaron en alta voz esta observación hallaron eco entre el resto de la concurrencia, [. . .] con lo cual fue pronto unánime el clamor pidiendo la zamacueca" (Blest Gana, *El ideal* 144). The voices of the individual audience members blend together in expressing their desire to observe the dance and together they witness the patriotic performance with spirited nationalistic enthusiasm. Carlos Vega recognizes that "esta danza del amor fue la danza de las Repúblicas emancipadas, de los grupos sociales librados, de los hombres libres" (6). The dance conveys a harmonious nationalistic message that binds the public together with shared customs and freedoms. Eugenio Pereira Salas argues that the *cueca* "es el órgano máximo del lirismo popular, y en ella vacia el pueblo todos sus entusiasmos, sus tristezas y sus desesperanzas seculares" (264; *sic*). By speaking with one voice, the audience shows that their love of country unites them as Chileans and their ability to speak harmoniously in demanding action demonstrates that the success of the nation-state depends on broad participation and shared patriotism. When the audience directs its gaze towards nationalistic symbols, social differences between audience members slip out of view and they are intrinsically connected in space and time (Bakhtin 84). Similarly, when houselights are dimmed, the theater obscures differences between audience members and further unites them as one.

Blest Gana nonetheless questions the practicality of national unity through a conflict that arises between social groups during the intermission. In this section of the theater scene, Timoleón Miraflores, a dandy whose mere name identifies him as one of the more wealthy patrons in attendance, grows frustrated when the time between acts is extended and voices his irritation through insult: "¡Arriba la malaya!, ¡arriba la malaya!" The narrator delays the immediate impact of the offense by offering insight into the national culture. He explains that Chilean readers will readily comprehend that these words serve as an affront on the curtain of the popular theater. Several in attendance, however, also consider the verbal ridicule a personal assault on their class (Blest Gana, *El ideal* 142). The resulting tense confrontation, which involves menacing looks and drawn swords, segues into a populist discourse that Solama delivers to defuse the situation. His speech, in theory, endorses equality between the social classes and urges Chileans to work together as fellow citizens; however, it also presents the limits of unity. He proclaims: "Ciudadanos, aquí estamos todos para divertirnos como hermanos, y la prueba de que no hemos querido burlarnos de ustedes es que el grito de 'arriba la malaya' es una voz ya consagrada por el pueblo para castigar la falta de cumplimiento que debe aburrir a todo buen ciudadano" (143). Solama builds his passionate remarks on populist rhetoric that attempts to ford the social chasm separating the two groups. He delivers a speech that employs context in order to argue that his insult has a unique linguistic meaning (Bakhtin 262). He contends that it represents the interests of the people and only insults the production company that is not fulfilling its civic duty. He

declares that they share in the experience of being wronged by those who direct the show and, as fellow citizens, invites them to unite against the theater company's empty promises. It is significant that he addresses the crowd as "citizens" and "brothers" because these terms imply that he advocates for the group's purported common interests. They also signify mutual concerns that go beyond the mere theatrical production and extend into the public realm of the national family.

Solama's speech relies on patriotic and religious imagery to defuse a tense confrontation that threatens to disrupt the hierarchical order. It aims to align the concerns of the underprivileged theatergoers with those expressed by the rising generation of the bourgeois. His monologue tends toward melodramatic language that belies an improvised performance. Since the audience receives his first assertions so well, Solama is inspired to continue pontificating with emotive theatricality:

> Yo no soy patrón de nadie; yo soy igual a ustedes: todos pertenecemos a la gran familia humana. ¡Ciudadanos, la fraternidad universal bautizada con sangre del divino demócrata de Gólgota debe ser nuestro credo, y la humanidad, formando una sola familia, hará temblar a los déspotas con el eco poderoso de su aspiración, que es la libertad! (Blest Gana, *El ideal* 143)

Solama takes advantage of the theater as a location capable of instigating social change to deliver a speech whose words impart a unifying message, and the content of his speech may be considered radical because it rejects the notion of social class. Solama relies on religious imagery to support the claim of equality by reminding his audience that the redeeming sacrifice of Jesus Christ makes them all one. He declares that they are all members of the human family and should unite themselves in a common cause as equal citizens. The speech hints that true liberty will only be achieved if rich and poor citizens have equal representation and work together to overcome authoritary rule. His speech artistically combines multiple layers of discourse that reveal authorial intentions (Bakhtin 332). The impassioned performance effectively delivers impromptu ideals that the masses want to hear and uses emotive language to quell their displeasure. Like the novel, it resolves confrontation through poetic expression and an inspiring message, but it stops short of proposing concrete actions that diminish social disparity.

Solama's address allows the audience to imagine a future that transcends division and class, but how the episode ends highlights the practical limits of change. A strength of Blest Gana's realism is that it extends beyond the theater to show hierarchies at work and to present unity, although it also demonstrates that unity may be a utopian ideal. Miraflores interrupts Solama's loquacious oration to propose that they share a drink with those who took offense: "Y bebamos juntos un trago, muchachos, para que todo se acabe. Más sensibles los asaltantes a este género de elocuencia que a las formas oratorias de Solama, aceptaron la invitación de Miraflores y fraternizaron con los de los palcos, apurando el contenido de los diez vasos..." (Blest Gana, *El ideal* 143). This invitation peacefully settles the situation and shortly thereafter "los del pueblo" return to their seats. Meanwhile, those in the gallery resume their verbal ridicule of the amateur production, thus signaling the discontinuance of interaction between the classes. The two friends resolve the contention without altering the situation of

anyone involved. Solama's words and Miraflores's offer of drinks dramatically distract those who were insulted and, like the Rabelaisian carnival, temporarily suspend reality to permit communication not possible in everyday life (Bakhtin 168). They are demonstrative of an upper class that attempts to buy off the lower class to maintain power. The situation allows the group to conceive different possibilities, but it also reminds them of who they are. Guy Debord affirms that spectacle and society are contradictory in that "the demonstrated division is unitary, while the demonstrated unity is divided" (par. 54). The tense encounter in Blest Gana's theater shows how emotion and an imagined common experience can placate society without transforming reality. It is also an example of how elite segments of society feign equality and rely on the status quo to protect the stability of the social order and their own privileged position. The outcome demonstrates how the space can fail to live up to the envisioned ideals of the collective theater. In fact, the resolution may even announce the material limits of the theater, as well as Blest Gana's imagined unified Chile, as a space capable of transcending class.

In *El ideal de un calavera*, the theater may be best understood as an intertextual extension of the chronotopically significant parlor due to an impromptu on-stage performance that further announces the limits of national unity. Like the parlor, the theater has the ability to expose private intrigue for the reader's consideration. However, it also presents that intrigue to a public audience. In the theater scene, a back-stage drama disrupts the lengthy intermission to offer powerful commentary on the proper interaction between the sexes and social classes in private settings. Two unwitting, but resourceful, theater patrons—don Cayetano Alvarado and don Lino Alcunza—venture on stage behind closed curtains to flirt and drink with the lovely young *cueca* dancers who had so fully caught their eye. Trusting in the privacy guaranteed by the curtains, the devious duo declares their amorous intent and invites the dancers to copious amounts of alcohol (Blest Gana, *El ideal* 146-47). The audience is invited to contemplate the gentlemen's secret performance when their actions are suddenly exposed at the pinnacle of their most incriminating moment. True to their progressive discourse, Abelardo Manríquez and Felipe Solama suddenly raise the curtain without warning to unveil the compromising snapshot of the viewers who involuntarily become the viewed:

> Alzáronse los vasos, y cuando se acercaban a los labios, don Cayetano, para ser más expresivo, trató de pasar la mano izquierda por la cintura de la bailarina que tenía al lado.
> En este momento Manríquez hizo una señal a Solama, y colgándose ambos de los cordeles levantaron el telón rápidamente, ofreciendo al público el espectáculo que formaban las bailarinas y sus viejos galanes.
> El golpe no podía haberse calculado con mayor acierto: su efecto teatral fue tan completo como rápido. (148)

The unexpected revelation occurs so swiftly that it surprises all involved and, for a few short seconds, candidly displays the ardor with which the so-called gentlemen pursue the alluring young dancers. The ridiculous display of older, more affluent men pursuing young women of inferior social standing challenges public perceptions of proper decorum and makes public the hidden reality of a ruling class that abuses its position. This event alludes to the

consolidated image of national identity that Blest Gana highlights in the theater scene. Alan Read notes that the purpose of most visual performances is to disrupt expectations: "At a time when seeing has become believing it is worth reminding theatre that its responsibility is still to disrupt, not to acquiesce with this spectacle" (59; *sic*). The startling visual revelation on stage interrupts Alvarado and Alcunza's erotic fantasy and effectively shames the wishful and lascivious suitors. The surprise momentarily silences the audience and the reader, who are restlessly awaiting the next scene, by presenting them with an image of moral ambiguity that questions the difference between standards of public decency and the abusive action that happens behind the scenes. Indeed, power forms the basis of the spectacle and "is the diplomatic representation of hierarchic society" (Debord, par. 23). The scene calls attention to the historical hegemonic force of wealthy men that continues to control the country and puts into doubt the currently accepted social order cultivated in exclusive parlors (Vicuña 27, 38).

This sudden revelation is, perhaps, the most artistically creative passage of the novel because it masterfully uses humor to reveal an unanticipated improvised theatrical performance that makes the private explicitly public. In his article, "Grotesco y tragicomedia en *El ideal de un calavera* de Alberto Blest Gana," Gotschlich Reyes stresses this scene's ability to comically transpose reality:

> El sentido del teatro dentro de la ficción novelesca que es atraído a esta larga escena, ofrece la imagen del mundo como representación de baja y ridícula índole, que se muestra en la asunción y caída de los roles, la afectación y envalentonada galantería de los viejos... tan auténtica ante los asistentes al teatro, que ven suspendido el curso de la ficción por la cual reclaman. [. . .] La farsa que provocan los calaveras tiene todos los aditamentos posibles que mueven magistralmente la realidad, en las proporciones variables que corresponde a la escurridiza verdad. (140)

The theater scene in the novel portrays the inversion and corruption of roles, on multiple levels, to effectively deliver an elusive reality at the moment when the audience anticipates a fictional performance. The farce highlights the deliberate actions of the courting codgers and, in a carnivalesque Bakhtinian twist, debases any social, political, and moral authority Alvarado and Alcunza may have possessed prior to impassionedly pursuing the patriotic performers. Gotschlich Reyes explains that the episode masterfully moves reality to represent the lowly and ridiculous nature of the world. However, I propose that the meaning of the episode transcends mere comedic purposes to illuminate hidden realities. Beyond its delightfully amusing and ironic content, the incident is a significant moment in the narrative formation of the emergent nation. It brings to light morally questionable behavior that is repeated countless times in private and that has clear implications for the future nation. It displaces a "fictional" theatrical scene with an "authentic" performance about the hierarchical and abusive nature of power. Blest Gana's fictional dramatic stage demonstrates the slippery nature of fiction through its ability to both conceal and reveal reality.

The perfectly framed intimate scene that is created when the curtains are abruptly lifted is analogous to the threshold chronotope of realist literature. Bakhtin muses that threshold

"time is essentially instantaneous, it is as if it has no duration and falls out of the normal course of biographical time" (248). The space marked by the swiftly hoisted curtains provides a spontaneous snapshot of a visceral moment that the *calaveras*, or playboys, intend to keep private. While the threshold marks the boundary from which the narrator typically describes the significant space of the parlor before crossing into the scene to participate in key novelistic action, in this instance the narrator is already behind the scenes and instead invites the restless audience into the performance, calling their attention to the absurd courting spectacle. The curtains Manríquez and Solama open lead the audience to visually step over the threshold into the impromptu parlor by extending the private scene into the open theater hall where the audience awaits. The open curtains prompt an encounter and frame a moment of narrative change. As a metaphorical national parlor, the stage functions as a public window into the actual domestic world. The stage is the obvious focal point of the theater and is where the audience primarily directs its gaze. The spatial and temporal shift from parlor to theater parallels the psychological shift between private and public life. The area between the open curtains reveals private abuses that continue to affect the nascent nation. By lifting the curtains, the two pranksters uncover hidden realities and function as stand-ins for the author who reveals Chile's complicated and highly diversified reality. Whereas the parlor endows private space with national connotation, the theater scene reverses this dynamic to make public the national implications of the private setting. Thus, the audience observes a scene of moral ambiguity that casts the unfaithful actions of Alvarado and Alcunza into the limelight.

Blest Gana's theater scene exposes the diegetic audience and the novel's readers to the hierarchical nature of power and, in so doing, educates the public on their ability to effect social change. Mark Fortier notes that theater—like the novel—"involves 'a politics of sign'" which works to display the construction of and motivation for hierarchies of power (29). The theater exposes the audience to the outside world and questions the currently accepted social structure. This reading hints that Blest Gana's novel moves beyond simply reproducing the social order created by the elite, implying that the narrative is part of an ongoing dialog that both shapes, and is shaped by, national identity. Thus, the theater is more than a mere performance of a play; it is also an elaborate sign that challenges power constructions. By lifting the curtain on Alvarado and Alcunza's private performance, the scene moves beyond fictional drama to educate the audience on their actual world. The audience reacts as one to the philanderers' sudden display with a collective and prolonged "¡Aaah!" and then, when Solama clearly captions the scene as "Escena pastoril: los amantes felices," explodes into laughing, yelling, clapping, and obnoxious whistling. Above the united uproar and mocking voices rises the horrified reaction of doña Dolores, Alvarado's indignant and betrayed wife, and with her the audience joins in calling him out by name (Blest Gana, *El ideal* 148-49). Their reaction marks the shift from a private to a public setting and should spark a new measure of public consciousness. Bakhtin points out that laughter is often used to destroy old ideas and matrixes of power in order to create an alternative image of the world (205). Rather than conceal threats to society through entertainment, Blest Gana's use of the diegetic theater seeks to enlighten the public about the political, social, and economic powers controlling society. Similarly, Gotschlich Reyes argues that in Blest Gana's literary works, "Ironía, comicidad y sátira castigan fuertemente los errores y vicios de una etapa históricamente reconocibles en la constitución de nuestra vida nacional" (119-20). The

public theater displays an actual private parlor performance in order to show the audience that unfaithful behavior and unequal power dynamics threaten the allegorical foundation of the nation.

The theater scene proposes a solution that goes beyond the collective action of the attentive public by symbolically suggesting that elite leaders correct their behavior. Following the embarrassing revelation, the concupiscent cavaliers quickly suffer the consequences of their immoral actions and abandon the theater in humiliation to pursue doña Dolores, who, while imprecating her husband, has fled to the street to escape from "aquel recinto funesto a su dicha conyugal" (Blest Gana, *El ideal* 150). At the entrance of the theater, Alvarado experiences a threshold moment in opposition to the one he endured on stage. Miraflores meets Alvarado at the door and informs him of doña Dolores's jealous rage. The would-be suitor finally registers the gravity of the situation and, discarding all levity, cries out Dolores's name as if he were "despertando de un sueño" (150). The awakening that Alvarado undergoes before stepping into the street in pursuit of his wife implies that he is now aware of the need to correct course. His reaction in this intermediary space hints at a breaking moment in which decisions change lives, and leaves open the hope that he will behave differently going forward (Bakhtin 248). It indicates that obscene intentions are an affront to the state and that corrupt behavior must be left behind.

Alvarado and Alcunza may be understood as disloyal leaders who exploit private spaces to promote personal interests. In pursuing the talented dancers, the unfaithful *calaveras* engage in an on-stage performance that is reminiscent of class exploitation. Their behavior reveals an all-too-common occurrence in which elite men employ power and private settings for their own advantage (Hosiasson, "Blest Gana" 267). For example, in an earlier parlor scene, don Calixto Arboleda, an unscrupulous landholder, boasts that, rather than cash, he pays his workers in tokens that they redeem in the company store so that his workers return to him what he has paid them (Blest Gana, *El ideal* 23). Similarly, Alvarado and Alcunza personify the elite who have traditionally enriched themselves at the expense of the working class (Barros and Vergara). As older, relatively powerful, married men they have no reason to intimately fraternize with working-class young women and thus exemplify the moral and political ambiguity that threaten the country's future development (Larra 100). These actions are beneath their social standing and throw awry the accepted norms of proper decorum between the classes. They engage in a performance on stage that shows that class power is constructed, exploitive, and theatrical in nature.

As experts of the Chilean national dance, the dancers convey the values upon which democracy is built and, as young women, they bear the future of the emerging nation. They project a generation that is desirable, homogenous, nationalistic, progressive, and young. As the women dance, Alvarado y Alcunza "dirigían a la bailarina sus aplausos con voces de calurosa aprobación, al propio tiempo que parecían querer seguirla en los giros de la danza, inclinándose si ella se inclinaba, y moviendo la mano en el aire cuando *borneaba* el pañuelo con la maestría que, en tal caso, distingue a la generalidad de las chilenas" (Blest Gana, *El ideal* 144).[2] From their place in the stands, Alvarado and Alcunza imitate the gracious movement of the dancers and idealize them as *chilenas*. The women figuratively reproduce the nation through dance and thus kindle patriotic and erotic passion. Yet, as mothers of the

future nation, they also preserve their virtuous moral authority and chaste loyalty by questioning Alvarado and Alcunza's advances. When the unprincipled pair venture backstage to declare their lascivious feelings, one of the dancers dryly remarks that "Están muy viejos para enamorarse," before determining to have fun at the would-be suitors' expense (147). The failure of the womanizers underscores the traditional idea that the foundational couple must build its relationship on commitment and fidelity (Sommer 5). This idea is further emphasized when Alvarado returns to his wife at the end of the theater episode.

Carnal desire, of course, is not confined to affluent gentlemen and the pedagogical function of Blest Gana's theater is not limited to questions of morality. Lust is a common human desire that runs through all classes. In this vein, Alvarado and Alcunza's indecent pursuit of the patriotic dancers may also be seen as an example of the nationalistic yearning or shared civic lust that the theater hopes to inspire in all Chileans. For example, when introducing the *cueca* performance the narrator observes: "Obediente el empresario al voto público [. . .] hizo levantar el telón y ofreció a los concurrentes el espectáculo de una pareja de zamacueca [que] hizo subir a considerable altura el entusiasmo del público" (Blest Gana, *El ideal* 144). Collective desire for the dance performance obliges the producer to deliver the spectacle as promised. Vega observes that the *cueca* has a long history of inspiring sensual desire and patriotic fervor across social classes (30, 45). Patriotic zeal is more socially transcendent than anything else in the theater performance and evokes the nationalistic mood present throughout the theater scene.

The theater scene in *El ideal de un calavera* uses a realistic description of the mid-nineteenth century, urban, Chilean, popular theater in order to promote a country united around shared experiences. In the theater, patrons from different social classes meet, enthusiastically sing the national anthem in one voice, and joyfully observe the national dance. It fosters democratic principles by bringing an assorted group of citizens together to intermingle and question the socio-political order. Solama delivers a well-received speech to the underprivileged members of the audience that draws parallels between their interests and those of the elevated middle class. His remarks suggest they may come together as fellow citizens to hold accountable the corrupt national leadership. However, his speech also highlights the limits of the theater and shows that patriotism and an imagined, shared experience may also simply preserve the social order. His melodramatic performance is an example of the theatrical nature of power. Similarly, the novel lifts the curtain on the morally ambiguous behavior of the establishment through Alvarado and Alcunza's unexpected on-stage performance. Their actions highlight how the ruling class abuses its influence in private places to benefit itself at the expense of the country. Alvarado and Alcunza's conduct demonstrates that power is performed and, since it is not inherent, those who hold it can change. The abuse of authority jeopardizes the development of the modern nation-state and hinders the expansion of patriotic passions. Along these lines, Goic recognizes that in Blest Gana's work, "Los fenómenos de la moda, del progreso, del entorno cultural, del utilitarismo brutal y del dinero, son observados con precisión y constituyen el objeto de la crítica, la sátira o la edificación moral" (88). The theater episode contemplates numerous aspects of Chilean life and serves as a viewfinder into the country's moral, political, and social issues. Blest Gana turns to the genre of the theater in his novel to intertextually show that power is performed.

While it may be slightly ironic for a novelist to use the theater to promote the nation, it does fit well within the realist endeavor to recreate the details of society. The novel metaphorically lifts the curtain on the theater's role in society, asserting that Chile can close the curtain on past performances and then raise it to reveal a bright and patriotic final act.

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Notes

[1] Pablo Garrido summarizes the etymology of *zamacueca* and concludes: "cualquiera de estos nombres significa una sola y misma danza: la que en la actualidad conocemos por cueca" (43).

[2] There is some inconsistency in the text regarding the number of dancers. This citation mentions "una pareja de zamacueca" and "la bailarina," but other instances refer to two couples and two female dancers (139, 145, 147, 148).

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