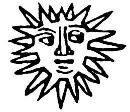

Boedo *Circense*: Leónidas Barletta, Raúl González Tuñón, and the Limits of Tradition

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ABSTRACT The circus and circensian practices lend themselves particularly well to the Latin American avant-gardes as privileged proletarian spaces encompassing both the "crafty" extreme of carnival—in Bakhtin's sense of subversive and artisan—as well as the commercial, technological aspects of the emerging mass media. This article focuses on the circus as a key link between traditional and modern culture in early twentieth-century Argentina. In particular, it examines the writing of Leónidas Barletta and Raúl González Tuñón, both figures loosely associated with the avant-garde Boedo movement. In the work of these writers, I argue, the circus operates primarily metonymically rather than metaphorically: through a series of interventions, principally Tuñón's early poems and Barletta's novel *Royal Circo*, the working-class suburb of Buenos Aires is laid out as a living theater of marginality in which the circus performs a central role. In his novel, Barletta sees the circensian as a site of greed and hunger in need of either liquidation or refinement—the latter option put to practice in Barletta's later work as founder and director of the influential Teatro del Pueblo. Tuñón, on the other hand, reconstitutes the circensian as a vital "osmotic" space between memory and modernity, in the process showing how apparently marginal cultural practices could be reconstituted through literary expression.

Long fascinating to Latin American poets, novelists, and playwrights, yet for the most part neglected by literary critics and cultural theorists, the modern circus furnished intellectuals of the early twentieth century with a partic-

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ularly useful form of cultural production at the intersection of traditional and mass culture. Combining the ''low'' visual register of traveling performers with the melodramatic language of the *folletín*, the circus served as a bridge between these popular forms and the music hall, *radionovela* and early cinema—a mediating channel that Jesús Martín-Barbero has called a ''lugar osmótico'' (184). The circus and circensian practices (such as street magic and puppet shows) lent themselves particularly well to the Latin American avant-gardes as interstitial spectacles of poverty and social marginality, but also as privileged proletarian spaces encompassing both the ''crafty'' extreme of carnival—in Bakhtin's sense of subversive *and* artisan—and elements of the modern, technological realm of film. The circus also conveniently offered Latin American writers immunity from confusion with ''folklore,'' allowing politically engaged intellectuals to inscribe themselves in the *circense* without disqualifying themselves by marking the terrain with which they wished to identify as unassimilably *autre*.

Thanks in part to the prestige of Ramón Gómez de la Serna's widely disseminated book of chronicles, *El circo* (1916), the circus enjoyed general cachet among Latin American avant-gardists.[1] It was in Peru, Brazil, and Argentina, however, where the Big Top would leave the biggest mark in intellectual circles. Beginning with the 1928 publication of José Carlos Mariátegui's essay ''Esquema de una explicación de Chaplin,'' the radical Peruvian journal *Amauta* championed the circensian as a model of ''bohemian'' cultural production and created a way to embrace popular cinema without appearing either to embrace Hollywood commercialism or to turn its back on traditional culture. Brazilian modernists, meanwhile, latched onto their own charismatic clowns as the patron saints of cultural cannibalism. Mário de Andrade published two investigative pieces in the *Revista de Antropofagia* speculating on the life and work of the nineteenth-century clown-singer Veludo.[2] Later, the *antropofagistas* reported a 1928 ''happening'' during which the *palhaço* Piolim was feted by the group—''almoçamos Piolim,'' the jour-

1. In spite of Gómez de la Serna's ties with numerous Latin American vanguard writers, his influence was felt strongest—and longest—in Argentina. In the 1920s, his arrival in Buenos Aires was eagerly anticipated by the *martinfierristas* (Macciuci 192). Years later, his collaboration with *Sur* and its editor Victoria Ocampo cemented his bond to the region (334–35).

2. See Mário de Andrade's two essays, ''Romance do Veludo'' and ''Lundú do escravo.''

nal declared.[3] In a number of essays published in the journal *Terra Roxa e outras terras*, meanwhile, Antônio de Alcântara Machado lauded the circus as Brazil's only "authentic" national theater, a model of politically engaged popular performance.[4]

It was in Argentina, however, where the circus made its deepest impact on literary production and performance. Mariátegui had embraced the circus as an archive of traditional memory conspicuously devoid of local color. Indeed, his celebration of the clown was contingent on the figure's "improvement" by Chaplin, whose "noble English" character as the Little Tramp represented the most "evolved" form of clown genealogy (172).[5] The *antropofogistas*' project was at once more nationalist and less explicitly proletarian than *Amauta*'s. Their mock canonization of Piolim was driven by a carnival impulse to crown a new Rei Momo and thereby implicitly consecrate their own vanguard project. In Argentina, by contrast, the circensian served neither as a vehicle for subversive "folk" celebrity nor as a totalizing metaphor of traditional resistance to modern capital. Especially in the social realism of the Boedo movement, the circus emerged as a trope of the semimodern as well as a historical referent of the *arrabal*. In the work of Raúl González Tuñón and Leónidas Barletta, I would like to propose, the *circense* operates primarily metonymically rather than metaphorically: through a series of interventions, principally Tuñón's early poems and Barletta's novel *Royal Circo*, the working-class suburb of Buenos Aires is laid out as a living theater of marginality of which the circus is deemed particularly emblematic. Whereas Barletta sees the circensian largely as a site of greed and hunger in need of either refinement or liquidation, Tuñón reconstitutes it as a vital "osmotic" space between memory and modernity.

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3. Piolim's vanguard renown does not end with his mention in the *Revista de Antropofagia*. In a *crônica* about the circus published in the *Diário Nacional* two years later, Mário de Andrade recalls the lunch and concedes that the *Modernistas*' enthusiasm for the circus had in truth been an enthusiasm for Piolim himself. Like Chaplin, Andrade writes, "a comicidade de Piolim evoca na gente uma entidade, um ser . . . que nós todos profundamente sentimos em nós, nas nossas indecisões e gestos contraditórios" ("Circo de cavalinhos" 104). Piolim later makes a cameo appearance in Oswald de Andrade's novel *Serrafim, Ponte Grande* (1933).

4. In one essay, for example, Alcântara Machado declares unequivocally that "O teatro nacional, como muita historia nossa, não é nacional" ("Indesejáveis" 5).

5. Mariátegui's rejection of local clowns could hardly be more explicit: "El *clown* inglés representa el máximo grado de evolución del payaso. Está lo más lejos posible de esos payasos bulliciosos, excesivos, estridentes, mediterráneos, que estamos acostumbrados a encontrar en los circos viajeros errantes" (172).

Clowning Literature

In an innovative study of popular English circus literature of the 1940s, Yoram S. Carmeli argues that such writing reifies the actual circus (by that time in decline) by reproducing the "play" of circus not just through narrative but also through the materiality of the books themselves—which constantly present themselves as authentic documents of circus culture while at the same time undermining their own credibility on the subject by their "clowning." The goal of highbrow literature and art, Carmeli contends, has been to present the Big Top as a metaphor for the fragmentation of modern society (183–84). Popular literature, by contrast, aims not for a serious treatment but rather conjures "a totalized presence of the (absent) circus" (197).

Argentine circus literature of the 1920s and 1930s falls somewhere between the popular and erudite models described by Carmeli. Although like the latter it employs the circus as a trope of problematic modernity, it shares with the former a project of preservation and nostalgia. Carmeli argues that popular literature reveals the circus "as an invented tradition" (180). While Tuñón, Barletta, and others reconstitute the circus through literature (albeit in ways that diverge from Carmeli's "nonserious" circus texts), the reverse is also true: Argentine literary tradition, to a much greater extent than in England and the United States, is itself "invented" by the circus. The most important foundational event of both the *circo criollo* and Riverplate theater history was the 1884 adaptation of Eduardo Gutiérrez's serial novel *Juan Moreira*. Initially staged in pantomime by the Uruguayan-born José Podestá, at the time one of the region's most celebrated circus personalities (known also by his clown moniker Pepino 88), the theatrical version of *Juan Moreira* was an enduring hit both in Argentina and elsewhere in Latin America. The popular spectacle combined the familiar story of a heroic gaucho driven to violence with the visual language of the Big Top. Inaugurating a formula that would last for decades, *Moreira* comprised the second and concluding bill of a mixed spectacle that began with traditional circus performances: clown routines, high wire acts, and equestrian feats, performed by the same artists who would later play the leads and supporting roles of the drama.[6] By the

6. According to Seibel, the unprecedented success of the *Moreira* pantomime was due principally to its tragicomic exploitation of national myth and the formal originality of the spectacle, whose circus semantics contrasted so sharply with the European, bourgeois conventions of contemporaneous national theater (65). The circus-play's success no doubt had much to do with shifting

1920s, the original *Juan Moreira* had spawned scores of different adaptations, including an opera, at least two silent films, and countless *cordel*-like rewritings of Gutiérrez's novel incorporating the numerous characters and novelties of the stage play (Seibel 66–67). The bawdy language, popular typology, and circus pedigree of the play incurred the disdain of the Argentine literary establishment, which saw in the widely disseminated revenge story a potential instigator of urban violence as well as the profanation of the nation's cultural landscape. Ironically, the public denouncement of the work by such prominent intellectuals as José Ingenieros and Florencio Sánchez probably contributed to the "bohemian" cachet enjoyed by the circus among the avant-gardes, and in particular among participants of the Boedo group, who were only too eager to distance themselves from their bourgeois predecessors.[7]

Perhaps in part because of the disfavor into which *Juan Moreira* had fallen with the cultural establishment, but also due to the circus's continuing popularity in Buenos Aires well into the 1930s, the *circense* plays a visible role in Argentine avant-garde literature. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the early work of the poet Raúl González Tuñón, in particular his first two collections *El violín del diablo* (1926) and *Miércoles de ceniza* (1928). Interestingly, it is not Pepino 88 that captivates the young Tuñón, but rather the English-born clown Frank Brown, Podestá's contemporary and frequent collaborator who had performed alongside Pepino 88 in the original production of *Juan Moreira*. Since Brown's elegant pantomime tended to appeal to children more than Podestá's, it is not surprising that the former should be singled out by a poet whose own childhood coincided with the latter end of Brown's

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demographics as well. As Ángel Rama has pointed out, the main problem with Argentine theater before the arrival of *Moreira* had been the lack of a "real and present" audience, "suficientemente numeroso como para financiar el funcionamiento de compañías estables" (132). The mass migration from the provinces therefore constituted a new, popular public ready to embrace a circus-drama about a wronged gaucho, especially since, as Rama notes, a number of *Moreira*'s spectators were in fact recently displaced gauchos themselves (142). The mostly nonverbal adaptation of Gutiérrez's novel—sparse dialogue was gradually introduced into the *Moreira* repertoire—also makes sense on another level. Pantomime and exaggerated physical gesture in the circus and popular theater, Martín-Barbero writes, were essentially nineteenth-century responses to various official prohibitions of "vulgar" dialogue. Along with "schematic" plots and "Maniquean" stylization, popular performance was compelled to adopt an anachronistic "rhetoric of excess," a rhetoric that has flourished to this day in the form of popular film and soap operas (126–31).

7. Ingenieros concludes that the "delincuente" Juan Moreira "no es . . . un exponente de las cualidades psicológicas del criollo, sino más bien su antítesis. Es funesto para nuestra moral colectiva el culto de semejante personaje" (150).

celebrity. In "A los veteranos del circo," Tuñón claims the English clown as "dueño de las risas de mi generación" (91) and safe-keeper of "mis primeras emociones plásticas" (92). Brown's privileged position in Tuñón's collection of circus characters is consistent with the poet's foregrounding of the exotic elements of the *circo criollo*. Along with "Old Tom Gin" (as Tuñón calls Brown), *El violín del diablo* spotlights a French woman lion tamer in "Circo," a Filipino carnival dancer in "Nostalgia de las danzas bárbaras," and Gypsy performers in "Gitanos ambulantes." The overall effect is that of the circensian as an essential component of a *porteño* landscape tinged with familiar strangeness: a conflation of *extraño* and *extranjero* somehow constitutive of normative *local* identity.

Beatriz Sarlo has argued that Tuñón's early work presents a cold, relatively unfiltered vision of the old Buenos Aires. "Centrado en el presente," Sarlo writes, "[Tuñón] admite el pasado solo bajo la sintaxis del flash-back explicativo o pintoresco pero no melancólico" (159). Sarlo's remark suggests that Tuñón's use of the *arrabal* as a metaphor precludes its metonymic validity as a historical referent—hence any sentiment the poet might harbor toward his childhood. Yet in its evocation of the past, the poet's tribute to Frank Brown in "A los veteranos del circo" is hardly just picturesque. Tuñón's "specular" vision lingers sentimentally—sometimes tenderly, sometimes irascibly—on the old clown, treating him as a beloved relic:

¡Frank Brown estás viejo!
¡Frank Brown tan arrugado!
Yo siento por ti la maldad del espejo.
¡Maldito maquillaje! ¡Ese carmín está pasado!
Frank Brown eres un fuelle demasiado gastado,
un juguete que ha caducado. (*El violín del diablo* 91)

Tuñón supplements his representation of Brown with a fantasy in which the poet "updates" his master by reviving the venerated clown's tired routine with "Shimmys and tangos and zamacuecas":

para hacer reir a un niño, que es tan noble misión,
haría de mi alma una matraca,
de mi entusiasmo una faca,
de mi poeta un clown,
y una serpentina de mi corazón. (91)

By casting his makeover as loving tribute, Tuñón at once mocks the circus as an anachronism and hallows it as a creative model: in *poeticizing* Frank Brown—to return to Carmeli's concept—Tuñón *clowns* himself. Such reciprocity could not have been enacted without the poet's sentimental embrace of the circus as a constitutive part of the *arrabal* of his youth. Rather than reducing the circus to metaphorical instrumentality as a symbol of cultural fragmentation or vulgarity, in other words, Tuñón (by "clowning") reconverts Brown's ludic anachronism to evoke "a totalized presence of the (absent) circus" (Carmeli 197) more typical of popular circus literature than high-minded poetry.

"A los veteranos del circo" reads, then, not like a wholesale rejection of nostalgia, as Sarlo contends, but rather as a playful, ambivalent expression of recognition by metonymy. As an anachronistic foreigner, Old Tom Gin (like many of the other circus figures from *El violín del diablo*) is ostensibly from the "wrong" place (England) and time (the nineteenth century) to serve as a fitting mentor for a young Argentine writer with vanguard ambitions. From a different set of criteria, Frank Brown is also representative of the "wrong" cultural practice, one tainted by the market and the moral dubiousness of *Moreira*—dual "vulgarities" that Tuñón does not attempt to disguise. In "Eche veinte centavos en la ranura," another poem from his first collection, Tuñón juxtaposes the wonder and venality of street sideshows, where money must be spent "si quiere ver la vida color de rosa" (97). If the *circense* spectacle promises the customer "otra esperanza remota de vida miliunanochesca" (99), it also freely mixes innocence with prurience.

Cien lucecitas. Maravillas
De reflejos funambulescos.
—Aquí hay mujer y manzanilla!
—Aquí hay títeres y refrescos!
Pero sobre todo, mujeres
para los hombres de los puertos
que prenden como alfileres
sus ojos, en los ojos muertos. (98)

Tuñón's depiction of the coexistence of juvenile and adult entertainment, where one can "become a child again / and walk among the sailors from Liverpool and the Suez" (98), is on one hand an accurate description of many early-twentieth-century circuses and carnival shows, and not just in

Argentina. At the same time, Tuñón's insistence on the interchangeability of fantasy as the stuff of gritty fairytale *and* light pornography reveals a literary project of decidedly modern enchantment. The commodification of *porteño* circus culture, in short, does little to diminish its power to cast a good spell. Tuñón thus simultaneously consecrates and disavows the circensian as a "correct" site of nostalgia and literary appropriation.

In *Miércoles de ceniza*, Tuñón trades in his Baudelairean alter ego François Villon for the struggling magician Juancito Caminador, in the process repositioning the clown as a twentieth-century subject much closer in spirit to Chaplin than Frank Brown. In his prose text, "Cosas que le ocurrieron a Juancito Caminador," Tuñón champions modern circus magic through the voice of Juancito: "Vengo a decirles que la prestidigitación triunfa en el arte y en la vida. Síntesis, sorpresa, fantasía. Somos la imaginación, somos la mentira, somos la velocidad" (92). Compared to Frank Brown's outdated clothing and tired routines, the new *payaso* is almost a futurist: emblematic of the speed, technical imagination, and artifice of the modern metropolis. Indeed, along with Betty Bronson films and featherweight boxing matches, for Juancito, "no hay arte tan superior y armonioso, tan asombroso y sutil como el arte de la prestidigitación," an art whose "best friends" are Yankee *empresarios*, poets, and lying children (93–94).

Juancito Caminador's motley assortment of bedfellows illustrates Tuñón's unique brand of radicalism. Peter Stallybrass and Allon White have argued that bourgeois intellectuals of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries typically "disowned" the carnival and consigned the "impurities" of carnival pleasure to the realm of the Other as a way of safeguarding "a stable and 'correct' sense of self" (178). From one angle, Tuñón's endorsement of formal synthesis and mass commercialism appears to perform a carnivalesque "profanation" of distinct discursive domains through a "high" hybridization of erudite and popular, modern and traditional. Such a maneuver is consistent with a vanguard rejection of most things bourgeois. At the same time, however, Juancito is partially "purified" by his unwitting social activism—which Tuñón ties to his character's shortcomings as a clown.

Much like Chaplin's Little Tramp, Juancito is a pathetic figure ill-equipped to excel at his chosen vocation, yet whose charming failures and comic excess endear him to children and the working classes while making a mockery of the cultural and political establishment. The conclusion of "Cosas que le ocurrieron a Juancito Caminador" underscores the clown's Chaplinesque

qualities. Performing in a provincial town, Juancito pulls streamers out of his hat until they inundate the audience:

> [La serpentina] llegó a llenar la carpa subiendo a las gradas más altas mientras los burgueses despavoridos se enredaban al querer huir y todo se enredaba en la serpentina y los niños pobres hacían bollos con ella para arrojarlos sobre el boticario del pueblo, el maestro, el socialista y los consejales. (*Miércoles* 100)

While Juancito's botched trick first drives away "petrified" bourgeois spectators, even the town socialist is not spared from the ensuing anarchy. The streamers are linked metaphorically to Juancito's tenderness—a quality associated repeatedly with the clown's special connection with children (93). Such identification with the irrational power of children recalls Latin American vanguards' frequent and spirited celebration of Chaplin.[8] In Tuñón's evocation of circus culture, social engagement and sentiment combine to mitigate the profanity of *mésalliances* without resorting to total depuration. The result is a body of early work that hovers between avant-garde and establishment, literary and popular.

Boedo and the Limits of the Circense

The increasing importance of political commitment in Tuñón's literary work soon distanced him from the Florida camp and brought him closer to the Boedo group. Regardless of affiliations and ideological stripes, Sarlo has argued, Argentine writers of the period shared a common obsession with borders and liminality, both actual and symbolic. Though the lines between Boedo and Florida were frequently blurry, constantly shifting and often arbitrarily drawn, one of the principal differences lay in the former's reconstitution of the city's working-class suburbs as a site of literary praxis. As Sarlo has noted, certain writers—including Raúl González Tuñón, his brother Enrique,

8. A notable example is Xavier Abril's unusual text, "Radiografía de Chaplin," published in two parts in *Amauta* (1928). Chaplin, in Abril's poetic vision, possesses a tacit, mysterious connection to children above all others. "La intención de Chaplin está ya en los ovarios de las madres contemporáneas . . . Los bebés dicen Chaplin y se orinan. En Virginia, para que los niños se queden dormidos les dan teta y Chaplin" (73).

Nicolás Olivari, and the consensus *boedenses* Elías Castelnuovo, Álvaro Yunque, and Leónidas Barletta—infused the *suburbio* not just with aesthetic but also ideological value (180). Whereas Jorge Luis Borges in his *martinfierrista* phase "acriolla la tradición literaria universal y, al mismo tiempo universaliza las orillas," other writers, exiled from Florida either by birth or choice, take a slightly different approach. Rather than, like Borges, jumping directly from a geographical to a literary referent, they insert a third, ideological step, rendering the social margins visible by introducing themselves as actors or near-actors in the outlying "stage" they describe (Sarlo 180–81).

Even more so than Raúl González Tuñón, it was Leónidas Barletta who identified the circus as a marginal site ideally suited for both aesthetic and ideological purposes—that is, as a multilevel referent (physical, social, and symbolic) that allowed the writer to assume a literary voice in consonance with the "others" of the *arrabal*. As Sarlo notes, the challenge and novelty of the Argentine vanguards consisted of their self-inscription into the working-class suburbs whose Others were "[o]tros que pueden configurar un nosotros con el yo literario de poetas e intelectuales; son Otros próximos, cuando no *uno mismo*" (180, original emphasis).

Barletta's novel *Royal Circo* (1926) presents the circus primarily as the terrain of impoverished subjects in a fruitless search for economic opportunity. Whereas Tuñón paints the Big Top as a marginally sentimental site of anachronism and nostalgia, for Barletta human oddities and material desperation translate into a theater of exploitation and broad pathos. In the novel, the founder of the eponymous Royal Circo, Sardina, hastily assembles a troupe of circus artists, "freaks," and animals, then runs off with Estella the Amazon when his venture soon proves unprofitable. The specter of human poverty—reiterated by the performers' cohabitation with a half-starved elephant, lion, and donkey—is a thread that runs throughout the novel. After Sardina abandons his circus, the English clown Timón (John Geeps) complains that the life of a circus performer is "a dog's life." Takeo, a Japanese tightrope walker and former owner of a laundry service, disagrees:

> —Es justa. Es la vida del artista. Esto no es un trabajo. No somos obreros. No producimos nada.
> —Alegramos a la gente.
> —Nadie nos pidió alegría. No hacemos nada útil. Planchar, lavar, sí . . .
> —No sólo de pan vive el hombre. La alegría es buena . . .

—La alegría . . . sí . . . la gente ríe . . . Pero nosotros, ¿Somos alegres? La pobreza nuestra es la que divierte a la gente. (127)

In spite of Timón's claims to the contrary, *Royal Circo* presents the circus mainly as an *unhappy* proletarian activity, yet one with which working-class readers could be reasonably expected to identify. The preponderance of foreign-born circus artists in the cast of characters, at the same time, lends the setting an exotic atmosphere that would appear to displace readers from the terrain of virtual Others to which Sarlo refers. This suggests an attempt to infuse the "otros próximos" of the *arrabal* with an aura of celebrity rooted in historical truth. Several of the novel's characters, in fact, bear a close resemblance to well-known fixtures of the *circo criollo*: John Geeps (Timón) clearly evokes Frank Brown; the "Amazon" Estella, meanwhile, may well have been inspired by the famous *écuyère* Rosita de la Plata, who made news not only for her unprecedented work under the Big Top but also for her widely publicized extramarital affair with Frank Brown and subsequent divorce from Antonio Podestá, José Podestá's younger brother (Seibel 54–55).

Barletta, therefore, represents the circus as a world of near-alterity whose occupants are meant to embody marginality to an *exceptional* degree without, however, being *exceedingly* marginal.[9] The characters of *Royal Circo* rarely stray into unassimilable extremes. By privileging the business of the circus over its traditional roots and foregrounding the European credentials of the traveling performers, Barletta dispenses with an issue he would not have been able to avoid had he set his novel in the carnival proper. In very general terms, circus and carnival are perhaps best thought of as cultural cousins whose divergent practices often belie their genealogical ties. Helen Stoddart has written of a crucial overlap between the two, such that "circus and circus texts may *perform* or represent some of the inversions and *mésalliances* which Bakhtin identifies as features of carnival processions, but they do so as carnivalesque art rather than as (temporarily) socially subversive carnival" (38).

As helpful as Stoddart's distinction is, it does not speak to the racial poli-

9. Helen Stoddart has recently called attention to the economic need for modern circus performers to maintain a balance between celebrity and "banal" approachability. Performers, she writes, "must be exceptional in some highly visible way, and yet at the same time be seen to possess enough of the attributes of ordinariness to facilitate identification and empathy on the part of the consumer" (56).

tics of carnival and circus so pertinent to the literary representation of either set of practices, especially in Latin America. To write about the local carnival with any degree of verisimilitude, Riverplate writers of the 1920s and 1930s were forced to grapple with the inherent ethnic otherness of the spectacle in terms of its participants, its practices, or both.[10] The choice of the circus as the setting of his novel, on the other hand, permits Barletta to emphasize the Continental aspects of the *arrabal* by exhibiting the margins in whiteface. Such a maneuver has a felicitous by-product in that it allows for a less contentious way to "configure a 'we.'" As Stallybrass and White contend, the emergent bourgeoisie, "with its sentimentalism and its disgust, *made* carnival into the festival of the Other" (178, original emphasis). Barletta, however, negotiates an alternative position—one certainly not free of bourgeois sentimentalism yet also not driven by "disgust" to isolate the Other entirely. By refusing to represent the circus as simply the "festival of the Other," Barletta avoids relegating himself to a position of privileged *outsider*. His circumvention of carnival extremes leaves the way clear for a literary treatment of the popular without resorting to primitivism.

Barletta exchanges wild saturnalia for scenes of sentimental solidarity. The spectacle of desperate characters caught in cycles of destitution and adversity generates pathos, and also serves as a pretext for sermonizing. *Royal Circo*'s main characters prove to be virtuous cast-offs of the circus's failure. Timón (the English clown), Salustino (a clown-magician whose morbidly obese first wife dies at the outset of the novel), and Gloria (a widowed trapeze artist) end up bound together by melodramatic circumstances: Salustino takes Gloria under his wing after her lover commits suicide, and Gloria's fatherless daughter Elena is eventually married off to Timón. Given the novel's relatively happy *denouement*, Sarlo argues that Barletta's approach combines sentimentality with "pious realism" (200). Barletta's strategy thus violates the guiding precepts of the Boedo school, which calls for a more sober social realism.[11] At the same time, the "Maniquean" plot and character devices and

10. For a number of writers, local carnival practices like the *corso*, the *murga*, and the *desfile* were tinged with *africanidad* and duly colored black. See, for example, the Uruguayan Ildefonso Pereda Valdés's negrista poems; Roberto Arlt's *aguafuertes* "Fiestas de carnaval" and "¡Qué farra 'hicimo' anoche!" (241–46); and Enrique González Tuñón's short story, "Tus besos fueron míos."

11. In a 1927 *Claridad* article titled "Ellos y nosotros," Roberto Mariani outlines the basic differences between Florida and Boedo. While claiming realism as the literary mode of "nosotros," he qualifies the term by underscoring the *boedenses*' "un-frivolous" solidarity with the working classes. "Nuestro realismo no es tendencioso," he writes, adding that "tenemos una interpretación seria, transcendental del arte" (18).

"rhetoric of excess" cited by Martín-Barbero as the hallmarks of melodrama at least offer the advantage, in *Royal Circo*'s case, of matching their popular subject matter.

Barletta "re-creates" the circus in a different way than the English circus literature described by Carmeli, where writing and consumption together constitute a "performance of marginality" in which the circus world is ludically "transformed and perceived as an embodiment of unique ontological isolation, epitomizing a temporality out of social time and a spatiality out of relations and meanings" (176). *Royal Circo* "performs marginality" from the point of view of work, not play. If Barletta muzzles "carnival laughter" for the sake of circus pathos, however, he also sacrifices some of the subversive power—the craftiness—typical of the carnival's marginal participants. In the lugubrious space of Barletta's Big Top, social hierarchies are not inverted, transgression is muted, and *malícia* is reserved for those already in power.[12] By showing a "complacencia melancólica con las tradiciones"—to use Néstor García-Canclini's turn of phrase (205)—Barletta displays a sensibility closer in spirit to nineteenth-century folklore studies than to early twentieth-century vanguardism.

Far from being a nostalgic tribute or "playful" recreation, then, *Royal Circo* represents the circus as a vehicle of capitalist exploitation. In one of the novel's last chapters, an aging Salustino and his adopted daughter headline a variety show at the "Cine-teatro Rivera" that opens with a short-reel silent Western. The impoverished audience, Barletta's narrator tells us, is impervious to the seductive wiles of the film industry: "¿[D]ónde iban a encontrar ellos minas de oro y tesoros escondidos, si todos vivían en la vecindad del arroyo Maldonado, que era depósito de latas y botines viejos?" (140). This same audience, however, proves highly susceptible to Salustino's simple yet beguiling magic act, in which the elderly *mago* conjures not gold but "useful" edible goods: garden vegetables and a duck (146). When at the conclusion of the show a near riot of enthusiasm erupts, causing damage to the theater, the owner reluctantly asks Salustino *not* to give an encore performance: "Si esto se repite tendré que cerrar el salón" (147). The message imparted by this

12. In his seminal work, Roberto da Matta has stressed the centrality of *malícia* and *malandragem* to the social outcast's unique power to destabilize the structure of authority by occupying the "interstices between order and disorder"—a subversive power da Matta has identified as the very core of Brazilian carnival (130–31). Yet in Barletta's novel, greed, hunger, and modern technology have sapped the circus of its sacred remnants, leaving dominant structures intact.

concluding scene is two-fold. On one hand, if traditional culture temporarily overshadows early Hollywood's movie magic, the theater owner's venality ultimately eclipses the folk genius of Salustino's performance—a genius cultivated in the circus. At the same time, the inclusion of the cinema in the "Cine-teatro Rivera" variety show signals Barletta's main anxiety about the modernization of popular entertainment—that the technical apparatus and profit motive spell the demise of the circus's ritual remnants, in spite of the latter's abiding suitability for the inhabitants of the *suburbio*.[13] The juxtaposition of the cinema and "late" circus culture in *Royal Circo* suggests that, for Leónidas Barletta at least, the arch of oral culture's resemantization was an essentially venal one failing to serve the needs of the working classes.

From a different vantage point, Barletta's novel can be seen also as an attempt to *purge* the circus by narrating its supposed demise at the hands of the market and new technologies. His maneuver stands in contrast to Raúl González Tuñón's poetry, particularly his collection *La calle del agujero en la media* (1930). In his third book, Tuñón curtails the *modernista* decadence of his earlier work in favor of a poetics that hovers even more precariously between the *arrabal* and the metropolis. Tuñón embraces the cinema as theme and creative muse in ways similar to those used later by Nicolás Olivari in his book *El hombre de la baraja y la puñalada* (1933), a collection of fanciful *crónicas* that imagine personal relationships with silent and early sound film stars.[14] Like Olivari, Tuñón naturalizes Hollywood celebrities by rerendering their screen personalities in such a way that they would not look

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13. Barletta's lament at the *circense*'s demise later surfaces in his collection of prose poems, *Los destinos humildes* (1938), in which assorted street vendors and entertainers—from peanut and candy salesmen to soothsayers and puppeteers—struggle against the changes brought on by modernity. One of the most interesting pieces is "El fotógrafo ambulante," a portrait of a man who photographs portraits, a primitive technologist caught between the traditional and the modern, the "miraculous" and the mundane. Barletta generates pathos by juxtaposing the wonder of the apparatus with the impoverished simplicity of its operator: "en su máxima sencillez, el fotógrafo hace como que ignora el portentoso milagro que va a realizar . . . no puede hacer otra cosa; aunque, sí, puede más: puede iluminar el retrato con unos toques ingenuos y falsos de color" (76–77).

14. The title of Olivari's book is a reference to one of several Hollywood stars he "covers" in his *crónicas*: William Powell. In addition, Olivari imagines Gary Cooper in a Buenos Aires dive bar, writes a love letter to Lillian Gish, and likens Laurel and Hardy to honorary *porteños*, "medio *burgueses* y medio vagos" (62). In his "letter" to Lillian Gish, Olivari foregrounds the geographical distance that separates the chronicler from the actress: she is, he writes, "la 'baby' de mi consciencia de gaviero en los muelles de San Francisco, condenado al periodismo en Buenos Aires, por un destino grotesco" (78).

out of place in the mean streets of Buenos Aires. Tuñón sees the actress Evelyn Brent as "friend to thieves and prostitutes" (48); George Bancroft as a "failed artist" and "artful thief" who at night frequents "nostalgic ports" and "hidden taverns" (47); and writes of the actor William Powell: "Fue jugador. Su vida fue una partida brava, / el pócker, el amor, el contrabando, y tuvo / la impasibilidad de un filósofo escéptico / que descubre lo inútil y pequeño del mundo" (49).

Elsewhere in the collection, Tuñón works in an inverse direction: instead of transfiguring the film industry into something local and intimate, he further internationalizes the *porteño* vernacular of his earlier works. "Marionettes," for example, emphasizes the European pedigree of circus and carnival culture. Tuñón mockingly historicizes the figures of Punch and Guignol to show how clown prototypes echo the folly of human societies, "pobre aserrín el corazón, pobre máscara desteñida / nuestra ilusión" (45).[15] In "Petrouchka," Tuñón likens himself to Stravinsky's puppet-clown in love with an enchanted ballerina, comparing the body of his own lover, however, to the "carne verde y brutal de Greta Garbo" (170). In the same way that the jump-cut and collage effects of his work reveal a formal influence of the cinema beyond the topical treatment of film celebrities, Tuñón's "free familiarization" of erudite and popular sources reveals a carnivalesque approach in his work transcending the thematics of circus and carnival.[16] Rather than anxiously viewing mass culture as the rival or executioner of oral culture, in short, *La calle del agujero en la media* juxtaposes cinema and the *circense* in ways that stress their propinquity.

The survival of his poetic voice Juancito Caminador in subsequent books from the 1930s consummates this mingling of the traditional and the modern, as Tuñón continues to liken his poetic work to that of a street-wise magician with "marvelous" qualities akin to those of a filmmaker. Juancito's world is hardly an insular one populated by pure anachronism and sad outcasts. Instead, it is "lived-in" space that reacts to modern injustices through a mixture of indignant protest and playful adaptation, a hybrid of tactics

15. "Marionettes" would later form the basis of a three-act play cowritten with Olivari and produced by Teatro del Pueblo called *Dan tres vueltas y luego se van* (1934).

16. Sarlo suggests Bakhtin's concept of "free familiarization" when she writes of *La calle del agujero en la media* that its "yo poético no se fija en ninguno de estos niveles [culturales diferentes] y puede, en consecuencia, organizar el collage de un traje de payaso con un libro de Rimbaud, mediante cortes y yuxtaposiciones aprendidos también en la sintaxis del cinematográfico" (171).

announced at the conclusion of the poem "Juancito Caminador," from the collection *Todos bailan* (1930): "Y mi corazón continúa alegre y violento / como el corazón alborotado de un mundo nuevo" (33). Years later, in his poem "Canto inconcluso a Chaplin" (from the collection *Hay alguien que está esperando*), Tuñón cements the link between circensian memory and cinematic modernity by reviving Chaplin's traditional roots: "Ya no es como en el circo de ayer, cara tiznada / ni cara de albayalde como luna prestada. / [Pero e]s el mismo hombrecito con cabellos más viejos" (148). If modern times have changed Carlitos, however, Juancito remains his loyal deputy. In the poem's last stanza, the poet-*prestidigitador* underscores the personal *and* vocational solidarity that still binds him to the movie-clown:

> ¡Oh calle de la media agujereada!
> Allí iremos en busca del sujeto notable
> como tú y como yo, a compartir el vino.
> En la calle burguesa la mula nos asedia. (149)

The Beautification of the Folk

Questioning the lack of precision in Bakhtin's articulation of "distinct discursive domains," Stallybrass and White argue that "[w]riting about a fair . . . could be as much an act of dissociation from, as a sign of engagement with, its festive space" (61). While Leónidas Barletta's early fictional work leans closer to engagement than dissociation, his subsequent leadership of Buenos Aires's Teatro del Pueblo promised to combine popular performance with literary representation in a way that conflated discursive domains. Teatro del Pueblo was founded in 1930 as an alternative to the city's commercial theaters, viewed by Barletta and other original members as artistically bankrupt and priced out of reach of working-class spectators. After struggling for a couple of years, the Teatro, under Barletta's direction, gradually won larger audiences, funding and the begrudging respect of the lettered elites who at first mocked the upstart theater's amateurish productions. Roberto Arlt comments that Barletta's enterprise was a particularly daring one because it invented a new theatrical tradition rather than relying on an already existing one. Comparing Barletta's audacity with Henry Ford's, Arlt writes, "No ex-

istían autores, ni teatros, pero [Barletta] debe haberse dicho: hagamos el teatro que los autores se harán después" (17).[17]

Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that new authors were not constituted from Barletta's project as much as already established writers *reconstituted* themselves as playwrights through the new theater. One such writer was Arlt himself, whose dramaturgy blossomed in the atmosphere of creative latitude fostered by Barletta.[18] Another was Ezequiel Martínez Estrada, author of the play *Títeres de pies ligeros*, the theater's first critical and popular success. In the journal *Metrópolis*, which during the early 1930s served as the literary and critical voice of Teatro del Pueblo, the theater was routinely advertised as a "teatro de marionetas," and indeed a number of productions of the period besides Martínez Estrada's dealt either materially or thematically with puppetry or marionettes.[19] Martínez Estrada's play, however, reveals that the *circense* would have to be diluted for it to be integrated into Teatro del Pueblo's brand of performance. *Títeres de pies ligeros* is a decidedly "high" rendering of the *commedia del' arte* tradition, offering a twentieth-century variation of what Bakhtin calls "an individual carnival," whereby the original "carnival spirit," conditioned by Romanticism, acquires a "private, 'chamber' character" (36–37). In *Títeres*, the stock characters Pierrot, Colombina, Arlequino, and Polichinela speak in measured verse, their irony is refined, and the story reveals little attempt to adapt its European modalities to local settings. Martínez Estrada, in other words, promotes Martín-Barbero's popular archetypes to "artistic" categories largely devoid of the earthy, carnival laughter that defined them to begin with. If Raúl González Tuñón's poem "Marionettes" had rendered clown prototypes as violent and coarse—that is, truer to their original form—Martínez Estrada dresses them up. Turning traditional performance into a theater of ideas, *Títeres de pies ligeros* features nostalgia without excess: the beautification of the folk.

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17. Both Barletta and Ford, Arlt adds, are like *conquistadores* who operate in similar ways: "crean la dificultad, se cierran el camino de salida, y entonces no les queda otro recurso que triunfar o romperse la cabeza" (17).

18. Arlt's emergence as a playwright began with Teatro del Pueblo's production of *Los humillados* (1931), an adaptation of a fragment of his novel *Los siete locos*; it continued with *Trescientos millones* (1932), *Saverio el cruel* (1936), *África* (1938), *La isla desierta* (1938), *La fiesta del hierro* (1940), and *El desierto entra en la ciudad* (1942). Although Arlt's work with the Teatro was generally well received by critics, especially those of the independent press, he would find the widest reception from his only play produced in the commercial circuit, *El fabricante de fantasmas* (1936).

19. One notable example is Eduardo González Lanuza's play *El bastón de polichinela*, staged in 1935.

At first glance, Teatro del Pueblo's lofty staging of the circensian would seem inconsistent with Boedo's platform of politically engaged art and Barletta's opposition to bourgeois theater. A closer look, however, reveals the ambivalence with which many *boedenses* had for some time approached the topic of the cultural "revolution" that the Teatro ostensibly spearheaded. In an important essay titled "Nuestro Teatro" and published in *Claridad* (1927), Álvaro Yunque had viciously described mainstream Argentine theater as "otro mal nacional [y] una ingeniosa máquina de distraer, o sea, de idiotizar" (24–25). The most remarkable aspect of Yunque's manifesto is not his predictable attack on the "monstrous hedonism" of capitalist society that, he claims, has "stained" the theater more than any other art (25). Rather, it is his wholesale rejection of both high and low registers of the 1920s theatrical scene that calls attention to itself. The greatest dangers to theatrical art, Yunque claims, are not just the serious "teatro de melodramas en nombre de dramas y, con el nombre de comedias, la merengue sentimental" but also the demotic "pantomimas sin pretensiones" (27). By condemning both high-minded melodrama and popular nonverbal performance, Yunque hopes to rid theater of any trace of vulgarity, whether bourgeois or plebeian.

The main problem with Yunque's frontal assault on the national stage is that it is essentially alchemical. Yunque attempts too forcefully to extract the *pueblo* from the *plebe*, condemning the latter as fatuous in order to transform the former into a whitewashed domain of "human fraternity" (28).[20] In a particularly telling passage of the essay, Yunque traces the dubious origins of the *público-plebe* to the "base" influence of the circus:

> ¡Cuánto mejor fuera para la cultura argentina que el ladrón Juan Moreira no saltara nunca del circo al escenario! Y curiosa coincidencia ésta de que la industria del teatro nacional moderno, industria según el concepto burgués: la de producir ganancias, haya tenido su origen en el personaje de un ladrón y salteador de oficio, "un caballero de industria," como castizamente se denomina a los tales. (24–25)

Yunque thus paints himself into a corner. To buttress his argument that the current theater scene suffers from a flawed foundation (correctable only by

20. In their excellent overview of the Teatro's early years, Patricia Verónica Fischer and Grisby Ogás Puga have noted that, given the theater's general failure to generate the truly popular audience they had hoped to attract, it was in some sense a "teatro popular sin pueblo" (169).

social and cultural revolution), he resorts to the conventionally bourgeois argument that Juan Moreira should be disqualified as a popular hero because of his supposed "immorality." The circus, meanwhile, emerges as a symbol of Moreira's—and Argentine theater's—venal menace: the native lair of the "caballero de industria."

"Nuestro Teatro" previews Teatro del Pueblo's ideological underpinnings and shows how even the most politically radical wing of the Argentine avant-garde either "elevated" or rejected the *circense* in its quest for cultural respectability. Beginning in *Claridad*, and later in the 1930s publications *Metrópolis* and *Conducta* (the latter two closely affiliated with Barletta's theater), criticism of "serious" art increasingly trumped assessments of popular forms. Both *Metrópolis* and *Conducta* go far beyond the scope of theater to include literary, music, art, and film criticism. Not mere vehicles of the Boedo group, moreover, the journals feature essays and reviews by such writers as Eduardo González Lanuza, Nicolás Olivari, and Raúl Scalabrini Ortiz, in addition to regular contributions from *boedenses* like Elías Castelnuovo, Yunque, and of course Barletta himself.

The inclusiveness of the journals' critical literature points both to the strengths and the weaknesses of the Teatro's project. On one hand it shows Barletta's growing influence and openness to a broad range of viewpoints; at the same time, the journals' very heterodoxy reflects a dampening of vanguard social activism that typified Barletta's earlier literary output. *Metrópolis*'s music criticism, for example, rarely engages with popular forms, preferring to comment on local performances of the European classical tradition; the journal's literary and theater criticism, meanwhile, tends to highlight putative artistic qualities over social content. Though often extensive, film criticism in both journals eschews Hollywood commercialism and seeks to expurgate the cinema's popularity by stressing its aesthetic refinement, when not insisting on its corrosive effect on live theater.[21] If film found an

21. One of the secrets to Teatro del Pueblo's broad appeal, nevertheless, is its selective assimilation of film. In a highly original essay, Arlt insists that the cinema "day by day is killing the laughable national theater," though, he says, film does not present a threat to "artistic" theater since it "lies outside its jurisdiction" (16). Particularly in the 1930s, however, Teatro del Pueblo integrates film into its productions and other cultural activities in a number of ways. In 1931, for example, the Teatro staged a play called *Cinema* by Roberto Pinetta. In 1938, Emilio Novas presented a conference titled "Sentido social y permanencia de la obra de Carlitos Chaplin" (Verzero 52). Later, in 1939, the theater staged a short theatrical piece by Ildefonso Pereda Valdés called "Un hombre en la pantalla," based on Chaplin's perennial character the Little Tramp. Yet it was the company's sole film production (*Los afincaos*, 1941, directed by Barletta) and the picture's ample coverage in

uneasy niche in Barletta's world, *Conducta*'s lukewarm reception of radio drama is especially indicative of Teatro del Pueblo's highly ambivalent stance toward the reconversion of the popular. In a 1942 editorial attributable to Barletta titled "El radioteatro: factor de embrutecimiento colectivo," the journal declares categorically that "la radiotelefonía es el enemigo público número uno de la cultura [que] rechaza sistemáticamente todo intento de arte superior" (10–11).

In later *Conducta* editorials, Barletta appears more and more preoccupied with El Teatro's acceptance by the mainstream press, going as far as to republish in the journal various accolades from foreign observers and local newspapers such as *La Prensa*. A telling example of the theater's push for respectability is signed by the New York-based stage actor Jacob Ben-Ami on April 17, 1941 and published with an accompanying Spanish "translation" in *Conducta*. The English hand-written original reads, "My congratulations to the finest folk-theater in South America," which is mistranslated as "Mis congratulaciones por el finísimo Teatro del Pueblo en Sudamérica" (17). Whether intentional or not, the rerendering of the original reveals Barletta's intention to cast the Teatro not as "the finest folk-theater" but rather as an "exceedingly refined" theater—a product not of the *plebe* (to return to Álvaro Yunque's distinction) but rather that of a morally and aesthetically elevated *pueblo*.

The document reveals a great deal not just about Teatro del Pueblo's strategies for acceptance, but also Barletta's ambivalent views on the evolution of popular culture. In many ways, Teatro del Pueblo was built as a "safe haven" from mass entertainment, although, under the guise of cultural praxis, it ultimately leaned heavily on erudite literature and art to lend it the "edifying" prestige and institutional leverage with which ostensibly to defy the bourgeois establishment. In fairness, it should be noted that the Teatro created a viable, moderately successful alternative to what Barletta and other *boedenses* saw as the corruption of the *plebe*, and in so doing undeniably transformed the literary landscape in the 1930s. Yet the Teatro was essentially an enterprise that sought to "correct" the working classes by contracting established writers like Martínez Estrada to beautify the folk instead of promoting the inclusion of "organic" popular forms on the national stage.

Conducta that ultimately consecrated the cinema as complementary to the Teatro's stage productions.

In their study *Memory and Modernity*, William Rowe and Vivian Schelling argue that the uneven transition from traditional to modern culture in Latin America during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was articulated principally through intermediaries like the *folletín* and the circus, in such a way that "[t]he traditional [was] resignified inside the modern—or, equally, the modern [was] arrived at through tradition" (33). The literary production and performance I have examined in this essay reveals the validity of Rowe and Schelling's assertion, but also suggests its limitations. Teatro del Pueblo's ideological platform was previewed in *Royal Circo*, in which Barletta depicts the circus less as an "osmotic" middle passage between memory and modernity than as a cultural dead-end condemned to perpetuate a cycle of venality and poverty—a cycle exacerbated by the circensian's gradual transformation by the modern culture industry. Both Barletta and Raúl González Tuñón were certainly instrumental in introducing the *circense* to the twentieth-century Argentine literary imaginary. Tuñón's work, though, signals alternative options largely absent from Barletta's literary and cultural production: namely, to recognize circus culture as cinema's forebear and potential comrade-in-arms, and to celebrate both the Big Top and the silver screen as equally viable vessels of popular culture. If Tuñón's later poetry suggests that neither Juancito nor the Little Tramp's playful magic could ultimately hold off the flood of the market, Tuñón at least illuminates a blueprint for socially engaged literature that integrates carnival and celluloid, showing that tradition could indeed be "resignified inside the modern."

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