

Performing the Nation in Manuel Galich's *El tren amarillo*

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The 1944 coup which overthrew the Guatemalan dictator Jorge Ubico and installed a democratic regime created a political and cultural opening. Guatemalans, poised at an era of national redefinition, began to look back upon a common national history to help answer the questions of what they may become as a nation in the future. For Guatemalan dramatist Manuel Galich this revisioning of the nation and of Guatemala's past was the project in his play *El tren amarillo*. Through the writing of *El tren amarillo* Galich hoped to unite Guatemalans through a sharing of national history and to create the recognition of a Guatemalan 'people.'

Written by Galich in the 1950s, *El tren amarillo* retraces the history of a Guatemala under imperialism, or, more specifically, economic and political domination by the Boston-based United Fruit Company. But the text of the play does not merely retell the story of the struggle of a people exploited by a U.S. company. A nationalist play offers insights into the ways in which the nation is realized for and by the citizen/audience member in three important ways. 1) The play defines the dimensions of the nation in terms of creating a national metaphor, using a national language and creating a "people." 2) The play creates a sense of national history that is shared by the citizens/audience members. 3) And the play creates a sense of national continuity both through the performance of the national history and through the projection back into time of the current values commonly held by the citizens/audience members.

El tren amarillo represents a Guatemala that existed before the economic domination by the United Fruit Company. Guatemala is given life through continuity and is shown to be a nation which has always existed and persisted under imperialism. Galich portrays the nation's current configuration not as a recent creation, but reproduces and reinforces the belief in the Guatemalan nation as a real entity that was there as it is all along. The play reflects the ideology that the nation is eternal and its subjection to foreign pressure must be answered with its liberation.

Though written in the 1950s, *El tren amarillo* looks to the events of the 1920s and 1930s. Beginning its heavy investments at the turn of the century, United Fruit by the 1930s controlled or owned huge tracts of land in Guatemala, all of the railroads, and the only Caribbean port, Puerto Barrios. They had a monopoly on trade and many other profitable arrangements with the U.S. trained and educated dictator, Jorge Ubico. Ubico controlled wages, keeping them low nation-wide so that the United Fruit workers would be less likely to attempt a strike. Ubico also gave United Fruit tax breaks on trade and on the property they owned allowing the company to claim the land was worth much less than its actual value for tax purposes. A growing middle class of professionals and academics, most of whom were *criollos* excluded from the landed elite, created a shift that allowed for Guatemala's brief bid for a democratic nation in the 1940s and 50s. Along with their desire for more universal participation in government Guatemalans began to understand that the arrangements with United Fruit benefited no Guatemalan except maybe Ubico himself.

Galich was personally involved in the 1944 coup that overthrew the Ubico dictatorship. He was a university professor and a friend of the coup leader and later president, Jacobo Arbenz. Galich was appointed Minister of Education during the democratic regime. Galich came from a theatrical family and began writing farces with a political edge in the late 30s. Until his death in 1984 he lived in Cuba and continued to write political comedies. Although his plays deal with the lives of the multi-racial poor, Galich himself was a *criollo* who came from some privilege. *El tren amarillo* would likely have been staged in Guatemala City for a white, bourgeois audience; however, in 1954, before the play was finished, the United States government, in a move to protect United Fruit's interests, staged a coup that overthrew Arbenz's democratic government and installed another dictator. The coup derailed the emerging national culture and forced Galich and others into permanent exile. The play ultimately premiered in Mexico City in 1957.

The three acts of the play follow the protagonists, a group of planters, as they are caught in a web of exploitation by the character, A. Tom Bomb. Bomb is a metaphorical representation of the United States and a "Mefisto moderno," Julio Babruskinas writes in the introduction to the play. The first act is set in the General Store of Mariano Quinto, the Chinese merchant. The characters who come to drink, dance and buy necessities there represent a broad spectrum of Caribbean Guatemalan society. The sailors who come to drink in the bar talk of traveling the Caribbean with the ship's holds open, a dangerous practice intended to keep the precious banana cargo from becoming

override. The planters in the store toast to their good fortune and look forward to continuing good business with the schooners who come to buy their banana crop. This is before the diabolical plans of the Company, here called La Bananera, squeeze out the independent growers. Sensing this possible dark future a planter recounts his bad experience with the company in Costa Rica. He also expresses his reservations about the coming railroad:

BERMUDEZ: Por eso digo que eso de los trenes . . . Parecerá que uno es enemigo del progreso. Pero es que hay progresos de progresos. . . .

BELISARIO: . . . No comprendo cómo el progreso puede aplastar a la gente.

BOESCHE: Yo tampoco lo entiendo. Será que hay algo así como un gran reloj oculto, cuya maquinaria ni siquiera imaginamos?

JOHNSON: Y que el diablo le da cuerda, tal vez.

BERMUDEZ: Puede ser. Nosotros sólo oímos las campanas, sin saber dónde. (40)

Bermúdez's nightmare of the machinations of the Devil seem to come true in the character of A. Tom Bomb. Bomb seems to manipulate the action from outside of it. He controls the flashback of Bermúdez and intervenes often to change the course of events. At the end of Act I, after he leaves for the capital to propose his idea for a railroad everything takes a turn for the worse.

The second and third acts show the stage divided between the house of the Superintendent of the company and the "yarda" – or the collective dwelling of the workers on the plantation. Several years have passed since the action of the first act. Among the workers are the planters from Act I who by now have been driven out of business by La Bananera and bought out. The stage directions point out that train whistles are heard from time to time in the background. They are the whistles of the banana trains as they speed the crop to the docks to be loaded on ships bound for the U.S.

Throughout the rest of the play, the oppression by the company gets worse as the company management seeks to crush the one last rival, a company called simply, La Rival. With the help of Bomb, La Bananera tightens its hold on the government by installing its own choice for president, the illiterate police lieutenant from the first act. In exchange for this promotion, the newly installed president creates an extremely repressive government and extends the power of law enforcement to the officers of the company itself. By the third act, workers are found executed in the field for stealing bananas to eat.

Because he was both a playwright and a politician, Manuel Galich used the theatre to stage his political ideas of the Guatemalan nation at a point when its identity was being redefined. His impact on the Guatemalan theatre reverberates in the words of Hugo Carrillo who called him “el padre del teatro guatemalteco contemporáneo” (95). The historical nature of *El tren amarillo* would provide for a Guatemalan audience a reenactment of the story of how the Guatemalan nation survived the abuse of U.S. imperialists, a testimony of the trials to which the people of the nation were subjected. Enough time had passed from the coup to the writing of the play that the events could be memorialized, agreed upon by the audience and preserved in drama for later generations.

The practice of staging a nation is not unique to this case. In her examination of British, French and U.S. nationalist theatre in *The National Stage*, Loren Kruger asserts that “the idea of representing the nation in the theatre, of summoning a representative audience that will in turn recognize itself” (3) is a compelling and problematic phenomenon. The public nature of theatre creates a forum where an audience may visibly and publicly recognize or contend the image of the nation on stage and could thereby legitimate the notion of the nation in a way that individual readers of a novel or newspaper cannot. However, my project must necessarily depart from Kruger’s on a very crucial point.

Kruger examines the phenomenon of staging the nation in a very different political economy from the one in which I work. She focuses on the national theatre of First World nations. While these nations have histories of ambiguity and contests of national identity, their identities have not recently been challenged as much as, or in the same way as, Third World nations. The identity of Central American nations in the Twentieth Century was formed in spite of, and because of, imperialist desires of countries, most notably the U.S., which sought to exploit or absorb them.

Also, it is important to note that this performance of the national identity is not a performance in isolation. As Benedict Anderson in *Imagined Communities* suggests, one of the paradoxes of nationalist thought is the “objective modernity of nations to the historian’s eye vs. their subjective antiquity in the eyes of nationalists” (5). In *The Invention of Tradition* Hobsbawm follows a similar line of thought: “It is clear that plenty of political institutions, ideological movements and groups – not least in nationalism – were so unprecedented that even historical continuity had to be invented” (7). The performance of national identity is a continuation of a dialogue of ideas about the character of the nation, the nation itself too unstable a construct

to exist outside of this continuous string of repeat performances. Judith Butler writes about the way in which performance constitutes identity:

What "performs" does not exhaust the "I"; it does not lay out in visible terms the comprehensive content of that "I," for if the performance is "repeated," there is always the question of what differentiates from each other the moments of identity that are repeated. And if the "I" is the effect of a certain repetition, one which produces the semblance of a continuity or coherence, then there is no "I" that preceded the gender that it is said to perform; the repetition, and the failure to repeat, produce a string of performances that constitute and contest the coherence of that "I." (18)

While she reiterates the way in which feminist and queer theorists use this concept to theorize gender and sexuality, the concept of performed identities applies also to national identity.

From the signs which are deployed on a daily basis, such as flags or anthems, to monuments of national history, to one time events, such as celebrations or the staging of plays, signs work in concert to create a sense of the nation as being natural or essential in some way. But, as Butler argues, it is the repetitive and obligatory nature of the performance that gives away its tenuousness. If it were natural, it would not need to be continually reaffirmed.

The theatre offers a public venue for this need to perform the nation. Those who count themselves as citizens gather at a national theatre to publicly approve or disapprove of the images presented to them. In this sense, Anderson's concept of homogenous, empty time is played out in a public forum, where the citizen can physically see fellow citizens engaged in the same action of legitimation. The citizen can go on from there and imagine the community of the nation following this practice as long as the drama runs and as long as there is a national theatre. These performances, scattered over many spatial and temporal locations reveal what Homi Bhabha believes is the "image of cultural authority . . . ambivalent because it is caught, uncertainly, in the act of 'composing' its powerful image" (3). The identity of the nation shifts and changes and the representation of the commonly held images follows changing practices, but the moment of performance projects the image of the unchanging and the eternal. Operating in much the same way as Butler's performance of the "I," the performances of the nation are inconsistent and fragmentary, yet continuous in the drive to create the seamless sense of nation.

In this way nationalist drama, at the moment of national redefinition such as a revolution, presents its audience with a stable and recognizable

nation. It provides clear boundaries between what is of the nation and what is not. In the drama, the character of the nation remains unchanged by both foreign pressure and by the movement of time although it is likely that this conception of the national character and national history is quite different from subsequent conceptions.

The drive for continuity appears within the text of Galich's narrative as he joins in the continuous action of refiguring the past. Cultural productions such as *El tren amarillo* fulfill this need for creating historical continuity for the fragmentary and unstable nation. First, Galich sets up an environment for the identification of who Guatemalans are and what they believe and then creates a contrast between what is Guatemalan and what is imposed by foreign imperialists. Act I is clearly a vision of what the nation must have been before the arrival of the company, a map for Guatemalan spectators on which they can locate themselves in opposition to the Outsider. Acts II and III are Galich's Guatemalans under pressure, forced to deal with situations that, in the context of the drama, seem inherently un-Guatemalan. Secondly, through the structure of the drama he creates the sense of this nation and these people as continuing from the Guatemalan past into the present.

For Galich, the map of the pre-imperialist nation looks like the General Store of Mariano Quinto, a despised Chinese merchant on the Caribbean coast. The store provides the site of important historical events leading up to the Revolution of 1944. It also provides a gathering place for a diverse cross-section of the Guatemalan population. As Galich attempts to establish a people, he draws the boundary between Insider/Outsider along racial lines. In Revolutionary Guatemala, the mobilization of the middle-class meant new racial variables in the political dialogue. The image of a racially diverse Guatemala circulated within cultural expressions against the now out-dated image of Guatemala as a nation of elite *criollos*.

The setting of the first act offers an image of the nation as racially diverse, as being made up of more than the dominant white *criollo* class; one planter is a *criollo*, one is black, and the other is mestizo. Although there is some discussion by the planters of the fact that racism is a problem in Guatemala, the general feeling among the Guatemalans at the table is that racial differences are unimportant: "Entre nosotros no se hacen diferencias," the mestizo planter says to the black planter (33). Galich presents a multiracial group of characters with which the audience is to identify as essentially Guatemalan. They would also recognize that which is not Guatemalan. Galich constructs the Chinese character and the character of A. Tom Bomb as the outsiders to provide a contrast to those who are recognizable as Guatemalan.

Bomb, the Yanqui Banker, represents the economic exploitation by a United States company, but instead of trying to accomplish this contrast with the Yanqui Banker alone he used the local store owner. The Banker represents an adversary too powerful and too absent to be entirely effective in this role. Mariano, who represents Chinese laborers imported by the United States, provides an easier target of anti-imperialist resentment.

Within the exchanges in the store Mariano possesses undesirable characteristics. He is drawn against, and preys upon, the “true” Guatemalans around him who are good and noble enough to bear the Chinaman’s abuse. He forces Hortensia, who works in the store, into prostitution against her will. She must sleep with the sailors who drink in the bar or lose her job. Mariano acts only to serve his own interests. When trouble breaks out in the form of fighting among the sailors, he hides behind his counter and blows the police whistle. When the Yanqui banker, A. Tom Bomb, appears, Mariano offers no information beyond what he can sell:

BOMB: Deseo continuar mi viaje hacia la capital del país. ¿Cómo puedo llegar hasta allá?

MARIANO: Solamente en mula.

BOMB: ¿Y qué distancia hay?

MARIANO: No sé. Talvé cien legua. ¿Señó tomá alguna cosa?

BOMB: No, gracias. Lo que deseo es salir hoy mismo para la capital. ¿Cómo puedo obtener mulas?

MARIANO: Ah, no posible, no posible.

BOMB: (Sonriendo.) Pago en dólares.

MARIANO: Así todo fácil. (42)

Primarily, the scene reveals Mariano’s greed and laziness. He remains conveniently ignorant until a U.S. dollar is offered as payment, and then he gladly offers his help. On another level, Mariano acts out the perceived relationship between the Chinese and the U.S. banks. His subservience to the dollar represents Chinese labor originally hired by United Fruit to build the railroads in Central America. The scene underscores the relationship of the two foreigners.

Mariano cheats a desperate woman with a very sick child. Matilda brings in her boy who she reports cannot eat or keep anything down. Mariano looks him over and announces that the child has tapeworm and that Matilda can buy the medicine for two reales. Matilda cannot afford it, at which point a generous Belisario, a planter, offers to pay for the treatment. As Matilda leaves with the medicine, Belisario expresses doubts about Mariano’s diagnosis:

BELISARIO: Yo creo que no se compone. ¿Estás seguro de que tiene lombrices?

MARIANO: (with a Chinese accent) Segulo. Aquí todo tené lomblice, todo andá panzone, todo amalillo de paludismo. Yo ya no sabé cual é mi amalillo de chino y cual é mi amalillo de paludismo.

BELISARIO: Eso no es explicación para decir que el niño tiene lombrices.

MARIANO: No podé enfelmate otlá cosa.

BELISARIO: Y por qué no?

MARIANO: Polque yo no tené otlá medicina. (30)

The statement “Polque you no tené otlá medicina” demonstrates that Mariano is either stupid or completely immoral. His diagnosis fits whatever he has for sale and does nothing to help the sick child. He also charges a high price as indicated by Matilda’s inability to pay. By contrast, the Guatemalan shows his concern and pays for her medicine.

In the same scene the audience discovers that people like Matilda are an easy target for unscrupulous businessmen like Mariano. He operates the only business in the small port town and the railroad has not reached that part of the country. Matilda tells Belisario that she cannot go to a doctor because there isn’t one within traveling distance. She says that Mariano is her only choice. Because of Matilda’s circumstances, a Guatemalan audience would recognize that it is U.S. economic hegemony that victimizes Matilda. In the historical moment of the story the characters speak with hope of the train which will rectify this problem, but the audience knows that the transportation monopoly of United Fruit will crush the very people who harbor that hope. Matilda’s diseased child stands out as a victim of both the jaundice which makes him yellow and the Chinese man who cheats his mother. The visible presence of the Chinese collapses into the invisible presence of the United States and becomes a clear target of anti-imperialist hatred. In this moment the “amalillo de Chino” and the “amalillo de paludismo” become one and the same.

Interestingly, the ethereal nature of the U.S. character, Bomb, resists being stereotyped. Bomb ominously narrates from the side of the action, and illustrates through enacted flashback scenes the evils that the U.S. has visited upon the countries of Central America. When the planters discuss their current troubles with the Fruit Company, Bomb tells the audience about the long history of the relationship he has had with the Central American region. He enacts a flashback scene with young Bermúdez when Bermúdez was a planter in Costa Rica. The company refused the crop Bermúdez brought to the docks

because he had refused to sign a ten year contract (39). Bomb is the mechanism by which the audience is shown this scene from the planter's past and is the link which demonstrates the length and scope of the company's domination in the region.

The cunning and deceitful nature of Bomb reads as a symbol of the then recent imperialist exploitation anthropomorphized and lacks the psychological depth of characters which represent "real" people. Lights change when he enters and exits the stage and his moves, often unnoticed by the other characters, when he does cross into the stage action. He represents rather than embodies. The two characters, Bomb and Mariano, work together to establish a clear boundary. Where the audience of the work may identify the source of imperialist evil in the figure of Bomb, it may also draw a tighter circle in opposition to the easily recognizable foreigner, the Chinese. The group defined against these two figures makes up the Guatemalan people: the hard working multiracial planters who possess essentially Guatemalan characteristics such as generosity and a strong sense of fairness. With the configuration of the Guatemalan people agreed upon, Galich can then demonstrate how the Guatemalan national character survives the pressure of imperialist domination.

The presence of Yanqui land-owners creates many situations that demonstrate the Guatemalan character reacting to pressures from a foreign invasion. Situations arise which highlight the durability and strength of the Guatemalan identity, but also create its sense of realness. The movement of the plot through this history also creates the sense of the continuity of the identity. The train is one example of Guatemalans reacting to the foreign invasion. In the first act it is acknowledged that there is little in the way of transportation on the Caribbean Coast. At one point it seems the train would be a great help to people with little resources when a mother cannot find adequate medical attention for her sick child, but later in the second act the ever-present banana trains cannot carry one of the planters who is dying. The Guatemalans seem better off without the constant reminder of the train whistle as it carries off their livelihood but cannot save their lives.

When the Guatemalans can no longer function at the hands of the foreigners they are met with foreign labels for their ideas and their actions. Galich presents a scene in which the U.S. company managers call them Communists and ask if they are on strike:

MR. WHIP: Ustedes son comunistas.

CANCHE: (Con humor no exento de conmisericación.) Pero míster Whip, si apenas tenemos tiempo para descansar. Si aquí no se conoce

un libro, ni un diario, ni nada, ni nadie que nos hable de eso que dice usted. Es mucho más sencillo. Es hambre y desesperación. Creímos que usted tendría oídos para eso, pero puesto que no es así, los trenes se van a quedar parados.

MR. WHIP: Eso es una huelga.

CANCHE: No sabemos cómo se llama. Tal vez sea huelga. (79)

The foreign supervisor attempts to apply labels to the actions of the Guatemalan workers, but the terms “communist” and “strike” seem artificial against a completely natural reflex to stop working when you no longer can because you are starving. The additional effect of Galich’s demonstration of Guatemalans and then Guatemalans under foreign domination is the feeling of continuity. The character of the Guatemalans is essential and unchanging in the three acts of the play – their values and convictions made stronger by the conflict with the corrupt managers of La Bananera. Galich accomplishes this when he projects the sense of racial solidarity back onto the 1920s and 1930s. Guatemala was still run by a few white landowners and class divisions ran along racial lines. He has refigured history to be continuous with a contemporary ideal.

It is the imposition of the U.S.-based company that creates a situation where race matters. In the second act, the black planter, Johnson, is attacked by company goons and lays dying in the workers’ housing. The trains cannot carry him to a doctor because they are full of cargo. There is a train he could take but it will be hours before it arrives and hours more before it can take him to help. Meanwhile, the management will not allow for the use of the motorcar: “Usted está loco. ¿Cómo se le ocurre que un negro vaya en el motocar de la Superintendencia?” (60) The Superintendent goes on to quote the law in Alabama. Racism in Galich’s drama is an importation of U.S. ideology.

As Guatemala began to have some mass participation in politics in the 1940s, more people were included in the configuration of the Guatemalan people. Projecting such contemporary ideas back on to the past lends a certain amount of continuity to what are actually shifting definitions: it is like this now and it was always like this. When the historical drama is structured in this manner, the contemporary audience can more readily identify with the events of the past and feel that the integral and unchanging character of the nation has come through to the present. The people of Galich’s Guatemala embody the national character. The planters who have been forced to work on land owned by La Bananera are defined in stark contrast to the foreign characters and this contrast remains constant through the action of the drama.

Galich creates a “people” who survive with their core values intact through the trials of history. Because these core values reflect the modern revolutionary ideology, he creates an ideal community with whom the Guatemalans in the audience can identify and produces a sense of national continuity.

Manuel Galich finished writing *El tren amarillo* as the CIA organized and trained an army of Guatemalan dissidents to overthrow the democratic government. Since the overthrow of Arbenz in 1954, Guatemala has once again retained power for elites (now mostly the military) who are at the service of U.S. companies. Galich went into exile, first in Mexico and then in Cuba, joining the Revolutionary effort there in 1959. His vision of a Guatemala, free from imperialist exploitation, struggling for justice and racial solidarity, never came to be, disrupted again by history, fragmented and ultimately discontinuous.

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