

(De)Constructing the “New Argentina”: Popular Theatricalities in the Era of Globalization

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In this paper we focus on the restaging of several performative practices in Buenos Aires, inherited from turn of the century popular culture (*sainetes, tango, candombe, murgas, comparsas*), with a clear agenda of decolonization. The goal of these theatre practices is to resist the fierce globalization imposed on a periphore neoliberal economy via the revamping of vernacular cultural productions and its potential counterhegemonic value. Several community-based organizations have added to their grass-roots activities a theatrical component. Such is the case of Catalinas Sur from the barrio la Boca, which has recovered from the carnival tradition the *murga* genre with which their members foreground and parody the social tensions generated by a widespread popular resistance to political and cultural economies implemented in the hope of placing Argentina in an international context. Framed within a carnivalesque context, the colorful spectacles presented by Catalinas Sur explore alternative visual constructions of a vernacular national identity (i.e., the *mise en scene* of a parodic Orientalism which refers critically to the increasing power of the Arab community, rendered hegemonic by the leadership of the former president, Carlos Menem, of Lebanese heritage).

These popular theatricalities, which in the past manifested a clear continuity with democratic practices staged in the public sphere, are in the present problematized due to the complexity of the political situation and its connection to a global culture. In contrast to a “world culture” that homogenizes differences, a trend has started in several Latin American countries – and notably in Argentina – of resistance to globalization and neoliberalism through the recovery of national popular practices that have a strong thrust towards decolonization. Gustavo Remedi in his study of

Uruguayan *murgas* claims that this popular genre – street bands originated in the festivities of Carnival, highly influenced by Afro-American elements – contributes to “the formation of a democratic, national and popular consciousness, critical of imperialism and of the neo-liberal State” (180). In addition to this anti-imperialistic ideology, certain carnivalesque genres, like the *murga*, allow for the construction of more inclusive national identities:

the cultural practices and reelaborations that circulate in the popular public sphere [...] help to debunk stereotypes centered around our national culture. They also allow for the construction of an image and a project of nation which acknowledges different subcultural expressions [...] thus promoting the creation of an inclusive, all-encompassing and dynamic model of cultural production, skillful in recycling surviving cultural remnants and incorporating changes that happen periodically in the map of the national culture (Remedi 180, my translation).

Historically an agent of racial integration, *murgas* have brought together diverse subaltern groups, such as Blacks, European immigrants and *criollos*, whose collective efforts at the turn of the century helped create the new popular culture of modern Argentina. The challenge that the demographics of the *murgas* poses to a “static, anti-dialectical and reified notion of identity and national culture” (180) springs from the cultural needs of a working-class sector of society – usually erased from hegemonic representations – as it draws its membership from labor unions, factories, cooperatives, student and low-income community centers. According to Remedi, these *murgas* can be seen as bands of “new civilizers,” as they decenter the hegemony of the “lettered city” (190), a model in vogue since the attempts of modernization of liberal governments keen in establishing a Eurocentric model for the hybrid cultures of Latin America. The acknowledgement of this cultural hybridity, in the case of the *murgas*, “illustrates a transculturating mechanism” (Remedi 191) that recycles and processes different types of elements, a classic situation in response to colonialism.

Following Augusto Boal’s categories of popular theatre, the *murga* genre satisfies all the requirements of a theatre practice “of the people” and “for the people”: as a subversive way of criticizing and carnivalizing society, it has a counterhegemonic approach to political and social issues; it is a theatre practice produced by the popular sectors for a popular audience, with a popular form and ideology. In Argentina, the epitome of this popular ethos and

aesthetic was Peronism, as conceived in the first and second presidencies of Juan Perón (1946-55), and its *aggiornamento* in the early 70s with Perón's return to the country after 20 years of exile. In their need to reclaim a public space that was denied to the lower classes by the dominant elite during most of Argentinian history, the key element of these multitudinous rallies promoted by Peronism was the visibility that the loud *bombo* gave to the masses. This percussion instrument (similar to a drum) was prominent in the carnivalesque festivities and a major beat marker in the *murgas*.

Although the rhetoric (and the many times carnivalesque aesthetic) of the former presidency of Carlos Menem (an old-time Peronist) would respond to this party's traditional populist agenda, the truth is that the violent turn towards market economy and fierce privatizations spearheaded by US trained economists appointed by Menem lack the decolonizing trend of previous Peronist governments, making of Menem's a dependent and subservient puppet of the World Bank and US interests. This regression to a neo-colonial relationship with the North of this "New Argentina" is what the *murga* Catalinas Sur tries to criticize and deconstruct in its work *La Catalina del Riachuelo 96*.

With its popular class origins in the barrio of La Boca, to the South of cosmopolitan Buenos Aires, historically a refuge of poor immigrants and marginals and a battleground for their social struggles against capitalist oppression and xenophobia, the troupe Catalinas Sur started out as a grass-roots organization of a poor neighborhood of 8,000 centered around the local school PTA. As many other community organizations, its activities were banned from the public school during the military dictatorship (1976-83), but were continued by its members off the school limits as a way of resistance to the authoritarian regime, with a clear goal of solidarity and community work. In order to challenge the death and repression disseminated by the military junta, the group opted to choose life and enjoy its pleasures, and it started organizing *choriceadas* (barbecues) among the neighbors, in the context of which the theatre group started its activities in 1983. Since then they have been performing in public spaces as parks, popular festivities and later in theatrical venues of downtown Buenos Aires and international theatre festivals.

Its director, Adhemar Bianchi, a Uruguayan in exile who started this project as a neighbor of the community, was invited to give workshops on community theatre for the 1991 meeting of the International Theatre School of Latin America and the Caribbean in Cuba, directed for several years by the late Argentinean playwright Osvaldo Dragún. The theatre work that he

facilitates has also raised the interest of Eugenio Barba, who has visited Buenos Aires on several occasions. In contrast to the Eurocentric perspective of Barba's anthropological theatre, Bianchi considers that his group practices theatre as social anthropology, as part of a "collective culture with all the elements of transformation and corruption" inherent in it. The most important difference with Barba's work is that Catalinas Sur is not interested in a laboratory of theatrical experimentation, but in recovering instead the memory of that particular community, and the recreation of its popular traditions. Bianchi believes firmly in a Utopian role for the theatre, focusing on local, communal expressions. He claims that in order to produce a transformative type of culture, it is not enough to foster the development of theatre in big cultural centers in downtown venues, but rather one must promote its expansion and dissemination in the city as a whole. The point is not to take "culture" to the barrios, not even to show the barrio culture in the center of the city, but to create a local culture that decenters preconceived forms of theatre and that becomes an agent for social change.

According to anthropologist Alicia Martín, who has done extensive research on the *murga* genre, the public appearances of these groups are highly codified and conform to a fixed pattern. Originally a theatre genre designed to be performed in the streets, in the midst of the Carnival festivities, the *murga* troupe makes its appearance in the public space with a musical and colorful parade. The entire group lines up according to preset hierarchies (the standard-bearer goes first, followed by the band, after which the extensive line of dancers and actors follows suit in order of age, children first, adults last). Recently Catalinas Sur has been performing in traditional theatres, and they have kept the initial parade to reach the stage dancing through the orchestra, where the audience actively participates by clapping and dancing, a type of reception that has become a convention of this popular genre.

Once on stage, the members of the *murga* introduce their troupe with a song that describes its origins – in Catalinas Sur, the barrio of la Boca. This particular group legitimizes its artistic skills reminding the audience of its seniority: they have been performing for the past 12 years. They add that, despite their public notoriety disseminated by the mass media, they still uphold their popular class origins, as "neighbors" of the community,

Ya salimos en los diarios
en la tele y en la radio
pero no nos la creímos,
seguimos siendo vecinos.

The next step in the structure of the *murga* performance is constituted by various musical numbers that parody the socio-political situation of the former presidency. This satiric genre, so common in the Hispanic tradition, is expressed in the *murga* through a tongue-in-cheek, and many times grotesque, representation of social mores. Historically this type of socio-political critique was found in popular theatre genres (such as the political revue of the Mexican revolution, the sainete criollo, the porteño revue and burlesque) and later updated in the 70s by Augusto Boal's journalistic theatre. This trend is still very current in TV parodies of political customs, such as "La noticia rebelde" in Argentina.

In *La Catalina del Riachuelo '96*, the message is a strong critique of the ruling class, described by the opposition as a post-modern caliphate, headed by President Carlos Menem. The different satirical skits are thus presented as an allegory of the machinations of a very corrupt leadership, their power struggles and their appropriation of the codes and values of the entertainment industry. The spectacular aura of the regime is contextualized within the aesthetics of a grotesque form of orientalism, which, curiously enough, was a favorite reference for old-time *murgas*. Indeed, belly dancers and odalisques were traditional Carnival costumes that are resemanticized in the context of this *murga*, with a clear intention of political parody. In fact, the role of narrator is reserved for an odalisque who obsessively repeats a refrain that reminds the audience that in this caliphate, there were "so many masks" (indicating the hypocrisy of Argentinian politicians) that "it was always carnival time." This reference alludes to the yuppy-carnavalesque tone of the Menem presidency which sparked a number of works that tried to understand this curious marriage, like the fascinating 1995 *Pizza con champán: crónica de la fiesta menemista*, written by journalist Sylvina Walger.

In this "fiesta menemista" the gossip press reproduces glossy pictures of the most important political leaders garbed in Italian suits rubbing shoulders with popular stars of the entertainment industry, beautiful models and muscular sportsmen. President Carlos Menem, as the "first man of the country" beat them all: he was usually seen in expensive and exclusive restaurants and nightclubs with the sexiest, most extravagant and unattainable women. After his divorce several years ago from troublemaker Yolanda Yoma, who publicly unmasked many of his shady businesses, he was considered an incorrigible playboy with his troupe of fleshy groupies, his "harem." This situation is the referent of one of the skits of this *murga* that presents body-

image-conscious Menem as a chubby, unappealing caliph surrounded by pretty odalisques who demand his attention.

In the background, adopting the role of a chorus, the membership of the *murga* comments about this allegory of the socio-political events current in the country. With a wink to the audience, they assure the spectators that this story is not real, that it happens somewhere else (“les queremos recordar que esta historia no es real/ sucede en otro lugar”). In this allegory, the governmental corruption is impersonated by a sexy woman wearing a Venetian mask, a siren-like seductress who dances around the stage luring her preys, the disempowered citizens who are desperate to find even partial solutions to their lack of power and economic clout.

Among the most revealing skits is one that foregrounds the strong dependency of the Argentinian neoliberal economy to a transnational power network. In it is presented a caricature of the former Secretary of Financial Affairs, Domingo Cavallo, who at the time was interested in running for the 1997 electoral campaign as a presidential candidate. In the song he sings to the tune of “New York, New York” he brags about his political power (“Yo soy el poder”) as the man responsible for the economic decisions of the country. The reference of the chorus line dancers to a Broadway production heightens the attraction to a US cultural and economic model, epitomized in the fiction by the lead dancer, portrayed as Uncle Sam. The familiarity of these two men is represented by a warm hug that they give each other after the song.

At the end of the musical numbers of socio-political parody, the *murga* leaves the theatrical space in a closing parade, singing and dancing to the tune of the drums. The whole performance has generated so much energy among the spectators that even in the theatre setting they dance, clap and sing along with the members of the troupe as they leave the orchestra. As the audience follows the parade to the foyer of the theatre, an improvised fiesta occurs, where the fourth wall is blurred and spectators and actors mingle in a *candombe*. In this way, not only the content of the parodical skits but also the format of the *murga*, in addition to the interaction it proposes with its audience, promote the recovery of old popular practices with a strong vernacular component. They also promote a theatre format that creates a public space to strengthen the sense of community and foster the construction of an identity of resistance to globalization and an implicit celebration of diversity.

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