

Research Article

Cody C. Hanson*

The Costumbrismo of Conflict in *El ideal de un calavera*

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Abstract: Alberto Blest Gana's 1863 novel *El ideal de un calavera* contains frequent and highly detailed *cuadros de costumbres* depictions of Chile's unique national culture. In the novel, the parlour and rodeo scenes explore imbalances of power which result from Chile's economic and social inequalities. These inequalities further exacerbate the rural versus urban divide to reveal a national identity that is hegemonic and contradictory. Power, money, and class coalesce in the aristocratic parlour. The parlour conversation between Abelardo Manríquez and don Calixto Arboleda reveals unscrupulous economic behaviour and questions the feasibility of a united and homogeneous society. In the rodeo, Manríquez and Juan Miguel Sendero compete against each other in a metaphorical contest between the rural versus urban and under-privileged versus elite segments of society. The contradictory nature of urban and rural cultures receives further attention through a depiction of folk medicine. The novel presents the role of religion in creating a shared national culture through the Christmas nativity tradition. These scenes contextualise Chile's unique and contradictory national identity to reveal what it means to be Chilean. Chile is a heterogeneous nation that is trying to reconcile its social, economic, and regional inequalities.

Keywords: Alberto Blest Gana, hegemony, parlour, rodeo, nation-building

Alberto Blest Gana's 1863 novel *El ideal de un calavera* [*Ideal of a Rogue*]¹ contains frequent and highly detailed *cuadros de costumbres* depictions of Chile's unique national culture. These realistic expository accounts are so ubiquitous that they overshadow the plot narrative and rise to the forefront of the novel. While the drama and amorous intrigue surrounding the protagonist Abelardo Manríquez are entertaining, as an overarching narrative his story primarily serves as a pretext for moving between descriptions of *chilenidad*. So while *El ideal de un calavera* may appear to be a psychological novel, Cedomil Goic contends that it is actually a spatial novel that explores the urban, suburban, and rural life of the 1830s (92). The *costumbrismo* accounts in Blest Gana's novel condense novelistic time in descriptive asides that reveal Chile's unique national culture (Gotschlich Reyes 119–120). José Zamudio observes that specific historical themes regularly inspire Blest Gana's work (65). In fact, Fernando Alegría equates reading Blest Gana to entering a historical museum where one relives behaviours and attitudes that are still present in Chilean society (51). Thus, the *cuadros* invite the reader to critically analyse culture and contribute to the richness of the text by filling the narrative space with historical context and national significance. Indeed, Mikhail Bakhtin argues that a character's actions are tied to novelistic images of space and time (167). In *El ideal de*

1 Translation mine. All translations from Spanish to English are mine unless otherwise indicated. Quotations of Blest Gana are given in Spanish and English.

* **Corresponding author: Cody C. Hanson**, Department of Languages, Literatures, and Linguistics, Indiana State University, Root Hall A-153, Terre Haute, IN 47809, United States of America, e-mail: cody.hanson@indstate.edu

un calavera, the parlour and rodeo scenes explore imbalances of power that result from Chile's economic and social inequalities. These inequalities further exacerbate the rural versus urban divide to reveal a national identity that is hegemonic and contradictory.

Blest Gana is the leading figure in nineteenth century Chilean literature. Critics frequently regard him as the father of the Chilean novel not only because he is among the nation's first authors, but also because his writing delivers delightfully intricate accounts of society and culture (Alegría 50; Alone 143; Lillo 132; Poblete Varas 75; Silva Castro x, 112–114). Although his novel *Martín Rivas* has received the most scholarly attention (Araya 22; Concha XXXVIII; Goic 90), Raul Silva Castro asserts that *El ideal de un calavera* more completely represents Chilean society and is among the author's most perfect novels (414). Despite Silva Castro's assessment, however, few critics have examined *El ideal de un calavera* in detail. The first among them is the study by Guillermo Gotschlich Reyes, where he explores the fundamental aesthetics of the novel to contend that its grotesque and tragicomic representations disharmonise reality and reveal multiple dimensions of society (148). Applying a comparative approach, on the other hand, Laura Janina Hosiasson juxtaposes the protagonists of *Martín Rivas* and *El ideal de un calavera* in her reflection on the novels and later expands her ideas to establish continuity between the seven novels Blest Gana published in the early 1860s ("Blest Gana" 261; "Siete" 236). In a similar vein, Horacio Simunovic Díaz et al. examine the speech style in *Martín Rivas* and *El ideal de un calavera* to explore the ideological configuration of the characters and reality (10). Patricia Vilches also mulls over *El ideal de un calavera* and *Martín Rivas* to argue that the chivalric, grotesque, and quixotic overtones of the novels are the result of Cervantes's influence ("Chivalry" 17). In a previous essay, I posit that the theatre is a unique nation-building space in *El ideal de un calavera* because it combines and questions public and private social interaction to show that power is performed (Hanson 35). The present study argues that the rural versus urban divide prevalent throughout *El ideal de un calavera* reveals a hegemonic national culture that questions Chile's heterogeneity and highlights the inequalities and imbalances of power that define nineteenth-century Chilean society.

Nineteenth-century Latin American novels are purposefully didactic in their literary representation of national elements. Authors wrote romances to promote values, customs, and processes that cultivate nation-building (Anderson 25; Bhabha 291; Sommer 7). For example, Joaquín Blest Gana, brother of the author of *El ideal de un calavera*, affirms that Chile's first authors have done as much as the founding fathers and that literature rejuvenates the nation (67, 69). Alberto Blest Gana further asserts that the novel is capable of spreading civilisation because it is accessible to all types of readers ("Literatura chilena" 465). Moreover, Juan Poblete demonstrates that Blest Gana expanded the appeal of the national novel by positioning it between what society considered the two gendered ways of reading. The critic maintains that Blest Gana's national novel mediates between what was perceived as the "feminine" pleasure of reading and the "masculine" endeavour of serious textual study ("La construcción" 75). In the same spirit, Fernando Unzueta points out that Spanish American national romances incorporate nonfictional discourse in a fictional love story as a "rhetorical strategy of inclusion and exclusion that resembles the hierarchical social practices and realities of the period, and they also signal the desire for (and not the reality of) national unity and a homogenous citizenry" ("Scenes" 132). The tensions between ways of reading, romance and historicity, unity and hierarchy, and hope and reality are constantly at play in Blest Gana's interpretation of the nation. Indeed, these duelling influences echo Antonio Cornejo Polar's concept of literary heterogeneity that he finds in the interplay between oral and written communication (*Sobre literatura* 120). While contemplating how these tensions unfold, Hosiasson finds that ironic depictions of popular society suggest it is a perversion of authentic values and customs ("Blest Gana" 267). Thus, Blest Gana's *costumbrista* novels allow author and reader to explore a lettered conception of (popular) Chilean identity (Fuenzalida Grandón 200; Unzueta, "La imaginación" 19).

Blest Gana was especially interested in portraying middle class Chileans in literature. His novels regularly address issues afflicting Chilean society, including problems caused by arrogance, class, corruption, inequality, money, and regional differences. In fact, during his lifetime Blest Gana lamented that Chile was more consumed with materialistic ventures than with cultivating intellectual pursuits ("Literatura chilena" 456). To address this, he endeavoured to produce literature that would cultivate reading in a wide audience. In fact, Poblete argues that mimetic representation in national novels redirects social

development in the modernising public, of which increasing readership is a part (*Literatura* 83). In his seminal biographical study on Blest Gana, Silva Castro muses that the author of *El ideal de un calavera* was especially concerned with exploring issues related to class, despite his distinguished status as a member of Chile's most exclusive and traditional society (567). Indeed, most of Blest Gana's characters are not representative of his class, but rather ambitious middle class Chileans who struggle to improve their condition and to be more socially involved and civically responsible than their standing would then allow. His work reveals a genuine interest in exploring spaces and situations contrary to his own. By accurately entering these settings, Blest Gana is able to illustrate inequalities afflicting his country.

One of the hallmarks of this literature in the wake of independence was the need to imagine a unified nation with its own unique characteristics. In order to describe their new country, the educated elite employed a homogenising discourse that minimised social, regional, ethnic, and other differences. Cornejo Polar observes that the purpose of this discourse was to "imagine a community sufficiently integrated to be recognised, and above all to recognise itself, as an independent nation" (*Escribir* 76). The reasons for this are clear: it is impossible to build a cohesive nation if fellow citizens fail to identify with each other or share patriotic values. Indeed, nineteenth-century literature addresses a national audience with the goal of uniting them through introspection and self-evaluation. Unzueta notes that the projection of unfulfilled national unity "remains in the political imagination of readers as a blueprint that guides projects of national formation" ("Scenes" 134). Indeed, romantic literature provides a fictional representation of what the nation can be and proposes how to get there. Writers hoped that the public would learn lessons from literature and thus advance the nation towards an ideal future (Reyes 33). Literature can foment greater cohesion and development by bringing equality into the national imagination. Blest Gana attempts to kindle social advances and bridge the gap between the classes by bringing their differences to light. However, the differences also signal that the hegemonic class may continue to preserve the status quo by staving off radical change to the social order.

Blest Gana situates *El ideal de un calavera* within the specific historical context of the 1837 Quillota Insurrection against the highly authoritarian and stable conservative political system that was dominated by Diego Portales, Chile's influential Minister of War (Encina 445–453). The short-lived rebellion targeted Portales due to his hegemonic influence in Chilean politics and his unpopular military campaign against the newly formed Peru-Bolivia Confederation (Collier and Sater 65). Although the revolt was ultimately unsuccessful, the mutineers were not crushed before they assassinated the "tyrant" Portales (Encina and Castedo 910–915). His death had a dramatic opposite effect on the national consciousness than the rebels intended. It pushed the people to idealise an orderly national soul centred on an organised political system that favoured the conservative establishment Portales represented (Encina and Castedo 920; Collier and Sater 66). The context of the novel, including Manríquez's fictional participation in the mutiny as a low-ranking military official, illustrates the hegemonic forces shaping the emerging nation. This historical episode reflects how the novel grapples with the inequalities and power dynamics defining nineteenth-century Chilean society.

The salon or parlour is a key space in nineteenth-century realism because it is where national hegemonic forces initially take shape. Blest Gana includes the private domestic space of the parlour to give an intimate view of Chilean life and to examine its economic and social implications. Goic acknowledges that the French realists greatly influenced Latin American *costumbrista* authors (85). In fact, Blest Gana freely confesses that Balzac inspired him to become a novelist ("Dos cartas" 134). Bakhtin observes that in the works of the great nineteenth-century French realists, the parlour is a key place where space and time intersect and that the fictionalised parlour has "all the gradations of the new social hierarchy; and here, finally, there unfold forms that are concrete and visible, the supreme power of life's new king – money" (246–247). Thus, the parlour is a critical place because it is where novelised space and time converge to reveal nationally symbolic encounters. Although the family room is a well-delineated private space, it is imbued with public meaning because it is implicated in social, financial, political, and historical events. In point of fact, Cristián Jara notes that social functions in Chilean parlours "became dedicated to discussing political and cultural topics" (186). While the parlour includes abundant dialogue and detailed encounters, these conversations steep private interaction in public connotation. In the parlour, tensions defining and

afflicting the nation come into focus, which allows Blest Gana to explore and question the hegemonic national culture. The parlour is where control, wealth, and status become visible; yet, since the parlour leaves these issues unresolved, it suggests little will change for the middle and lower classes and thus affirms its position as an elite space that is resistant to change. Indeed, the Chilean parlour harkens to the legacy of the social elite and represents exclusive centres of power and influence (Vicuña 65). In realist literature, the parlour blends private intrigue with public affairs in order to stage power structures and social differences that shape national culture and question its stability.

Power, money, and class coalesce in the aristocratic parlour of don Calixto Arboleda's country estate during the first complete *costumbrista* scene of the novel. The beginning of the scene underscores the social distance between the protagonist, Abelardo Manríquez, and the Arboleda household. Manríquez has access to elite spaces because he is a member of the respectable middle class, but since he is of limited means he enters that space as an inferior (Blest Gana, *El ideal* 12; Silva Castro 414). He further distinguishes himself from the elite in that his passions lie in the heart rather than in the accumulation of material wealth (Blest Gana, *El ideal* 14). The narrator draws attention to these differences while meticulously detailing the parlour scene through Manríquez's eyes: "El cuadro que se ofreció a su vista hubiera podido tomarse por la creación de algún pintor flamenco. El joven, que nada entendía de pintura, no pudo figurarse ese símil; pero sintió una especie de admiración al contemplar la profunda calma del tono general de ese cuadro" [The picture that presented itself to his view could have been taken as the creation of a Flemish painter. The young man, who knew nothing about painting, could not imagine this simile; but he felt a kind of admiration as he contemplated the profound calm of the general tone of that scene] (22). The narrator introduces the parlour scene with the same propensity for objective expression that Flemish painters use to render objects precisely (Puyvelde 9). Indeed, the characteristic aesthetic of literary realism allows the narrator to imitate verbally the artistic style he names by using a third-person rhetoric that is devoid of sentimental affect and that communicates a painstakingly accurate description of the scene (Simunovic Díaz 11). In two-dimensional art, precise and objective depiction is more than an end in itself. It is "a means of sincere expression" that is "capable of conveying subtle emotions and transcendent ideas" (Puyvelde 12). While Manríquez appreciates the beauty of the clear scene before him, with its soothing colours and sharply delineated forms, his inability to couch that image in aesthetic expression and figurative language indicates he lacks the analytical tools of an elite upbringing. This initial portrayal of the realist parlour subtly calls attention to Manríquez's standing and reinforces social hierarchy. It portends the direction the narrative will take in a space that unveils a hegemonic culture and differences in power.

The conversation that Manríquez and don Calixto Arboleda have in this initial parlour scene reveals unscrupulous economic behaviour and casts doubt on the feasibility of a united and homogeneous society. It exposes the supreme power of money and its place in propagating dominance and influence in the hegemonic order. The conversation begins with a business inquiry that allows Arboleda to report enthusiastically his economic success and ruthless exploit:

Tengo un bodegón: por consiguiente, lo que yo pago debe volver a mi bolsillo. Si pago en plata, los peones se van donde quieren. No señor, ¿sabe lo que hago? Yo tengo mucha cicuta y con la ceniza hago jabón. Esta es mi plata; les pago en jabón. Así tienen que comprar en el bodegón y aprenden también a asearse, porque siempre les queda algún pan. El que quiere plata sufre un descuento (*El Ideal* 23).

[I have a storehouse: therefore, what I pay should return to my pocket. If I pay in cash, the workers go where they want. No sir. Do you know what I do? I have many hemlocks and with the ash I make soap. This is my currency; I pay them with soap. This way they have to buy from my store and they also learn personal hygiene because they always have a bar left over. He who wants cash suffers a deduction.]

This new method for taking advantage of his workers excites Arboleda and energises him as if he were "un alquimista que hubiese encontrado un método para hacer oro" [an alchemist who had discovered a method for making gold] and contrasts with Manríquez's method of paying his workers in cash (23). Arboleda's shrewd ability to extract profit from his workers reveals that he is "a capitalist who measured people exclusively by their monetary worth" (Vilches, "Chivalry" 20). His scheme of remunerating wagedworkers,

however, is also indicative of the aristocracy's desire to preserve material advantage and political power at the expense of the working class. Their views on social hierarchy made money the primary factor in defining one's station in society (Vicuña 17). Indeed, Luís Barros and Ximena Vergara argue that the upper echelons of society believed proper appearances were the result of conspicuous consumption and a life of convenience derived from passive income (62). One only truly became aristocratic by possessing resources that generated profit with minimal effort. Thus, the elite's privileged position at the top of Chilean hierarchy largely depended on their ability to live in the city while benefiting from country estates they frequented in the summer (Vicuña 21). They considered a social life of leisure financed by a return on investment and landownership to be morally superior to active labour (Barros and Vergara 67). Arboleda's purpose in spending a generous portion of his time at his newly acquired hacienda is to secure its future financial success and his privileged social position (Blest Gana, *El ideal* 15). In fact, Arboleda's name itself ties him to the trees and the earth on which they grow (Real Academia Española). His strategy is to use land to guarantee his continued prosperity through the exploitation of Chile's rural poor. The elite projected their values on every aspect of Chilean society, instilling within themselves "a sense of social superiority" and "an often contemptuous view of the lower class" since they were able to maintain themselves without active labour (Collier and Sater 89). Arboleda's frank revelation invites a critical look at the elite's obsession with protecting material advantage and at the social costs of maintaining privilege and influence. His plan betrays economic and social inequalities that may threaten the stability of the nation.

Space and time in the *costumbrista* scenes of the novel provide insight into the characters' unique ideologies. For example, the narrator comments that "escenas propias del campo... debían influir en el desarrollo de los acontecimientos que forman la vida de Manríquez" [typical country scenes must influence the development of the events that form Manríquez's life] (33). The characters' perception of space and time in the scenes defines experience and shapes individual motivations. They influence behaviour and reveal how the characters understand the world. They expose a "form-shaping ideology" that is constructed in relation to the characters (Morson and Emerson 365; Vice 201). During the parlour scene, Arboleda's admission of economic exploitation and profiteering is tied directly to his present success and to preserving his elite social status in the future. Manríquez, in contrast, rejects Arboleda's conversation in historical terms through a vow to court Inés, his interlocutor's daughter, with the same navigational faith as Columbus (Blest Gana, *El ideal* 24). During the segment in which Arboleda reveals his abuse, words tumble out of his mouth and quickly advance the narrative. In fact, the speech moves time along so quickly that the narrator summarises the entirety of Arboleda's profound verbosity in one short paragraph. On the other hand, the narrator dedicates five long paragraphs to describe the parlour scene and relates Manríquez's disinterest in Arboleda's exploits in three paragraphs (22–24). The narrator assesses Arboleda's conduct by stating that: "su plan general, en fin, de expoliación de los infelices huasos, a quienes los patrones se han creído siempre con indisputable derecho de hostilizar y de esquilmar" [his general plan, in short, to despoil the miserable *huasos*, whom landowners have always believed to have the indisputable right to antagonise and swindle] (23). The narrator notes that Arboleda's exploitation of rural laborers and *huasos* perpetuates a pattern of harassment and abuse. Time reveals an ideology that perpetuates power imbalances that disadvantage the rural poor.

In the novel, the opening description of the rodeo scene at the Arboleda estate alludes to cultural unity and social diversity. In this account of Chile's rich cowboy history, the narrator celebrates the rodeo as a symbolic space that blurs individual differences to create a shared national identity. The scene begins by enumerating the layers of rural Chilean society, from master to manual labourer, to show that the heterogeneous ranks of provincial hierarchy participate in a common experience. As the concourses arrive at the rodeo, the narrator recognises that the dust they kick up conceals individual identity: "Difícil era distinguir las facciones de los vaqueros ni las de los inquilinos, cubiertas del espeso polvo que en densas nubes levantaban los cascos de los animales" [It was difficult to distinguish the features of the cowboys and the tenant farmers, covered, as they were, with the thick dust the animals' hooves raised up in dense clouds] (33). The dust and the multitude eliminate personal features and abscond individuality, which highlights the participants' collective experience and mutual culture. The mask of dust obliges the narrator to concentrate on the rodeo participants' unique costumes and to describe them as universal character types that

represent a unique place and historical time (Bakhtin 250). This initial depiction of the rodeo foreshadows a liberally inclusive national discourse that transcends social class. It brings Chileans together in a space that communicates a mutual culture and shared *chilenidad*. It is a beautiful and hopeful image of how shared experiences and culture can cultivate togetherness notwithstanding differences in social rank.

Despite this initial image of the arriving multitude, the rodeo is a space for competing economic and social interests and grapples with the contradictory values of unity and multiplicity. In a study on the historical reality of Blest Gana's oeuvre, Yvonne Barrett observes this multifaceted character of the emblematic Chilean rodeo: "These operations, as typical of the Chilean countryside as indispensable and routine in agricultural work, convert into celebrations when landowners wish to entertain visitors with an exciting spectacle that reduces the monotony of rural life" (135). The rodeo has traditional roots and reinforces customs that have been characteristic of rural life for generations. In a practical sense, the rodeo facilitates the exchange of cattle and other agricultural products. However, it also brings the community together as a venue for entertainment and socialising. In the novel, for example, Manríquez and his friends consider the rodeo a stage for duelling romantic interests, but Arboleda views it as a business venture: "Era natural que, mientras los jóvenes buscaban su solaz en las escaramuzas del corazón, lo buscara don Calixto en las especulaciones campestres. Este era el origen del rodeo. Habiendo vendido cierto número de animales vacunos, fue preciso *parar el rodeo* para hacer la *aparta* en presencia del comprador" [It was natural that, while the youth were searching for solace by competing for love, Don Calixto was searching for it in agricultural speculation. This was the origin of the rodeo. Having sold a certain number of cattle, it was necessary to *stop the rodeo* in order to carry out *the cutting* in the buyer's presence] (33). Manríquez's approach to the rodeo is highly personal because he sees it as a romantic battleground. Arboleda, on the other hand, is attracted to the monetary gain promised by the *aparta* competition. While the rodeo hints at inclusivity, it is a space where social and financial competition come to a head. The scene provides a diegetic window into duelling values that both support and challenge the feasibility of a monolithic national culture.

In the rodeo, competition culminates in an *aparta* event that epitomises the conflict arising from social, economic, and cultural divisions in nineteenth-century Chile. The *aparta* is a formidable sport in which a *huaso* or Chilean cowboy expertly manoeuvres his horse in order to separate an individual head of cattle from a small herd and force it into a separate corral. Since the task is inherently dangerous, the *huasos* consider the competition to be a mark of valour and skill: "Para los huasos, el rodeo es un campo de batalla en que el deber les manda desafiar los peligros: las caídas de algunos y aun la muerte que suelen encontrar en sus caídas no interrumpen ni modifican el curso de la faena" [For the *huasos*, the rodeo is a battleground where duty mandates they defy danger: the falls of some and even the death they often encounter in their falls do not interrupt or modify the course of the performance] (Blest Gana, *El ideal* 35). The *aparta* is a figurative agrarian battleground where personal duty and danger give rise to public conflict. While the narrator's account of the *aparta* signals how the scene will end, Manríquez takes advantage of the arena to challenge Juan Miguel Sendero's standing as Inés Arboleda's favoured admirer and thus frames a social and political competition as a romantic rivalry. Jorge Roman-Lagunas ruminates on Blest Gana's characters as allegorical representations of social classes through whom the author portrays stereotypical customs and society (606). Since the competing suitors represent opposing regional and social interests, their diegetic rivalry questions the hegemonic social order.

While competing in the *aparta*, Manríquez's rugged virility and equestrian skill are on full display, which betray his social, economic, and bucolic status as a respectable, impoverished ruralite. In fact, critics regard the protagonist as both a noble hero with an enviable physique and an antihero who rejects social conventions and traditional norms (Blest Gana, "Dos cartas" 136; Pereira 65). Vilches notes that Manríquez's clothing perfectly describes his interior conflict and identifies him as one who opposes "[Diego] Portales's drastic designs and questions the banality of spaces adjudicated to the elite" ("El tejido" 40, 47). The protagonist's appearance is equated to the narrative's historical conflict, which centres around his participation in the Quillota rebellion. Apparel clearly reflects social, financial, and regional identity, but it also reveals inner turmoil and political predilection. Even though Manríquez sports a dashing appearance and magnetic personality, his actions and desires are frustrated at every turn. His persona is indicative of

the conflicts challenging the social order and questions the long-term social viability of repressing a heterogeneous citizenry.

Like Manríquez, Sendero's appearance and performance in the *aparta* demarcate his social and political standing. Sendero is a city dandy who, according to Hosiasson, fictionally represents "the elite with strong and clear political influences, comprised of waning and corrupt aristocrats" ("Blest Gana" 267). Sendero's status as a politically connected and corrupt aristocrat from the capital contrasts completely with the segment of society that Manríquez embodies as an audacious, but stymied competitor. Vilches recognises that Sendero's background makes him an ideal beau for Inés Arboleda because he is of the correct class and political inclinations: "The young man is perfect: he is the son of a rich merchant and has pride in his class. The profession of Miguel's father produces an instant association with Portales and the 'estancieros,' promulgators of a government destined for a few" ("El tejido" 48). Indeed, Sendero symbolises the hegemonic urban elite who pull the political, financial, and social strings that direct Chile. His capitalistic political connections make him the favoured choice for Inés Arboleda's affection. Sendero's attempt to meld his identity with a superficially adopted rodeo persona further questions the reality and viability of a homogenous society. Manríquez and Sendero's attempt at adopting an in-between persona in the competition harkens back to Cornejo Polar's concept of heterogeneity as an intermediary enunciation that circumvents binary oppositions that are the product of homogenising colonial forces and Eurocentric ideologies of the nation-state (*Escribir* 7–12).

Manríquez and Sendero's performance in the *aparta* contest is a metaphor for the rural versus urban and underprivileged versus aristocratic divisions in Chilean society. The subtle criticism that Sendero levies against the competing *huasos* frames the resulting competition with Manríquez as a cultural battle that reflects the homogenising forces defining the nation: "Estos huasos—dijo Juan Miguel, al oír esos aplausos—se figuran que ellos no más pueden hacer estas cosas" [These *huasos*—said Juan Miguel, on hearing that applause—imagine they are the only ones who can do these things] (Blest Gana, *El ideal* 35). Sendero's annoyance and his contention that the task is not difficult reveal his disdain for the cultural traditions of the emblematic country dwellers and manifest his belief that he possesses a similar ability. Sendero approaches the task so inexpertly, however, that a number of *huasos* return insult to him: "¡Vaya con el caballero falso!" [What a fake gentleman!] (36). Sendero's false confidence exhibits the dominant class's tendency toward self-aggrandisement that leads to a general indifference toward other segments of society. Manríquez responds to this performance with an attempt of his own that positions himself in direct contrast to Sendero (Poblete Varas 144). While he begins his attempt with expert valour and incredible speed, accentuating his courageous masculinity and provincial roots, the daring cavalier's success comes to a disastrous end when his horse spontaneously collapses (37). Manríquez's initial performance demonstrates the underprivileged rural community's potential, but his failure recognises the limits imposed by an unequal society. Since neither character completes the challenge successfully, the regional and economic divisions they represent remain unresolved and the binary models for theorising the nation-state remain intact.

The contradictory nature of urban and rural cultures receives further attention through the medical treatment administered to Manríquez after the *aparta* incident. The narrator's tone in this *costumbrista* account reveals a critical opinion of the state of rural healthcare: "Las nociones de medicina casera eran entonces más limitadas todavía que al presente. La clínica de las familias aplicaba a toda enfermedad, como panacea, dos medicamentos tradicionales... que no tenía más variedad que la mezcla de ingredientes de que se componía el específico. Administrábalo algún personaje del lugar... que suplía la ciencia que le faltaba con la superstición y el misterio" [The notions of homespun medicine were then more limited than they are presently. Family clinics applied to every infirmity, as a panacea, two traditional treatments that had no more variety than the blend of ingredients that specifically form them. It was administered by some local character who supplemented their lack of science with superstition and mystery] (39). The narrator meets the home remedies Manríquez receives at the hands of untrained country *médicos* with a healthy dose of scepticism. As the son of a British-educated medical doctor, Blest Gana contrasts the "superstitious" care of the countryside with the "proper" medical care available in the capital. While the medicinal value of herbs has been extensively documented ("Herbs at a Glance"), the narrator's comments question their effectiveness while also critiquing the historical role of religion and superstition. From the perspective of

costumbrismo, this criticism asserts a hegemonic western view of healthcare and hints at the challenges the nation faces in establishing a homogeneous, rational, modern culture.

The rural *médica* – a type of curandero, shaman, or witch doctor – is at the heart of traditional rural folk remedies in the *costumbrista* account that stems from Manríquez's fall during the *aparta*. While Manríquez's healer is a specific individual, the narrator describes her as a universal character type present throughout Chile. The narrator cynically chronicles the superstition and mystery surrounding her persona and expresses his opinion that she is incapable of healing:

se había rodeado de cierto misterio y envolvía en fórmulas caprichosas los conocimientos generales de los demás en materia de específicos: la fe de sus clientes sencillos le aseguraba de ese modo el respeto de los que la visitaban y la robusta organización de los campesinos, a quienes la naturaleza curaba más bien que los remedios de la médica, daban a su misteriosa ciencia la importancia de que carecía en realidad (40).

[she had surrounded herself with true mystery and wrapped in capricious formulas her general knowledge of others into specific matters: the simple faith of her clients assured her in this way the respect of those that visited her and the robust organization of the peasants, who nature cured better than the healer's remedies, lent her mysterious science the importance it lacked in reality.]

The superstitious belief country peasants have in her capacity to cure comes from her ability to project a mysterious and supernatural persona that lends her a timeless quality. The *médica*'s status as a healer centres on folklore, superstition, and popular perception rather than real medical ability. The narrator makes clear she capitalises on simple-mindedness and astutely uses gossip to shroud herself in mystery. The scepticism with which the narrator prefaces the *médica*'s healing ability reveals a division between the rational and educated urban elite and the simplistic superstitious faith of rural Chileans. The scene depicts the inequality between rural and urban development and denotes a hegemonic national belief that takes priority over contradictory multiculturalism. It also seems to discount an intermediary heterogeneous interpretation of national values in favour of the hegemonic ideals of the elite.

The novel illustrates how a shared faith contributes to a hegemonic national culture through the Chilean Christmas nativity tradition, as described in doña Antonia Jaramillo's exclusive parlour. The account reflects on the elaborate nativity displays Chileans create in their homes and how the custom has evolved from the novel's historical setting in 1836 to its actual composition in 1863. The narrator notes: "La fiesta con que los países católicos celebran el nacimiento del Redentor ha perdido en Santiago gran parte del aparato con que nuestros padres la adornaban y del entusiasmo de los asistentes que concurrían a solemnizarla. No son ahora lo que eran en 1836 los nacimientos... ya que los que existen en el día apenas son reflejos pálidos de aquéllos" [The festivity with which Catholic countries celebrate the birth of the Redeemer in Santiago has lost a large part of the detail with which our parents decorated it and of the participant's enthusiasm who came together to solemnise it. Nativity scenes are no longer what they were in 1836... since those that currently exist are merely pale reflections of those ones] (92). This preamble to the festive parlour draws a connection from the historical setting of the novel to the time in which the novel's first readers would appreciate the intricate account. The narrator points out that a common faith continues to unite Chileans together across time, but that expression of faith has evolved. Indeed, Bakhtin suggests that novelistic interpretations of space and time are a reflection of the actual world (253). The narrator thus recreates the nativity display based upon his knowledge and experience of Chilean traditions. He suggests that the reader cannot appreciate the events that occur in this parlour without first being acquainted with traditional culture. Jaramillo's display is the best in Santiago and serves as a model for inspiring other devoted families to create similar scenes. The narrator's introductory comments link the nativity celebration to the future because he projects the scene as an idealised historical event that contrasts with his own diminished present reality. Through this *costumbrista* scene, Blest Gana is witnessing, and ultimately affirming, a national culture with the overarching theme of Catholic faith, a reflection of the colonial trope of evangelisation that points to the commonality of events that make the nation united by a clear verticality of order. On the other hand, the scrutiny of the nativity figurines exhibited in Jaramillo's parlour is a successful explanation of religion as a bond between elements comprising the nation.

The hegemonic place of religion in history and culture becomes clear when the narrator delves into the complex nativity scene gracing Jaramillo's parlour. The unique and extensive collection of pieces that make up the nativity proposes a common faith, history, and culture shared by all Chileans. The display encompasses much more than the event of Christ's birth; it portrays great historical events, important present-day figures, and the immense beauty of future paradise: "se colocaba una gran mesa, sobre la cual se disponía el nacimiento, compuesto de distintos episodios o pasos, figurando a veces desde la tentación fatal de nuestra madre común, la frágil Eva, hasta algún cuadro formado por personajes del día, como para marcar las grandes épocas del mundo" [a large table was placed, on which the nativity was arranged, composed of distinct episodes or events, at times representing the fatal temptation of our common mother, the fragile Eve, to some scene made up of present-day characters, as if to mark the great eras of the world] (93). The chronotopically comprehensive crèche concentrates time and faith in the parlour because it is the focal point of everyone in attendance. The nativity extends the parlour space bi-directionally in time through its numerous scenes and thus encourages multiple times to dwell in the parlour. It promotes a common faith that transcends time and culture to present a vision that Chilean identity includes shared beliefs. In fact, in the years following 1830, a religious revival in Chile led to renewed religious intolerance (Encina 310). The nativity scene thus intertwines religion and history as dominant forces in the great homogenising national discourse.

The fascinating *costumbrista* descriptions that dominate Alberto Blest Gana's *El ideal de un calavera* offer the reader glimpses into nineteenth-century Chilean society. The parlour, rodeo, folk medicine, and nativity scenes beg the reader to consider what the nation values and contribute to the beauty of the text by filling the narrative space with historical time and nationally significant images. Although these scenes often attempt to project a united hegemonic national culture, they reveal a heterogeneous and diverse reality that is far from being united. Cornejo Polar argues that the desire to create a standard national identity was the result of Latin America looking towards Europe as its model for nationhood. That European image of imposed unity, however, does not fit with the region's reality of multiplicity, diversity, and contradictions (*La cultura* 10). Blest Gana depicts a nation that fuses diverse social and cultural elements, presenting spaces where the hegemonic imposition of culture interacts and competes with resistance to change. It suggests that a national culture may be achieved without erasing the rich diversity and complex contradictions that make Chile unique. The nation must respond to multiplicity and diversity rather than impose a monoculture that does not fit reality. While the lettered intent behind *costumbrista* scenes may be to establish a unified, hegemonic, national culture based on European models, in so doing they also reveal a society in conflict. The scenes call attention to areas where Chile is struggling and reveal the nation's fledgling multiculturalism. They slow down the narrative by condensing time in descriptive asides that contextualise Chile's unique and contradictory national identity. Behind the homogeneous, hegemonic vision of the nation hides a heterogeneous society that is trying to reconcile its social, economic, and regional inequalities.

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