Leopoldo Marechal’s *Antígona Vélez* and the Symbolic Landscapes of Peronism

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Leopoldo Marechal adapts his *Antígona Vélez* to Argentina’s nineteenth-century landscape and refashions the play as a vehicle for Peronist ideology and foundational discourse for a “New Argentina.” The play offers an example of how pro-Peronist cultural representation assisted the regime in consolidating the vision of the Peronist pueblo for Argentine audiences. Premiered May 25, 1951, at the National Cervantes Theater in the heart of Buenos Aires and accompanied by museum exhibitions and commemorative rituals, the performance of *Antígona Vélez* functioned both as metaphor for national identity and as urban intervention in the Peronist landscape. Marechal’s adaptation of Antigone translates the spatial duality scholars have found inherent in Greek tragedy (Padel 362) into a landscape of extremes in which the founding of a future nation (on the fertile pampa) depends on the extermination of an abstract indigenous “Other” (inhabiting the barren desert).

Though transposed to the nineteenth-century pampa, I argue that Marechal’s adaptation of Sophocles’ *Antigone* can be interpreted most productively in the urban context of Buenos Aires, where Peronist cultivation of a discourse of social inclusion and uniformity, on the one hand, and a rigid “us” versus “them” rhetoric, on the other, played out in spectacular fashion. A centerpiece of Peronist identity and contested space, the city of Buenos Aires provided the stage for alternative interventions that, when read against Marechal’s landscapes of inclusion and exclusion, make evident the dissonance between theatrical metaphors of national uniformity and real claims of difference and dissent enacted in the space of the city.

Marechal adapts the setting and language of his play to the nineteenth-century Argentine pampa, but the basic fabula from Sophocles’ *Antigone* is recognizable, particularly in the first half of the

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play. Ignacio Vélez (Polyneices) has joined ranks with the Pampa Indians engaged in battle over the land where the estancia La Postrera stands.¹ Don Facundo Galván (Creon), the caudillo figure in power, declares that Martín (Eteocles), who fought against his brother and was killed while defending La Postrera, will be honored, while Ignacio’s body will remain unburied and left exposed. Antígona defies his orders and takes it upon herself to perform burial rites for Ignacio, for which she is punished.

In his comprehensive study Antigones, George Steiner expresses fascination with the idea that Antigone continues “to give vital shape to our sense of self and the world” (1). To say, as Steiner does, that Antigone is “éternelle” and “immediate” to the present is to acknowledge that the meaning of Antigone strives to transcend the political and philosophical concerns of modernity, while at the same time constantly changing to accommodate the contexts that frame the engagement between self and the world. Several of the most celebrated modern adaptations of Antigone by Jean Anouilh, Bertolt Brecht, Athol Fugard, and Griselda Gambaro give testimony to the major world events and paradigms of thought that shaped the twentieth century. Emerging in response to the horrors of Nazism, apartheid, and dictatorship, these modern adaptations signal the transformation of Antigone into a figure whose context, regardless of specific location, can frequently be characterized as aftermath.

Scholars have observed that late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century adaptations of the play tend to diminish the conflict between Antigone and Creon and focus instead on the cost of the conflict itself (MacArthur et al. 26). Jill Lane echoes this sentiment in her observation that “the story of Antigone illustrates not the ethics of waging war but rather the ethics of waging peace” (524). In recent Latin American adaptations by Argentine playwright Griselda Gambaro (Antígona furiosa, 1986) and the Peruvian theater collective Yuyachkani (Antígona, 2000) witnessing is of central importance, and demands for justice and commemoration become imperative.² These Antigones engage post-conflict memory politics and make gestures toward or against national reconciliation.

There is a significant difference, however, that sets Marechal’s Antígona Vélez apart from these other post-World War II Latin American Antigones. Contrary to modern adaptations exhibiting what Edith Hall describes as an anachronistic portrayal of Antigone “shaking her little fist against a totalitarian state” (xvii), in Marechal’s play, Antígona recognizes that her punishment for defying the Creon figure is just and her sacrifice necessary to preserve the nation and enable it to flourish.³ Premiering just six years after the end of World War II in 1951, it seems unlikely at first glance that a play promoting an authoritarian message was able to draw such large audiences and generate such popular appeal. Press accounts (admittedly pro-Peronist) not only called the play a “great success,” but also made a point of
noting that the audience members in attendance were highly esteemed
government authorities and distinguished figures in the arts.\textsuperscript{4} Maristella
Svampa suggests that although World War II showcased the ideological
struggle between democracy and totalitarianism on the world stage, in
Argentina this struggle was perceived through the lens of the country’s
nineteenth-century conflict between civilization and barbarism (251).
This translation to the national framework partially explains the effusive
reception to the premiere, though, when considered in the broader,
international context of post-World War II, the appeal of the play’s pro-
authoritarian message seems counterintuitive.

The Peronist regime proved adept at interweaving discourses of
civilization and practices of authoritarianism. According to Svampa,
Perón viewed his role as crucial for the transformation of the “inorganic
masses” into a civilized “pueblo” (226) (people). Yet, as skillfully as
Perón portrayed himself as the leader who could orchestrate this
transformation, his cultural and political opponents continued to accuse
him of provoking a resurgence of barbarism (229). Literary figures such
as Julio Cortázar, Jorge Luis Borges, and Adolfo Bioy Casares
exacerbated this association between Peronism and barbarism in short
stories from the late 1940s and early 1950s.\textsuperscript{5} As Laura Podalsky notes,
“These stories focused on what would commonly be characterized in
later years (by historians as well as fiction writers) as the ‘invasion’ of
Buenos Aires by the uncultured masses” (39). Though critics sought to
discredit Perón by linking the resurrection of barbarism directly to his
rule, in fact this only partially succeeded, because, as Svampa observes,
the stigma and threat of barbarism served at the same time to legitimate
Perón’s heavy-handed civilizing mission (20).

In theater, too, the stigma of barbarism produced heated debates.
Critics accused Roberto Alejandri Vagni, the author of the play Camino
bueno, premiered in 1947 at the National Cervantes Theater, of writing
Peronist propaganda. In her analysis of the play, Laura Mogliani
describes the main character as a vehicle for Peronist discourse (203).
Nerio Rojas, a deputy of the Radical Party, accused Vagni of being
partial and obsequious to Perón in his theatrical portrayal (Zayas de
Lima 352–53). In his rebuke, Vagni insisted that he was only trying to
show the reasons why the “simple, generous, good, and forgotten
(simple, generosa, buena, olvidada)” people had voted for Perón and he
criticized Rojas’s colleague for referring to those people as the “beastly
hordes” (352–53) (el aluvión zoológico).\textsuperscript{6}

Though less influential than film and radio, official Peronist theater
played an integral role in providing a venue for the regime’s mission to
civilize and educate the masses. Theater was envisioned as a form of
authentic expression of a “New Argentina” and authors in line with this
thinking sought out capacious venues that could house massive
audiences (354). These official performances provided audiences with
an interactive experience that modeled what Mariano Ben Plotkin
identifies as the “efficient system for symbolic interchange between
Perón and the masses” (xi). Indeed, playwrights and directors exploited the potential of theater as a venue for rehearsing this interchange. Press reviews of Antígona Vélez indicate that the play’s cast of secondary characters was sizable and the stage director, Enrique S. Discépolo, was praised for his ability to control the “movimiento de las masas” (movement of the masses) onstage. The presence of a large number of secondary characters likely served to heighten identification between on- and off-stage masses and to condition audience members in their role as spectators in public spaces outside of the theater.

The onstage behavior of the masses in relation to spectacle in Antígona Vélez mirrors the practices and attitudes expected of the pueblo under Perón. Another strategy of Marechal’s to make Antígona more familiar to Argentine audiences, or rather, as Brunn argues, to “promote the hegemonic ideology of the state,” was to create a more localized Antígone, an “Antígona criolla” possessing both Argentine and universal characteristics (40). In an interview two months after the premiere, Marechal states that his goal was to take the fabula of the classic drama and transpose it to the Argentine landscape without losing sight of its universality (“¿Debe el teatro?”). He draws an explicit link between Argentine theater’s ability to transcend “localism” and Perón’s famous “third position,” a key strategy of the Justicialist doctrine, which strove to negotiate between capitalism (the United States and the United Kingdom) and socialism (the communist Eastern Bloc) without identifying with or alienating either (Podalsky 34). Though one of the goals of universalism, according to Marechal, was to make art accessible and intelligible to people from other countries, the term “internationalism” was notably absent from discourse, as the term increasingly had become associated with a shift in the redistribution of capital and the consolidation of the hegemonic role of the United States in this shift (Giunta 9).

Marechal’s aim of creating a fusion between Argentine and universal elements in his play is immediately made apparent by the protagonist’s name, which combines the Greek “Antígona” with the criollo “Vélez.” Antígona Vélez is the only character that retains her classic first name. The rest of the characters are given criollo names charged with national symbolism. Thus the Creon figure becomes Don Facundo Galván (in direct reference to Sarmiento’s Facundo) and the Eteocles character becomes Martín (in a nod to José Hernández’s Martín Fierro). Marechal makes other adaptations to distinguish his Antigone from Sophocles’ play, make the play more palatable to Argentine audiences, and promote a pro-Peronist agenda. Mirta Arlt identifies several significant modifications, including the elimination of the Tireisias character; the romantic interlude between Antígona and Lisandro in the fourth cuadro; the translation of verse into prose; the colloquial, costumbrista tone; and the replacement of the guard with the tracker (“rastreador”), a well-established figure in costumbrista literature also described by Sarmiento in Facundo (Romero 232).
Other important adaptations include Marechal’s decision to set the action in the nineteenth-century pampa at an estancia called La Posrera, which translates roughly as “the last one” and alludes to its location on the edge of civilization. Categorized by Arlt as “literatura de frontera” (frontier literature), Antígona Vélez shares characteristics with a canon of Argentine works that illustrate the country’s historical conflict between the state and indigenous tribes (Martínez Gramuglia 43). Zayas de Lima observes that at first glance the resurgence in rural costumbriстиa dramas between 1944 and 1955 is surprising given the importance the Peronist regime attributed to urban spectacle (360). According to Zayas de Lima, the Peronist government promoted the creation of rural dramas in order to reinforce the idea of a unified nation, race, and identity. Ironically, a main premise of Antígona Vélez is that the consolidation of the future nation is dependent upon the eradication of an abstract, indigenous Other. Later in this essay I will return to the discourse of social inclusion and exclusion in the play and its significance in the context of Peronism.

There are several other notable changes that distinguish Marechal’s Antígona Vélez from Sophocles’ play and make it unique among other adaptations. First, in Marechal’s version, instead of being immured in a cave, Antígona’s punishment is to be sent on a galloping horse into the enemy territory of the south. She does this wearing men’s clothing; perhaps the most likely interpretation of this adaptation is that Marechal sought to avoid alienating spectators by masculinizing her appearance and making her fate less visually shocking as she gallops to her death. Second, and certainly more shocking in Marechal’s version is the gory detail with which the unburied corpse of Ignacio Vélez (the Polyneices figure) is described. His eyes and lips have been picked clean away by the birds and all that is left of his face are his grinning white teeth (39). Third, Marechal has included the characters of three prescient Macbeth-inspired brujas (witches), who offer commentary throughout the play on Antígona’s actions. And last, Marechal introduces overdetermined religious symbolism; the women in the chorus liken Martín Vélez, who has been stabbed in the side, to Jesus Christ. And in the beginning of the fourth cuadro, Marechal invokes an Edenic scene in which Antígona and Lisandro are seated together underneath an Argentine ombú tree.

The Performance of Peronism

In The New Cultural History of Peronism (2010), Matthew Karush and Oscar Chamosa initiate new directions in scholarship on Peronism. In particular, they identify and build on a critical approach, starting with Daniel James’ Resistance and Integration (1988), that emphasizes the “performative aspects of Peronism” (Karush and Chamosa 7). The material under examination in this new approach consists of ceremonies, celebrations of national holidays, speeches made by Juan and Eva Perón,
demonstrations, strikes, pageants, processions and contests (Karush and Chamosa 7; Chamosa 11). This turn to the performative and ritualistic elements of Peronism is exciting for scholars of theater. Reflecting this turn, in her analysis of Marechal’s Antígona Vélez, Victoria Brunn focuses on “the ritual of sacrifice and how it mediates in the context of the play between such dualities as exclusion/inclusion, death/rebirth, and the public/the private” (43). She identifies a “quasi-ritual space” that erases the division between spectators and performers and framed the entire performance, “endowing it with an aura of sacrality and non-arbitrariness” (59–60). Ritualistic elements related to but not formally a part of the staged play created the impression that the boundaries of this space were quite negotiable and constantly changing. The premiere of Antígona Vélez in 1951 served jointly to inaugurate the official theater season at the National Cervantes Theater and to commemorate May 25, the national holiday on which Argentines celebrate the May Revolution. Well documented in the press and substantiated by Marechal is the rumor that a few days before the premiere, the main actress, Fanny Navarro, lost the only manuscript of the play and none other than Eva Perón made inquiries to make sure the premiere would take place on May 25 as planned (Alfredo 50). The joint inaugural and commemorative function attributed to the premiere demonstrates how in this case the theatrical performance was used to fortify already existing national spaces and symbols (Maturo 166; Romero 228).

In adjacent salons of the theater there were two exhibitions set up that displayed to one side the achievements of the Peronist government, and to the other, Eva Perón’s social work, both open to the public on the days of the performances. Juxtaposing the theatrical performance to the museum-like displays in the National Cervantes Theater demonstrates how different kinds of spectacles were used to transmit distinct Peronist messages. In enacting an onstage narrative with a beginning, middle, and end, the performers of Antígona Vélez participated in constructing for audiences an allegory that extolled the power of Peronism to transform weak and disunited individuals into a strong, organized, and unified pueblo. While the play emphasized the transformative potential of Peronism, the museum exhibition, on the other hand, sent the message that Peronism was already a fully realized and consolidated system. In effect, the displays outside of the auditorium, in between the theater performance and the streets of Buenos Aires, appear to support Plotkin’s periodization of Peronism, in which a third period (1950–1955) corresponds to the “crystallization of the Peronist rituals” (45). If one envisions a system of overlapping frameworks, the performance of Antígona Vélez can be considered the epicenter and forum for witnessing what the regime would like spectators to interpret as the transformative agency of Peronism. The doors leading out of the theatrical space introduce audiences into a broader framework in which Peronism is shown already to be realized and “crystallized.” If spectators then leave the building entirely, they do not escape the performative framework of
Peronism; rather, they enter into yet another frame that encompasses the urban stage of Buenos Aires and includes some of the landmarks most associated with the Peronist regime, such as 9 de Julio Avenue and Plaza de Mayo, just blocks away from the National Cervantes Theater.

**Contested Landscapes and Urban Imaginaries**

The Peronist regime appropriated these urban landmarks symbolically in order to stage a sense of unified, national identity. Alberto Ciria refers to Plaza de Mayo explicitly as a stage that showcased the nation’s “transcendent events,” such as the demonstration that took place October 17, 1945, when Perón’s labor and military supporters took to the streets en masse to demand his release and return to Buenos Aires (Ciria 47; Navarro 127). As James writes, “Peronism’s fundamental political appeal lay in its ability to redefine the notion of citizenship within a broader, ultimately social, context” (14). The physical laboratory for this “broader, ultimately social, context” was, in many regards, the city of Buenos Aires. Anahí Ballent remarks that the idea of a “ciudad nueva” (new city) and the “transformación radical del medio urbano” (radical transformation of the urban sphere) was very seductive for a government trying to portray itself as eager to found a new national identity, and the capital city of Buenos Aires was the cornerstone of this symbolic imaginary (303–5). The foundational event in the construction of this new city was the October 17, 1945 (305). As Ballent observes, not only did this event provide Peronism with a foundational myth; it also nourished the idea of an invasion and a “toma simbólica de la ciudad” (symbolic take of the city), orchestrated by the popular classes (305). As discussed earlier, the trope of the “aluvión zoológico” (beastly hordes) invading the city produced the dual effect of accentuating the association between Perón and barbarism, while at the same time allowing Perón to project an image of himself as the leader who was capable of integrating them into a homogenous people and nation.

Ballent makes the important observation that mass demonstrations in the streets of Buenos Aires did not begin with Peronism (316). She traces the increase in popular participation in public, urban space to the boom in the number of spectators of film, theater, and open-air performances in the 1930s (321). Regardless of the specific causes of the development of a large community of spectators in Buenos Aires, under Perón, this new “public” grew accustomed to pro-Peronist urban spectacles performed around city landmarks such as Plaza de Mayo, 9 de Julio, and in theaters like the National Cervantes.

The struggle over a city (Thebes) is also at the heart of Sophocles’ *Antigone*. Marechal adapts this struggle by replacing the city with the pampa as the contested territory. In her comments on the development of theater in ancient Greece, Ruth Padel notes that the assemblies and commerce of the *agora* had always possessed a theatrical character and
that as the city-state developed, theater in a sense became a double for the *agora* (337). She further comments that those who entered that theatrical/public space “felt and saw themselves to be the city” (338). This way of conceiving the relationship between self, theater, and city resonates with the Peronist regime as well, in which a new popular class not only identified with but also participated politically in the city and its public spaces. In Sophocles’ *Antigone*, as Lucrecio Pérez Blanco points out, while Polyneices and Eteocles are involved in a struggle over a city that already exists and functions as such, in Marechal’s *Antígona Vélez*, Martín and Ignacio Vélez are engaged in conflict over the domination of a piece of land and what it will become in the future (157). And yet, given the symbolic significance attributed to urban space under Peronism, the central location of the National Cervantes theater in that space, and the performative spectacles constructed around the premiere, such as the exhibits on the achievements of Peronism and Evita’s social work, I argue that *Antígona Vélez*, despite its displacement to the nineteenth-century pampa, is very much about the struggle for Buenos Aires in the Peronist imaginary.

The Peronist regime accentuated the ideological dimensions of its ambition by evoking and fusing different physical and symbolic landscapes. Although the regime used the city of Buenos Aires in very tangible ways to consolidate power, the nineteenth-century pampa, limitless in the national imagination, proved to be a potent metaphor for imagining the far-reaching objectives of Peronism. The appeal of this metaphor offers a potential explanation for Marechal’s choice to translate the action of his *Antígona* to the pampa, and it also reflects the “telluric character” that scholars find innate to the Peronist movement (Ciria 215). Taking cue from Sarmiento’s *Facundo*, Marechal constructs the nineteenth-century pampa in *Antígona Vélez* as both barren and limitless, and inhabited and contested by the indigenous tribes who were there before the arrival of the colonizers. Buenos Aires, during the Peronist regime, and the pampa, in Marechal’s *Antígona Vélez*, represent landscapes whose control and identity are in dispute. The concept of landscape is useful here because it can encompass both the concrete topographical contours and the symbolic imagery of the city and the pampa. The term seemed to capture the imagination of Perón himself, who, in one of his most iconic speeches, delivered in 1949 at the Theater *La Independencia* (The Independence) in Mendoza, made reference to “paisajes de la conciencia” (landscapes of consciousness) and gestured toward the importance of founding “un nuevo paisaje” (“La comunidad organizada”) (a new landscape).

Theater scholars Elinor Fuchs and Una Chaudhuri arrive at the term landscape to describe “a new spatial paradigm” and a new “framework for fresh thinking on modern theater” (1–2). They write that the concept of landscape “escapes measurement” and embodies “an awkward conflict” between “the gritty specificities of the material world and the idealizations of various aesthetic traditions” (2). Fuchs and Chaudhuri
observe that “at the threshold of modernism, theater began to manifest a new spatial dimension, both visually and dramaturgically, in which landscape for the first time held itself apart from character and became a figure of its own” (3). The immeasurability of landscape, its dual material and idealized characteristics, and its protagonism are all qualities Marechal attributes to the pampa in Antígona Vélez. Specifically, Marechal’s portrayal of the landscape of the pampa imbues discourses related to national identity, belonging, and exclusion with a spatial consciousness that can then be reinterpreted in the context of Buenos Aires during the Peronist regime.

Superimposing the nineteenth-century pampa onto the twentieth-century urban sphere of Buenos Aires also brings to the fore the historically fraught power relations between the Argentine provinces and the city of Buenos Aires. In his discussion of the politics surrounding the San Juan earthquake of 1944 and its impact on Peronism, Mark Healey stresses the importance of considering the provinces as spaces for producing the political and draws attention to the unique configuration of power relations dating from the nineteenth century that have allowed the Argentine provinces a surprising, and, in Healey’s words, even paradoxical amount of political power in spite of economic weakness (9). “Given this larger picture,” Healey writes, “it is striking how the provinces vanish from studies of national history around 1880” (10). The impact of this “vanishing,” Healey maintains, is apparent in existing scholarship on Peronism, which has studied the phenomenon almost exclusively from the center (10). The large number of artistic and literary works produced under Peronism that resurrect the imaginary of the nineteenth-century pampa, Antígona Vélez included, provide an entrée into contemplating the anxieties behind the “vanishing” of the Argentine interior in public discourse during the twentieth century. Though reduced to metaphor and in many ways subordinate to the dominant urban, twentieth-century vantage point these works adapt, the resurrection of these nineteenth-century images of the pampa nonetheless reasserts the presence of the provinces in national consciousness.

In Antígona Vélez, Marechal’s description of the pampa first and foremost links the landscape to a discourse of foundational national identity. The piece of earth where Ignacio Vélez’s body has been left abandoned and exposed is described as a muddy, primordial soup belonging to no one (14). It is this same muddy earth that calls on Antígona—“un grito de barro” (a cry of the earth)—to defy Don Facundo’s orders and bury her brother (23). Antígona insists that neither by divine light nor human eye will anyone see Ignacio’s body because “la tierra esconde todo” (17) (the earth hides everything). The landscape in Antígona Vélez expressed at times throughout the play as “el barro, la llanura, la tierra, el desierto, la pampa” (mud, the plains, the land, the desert, and the pampa) exhibits a personality and will of its own.
The will of the landscape is best expressed in the play by the idea that the plains have their own law, “la ley de la llanura” (25) (the law of the plains). Facundo Galván tells Antígona that Ignacio Vélez must be punished because he betrayed “la ley de la llanura” (the law of the plains) and when Antígona asks Facundo what law he is referring to, he answers that it is the law that makes one to “agarrarse a este suelo y no soltarlo” (25) (grasp the soil and not let go). In a first glimpse of Antígona’s willing acceptance of her punishment, she responds by concurring with Facundo that it is “una ley justa” (25) (a just law). Personified in the play as furious and omniscient, the landscape nonetheless does not constitute a match for Facundo Galván, who proclaims that “¡En esta pampa no hay otra voluntad que la mía!” (37) (It is my will only that prevails in the pampa!). By asserting Facundo Galván’s ultimate domination over the pampa, Marechal departs from Ezequiel Martínez Estrada’s classic manifesto on the origins of Argentine national identity, Radiografía de la Pampa (1933), in which dreams of progress remain subordinate to the whims of the pampa, described as the destroyer of illusions: “llanura destructura” (Martínez Estrada 10) (destructive plains). Martínez Estrada remarks, “Sobre una tierra inmensa, que era en realidad imposible de modificar, se alzarían las obras precarias de los hombres” (10) (On an immense land, which in reality was impossible to modify, men built precarious works). The ambition of men could not overpower what Martínez Estrada described as “el dictamen de la topografía” (62) (the ruling of the topography). In asserting Facundo Galván’s dominance over the pampa, Marechal modifies or updates the historical relationship between man and landscape so that man’s progress is no longer impeded by the capricious character of the pampa.

Likewise, Don Facundo’s character, a stand-in for Perón, represents a modification to a preexisting lineage of nineteenth-century national heroes. Taking over the reigns of control of La Postera after Don Luis Vélez’s glorious death in battle against the indigenous tribes of the south, Facundo Galván vows to defend La Postera until Martín and Ignacio Vélez are old enough to do it themselves (Marechal, Antígona Vélez 12–13). The image of Facundo Galván carrying on the mission of a brave fighter and defending his legacy until his children have come of age immediately evokes Perón’s desire to be perceived as continuing the legacy of Argentina’s nineteenth-century founding fathers. In their analysis of the ways in which Perón used history to construct his image, Viviana Postay and Natalia Uanini identify the rupture and continuity innate to the discourse of a powerful leader who sought to position himself in deferential, yet superior relation to his predecessors (34). They observe that Perón relied very heavily on heroic nineteenth-century narratives from San Martín, Belgrano, Sarmiento, Rivadavia, Roca, and others in order to found a “new Argentina” (somewhat of a misnomer, they argue, given the exactness with which Perón summoned nineteenth-century heroic discourse) (87). Perón proclaims to help the
Argentine *pueblo* reach adulthood so that these nineteenth-century projects can finally be perfected and brought to fruition (87). The trope of coming of age is strong in Marechal’s *Antígona Vélez* as well, as seen in Facundo Galván’s determination to protect La Postrera until Martín and Ignacio are adults, and in the fourth *cuadro*, when Lisandro reminisces over the first time he tamed a colt (and simultaneously realized he was a man).

Although Perón frequently identified himself with Argentina’s nineteenth-century national heroes, he consciously avoided mention of authoritarian leader Juan Manuel de Rosas (the alternative founding father to San Martín for the country’s historical revisionists) and other caudillo-like figures (Ciria 220). Perón aligned himself, instead, with those national figures (San Martín, Belgrano, Sarmiento, Rivadavia, Roca) associated with a civilizing mission, who always framed themselves in opposition to the caudillos and tyrants they linked to barbarism and rural backwardness (Postay and Uanini 39). For Sarmiento, barbarism encompassed not only the indigenous populations, but also the mestizo gauchos and plainsmen (Fernández-Retamar 191). Sarmiento’s call to rid the country of barbarism rationalized the eradication of indigenous groups as a precondition for the importation and education of white Europeans on Argentine soil (197). As Roberto Fernández-Retamar keenly observes, in reality, Sarmiento’s appropriation of the civilization/barbarism binary was largely Eurocentric and aspired more to protect the interests of European capitalism than the wellbeing of the Argentine nation.10

Sarmiento’s Eurocentric vision complicates his role as national hero, but it does not prevent him from being included in the canon of founding fathers revered for exhibiting virtues such as “valentía, generosidad, humildad, destreza en el campo de batalla” (courage, generosity, humility, and skill on the battlefield), and most importantly, “un amor a la patria que se sobrepone al amor filial, conyugal, de amistad” (a love of country that surpasses filial and conjugal love, and friendship). In Marechal’s play, Facundo Galván exemplifies this absolute loyalty to the *patria* in overdetermined fashion. A chorus member quotes Facundo Galván saying, “Los enemigos de ‘La Postrera’ son mis enemigos” (Marechal, *Antígona Vélez* 12) (any enemy of ‘La Postrera’ is an enemy of mine). As in Sophocles’ play, Antígona’s allegiance to her brother defies this loyalty to the *patria* and fuels the conflict between kinship and state. Marechal’s Antígona, however, differs in that she does not remain defiant until the end; rather, Marechal has Antígona gradually acquire consciousness of Facundo Galván’s superior “razón” (reason), and she acknowledges that he is right to condemn her: “El hombre que ahora me condena es duro porque tiene razón” (52) (The man who now condemns me is harsh because he is right). Beyond punishment, Antígona’s death is portrayed as a necessary sacrifice in order for future generations to prosper in the pampa. One chorus member proclaims, “Antígona debe morir, para que se cubra de
flores el desierto” (57) (Antígona has to die in order to cover the desert with flowers). The effects of Antígona’s sacrificial act are expressed almost entirely through the metaphor of the landscape and its transformation. Once again, a chorus member explains Facundo Galván’s rationale: “Él quiere poblar de flores el sur! Y sabe que Antígona Vélez, muerta en un alazán ensangrentado, podría ser la primera flor del jardín” (52) (He wants to populate the south with flowers! And he knows that Antígona Vélez, who bled to death on a sorrel horse, could be the first flower in the garden). Barren and inhospitable, the south represents the last enclave of the indigenous populations, and is described as the antithesis of Facundo Galván’s illusions of a fertile pampa. The chorus of women chants, “El sur es amargo, y no deja crecer ni la espiga derecha ni el amor eterno” (56) (The south is bitter, and it neither allows a spike of wheat nor eternal love to grow).

Throughout the play references are made to the sacrificial blood that will nourish the desert, ripen the wheat, and fatten the young bulls for “todos lo hombres y mujeres que, algún día, cosecharán en esta pampa el fruto de tanta sangre” (65) (all of the men and women of the pampa who one day will reap the harvest of so much blood). The play’s abundant references to blood sacrifice infuse the foundational discourse with violence. One chorus member’s claim that “la llanura es ancha, y caben todos los muertos” (26) (the plains are wide enough to hold all of the dead), suggests that the pampa has an insatiable appetite for blood and bodies. The transformation of the landscape from untamed, inhospitable desert into fertile, civilized pampa demands the blood of those who betray their allegiance to La Postrera. Ignacio, Antígona, and Lisandro, in various ways have all betrayed Facundo Galván and “the law of the plains” (la ley de la llanura) through their allegiances to an excluded Other. First, Ignacio joins forces with the Pampa Indians and takes up arms against his brother. Antígona, and consequently Lisandro, take sides with Ignacio, whose body has been ostracized from La Postrera and whose burial has been forbidden. Their expulsion as live, defiant individuals and return to La Postrera as dead bodies illustrate not only the mechanics of the ritual of sacrifice but also the role exclusion and inclusion play in consolidating the boundaries of the civilized pampa and keeping an abstract, barbarous Other at bay (Martínez Gramuglia 44).

In the closing line of the play, Facundo Galván proclaims that future generations will thrive on the land he has fought for (Marechal, Antígona Vélez 65). Brunn rightly notes that the “reference to all those men and women who will some day harvest the fruit of the spilt blood is, in fact, an allusion to none but the spectators” (60). While Marechal constructs a strong bond of identification between the future generations evoked in Facundo Galván’s prediction and spectators at the National Cervantes Theater, the excluded Other remains an abstraction to the audience, referred to in press reviews as the “hordas salvajes” (savage
It is perhaps due to this almost total abstraction that most scholars have not taken an interest in the identity of this Other in their analyses of Antígona Vélez. One exception is Norma Pérez Martín, who in her article, “Antígona Vélez de Leopoldo Marechal: Trágica fusión de culturas,” turns her attention to the indigenous tribes of the south: “Allí vivieron y sufrieron los caciques Calfucurá, Namancurá, Catriel, Renque-Curá, Baigorrita y otros. . . . En ningún momento el autor apela a fechas ni nombres históricos concretos” (236) (There lived and suffered the Caciques Calfucurá, Namancurá, Catriel, Renque-Curá, Baigorrita, and others. . . . At no time does the author name dates or concrete historical figures). This last sentence is less of a reproach and more of an acknowledgment that it was not within Marechal’s set of objectives to specify the identity of the indigenous tribes engaged in battle over the pampa. Particularly when Perón sought to construct a message of integration and uniformity of the pueblo, Marechal’s focus on an abstract, anachronistic Other helped to reinforce for audiences a sense of national inclusion on a symbolic level, without having to consider the complexity of social exclusion on a pragmatic or ethical level.

In Antígona Vélez, representation of the indigenous tribes of the south remains in the off-stage dramatic imagination and peripheral to the action at La Postrera. Marechal’s use of landscape to describe the relationship between what is considered central and marginalized to the fabula also harks back to Greek myths in which, according to Jean Davison, “wandering figures traverse the ‘savage’ spaces—inhhabited by the ‘others’—in journeys that culminate in the foundation of a civilized center” (49). Further, she remarks that “The far frontiers, in particular, serve as a metaphor for extremes of social organization and human types” (57). The polar extremes Marechal’s play establishes between the center and the margins illustrate the spatial dualities Padel and other classics scholars find inherent in the performance of tragedy (Padel 364). In turn, these geographical extremes depicted in Marechal’s adaptation serve as a metaphor for what Karush calls the “essential binarism” at the heart of Peronism (Karush 23). In spite of this binarism and the regime’s tendency to frame opposition in Manichean terms, Perón’s “third position” also shows the ability to navigate between seemingly irreconcilable extremes. In Antígona Vélez, Martínez Gramuglia identifies this characteristic in Facundo Galván, considered a hero of civilization despite the fact that he employs barbarous methods (49). He represents “un lugar de síntesis de las antinomias argentinas como Perón se presentaba a sí mismo: es ‘Facundo’ y al mismo tiempo piensa en el futuro y el progreso de la patria” (49) (a place of synthesis between Argentine antinomies, like Perón’s image of himself: he is ‘Facundo’ and at the same time he thinks of the nation’s future and progress).

In representing the division between La Postrera and the abstract Other, Marechal uses the metaphor of landscape both to accentuate their
separateness and to create a liminal space that mediates between what the author constructs as central and marginalized to the project of a future nation. La Postrera itself is positioned on the frontier between civilization (visible onstage) and barbarism (invisible off-stage). The “zaguán tenébrosa” (dark hall) that figures prominently onstage represents the threshold between these two worlds. The centrality of the dark hall heightens consciousness of the dialectic between inside and outside for audiences, although all information about what happens outside is limited to third person accounts of the ongoing battle between the indigenous tribes and the cavalry soldiers. Carmen (the Ismene character) reports that she has heard that Ignacio has betrayed them: “Se fue con los pampas, ¡y nos ha traído este malón!” (Marechal, Antígona Vélez 16) (He joined forces with the traitorous Pampas in their raid!). And the tracker character relates that Captain Rojas (a fictionally named character) will “barrerá de indios esta llanura” (32) (wipe out the Indians from the pampa).

In Marechal’s play betrayal and Otherness are the two characteristics that ensure one’s exclusion from the future nation. The Peronist regime, however, had a complicated relationship to Argentina’s indigenous communities and in fact is recognized for initiating important reforms in the government’s policies concerning Argentina’s indigenous populations (Lenton 85). According to Diana Lenton, “The years of Perón’s rule are remembered as a foundational moment in indigenous people’s transformation from ‘pariahs’ to ‘citizens’ as well as the period during which these groups began to mobilize politically in defense of their interests” (85). Lenton notes that the Constitutional Reform of 1949 under Perón was the first in Argentina to denounce racial discrimination (89). She further explains how Perón created the National Department of Migrations in a problematic attempt to “centralize” policies concerning the country’s subgroups, including both immigrant and indigenous populations (91). This consolidation of diverse groups under one overarching Peronist policy reflected the regime’s strategy to neutralize difference and create the illusion of equality among all Peronists (91). Lenton uses the 1946 episode of the Malón de La Paz (Caravan for Peace) as a case study to demonstrate that in spite of grand gestures made by the Peronists toward indigenous policy reform and a discourse of social inclusion, the actual presence and rights claims made by indigenous peoples proved to be unsettling for the regime (93).

A summary of the events surrounding the Malón de la Paz, described in much greater depth by Lenton, is as follows: in mid-1946 a group of Kolla people living in the Northwest of Argentina marched to the city of Buenos Aires to meet with officials and demand the return of their land (93). As Lenton describes, their claims were not taken seriously by government officials, who did not know what to make politically of their protest. After meeting with a group of congressional legislators, the marchers waited for a response at the Hotel de
Inmigrantes (The Immigrants Hotel) for three weeks until they were forcibly removed, packed into a boxcar, and sent back to the Northwest highlands (98). The government neglected to offer an explanation (99). Lenton attributes the Caravan’s unfortunate outcome to the reductive definition of the pueblo enforced by the Peronist regime. She writes, “The homogenizing and ‘harmonizing’ efforts of justicialism, which sought to unify the nation against oligarchy, did not tolerate internal dissidence. More important, it refused to permit the visualization of categories or classifications along other lines, and thus rejected the raising of other problematics” (101). Consideration of this episode reveals major contradictions between the theory and practice of Peronism. Although the Peronist regime skillfully maneuvered the discourses of barbarism and civilization to consolidate a sense of national belonging on a metaphorical level, as the Caravan of Peace exemplifies, the sudden, real confrontation in Buenos Aires with indigenous communities historically contrived as “the barbarous Other,” made evident the pragmatic limitations and latent racism of the pueblo as it was envisioned under Peronism.

The arrival of the indigenous marchers in Buenos Aires demanding recognition of their rights precipitated a collapse of the metaphor of Otherness, as well as a collapse of the symbolic separation between the city of Buenos Aires and the rural provinces. It is revealing to read Marechal’s Antígona Vélez against the backdrop of this protest. Marechal uses landscape to create metaphors that accentuate Otherness as a part of a foundational national discourse. In reducing the representation of indigenous communities to a metaphor of extreme Otherness, Marechal’s play makes the rights and identity claims of those communities seem inconsequential. The marchers in the Caravan of Peace provide a visually powerful counter-narrative by traversing a physical landscape and transcending the boundary Marechal envisions between the margin and the center in his play. In this movement across borders, the marchers undermine the power of abstract metaphor and call into question the legitimacy of claims of uniform, national unity. It is important to take into account these very real interventions in the Argentine landscape under Peronism when considering Marechal’s Antígona Vélez, a play that clearly champions the Peronist message of social inclusion, but does not aspire to overcome an underlying premise of difference founded on the rhetoric of “us” versus “them.”

Marechal’s Antígona Vélez sheds light on the way the regime employed official theater strategically to consolidate power and perform Peronist identity. The fact that Marechal’s play served a propagandistic function, combined with the play’s pro-authoritarian message, reminds us of the extreme political adaptability of Antigone and the play’s potential to create different and often contradictory meanings across contexts and over time. Marechal’s play is unique compared to other more recent Latin American adaptations such as Griselda Gambaro’s Antígona furiosa, in which Antigone’s role is interpreted in the context
of post-conflict human rights advocacy. In Antígona Vélez, Antígona’s burial of her slain brother is not supposed to be perceived broadly as a symbolic act of retroactive justice and a reminder never to forget; instead, it is the betrayal that serves as the sacrifice that is necessary to found a future nation. In spite of Marechal’s desire to reflect the ideals and foundational objectives of Peronism in his adaptation, the play does not reconcile, and in fact seems to accentuate the antinomic relationship between discourses of social inclusion and Otherness inherent to Peronism. A fascinating testimony to the contradictions of Peronism, Marechal’s adaptation strives to create an allegory of foundational national identity, and instead reveals more forcefully the very limits of this attempt.

Notes

1. The designation Pampa Indians (los Indios Pampas) was first employed by the Spaniards to describe all of the indigenous tribes living in the south of Argentina and does not take into account the cultural diversity of the region.
2. Yuyachkani worked with the writer José Watanabe, who wrote the Antígona text.
3. Antígona’s willing self-sacrifice in Marechal’s adaptation has intrigued scholars and has been a central focus in studies by Mirta Arlt (1997), Victoria Brunn (2009), Alice DeKuehne (1970), and Silvia Romero (1981).
4. See “Antígona Vélez constituyó un gran éxito”; “Aplaudiéndose a Fanny Navarro en una brillante creación de la protagonista de Antígona Vélez.”
5. See Cortázar’s “La casa tomada” (House Taken Over) and “Ómnibus,” and Bioy Casares and Borges’s “La fiesta del monstruo” (The Feast of the Monster).
6. All translations are the author’s unless stated otherwise.
7. See “Antígona Vélez constituyó un gran éxito”; “Aplaudiéndose a Fanny Navarro en una brillante creación de la protagonista de Antígona Vélez.”
8. See “Antígona Vélez tuvo una gran intérprete.”
9. In this context, the plains refer to the landscape of the Argentine pampa.
10. In his book Transatlantic Fascism, Federico Finchelstein observes that the rise of fascism in Europe altered but did not diminish the potency of the trope of civilization and barbarism in formulating attitudes and policy toward Latin America. Finchelstein writes, “Fascist orientalism was clearly imbued with imperial readings of these regions as sites of Western civilizational engagement” (36). Perón adapts elements of this “fascist orientalism” in his particular brand of leadership, which paired totalitarian practices with the express aim of civilizing the masses.
11. Translation emended by Ashley Puig-Herz.
12. In a 2011 version of Antígona Vélez, directed by Pompeo Audivert and staged at the National Cervantes Theater, the stage space is radically altered so that the right end of the stage extends so that it juts out into the audience space and removes several rows of seating in the auditorium. At the end of this extended stage, Ignacio’s lifeless body remains throughout most of the play. His body, ostracized by the onstage action, seems instead to belong to the audience. This recent version confirms that the discourse of inclusion and exclusion is one of the most central concerns in the play.
13. See “Antígona Vélez constituyó un gran éxito.”
Works Cited


