Bones of Contention: Violence, Monumentality, and the State-as-Detective in Chávez's Venezuela

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"It is in my portrait or my portraits alone that I can learn, if I need to, of my 'sameness'. And each of my portraits will identify yet another resemblance."
Jean-Luc Nancy

"Every portrait plays out in the singular the impossible portrait of God, His retreat and His attraction."
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What if rather than on secure, hallowed ground, the whole edifice of the state rested on hollow foundations so that the originating site from which such a state draws much if not all of its auratic energy was the scene of a crime, a nefarious *quid pro quo* or horrible hoax perpe-

trated centuries ago but that only now, some two hundred years after the fact, is brought sharply into the light? Would not such an untimely "discovery" wreak havoc on such a state, imploding one by one from within as it were each and every one of its most cherished legitimating beliefs and assumptions until, eventually, the whole state-edifice would collapse leaving only wreckage behind?

Presumably not realizing the true extent of his words, it is precisely such a catastrophic possibility that Lt Colonel Hugo Frías, current President of Venezuela, raised on December 17, 2007, on the occasion of the commemoration of the 177th anniversary of Simón Bolívar's death. Addressing an audience of followers and foreign dignitaries in the National Pantheon, Chávez intimated on that occasion the possibility that, rather than of natural causes, the Liberator Simón Bolívar had been assassinated, poisoned slowly by his mortal enemy, the oligarchy. Not only that but, more ominously perhaps, he also cast doubt on the authenticity of the remains locked inside the hero's sarcophagus which, according to the Venezuelan President, may not even belong to the Liberator but be someone (or even something) else's bones. According to Chávez, it all had to do with the slew of disappearing acts to which, according to him, since the time of the Liberator and up to the present, the oligarchy has subjected Bolívar's patrimony, to the point of replacing each and every one of the heroes' surviving physical remains and personal belongings, including his bones, with an

inauthentic replica or copy. Imparting the kind of somber, melodramatic tone to his words that is characteristic of suspenseful transitions in Venezuelan *telenovelas* and radio soap operas—honoring in this way, once again, his status as the nation's foremost anchorperson and all-around media personality—this is what Chávez had to say:

> Mr. Minister of the Interior, Mr. Minister of Culture, place something there that speaks the truth, because we cannot continue deceiving our children, we must tell them it is not on this bed but on one similar to it that Bolívar died. But all of that was disappeared by the oligarchy and who knows if even the bones of Bolívar were disappeared by them. We must determine if that was the case, now, this time without hesitations, at the beginning of the 21th century. We have the moral obligation of solving such an enigma, the obligation to open, now once and for all, that sacrosanct coffin and revise with the scientific advancements from the 21th century and from the 20th century the remains that are there. Let us hope that they will be those of Bolívar!

Laid out before the state-as-detective, and at the intersection of two heterogeneous knowledge-series, one constituted by this state's legitimizing fictions and historiographic constructions, the other by the scientific advancements in forensic medicine, biomedical technology and DNA research, such "bones of contention" lie at the basis of the decision to create a presidential commission "at the highest level" charged with investigating the "true causes" of Bolívar's death. In case there are any doubts concerning the gravity of Chávez's intentions, suffice it to say here that when the Presidential Commission was finally created by Decree number

5834, published on January 28, 2008, it was staffed by a cast of highly prominent members of the regime, from the nation's Vice-President, to a long list of Prime Ministers including the ministers of the interior, defense, health, education, and finance, all the way to Venezuela's Attorney General. So much for the possible notion, then, that when Chávez announced his decision to open Bolívar's sarcophagus and order an investigation into the true causes of the Liberator's demise he was only indulging in yet another of his famous rhetorical flourishes, to be forgotten as soon as it was pronounced, and, hence, without any practical consequences for the world.

To better understand the significance of Chávez's decision, and also why, very much against the Venezuelan President's objective to redress a historical wrong, ultimately such a decision may have unwittingly exposed the quite equivocal foundations on which his regime eventually stands, I need to say something about this regime's political theology. Before that, however, it is important to focus, briefly, on an aspect of the excerpt from Chávez's speech that I quoted a moment ago. I refer to Chávez's sense of himself and all other Venezuelans as being awash in a sea of copies, flooded by an interminable series of inauthentic substitutes or replicas of the Liberator's personal belongings and physical remains. Along with the historical falsifications concerning Bolívar's true historical significance perpetrated by the oligarchy, so often decried by Chávez and other members

of his regime, such a sea of simulacra ultimately threatens to draw the hero into a confusing haze where his true countenance is forever unattainable. As I will argue, very much at stake in all of this is Bolívar's true appearance, and, more pointedly, the hero's real face, whose traits would have been disfigured over time by a series of oligarchic brushstrokes to the point of rendering them thoroughly unrecognizable.

The experience of being overwhelmed by fakery goes well beyond the true face of Bolívar; a nagging sense of lack of authenticity afflicts the chavista regime as a whole whose most hallowed emblems, symbols and initiatives often fall victim to a bad infinity, a nightmarish scenario of bad repetitions and cloning where any sense of pristine revolutionary wills or intentions rapidly dissipates. A privileged example of this is the 1999 National Constitution, which the regime proclaimed shortly after being installed but that nowadays is busily trying to overturn on the grounds that it no longer serves its revolutionary purposes. Immediately following its proclamation, a number of published versions of the Constitution began to circulate publicly, each slightly different from the other. No matter how minute, the differences among the various versions were nonetheless significant enough that, for some time, it became difficult to say which, among them all, was the authentic Constitution. This predicament is particularly serious considering the preeminent role that the Constitution plays in the revolu-

tionary ideology of chavismo, of which I will have more to say in a moment.

Another example is that of the star witnesses, revolutionary priests, and heroes of the revolution who, upon inspection, turn out to be impostors or just simply crooks. Nothing, in any case, like the real thing that they originally made themselves out to be. Something that I heard during research among Pentecostal squatters in the city of Caracas sums up, I believe, the situation well. Looking straight into my eyes across from where she was sitting in the living room of "her" apartment one of my informants suddenly called attention to my appearance: "Although you always dress very simply you can't fool me," she said, "right from the very shoes you have on and all the way up to your watch, t-shirt and glasses, everything that you wear is an 'original,' very different from all the 'copies' that we sell here on the streets."

Even if my informant's observation was very much in keeping with her condition as someone who, much like the majority of the other Pentecostal squatters, makes a living in the economy's informal sector, my sense of surprise and revelation at her words was not for that less intense. A dizzying vision of row after row of identical, cheaply manufactured commodities, all more or less neatly displayed on the stalls of an army of street vendors, suddenly rose up before my eyes as an image of Venezuela under Chávez. Thus, much like the *buhonera* or informal merchant of my story, the chavista regime

also toils in a similarly inauthentic universe, a platonic realm of "bad" copies or replicas far removed from the true "originals" of which they are the debased simulacra. A universe in which, as I have argued elsewhere, the originating force of revolutionary ideals, beliefs, and intentions constantly dissipates, caught as these are in an untutored circulation of signs, images, and commodities compulsively driven by mechanical and digital reproduction.

Under the prevailing circumstances it is not all that surprising if, for me, the image of a chavista follower disguised as Che Guevara and cruising the streets of Caracas on his motorcycle with a cigar ostentatiously protruding from his mouth eventually assumed truly emblematic significance. After all it is the other chavistas who seemingly confer such significance on this character when, in meetings and other political events, they invite him up into the podium to take a sit alongside some of the main leaders of the movement. Considering that, at least to my knowledge, the only claim that this one chavista has to such a pride of place would be his status as a Che Guevara look alike, one can hardly avoid the conclusion that, thus honoring him, the chavista movement as a whole is tacitly acknowledging its predicament as a revolutionary experience strangely beset by derivation and cloning. In other words, it is as if, by honoring him in this way, chavismo is elevating the "Che" impersonator to the status of an emblem of this predicament

itself, and this, in order to somewhat avert the predicament's dire, truly deconstructive consequences.

As to why the elevation to such lofty emblematic status of someone who otherwise would appear to be at least slightly off may have such salutary effects on chavismo as a whole, I can only make some suggestions here. Lacoue-Labarthe has argued that the reason a figure like that of the double is so prevalent among common folk, philosophers and madmen alike is because, in providing a seemingly more stable figure of identification, such a figure is in charge of momentarily arresting the terrifying instability of the mimetic drift in which the subject, philosophical or otherwise, is irrepressibly caught. For reasons not unlike those that are prevalent among all these distinct categories of subjects, including philosophers, and only exaggerating somewhat, one, then, may very well conclude that chavismo has its "Che Guevara" in much the same way and for much the same reason that Plato had "Socrates," Nietzsche "Zarathustra" or one or another madman "unreasonably" identifies with a "Napoleon" or, for that matter, "Bolívar." That is to say, in all these cases "Che Guevara" and other such figures of mimetic identification are there, insistently showing up in the very midst of the chavista movement, in order to momentarily arrest the irrepressible mimetic drift, the sheer barrage of "bad" simulacra and copies along which the movement inexorably unravels.

Ultimately, it is all a case of turning mimesis against itself. If such figures or doubles are somewhat capable of accomplishing such an immobilizing feat, then this is because these figures, in some ways emblematic of mimesis itself, offer the illusion that in effect it is possible to achieve, once and for all, some sort of stable identity through identification with a restricted gallery of exemplary icons, those that, for one or another reason, a dominant power happens to have raised before its constituency. It is, in other words, by being raised to such a privileged position by the powers-that-be as exemplary icons worthy of everyone's imitation that, at least for the time being, these officially authorized doubles are capable of doing their job, thus seemingly accomplishing the ultimately impossible feat of immobilizing the dizzying flow of mimetic appearances, the irrepressible parade of simulacra of which all of reality, not just the chavistas', is inescapably made.

Whenever in Venezuela one speaks of a figure of mimetic identification that ranks paramount over all the rest one speaks of Bolívar. If stopped and questioned in the streets, a majority of Venezuelans would without hesitation instantly point to Bolívar as the nation's preeminent exemplar, the undisputed paragon who, in principle, all should imitate and on whom all should single-mindedly focus as the source of the loftier Republican values and the irreplaceable axis around which everything republican should fatefully revolve. As the nation's Founding

Father and main hero of the Independence Wars against Spain that resulted in the creation of the five Bolivarian nations of Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia, Bolívar is indeed the unsurpassable horizon to which, in these nations, but especially in Venezuela, the hero's birthplace, everything from personal quirks to practices of government ultimately refers.

As I argue extensively elsewhere, this all has to do with what I call "monumental governmentality," a form of government that emerged and developed in the wake of Independence from Spain and in response to the catastrophic violence unleashed by these wars. To make a long story short, it all had to do with the Spanish King's awesome disappearance some two hundred years ago and the catastrophic consequences that followed, especially in those parts of South America like Venezuela that were the main epicenters of the revolutionary effort. Among these consequences were the collapse of the entire colonial order, with its articulated orders and estates, now bereft of the kingly "thing" that had glued it together, and the freeing of the mimetic subjects from their corporate niches as the colony crumbled. If, for reasons that I cannot elaborate here, the colonial order can be described as a well-oiled machine for reducing mimesis to codified identity, with the collapse of this order into "terrifying instability…mimesis" returned "to regain its powers."

In practical terms what this meant is a catastrophic situation where, amidst an unstoppable circulation of masks, all government capsized. It all had to do with the seizure of the emergent spaces of the postcolony by the new subalterns that were being released by the collapsing colonial order. If not always in actuality the symbolically at least, in the King's wake these emergent spaces had been rendered vacant and flattened as a horizontal domain of abstract exchangeability among autonomous, interchangeable individuals. It was precisely these supposedly vacant spaces that the subalterns now filled with their homicidal metonymic slippage "from one term to the next," or from one hegemonic identity to the following, bent as these subaltern were on not just killing the whites but on stealing their identities. Unburdened from their corporately appointed identities which a crumbling colonial order was no longer capable of enforcing, the new subalterns gave themselves over in other words to a gruesome charivari where the bloodied masks of their former rulers, seized by them in the heat of the war, kept falling from their faces in dizzying succession.

Confronted with this maelstrom of torn bodies and stolen identities, the founding fathers unsurprisingly saw their task as that of creating the nation from scratch, since, like their Jacobin predecessors, it was from scratch or from the crowd's violent mimesis that they had to proceed. Hence the emphasis on the demiurgic powers of the nation's Foundational Charter, so characteristic of Latin

America's constitutionalism, which these tribunes envisaged as tools to mould or create the nation ex nihilo as the exclusive aftereffect of the law which was enshrined in the Constitution. In its abstract universality, only the law could provide a fitting mirror where, as bearers of equality, the postcolonial crowds could see themselves reflected as the homogeneous people of a nation. It was, in other words, a matter of arresting through reflection the crowd's lateral mimetic flight by holding up to them the mirror of the law as allegedly expressive of their latent "general will."

To be effective, however, the law needed to incarnate, hence the founding fathers drive to monumentalize themselves as representatives of the law, or, what amounted to the same, of the people's "general will" on the stage of the polity, so as to at least temporarily stop the postcolonial masses in their tracks by asking them to focus on and mimetically identify with these tribunes' words and gestures on stage as on that which, deep within their hearts, yet already enshrined in the text of the Constitution, everyone presumably shared, namely, the "general will." Given the Rousseauan character of the nation's beginnings, its distinctively Jacobin origins, such a putatively shared "will," amounting to the nation's law, is close to the definition of what the "nation" was.

Theatrical through and through, such tribunal performances over time crystallized in *monumental governmentality*. Brought about by a wide range of discursive

and nondiscursive practices, from historiography and the theater to civic rituals and various forms of domestic and public bodily training now for over two hundred years, since the time of Independence from Spain, such *monumental governmentality* has been sculpting the voices, gestures, expressions, and overall bodily demeanor of the nation's tribunes. This, so that, appropriately monumentalized, these "tribunes" may "speak" the law to their assembled audiences from the raised stage of the polity, thereby turning these, after the fact, into the nation's sovereign that was supposed to be there all along. Nevertheless, though incessantly repeated, such *après-coup* performatives eventually fail. Because of the tensions between the universal and the particular and the aporetic nature of the "general will," the republican audiences eventually vacate the republican theater. Regardless of how much the nation's tribunes strive to render themselves into the impossible sites for the reconciliation of the "general" and the "particular" or the "singular" and the "universal" right there, on the very stage of the polity, thus turning into the "dancing Jacobins" of which I speak elsewhere, these audiences eventually vacate the scenes of interpellation contrived for their benefit. And, as that happens, the "terrorizing instability" of the origin once again returns with the crowds resuming the lateral mimetic flight from which the tribunes' monumentalized yet dancing performances had temporarily wrested them.

Yet, nearly since the moment of Independence, and beyond the army of pompous figureheads or "notables" that, to this day, so prominently crowd the public spaces of Latin American nations as living/talking, monumentalized embodiments of the "general will," there has been, at least in Venezuela, one way available to temporarily arrest, or at least slow down, the inevitable dispersal of the general will imminent in the scenario that I have just sketched. I refer here to the "Bolívar" way, whereby, monumentalized by the local governmental canon as a Great Legislator, and, as such symbolically turned into a foreigner with no stakes in the local order of things, Bolívar "returns" once again to totalize "society" or a nation about to blow apart into a myriad of disparate fragments. Given the central role of "Bolívar" in the nation's imaginary as a sort of last resort held in reserve by local forms of commemoration and official historiography to be made full use of in times of acute crisis, it is not altogether surprising that during the current Chávez regime "Bolívar" has returned with a vengeance. After all such a regime was established in the wake of precisely the kind of colossal social and economic crisis to which, in Venezuela, "Bolívar" has canonically provided the "solution."

Also to be expected is that given Bolívar's central role in the nation's political theology cum monumental governmentality, and how much such a role hinges upon the hero's "true" appearance, "getting Bolívar right" would

be a national obsession of such monumental proportions in Venezuela. Given how much such a governmentality is, in the last instance, predicated on the identification through reflection of the masses with "Bolívar" looking right back at them from the raised political stage, it follows that achieving certainty about everything having to do with the hero, in particular his "true" face and overall appearance, are all matters of high national interest; and this, not just in Venezuela, but also, to a greater or lesser extent, in all the other Bolivarian nations. Indeed, as the recent decision by President Chávez to open Bolívar's sarcophagus in order to disclose what is really there so clearly suggests, achieving such certainty is ultimately nothing less than an affair of state.

The existence in Venezuela of a whole genre of coffee table books focused on the face of one or another national hero— Bolívar, Páez, Urdaneta, Soublette— is, I believe, clearly symptomatic of precisely such a pursuit of certainty. How else to make sense of books in which the reproduction of all the known portraits of some particular hero is always done in the service of sorting out this hero's "true" face from among the panoply of his existing representations? Is not such an endeavor expressive both of how crucial getting the hero's "true" look right really is, but also of the difficulties of achieving such certainty considering how discrepant the existing representations all are from one another? Such discrepancies are often so great that saying

that the representations all belong to the same individual is, indeed, taking a risk. For all that one knows one might as well be dealing with a range of different models whose only commonality is the proper name of the hero under which they all are collected.

When recently searching the web for "The Face of Bolívar" I came across a website from Colombia, the Bolivarian nation that is geographically closest to Venezuela, in which the difficulties involved in this sort of pursuit are clearly spelled out. Commenting among others on the work of the Venezuelan art historian and photographer Alfredo Boulton, who wrote the two classic books on the topic of Bolívar's "real" face, the author of this site insists that what makes it hard to discern the "true" Liberator from among all of his existing portraits is the extent to which, over time, the presumed model of these portraits, in short, Bolívar, has been made to conform to the oligarchy's reactionary ideals. So much so, indeed, that beyond any superficial resemblances, the essential or what, in other words, would be what is most precious about Bolívar is, precisely, what has been lost. In the author's own words:

> …overtime the inhabitants of the Bolivarian nations have become accustomed to images fabricated (…) by artists and drawers that had no personal knowledge of their model, and that, in the course of a series of successive retouches accentuated by a century and a half of historical make ups, have softened the traits and appeased the attitude. The Genius of War, the Man of Difficulties, as Bolívar called himself, is presented to us sitting in his study posing like a statesman, in

> the attitude of someone meditating, with dulled eyes, on the mysteries of administration. The result is a historical novelty and a psychological incongruity: Bolívar himself confessed that, for him, offices and studies were an unbearable torture. Besides, as those who knew him personally have unanimously confirmed, *his eyes always were like two lively charcoals, always burning and restless* (my emphasis).

Immediately following this passage, the website's author alludes to "one of the official representations that is more in vogue" saying that, according to him, such representation

> shows us a chief of state more concerned with crossing his cape over his chest than with *looking the painter straight in the eyes*. Doubtless the painting is both brilliant and striking, but unfortunately it is not useful to us as a historical document. Purely political, its usefulness consists in setting itself up as an effective symbol in the process of identifying with the taste and categories of the establishment (my emphasis).

I could go on piling up instances of this quest for the "true" Bolívar, some of which would add nuances to the rest that would enrich our understanding of the complexities involved. Considerations of space do not, however, allow me to venture into such territory here. Suffice it to say that one can already identify in the two passages the same concern that informs President Chávez's recent decision to open Bolívar's sarcophagus and create a Presidential Commission to investigate the real causes of the hero's death. Namely, the notion that a series of oligarchic interventions would have distorted over time the Founding Father's countenance to such an extent that restoring the Liberator to his original appearance is nowadays

a matter of considerable historical urgency. These two passages, however, add a detail that, absent from President Chávez's address of December of 2007 in Venezuela's national pantheon, throws considerable light on the precise reasons why, first, beyond what I have already said concerning the region's *monumental governmentality*, it is so crucial to get "Bolívar" right, and, also, why, if taken to its logical extremes, such a quest necessarily ends in disappointment.

What I have in mind here is the reference that the two passages make to the unique character of Bolívar's "look," the peculiar quality of his gaze, which the author singles out as the one crucial element that is irreparably lost as a result of the oligarchy's painterly interventions. So lost, indeed, that "in one of his official representations that is more in vogue" the Liberator hides behind his "cape," not even being capable of *looking the painter straight in the eyes*. Given what he had just said about Bolívar's burning eyes, the question that immediately comes to mind is what kind of "Bolívar" could this possibly be that so coyly looks away. In order to somewhat clarify why focusing on Bolívar's "look" holds the kind of hermeneutical promise that I intimated a moment ago I need to reflect briefly on what Jean-Luc Nancy says concerning "the look of the portrait" in a fascinating (and difficult) essay with this precise title.

According to Nancy, what is most characteristic about the portrait is that it re-presents or portrays the absolute

subject, that is, the subject absolved from all of its "actions or expressions" and painted as such. I cannot possibly do justice here to Nancy's fascinating and extraordinarily complex arguments. Let me just say that, for Nancy, painting the absolute subject is tantamount to painting him or her in his or her own self-relation, absolved from all of her predicates, since it is such self-relation that the subject is indeed all about. For my present purposes what this means is that, rather than any hidden substance to which one might then gain access as an entity in itself, the subject comes into being, so to speak, on the surface of the canvas itself. Put otherwise, it is by returning to him or herself in the wake of a passage through exteriority that the subject comes about. Such an inescapable exteriority is the "absent/present" ground of the subject, or all that which such a subject brings back to him or herself but that, simultaneously, always eludes her as excess that takes the subject way beyond itself.

It is precisely such a passage through exteriority, such a "return," and such "excess" that, for Nancy, is staged on the painterly surface of any portrait and this is why, for him, every subject is a "painted" subject and, rather than its representation, every subject's portrait is such a subject's enactment. As such, following Nancy, the portrait is the site of a unique, singular encounter between, on the one hand, the subject and him or herself, and, on the other, the subject and "us," or whoever happens to be standing in front of the portrait. The subject relates

to herself by re-collecting or recalling herself or, what amounts to the same, by "looking" at her own ground which, in the painted surface of the canvas, is whatever is figured there in excess of the subject's very face and main defining outline. In the same move, the subject relates to "us" by recollecting himself in front of us as we look at him and s/he returns our gaze.

What is crucial to retain from all of these somewhat cryptic considerations is, first, that it is always a singular, non exchangeable relation between subjects that comes about whenever someone looks at a portrait and the portrait looks back; second, that it is the whole painted canvas of the portrait and not just the eyes of the portrayed subject that "looks" or is dynamically organized for such "looking"; third, that the subject that comes about in the portrait through self-relation *and* for another subject(s), is always surpassed by his or her absent/present ground which, painted on the canvas, is all that the subject is (not). In other words, in its very presence such a ground is the death or the absence that dwells within any subject as both a constitutive and an excessive dimension, an "intimate disunion" both facing and defacing the subject; fourth, that modern abstract painting is not the abandonment of the portrait, as so often is thought, but a radicalization of the movement of departure that always already has taken its "look," the look of the subject, away from the self into the subject's "absent/present" ground. Such a "departure from the self through which alone the subject becomes

a subject" always entailed an "opening toward a world." With the advent of abstract painting such an "opening" takes the form of a sheer exploratory wandering "into the spacing of a world with its attraction and its disquiet" that amounts to a certain kind of modernity.

Force of death or of absence, then, as the force of the portrait: the subject's absent-present ground arriving to his or her figure, especially the face, to shine there, on every feature while simultaneously withdrawing from them all, a "death" denoting the "departure of the subject" from his or her "ordinary presence." It is on account of its ability to render present such constitutive, and, at the same time, defacing absence that the portrait, according to Nancy, "refers back to the absent presence that was once called the sacred. The portrait takes on the somber glow of this region in which presence exceeds itself…" As such, the portrait offers the "deceptive and redemptive promise (..) of a presence equal to its absence," which turns it into "the repository and the emissary of the collapse of the divinity into absence that lies at the very heart of monotheism." The portrait, then, plays out "in the singular the impossible portrait of God, His retreat and His attraction." If, as Nancy says, what is most characteristic of monotheism is not the unity but the indivisibility of the deity, therefore, its radical invisibility in contrast to pagan divinities that offer themselves to the eye in a multiplicity of appearances, the portrait offers the deceptive and idolatrous promise of a surface

where presence and absence are reconciled. Not surprisingly, then, if portraits have figured secularly among the main targets of iconoclastic outbursts.

What happens, then, when someone takes the "deceptive" promise of the portrait at face value, which is what Chávez and other Bolivarians do whenever they pretend to meet the deity—that is, Bolívar himself, "our Father," as Chávez so often calls Him—so to speak face-to-face in each and every one of his singular portraits? Needless to say, for all of the reasons that I have put forward here, the straightforward answer to such question cannot be other than bitter disappointment. Indeed, to expect from the singular encounter with a singular subject, which is all the portrait can offer, a visible encounter with Bolívar, the monotheistic deity of the state cult that is practiced in all of the so called Bolivarian nations, and, with singular virulence, in Venezuela, is to fall prey to a nefarious hoax where the gold of the encounter is routinely exchanged for a considerably more unsavory substance. In that case, instead of plunging with "the look of the portrait (…) into the absence of the subject" where a certain kind of modernity is possible, the viewer remains ensnared in the gorgonian look of its deceivingly burning eyes. Mired in such a swamp, it is not the invisible deity but this deity's most insignificant remains—cinder, bones, or, simply, nothing—that meets the viewer. In sum, not the subject but the subject's debris.

Subjected to unrealistic demands by a certain discursivity, every portrait of Bolívar is, in other words, Bolívar's assassination, and, rather than the empty grave of the monotheistic deity, Bolívar's sarcophagus is the sad repository of highly equivocal, rapidly decaying remains. In light of these considerations when the great Latin American writer Roberto Bolaño, shortly before his untimely death, spoke of Chávez as one man "whose discourse smells like shit, and is shit" he sniffed something that is truly essential to chavista discourse. As often happens with great artists who in the aim of enunciating some fundamental truth do not mince words, going straight to the point, with these words Bolaño managed, in ways that no academic sobriety could match, to name without equivocation what so often awaits at the end of the heroic glitter emitted by so much Bolivarian discourse. In our current times in which globalization and the media stretch to unprecedented extremes the distance between any putative originals, including "Bolívar," and a receding universe, such unsavory encounters are, more and more, the order of the day. Or, in short, as the fundamentalist urge to restore one or another presumed original to its full, radiant presence is intensified by such worldly withdrawal, the risks of disappointment at the transmutation of such glittery presence into mere detritus grow exponentially large.