

When the Boat Comes In:

Myth, Reification, and the Changing Face of Simón Bolívar in Venezuelan Politics and Culture

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Throughout his work, the Venezuelan poet and essayist Eugenio Montejo was concerned with locating and poeticizing the central symbols of Venezuelan identity and being (see Roberts 2009, *passim*). It should therefore be no surprise that Simón Bolívar appears as the subject matter of one of his longest poems, “Nostalgia for/of Bolívar” (Montejo 2005, 105-9).¹ The poem, dating from 1976, does what many good poems do: it resonates far beyond its literary borders. Using this poem as its starting point, this essay examines to what extent the Bolívar that is traced and metaphorized within its lines serve as a basis for understanding how the figure has been used and appropriated by politicians down the ages in Venezuela. It then explores how Hugo Chávez’s appeal to the Liberator has, however, altered the way in which the figure operates as a political, social, and cultural icon, analyzing how the solemnity of “Nostalgia for/of Bolívar” has, as a result, given way to the satiric comedy of more recent cultural engagements. Finally, it asks whether these changes signal the end of the Bolívar depicted in Montejo’s poem.

The poetic Bolívar

“Nostalgia for/of Bolívar” is not concerned with the flesh-and-blood Bolívar, so much as the mythic figure who grounds Venezuelan identity and being. This is clear from the poem’s opening lines, which describe the Liberator as the essence of the Venezuelan land and its people, coursing through both as their pulsing lifeblood:

On the birth map that we tattoo in our dreams
on the skin, the arms, the voices of this land,
Bolívar is the first of the rivers
that cross our fields.

(Montejo 2005, 107)

As the poem advances, this fluvial metaphor continues, the river Bolívar picking up different elements and associations as it flows through the verses: the river has its wellspring “close to Manoa” (107) and offers the Venezuelan people “the keys to El Dorado” (108), as the identification of Bolívar as the mythic essence of the country is underlined. This is a river and a figure that at once is written into the being of the very stones of this land (“it leaves its light written on the stones’ veins” (108)), and yet is also bound up with a heady, ungraspable promised land (“until it/he appears again, on horseback, | at the end of the rainbow, wrapped up in its colors” (108)). Unsurprisingly, then, Montejó’s poem carries within it a clear religiosity, evident not just in its reverential, almost incantatory tone, but in its biblical references to how “On his bank the men congregate in line | they hear him speak alone with the earth | with the sun and the high astral spaces” (108), lines which allude to both the figure of Christ and the pantheistic presence of the divine.

Moving towards the poem's *dénouement*, the historical and mythical identities of Bolívar converge. Already signposted in the reference to the "river" Bolívar as "on horseback", ll. 38-43 of this 67-line poem bring in the historical personage more strongly, relating the Liberator's exile in sparse, terse lines:

Afterwards he starts to lose his clothes,
his horse,
his shadow,
everything...

When he heads out towards the ocean he is already very poor
he arrives almost in rags.

(Montejo 2005, 108)

The presentation of the mythic Bolívar as the central ontological river into which all Venezuelan rivers, real and figurative, run (ll. 5-9) ties in neatly with this movement into exile, as the flowing of the river Bolívar leads inexorably to the sea. Thus the historical exile, in which Bolívar died in Santa Marta, Colombia before setting sail, is fused with the poem's metaphorical and mythic portrayal, as the latter completes that exilic journey, in effect understanding Bolívar's death as the fulfillment of that movement out into the open sea:

Faced with the final blue-ness he disappears,
beyond, his wake dissolves into the sea,
there are no steps which follow him,

there are no boats.

(Montejo 2005, 109)

The mythic, fluvial Bolívar and the historical Bolívar, (to be) carried on a boat, thus combine in this final image, and the message of the poem is clear: the importance and role of the historical figure can only be fully grasped through an understanding of the mythical figure, and the relationship of Venezuela, as land and people, to the Liberator can thus only be understood through this final, mythified image.

So what is the nature and what are the implications of this image of Bolívar, as man and myth, exiled and separated from the land and people of which he is the essence and the lifeblood? Well, the poem ends by deepening its religious elements, as Bolívar becomes a Christ-like figure, to be remembered and invoked in rite and ritual:

at each table, bread is broken in his name,

in each voice resound his words.

(Montejo 2005, 109)

As I have argued elsewhere (Roberts 2009, 170), ritual implies and confirms the absence of what is remembered, whilst also pointing to the centrality of that absence. Bolívar thus appears here as the essential point around which society operates, but where this essence is unattainable, caught in a constant slipping-away.

Reading this idea back into the body of the poem, we come to see it anew. Every image contained in it is bound up with unlocatability, ungraspability, slipping-

away-ness: the association of Bolívar with the mythic locations of Manoa and El Dorado, with the evanescent end of the rainbow; his depiction as a river inexorably flowing through and out of the land; the flitting between different allusions to Bolívar as Christ, as the divine, as the historical figure. The poem was written, we must remember, from the condition described in its final lines, and its portrayal of Bolívar is, then, a portrayal of Bolívar-as-*already*-absent, as that elusive, ungraspable essence of Venezuela.

Yet “Nostalgia for/of Bolívar” does more than just speak of the absent, religious nature of the Liberator. Rather, Bolívar’s role within the Venezuelan socio-political imaginary is found in a more literal appreciation of his imagined watery exile, in that, with the implied image of the historical Bolívar carried on a boat, he appears – quite literally – as a floating signifier. The implication is that Bolívar functions as a signifier without a fixed meaning, open to different referents being attached to it. With this reading in mind, we see that the poem’s varied depictions of Bolívar show not just the inexorable always-already slipping-away of the essence that the figure constitutes, but, more specifically, its/his lack of fixed valency.

Bolívar in Venezuelan political history

Moving outside of the poem to a consideration of the socio-political reality of Venezuela since the death of Simón Bolívar, we can now examine how the main elements to emerge from our reading of Montejo’s poem map onto and elucidate the ways in which Bolívar has functioned in the country.

Firstly, there is general scholarly consensus that Bolívar has, as “Nostalgia from/of Bolívar” describes, come to be synonymous with national identity and being. José Pasual Mora-García describes how “it is impossible to understand Venezuelan-ness without Bolívar; because Bolívar is the foundational myth” (Mora-García 2005, 8), with Luis Castro Leiva stating simply that “being Bolivarian is the same as being Venezuelan” (Castro Leiva 1991, 10). Emphasizing this inclusiveness, Harwich describes how Bolívar foments a sense of “national cohesion” (2003, 11).

Second, there is the identification of Bolívar as a divine figure. Again, this understanding of Bolívar is widely commented on by scholars (see in particular in Elías Pino Iturrieta 2004): he is the central being of a “civic religion” (Harwich 2003, 11). Moreover, the implications of this divine characteristic, as set out by Montejo’s poem, are also evident in Venezuelan historical reality: when Germán Carrera Damas speaks of the idea of “the return of he who was the soul of the nation, overcoming thus the effects of an irreparable loss” (Carrera Damas 1983, 114-5), he is conjuring the same image as “Nostalgia for/of Bolívar”, of the Liberator as the nation(’s essence), distanced and absent from it. Moreover, he proceeds to underscore the condition in which this leaves the country, determined by a “paradigm, always present but unattainable in its perfection” (Carrera Damas 1983, 131), at once putting under erasure the adjective ‘present’: Bolívar operates as the presence of an absence, invoked by rite but essentially elusive.

The third significant element of Montejo’s poem is the identification of the Liberator as a floating signifier. The history of the cult of Bolívar confirms that this is not merely an amusing coming together of literal and semiological descriptions, but an apt way of understanding how Bolívar has functioned over the last two centuries.

Even a brief survey of the prominent political figures who have used Bolívar discloses to what extent he has become a vessel into which different meanings, contexts, and discourses are poured. The nineteenth-century president Antonio Guzmán Blanco, the first fully to develop the cult, worked to “project the image of himself as the continuer of Bolívar’s work” (Harwich 2003, 12), and many subsequent leaders followed his model.

Juan Vicente Gómez, for example, the *de facto* dictator of Venezuela from 1908 to 1935, took advantage of “the foundations that the Guzmán regime had laid, [and] was able to maintain and widen the official heroic image of the Liberator” (13). Perhaps most notable, however, is that this use of the figure is found amongst leaders and movements of different natures, many of which were attempting to distinguish themselves from previous or current administrations. Thus, in the difficult transition period after Gómez’s death, the new president Eleazar López Contreras appealed directly to Bolívar as being at the heart of his thought and ideology, focusing on “unity and solidarity” (Carrera Damas 1983, 140). Similarly, just as the dictator Marcos Pérez Jiménez (1952-1958) declared himself to be Bolivarian, so too did governments of the *puntofijista* democratic system (named after the Punto Fijo Pact of 1958, an accord drawn up by the main political parties aimed at preserving the nascent democratic system), which ran from 1958 to 1999. On repeated occasions during this period, the *puntofijista* parties appealed directly to the Liberator in the promotion of their different political ideologies and projects: Pino Iturrieta, for instance, has discussed examples from Luis Herrera Campins’s government (1979-1983) (Pino Iturrieta 2004, 163-4). In short, what marks the appeal to Bolívar down the years in Venezuela is the remarkable polyvalency of the figure, as successive

political leaders and movements have invested him with a context, ideology, and politics designed to fit their own requirements and to confer legitimacy on them.

Yet, whilst this polyvalency underpins an understanding of Bolívar as a floating signifier, Montejo's poem is important in signaling the particular way in which this operates within Venezuela. Specifically, in its implied depiction of Bolívar floating out at sea, its wake having long since vanished, the poem allows us to understand the political appeals to Bolívar not as present-ings or reifications of the figure, but, rather, as the laying down of *paths* by which Bolívar *might* be found and returned. That is, in foregrounding his resistance to being brought back and moored at land, the poem underscores Bolívar's resistance to political hegemonization through the application of a fixed valency. At once, then, the poem carries with it the sense that Bolívar's status as a common, unifying denominator depends, somewhat paradoxically, on its being a figure where competing visions and understandings clash, thus fulfilling the role that such a signifier must fulfill if it is to carry with it the possibility of a democratic turn. As Chantal Mouffe writes:

Democratic politics does not consist in the moment when a fully constituted people exercises its rule. The moment of rule is indissociable from the very struggle about the definition of the people, about the constitution of its identity. Such an identity, however, can never be fully constituted, and it can exist only through multiple and competing forms of *identifications*. [...]

Hence the importance of leaving this space of contestation forever open, instead of trying to fill it with the establishment of a supposedly "rational" consensus. (Mouffe 2013, 178)

Bolívar, then, is the space of contestation, the polyvalent floating signifier that acts as a potential locus for the (continued?) construction of liberal democracy within Venezuela.

Chávez and the Bolivarian Revolution

In 1999, with the arrival of Hugo Chávez as Venezuelan president, the story of the political use of the figure of Bolívar began a markedly different chapter, with Chávez going much further than any previous instance. As Irma Chumaceiro Arreaza notes, in the case of Chávez, the extent to which Bolívar was linked in with every aspect of the *Revolución Bolivariana* is striking, with “the profuse, reiterated and systematic appeal to the figure of the Liberator, his ideas and his feats” (Chumaceiro Arreaza 2003, 25). But, with Montejo’s poem in mind, I would argue that what sets Chávez’s use of Bolívar apart from previous appropriations is a striking move away from Bolívar as being, above all, a guiding (absent) spirit, a goal to work towards, in favor of something decidedly more corporeal. At the swearing in of the Revolutionary Commando in 2002, for example, Chávez declared that:

the eternal commander of this revolution is none other than Simón Bolívar.
[...] Viva Bolívar! Bolívar has returned and is made [into the] people/nation
[*pueblo*]. (cited in Chumaceiro Arreaza 2003, 31)

The religious language is there, but Bolívar is not a divine figure to be remembered and honored; rather, he is reincarnate in the *pueblo*, in the nation of and under Chávez. This present-ing or reifying of Bolívar is further evident in Chávez's renaming the country the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela in 2005, asserting the (essential) nation/fatherland/Republic as having been realized, as well as in his practice of leaving a seat for Bolívar at cabinet meetings. This shift from absent to realized essence, and the fact that it has been internalized and taken on by those who support the *chavista* revolution, is nowhere made more stark than in the current (December 2013) usage by both Nicolás Maduro's government and its supporters of the slogan "we have fatherland [*tenemos patria*]."

Most significantly, though, this present-ing of Bolívar as the realized essence of the nation is accompanied by an alignment of Chávez with *and as* Bolívar. This is evident in the interchangeability of the recurrent epithets *bolivariano* and *chavista* in the description of the Venezuelan political project post-1999, but there were also numerous specific examples of this fusion in Chávez's discourse. In Caracas on 6 February 2010, for example, at an event marking the birth of the *Frente de Juventudes Bicentenario 200*, Chávez, brandishing Bolívar's sword, pronounced an oath which re-enacted and re-contextualized Bolívar's "Oath of Monte Sacro" from 1805, declaring:

I swear by the God of my parents, I swear by them, I swear by my honor, I swear by the country, I swear by my people, I swear by the youth I carry within, that we will not rest body or soul until we have freed the nation, until we have crowned our independence by building socialism. (Chávez 2010)

Compare this to Bolívar's words:

I swear by the God of my parents, I swear by them, I swear by my honor, and I swear by the country that I will not rest body or soul until I have broken the chains with which Spanish power oppresses us! (Bolívar 2013, "Documento 28")

Likewise, Chávez's exhumation of Bolívar's remains in 2010 was widely seen as designed to enable Chávez to entrench yet further the idea that he was the inheritor, even reincarnation, of Bolívar, both in his speeches surrounding the event and in implicitly suggesting that just as he was, he claimed, in danger of being assassinated by his enemies, so too did Bolívar meet his end by foul means rather than the official cause of tuberculosis (a thesis not proven by the exhumation). Frédérique Langué, for example, commented that the exhumation episode came down to a bringing together of "the present hero and the past hero: Chávez is the new Bolívar" (Langué 2011, 40). A more withering response appeared in the satirical Venezuelan website *El Chigüire Bipolar*, in the article "Study reveals Chávez and Bolívar had bones, therefore they are the same person" (2011a).

Put simply, the extent of Chávez's appropriation of Bolívar has led to a significant shift in the nature of the Liberator as signifier. He is no longer absent, floating, the bobbing boat implied in Montejo's poem, onto which leaders and socio-political groupings project different meanings and contexts, tracing different paths by which he might be brought back. The empty, floating vessel that was Bolívar has

been moored to the land, to the present, and to the figure and revolution of Hugo Chávez. He is, quite simply, no longer a floating signifier.

Cultural response: from solemnity to satire

The question thus poses itself: if Montejo's pre-Chávez poem acted as a reflection of a multivocal, divine Bolívar, how has recent Venezuelan culture changed its appeals to the Liberator in the face of his new political role and identification? And how does this cultural engagement enable us better to understand the nature of the port at which Bolívar has come to be moored?

Perhaps the most significant material for answering these questions is found in Venezuelan humor, in particular in the routines of arguably the two most popular Venezuelan comedians of the last two decades, Emilio Lovera and Er Conde del Guácharo, and in articles published by *El Chigüire Bipolar*.

Lovera, in a recent routine (2010), recounts a comic version of Bolívar's independence campaigns, where the Liberator drags an increasingly tired and hungry group of Venezuelan peasants around Latin America. Central to this narrative joke is the fact that Lovera uses his well-known impression of Chávez in imitating Bolívar. The fusion of present/Chávez and past/Bolívar underscores how far the two have become fused within the contemporary Venezuelan imaginary, but it has the additional effect here of showing how this fusion leads to both figures being satirized. Put simply, the target of this narrative is, to be sure, Hugo Chávez, but the satire and comedic critique of Chávez unavoidably tips over into a satirizing of Bolívar and his actions. Thus, the early part of this story has Lovera, playing Bolívar in Chávez's

voice, telling the peasants he is trying to recruit to take any horse that is not being used and any land they want (including land that belongs to the Bolívar family), in a clear allusion to Chávez's policies of land and property appropriation. Yet this comes at Bolívar's expense, as it undercuts the grander nature of his motives, as well as his intelligence (in telling them, unwittingly, to take his own family's land). Perhaps the most significant part of the narrative, however, occurs when, surveying the vast emptiness of the part of Bolivia that they have reached, one of the peasants asks Bolívar-Chávez why they have come here. Bolívar-Chávez replies "to liberate this beautiful nation/people [*pueblo*]", to which the peasant retorts "but there's no one here [...] what are we going to liberate it from? [...] Bolívar, the fact is we're hungry". A satire on the priorities and anti-imperial (US) discourse of Chávez is – ineluctably even if unwittingly – at once a satire on the priorities and actions of Bolívar himself in liberating much of Latin America.

Turning to the example of Er Conde del Guácharo (2009), whose humor is somewhat more risqué than Lovera's, we find that the treatment of Bolívar is, if anything, even more subversively satirical. In one of the staple jokes in his routine c. 2009, Er Conde sends up the extent to which Chávez sought to do everything as Bolívar had done it. He ends the joke by satirizing this near-amorous obsession on Chávez's part, as he refers to a (one assumes apocryphal) piece of graffiti that he apparently saw in Caracas, which read "Chávez, take it out of my ass [*Chávez, sácamelo*]", signed Simón Bolívar". Whilst the target here is clearly Chávez, the implied image of the graffiti clearly shows the extent to which the alignment of the two figures has led to a peeling away of the layers of sacrosanct reverence that have traditionally surrounded public discourse regarding the Liberator. In a traditionally

machista society in which attitudes to homosexuality still struggle to break free from insult and denigration, the placing of Bolívar, the “man of the nation,” in the homosexual act – and in the passive role – represents a significant shift in the ways in which it is deemed acceptable to engage with Bolívar in cultural output, in that, whilst prior to the Chávez era historians such as Carrera Damas (1983) engaged in reassessments of the cult, deeds, and reputation of the Liberator, subjecting the iconic Bolívar to such denigrating satire has, as far as one can tell from extant evidence, not been seen before in the public sphere.

In both of these examples, the solemnity of the cultural presentation of Bolívar in Montejo’s “Nostalgia for/of Bolívar” has been replaced by a satire operating at the level of his ideas, actions, and virility, an ineluctable correlate of the primary satirical target being Chávez. Moreover, a brief examination of the articles found in *El Chigüire Bipolar* discloses to what extent this satire has pervaded all aspects of the Bolívar cult, as a result of Chávez’s own all-pervading employment of it. Since emerging during the 2000s, *El Chigüire Bipolar* has published many articles that make reference to Bolívar in relation to Chávez and his appropriation of the figure. The two most recurrent themes are Bolívar’s sword and his bodily remains. In the case of the former, the satire takes aim at the large number of replicas given out by Chávez to different world leaders, the most notable pieces being a mock infomercial for the “Bolívar Sword 3000” (2010a), and an article describing how dictators around the world have returned their swords, fearing they are cursed after seeing the fate of recipients such as Gaddafi (2011b). The humor here, whilst aimed at Chávez, nonetheless has the effect of grounding what was the most sacred relic of Bolívar, the sword with which he was presented by Peru in 1825 as a post-independence gift, and

which Chávez used as a symbol of (continuing) liberation and anti-imperial struggle, tying it in to a consumerist, kitsch paradigm, which signals now the defeat, rather than the triumph, of those who (metaphorically) wield it. It seems, here at least, as if there is no space left for a representation of Bolívar's sword that is not bound up with (a satirical swipe at) Chávez's appropriation of it.

Arguably the most significant examples here, however, are the references made to the Liberator's bodily remains, in particular the article "Bolívar's bones catch dengue" (2010b). Alluding heavily to Chávez's exhumation of Bolívar, this article has the latter's bones catching dengue fever, upon which the Liberator declares his determination to rid Venezuela of the disease, in words which recast the last line of his final declarations:

If my death contributes to the end of the mosquitos and the death of dengue fever,
I shall be lowered in peace into my grave (*El Chigüire Bipolar* 2010b)

If my death contributes to the end of partisanship and the consolidation of the
union, I shall be lowered in peace into my grave (Bolívar 2013, "Documento
191")

Clearly, the presentation of Bolívar's bones as both talking and catching dengue is a far cry from the reverent, quasi-religious respect granted to his remains both in socio-political discourse and in the cultural representation of the type found in "Nostalgia for/of Bolívar", where, implying immanence, we are told that "his bones are scattered throughout the world" (Montejo 2005, 108). But this article also underscores what is

at stake in its satirical move in other ways. Key here is the image that accompanies the piece, which is an altered version of Antonio Herrera Toro's famous painting *Los últimos momentos del Libertador* (1883), a work which symbolizes the (cultural) sanctity and reverence in which Bolívar has traditionally been held. In this "new" version, the face of Bolívar on his deathbed appears as a skull, and the painting on the wall behind the dying Bolívar, which in the original is of the Holy Trinity crowning the Virgin, has been replaced by one of Hugo Chávez. This is significant in several ways. Firstly, it reverses the usual media image of Chávez during his presidency appearing in front of a painting of Bolívar, suggesting the now-profound interchangeability of the two. More than that, however, the placing of the image of Chávez in such an anachronistic setting carries with it the idea that Bolívar can no longer be imagined or portrayed without reference to Chávez: the Bolívar of history (the scene depicted *in* the painting) and Bolívar in culture (the painting *as* one of, if not *the* most iconic cultural depiction(s) of Bolívar) can now only be seen through the lens of the present, of the Bolívar-Chávez conflation. And thirdly, in replacing a painting of divine iconography with a portrait of Chávez, the image further underscores to what extent the sacred (and, as Montejo's poem shows, attendantly polyvalent) associations of the Liberator have been, to return to our metaphor, moored at the shores of contemporary historical reality. Humorous this article may be, but it is a highly revealing piece of popular culture.

Hegemonization and democracy

Given these comedic engagements, it might be tempting to conceive of the port at which Bolívar now finds himself as having a carnivalesque quarter, alongside the official Bolívar-Chávez reverence. Certainly, the characteristics of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque, most importantly parody at the expense of higher authorities and “the profanation of everything sacred” (Bakhtin 1984, 130), including the debasement or carnivalization of high culture, are explicitly present in the examples analyzed above. But, rather than acting in an emancipatory manner, as Bakhtin describes (122-4), these popular culture engagements both depend upon and entrench the official, hegemonic Bolívar-Chávez conflation. Moreover, this entrenchment contributes to the contemporary inability of other political figures and groups successfully to avail themselves of Bolívar as the signifier of the nation, as was evident when the Venezuelan opposition (Democratic Unity Roundtable [*Mesa de la Unidad Democrática*]) named their command center for both the Presidential and Municipal Elections in 2013 the “Simón Bolívar Command Center”. The response, even amongst the opposition-supporting sections of the media, was muted, to say the least, with Clodovaldo Hernández writing on 15 March 2013 in the newspaper *El Universal*, for example, that:

Bolívar [...] is a complex concept that President Chávez interpreted and loaded – in his own way – with contemporary associations. [...] Nowadays, whether you like it or not, the concept of the Bolivarian is linked to Chávez’s system of ideas and twenty-first-century socialism. (2013)

In short, the attempted reappropriation of Simón Bolívar is unsustainable and unsuccessful post-Chávez, because he has been hegemonized and is no longer a site of contestation. Moreover, that this has been accompanied by dismantling the separation of powers in Venezuela (Human Rights Watch 2008, 36-63), together with a catalogue of other significant blows to the democratic and pluralistic claims of both the Chávez and Maduro governments (Kornblith 2013), sends us back to Mouffe's warnings about the detrimental impact on democracy that results from the loss of such a site (Mouffe 2013, 178).

Conclusion

So where does this leave Bolívar for future generations in Venezuela? What must become of this figure if there is to be a move outside of the current social and democratic crisis in the country?

First it is necessary to underscore that, although my discussion has leaned upon the notion of an empty signifier to-be-filled as well as that of a floating signifier, as Montejo's poem shows, with its implied image of Bolívar floating away in exile, it is, finally, the concept of the floating signifier that offers the most accurate and useful way of understanding the nature and role of Bolívar in post-independence Venezuela. For Bolívar the signifier is never and has never been truly empty; it bears the traces of the different contexts, meanings, interpretations assigned to it: the *caudillo* figure, the military strongman, the fighter against imperialist forces. These traces have remained attached to the figure of the Liberator and have been variously incorporated into the more complex, contingent uses to which he has been put by leaders such as Guzmán

Blanco, Gómez, and Herrera Campins, all of whom have themselves added to the accrued meanings associated with the signifier. The final result of such an accrual of traces is, then, either the sinking of the floating signifier, weighed down by its semiological baggage, or its mooring back at shore, as one meaning and context inscribes its mark on Bolívar with particular vigor and purchase, reifying and hegemonizing it, as has occurred with the *chavista* appropriation of the figure. The implication, then, is clear: what is needed is not so much the opening up of a (specific) floating signifier as a space of contestation; rather, it is at the level of the signifier *itself*, as well as the signified assigned to it, that contestation needs to be kept open. That is, the floating signifier of the nation needs *itself* to be open to change, to reassessment, to renaming. Only thus can Venezuela truly open itself up to democratic possibility, and only thus can Bolívar's load be lightened and his name be allowed to dissolve into the Caribbean sea which delimits and defines the Venezuelan nation.

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¹ All translations are mine and err on the side of the literal.