

HUGO CHÁVEZ AND MAISANTA: ORALITY, LITERACY AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF LEGITIMACY
OUTSIDE THE LAW

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Chávez: orality, literacy and poietic potency¹

Hugo Chávez, president of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, elicits strong passions: undivided loyalty as well as unrelenting hatred, hyperbolic admiration as well as cruel mockery and despise. But another passion can be detected in some of the writings of the best cultural critics who deal with the Chávez phenomenon (such as Ana Teresa Torres and Elías Pino Iturrieta, among others). I would call this passion *fascination*, in the strong sense of an inextricable mix of horror and attraction before what is considered simultaneously abject and admirable. This fascination (which, I would venture, is the flip side of charisma, its evil brother) is not based on the controversial achievements of the Bolivarian Revolution (“controversial” is the favorite non-committal word in the English language). It is based on what I would propose as a *poietic potency* in Chávez himself, meaning by this his ability to create (or recreate), consistently and convincingly, a totalizing narrative about the nation, and about his own place in it, and his ability to do so by tapping, with a skill and effectiveness that elite intellectuals could only dream of, into a double source of cultural capital: that of the subaltern classes and that of the lettered elite.² The locus of that poietic potency is his *voice* (understanding voice as a complex of words, intonation, relationship with the body and a performative context). Chávez’s orality has a calibanesque quality. It is the voice of the rural, non-white, violent barbarian (another embodiment of that long-standing nightmare of the lettered city), but like Caliban, it is a barbarian that threatens to defeat its better educated adversaries at their own game, with their own words. Allow me, in the pages that follow, to elaborate on one aspect of that poietic potency as a cornerstone of his rule: Chávez’s ability to construct a narrative that links his persona and style of rule with a long tradition of insurgents. In particular, Chávez makes this link with one outlaw insurgent: Pedro Pérez Delgado, a.k.a. Maisanta. In order to do this, Chávez appropriates (in his oral performances) the epistemological privilege assigned to literature, and in particular to one specific literary work: *Maisanta: el último hombre a caballo*, by José León Tapia.

I adapted the term poietic potency from Domingo Faustino Sarmiento. Sarmiento is perhaps emblematic of the political and epistemological dilemmas of the liberal intellectual confronted with a ruler who is at the same time authoritarian, undoubtedly popular and endowed with a rare political talent. As it is well known, there was no love lost between Sarmiento and Rosas. Sarmiento considered Rosas a monster, a bandit, a tyrant, a murderer and a cannibal. But at the same time, he considered him a political genius, worthy of hyperbolic praise. Consider, for

example, the paean that he devoted to Rosas and his cynical (but accurate) understanding of human nature:

¡Rosas! ¡Rosas! ¡Me prosterno y humillo ante tu poderosa intelectual! ¡Sois grande como el Plata, como los Andes! ¡Sólo tú has comprendido cuán despreciable es la especie humana, sus libertades, su ciencia, y su orgullo! ¡Pisoteadla! ¡Que todos los gobiernos del mundo civilizado te acatarán, a medida que seas más insolente! (179)

This is not sarcastic (or if it is, the sarcasm is directed against himself and his faction, as well as it is against Rosas). Sarmiento considers Rosas a sort of Plato. He comments on Rosas taking office in 1835: “Es el Estado una tabla rasa en que él va a escribir una cosa nueva, original; él es un poeta, un Platón que va a realizar su República ideal, según él ha concebido” (206). The epithet might sound surprising, but it is not. In Rosas, Sarmiento identifies a poetic potency, the talent to *create a myth* (in the sense of Georges Sorel), that is expressed in the battle cry “¡Viva la Federación, mueran los salvajes asquerosos traidores unitarios!” That myth articulates, without rest, all of the instances of the social realm. This myth *creates the social* as the scene of a conflict of indefinite duration that happens in a time of exception. For almost two decades, this legitimated a state that was organized as a warrior machine, and it legitimated Rosas as a ruler with the “Suma del Poder Público.”

Hugo Chávez likes to talk. In fact the image with which we are most likely to identify Chávez is that of a man talking. And even though Chávez is not averse to participating in the classic populist scene of the leader addressing the gathered masses at energized rallies in vast, open spaces, I suspect that this is not the classic chavista scene. The classic chavista scene is more likely that of a public monologue, in which he talks for minutes (or a minute, like the one that was accorded to him by Carlos Andrés Pérez in the wake of the failed 4-F uprising, that marked Chávez’ entrance into Venezuela’s public imagination) or for hours, both to audiences just in front of him (with which he usually engages in some kind of dialogue) or watching him on TV. He talks digressively, incessantly, with unrelenting passion. He visits any topic that comes to his mind; from God to peas, sharing with his audience his vision of history as well as providing advice on the number of minutes that a person should spend in the shower in order to conserve water. He lectures, confesses, challenges, reads, sings, insults, muses aloud, tells jokes and anecdotes. Frequently he does this with intelligent folksy humor and piquancy. Sometimes he seems to lack any sense of timing or propriety. Enlightening, amusing or embarrassing, this verbosity is certainly part of his charisma. Ana Teresa Torres points out, with complete reason in my view, that it is not by chance that Chávez’s favorite book is *Les misérables*, by Victor Hugo (216-217). In reading *Les misérables*, one finds that there are a lot of similarities not only in the identification between Chávez and the character of Jean Valjean, the outlaw who sets out to redeem his people, but mainly in the

narrative voice that moves from one topic to the next in a seamless, but completely associative fashion.

Allow me to provide one small example. In 2006, in one of his many televised appearances, Chávez revisits one of his favorite topics: George W. Bush. But he does not talk about Bush: he *addresses Bush directly*. The text of the speech (only a fragment of it) is as follows:

Te metiste conmigo, pajarito. Te metiste conmigo, pajarito, ¿no? Tú no sabes mucho de historia. Tú no sabes mucho de nada ¿sabes? Una gran ignorancia es la que tú tienes. Eres un ignorante, Mr. Danger. Eres un ignorante. Eres un burro, Mr. Danger. Eres un burro, Mr. Danger. O para decírtelo más bien... para decírtelo en mi mal inglés, en mi bad English, you are a donkey, Mr. Danger. You are a donkey. Me refiero, Uds. saben, para decirlo con todas sus letras a Mr. George W. Bush. You are a donkey, Mr. Bush. [...] Te voy a decir algo, Mr. Danger. Tú eres un cobarde, ¿sabes? Tú eres un cobarde. ¿Por qué no te vas a Irak a comandar tus fuerzas armadas? Es muy fácil comandarlas desde lejos. Si algún día se te va a ocurrir la locura de invadir Venezuela, te espero en esta sabana Mr. Danger. Come on here Mr. Danger. Come on here. (Aplausos.) Come on here Mr. Danger. Cobarde, asesino, genocida, genocida, genocida. Eres un genocida. Eres un alcoholic Mr. Danger. Es decir eres un borracho. Eres un borracho, Mr. Danger. Eres un inmoral, Mr. Danger. Eres de lo peor, Mr. Danger. (addressing the audience) ¿Cómo se dice de lo peor en inglés? (inaudible response from the audience) The last! You are the last!

There are a number of features in this performance that are worth mentioning and that I consider emblematic of Chávez's performative mode of rule. Whereas in Western political tradition, states communicate in *written* form—treaties, declarations of war, international law, passports, visas—and whereas orality is reserved for ceremonial niceties or backroom deals, Chávez makes the oral medium the privileged medium of political exchange. This address to Bush assumes the form of a challenge. In this dramatic enactment the oral duel between Chávez and Bush is the core of the scene. The real audience (those who are there with Chávez in the *hato* [cattle raising ranch], those who are watching him on TV) is not the “real” audience because Chávez is not talking to these people. They are, rather, only spectators of a drama of historical proportions. This challenge rests on a supposedly shared code of masculinity: Chávez calls Bush a coward (that ultimate offense towards masculinity) and a drunkard—and drunkard does not mean here “someone who drinks” but “someone who cannot hold his liquor.” And Chávez is not challenging Bush as the President of Venezuela to the then President of the United States; rather he is challenging him as one *llanero*, a man of the plains, to another, a Texan, also a man of the plains. To challenge Bush, Chávez cleverly prefers the condescending tone of the masculine rural challenge (“te metiste conmigo, pajarito”) to the angry tone of the fundamentalist (that of other Bush nemeses: Kim Jong-il or

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad). And he is not challenging him to a war between states and armies, but to an outlaw duel, a variation of the singular combat. And that duel will happen in a very particular place: the *llanos* of Venezuela, the locus of Venezuelan nationhood, as I will explain later on. But there are certain complexities that make this much more than a mere display of macho bravado. Chávez frames his challenge in a peculiar fashion: he appropriates the prestige of the literary institution, by calling Bush “Mr Danger,” the character of the American interloper in the ultimate nationalist novel: *Doña Bárbara* (Rómulo Gallegos, 1929). And he does this is an heterodox appropriation of literary authority: Chávez wants to display his literary knowledge (something that he does quite often: witnessed in this particular instance by the fact that the desk from which he is talking is littered with books, pens, notebooks), as much as he wants to display his distance from it. He pronounces with exaggerated disregard for English phonetics, “Míster Dan-yer,” he calls Bush “a donkey” instead of “an ass” and he mistakenly translates “lo peor” as “the last” instead of “the worst.” I don’t know how much English (“eenglish”) Chávez knows I do know that he is a superbly astute person, and that he knows very well that he is displaying a deliberate butchering of the English language. But this butchering, in a country whose elite prided (and prides) itself on its ability to mimic American ways, is a performance of strong cultural value by itself. He even asks the audience: “how do you say ‘lo peor’?” An unidentified member of the audience responds “the last.” He dutifully repeats: “Mr. Danger, you are the last.” One would imagine that Chávez is making a fool of himself. But, this is not the case at all. By appropriating this mistake, he incorporates “popular” orality into his own voice. And by doing that, he incorporates popular orality into the historical drama of which Chávez is the protagonist. His own voice becomes, not the expression of his own passions, but a conveyor of the passions of the People. And Chávez becomes not only a Leader, but the ultimate image of the Intellectual, who, in his own voice, accomplishes a cultural synthesis of popular and elite cultures.

But Chávez’s speech begins with a rather enigmatic reference to history: “Tú no sabes mucho de historia. Tú no sabes mucho de nada ¿sabes?” The topic is seemingly abandoned later on. But is it? I would propose that History is what frames the challenge, because this allocution is much more than another instance of Chávez’s personal obsession with Bush. It is the culminating point of a historical narrative. This narrative organizes the social realm around a protracted conflict that unrelentingly divides this realm into two opposing camps. These camps have a few proper names as their emblems. On the one hand, Empire: Diego de Losada (the Conquistador who founded Caracas in 1567), the Spaniards and the *godos* who opposed the war of Independence and who later on were able to co-opt it; José Antonio Páez, who betrayed Bolívar’s dream of hemispheric unity and democracy; Antonio Guzmán Blanco and the oligarchy that betrayed the popular federalist dream; Juan Vicente Gómez, who squandered the national wealth by selling it off to Shell and Exxon, the signers and beneficiaries of the *Pacto de Punto Fijo*, the opposition to Chávez, and, of course, “W.”

On the other hand, we have an insurgent lineage that begins with Guaicaipuro (chief of the Teques and Caracas tribes, and leader of the rebellion against the Spaniards in the Caracas Valley); Bolívar (and his mentor, Simón Rodríguez); Ezequiel Zamora, the leader of popular federalism in mid nineteenth century, coiner of one of Chávez's favorite phrases: "Horror a la oligarquía"; Cipriano Castro, the forerunner of a nationalist oil policy (according to Chávez); Maisanta and (predictably), as culmination and synthesis of this historical lineage, Chávez himself. This narrative locates the conflict that defines Venezuela in a completely mythical fashion, since Guaicaipuro and his descendants (the "real Venezuela") had no notion whatsoever of something called Venezuela, while the "non-real-Venezuelans," the evil agents of Empire, were the ones who actually created the name Venezuela (from little Venice, since the stilt houses in lake Maracaibo reminded the Conquistadors of Venice). This insurgent lineage has carried out a protracted anti-imperialist, class and race-based struggle, and this anachronistic attribution of origin is a defining feature of nationalism of a primordialist bent. But what is important is that this lineage relies entirely on the power of the intellectual who is able to see and to articulate a complete historical development in narrative form. In the case that occupies this study, that intellectual is Chávez himself, the one who, to use Renan's phrase, "speaks for the dead." At the same time, this narrative suppresses a central feature of nationalist narratives: that of the "reassuring effect of the fratricide," since Chávez refuses to consider the history of Venezuela as part of a family drama (even a dysfunctional family drama, as in the case of Mexico, and the seduction of la Malinche by Cortés) in which the enemies, without their knowledge, still belong to the same imaginary whole. That is why his narrative is defined by Empire (Lozada, Morillo, Exxon, Royal Dutch, Bush), that is, with an Other who has no relationship to the self. It is an "other" that needs to be suppressed and excluded. In this light, if there is no family drama, there is no political body and the entire Venezuelan history is not the development of an original identity, but a time of exception defined by an unfinished (and probably endless) conflict, the struggle for emancipation with no compromise. This struggle legitimates *ad infinitum* Chávez's authoritarian populism. That *poietic* potency, eminently exerted in incessant, unending discourses, is at the same time the most admirable and the most irritating feature of Chávez's rule. And in the twenty first century, when macro-narratives have been declared defunct, or at best the tools of fundamentalists or cynics, it is surprising to witness the efficacy of a narrative definitely nationalistic, totalizing, teleological, and decidedly rooted in an appropriation of the prestige of literature that it is at the same time incredibly respectful and incredibly heterodox.

Maisanta: the genealogy of the outlaw

A genealogy of insurgents, of rebels, of outlaws defines "true" Venezuelan history and identity. But in addition to the chronology, there is a locus where the "true" nation lives. That locus is the *llanos*. The *llanos* of Venezuela is the region of subtropical plains that encompasses

areas of the states of Apure, Barinas, Portuguesa, Cojedes, Guárico, Anzoátegui and Monagas. Since colonial times the main economic activity of this area has been (and to a significant extent, still remains) extensive cattle ranching. This gave rise to a distinctive frontier culture. Other factors were also decisive in the establishment of this frontier culture. The *llanos*' geographical position away from the coastal urban centers and plantations that formed Venezuela's political and economic core, as well as the *llanos*' economic and cultural unity with the Colombian *llanos*, contributed to a sense of identity different from the national identity at large. Secondly, the *llanos* were ethnically comprised of a mixture of poor whites, many of who were from the Canary Islands, runaway slaves, and indigenous peoples. In a society that was (and is) firmly organized around racial lines, this stigmatized the *llaneros* as a group. Also, cattle ranching in the *llanos* catered to the needs of a highly developed smuggling economy of cattle products that bypassed the tight regulations for colonial commerce established by the Crown. This, coupled with the fact that in the *llanos* there was, at best, a vague sense of land and cattle property, created a perception of the *llanos* and the *llaneros* as comprising an outlaw society. The very denomination *llanero* came to be practically synonymous with "bandit." This phenomenon is parallel to what happened in other cattle frontiers in Latin America, such as the Argentine pampa and its gauchos, northern Mexico and its vaqueros, and Northeastern Brazil and its jagunços (see Izard, Slatta).

Either in spite of this or because of this, *llaneros* loom large in both Venezuelan history and culture. They were the main military actors in certain phases of the war of Independence, in particular in the civil war of 1813-1814, filled with race, class and cultural overtones. Disguised as a Royalist reaction, the main character in this civil war was the "Legion from Hell," the fearsome *llanero* lancers under the leadership of the Asturian-become-*llanero* José Tomás Boves. Boves and his *montoneros* soundly defeated the white Creole (*mantuano*) armies led by Bolívar; they destroyed the Second Republic, and terrorized whites to the point of triggering the exodus of most of Caracas' whites to the East, away from Boves's advancing hordes. Years later, in a singular reversal of allegiances, the *llaneros* became the fighting force that defeated the Royalist armies when they deserted and flocked to the armies of another *llanero*, José Antonio Páez, the founding father of Venezuela. Throughout the nineteenth century, *llanero* insurgents played a major role in the civil wars that prevented, until the advent of Venezuela's oil economy, the emergence of a state that was able to exert true sovereignty. (The most important of the roles was the one where the *llaneros* played under the leadership of Ezequiel Zamora, a popular leader and one of the most prominent members in the chavista pantheon). At the same time, the *llanos* were the arena where the bloodiest uprisings against the decades-long Gómez dictatorship were fought (and defeated). Hence, as a conceptual character, a cultural signifier, the image of the *llanero* is split between that of the monster vomited from hell, and that of the hero of the national and popular epic; between that of the blood thirsty barbarian who makes the nation impossible and that of the freedom fighter. Stuart Hall reminds us that this split nature is characteristic of all tropes of otherness, and

this is shown, just to give two prominent examples, in the two most important novels in modern Venezuelan literary history: *Las lanzas coloradas* (1931), by Arturo Uslar Pietri and the aforementioned *Doña Bárbara*.

Maisanta

Maisanta, el último hombre a caballo was published in 1974 by the physician and writer José León Tapia (1928-2007). The book tells the story of the last *llanero* caudillo, Pedro Pérez Delgado, a.k.a. Maisanta, “El Americano” and, posthumously, “The last man on horseback.” Allow me to provide a brief biography of this legendary figure. Maisanta was a minor caudillo, who between 1898 and 1921 took part in the last *llanero* uprisings. Maisanta entered the life of an insurgent as an officer of Mocho Hernández in the *Revolución de Queipa* against Joaquín Crespo and Ignacio Andrade. In 1901, he joined the *Revolución Libertadora*, the last stand of the caudillos against Cipriano Castro. The caudillos’ defeat signaled their irreversible decline as a national political force. In 1914 and again in 1921 he joined rebellions against Gómez. These rebellions ended, somewhat predictably, with Maisanta and his fellow revolutionaries in exile. Disenchanted with the revolutionary option, he later reconciled with Gómez (whose officer he had already been before 1914). In 1922 he was accused of complicity in yet another rebellion and although Maisanta always denied participation in it, he was apprehended and confined to the horrendous prison of Puerto Cabello, where he died in 1924 of a heart attack. Following the legend, Tapia maintains that Maisanta died of septicemia, since he had been fed powdered glass mixed with his meals, a diet that caused internal hemorrhages and a painful and inevitable death.

El último hombre a caballo was an inaugural (and so far unsurpassed) attempt to totalize a story that had theretofore been scattered between oral sources (which Tapia uses almost exclusively) and historical testimonies (which Tapia does not mention), some of which were unpublished at the time of the release of the novel. At the same time, Tapia’s book is a hybrid of regionalist novel, collective testimonial narrative (in the vein of *La noche de Tlatelolco*) and an exercise in regional oral history. The book also hybridizes political and intellectual traditions of diverse relevance. On the one hand, it is the book of a local intellectual, a liberal professional turned into regional history buff (in this case, Barinas). With certain caveats, which I will discuss later, the book also belongs to the vigorous Latin American tradition of testimonial narrative (of a national-populist orientation, in Tapia’s case). Finally, *El último hombre a caballo* belongs to the worldwide current that in the 1960s and 1970s, under the influence of the events in Cuba, China, Vietnam and the development of the American and European counterculture, reevaluated the memory of rural insurgents, in manifestations that ranged from Sergio Leone and the Spaghetti Western to Eric Hobsbawm and new branches of social history. When published, the work had some success, which established Tapia as a respected regionalist author. Tapia would later become a writer of national visibility, and probably the most influential Latin American regionalist writer

of the last decades. However *Maisanta* is relevant to today's Venezuela because its most devoted reader and promoter is Hugo Chávez. Chávez is a *llanero* himself, born and raised in Sabaneta, a town in Barinas state. And he is a descendant of the real life Maisanta (he is his great grandson, on his mother's side). The Bolivarian appropriation of Tapia's book was and is crucial in the constitution of certain aspects of Chávez's public persona and style of rule, since the story of Maisanta provides an essential link in the construction of the Bolivarian narrative, which, in truly personalist style, revolves about Chávez's biography, his body, his voice. This appropriation happened against Tapia's will. In fact, Tapia was always uncomfortable with his unofficial role of legitimating intellectual. He even declined the 2004 *Premio Nacional de Literatura*, in order to avoid that his work be considered political propaganda.

But the thing is: Maisanta's biography, as narrated by Tapia, is what was essential in providing a "live link" that legitimated Chávez's claims to be the culmination of the popular insurgent *llanero* lineage. Chávez, as I have mentioned, was a descendant of Maisanta. But Maisanta was an ancestor of ill reputation ("that murderer," "that brigand" Chávez recalls overhearing when he was a child [Blanco-Muñoz 29]). He discovers that Maisanta was something different from this shameful family memory when reading, in 1974, Tapia's book (Blanco-Muñoz 29). There, a long relationship with the figure was born. Tapia remembers receiving a passionate letter by a young lieutenant at the time of the publishing of the work. Moreover Chávez engaged in a project of writing a biography of Maisanta, a task for which he travelled to the places where Maisanta lived and fought in Venezuela and Colombia. The book was never written, but his incursion into Colombia cost him several days in jail (Blanco-Muñoz 30, 60).

According to Herma Marksman, his lover throughout the 1980s and 1990s, now a disgruntled member of the anti-Chávez camp, this reverence bordered on messianic delirium. Marksman tells of how the first gift that Chávez presented to her, on one of their first dates, was Tapia's book (86). While commander of a secondary garrison, Chávez demanded, from the soldiers under his command, daily demonstrations of reverence to Maisanta, together with the more official ones to Bolívar (both pictures adorned his office there). Marksman also refers to how, when a certain Adarmes, a political and personal enemy, died in a car accident, Chávez mentioned that Maisanta had administered justice. Additionally, there are controversial testimonies about events of Chávez's "possession" by Maisanta's disembodied soul, while he was in prison after the 1992 coup attempt (Marksman 87). Also well-known is Chavez's use and repeated exhibition of Maisanta's scapulary of Our Lady of the Socorro. This scapulary was given to Maisanta by his mother, after he was forced to flee because of a (justified) murder. Maisanta invoked the protection of the Virgin before every war action by invoking "Mai Santa" (for Madre Santa), or used the expression as emphasis. The contraction, in time, replaced "Maisanta's" real name, much like in the case of "Ché." Chávez, after reading Tapia's book, and becoming aware of his now illustrious lineage, contacted Maisanta's elderly daughter and was given the relic that he

now wears around his neck. This relic, according to Chávez himself, would protect him against both assassinations and coups (it is not entirely clear if this protection was afforded by the Virgin depicted in the relic, or by Maisanta, the former owner of the relic).

From the start, this overly emphatic reverence for Maisanta (who was also the son of a Colonel of Zamora's army) legitimizes Chávez's revolutionary credentials, towards the past as well as towards the future. But it does even more: because of this legacy, Chávez not only belongs to an insurgent family, but he also belongs to a *llanero* insurgent family. The *llanos* were displaced from their political and economic place in Venezuela by the rise of the oil economy, thus turning into an economic backwater. But in the Venezuelan imaginary, oil has an ambiguous place: it is infinite wealth that belongs to everybody, that is right there for the taking, like a new El Dorado. But it is also a deleterious influence that brought about imperial ambitions, corrupting luxury, and the destruction or forgetting of the real, rural warrior "Venezuela," and with that, the "people" as depository of Venezuelan identity. To claim a *llanero* ancestry is to claim an origin that is older and more legitimate than modern Venezuela, the pre-oil Venezuela. Of course, Chávez's ambitious agenda can only be sustained with the revenue derived from oil, and from oil exported to Chávez's avowed enemy, America (PDVSA, the state run oil company, is the owner of CITGO, the large chain of American refineries and gas stations). But, unlike Carlos Andrés Pérez, whose identity was forever fixed to the "Saudi Venezuela" of the 1970s, Chávez, *llanero*, descendant of a family that was destroyed by the oil economy (the family hacienda "La Marqueseña" was expropriated, as it belonging to a rebel [Blanco-Muñoz 49]), can claim a symbolic independence from the corrupting influence of oil (Torres 117). And in fact, the way in which Chávez redistributes oil revenue, through the so called "missions," that bypass state standards for accountability, reminds us less of the state populism of the 1930s through the 1950s of Cárdenas, Vargas or Perón, and more of the outlaw *modus operandi*, in which the rich (the "oligarchy") are dispossessed and the bounty is redistributed to the poor, in a personalist, not bureaucratic fashion, and the distribution is less an investment in the future and more a reward.

But there is more. There are a number of features in Tapia's work that allowed for its appropriation as a decisive piece in the Bolivarian narrative. While alive, the image of Maisanta oscillated between that of an insurgent "Jefe grande" and that of a rural bandit. In all official communications between Gómez and local officials, Maisanta and his associates are always called "bandidos," "bandoleros," "cuatreros," and "Gavilleros." And of course, he met the end of a bandit. He was apprehended without warrant, jailed without trial, and died without a sentence. This labeling is a classic procedure that delegitimizes rural insurgency in Latin America as well as elsewhere. In the case of the anti-Gómez armed parties, as in most cases of rural insurgency, there is a grain of truth. The rebel armies lacked regular lines of supplies. It was a long sanctioned practice to sustain the forces on the move by plundering stores or haciendas that belonged to the enemy faction, or by demanding ransoms in cash, cattle, lodging or supplies. The same coerced

extraction was carried out with the allies, but in this case it was not a “patriotic contribution” or a loan to be returned in an entirely hypothetical future. The line that separated plundering or extortion from the patriotic contribution was blurry, or nonexistent. It determined, above all, the level of exaction, not its occurrence (and that level was rarely random or arbitrary, but rather was determined by a more or less strict “moral economy”). And of course, more often than not, store and hacienda owners contributed to both sides in any given struggle. As long as the predatory practice was carried out with a certain restraint, it was considered the price of doing business. Furthermore, this was a widespread practice among the enforcers of the law. The vast majority of Latin American armed forces, either national armies or state militias, as well as rural police forces, until well into the twentieth century, were not that different from bandits when it came to the material aspect of certain practices. The difference was how those practices were articulated to a legality not yet completely defined or enforced. Thus, “bandit” was above all an “effect of articulation” (Laclau), where what was being decided was precisely who was the bandit.

Tapia emphasizes motifs that define social bandit narratives. Maisanta begins his career after murdering Pedro Macías, a local boss who had sexually abused his sister. His mother urges him to act as the man of the house, which he does, even though he has to flee. Much like Demetrio Macías in *Los de abajo*, or the Tigres de San Pablo in *Vámonos con Pancho Villa*, Maisanta lacks an ideology articulated according to the categories around which the political, in modern terms, is defined (class, state, and so forth). He leaves with Mocho Hernández just looking for adventure. He joins the Libertadora against Castro out of personal loyalty to a friend. He murders Colmenares, a gomecista political boss just in order to avenge his friend Mauriello, while at the same time he remains loyal to Gómez until the death of another friend.

His career as a rural insurgent also brings to mind many of the motifs of the rural outlaw. He does not have a huge fighting force, but he relies on charisma, a sense of shared cultural capital with rural community that ensures the loyalty of the local population, a superb knowledge of the terrain, as well as master strokes of genius when it comes to strategy or dissimulation. His identity mixes popular Catholicism (witnessed in the use of the scapulary) with implicit machismo, and an undivided loyalty to family honor. His supernatural powers are a part of his prestige, and finally, he can only be brought down by treason.

Chávez, on the other hand, embraces the identity of outlaw-turned into sovereign. This is not only because his failed rebellion in 1992 bore an uncanny resemblance to the nineteenth century and early twenty century “invasions.” (In fact, Gustavo Wahloxten used the term “Maisanta in an Iron horse,” as the title for his largely sympathetic account of the 4-F rebellion). Nor is it because he mentions that certain organizational aspects of his own rebellion imitate certain aspects of the anti-Gómez insurgency of the 1920s (Blanco-Muñoz 62). Chávez claims an outlaw identity when, while taking the oath as president, he denies the validity of the Constitution that is actually making him president (the constitution upon which Chávez was sworn in was the

1961 constitution, contemporary of the *Pacto de Punto Fijo*, that for Chávez embodies all of the lost opportunities of Venezuelan democracy). Then, his becoming president is not legitimized by the Constitution, whose validity he denies, but by the 4-F insurrection that allowed him one minute of public exposure on the media that made him into an instant celebrity. Chávez thus builds his image as that of a subject of violence outside the law. In that sense, *outlaw* is the flip side of the sovereign, since he inhabits a space of exception, or better yet, in order to borrow Schmitt's definition, he decides upon the exception. But, just like in the case of social bandits, this subject position outside the law claims a legitimacy that is exterior and previous to the law. Legitimacy resides in the "people" ("my people" as it appears in the variation of the oath that he takes). And again, Tapia's text provides a decisive key on how "the people" is constructed. Tapia states in the foreword to the work that he is not the author of the book. He states that his narrative is the voice of "the people," and that his text is less written than transcribed. Tapia explains: "Se nos ha ocurrido conversar con la gente y recoger leyendas, anécdotas o relatos de testigos presenciales o referenciales de las cosas que han pasado en la tierra barinesa. Nos vamos a veces por los caminos de Barinas a conversar con la vieja gente y allí hemos encontrado un filón de tradición popular" (27). The idea that *Maisanta* represents the unmediated voice of the people (specified differently along regional, cultural or class lines) is the inaugural gesture of all the criticism on the work that, since the 1980s, has been recuperating Tapia's memory, and this recuperation of the voice of the people was such a powerful gesture, that even a work like Botello's, that explicitly relies on documentation, feels the need to legitimize his work claiming also first-hand access to oral testimonies.

But *El último hombre a caballo*, at its most literal level, is not the voice of the people. It is the voice of a series of individuals that share their memories with Tapia. The collective artifact "people" is a totalization by Tapia that happens *a posteriori* and this totalization implies two operations. First, it implies that individuals disappear from the narrative. Some informants are mentioned, but there is never a portion of the narrative that is linked to a particular informant, which is a suppression that causes Tapia, by default, to become the sole, unmediated narrator (since no other voices can be isolated). In the second operation, Tapia transforms the informants' scattered narratives into a coherent whole. This whole is inscribed into another totality: the history of Venezuela. Because of his narration, the story of Maisanta becomes an elegy of rural Venezuela, a picture of the painful transition towards an oil economy, a reflection on imperialism and the neocolonial destiny of Venezuela. The "people" does not preexist the novel: it is a synthesis that is created in the novel and that does not exist outside the novel. To postulate its existence is a mechanism of cultural legitimation that, at the same time, affirms and denies the epistemological privilege of the man of letters as the unavoidable and immediate mediator, and that transforms the murmurs and muffled voices of the multitude into a recognizable historical figure.

Chávez's profuse oral interventions, whose epitome is the TV program "Aló president," are structured in the same fiction. As the title of the program indicates, the assumed origin of the dialogue, its active pole, is the people. But again, it is never "the people." There are only individuals. The moment of synthesis, in which "the people" is born, is the voice of Chávez, his digressive and totalizing answers that exert an invariable interpretative privilege.

But returning to Tapia: the suppression of the voice of the individual narratives has another effect in Tapia. It makes Maisanta an unequivocally epic hero. The testimonials that Tapia collects are testimonials of people that fought with Maisanta. But their actions are never mentioned (and whoever reads *Cimarrón*, or *Hasta no verte Jesús mío*, should be aware of how the elderly who took part in memorable actions do not forget their part in them). In *El último hombre a caballo*, Maisanta is the only character of any relevance. That suppression of the other biographies uses the epic shortcut, in which the hero is made into a synecdoche of the rest of the community, and that narrative suppression is balanced with a symbolic overcharge. Chávez takes this a step further, since he occupies a double position: he is a character (a descendant of Maisanta) and he is an interpreter (the creator and propagator of the Venezuelan emancipatory narrative) and as such, he is the place where the synthesis that we call "the people" comes into being. Chavista orality is popular, epic, and post-popular all at the same time. Chávez speaks as a hero, he speaks as the people, and he speaks as an interpreter of the people. It is in his voice, it is in his body at risk that (according to Chávez himself) "the people" comes to being. And this is not my hyperbole: in the message in front of the Constitutional Assembly, when Chávez was turning in his project for the new constitution of the future Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, Chávez asserted, bluntly, that until the events of 1989-1992, there was no "people" in Venezuela.

Chávez adopts three more tropes from Tapia's *Maisanta*. With them I would like to close these pages. First, Maisanta was not a victorious caudillo. He won a number of encounters, but he never won a major battle, he never took a provincial capital. But in Tapia's account those defeats are attributed to two reasons: first, they are due to treason by the "doctores", meaning betrayal by caudillos such as París, Vargas o Arévalo Cedeño who were also professional politicians with formal educations. And secondly, they are due to the absence of a unified and legitimate leadership. Maisanta, the only qualified leader, according to Tapia, subordinated himself to unqualified leaders. But also, these tropes are elevated in Tapia's text to the keys of Venezuelan history. In fact, a summary of Venezuelan history as a chain of treason and dissension that prevented Venezuela's coming into being is the political education that Elías Cordero gives Maisanta at the beginning of the text (56). Chávez, on his part, enters political life, he becomes an overnight hero, not as the leader of a victorious uprising but as a dignified loser. I am referring to his media inauguration, when he became a popular icon: the fateful minute that was given to him in order to call for the surrender of his comrades in arms. Unlike Pancho Villa, whose charisma

was based on his victories, Chavez's charisma was born out of his defeat. Defeat—and dignity in defeat—is a signifier that encompasses at the same time the populist leader and the people, as common victims of an historical defeat with a superlative power of interpellation. The trope of defeat by treason creates other links with the other heroes vindicated by Chavismo: Guaicupuro, Bolívar, Zamora and Castro. They were defeated and betrayed because, like Maisanta, they listened to the bachelors and PhDs (“los doctores”). One of the most memorable moments in Maisanta's history is the cursing of the doctors: “—Maldita sean los doctores y todo aquel que aprovecha la guerra para ver si llega arriba a costillas de los de abajo! [...] —Juro que no daré un paso más al lado de estos carajos, que cuando hay que jugársela toda como corresponde a los hombres completos, comienzan con la conversadera.” (228). But again, Chávez performs a cunning sleigh of hands. He assumes the position of the defeated, and connects with the audience, but he does not define his entire identity by it. This is the role of the famous “we've lost for now” proclaimed in his one minute televised address.

Failure to assume leadership, falling victim to treason, mark and stunt Maisanta's destiny. They leave the historical cycle incomplete. If Maisanta as outlaw is a point of positive legitimation (to be imitated), these last tropes are a legitimating contrastive instance where Chávez completes what Bolívar, Zamora, Castro y Maisanta left unfinished (the denomination that Chávez uses to refer to his government, “fifth republic” serves that purpose also) (Marksman 86). Chávez echoes Maisanta as identity under the form of lineage and as difference under the form of completion. He echoes Maisanta in his obsession for the unity of leadership, the historical defeat to be vindicated, in his obsession with treason and internal divisiveness, in his challenge to the authority of the “PhDs” (in this case, the Adecos and Copeyanos, the signatories of the Pacto de Punto Fijo). Finally he echoes Maisanta in the obsession with the exclusion of internal dissidence from the political game, and the absolute need to complete a destiny. From this point of view, the indefinite extension of his rule is not presented as a personal ambition, but as an historical need. Finally, Chávez's reliance upon *El último hombre a caballo* brings to the fore one of the most disconcerting features of his leadership and his political persona: his devotion to literature, a devotion that made him postulate *Los miserables*, as the key to the Latin American political present (“Chávez y Víctor Hugo,” “Chávez: *Los miserables* y Fidel Castro”). It is a devotion that is one among the many factors that explains the disoriented mix of puzzlement, admiration and disdain with which we cannot avoid considering this instance of “Socialism of the twenty first century.”

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Notes

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² In this article, I follow broadly the brilliant analysis that Ana Teresa Torres carries out in *La herencia de la tribu*, when it comes to the analysis of Chávez's legitimating narrative. I introduce some additional elements (such as the centrality that I assign to Maisanta). But my own analysis is possible because hers preceded it. My debts to her when it comes to understanding Chávez are much more than what mere quotations can convey.