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The President in His Labyrinth: Literature and the Construction of the Chávez Mythology

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Abstract

This article analyzes the complex relationship between writers and the self-mythologizing of Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez. The author traces Chávez's attempts to acquire cultural capital through the support of writers such as Gabriel García Márquez and Victor Hugo while confronting other notable figures, such as Mario Vargas Llosa. The author argues that emphasis on Chávez's role in manipulating the media has obscured the fact that he also has attempted to be taken seriously as a public intellectual. Using Angel Rama's concept of the "letrado" (the learned man of letters), the author argues that Chávez's relationship with public intellectuals fits within a historical continuum of using literary writing as a basis for legitimizing political power. Finally, the author contrasts the role of García Márquez with that of two other Boom figures, Mario Vargas Llosa and Carlos Fuentes, who have been vehement in their criticism of the Venezuelan president.

Key words: Hegemony, Socialism, Literature, Cultural capital, Boom, Magical realism, New Left, Hugo Chavez

Hugo Chávez and the Letrados

In April 2009, at a Latin American regional summit in Trinidad and Tobago, Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez walked around a table to introduce himself to the then-new president of the United States, Barack Obama. Obama appeared a little surprised as Chávez shook his hand and offered him a copy of a book, Eduardo Galeano's *Open Veins of Latin America: Five Centuries of the Pillage of a Continent*.¹ The gift befuddled many in the media, who had never heard of Galeano's work. According to *The Guardian*, Chávez's gift briefly vaulted the book to the top of Amazon.com's bestseller lists.² In his lyrical take on the history of the Americas, Galeano traces a line of exploitation from the arrival of the Spanish in 1492 to the U.S. neo-colonial regimes in place in the 1970s, when the work was first published.³ By presenting Obama with the work of a writer known for literary non-fiction, Chávez also demonstrated the importance of writing—especially literary writing—in the ongoing construction of his own image and his vision of "21st Century Socialism."⁴ As many scholars of political rhetoric have noted, Chávez often employed a messianic populism in his discourses while demonizing "the Empire" and "the oligarchy."⁵ What is remarkable about this moment, then, is that it demonstrated a Chávez seeking cultural and intellectual capital to bolster his own myth-making. As I demonstrate in this article, this incident was not an isolated case of Chávez playing up his intellectual credentials for a U.S. president known as a legal scholar in his own right, but rather part of a larger, often overlooked phenomenon of *chavismo*, which sought to wed Chávez's own myth-making to existing tropes in the tradition of Latin American literature.

Much of the attention paid to Hugo Chávez and his Bolivarian Revolution has centered on the Venezuelan president's battles with the privately held media. Because the private media played an important role in the short-lived coup against Chávez in 2002, it would appear that the cultural front between the Venezuelan opposition and the Bolivarian Revolution centers primarily in television, newspapers, and the Internet.⁶ While there is indeed much to learn from discussion of Chávez's manipulation of the media, what is often ignored is the role of cultural figures—mainly novelists and essayists—in the ongoing construction of the Chávez myth as well as the president's concomitant interest in obtaining cultural capital from academic and literary elites.

At first glance, it would seem that there is little literary merit in Chávez's rhetoric. José Pablo Zúerete's thorough content analysis of the president's speeches on "Alô Presidente" reveals that much of Chávez's rhetoric resorts to a Manichean split between "elites" (bad) vs. "el pueblo" (good)

Chavez constantly separates the "people," the "true" patriots, from the "oligarchy," those self-serving elites who work against the homeland. During the general strike called by the opposition, Chavez declared, "this is not about the pro-Chavez against the anti-Chavez... but . . . the patriots against the enemies of the homeland. There is no third way here," he stated, typically. "No, here there is only revolution and counterrevolution, and we are going to annihilate the counterrevolution."⁷

The Manichean binaries were not invented by Chávez, of course, and the split between "revolution" and "counterrevolution" echoes the famous dictum by Fidel Castro to Cuba's intellectual class in 1961: "Within the Revolution, everything; outside the Revolution, nothing."⁸ While Castro used the occasion of this speech to dictate certain parameters of artistic creation (freedom of "form" would be absolutely permissible, while freedom of "content" would have to conform to the Revolution), Chávez often took his cues *from* writers, most notably Gabriel García Márquez and Victor Hugo, in crafting many of his ideas, as we shall examine in detail later.

In focusing on what is unprecedented in Chávez's rhetoric and policies, scholars have overlooked the degree to which Chávez's support from international intellectual elites (the *letrados* who have been central in Latin American writing since colonial times) fits within an established historical narrative in Venezuela and other Latin American countries. Indeed, while many business elites have opposed Chávez from the start, Latin American intellectual elites, including Elena Poniatowska, Eduardo Galeano, and Gabriel García Márquez, were—at one time or another—supporters of Chávez.⁹ I should be clear here that the dynamic between Chávez and public intellectuals outside Venezuela is very different from that of the dynamic inside Venezuela, which has its own complex dimensions, with many leftists and intellectuals opposed to Chávez. My concern here is with public intellectuals who operate in international circles of publishing and academia, and their role in constructing a contemporary literary mythology of Chávez. In considering the split between cultural and economic elites regarding Chávez and his policies, I turn to Bourdieu's distinction between economic and cultural capital. Bourdieu argues that there are several forms of cultural capital, but that they do not necessarily function on the same level as economic capital. Although the acquisition of cultural capital is often corollary to the expansion and transmission of economic capital, Bourdieu concedes that the "cultural bourgeoisie," often dominated by professors, artists, and professional writers, may operate according to its own rules.¹⁰ When one considers the legitimacy that major artistic producers outside Venezuela—including Galeano, but also figures such as Sean Penn, Danny Glover, and Oliver Stone—have lent to Chávez, it becomes clear that the Venezuelan president has been immensely successful in currying favor among middle-to-highbrow cultural producers, even while he alienated business elites at home and abroad. Chávez's relationship with the Hollywood culture industry was, like much of the president's persona, a paradox: he cultivated relationships with established personalities in Hollywood who were themselves often anti-establishment. The cultural capital Chávez acquired among the international cultural elite stands in contrast to the declining fortunes of Venezuela's financial elite, which has been squeezed out by land and business expropriations.¹¹

Although Chávez's intimate relationship with writers appears, at first glance, to be unique in the field of Latin American politics, the longer view reveals that it fits within a historical continuum of a struggle between the *caudillo* and the *letrado*. The *letrado*, as Rama and others have demonstrated, played a unique role in inscribing and adjudicating social norms and laws from the time of the conquest through the 19th century. While some critics have characterized the *letrado* as a mere courtesan to power, Javier Malagón-Barceló cites a number of instances in which the legal authority of the *letrado* led to conflicts with powerful landowners and local politicians. The *letrado*, Malagón-Barcelón demonstrates, had the prestige of a university of education, but often found himself at odds with "adventurers or soldiers of fortune," the very men who would establish themselves as *caudillos*.¹² The *letrado*, as Rama writes, may have been obsessed by imposing and maintaining order through the written word, but that order was often challenged by rivals for power. Chávez, in a way, sought to play both ends of the spectrum of power, performing the role of the populist *caudillo* on television while also becoming a *letrado* when the context called for intellectual legitimacy. By citing the work of Chomsky, Galeano, or quoting from French theory, Chávez performed the role of a sort of postmodern *letrado*, one who, paraphrasing Nestor García Canclini, understood strategies to enter and leave modernity while still maintaining a grip on power.

Indeed, Chávez used literary works to critique Venezuela's position on the periphery of modernity. Invoking one of his favorite texts, *Les Misérables*, Chávez told a crowd of French journalists in 2007:

You want to meet Jean Valjean? Go to Latin America. There are many **Jean Valjeans** in Latin America. Many: I know some. You want to know Fantine? There are many Fantines in Latin America—and in Africa too. You want to know little Cosette and all the others... you want to know Marius? They're all down there in Latin America.¹³

He told the journalist John Lee Anderson that *Les Misérables*--and not just his conversations with Fidel Castro--were responsible for his ideological transformation to socialism even after the Cold War had ended.¹⁴

This belief in literature as a catalyst for ideological change led Chávez to implement the Plan Revolucionario de Lectura in 2009. Under the plan, government workers would help to distribute books and facilitate discussions in poor sections of Venezuela.¹⁵ Chávez's vision of a literary education for the poor included some Western canonical texts (*Les Misérables* and *Don Quixote*, most notably), but did not conform to the traditional liberal arts foundations as the vast majority of texts were instrumentalist in nature, emphasizing the role of socialism in society.¹⁶ The accompanying guide for the reading program left no doubt about the didactic nature of the reading project. Titled "Procesos del Libro y Plan Revolucionario de Lectura en Venezuela," the Ministry of Popular Culture stated that reading and writing were human social acts, and, as such were, "profoundly socialist practices."¹⁷ Repurposing the ideological backbone of Che Guevara's writings on the socialist New Man, the document stressed the notion that collective cultural practices that would lead to a moral purification.¹⁸ The act of reading literature, according to the project, would reclaim the individualistic, "bourgeois" practice for the working poor.

If the texts and theory behind Chávez's program owed their legacy to their Marxist forbearers, Chávez himself juxtaposed his pedagogical and instrumentalist vision with cultural performances that often bordered on the comedic. The result was more like a postmodern pastiche at times than a coherent statement of beliefs, as his performances veer from political manifestoes to improvisational comedy. In a speech shortly before he announced that he was undergoing cancer treatment in Cuba, for example, Chávez began with a reference to the 1970s film *Saturday Night Fever*, a reference that caught the President of the National Assembly, Diosdado Cabello, off-guard:

Presidente Chávez: Buenas noches a todos, buenas noches a todas. Bueno yo me veo obligado por las circunstancias, ustedes saben mis queridas amigas, mis queridos amigos venezolanos y venezolanas todos, que no es mi estilo un sábado por la noche y menos a esta hora, nueve y media de la noche ¿te acuerdas de aquella película Diosdado?

Presidente de la Asamblea Nacional, Diosdado Cabello: ¿Cuál?

Presidente Chávez: Saturday... ¿cómo es?

Presidente de la Asamblea Nacional, Diosdado Cabello: Saturday night fever [sic].

Presidente Chávez: Fiebre de sábado por la noche, John Travolta, yo bailaba La lambada compadre [risa] Yadira también la bailaba.¹⁹

Here Chávez, the strident anti-imperialist, leavened a serious discourse on his own illness with a reference to Hollywood, demonstrating that, for all his intellectual pretensions, he was still capable of humor. He used comedic moments to temporarily suspend his authoritarian discourse. Chávez's ability to cultivate the pathos of a nation in one instant, make an absurd joke in another instant, and then conclude with a fiery discourse on Empire with quotations from Noam Chomsky calls to mind Rama's reflections of the paradoxical role of the *letrado* during the Mexican Revolution. The *letrado* has an awe-inspiring capacity to "manipulate language" in both the written word and in speech, inspiring both confidence and fear for those outside the realms of power. While it would seem that modernity would have decreased the power of the *letrado*, as a polyphony of voices arose through print and electronic media, Rama suggests that, in the era of 20th century, the *letrado's* role in creating a national imaginary actually increased. Explaining the importance of the *letrado* in Latin America's first modern revolution, the Mexican Revolution, Rama writes:

[Mariano] Azuela's paradigm of intellectuals in the revolution has a long tradition in Latin America and draws on a commonplace of the popular imagination regarding the representatives of the lettered city: an undisguised awe of the intellectual's capacity to manipulate language, whether in oratory or in writing.²⁰ In revolutions, it falls to the *letrado* to compose documents that provide satisfying ideological justifications of the struggle, the requisite glorifications of revolutionary leaders, and the plans coordinating scattered forces. On the other hand, there is an abiding lack of confidence in the *letrado's* perseverance and true solidarity with those who stand outside the lettered city, a suspicion that the fruits of the revolution will be lost through the treachery of the *letrado*.²¹

Rule by caudillos in Mexico and Venezuela in the 19th century created conditions under which it was in the *letrados'* best interest to collaborate with authoritarian rule; the relationship between *letrados* and caudillos was important but, ultimately, of a servile character.

While it might appear that Chávez's vision of "participatory democracy," in which policy decisions supposedly emanate from subalterns up towards the political leadership, represents a break with the central role of the *letrado*, his importance is undiminished under Chávez.

Chávez, despite his socialist-populist rhetoric, has attempted to maintain this relationship by embracing some of Latin America's most prestigious and prominent writers. Most of these are from the generation of the Boom—that period of the 1960s and 1970s in which writers such as Gabriel García Márquez and Julio Cortázar became international publishing phenomena. He has explicitly embraced some of these writers, even going so far as to paraphrase them in his speeches, while openly challenging others (especially Mario Vargas Llosa and Carlos Fuentes). In this regard, Chávez's relationship to the class of *letrados* that makes up the Boom fits squarely within a historical tradition, one which Rama traces back to the ideals of the French Revolution:

Writers of the day were exponents of the tenacious myth—adopted from French thought of the independence period, nourished by nineteenth century liberalism, and steadfastly maintained thereafter by each generation of *letrados*—that men of letters are best suited to conduct political affairs. Far from losing its influence during late-nineteenth-century modernization, the myth became more diffuse but also more embracing. In the twentieth century, it remained robust enough for the sociologist C. Wright Mills to consider it a defining factor in Latin American life. **22**

All of this despite the fact that by the 1960s, as in North America, the *métier* of the writer was becoming professionalized. This meant that writers had institutions to support them—profitable publishing houses, university sinecures, media exposure—but that removed them to a greater distance from the halls of power. This distance from actual political power allowed the "dictator novel" to take a turn away from the realist representation of the *caudillo* figure toward a modernist, fragmented text that sought to narrate the consciousness of a dictator. In the late 1960s and through the 1970s, Latin American writers produced a number of works that interrogated the very psyche of power. Novels such as Augusto Roa Bastos's *I, the Supreme* (1974) and García Márquez's *The Autumn of the Patriarch* (1975) seek to penetrate the thought processes of the *caudillo*, revealing his megalomania and paranoia through stream of consciousness narration. There have been many studies on particular aspects of the dictator novel, and it is beyond the scope of this article to exhaustively cover the many approaches to the phenomenon. However, it is worth remarking that González Echevarría and others have seen this genre as something more than the mere representation of power. In the hands of its most sophisticated writers, the dictator novel "dismantles" the authority of dictator through his own language. Chávez may not have deconstructed his own authority on "Alô Presidente," but the show did provide moments of comedic relief that bordered on farce, such as the "Saturday Night Fever" episode. **23**

For all their distance from actually existing structures of power, Latin American writers of the post-Boom 1970s were aware the discourses of politics and fiction could never be entirely separated. As González Echeverría has noted in the context of Alejo Carpentier's novel *Reasons of State* (1974), literary discourse has often served to legitimate political power:

both power and rhetoric are generated together and cannot exist independently of one another. In Carpentier's novel, academics and poets provide the appropriate rhetoric to help legitimize political power as some sort of autochthonous, telluric force. **24**

Hugo Chávez, perhaps uniquely in the field of contemporary Latin American political leaders, brought literary authors to the fore as legitimizing forces of his regime. Furthermore, as I will demonstrate later, Chávez appropriates literary tropes from his favorite authors in constructing a mythology around himself and the Bolivarian Revolution. From his appropriation of Galeano's *Open Veins of Latin America*, to Oliver Stone's flattering portrait of Chávez in *South of the Border*, to Elena Poniatowska's appearance with Chávez at the Rómulo Gallegos prize ceremony in 2007, international cultural production has helped legitimize Chávez's political authority even as he faces criticism at home and abroad.

This is nothing new. The interplay between literature and political power in Latin America was essential in forming national identities and legitimizing rule by individuals or entire political classes. **25** Gabriel García Márquez's friendship with Fidel Castro, for example, is well documented in written texts and it has been relatively easy to trace the influence of certain writers on the official discourse of the Cuban Revolution. **26** Mario Vargas Llosa relied

heavily on the prestige he had acquired as a novelist to bolster his credentials as candidate for president of Peru in 1990. In Mexico, the PRI long relied on a system of patronage with artists and writers in an effort to lend intellectual legitimacy to its regimes. What is unusual, though, is the degree to which Chávez has become a literary figure in his own right. Enrique Krause has hinted at this dynamic:

During the fifteen years in which he patiently plotted his revolutionary conspiracy, forging his mystical links between his own genealogy and the nation's heroes, Hugo Chávez made himself into a kind of creature of magical realism. He would be the redemption, the climax, the supreme text prophesied by other texts, of the sacred writ of Venezuelan history.²⁷

What Krause fails to observe, however, is the degree to which this self-mythologizing might be seen as a literary reference to his literary heroes, Gabriel García Márquez and Victor Hugo.

500 Hundred Years of Companionship: Gabo and Hugo in Cuba

Within two weeks of being elected president of Venezuela, Hugo Chávez flew to Cuba. Political observers, of course, were struck by the mentor-mentee relationship that Chávez had developed with Fidel Castro. And while much ink has been spilled analyzing the link between Cuba and Venezuela in reviving socialism in twenty-first-century Latin America,²⁸ the visit has also had significant literary repercussions. Chávez, like Castro, has often cited Latin American writers as a source of inspiration and, on occasion, used them to lend intellectual legitimacy to his political project. Of special note here is Chávez's problematic relationship with the writers of the Boom, that period from the early 1960s to early 1970s in which Latin American literature started to participate in the global marketplace for literature on a large scale, achieving an unprecedented amount of cultural capital as well as commercial success.²⁹ On his way back to Caracas from Havana in January 1999, Chávez flew with García Márquez—a self-proclaimed "journalist in retirement"—who then set about creating a portrait that would reveal the true Hugo Chávez to the world. What he ended up writing, however, was the portrait of an enigma:

As Chávez was telling me his life story, I started discovering a personality that did not match at all with the image of the despot that had been formed by the mass media. This was another Chávez. Which one was the real one?³⁰

The end result of the interview was a long feature article for the Colombian newspaper *Cambio*, reproduced throughout the world as "El enigma de los dos Chávez." The article is a work of journalism but it reflects the author's abiding interest in the nature of power: how it is asserted, wielded, and abused. García Márquez was known for his very public friendship with Fidel Castro and remained friendly with Chávez after the publication of his *Cambio* profile. Far from being an endorsement of Chávez, however, it contains some contradictory assessments of the president. In this sense, the meditation on power and truth is similar that of some of García Márquez's fiction, including *Crónica de una muerte anunciada*. This novel begins with the murder of Santiago Nassar, a murder that the entire town sees coming.³¹ The narrator leads us to believe that Nassar is killed because he had a pre-marital affair with the bride of the town's richest man, Bayardo San Roman, who learns on the night of their nuptials that his new wife is not a virgin, and that Nassar is the apparent culprit. The novel is written like a piece of long-form journalism, as the narrator interviews eyewitnesses and includes a lot of dry but detailed facts about the weather. And yet, the more the reader learns about the case, the more complicated the truth becomes. The narrator begins to imply that Angela may have accused Santiago of robbing her of her virginity to protect her true lover, whose identity we never learn. The murderers, Angela's brothers, announce their intention to kill Santiago, practically begging someone, anyone, to stop them. In the end, then, not only do we not know if Santiago truly deflowered Angela, but we are left with a sense of collective complicity in his murder. A cut-and-dried murder case turns out to be an immensely complicated web of guilt, complicity, and shame. As in much of García Márquez's writings—and, indeed, in much of the writing produced by the Boom writers—Truth, that meta-narrative at the center of Western reason, is indeterminate and fragmented.

García Márquez's profile of Hugo Chávez, I would argue, is no exception. The profile represents not a break with the conventions of Boom writing, but rather, in its portrait of indeterminacy, a continuation. As García Márquez begins the piece, there is a clear differentiation in narrative point of view between the interviewer and the interviewee. The story of Chávez's failed coup attempt in 1992 is related in a detached, Associated Press style. Following the coup, however, the narrative of voice of García Márquez becomes subsumed by that of Chávez. Narrating the events of the *Caracazo*, when thousands of Venezuelans poured into the streets to protest the elimination of gas and food subsidies by the government, Chávez's voice takes over. Here the narrative distance between the author and his subject is eliminated as Chávez's point of view comes to the fore:

Then I see that troops are being deployed and I ask him: Where are all these soldiers going? Why are they deploying logistical troops, who are not trained for combat, and especially not for combat in close quarters. They were recruits scared by the same rifle they were carrying. So, I ask the colonel: where are all these people going? And the colonel says to me: to the street, to the street. The order had been given: this uprising had to be stopped, by any means necessary. My God, but what order was given? Well, Chávez, the colonel replies: we have to stop it by any means necessary. And I say to him: but, my Colonel, you can imagine what might happen. And he says to me: it's an order and there's nothing to be done. Let's hope it's what God wants.³²

The reader will notice, here, that the narrative is rendered in the first person: it is Chávez speaking, and his voice is apparently unmediated by the author's. Chávez's assumption of moral superiority over the sheepish colonel comes without the perspective of an intervening or interpreting author. In the *Cambio* article, Chávez conscientiously seeks to imitate García Márquez's narrative style. Later, Chávez self-consciously reconstructed his encounter with Fidel Castro as if it were a García Márquez tale. Here, Chávez describes meeting Castro in 1994 this way:

The day that he [Castro] came in my grandmother's house in Sabeneta, he had to duck. The doorway is really low and he is a giant. I saw this happening and I commented to Adam, looking at him there, as if it were a dream: 'this is like a García Márquez novel.' That is, forty years after I first heard the name Fidel Castro, here he was, coming in the house where we grew up. I recollected this event in Plaza Bolívar...Oh my God! This is like one of those novels that Gabo wrote, but instead of 500 hundred years of solitude [sic], we will have 500 years of companionship.³³

There is a suggestion of historical inevitability working here, and Chávez rewrites the famous title of the García Márquez novel to suggest that, in place of the solitude of power—that perennial theme in the novelist's texts—there will be a triumphant solidarity between the Cuban Revolution and the Bolivarian Revolution. Chávez, in other words, envisions his own history in the terms of a literary title popularized by García Márquez, and in doing so appropriates it for his own ideological purposes. García Márquez, in his profile of Chávez, assumes the voice of the Venezuelan, who later uses narrative tropes developed by the novelist to describe his own ascendance to power. To return to Gonzalez Echevarría's insight about the interdependence of power and rhetoric, we might add that it is not only political rhetoric as described by Zúquete and others, but specifically literary narrative that reinforced many of the commonplaces the Bolivarian Revolution. The plight of the fictional character Jean Valjean, as we have seen, was as vital to Chavismo as many key texts in Marxist political theory. At the risk of overgeneralizing, I believe we can now see, with the hindsight afforded by the death of Chávez in 2013, that much of his myth-making was a literary creation. I do not mean to argue that García Márquez was some sort of literary courtesan for Chávez, but rather that the latter saw in the former the symbolic capital he needed to project himself as a mythic icon.

While it is true that the end effect of the article is a rather sympathetic portrait of a Latin American leader, García Márquez is not seduced by the mythology of Chávez as a latter-day Bolívar; in the end, Chávez remains "an enigma," much like the other caudillos in his novels. García Márquez ends the article by saying that despite his charm, charisma, and good intentions, there are still two Chávés:

As he disappeared into the crowd of decorated military escorts and important friends, the inspiration came to me that I had traveled and conversed pleasantly with two opposing men. One for whom dumb luck had struck with the opportunity to save his country. The other was a kind of magician, who might pass into history as one more despot.³⁴

One Chávez is a savior. The other, like García Márquez himself, is *un ilusionista*, but one who may yet become a despot. García Márquez's profile of Chávez was written in early 1999, before many of the most controversial events of the Chávez regime. We are left to wonder what sort of profile he might have written ten years later, after the coup, the restoration of power, and the repression of the privately held media.

Boom Writers, Chávez, and Media Spectacles

Examining the contemporary reaction to Chávez's Bolivarian Revolution of the other two major Boom writers, we witness another striking feature: the reduction of the public sphere to a never-ending cycle of insults and accusations through the mass media. Whereas the Boom once rallied around the Cuban Revolution as the one phenomenon that gave the writers ideological cohesion, the Bolivarian Revolution has inspired no such enthusiasm. While Latin American writers once viewed themselves as an intellectual vanguard whose work exhibited in literary congresses, manifestoes, and literary magazines such as *Casa de las Américas*, Boom writers, like Chávez

himself, became mediatised figures who were instantly recognized by viewers of mass media by the early 21st century.

The example of Mario Vargas Llosa is perhaps the most striking. In his speech "Literature as Fire" from 1967, which functioned as a sort of manifesto for the contemporary, alienated writer as public intellectual, Vargas Llosa argued for literature as a weapon against power, against consensus. Vargas Llosa argued for a "difficult" literature, non-conformist with dogmas on the left and on the right. Upon receiving the Romulo Gallegos prize in 1967, Vargas Llosa declared:

The same societies that exiled and rejected the writer, might think that now it would be convenient to assimilate him, integrate him, confer a type of official status on him. It is necessary, then, to remind these societies what awaits them, remind them that literature is fire, that it symbolizes non-conformity and rebellion, that the writer's entire reason for existing is to protest, contradict, and criticize. **35**

Vargas Llosa's statement came to be known as a sort of manifesto for the restless political engagement of Boom-era writing. With his emphasis on dissidence and rebellion, Vargas Llosa represented the antithesis of Rama's *letrado*. Whereas Rama's vision of the man of letters in Latin America relegates the writer to a supporting role in the ongoing construction of hegemony, Vargas Llosa created a paradigm—inspired by French models, to be sure—of the writer as outsider, one who speaks truth to power. This paradigm is belied, however, by the trajectory of Vargas Llosa's subsequent career: best-selling author, runner-up in the Peruvian presidential election of 1990, Nobel Laureate, consultant to North American conservative think tanks. From the contemporary perspective, it would appear that no writer better represents the model of Rama's *letrado* than Mario Vargas Llosa.

Indeed, Vargas Llosa's pronouncements on Hugo Chávez represent an interesting case study of the *letrado* in contemporary Latin America. Whereas, only a generation ago, the battle over *chavismo* might have been debated among *letrados* at conferences, in literary magazines, and at universities, the contemporary discourse is now filtered through mass media: *CNN en español*, blogs and online newspapers, TV talk shows, Facebook, and Twitter. Recently, Vargas Llosa became just another episode in the ongoing spectacle of the private media versus Chávez. Vargas Llosa, the Mexican journalist and political scientist Enrique Krause, and Jorge Castañeda went to Venezuela to challenge Chávez through debates and conferences. Chávez, on hearing news of their arrival, challenged the trio to a nationwide debate to be aired on live TV. The debate was supposed to focus on the big ideas: socialism, capitalism, and freedom of the press. When Vargas Llosa, Castañeda, and Krause found out that it was not Chávez but rather a group of experts that they were to debate, they backed out. Then began a round of insults. Chávez took to state-run TV to launch an ad hominem attack: "I'm in the big leagues, and you're in the AAA [the minor leagues]." **36** Vargas Llosa then shot back, comparing Chávez to a 19th century caudillo on *CNN en español*. **37** The discourse of the *letrado* had been displaced by the discourse of the around-the-clock news cycle, where every opinion is reduced to byte-sized talking points. In the brief media war between Chávez and Vargas Llosa, both attempted to play the part of the public intellectual, but the end result was an ephemeral spat that lasted only a couple of days before the media lost attention. A war between *letrados* and *caudillos* had been converted into an easily understandable media spectacle.

The discourse of the Chávez-Vargas Llosa dispute has also been echoed by the recently deceased Boom writer, Carlos Fuentes. Fuentes, like Vargas Llosa, has written a subtle and compelling "novela de la dictadura" and has alternated between support for leftist causes and cautious criticism of them. Thus, one might have expected Fuentes to offer a more subtle insight into Chávez's impact on Latin American culture than Vargas Llosa. His rhetoric, however, deteriorated into machismo when discussing the Venezuelan president. After Chávez openly questioned the legitimacy of Felipe Calderón's narrow victory over Manuel López Obrador in Mexico's 2006 presidential election, Fuentes inflamed the already heated rhetoric. Chávez, he said, was a "clown of the continent. What he says does not have the slightest importance, it's all part of his clownish act and as a clown he does it pretty well." Finally, he called on Chávez to be more of a "man." Fuentes stated, "He shouldn't mess in Mexico's affairs, since we don't mess with Venezuela. He should be more respectful, more manly." **38** What might have been a debate about the future of twenty-first-century socialism was now a question of manhood. Fuentes's statements, much like those of Vargas Llosa, confirmed that, when it came to Chávez, there was little room for subtleties or nuances. The twenty-first-century *letrado* took to the media to either support the Venezuelan president or condemn him in quotable sound bites.

Conclusion

While there has always been a contentious relationship in Latin America between politicians and writers, who wield a considerable voice in the public sphere, the presidency of Hugo Chávez placed the role of the writer front and

center. Whether he was reciting the poetry of Pablo Neruda, presenting books by Eduardo Galeano to Barack Obama, or feuding with Mario Vargas Llosa, it is clear that Chávez wanted to be taken seriously as an intellectual in his own right. Whether intellectuals took him seriously, however, is another question. For the generation of the Boom, Chávez fit the mold of a *caudillo*. For García Márquez, the *caudillo* is an enigma who still has the power to help his country, but a *caudillo* nonetheless. Indeed, as a quick survey of dictator novels reveals, not all *caudillos* are created equal. There are evil, megalomaniacal *caudillos* such as the Dr. Francia character in Augusto Roa Bastos's *Yo, El Supremo* and the figure of Rafeal Trujillo in Vargas Llosa's *La fiesta del chivo*. Then there are more ambiguous *caudillos*, such as García Márquez's version of Simon Bolívar in *El General en su laberinto*, a figure of flesh and bones, of human desires and contradictions. That Garcia Marquez's Bolívar is a *caudillo* with a hot head and a bad temper, there can be no doubt, but he remains, like Chávez himself, an enigma.

In any case, the dictator novel is almost always a representation of political power, rather than a primary text for the foundation of a new political order. In the case of Hugo Chávez, however, we see something more striking: the interdependence of political power and literary creation, something that was evident in everything from nationwide reading campaigns to the President's own television show. Chávez's multiple performances, which alternated between the roles of *caudillo*, *letrado*, and comedian, ranged from the slightly amusing to enthralling, especially for those who watched from abroad. More than a year after Chávez's death, the importance of that performance is all the more evident.

Endnotes

- 1 "Chávez Presents Obama with a Gift," *BBC News*, April 18, 2009, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8006556.stm>.
- 2 "Chávez creates overnight bestseller with book gift to Obama" *The Guardian*, April 19, 2009, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/apr/19/obama-chavez-book-gift-latin-america>
- 3 Eduardo Galeano, *The Open Veins of Latin America: Five Centuries of the Pillage of a Continent* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1997).
- 4 A full account of Chávez's brand of socialism might be impossible here, although observers like Steve Ellner have stressed the emphasis on social programs over neoliberal economics as one of the defining elements.
- 5 See José Pedro Zúquete, "The Missionary Politics of Hugo Chávez," *Latin American Politics and Society*, Vol. 50, No. 1 (Spring, 2008).
- 6 See, for example, the debate surrounding the Irish documentary, *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised* in Rod Stoneman, *Chávez: The Revolution will not be Televised: A Case Study of Politics and the Media* (London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2008).
- 7 Zúquete, p. 105
- 8 Ramonet, Ignacio, Fidel Castro, and Andrew Hurley. *Fidel Castro: My Life: A Spoken Autobiography*. New York: Scribner, 2008, p. 639.
- 9 A distinction should be drawn between intellectual elites and "elitists." The former is a value-neutral description of writers, artists, and academics who have a level of cultural prestige that is recognized through academic titles, literary awards, exhibitions, book titles, etc. The latter is a value judgment.
- 10 Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (London: Routledge, 1984).
- 11 Not only businesses, but also social clubs that symbolize prestige—such as the Caracas Country Club—have come under pressure from Chávez. See Simon Romero, "A Venezuelan Oasis of Elitism Counts Its Days," *New York Times*, December 27, 2010.
- 12 Javier Malagón-Barceló, "The Role of the Letrado in the Colonization of America," *The Americas*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (Jul., 1961), pp. 1-17 .
- 13 "Chávez et Victor Hugo," *Le Figaro* November 21, 2007, http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x3jkdy_chavez-et-victor-hugo_news#.UTdwFOvwJD4
- 14 John Lee Anderson, "Postscript: Hugo Chávez, 1954-2013," *The New Yorker*, March 5, 2013.
- 15 See Gisela Kozak Rovero, "Lectura y hegemonía en la Revolución Bolivariana," *Cuadernos de literatura*. Vol.

17, number 33, 2013.

16 Ibid.

17 "Procesos del Libro y Plan Revolucionario de Lectura en Venezuela," Ministerio del Poder Popular para la Cultura República Bolivariana de Venezuela. p. 6.

18 Ibid, p. 15.

19 "En video: la alocución completa de Hugo Chávez" Noticias 24. December 8, 2012.
<http://www.noticias24.com/venezuela/noticia/140002/en-video-la-allocucion-completa-de-hugo-chavez/> Accessed January 23, 2013.

20 One is tempted to think of Chávez himself as a *letrado* in this sense. Not only does he cite writers in his speeches, he also demonstrates a capacity to awe his audiences with linguistic performances on his weekly television show, *Alo Presidente*.

21 Angel Rama, *The Lettered City*, trans. and ed. John Charles Chasteen (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), 125.

22 Ibid., 77.

23 Roberto González Echevarria, *The Voice of the Masters: Writing and Authority in Modern Latin American Literature*, (Austin: U of Texas, 1985).

24 Ibid, pp.1-2.

25 See, for example, Doris Sommer, *Foundational Fictions: The National Romances of Latin America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991) and Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991).

26 See Angel Esteban, Diane Stockwell, and Stéphanie Panichelli, *Fidel and Gabo: A Portrait of the Legendary Friendship between Fidel Castro and Gabriel García Márquez* (New York: Pegasus, 2009).

27 Enrique Krause, "Hugo Chávez and Venezuela: A Leader's Destiny," *Open Democracy*, July 24, 2009.

28 See Marc Becker, "Latin America's Radical Left In Power: Complexities And Challenges In The Twenty-First Century," *Latin American Perspectives*, Vol. 40, No. 3, (May 2013), in which Becker reviews a number of books assessing contemporary socialist movements in South America and their similarities and differences with the Cuban Revolution.

29 See Pascale Casanova's *The World Republic of Letters* (Cambridge: Harvard, 2007) for a detailed description of how Latin American literature became more widely translated and reviewed during this period and more statistics on the publication of Julio Cortázar's books over the course of the 1960s in Russell Cobb, "The Politics of Literary Prestige: Promoting the Latin American "Boom" in the Pages of *Mundo Nuevo*," *A Contracorriente*, Vol. 5, No. 3, Spring 2008, 75-94.

30 Gabriel García Márquez, "El enigma de los dos Chávez," *Cambio*, February, 1999, 60.

31 Gabriel García Márquez, *Crónica de una muerte anunciada* (New York: Vintage, 2003).

32 Gabriel García Márquez, "El enigma de los dos Chávez," *Cambio*, February 1999, 66.

33 Hugo Chávez, "Soy sencillamente un revolucionario,"
http://www.cva.gob.ve/sitio/lineas_chavez/soy_revolucionario.html.

34 Gracia Márquez, "El enigma de los dos Chávez," 66.

35 Mario Vargas Llosa, "La literatura es fuego," speech given upon receiving the Romulo Gallegos Prize in Caracas, Venezuela, 1967.

36 Maye Primera, "Hugo Chávez rechaza debatir con Vargas Llosa a última hora," *El País*, May 30, 2009.

37 Ibid.

38 "Fuentes tacha a Chávez de 'payaso continental,'" *Crónica de Hoy*, September 14, 2006.

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