

Intimate Publicities

Retreating the Theologico-Political in the Chávez Regime?

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Para Edmundo Bracho y Diómedes Cordero

The current space of sovereignty . . . , which is also the space of the finishing of identity in general, is solely a distended space full of holes, where nothing can come to presence.

—Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*

On January 10, 2001, television screens across Venezuela filled with an extraordinary image: surrounded by a forest of microphones and journalists, the nation's Defense Prime Minister, General Ismael Eliécer Hurtado Soucre, suddenly produced and held up in his right hand a pair of lightly colored women's panties, which he waved at the cameras while delivering a volley of fiery accusations against enemies of the regime. In the wake of the avid succession of flash pans that greeted the general's press-conference revelations, and after brief hesitation, most members of the audience burst into irrepressible laughter. Soon that laughter would be echoed all over the globe. Carried by local television and newspapers, the electronically reproduced image of the general and his panties instantly traveled everywhere, so that, at least for some brief, discontinuous moments, the most distant points of the planet burst into globalized laughter at the unintended prank of this South American general. Or so, at any rate, I like to imagine General Hurtado's worldwide reception. Whatever happened elsewhere, in Venezuela the laughter still resonates, and it is anyone's guess how long its waves will keep rippling into the future.

I argue in this essay that the general's colored panties blew a gaping hole in the theologico-political balloon of the Venezuelan Chávez re-

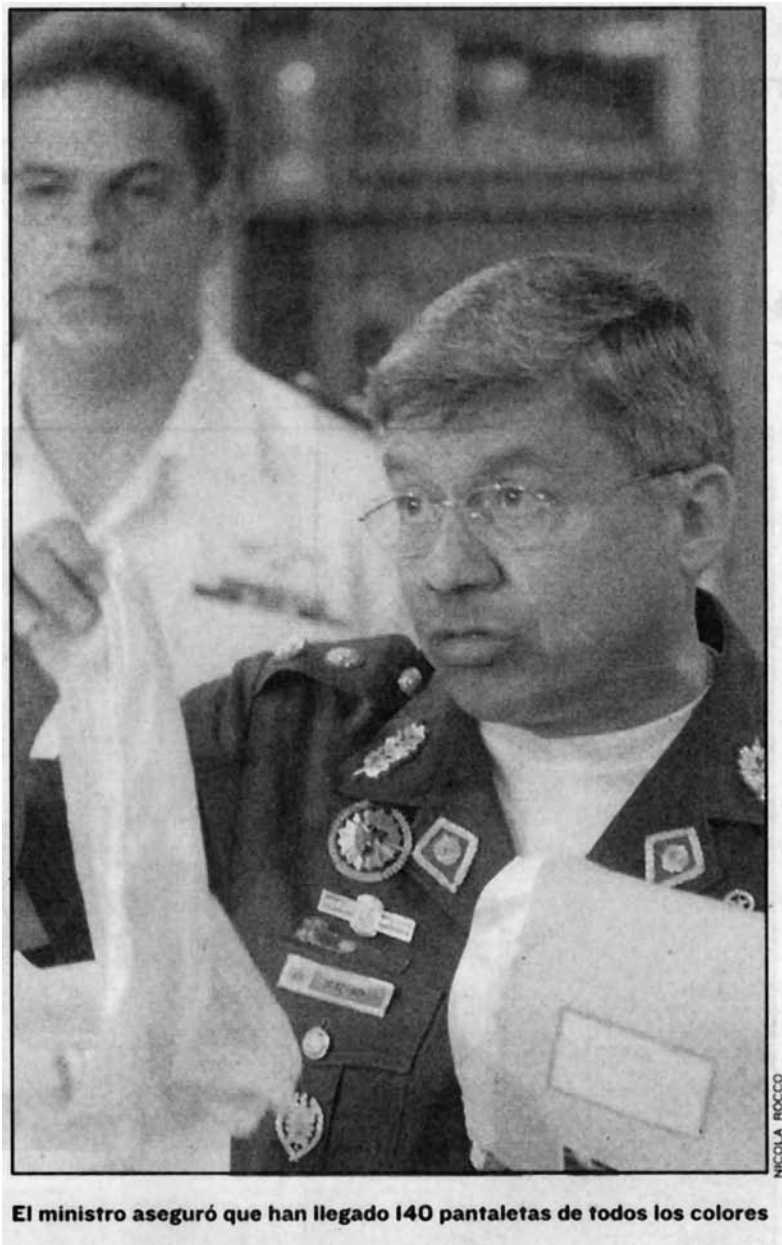


FIGURE 2 “The minister has assured the public that the army has received 140 panties in as many different colors.” (*El Universal*, January 11, 2001.)

gime, which keeps growing bigger day by day. Even if by one or another spectacular means the regime constantly puffs itself up, since that moment its theologico-political substance has not ceased leaking through this hole. Indeed, if things continue as they are, one Schmittian scenario would be a total collapse of the political amid proliferating conflicts. As Schmitt and others after him have argued, given the world's radical indeterminacy, the political can only come about as the result of constantly reiterated, inherently violent decision. Akin to the miracle in a certain theological tradition, such a decision, the sovereign exception, makes both lawful regularity and the political community possible. Thoroughly transcendent to the political, this decision brings it into being as a more or less delineated, cohesive totality, while designating the enemies or enemy vis-à-vis which the political totality defines itself.¹ Given such an understanding of how, in all its seriousness and gravity, the political totality comes about, I now wish to consider the opposite, largely comical possibility, that is not how totalization happens or how it triumphantly succeeds but rather how, precipitated by laughter, it hilariously fails.

Considering the awesome, transcendent force that goes into the making of the political community—the sheer constructivist bent of the decision that so deliberately puts it together as an articulated, ordered totality—it is not surprising that laughter can have a wondrous effect. After all, according to Bataille, “laughter exposes the relation between reason and unreason,” in an eruptive moment of excess that momentarily reveals the unknown that dwells within the known, ruining from within any reasonable construct, in this case the state.² As Bataille puts it, “that which is laughable may simply be the unknowable,” and “the unknown makes us laugh.”³ Simon Critchley offers a related way of understanding how laughter and, more generally, the comic expose the boundaries of any objectivity to an ineradicable alterity. For him, humor issues from a “disjunction . . . between expectations and actuality,” which, defeating “our expectations” about reality or causality, produces “a novel actuality.” “The comic world,” Critchley writes, “is the world with its causal chains broken, its social practices turned inside out, and commonsense rationality left in tatters.” The Venezuelan instance may be confidently added to Critchley’s list of examples of such subversive disjunction between expectations and actuality, from “talking dogs” to “farting professors and incontinent ballerinas.”⁴ Indeed, given our everyday expectations about generals, what could be more jarringly discrepant than for one of them, the nation’s Defense Prime Minister, no less, to be caught on national television beside himself with anger, with a pair of women’s panties clutched in his right hand?

It is enough to focus briefly on the televised, electronically reproduced image of the general and his panties to see why, within seconds, the effects of the panties episode, the laughter it provoked, spread like a virus throughout the regime. Invoking an epidemic is not all that outlandish, considering that for Bataille laughter falls under the “principle of contagion” that is constitutive of “society” or the “community” (provided, I might add, the latter is understood as “infinite resistance to presence, foundation and essence”).⁵ If

the theological imbues the state with its capacity to shape or totalize “society,” laughter, in Pierre Clastres’s formulation, may be a case of “society against the state.”⁶ Though in the wake of the incident the regime has steadily kept losing its aura of authority, probably it still does not quite know what hit it. Probably, too, most if not all local actors, for whom the panties episode is by now a receding memory, would not accord it as much consequence as I do. Yet a cursory glance at the local media, overwhelmingly in the hands of the opposition, would confirm that a momentous shift in the overall tone of public discourse did take place in the wake of the incident. Before General Hurtado’s fateful press-conference revelations, public communications by even the most uncompromising critics of the regime were suffused with the modicum of deference that a democratically elected government extracts from its audience. After the incident, however, such deference all but disappeared. Increasingly, the regime has been publicly portrayed in the media as either a joke, an illegitimate autocracy, or both. Ludicrous operetta, quintessential banana republic, rapidly deflating balloon—these are some of the tropes that increasingly recur in public portrayals of the regime, and they do not hesitate to point out the violent intolerance peeking through the crumbling façade of its legitimizing rhetoric. The initial responses to the 2001 incident indicate just how momentous it was for the local political imagination and suggest why this shift could have happened.⁷

Take, for example, one journalist’s label for the entire episode: climaxing in the generals’ press conference appearance: “the mysterious case of the multicolor panties.”⁸ By labeling it a whodunit, the journalist hints at the episode’s huge potential to deflate by alluding to a form of emplotment that could not but signal the depths of triviality to which the regime had suddenly sunk. Even more telling is the expression *el pantaletazo*, with which the media all alluded to the repercussions that the general’s decision to wave his panties in front of the cameras had both in the army and, more generally, throughout the regime. Added to any noun, the Spanish ending *azo* enlarges it to the point of bursting. Formed from the Spanish noun *pantaletas*, “panties,” the expression *el pantaletazo* signals literally an explosion of multicolored panties, which threatened to blow the regime’s transcendental claims and illusions to smithereens.

Humor, perhaps more than anything else, best captured the enduring significance of the panties episode. Shortly after the media revelation, a group of local comedians announced the opening in a local theater of their new production *El Pantaletazo*, advertised as a follow-up to their previous theatrical production. Both in the capital city Caracas and elsewhere in Venezuela, for over two years the group had been presenting to full houses and great public acclaim a satirical comedy called *La Constituyente*, whose characters and events kept changing as they followed, day by day, the main events in and developments of the Chávez regime. The comedy featured local personalities from both politics and the media, including, of course, Chávez, impersonated to great satirical effect by a local actor, who, occasionally, mockingly shows up in the media parading as the president. Since the sequel figured the same cast of characters, when it opened President Chávez could rest

assured that for the foreseeable future every one of his public gestures, interventions, and appearances would reverberate in the antics of his theatrical double.

As I was toying with the idea for this essay, it occurred to me that both the title of the original comedy, *La Constituyente*, and that of its sequel, *El Pantaletazo*, admirably characterize the two main moments that, I argue, the regime has undergone since it was elected in December 1998. An initial period, lasting for approximately two years, was distinguished by a radical constitutionalism (hence the title *La Constituyente*), bent on founding anew all aspects of the nation through recourse to the originary constituting powers of the people. This was followed by a *pantaletazo*, or explosion of multicolored panties that possibly signaled the beginning of the regime's unraveling. Whether inadvertently or not, by their decision to switch titles from *La Constituyente* to *El Pantaletazo*, the local comedians registered a transition from radical constitutionalism to its undoing. In any event, just when references to the panties episode began to peter out in the media, the decision of the local comedians to name their new production *El Pantaletazo* brought the whole affair back into the limelight. Given how long *La Constituyente* stayed in local theaters, it is not surprising that its successor, *El Pantaletazo*, kept the panties affair highly visible until relatively recently.

The whole affair began with a letter sent to the Venezuelan journal *El Nacional* by one Pablo Aure, who is a lawyer, a sometime university professor, and a failed politician from one of the Venezuelan states, where he occasionally writes for the local newspapers. Titled "Generals in Panties," the letter berates the army for its lack of courage vis-à-vis President Chávez and alludes to how "generals have been lately receiving as presents delicate and intimate feminine garments."⁹ On the whole, the letter belongs to an unsavory genre that consists in messages sent to prominent figures, especially in the military, accompanied by feminine garments meant to shame the addressees into action by suggesting their unmanly, cowardly behavior vis-à-vis those in power. Although I have not been able to check their accuracy, I have come across references in the Venezuelan press to an episode during the Allende years in Chile in which panties were sent to officers in the military in order to provoke them into staging a coup against the democratically elected president, one in which no less than the Prussian army humiliates an enemy with a similar gift, and references to various other incidents in Venezuela from several years ago.¹⁰ The sexism implicit in this form of humiliation is unquestionable. Examining the local gender economy is not my purpose here, however, although gender will remain a crucial dimension in much of what follows. In order to prevent any easy generalizations about local gender relations, I will say that throughout the weeks after General Hurtado's press conference, there was no dearth of feminist voices deploring the incident in the local media. Nothing, including its insults, misogyny, and vulgarity, sets the letter that Aure sent to the Venezuelan army apart from the sexism characteristic of the genre overall.

In light of later developments, especially the electronically reproduced panties of the televised press conference, one of the letter's passages stands out, however, suggesting not

only what might be unique about the latest Venezuelan instance of the genre but also why, in this instance, things went so awry. Immediately after mentioning the intimate gifts sent to the generals, the letter says: “The image of courage that once we had of Venezuelan generals has nowadays altogether vanished and we simply imagine them in the presidential palace, Miraflores, or in the president’s residence, La Casona, parading their multicolored panties.”¹¹ There is something excessive, is there not, about the image of these middle-aged generals parading their multicolored panties in the public space and in full view of their president? Surely panties are meant not for such serial exposure but to be demurely worn close to the body and out of public view. Also, curiously anticipating in its very seriality the panties’ serialized TV transmission, in Aure’s mediatized imaginings not only are the generals’ panties serially laid in row after row of scantily clad generals but all come in different colors. Blue, orange, violet, pink . . . I can only imagine the delicate commercial transactions in which the mysterious senders of the panties engaged in order to avoid overlaps, making sure that the color of every panty differed, however subtly or minutely, from the rest. Not a mean task, considering that, as it turned out, no fewer than 140 different panties were sent to the generals, so that simply to grasp the color spectrum induces vertigo.

One final oddity in the passage concerns the usage of the Spanish word *desfilando*, which I translate “parading.” In Spanish *desfilan* means both “to march,” what the military does, and “to parade” or display something in the presence of some significant other or others. Thus, for example, in a fashion or a military parade either models or army personnel march in front of an audience while parading their couturier designs or their uniforms and weapons before an audience. Interestingly, in Aure’s passage the generals do not parade *in* panties but are, rather, parading *their* panties before the President. The construction is so odd in Spanish that I believe it betrays intention on the part of the writer. By imagining the generals parading not *in* panties but *their* panties, the writer reduces the generals’ bodies to the status of mannequins, arranged in rows to display what is truly important: namely, the multicolored panties serially displayed on the generals’ bodies as waiting to be bought by customers in a clothing store. In sum, a radical desubjectification is added to a no less radical commodification of the body, to which the intended feminization of the letter’s addressees is surely not indifferent.

I cannot think of anything farther removed from the auratic depth that I imagine intrinsic to the earlier panties episodes as public instances of private debasement, and thus necessarily sparing graphic details that would break that privacy open, than the intense graphicality, even the exhibitionism of Aure’s commodified imaginings. I can easily envisage, some twenty or thirty years ago, a high military personage from any country being overcome by shame as he opens, in the chiaroscuro of his public office, a box containing the anonymous gift of a translucent, delicately vulnerable panty.¹² By contrast to the recent Venezuelan affair, the social efficacy of the whole episode would reside in the public presumption of secrecy, not on serialized exposure, and on the swirling of

rumors about an unavailable and invisible chamber of power where an ominous reversal and defilement is thought to take place. In these earlier episodes, at least part of the efficacy of the panties depends on their ability to provoke in private a catastrophic reversal, collapsing all distinctions and separation between gazing male subjects and gazed-at feminine objects, or between public and private spaces, while violently returning the generals' bodies to a stage that presumably they had left behind. As in some fantasy scenarios where the onset of male adolescent sexuality is ambivalently played out against the embracing phantasm of the mother's body, through this gift of feminine panties the generals are once again brought in dangerous proximity to the mother. Yet this time the repetition does not harbor detachment but rather is a dreaded return that leaves the generals paddling in sticky maternal stuff.¹³ I bring up all this Freudian imagery, whatever its merits may be, simply to make salient how well it fits the closed economy of the patriarchal subject of modernity, which, as Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy insist, occludes the nonsubjective "wider stage" of inscription that antedates the subject, as well as to underscore how far removed both this imagery and probably also this subject are from the recent Venezuelan incident.¹⁴

A few days after the publication of Aure's letter, military intelligence broke into his residence and took him into custody, on the accusation of "offending, insulting, and despising the armed forces."¹⁵ After thirty-six hours in detention, at the request of both the nation's attorney general and the Defensoría del Pueblo, who insisted that the military had no jurisdiction over a civilian,¹⁶ and in the wake of spirited protests from several public instances, including NGOs and other civil rights organizations, Aure was freed. Amid such widespread criticism of the armed forces, Minister Hurtado decided to call his fateful press conference. It was in this mediatized context, after justifying Aure's detention on the grounds of his suspected involvement in the affair (Why did he mention panties and not, for example, "brassieres or men's underwear," given that, before his letter, all official references were only to "intimate garments"?), that the General produced his colored panties, out of a box presumably containing the remaining 139.¹⁷

In the wake of this mediatized exposure, all hell broke loose, both in the press and in the media, and innumerable jokes started to circulate in the streets. For a while, a pandemonium of discordant voices crowded the public space, some high pitched and strident, others grave and ponderous, most comically deflating. One journalist hinted at the reasons for the universal hilarity when he spoke of the incident as "the first time ever in the history of Venezuelan TV that panties and epaulets came together on the screen."¹⁸

The juxtaposition was seen as so outrageously incongruous that in its wake any gravitas and majesty that the Prime Minister General had ever claimed for himself thoroughly dissipated. Like a balloon, such claims deflated in sight of everyone, amid general laughter. One weekly magazine from Caracas chose General Hurtado as that week's looser "for a press conference that will pass into the history of Venezuelan humor." For its probable victims, this laughter threatened to engulf everything the General had ever touched or

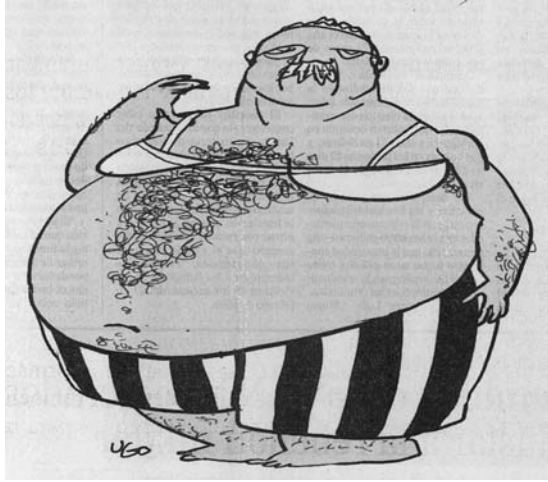


FIGURE 3 Caricature by UGO from *El Nacional*, January 13, 2001, featuring a general in women's underwear.

FIGURE 4 "The panties affair has allowed us to observe the great 'importance' that a general loses when not wearing his uniform. (Caricature by Weil, *Tal Cual*, January 12, 2001.)



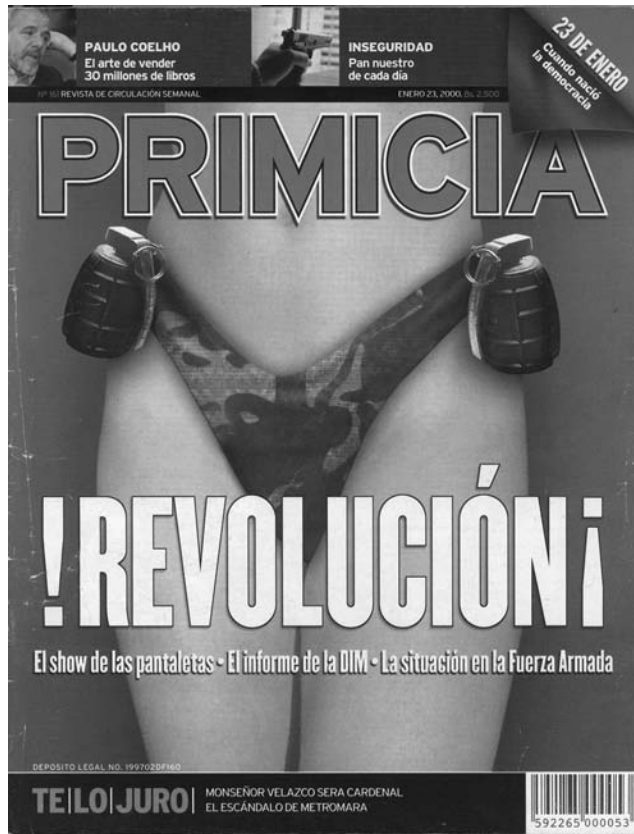


FIGURE 5 "Revolution! The Panties Show." (*Primicia*, February 1, 2001.)

been in contact with. To begin with, the entire armed forces, which he publicly represented, now stood exposed in the media as good only for handling a rather fragile opponent. Even more threatening, however, was the fact that, because of the regime's militarism, President Chávez himself, along with the entire regime, risked dissolving in this corrosive laughter. Indeed, the media event was seen as so damaging for everyone and everything concerned that one political commentator wondered why the prime minister had been so reckless as to appear before the cameras in such a dubious company without first having listened to the advice of an expert in image management.¹⁹

As with the surrealist montage of an umbrella and a sewing machine on a dissecting table, the mediatized coupling of epaulets and panties aroused such surprise and hilarity in part because their public juxtaposition troubled the boundaries between domains that not only are customarily kept separate but whose very identities depend on such strict demarcation, as the gendered identity and auratic authority of the public domain of the

state are largely contingent upon its being demarcated from the domain of privacy and feminine sexuality alluringly evoked in women's lingerie ads, or the corporate identity of the armed forces as the state's means for the monopolistic control of violence is still, in many places, made contingent upon the exclusion of women. For one dangerous moment, the televised spectacle of a single, lightly colored panty held in the Defense Prime Minister's right hand put all such identities publicly under erasure. By triggering all kinds of funny, wild associations playing on the motifs of the generals' uncertain gendered identities and unabashed transvestism, the media event briefly made the army's claims to masculine purity and virility appear rather foolish.

It would be easy to pile up example after example from the Venezuelan press, many of a feminist bent, that in one way or another betray awareness of the high stakes involved in the whole panties episode. In general, the multicolored panties' ability to trouble established identities and boundaries was largely contingent on their serialized exposure in the electronic media, already foreshadowed in Aure's mediatized imaginings. In other words, their efficacy was contingent on their value as exposition, not, as in the earlier panties episodes, on any public assumption of secrecy. Drawn into the open from the private niches where modernist sensibilities had confined them, the panties, in their serialized reproduction in both the media and the mediatized imaginings of some of the regime's opponents, were unleashed in public space. There they took on a life of their own as mobile signs drifting across the public surfaces of the nation. Hitherto repressed in the domains of privacy, the panties' commodity lineage was sharply brought out by such mediatized exposure. Spread across the nation's public surfaces, their sedimented significance as quintessential tokens of privacy subverted institutionally established boundaries, among them those of the state, which trembled at the public sight of the general's multicolored panties.

Two examples drawn from the Venezuelan press eloquently illustrate how, on the one hand, the panties' new life focused public awareness on their status as commodities, and, on the other, this very publicity entailed a breaking open, with unpredictable consequences, of the private sphere where heretofore panties had alluringly glowed. In one, a dreamily mournful piece written for the literary supplement of one of the two main local newspapers, after stating that "intimate garments hound us in the darkness," its writer mulls over the reasons why, lately, Caracas's advertisers have "resorted to the intimacy of closed spaces," especially to the walls of the metro, as preferred public sites for the outdoor advertising of women's lingerie. Unproblematically assuming a male gaze as the advertisements' target, he explains that "lust is reserved for obscurity." Interpellated "amidst the nocturnal buzz of the trains" by "the anonymous voice from that gigantic body" unexpectedly stretched out on the neon-lit billboard, the masculine passer-by is catapulted out of the "urban scene" and into the "very center of her bed." Such a rewarding fantasy is, however, frustrated by the recent media event, concerning which he says:

we have been abruptly coaxed out of the darkness like fish lifted on an invisible line. They take away from us the secret passages and the reveries to which all self-respecting passers-by succumb. . . . There are those who wish to bring the garments to the surface, denying the night in which they are surrounded and enveloped. . . . A solitary garment has emerged from the catacombs to be hung from a pen or a pencil, where, to our shame, it oscillates before the world's astonished gaze.²⁰

Under such a crude glare, the panties' repressed life as commodities also comes into focus. In another, outrageously funny piece from about the same time, two other journalists, in a joint article, propose that, rather than take it so much to heart, the army should rejoice at the aggregate monetary value represented by the no fewer than 140 multicolored panties sent by mail to the generals over the past few weeks. They then go on to enumerate different possible models—Panty, Dental Floss, Boxer, Sash, Turtle Neck, Touché—insisting that, paradoxically, the smaller the item, the more expensive it is. Given their impression that what General Hurtado flashed at the cameras was a “tiny tanga,” they find it safe to assume that the army has recently come into a nice sum of money. Switching tone, the journalists hint that perhaps the true reason the Defense Ministry is so upset is “the panties' nationality.” Most of the panties that circulate in the Venezuelan market, whether smuggled or legally imported, come from neighboring Colombia, where lingerie figures among the 10 leading export items, with annual sales of 10.6 million dollars. In view of this situation “the gift may have constituted an unforgivable intrusion from neighbors in the internal affairs of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela.” The moral that the authors extract from the whole affair is “that behind every panty always hides a serious matter.”²¹

The serious matter hidden behind the alluring presence of the panties as tokens of intimacy is nothing less than their status as both commodities and mediatized images within an expanding, anonymous realm of ceaseless circulation and mobility resilient to any attempts at closure, whether by the state or by any other totalizing instance. No matter how briefly, what the *pantaletazo* explosively brought into public awareness, hence its subversive potential, is that more and more, as Nancy puts it, the givenness of being “is given to us as meaning . . . that is, in turn, its own circulation—and we are this circulation.”²² For a brief interval, the explosion of multicolored panties opened up a gap through which being intruded into public awareness as an “explosion of presence” that “is the spacing of meaning, spacing as meaning and circulation.”²³ From “presence to presence,” this circulation is carried in all directions—for example, here, across the boundaries of the nation-state, which the migrant, multicultural panties infiltrate by means legal and illegal—by touches among things, dead or alive, animate or inanimate: “stones, plants, nails, gods, . . . humans,”²⁴ and now, also, multicolored panties. The in-betweenness that arises every time two or more entities or things touch one another does not amount to any connective tissue that could lend itself to the beautiful sublation of

Subió cotización de pantaletas

El regalo recibido por las Fuerzas Armadas podría llegar a Bs. 7 millones. Entre las marcas preferidas están las colombianas, pero entran de contrabando

Andrés Urbáez
Delia Meneses

El general Eliécer Hurtado Soucre no debería tomarse tan a pecho el obsequio de 140 pantaletas, de variados colores, que le han hecho supuestos subversivos desestabilizadores a las Fuerzas Armadas Nacionales. Antes bien, debería considerar que sumando el valor del regalo contenido en los múltiples sobres que, de manera parcial, mostró en su rueda de prensa, este podría alcanzar los siete millones de bolívares.

Si los generales recibieron una pantaleta Touché, es posible que les haya tocado un regalo de 50 mil bolívares. El valor también depende del modelo.

Paradójicamente, mientras más pequeña la prenda, más cara. Así, si los generales recibieron un mayor número de las llamadas "hilo", es posible que el obsequio haya sido más costoso que si, en cambio, les tocó las "cuello tortuga". Bien mirado el ejemplar mostrado en cámaras por el ministro se aprecia una diminuta tanga.

PRENDA DE VALOR

Parte del enfado ministerial puede deberse a la nacionalidad de las pantaletas. Desde hace no poco tiempo, la mayoría de las pantaletas que utilizan las venezolanas son importadas a Venezuela desde Colombia, por lo que el obsequio podría constituir una intrusión imperdonable de los vecinos en los asuntos internos de la República Bolivariana de Venezuela.

Por otra parte, un porcentaje importante de estas importaciones se hace de manera ilegal, por la vía del contrabando, a causa de la negligencia de los encargados de vigilar los límites fronterizos, lo que constituye una comprensible causa de mo-

lestia en predios castrenses.

De hecho, en el intercambio comercial binacional, la ropa interior constituye uno de los rubros más transados. En el Boletín de Comercio Exterior publicado por la Dirección de Impuestos y Aduanas Nacionales colomb-

biano, correspondiente al lapso enero-septiembre del 2000, el rubro "sostenes y sus partes, incluso de punto" aparece entre los 10 principales productos de exportación hacia Venezuela, representando un monto de 10,6 millones de dólares, un incremento de 53%, con respecto a 1999. Venezuela es, después de Estados Unidos, el principal destino para las exportaciones colombianas.

Lo único que demuestra todo este caso es que detrás de toda pantaleta se esconde, siempre, un asunto de fondo.



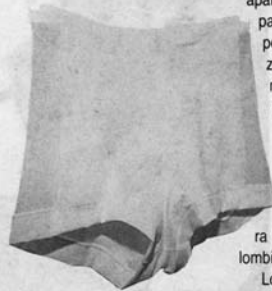
Faja
Bs. 18500
Leonisa



Hilo dental
Bs. 5500
Haby



Panty
Bs. 5000
Eva



Boxer
Bs. 8000
Leonisa

FIGURE 6 Humorous article in *TalCual*, January 22, 2001, entitled "The Prices of Panties Went Up," concerning the different models of panties supposedly received by the army.

everything into one or another higher-order instance or totality. Rather, it is precisely because its “law . . . is separation”²⁵ that this touch of circulation opens up, in all possible directions, unprecedented space-times: for instance, the unprecedented space-time opened up by the touch, in front of the cameras, between the (touché?) colored panty and the right hand of the general.

The Chávez regime came to power in December 1998 as the result of general elections, which Lieutenant Colonel Hugo Chávez Frías surprisingly won by a devastating margin. One of the leaders of a clandestine cell within the army, Chávez had, in 1992, led a failed left-wing coup against the then democratically elected government. Permeated by a fundamentalist nationalist ideology, from the start Chávez’s secret organization, the MBR200, sought to regenerate the nation’s decay by returning it to the teachings of its founding fathers, especially those of Simón Bolívar, father of the fatherland. Such an impulse to regeneration is already discernible in the fraternal oath that, in a mythical moment of foundation, presumably gave birth to the organization. Sworn before a sacred tree that is one of the telluric emblems of the nation, such an oath amounts to a striking instance of the “politics of friendship” that Derrida has recently deconstructed. In it the nation’s very soil, along with its putatively autochthonous people and founding ancestors, are all summoned to co-presence through a performative that asserts a mystical “bond between the political and autochthonous consanguinity.” In sum, the organization’s founding oath is “the place of fraternization as the symbolic bond alleging the repetition of a genetic tie.”²⁶

Since the establishment of the regime, this political theology has run an extraordinary course. Characterized by a radical constitutionalism, the regime aims at nothing less than founding anew the entire people/nation, along with its main domains, institutions, and authorities. Armed with a newly approved Constitution, this project makes constant appeals to the originating powers of the sovereign people. It is not, however, these powers but the unifying will of the nation’s dead founding hero, Bolívar, that the regime’s political theology identifies as the source of the totalizing energies on which the official project draws. As I argue elsewhere, it is largely on account of his symbolic status in the nation’s political imaginary as Rousseauian Great Legislator and People’s Delegate that the regime’s political theology puts Bolívar in charge of healing the nation’s fractures by once again uniting the nation in an inclusive totality, needless to say, through the ventriloquizing agency of President Chávez.²⁷ Although a series of innovations may be discerned, some registering the intensely globalized times, along with this ventriloquism, the regime’s political theology is anything but new. In many ways, it is a citation of a theologico-political formation that, repeatedly recycled throughout the nation’s history, goes back to the founding of the country some two hundred years ago in the two decades of unimaginable violence that followed Venezuela’s declaration of independence in 1811.

It is surely not irrelevant that the kind of political theology that concerns me here posits the nation as a matter of absolute, radical beginnings, claiming a radical break with

the colonial past. To make a long story short, it all has to do with the Spanish king's awesome disappearance some two hundred years ago and the catastrophic consequences that followed. Among these were the collapse of the entire colonial order, with its articulated orders and estates, now bereft of the kingly "thing" that had glued it together, and the freeing of mimetic subjects from corporate niches as the colony crumbled.²⁸ The colonial order could be described as a well-oiled machine for reducing mimesis to codified identity. To put it in Lacoue-Labarthe's terms, with the collapse of this order into "terrifying instability . . . mimesis" returned "to regain its powers."²⁹ In an exorbitant mimetic expropriation of the panoply of hegemonic roles and identities, the new subalterns sought to fill the postcolonial spaces now made vacant and flattened—flattened because, although in reconfigured ways some of the hierarchies and partitions of old were still precariously in place, in principle, at least, the new democratic syntax that emerged in the king's wake symbolically rendered postcolonial space as a flat, horizontal domain of abstract exchangeability among autonomous, interchangeable individuals.

It was these flattened spaces that, amidst an unstoppable circulation of masks in which all government capsized, the subalterns now filled with a homicidal metonymic slippage "from one term to the next,"³⁰ bent not just on killing the whites but on stealing their identities. Hence all the anxieties about imitation that are voiced in the writings of the founding fathers and in the archives from the moment of independence. A kind of "modernity from below," confronted with this maelstrom of torn bodies and stolen identities, the founding fathers unsurprisingly saw their task as being to create the nation from scratch, since, like their Jacobin predecessors, it was indeed from scratch or from the crowd's violent mimesis that they had to proceed. Hence all the emphasis on the nation's absolute, radical beginnings in Venezuela's and Latin America's other foundational charters, which these tribunes envisaged as tools to mould or create the nation *ex nihilo* as the exclusive aftereffect of the law enshrined in the Constitution.³¹ In its abstract universality, only the law could provide a fitting mirror where, as bearers of equality, the postcolonial crowds could see themselves reflected as the homogeneous people of a nation. It was a matter, in other words, of arresting through reflection the crowd's lateral mimetic flight by holding up to them the mirror of the law as allegedly expressing their latent "general will."³²

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

such tribunal performances required that the domain of political representation be sealed off from “society” so as to be constituted as a (bourgeois) theater where, as on a stage, the claims of the Jacobin tribunes to represent the new nation could be sustained. Where but in such an enclosed space can re-presentation or the representative relation, instituting a radical demarcation between a theatrical “inside” and an excluded “outside,” thrive? As Lyotard and others argue, only in such a well-demarcated theatrical space is it at all possible for any entity enduringly to re-present one or more absent ones.³³ Nothing was more urgent for the founding fathers than to erect such a sealed representational domain so as to constitute themselves as the representatives of the nation left outside its walls.³⁴

Over time, such efforts crystallized in *monumental governmentality*, which I describe elsewhere.³⁵ Brought about by a wide range of discursive and nondiscursive practices, from historiography and the theater to civic rituals and various forms of domestic and public bodily training, for over two hundred years, since the time of independence, such monumental governmentality has been sculpting the voices, gestures, expressions, and overall bodily demeanor of the nation’s tribunes, so that, appropriately monumentalized, these “tribunes” can “speak” the law to their assembled audiences from the raised stage of the polity, thereby making them, after the fact, into the nation’s sovereign that was supposed to be there all along. Such *après-coup* performatives, though incessantly repeated, eventually fail. Because of tensions between the universal and the particular *and* the aporetic nature of the “general will,” republican audiences eventually vacate the scenes of interpellation contrived for their benefit, once again becoming republican crowds. No matter how much they try to constitute themselves as impossible sites for reconciling the universal and the particular, thus submitting to the hyperbolic frenzy of “dancing Jacobins” that, I argue, is endemic to the continent’s populism, Venezuela’s and Latin America’s other “tribunes” eventually lose their audiences. Vacating the republican theater through any crack available, such audiences eventually leave these tribunes gesticulating in an empty theater.

As that happens, once again the “terrorizing instability” of the origin returns as crowds resume the lateral mimetic flight from which the tribune’s monumentalized yet dancing performances had temporarily wrested them.³⁶ If, as Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy have argued, ours is an age of the “retreat” of the theologico-political as the withdrawal of any communal figure of identification,³⁷ then, as the preceding scenario suggests, since independence Latin America has lived such a withdrawal as a chronic, catastrophic occurrence. All of which is to say that, rather than “biopolitics” succeeding “politics” or, to stay with Foucault, a “society of discipline” one predicated on “sovereignty,”³⁸ with all the horror and promise involved, in Venezuela, at least, no such means of pacifying the republican crowds became widely available. Instead, in Venezuela (and Latin America generally) the politics of exemplarity of an early republicanism crystallized in a form of monumental governmentality, and as a result the whole continent froze in an inaugural moment of modernity: that when a Jacobin tribune or one of his present-day populist

successors addresses his or her popular audiences, swelling with republican sentiment, just across the stage.

Yet, nearly since independence, there has been, at least in Venezuela, one way available to temporarily arrest, or at least slow down, the inevitable dispersal of the general will imminent in the scenario to which I have just alluded. I am referring to the “Bolívar” way, whereby, monumentalized as a Great Legislator and as such symbolically made into a foreigner with no stakes in the local order of things, Bolívar “returns” once again to totalize “society” or a nation about to blow up into a myriad disparate fragments.³⁹ Unlike the “horizontal” tribunal prosthesis, which is subject to endless metonymic decay, Bolívar is what, following Geoffrey Bennington,⁴⁰ I call a “vertical prosthesis” of the general will, that is, a thoroughly transcendent, theological means of supplementing this will’s originary lack of self-presence by totalizing it, thus temporarily arresting the general will’s fall into the singularity of its cases, of the sovereign into the individual’s maddeningly conflicting (mimetic) desires.⁴¹ Given that it came to power in the wake of an acute economic crisis and an even more acute crisis in political representation, where all available representative instances, especially the political parties, were thoroughly delegitimized, it is not surprising that from the beginning the Chávez regime appealed to Bolívar with a vengeance. Considering the combined centrifugal forces of a huge international debt, the unemployment and poverty that had followed an IMF-imposed program of structural adjustment, a colossal crisis in the nation’s banking system, and the alarming rate at which capital kept flying out of Venezuela, such a widespread appeal is hardly surprising. After all, it is during such times that Bolívar “returns” in order, precisely, symbolically to suture the nation.

From the beginning, Chávez employed an extraordinarily aggressive rhetoric as a weapon to dismantle the last remnants of the ancien régime, and his and his regime’s constant use of “Bolívar” as a rallying cry and point of identification immediately paid handsome dividends. After coming to power in December 1998, Chávez rapidly called for a referendum to elect delegates for a Constituent Assembly charged with drafting a new Constitution. Claiming originary powers and staffed by an overwhelming majority of Chávez supporters, this assembly from the beginning went beyond its electoral mandate, declaring itself to be “the sole legitimate authority of the land,” dissolving the opposition-controlled Congress, and assuming the right “to fire judges, majors, and governors.”⁴² From Congress to the judiciary, after a series of elections won in quick succession, in little over a year the regime was firmly in control of all the main institutions of the Venezuelan state. By the end of 2000, just two years after assuming power, it seemed as if, with the exception of the national media, which were controlled by powerful private interests, nothing stood in the way of the regime’s revolutionary project of state recentralization. Whatever elements of an organized opposition may have survived did not seem to amount to much. These were the *escuálidos*, or “emaciated,” whom Chávez incessantly mocked in his weekly radio program *Aló Presidente*. In sum, with a few annoying blips,

at the time everything suggested that the regime's project of tightly collecting the entire nation around the ancestral figure of Bolívar via the ventriloquizing agency of Chávez, thereby refashioning it in the dead hero's image, had succeeded. As if drawing on a "mystical foundation,"⁴³ the realization of the old theological dream of a "common existence" entirely defined by the state form, by "the decisions and reach of sovereignty," seemed at hand.⁴⁴

And then, as if out of thin air, in April 2002 the opposition staged a huge rally in the streets of Caracas. Since then, things have drastically changed, in a political landscape marked by a string of momentous events: a frustrated coup d'état by radicalized right-wing sectors after nineteen people had been shot dead and more than a hundred wounded in the streets of Caracas during an opposition rally, an incident still shrouded in mystery; a series of huge rallies and counter-rallies, staged either successively or simultaneously by the opposition and the followers of the regime; a vast business and workers' strike that brought the national oil industry to a halt and that may have wrecked the local economy for years to come; and, most recently, sanctioned by the Constitution, a huge effort by the opposition to collect signatures calling for a referendum to decide upon Chávez's stay in power, a possibility that the beleaguered regime tried unsuccessfully to prevent by declaring null more than a million of the over three million signatures collected. What has happened? What can possibly explain that in a little over a year the *escuálidos*, or "emaciated," of yesterday have become the relatively plump characters of today? Moreover, how are we to account for the suddenness of the transformation?

To begin with, this recovery did not mean that two well-defined, consolidated enemies or antagonists now confront each other on the political stage, so that eventually one will displace or cannibalize the other. Things are more porous and complicated than that. For one thing, the supposed victories of the opposition are at best pyrrhic. Every one of its actions either immediately met with a commensurate reaction from the forces of the regime or, especially in the case of the opposition's most ambitious initiatives, eventually dissipated into a chorus of discordant voices, images, and happenings in the face of a regime that, like the living dead, keeps coming back. Such a string of faux pas by the opposition could not but be subject to considerable laughter. The sort of laughter that concerns me here is not at all choosy about its targets. It does not, for example, single out some special entity or entities as objects of mockery and derision while neatly sparing the rest. True, the Chávez regime was primarily affected by the panties incident, its hollow principles momentarily deflated by thunderous, omnivorous laughter. Such contagious laughter has, however, a tendency to lead a life of its own, rippling out from the throats of those who laugh first to resonate in the proliferating and ever-widening gaps in the polity. It acts like a corrosive solvent and tends to become endemic. Eventually, everything and everyone concerned is overcome by it, including those who laughed first but, amid the growing laughter, regardless of what they try or do, eventually are left looking silly or somewhat ridiculous on the political stage.

Such laughter does not affect this or that political party, personality, or entity: rather, it afflicts the political as such. From left to right, and right down the middle, such comprehensive laughter envelops the entire political topography, delivering it over to a scary, unfathomable otherness. Regardless of any informing ideologies, or of the actors' desires, worries, or programmatic intentions, it eventually overtakes every site where the political is at all enunciated, leaving them all encompassed by a troubling, advancing obscurity, the night of not knowing where every (postpolitical?) initiative is being tried out. It may even be said that this laughter is the anonymous sound that the theologico-political makes in its irrepressible retreat. In Venezuela it is so prevalent that one local caricaturist goes so far as to suggest that, if prices keep going down, "comicalness" may eventually overtake oil as the nation's most profitable export item.⁴⁵ Moreover, in Venezuela such laughter affects the opposition perhaps even more than it does the government. Bereft of any credible leadership, organization, or program and affected even more than the regime by the institutional debacle of recent years, the opposition, in its urgency to get rid of Chávez, often abruptly descends from the heights of tragedy into the lowly bosom of comedy. If the circumstances were not the uncertain mess that they presently are, it might even be said that he who laughs last laughs best, with the government uttering the final, deafening laughter before the sorry spectacle of the opposition's many trials and tribulations.



FIGURE 7 "If oil prices continue to go down, we will have to increase exports in humor." (Caricature by Rayma, *El Universal*, November 6, 2001.)

As one cartoon intimates, however, under the prevailing circumstances it is impossible once and for all to award the prize for the greatest laughingstock. Laughter is a great equalizer, democratically afflicting all the contending parties. Saying to whom the last laugh will go is not just hard to decide, it is radically undecidable. As a result, even if often the regime laughs even harder than the opposition does, this does not mean that it achieves any more success in quashing or subduing its opponents. As in some virulent replay of the nation's implosive origins, the more that the regime exerts overwhelming force at some point or another in the political landscape, trying to bring everything within its grasp, the more, in their lateral flight, such things elude its sovereign grasp. Much like the electronically reproduced panties of the general, things fly in all directions, briefly touching each other to form fleeting figures where, amidst tumbling monuments, the face of the sovereign state does not catch its reflection. In a political landscape increasingly crisscrossed by NGOs, manifold media images, Internet messages, cellular phone commu-

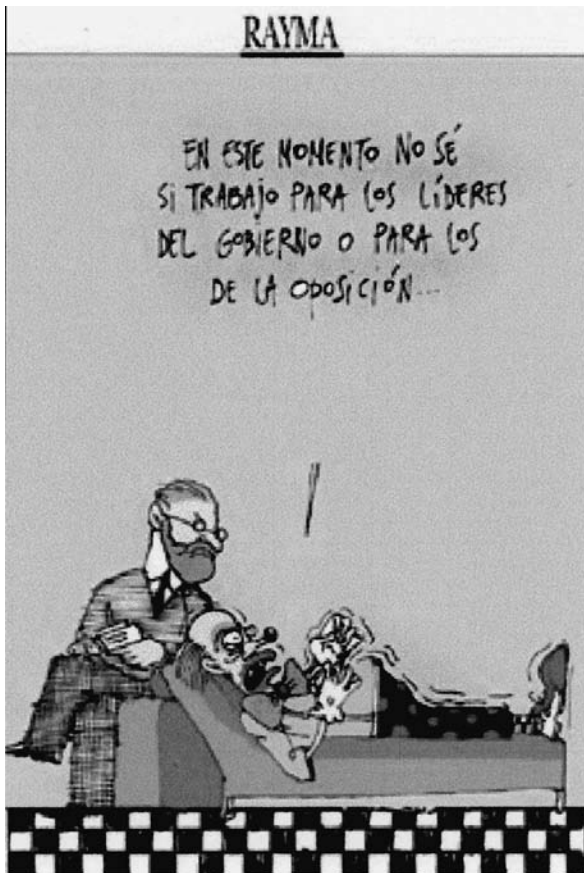


FIGURE 8 "At the moment, I don't know whether I work for the leaders of the government or for those of the opposition." (Caricature by Rayma, *El Universal*, May 8, 2004.)

nications, and human rights organizations, where some of the traditional functions of the nation-state are increasingly taken over by a congeries of transnational instances, such as granting agencies, financial organizations, multinational corporations, or multi-state political corporations, the local state finds it increasingly difficult to do its job. Paradoxical as it may seem, a tell-tale sign of such difficulty is the regime's inflationary use of the "Bolívar" sign, which, as concerned local historians insist, can only bring about its devaluation.

It is not, then, surprising that, to borrow a revealing expression from a local analyst, in this era of "diminished sovereignties" Venezuela's political antagonists have found themselves mired in an endless, exhausting war of attrition, since, as he insightfully suggests, every time these actors make a move they must look behind their backs and seek approval from the relevant international instance or instances.⁴⁶ The very notion of a sovereign decision falls victim to such a play of mirrors, increasingly incapable, as all decisions are, of attaining the kind of self-identity and consistency that, by totalizing the political field while designating one or more enemies significant, renders them sovereign. There are enough indications that, lately, in Venezuela something may be seriously amiss with the sort of political theology that, explicitly or implicitly, makes national sovereignty the obverse of a delineation of the nation's enemies. Take, for example, the nervousness with which the Chávez regime keeps vertiginously reiterating its founding constitutional gesture, serially to found anew all imaginable aspects of the nation—from the parliament, to worker and neighborhood organizations, to the university and a string of other similar institutions. Some local commentators have even spoken of the "constitutional franchise" that the regime has extended to the most varied personalities and groups in their efforts incessantly to found everything anew. Or the jitteriness with which President Chávez, in his self-appointed role as media mogul, keeps adding new political enemies to a list that already including oligarchs, the Church, landlords, and the media, without that list in any way congealing into the single enemy of the people that thinkers like Ernesto Laclau have identified as populism's unsurpassable other, the necessary foil against which this sort of regime establishes and defines itself. In this regard, even if the Chávez regime is often viewed as populist, so far it has failed to achieve that which, according to Laclau, is distinctive of populism—as, I might add, of a singularly virulent version of the Schmittian logic of the political—namely, the ability to totalize the social field or, what amounts to the same, the field of the popular by designating an imaginary enemy.⁴⁷

Little wonder if, in such weak, or *debole*, circumstances, as Vattimo might have it, *fuera*, or "force," is one of the most insistent demands of the agents. Much like the members of the Venezuelan María Lionza possession cult—who for hours chant to achieve "force" while, paradoxically, seeing it dissipate along an endless, metonymic chain of spirits, from "Vikings" and "Barbarians" to Mexican movie stars, by whom they are routinely possessed—so Venezuelan political subjects see their force dissipate just as they ask for more.⁴⁸ Considering what has been said of the Hegelian State as "the thought of

the social totality” and, as such, “the final truth of the entire regime of subjectivity,” it may very well be that the very notion of the subject is now at stake.⁴⁹

I will conclude with an image that brings home the kind of unhomely explosion of privacy into public space that Roland Barthes called the “publicity of the private” and that in Venezuela today is playing such havoc with the nation and the regime’s political theology.⁵⁰ Just when references to the multicolored panties were petering out in the media, an article in one of the major national newspapers cast a strange light on the entire episode. In it a local humorist describes repeatedly arriving home to traces of a rebellion that all of his domestic objects, especially his clothing, have staged during his absence. He finds hints of underwear, socks, or shirts having fallen in love and taken off together, clothing lying everywhere as if exhausted from the wild party of the night before, or buttons nibbled like crackers on top of little dishes in the living room. And everywhere his most beloved public gala dressing, tuxedos and the like, is entirely covered over with feminine underwear, especially panties, in a scene resembling an “orgy of cloth, synthetic textiles, 100% cotton and silk.” After swearing that his “clothing is alive,” the author ends his piece with a vision of this clothing folding him into a luggage and, much “like a departing sock,” sending him packing.⁵¹

By contrast to the sense of subjective destitution in our earlier dreamily mournful example, in which the panties no longer hound the masculine subject in the dark, here such a subject is well on the way to becoming an object. What was salient in that earlier scene was the subject’s intense shame as the solitary panty migrated from the alluring domains of privacy into the glare of public exposure. In thus shaming the masculine subject, such a migration by the object disclosed how much the domains of publicity and the political thrive on suppressed viscerality, a point that Michael Warner has effectively made.⁵² Regardless of all of their claims to universalism and neutrality, the self-identity and perpetuation of such domains of unmarked masculinity require that they be rigorously sealed off from the realms of privacy and sexuality. This means that the boundaries between the public and the private must be carefully policed, so that no unauthorized passage occurs. Hence the subversiveness of the panty’s solitary emergence from the catacombs of privacy, a passage sharply revealing how, in Venezuela at least, sexuality remains the unavowed truth of the subject.⁵³ It also brings out how much the perpetuation of the kind of political theology addressed here requires that masculine subjects take their pleasures privately, so that they may be freed to declare publicly the sober truths of the state.

Not that these neat demarcations have ever quite worked in Venezuela, where the sexualization of the political and the politicization of privacy have long been the norm. Yet, largely due to globalization and the media, the increasingly promiscuous quid pro quos and exchanges between the public and the private threaten to wreck any residual integrity that such domains might formerly have possessed, a possibility that in Venezuela arrives amid growing violence. In an equivocal space—where public statues “walk,”⁵⁴ mysteriously migrating from their assigned sites to reappear in the city’s most unexpected

places; the president sings on national TV or hands over recipes for combatting the common cold or improving one's diet; open-air public art, escalators, and rails surreptitiously yet constantly shrink, their materials chipped away by a nocturnal army of anonymous "workers" and perhaps later redeployed as components in, for example, a variety of domestic appliances; or retired army officers march against the government with their military uniforms neatly and somewhat quaintly arranged on hangers so as to circumvent a prohibition on wearing them⁵⁵—in such a space all denominations falter. About to become something else, common names (and what they stand for) totter at some unfathomable edge, undermined by uncertainty. To call such a space "public" is to indulge in a misnomer, considering how, increasingly, virtually everything within this space is irrepressibly (and glaringly) contaminated by its canonical opposite. Something similar can be said of the "private." As every inside yields to an unmasterable outside, more and more this domain's most intimate souvenirs, mementos, and fetishes are unceremoniously delivered to a faceless, borderless exterior. What becomes of these in such a mobile, hybrid terrain—neither straightforwardly "public" nor unabashedly "private"—cannot safely be predicted. Indeed, what subjects, politics, entities, or identities might still be possible is a question that, amid growing violence, must remain up for grabs.

In this undecidably utopian or dystopian scenario lurks a possibility other than random violence: that of a freeing of all objects from the subjective regimes, the subject-object dialectics to which objects have hitherto been subjected. If in one of my earlier examples the solitary panty summons the subject sexually in the dark only to deflate him,⁵⁶ the scenario in which all domestic objects, including panties, rebel may have less to do with sex per se than with what the Italian philosopher Mario Perniola recently called the "sex appeal of the inorganic" or Nancy calls "the touch,"⁵⁷ a condition in which, as objects among objects, former subjects, sent packing from their homes, enter an oceanic realm where the theologico-political "retreats," while a touch circulates among stones, stars, generals, or multicolored panties, multiplying the gaps through which laughter erupts.

Postscript, August 2005

Since the first version of this paper, written now some three years ago, much water has gone under the proverbial bridge in Venezuela. While at the time things appeared undecided, with the main political opponents locked in a war of attrition with an unforeseeable outcome, the situation today is quite different. Against the expectations of many, on August 15, 2004, the Chávez camp won, by a large margin, a referendum called by the opposition to revoke its mandate. The regime now seems firmly in control of virtually all the nation's main political institutions and levers of power. Taking advantage of the disarray that the largely unexpected defeat inflicted upon its adversaries and making effective

use of its precarious majority in parliament, following the referendum the regime swiftly went on the offensive. Rapidly it passed a series of laws and undertook initiatives that both expanded and consolidated its grip over such crucial institutions as the armed forces, the oil industry, the central bank, and the judiciary, while criminalizing many forms of protest that heretofore opposition forces had used to great effect in their efforts to bring down the government. To give one crucial example, though previously the privately owned media had been one of the main weapons wielded by the regime's opponents in their crusade against Chávez, in the months after the referendum a law was passed by the government-controlled parliament that, insidiously, encourages self-censorship by the media. Given the apparent consolidation of the regime, its seeming solidity and power, it should come as no surprise that I regarded publishing this paper, originally written under quite different circumstances, with some trepidation.⁵⁸ Indeed, how is one to accommodate the notion of a politico-theological retreat and the image (and the reality) of a regime triumphantly basking “in the shadow of the liberator,”⁵⁹ that is, in the rich afterglow of a Bolivarian political theology? The difficulties are compounded when one considers that such an apotheosis unfolds against the backdrop of a floundering and thoroughly disarticulated opposition.

A total of six months of fieldwork in Venezuela, conducted in two stages, in 2005 and in the fall of 2004, has convinced me that realities on the ground are less of a piece than reporting in the global media might suggest, hence, that the image of an all-powerful regime secure in its totalizing reach is overblown. I cannot here go into all the reasons that sustain my conclusions—or, for that matter, account for the regime's ability so thoroughly to quash its opponents under circumstances that, like the ones addressed in this paper, should have rendered such an outcome unlikely. Doing this would mean writing a new and different paper, something that I leave for another occasion. Suffice it to say two things. One, that the notion of a retreating, or even imploding political theology in principle does not preclude the possibility of relatively unstable configurations of force contingently coming into being, in which one or more political actors temporarily gain the upper hand against some crushed opponent(s). In retrospect, such a result was something of a foregone conclusion in Venezuela, where, with a few notable exceptions, an opposition narcissistically locked in the mantralike recitation of a few sound bytes—“civil society,” “democracy,” and the like—showed itself singularly unable to address the aspirations, predicaments, and grievances of the vast majority of the population. And this in a country that, during the last few decades, has experienced dramatically increased rates of poverty, amid the near-total collapse of its representative institutions. Little wonder if, confronted with a regime that, whatever its shortcomings, came into power and defines itself precisely in reference to such dire circumstances, the opposition floundered.⁶⁰ Best exemplified in the campaign slogan *Chávez vete ya!* (“Chávez, go now!”), insistently heard in opposition rallies during the closing days of the campaign for the referendum, the shortcomings of a media-driven politics have perhaps never been so glaring.

Which does not mean, contrary to what some local commentators think, that the overall significance of the recent Venezuelan events comes down to the notion of a deficit of politics that can simply be remedied by injecting more of the same into the activities and programs of the opposition. Without clarifying how, in the present circumstances, doing so would be possible, these analysts draw from the opposition's defeat in the referendum the lesson that more politics is needed if in the future this sector is to have a fighting chance against Chávez. In other words, according to them, any opposition comeback is contingent upon the ability of this sector to shake off its dependency upon the media and to get on with the reconstitution of the political parties and other representative instances that have been washed out by the catastrophic socio-political upheavals of recent years. While there is some truth in this—certainly, the opposition will somehow have to improve upon that (political) score if it wishes to leave its mark on the future course of local events—the question still remains as to how doing so would be possible in Venezuela today. That is, how, beyond wishful thinking, would it be possible effectively to reconstitute political instances that the drift of events has perhaps rendered hopelessly ineffectual?

With this, I arrive at my second point concerning what has transpired in Venezuela since the referendum, one that is considerably more disturbing than just saying that politics was lacking so as to better pave the way for the return of the (theologico-)political. It is, after all, not politics but its retreat—that is, the retreat of the theologico-political—that, in such events, is ultimately at stake. While the excess of the regime's politics, if that is what it was, bought it some time, allowing it momentarily to prevail over its politically deficient opponents, abundant signs suggest how fragile such an outcome really is, how much, in other words, the present configuration of forces is an equilibrium that is highly volatile, largely because, no matter how numerically overbearing it may be,⁶¹ the victory of the regime in the referendum has not stopped the hemorrhage of politico-theological substance with which, after a relatively brief honeymoon in the beginning, it has ceaselessly been afflicted.

The distinction Louis Marin makes between “force” and “power” may be useful here. If, for Marin, “force” results in the struggle to the death among contending parties right now, “power” is the ability of some signs to hold such force in reserve, thereby introducing a necessary delay, which somewhat defuses the devastations of the present.⁶² While at present the Chávez regime enjoys considerable amounts of “force,” as measured by its success in the polls or its ability to control virtually all of the nation's main economic and political institutions over and against the will and desires of its opponents, the same cannot be said of its capacity to accumulate “power.” Bedeviled by a rosary of calamitous ills that instantly reverberate in the media,⁶³ from rampant corruption to faltering government-sponsored programs for the poor, a failing oil industry, and proliferating conflicts among its rank and file, the regime seems constitutionally unable to capitalize on its successes so as enduringly to totalize the social and political field in reference to some

significant enemy or enemies. This bespeaks a retreating political theology that, accelerated by globalization and the media, no amount of inflammatory rhetoric on the part of Chávez or other spokespersons of the regime can suffice to slow down. As in the case of the Defense Prime Minister and his panties, such forceful rhetoric and sovereign acts seem caught in a horizontal drift in which any auratic height they seek to secure for themselves fatefully dissipates.

To put all this in terms that slightly stretch Marin's, yet I believe are compatible with his, in spite of its avowedly politico-theological inclinations, the regime seems fatefully unable to gather enough political-theological signs around itself so as to translate, not just the destructively divisive play of forces in the present, but also its gaps, oblivions, and lacunae into an enduring socio-political constellation. As a result, no sooner does it quench a fire than another flares up with equal or greater intensity, a situation still rife with laughter, even if nowadays somewhat frozen or contained by the regime's official spectacle of might. Thus the regime goes on, from one fire to the next, in a disconcerting drift that, if not somehow halted (but how, given the difficulties of adopting any unabashedly authoritarian solutions under the current global and local preconditions?), cannot but endanger, if not its survival, then its overall, long-term revolutionary design. No wonder that lately the term *implosion* has repeatedly surfaced in the writings of a series of local political analysts in reference to the regime's current predicament. In a recent newspaper article, one of these insightfully summarized the situation by pointing out that, curiously enough, given how much it has overcome any overt challenges to its rule, "the recurrent trait of this government has been its incapacity to consolidate the dominion over institutions that were already regarded as definitively controlled."⁶⁴ Another way of saying this is that, as in a dream, at least according to some indications, the more the government assumes complete control of any particular institution or domain, the more things slip out of its hands, any illusion of control rapidly dissolving into thin air.

I will end this postscript with an event that recently filled all the main Venezuelan media and that I believe illustrates much of what I have been saying. This is the assassination in the streets of Caracas, on November 18, 2004, of Danilo Anderson, the state prosecutor in charge of bringing to trial all those accused of participating in the failed coup attempt against Chávez of April 2002. He was killed by a car-bomb, and, if one is to judge from the government's immediate response, it is hard to come up with any other incident that so instantly raised local political temperatures. A series of rallies was swiftly organized, which, besides blaming the oligarchy, attempted to canonize Anderson as the first martyr of the revolution. The government went so far as to rapidly commission a series of busts of the young prosecutor, which were to be placed in all official institutions to honor his memory. Such an effervescent state of affairs did not last long. Before the official pathos had any chance to settle into anything like a collective state of grief and rightful indignation, news started to percolate in the media that suggested an altogether different scenario than the one the regime wished to impress on the public: namely, that,

rather than being a virtuous martyr, Anderson might have been simply a crook, the hub of a clandestine network of blackmailers secretly extorting great sums of money from the accused in exchange for having their names removed from the list of those allegedly involved in the plot to bring Chávez down. In light of these accusations, the reasons for Anderson's killing would have been chrematistic rather than political, his assassination ordered by some big banker or some other fat cat unwilling to pick up the tab the accusers were putting on his or her head.

Whatever truth there may be in these revelations—and some argument concerning their merit is still going on in Venezuela—the fact is that, ever since they started to emerge, the official commemoration has stopped dead in its tracks, with a stony silence filling the void that the receding official rhetoric has left behind—so dead, in fact, that, at least according to some media reporting, all the busts that at a considerable cost the government had commissioned in order to commemorate Anderson were rapidly and surreptitiously melted down.⁶⁵ Even if they had just been paid for but not yet actually made, or simply put aside until some hypothetical vindication of Anderson takes place,⁶⁶ the fact is that at least for now the dead prosecutor has dropped far down the list of topics that the government wants to see addressed in public. I will leave the reader with this image of melting official busts, which, even if not factually true, in light of all that I have said about Venezuela's monumental governmentality and the role of statuary therein is, at the very least, poetically so.⁶⁷ The state's inability even to lastingly canonize its martyrs is a paradoxical monument or reminder of the continuous retreat of the political theological in Venezuela today.