

CULTURES OF THE BODY: VENEZUELA'S HOLY FAMILY¹

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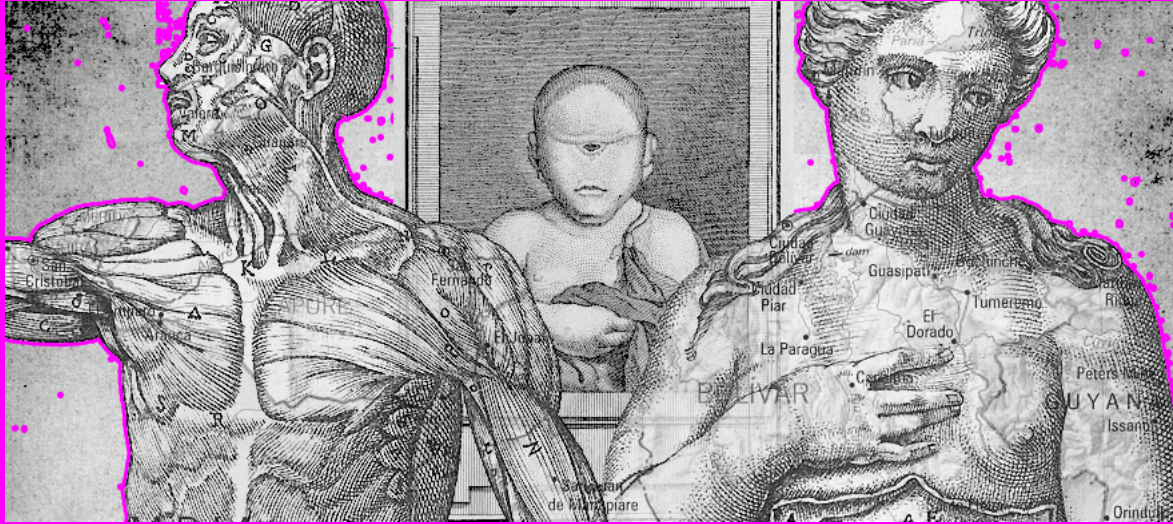
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Abstract || In this article, I propose reading the body as a privileged space to debate Venezuelan politics. I expose the violent metaphorical and allegorical operations that manage to disfigure the national bodies, taking them to the very limits of monstrosity before normalizing them. Notwithstanding the compulsion to denounce the political adversary that defiles the Venezuelan 'holy' family, the need to preserve the national body *par excellence* is stronger than these differences and the incidental possession of power. The bodies that make up this national family are problematic productions that offer little space for other bodies and sensibilities to destabilize, revise, or re-articulate the Venezuelan nation's most conservative values.

Keywords || Venezuela, body, Venezuelan family, nation, Simón Bolívar, Hugo Chávez, Bolivarian revolution, violence, gay body.

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1 | A first version of this article was presented in the symposium Gazing at Bolívar's Body, that took place in November 2009 in Rice University, Houston. I thank a Luis Duno-Gottberg, Beatriz González Stephan, Nathalie Bouzaglo, Rafael Sánchez y Gina Saraceni for their comments and the intense dialog on these Venezuelan bodies.

0. Introduction: “Watch yourself on the inside”

4th of March 2009, 7:30 pm. Twenty five agents of the National Guard, twenty agents of the Forensic and Criminal Investigations Unit (CICPC, for its name in Spanish), with the national coordinator of the Forensic Division and fifteen officers of the National Integrated Service for the Administration of Customs Duties and Taxes (SENIAT, for its name in Spanish) (“Informe del SENIAT sobre Exposición *Bodies*” 2009), together with a team of Venezolana de Televisión –VTV, the public television channel of Venezuela–, got into the business premises where the opening of the exhibition *Bodies, Revealed* was taking place, in the city of Caracas (Orozco, 2009). The officers informed that they suspected that the thirteen bodies and more than two hundred and nineteen organs on exhibition, which the company declared as plastic, were human cuts, corpses dissected by means of a special process based on polymers. For this reason, the competent authorities proceed to close the exhibition *Bodies...* until they knew if it was a mistake.

The intervention of the Venezuelan state institutions happened immediately after the government-supporter diary *Vea* published the article “*Bodies Inhumanos*”, where it urged the national government to “impedir esta muestra de necrofilia comercial”. When proceeding, the superintendent of the tributary organ stated that even if the advertising of the event guaranteed that the corpses used for the exhibition “fueron tratados con todo el respeto y con toda la dignidad que merece un ser humano [...]” (Bracci y García, 2009), this should be questioned, because if they were really treated with respect and dignity, they would not have been declared as “partes plásticas” (Bracci y García, 2009). Soon after the temporary closure, a multidisciplinary team formed by the Forensic Department of the CICPC, the INDEPABIS and the SENIAT itself corroborated that the bodies exhibited were real human parts and not plastic parts as the company had declared to the custom authorities. Therefore, the tributary organization decided to revoke the administrative acts by which the temporary admission of the specified assets was authorised. At the same time, they ordered that the goods should be taken out of the country in a period of ten days, the company was fined for a breach of the obligations and conditions upon which the authorisations of temporary admission were conceived, a disciplinary administrative process was initiated to the custom officers involved, for transferring the use of the goods without previous authorisation of the customs administration and the exhibition was closed for breaking the regulations of invoice issuing during the operational days, as well as the closure of the company for not having the sales and purchase ledgers on their premises (SENIAT, 2009).



Fig. 1. Photograph of the closure of the exhibition *Bodies, Revealed*. Caracas, 4 March 2009.

On Sunday 8th of March 2009, four days after the closure had place, the Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez confirmed on his customary Sunday TV program *Aló Presidente* that it was he who had asked Ramón Carrizales, the Venezuelan Vice-President, to investigate *Bodies...* In Chávez's opinion, the exhibition was a very evident sign of the moral decomposition that shakes the whole planet. The President showed his surprise for parents to take their children to see corpses and expressed his astonishment for this exhibition being shown around the world: "Tienen Internet, propaganda, presentan un *show*: "Venga y véase usted mismo por dentro". Y ganan mucho dinero. ¿Dónde está el respeto al ser humano? Como dice Antonio Aponte: "Esos cadáveres, ¿de quién son? ¿Por qué están insepultos?" (Bracci, 2009).

To the mind of the President, the exhibition represented a sign of "barbarie" which should be replied with a "revolución moral y ética".

I start my reading on the body with the above narration explained as a gateway, as a frame for the representations of the body of Bolivarian Venezuela. This closing of the body, i.e. of the exhibition *Bodies...* does not escape from the politic polarization that is modelling representations in Venezuela today. On the contrary, the intervention from all the powers of the State-Government — mediatic and, besides, intimidating— politized the closing of the exhibition. Following the public opinion, the closed body became then a metaphor for the cessation of scientific and cultural advance, as well as for the paralysation of progress. However I want to put this intervention only as a reference framework, without asking myself which body is closed; the body reproduced by a globalized franchise of consumption —which is accentuated even more with the name of the exhibition, in English language— or the body of progress, scientific and cultural advance. I do not ask myself, then, which body is closed since the question itself reproduces the polarized imaginary which I am trying to discuss. I emphasize, on the contrary, the body itself and its closing as national problems, as issues concerning today more than ever the Government, the public opinion and the bodies

that configure the nation.

I propose in this article to read the body as a privileged place in which Venezuelan politics is discussed. I specially want to put forward the way the metaphoric and allegoric operations from national bodies are so little ready to give space for other matters and sensibilities, that they have to use side strategies, sometimes unsuccessful, to gain certain visibility in privileged spaces of the Nation. How are scheduled such excluded bodies? How are the bodies that matter for the nation deformed? Why are they disfigured? Which way do these operations work? Which operations normalize the family of the nation? Are the scheduled bodies resistant to the tactics of the corporal hegemony of the nation and its violences? How do they materially affect? In the cultures of the body, sometimes the bodies themselves seem to go unnoticed. I would like to report how the way the bodies integrating the *Holy Family* of the nation are problematic productions, offering little space for the habitability of other bodies which are more complex or have the capability to disestablish, revisit and reinterpret the more conservative —racist, classist and heteronormative— values of the nation.

1. “Watch yourself on the outside”

Perhaps, studies about Venezuela have not reported enough for the constant anxiety that bodies, as cultural representations of the nation, have generated in the 20th Century. At the end of the Venezuelan 19th Century, the body is placed in the focus of the public interest for being the indisputable matter on which illness and sex are experienced. In her book *De médicos, idilios y otras historias* Paulette Silva warns that anyone approaching the culture of the end of the century will be shocked by the proliferation of the speeches, in a country which is hardly beginning to change, about diseases caused by modern culture (2000: 173). In turn, such illnesses discover a body that, when examined, observed and even listened, is represented as a privileged area of Modernity. The proliferation of patriotic bodies, the fascination for the beauty contests² or the supremacy of the presidential anatomy in Venezuela speak of the omnipresence of the body and the way the nation is represented, the way the nation becomes *body*.

In Venezuela, both the presidential body and the body of the national heroes always generated an excessive interest. The cult to the figure of Simón Bolívar has developed hand in hand with the exaltation of the physical attributes or, at least, with the grandeur emanated from his presence of *Liberator*. The need to reach a consensus about the body of Bolívar³ has been constant within the cult, and the stability of

NOTES

2 | It can be said that in Venezuela a cult to the beauty pageants exists, furthermore supported by republican Presidents of Venezuela. On the occasion of the consecutive victories of Venezuela in Miss Universe, the President Hugo Chávez congratulated the winner, Estefanía Fernández, publicly, and quoted the Guinness record by Venezuela on this international contest.

3 | The anxiety before the unique face of Simón Bolívar has been present from its invention as National Body and its institutionalization as the *Liberator*. Marta Traba praise in her article the realization of an iconographic exhibition of Bolívar by Alfredo Boulton and say that it has “un sentido pedagógico de investigación histórica, cuya finalidad es la de aproximar la mayor cantidad de rasgos semejantes y de cotejar unas y otras interpretaciones hechas en vida de Bolívar, hasta fijar ese rostro móvil, sacar ese rostro del agua del tiempo y obligarlo, pacientemente, a definirse con claridad” (2005: 221).

his anatomical characteristics has been a key factor to value him as the undeniable and only Father of the Nation. John Lynch states in his biography about Bolívar that the Independence of Latin America would be incomprehensible without the presence of the *Liberators*: “La historia subsiguiente sería algo vacío sin la intervención de la autoridad personal” (quoted in Martínez, 2006). The invention of such personal authority comes from the conception of the national body itself. Lynch continues:

The [Bolívar] cultists had a good story. A hero of pure Venezuelan lineage, after a tragic marriage and a golden youth in Europe, assumes the leadership of national independence, provides the intellectual base of a continent revolution, and then the military and political talents to create a union of states and win international respect, all the time asserting his manhood as a glorious lover (Lynch, 2006: 301).

The same thing has happened with the Venezuelan presidents, from Juan Vicente Gómez to Hugo Chávez. The presidential body has been one of the favorite interests of the Venezuelan nation, and Hugo Chávez’s is not an exception. The speculations have undermined this national enjoyment. The increase of the body mass of Hugo—his *obesity*, his excess—has been used on the opposite way of what I have quoted. Opponent national and international sectors have noticed the dramatic weight gain of the Venezuelan president. Salomón Jakubowicz speculates in his article “¿Por qué Chávez ha aumentado de peso y qué puede hacer para adelgazar?” about the reasons and suggests that the President could be taking medication (antidepressants, anxiolytics, etc.) which would cause such excess. He also mentions the lack of sleep and the frequent travels. All these variables have shaped a part of the speculations by politically adverse sectors about the body mass of the presidential body. However, it specially leaps to the eye how the obesity of Hugo Chávez has allowed him to represent the excess of power, authoritarianism and, in a way, has achieved to reinvent in the 21st Century the body of the dictator of the new *banana* republic. The body is, most definitely, a matter given to being altered and shaped.

In turn, Hugo Chávez made a reference to the increase in the body mass index of the population. Following his statistics, 14.5 % of Venezuelan people registered an excess of weight, in contrast with the percentage (6.3%) from twenty years ago (“Chávez dice que hay muchos gordos...”). Despite the President stating his concern about the health of the Venezuelan citizens, in a strictly biopolitical sense, the statistics about weight excess help him to measure the economical splendour and the redistribution of the national income. Even though it seems incomprehensible, according to the head of state, the average Venezuelan excess of weight means welfare: it is an excess that allows to measure the national health—obtaining a positive balance.

Likewise, the health of the President has been a national affair that has even overlapped the issues of national interest and urgency⁴. In 2011, after his participation in the IV Cuba-Venezuela Joint Commission, Hugo Chávez was emergency operated in La Habana city (“Comunicado oficial...”). Shortly after, the Venezuelan president confirmed on a televised speech that he had a cancer, although he did not give more details about it and the illness has never been clarified enough. The vagueness relating to the presidential illness has been an endless source for speculation and has made the body of Hugo Chávez, from the chavism itself and from the opposition too, a crucial matter in the Venezuelan political polarization. The body, due to its illness, has been converted in a crucial element for the governability of the present and future Venezuela. That is because the body, despite its eloquence, is a recurrently censured matter, shaped to the convenience and interest of the national hegemony.

The French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy states that the body is nor significance nor signifier (2008: 25). We have no body, *we are* body. The body is exposition, exteriorization and extension, from the fracture that is the existence. I recall for an interesting statement made by Nancy for the purposes of this study: “El cuerpo es una imagen que se ofrece a otros cuerpos, todo un corpus de imágenes tensadas de cuerpo a cuerpo” (2008: 121). In this sense, I am interested on thinking how the representations of the body are dependant on this tension, on this chain of linked bodies. However, we should notice a recurrent condition announced by Nancy, who assures that, relating to the body, there is a promise of keeping quiet: “no tanto de callar a propósito del cuerpo, sino más bien de callar al cuerpo, sustrayéndolo materialmente a las improntas significantes, aquí, directamente, en la página escrita y leída” (Nancy, 2003: 6). The idea of reducing the distance between body and writing is one of the main elements of this idea of the body. For Nancy, the only possibility of the body for speaking is —and in this sense I understand the performativity of his books, specially in the case of *Corpus* and *El intruso*— is based on writing the body, in the sense of writing about the body and engraving the body. Writing and engraving mean to touch, to intervene. Writing is this way touching the body.

Paradoxically, although I have stated the preponderance and omnipresence of the body in Venezuela, I have to emphasize the recurrent critical operations that aimed to overshadow the fictional representations of the body in the 20th Venezuelan Century. The case of Armando Reverón, for example, is especially notorious. The national and international critic has tried to overlap, in his work, landscape over body. Alfredo Boulton sophisticatedly shows his phobia to the sexual bodies that Reverón paints and builds, and compulsively baptizes the Venezuelan artist as the painter of the landscape. The famous dolls by Reverón are deformed, feared, and

NOTES

4 | Respecting to this, Luis Duno-Gottberg confirm that the illness of the President Chávez has generated a mediatic interest even before being public the cancer diagnosis. “El personalismo que ha caracterizado la presidencia de Hugo Chávez Frías ha creado también oportunidades para la emergencia de otro tipo de lecturas en las que el cuerpo enfermo de la nación se corresponde al cuerpo enfermo del mandatario. Recordamos inevitablemente aquí las reflexiones de Hobbes, abordadas al inicio de este ensayo, y leemos este tipo de razonamiento desde la imagen de un “Leviatán populista”: si el líder carismático encarna la nación-pueblo y ésta se halla enferma, entonces el cuerpo del primero comunica (acaso por contagio) el estado de la segunda. En el año 2008, el siario *Versión Final*, de la ciudad de Maracaibo, dedicó una gran página al tema de “la enfermedad de Hugo Chávez”. Una serie de gráficos y cuadros explicativos operaban allí como diseccionando la figura del presidente para comprobar que no sólo sufría de una serie de trastornos en la cervical, sino, más importante aún, que todo ello podía afectar su estado psíquico, haciéndolo irritable. En la parte inferior del recuadro se sugiere incluso su consumo de tabaco y cafeína como “caldo de cultivo [de su] cuadro clínico”. Estos razonamientos se conectan también a una serie de acusaciones absurdas sobre su consumo de drogas, aunque la discusión había ya alcanzado su más alto grado de ridículo cuando, meses antes, se habían difundido las declaraciones del astrólogo Walter Mercado, quien predecía la muerte del presidente a causa de “una extraña enfermedad de la cabeza” (2009: 423-424).

disgusting. The phobia to sexual body, dangerous for being unknown, threatens the international consolidation of the Venezuelan artist par excellence and his entrance into plastic modernity. At the expense of overshadowing the body, the critics find in the landscape the non-stop ticket for the Venezuelan plastics to modernity⁵. This project consolidates him as the artist of the light, the national painter of Venezuela and inscribes him in a Caribbean imaginary that will later be awarded with the consolidation in the international modernism, the official entrance being marked by the individual exhibition of the artist in the Museum of Modern Art of New York (MoMA) in 2007.

Anyway, the representations of the body in Venezuela are especially problematic. The political polarization not only takes bodies but shapes them too, configuring the group that I call *the new family of the nation*. Likewise, the national scene tends to quote the excluded bodies to erase them, to insist in their abjection, i.e. their belonging to an *outside* of the national space. Next, I will refer to three events where the materiality of the body became a space in which the political discomfort of the nation fantasizes. I will quote the three events where the eyes of Venezuelan people were put over the body, its transformations and materiality. I want to set out the way these representations materialize, give body to, the new family of the nation.

2. Venezuela's Holy Family

2.1. The Mother

6th of June, 2004. One day after the announcement of the culmination of a restoration, after more than half a century exposed to the weather, of the statue of the Venezuelan goddess María Lionza — essential representation of the Venezuelan nation—, placed in the main highway of Caracas, it was broken into two pieces, fractured by the waist. Fundapatrimonio, the institution that executed the restoration process, had actually declared the end of a “tratamiento preventivo para conservar las partes más afectadas por el avanzado deterioro de la pieza, cada vez más agrietada” (“Cae María Lionza”, 2004). The fracture of the body of the goddess took place within a heated controversy undertaken by the authorities from the Central University of Venezuela —at whose entrance is located the statue— and Fundapatrimonio —official institution linked to the *Alcaldía de Liberator*—, about the restoration and relocation of the statue. The split body of the goddess was interpreted in many ways, but it prevailed as a mythic figure with an extensive cult in Venezuela⁶ and without any doubt as the more relevant femininity from the national mestizo pantheon, sign that hard times were coming for a polarized

NOTES

5 | In the prologue for the book by Alfredo Boulton, *Reverón*, Venezuelan writer Guillermo Meneses appeared interested for the body within the work by the artist and tries to emphasize its importance, even considering the apparition of dolls establishes severe differences respecting the previous works by the artists. To the serene melancholy characterizing the female bodies represented “ambientes de lujuria y violencia” which could be related to “cierto falso mundo parisino sacado de Toulouse Lautrec” (Meneses, 1979: 57) are added. For the Venezuelan writer, the new bodies mark a deep break in the creative procedures taking by Reverón. Nevertheless, even if Meneses seems to be attracted by dolls and the powerful representation of the body in the works of Reverón, especially the female one, clarify his enthusiasm to share the thesis by Alfredo Boulton. Reverón is, then, a landscapes painter: “No podemos señalar con una raya firme la época de las muñecas como un momento que separa definitivamente ciertas formas de la obra de Reverón. La tarea del artista no está limitada a la invención de formas y colores referidos al cuerpo humano. Mucho de lo mejor que realizó a lo largo de sus años de actividad está relacionado con el paisaje y mal podría pretenderse catalogar dentro de determinada época lo que corresponde a su relación con modelos o con *muñecas*” (Meneses, 1979: 57). Such change of interest and direction seems to be especially symptomatic since Meneses is one of the few authors enhancing the preponderance of the body and creation of the dolls as a nodal episode in the works of Reverón. Even in the prologue for the book of Boulton itself, the Venezuelan

country in a year in which an abrogative referendum (August 2004) would be carried out that could mean the end of the government by the president Hugo Chávez and the governance of the Republic.

“¡María Lionza, llévatelo!, ¡María Lionza, cuídalo!” Such were the slogans that, according to journalistic sources, were heard near the battered statue (EFE). Before the fracture of the body, resulting from the confrontation between Fundapatrimonio and the board of COPRED of the UCV, the Alejandro Colonia Foundation—who owns all the copyright derived from the statue, since the famous sculptor Colina is the author of the more famous representation of the Venezuelan goddess— issues a press release in which they claim the parties to exclude María Lionza from the political agenda and come to an agreement between them (“La Fundación Alejandro Colina...”, 2004). According to Yolanda Salas, who is an expert on the cult, the broken body of the goddess becomes, from this event, a metaphor of a Venezuela torn to pieces by a political fighting: two sides are destroying the country and themselves (“Diosa pagana se rompe...”, 2004). In the same manner, a journal report says that even if the President has never has talked about the case, nor the case of the goddess of Sorte, in a meeting before the referendum he spoke about the rumours of the opposition groups using *witchery* to take him out of power: “¡150 brujos y que tiene el comando del diablo!”, he said. But he added they would not have success: “¡con nosotros está Cristo, que pulveriza (a) brujos y brujas!” (“Chávez acusa a la oposición...”).

2.2. The Children

5th of April, 2006. The bodies of the brothers Jhon Bryan Faddoul, 17 years old, Kevin José Faddoul, 13 years old and Jeason Faddoul, 12 years old, were found dead in the locality of Yare, about 40 km SW Caracas. One of them, Kevin José, suffered from cerebral palsy so he could not move his right leg and hand. The Faddoul brothers were kidnapped together with his driver, Miguel Rivas, being intercepted by a pretended police group the 23rd of February of the same year. The bodies presented “impactos de bala en la región occipital y cervical y en forma lineal, por lo cual se presume que se trató de un ajusticiamiento [...] ocurrido [...] 48 o 72 horas” before they were found (“Ministro Jesse Chacón confirma...”, 2006). However, after they were found, a video from a cellular telephone was spread in Canada making public that the executed bodies were found naked. Allegedly, the police had dressed them and took them to another locality, to show them before the country. The dead bodies of the Faddoul brothers and Miguel Rivas were allegedly dressed with scholar uniforms to avoid the violence raised by their nudity. An endless number of hypotheses derived from the case. The location of the bodies, the way they were dressed—the children were school-

NOTES

teller dismiss in some way the thesis of the dolls being only figures substituting models when he states that some paints of the moment are reproducing them as they are: “Muchos de esos estudios (bocetos hechos en carboncillos y lápices de color) [...] no dejan la menor duda, al ser reproducidos en los cuadros, de que se trata de objetos fabricados” (1979: 56). According to the writer, the represented figures seems to be swimming on the air or if they were hanging up. Meneses give way to a tradition tightly built by Boulton, “obligándonos a ver una obra del todo mediada”.

6 | Rafael Sánchez explains how the myth of María Lionza becomes a cult: “The development of the María Lionza cult illustrates the tensions and dynamism inherent in this populist imaginary. Through a host of publication, public forums, and media interventions, drawing on available iconographical and literary representations, in the 1930s and 1940s a group of *indigenista* artists and intellectuals turned what until then was a set of dispersed and localized oral traditions into an aboriginal myth aimed at a national audience. Centered on the mythical figure of María Lionza, presumably a princess from an aboriginal tribe, this elite artifact was part and parcel of a more general populist move to represent the nation as uniquely autochthonous. Eagerly taken over by individuals and groups from the slum areas of the largest cities, this artifact rapidly began to lead a life of its own. Translated across cultural level, the “Myth of María Lionza” eventually changed into the “Cult of María Lionza”, and, in the shift, the princess became a queen [...]. This transformation of myth into cult entailed a vertiginous

aged but the colour of the shirts was not the one of their year—, the words by the fathers, their actions. Once the dead children were found, the mother states to the nation, aiming to whom she claims *the counsellor of the Republic* that

Al pasar por alto y no darle importancia a esta tortura y asesinato de cuatro personas, entre ellos un niño con parálisis, yo, Gladys Diab, públicamente anuncio: lo aborrezco [...] No lo odio, para mí este y otros casos de apatía a la ley de Dios van a ser el inicio del fin, de orientar a Venezuela bajo la luz divina de la paz y la justicia» (Madre de los Faddoul...).

But shortly after, in declarations to a TV program of a strongly opposition nature, *La entrevista*, from the RCTV channel, the mother of the Faddoul brothers warns: “A las personas que quieran usar mis palabras con fines propios, les pido que no utilicen mi dolor... esta cruz se me está haciendo más pesada al ver que mis palabras quieren utilizarse con fines políticos”. The dead bodies of the Faddoul brothers and Miguel Rivas become at the same time matter whose modelling depends on the “incompetencia del Estado” or the “tergiversación” of the mass media.

Nevertheless, the speculations around the disturbing tone of the case started from the beginning of this episode, when the mother writes to the raptors:

Ya ustedes señores secuestradores conocen a mis hijos. Saben que no son malos y saben que nacieron para no ser negociados... Si Dios los escogió para finalizar con la misión de esas criaturas, no puedo hacer nada para evitarlo. No soy nadie delante de ustedes ni delante de Dios. Sólo les suplico que lo hagan rápido y mientras ellos duermen, les suplico que le den una foto de cualquier santo para que no se sientan solos. Lo único que puedo yo hacer de mi parte es rezarle a sus ángeles para que la subida al cielo sea rápida y hermosa (Blanco Muñoz, 2006).

The bodies of the Faddoul brothers and his driver shook Venezuela by giving account of the violence the country is living, and by being interpreted by the national —both opposition and official— public opinion as sons of the nation.

2.2. The Father

Late 2005. The Venezuelan mass media echoed that the Government, through its state oil company, was considering to sponsor a school of Brazilian samba to take part in the 2006 Carioca carnival, because of its central proposal was the figure of Simón Bolívar as a continental leader. In one of the eight parade floats, an articulated toy doll 13 meters high representing the *Liberator* would march to greet the masses “pero en vez de blandir su espada, sostendría en su mano [...] un corazón rojo en nombre de la paz y de la armonía” (Escuela...).

NOTES

and open-ended incorporation of heterogeneous influences and signifiers; from Kardecist spiritualism and Catholic and state iconography to Cuban Santería and a welter of globalized media images [...]. As a result, the meaning of “María Lionza” has migrated ever further away from those intended by the elite mythographers. And the process continues” (Sánchez, 2001: 393-394).

The news began to spread surprisingly fast and, although the amount of the investment by the Bolivarian Government became a national enigma⁷, at the first moment the Venezuelan opposition considered it another expense from the generous international chequebook of the president Hugo Chávez.

On Monday the 27th of February at 03:15 in the morning, the school Vila Isabel went into the Rio Sambodromo, crossing the famous avenue in a parade that included more than 3500 people and 5000 turkey and pheasant feathers. An article from the international press spoke about the participation of the school:

Las carrozas y bailarines avanzaron en medio de la samba «Soy loco por ti, América», cantada en portugués... en un acto sin precedentes en el templo del carnaval brasileño. Al hacer su entrada [...] Vila Isabel desplegó grupos de bailarines vestidos en trajes típicos del continente en medio de racimos de bananas que se abrían al compás de la samba, para seguir con la presentación de lujosas carrozas que representaban a Latinoamérica desde la época precolombina al momento actual (ANSA, 2006: A-9).

Around the figure of the *Liberator* and between dancers with glittering feathers who danced over gigantic pyramids, other Latin-American characters like Eva Perón, Ché Guevara, Benito Juárez, Sandino, Gabriel García Márquez, Frida Kahlo, Pablo Neruda and even Carmen Miranda confirmed the attempt to recreate the Bolivarian dream of integrity. The divulgation of the carnival image of Simón Bolívar —selected by the school organizers and financed by PDVSA— filled the national public opinion with dismay and they considered it a disrespectful representation of the Father of the Nation. “Mamarracho”, “vergüenza nacional”, “aberración”, “hazmerreír continental” are some of the more restrained words used during the heated polemic; but surprisingly, the interpretation saying the Venezuelan Government had financed a gay Bolívar⁸ was decisive and widespread.

This event caused an endless number of accusations against the national government. Politics from the opposition, religious institutions and the National Academy of History complained about the fact that the body of the *Libertator* was “mariconeado”. The public absence of the President generated speculations too. But the 5th of March 2006, Hugo Chávez reappeared in his TV program *Aló Presidente* number 248. A new chronicle written from the journal records I have presented tries to delete and overwrite the previous ones:

Eran las 3 y media de la mañana cuando entró Villa Isabel en el Sambódromo de Río de Janeiro y miles, cien mil, ochenta mil, cien mil personas se pusieron de pie a ovacionar a Villa Isabel, a su magia, a su canto *Soy loco por ti, América*, y a Bolívar. Al ritmo de samba, al ritmo del amor, al ritmo de la alegría, de la utopía, del nuevo tiempo que amanece

NOTES

7 | Relating to the financial vagueness of the patronage, I could track the information following declarations by both parties. The president of the *Vila Isabel* school noted that the contract had a “nondisclosure agreement” about the sum of the contribution by PDVSA, being forbidden to reveal it publicly. However it seems to be between 200 000 and 1 million and a half of dollars, the sum has been maintained a secret. The head of the Venezuelan embassy in Brazil confirm in an article appeared the 16th February 2006 in the newspaper called *El Nacional* to not know exactly the sum, but he asserts that it was less than one million dollars.

8 | In my article “El Gran Varón: disputas del cuerpo nacional venezolano en tiempos de revolución” I explore the incommodities generated by the fact alone of thinking about a gay Bolívar, and specially the unexpected strategies spread by the Bolivarian Government to avoid his *Liberator* to be released from the closet.

en estas tierras. Vean qué figura majestuosa de nuestro Simón Bolívar [...].

And in the next breath the description of the Father of the Nation starts:

además con unos rasgos negroides, que [se] me parece también. Porque a Bolívar la oligarquía venezolana lo convirtió en blanco. Yo no tengo nada contra los blancos [...], pero Bolívar no era blanco. Es más, dicen que nació en Capaya [...] Bolívar nació entre los negros. Bolívar tenía el pelo rizado. Bolívar era más negro que blanco. No tenía los ojos verdes. Y ustedes ven retratos de Bolívar con los ojos verdes, el pelo amarillento y la cara blanca. Bolívar era chiquito y lo ponen grandote. No, Bolívar era chiquitico, con la voz chillona y era zambo.

The crossing of the bodies is interesting. The answer from Hugo Chávez seems to ignore that the polemics about the *Liberator* is due to its carnival image⁹, to his *maricón* body and not only to his representation as a mestizo. The *zambo* Bolívar of the President has as its main objective, more than building a mestizo national body—which is otherwise a traditional operation for the Venezuelan nation—, preventing the most remote possibility of Bolívar being *released from the closet*. The “simones emplumados”—described by the Venezuelan journalist Nelson Bocaranda, special correspondent in Rio for the channel with an opposition tone Globovisión— did not have a place in the presidential speech. When replying in his TV program to the leading article by the newspaper *El Nacional*, Chávez excluded the subject of the discussion, saying: “Lo demás son otras cosas que no vale la pena leer. Sólo quería referirme a esto”.

3. Normalizing the Family

A *maricón* father and a mother fractured in the waist and displaced, foreign and murdered children; the Venezuela’s *Holy Family* is broken. The anxiety related to the powers of the body as representations of the Nation is skin deep. A polarized Venezuela builds a hideous family group composed by bodies that disfigure the —*mestiza*— national *Holy Family* to report the poor management, the disagreement between the different political sectors towards power, executive or symbolic, of the adversary. The political polarization and its violence, undeniable signs of these revolutionary times, act in a direct manner on these bodies and shape their representation. The body is a sensible area for the operations of the nation. In all the cases I have approached, the materiality of the body is fantasized as a disputed area. All of them are bodies in a strict sense. The statue of the goddess María Lionza—a forceful body which shows his own emblem of body— raises a pelvis, undeniable sign of sexuality and power; the murdered bodies of the children confirm their condition

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9 | Apparently, Simón Bolívar liked carnival. In his personal diary Sir Robert Ker Porter takes the following commentaries: “Lunes 26 [...]. Como esta es la desagradable época en que esta gente tira huevos llenos de fluidos de todas clases, *sans respect*, además de harina, almidón y otras molestias polvorientas, me quedaré en casa hasta que cese esta locura. No ha llovido. Termómetro, 20° a las 7 h y 24° a las 4 h” (Ker Porter, 1997: 196). And: “Martes 27. Bolívar está ausente en casa del general Ibarra donde, según me dicen, vestido de chaqueta blanca, alegremente, se une al lanzamiento de huevos y otros deportes del festival, como un muchacho de 18 años” (1997: 196). I thank Paulette Silva for getting me on the trail of de Porter.

being dead —corpses or bodies, for the criminalistic slang— and the articulated toy with 13 meters in height accuses its own materiality. The family becomes hideous: the bodies are disfigured and, this way, they substitute with (broken) bodies the bodies of the nation.

Of course, this new hideous family is invented to normalize the Venezuelan *holy* family. And, in this sense, there is a consensus between the confronted parts. The national imperative uses strategies that normalize and *correct* the fragmented bodies hurt in the fighting for power. The carnival body of Simón Bolívar finally recovers the more conservative of the national bodies, the presidential body. The clear strategies to mix up the mentioned bodies lead to make a local version of the Carioca float and the body of the Father of the Nation for the presidential campaign in 2005, this time directly using a representation of Chávez. The 13 meters toy presented in Rio became a rubber creole toy. In turn, María Lionza was substituted by a copy and located again in the tumultuous Highway of Caracas. Her body now shows again the mestizo —religious, racial— unity of the Nation. The bodies of the Faddoul children were not buried. The family asked for an authorization to incinerate them and it was granted. This news raised suspicion, as a report points out:

A los detectives les preocupa que se autorizara la cremación de las víctimas. Temen que durante el proceso requieran realizar experticias posteriores a los cadáveres. Por regla general se prohíbe esta práctica hasta que el caso quede cerrado, definitivamente firme y se condene a los imputados (Blanco Muñoz, 2006).

Nevertheless and notwithstanding every recommendation, the bodies disappeared, symbolically and materially.

Now, then, once the national body is organized, can be other bodies —sexual bodies, racial bodies— be represented in the space of the nation? I have insisted that the entrance of alien bodies and sensibilities takes place from phobic quotes that build a hideous family. But now I ask specifically about the sexual body. Can bodies survive to the imperative of the Venezuelan nation? For example, the gay body —or homosexual, to quote it as an ill, pathological body— has been represented compulsively to point out its deformities. The military rule and the naked life (Agamben, 1998) have stressed out the brutal strategies of the power. The gay body has been quote multiply in the Bolivarian Venezuela. The kiss from Chávez to a Brazilian transsexual —publicly cleared and normalized later, explaining the President did not know *she* was a *man*—, the questioning of the sexuality of Hugo Chávez by an Spanish columnist, also denied by the President himself; the declaration from the Attorney General of the Venezuelan Bolivarian Republic before the case of a Catholic priest murdered in the wake of a gay sexual ambush¹⁰, the statement

by the President of the National Assembly saying that the Venezuelan law protects the rights of the homosexual people and, therefore, of the homosexuals hidden within the Church, or the public presidential rebuke for the single ministers and civil servants to get married. In the same way, the gay body has been used to represent *inconvenient* alliances for the nation. At the end of his book *El poder y el delirio*, Enrique Krauze describes the end of a meeting between Fidel Castro and Hugo Chávez: “Y en una escena simétrica a la del día en que se conocieron en La Habana, Chávez lo despidió lanzando besos con la mano en el aire” (2008: 73). The represented scene constitutes a *dangerous* alliance to certain sectors of the Venezuelan nation and this building is made from the homoerotization of friendship. All these cases work to assert compulsively the Venezuelan heterosexual body, the heteronormative couple of the nation. The bodies of the nation, the Venezuelan *Holy Family*, need the building of a hideous, abnormal family group to reassert its *normality*. Nevertheless, I am interested in thinking the way this *others* bodies —sexual, racial, excluded by the nation— take a life and sneak in through the back door of the representations of the nation. Does any habitable space remain?

Before trying to answer this question, I am going to refer to the body from the theoretical approach, from philosophy and gender and sexuality studies, to propose the possibilities that remain for the bodies repudiated by the imperative, the phobias and the violences of the nation.

4. The body

Many representations have been inscribed on the body. It has been a metaphor for countless operations by power and meanings. The body has been the metaphor for territory and also territory has been metaphor for the body. Nevertheless, it has been charged with so many metaphors by its cultural construction that I wonder: Could we empty it of such meanings? How much possible is to quote the matter without making it a metaphor? I am interested in the representation of the body as matter in the opposite sense to the traditional conception of the allegory, of its metaphoric operations and even the consideration of the sexual performativity as an autonomous component, unanchored from its materiality. Definitely, its impulse does not seem to work in an individual way.

Perhaps, enough has been said about the alternate bodies as naked life, as marked territories where the forbidden and punished bodies are fantasized. The gay body, the female body, the foreign body — which in turn can overlap— tend to be quiet and, as Nancy hints

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10 | The General Attorney of the Republic, Julián Isaias Rodríguez, commented on the corporal details revealing the sexuality of the murdered priest. He gave details especially about “laceraciones anales” and informed about the victim taking an active role on his own murder.

at, to succumb in the hands the nation. Nancy's notion is especially interesting to deal with these bodies since, proposing total externality, the bodies get their material condition. Nancy's conception is opposed to the Cartesian conception of the body and even opposed to the Foucaultian body, in which "el alma aparece como un instrumento de poder a través del que se cultiva y se forma el cuerpo. En cierto sentido, obra como un esquema cargado de poder que produce y realiza el cuerpo mismo" (Butler, 2002: 62). To Michael Foucault, the soul is the jail of the body.

The publishing of *Gender Trouble* by Judith Butler created a special enthusiasm for the notion of sexual performativity. But at the same time it also generated critics from the feminist theory itself, sceptical about the functionality of the Butlerian proposal (Armour, 2006:8). However, one of the more severe critics was related to the absence of the materiality of the sex and the body as anchors of sexuality, although understood as an experience of performative components. Butler denominated herself as a "bad materialist", but three years later she published *Bodies that Matter*, a book in which she directly tackle the material condition of the sexuality as an answer to the very numerous critics she had arisen. If *Gender Trouble* wonders about gender, *Bodies that Matter* thinks about the sex and the materiality to which gender is anchored. Butler passes from building to materialization with the purpose of demonstrating the regulations exerted by the relations of power within the shaping of the sex and the body. Since such materiality cannot be conceived independently from the regulatory statute, Butler warns that the process in which the bodies are materialized is operated by the heterosexual imperative to allow certain sexual identifications and to exclude others. Although the binary opposition is invented in relation to the masculine-feminine relationship, the feminine ends up excluded (Butler, 2002:66).

To account for the materialization of the body/sex, Butler tries to empty the body of meaning and to establish a hypothetical pre-corporal, pre-cultural and pre-sexual state. Such procedure allows us to think the body out of the stages of allegory and metaphor. Nevertheless, one of the more interesting points of *Bodies that Matter* is related to an additional movement: the way the exiled and excluded (the abject) from the sex sphere —as a regulatory and materializing instance— comes back now, not only invested with "imaginary opposition" but as a preparatory disorganization too, which radically re-articulates the symbolic horizon of sex. The only possibility to survive is emptying the metaphors that build it as abjection, or the systematic repudiation of them. In this sense, the projects by Nancy and Butler, besides the complex tactics by the power and the heteronormative compulsion, are proposing a possibility, a space habitable to us. How is such disorganization materialized? How can the bodies survive to the violence of the nation? How can the *others* bodies resist to being

used as deforming agents to the national bodies?

5. The Body of Bolivar

“Bolívar ha vuelto a la batalla”. The sentence resounded with force in the voice of Hugo Chávez in one of the many allocutions in radio and national TV channels performed a few days after the exhumation of the *Liberator's* remains. Once more, Simón Bolívar comes back. Between the 14th and 15th of July 2010, the *Liberator's* remains were showed in the national TV after the exhumation of the corpse being ordered. But, why in that moment? What is hidden behind the televised exhibition of the corpse of the Father of the Nation? On one side, the hypotheses considered around the presidential commission for the exhumation of Simón Bolívar's remains are based on speculations by Chávez. In general, the president has referred several times to two hypotheses: (1) The body that rests in the sarcophagus of Bolívar is not the one of the *Liberator*, usurped by the Colombian oligarchy, and (2) Simón Bolívar could had been murdered —poisoned, perhaps— and not died of tuberculosis, as historians say. This way, the exhumation comes to clear the presidential doubts, to confirm any of these hypotheses or, on the contrary, to deny them¹¹. However, it must be clarified that the lead urn in which Bolívar's corpse rested had not been open since, in 1843, José María Vargas took part of the commission responsible for the transfer of Bolívar's corpse from Santa Marta (Colombia) to Caracas.

Besides the reiteration of the presidential doubts, the exhumation has raised some suspicions and, in countless occasions, Hugo Chávez himself has categorically vitiated the rumour from the opposition according to which it would be a *santero* ritual. My worries are then focused in the reasons of the exhumation, far from confirming or denying the presidential hypotheses. Or rather: What is the meaning of such televised national ritual in which the skeleton of the *Liberator* is showed? At the same time I wonder about the way such event is going to be processed in contemporary Venezuela. Which function has the televised image in the political situation of the country? To this respect, I propose a variety of answers and expectatives, especially when other political events have followed the exhumation, like the breach of diplomatic relations with Bogotá. But I do not consider it as clear tactic by the president or the so referred Situational Room of the Government. On the contrary, I consider it constitutes a risk; an intuition resulted from the Bolivarian excesses by the President, which have shaped his governability and charisma and have been electorally effective thus far. So, are not we before the biggest expression of the cult to Bolívar that has took place to this date? Is there any other way after such event to worship more the Father of

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11 | The results from the studies carried out after the exhumation confirmed that the remains belonged to Simón Bolívar.

the Nation?

A report given by the Venezuelan vice-president, Elias Jaua, to the mass media, states that the remains of the national hero were placed in a methacrylate urn, vacuum sealed and screwed with Guayana gold screws and at the same time sheltered inside a sarcophagus made in wooden from *Caraipa Llanorum* with the national coat of arms, incrustated with gold in the cover. In turn, the president has ordered a new pantheon for Bolívar, and even the flag that is going to cover the new urn has been boiled by the own hands of the Bolivarian people in a never seen performance. But what remains clear is that Chávez, in his obsession of being confused with the *Liberator* has essayed more than one manoeuvre. One of them is the reinvention of national symbols and the starting up of a national symbology, which includes himself. Even the big float which paraded in the Brazilian Carnival in 2006 arose the more astonishing national stories, among them, that accusation to the president of disfiguring the Father of the Nation and to have assigned him a wrong body. How did the nation decide then to open the sacred sarcophagus of the *Liberator* on an unfounded hypotheses, —since Chávez himself said through Twitter, only a few minutes after the exhumation took place, that the bones were without any doubt from Bolívar—? I think —at this point, since in the moment I am writing this article this matter is not yet concluded— that the identification Bolívar-nation-Chávez has been enough to reach the self bones of the cult and to hyperbolize it to an unexpected point. One of the planed procedures is a study, which will allow, with specialized application software, to recreate a three-dimensional computerized image of the face of the *Liberator*. I wonder: will his face be, after all, similar to that of the president Hugo Chávez? How far does the Venezuelan cult the body of Bolívar go?

Nevertheless, the result of the exhumation of Simón Bolívar remains not only works to build a speculative representation between the presidential body and the *Liberator's*, but also in the symbolic importance of the possession of the body of Bolívar. According to Michael Taussig, the possession of the spiritual and material remains of Bolívar constitutes the basis of the image of the Venezuelan state (Lomnitz, 2006: 39). Opening the sacred sarcophagus of the Father of the Nation, Hugo Chávez accounts for this belonging. Taussig proposes that the President Chávez is precisely the result, the body, of that mystic foundation of authority.

But the new heresy, far from maintaining continuity with the constitutional ideas of Bolívar, as was claimed, invented a new attribute, the populist Bolívar, and in the case of Cuba gave him a new identity, the socialist Bolívar. By exploiting the authoritarian tendency, which certainly existed in the thought and action of Bolívar, regimes in Cuba and Venezuela claim the *Liberator* as a patron for their policies, distorting his ideas in the process (Lynch, 2006: 304).

Simón Bolívar becomes a figure whose body, even in a constant attempt of disfiguration, stabilizes the Venezuelan *Holy Family*¹². The corpse of Simón Bolívar, besides all dramatized complaints, gives force to the national family. This is the reason why the performance of opening the sacred sarcophagus of the *Liberator* confirms the possession of the more precious body of the nation, the image of the Venezuelan state.

6. Cultures of the Body

In this article I have analyzed how —despite the compulsion to condemn and assert— the responsibility of the political adversary in the distortion of the Venezuelan family, the need to keep the body and the image of the nation-state untouched, has had more weight than the differences and the circumstantial holding of power. The nation, as Ernest Renan accurately points out, is based as much on the possession of a legacy, the past, as on the consensus on the present, the wish to live together (2003: 19). Venezuela owns a powerful figure, an unique body around of which its image gets together, around of which the *Holy Family* is built up, that belongs to the past glories, to the heroic deeds of emancipation, but who is constantly updated. Simón Bolívar heads this family and seems to watch for the national body not to be changed. The Venezuelan pantheon —unlike for example the Mexican, which is composed by leaders who died in many cases killed by each other and who represent different national projects— is based on the consensus of Bolívar as the only and undeniable founder figure (Lomnitz, 2009: 39-40). Such constantly called hegemonic figure that dominates the image of the national body makes its transformation more complex. Nevertheless, I believe that certain dramatizations make it possible to re-think and, in a certain sense, destabilize in some moments the very solid body of the nation.

One of such dramatizations took place in 1994 out of the postcard by the artist Juan Domingo Dávila. Chile faced up the official angry complaints from the Venezuelan government —but also from the Ecuadorian and the Colombian governments— for financing the work *El Libertador Simón Bolívar* by Dávila. The artist painted a portrait of Bolívar with naked breasts, naked waist-down, pronounced hips and mestizo features and making an obscene gesture with his hand. The work was exhibited in the Hayward Gallery of London but run through Latin-America in the form of a postcard. Venezuela denounced through a communicate: “una campaña orquestada de desprestigio en contra del más sagrado valor de nuestra nacionalidad” (Lomné, 2002:33). The infiltration of the image by Dávila, deciding to run through channels alternative to the art circuit, produced “el repentino

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12 | Venezuelan identity is articulated respecting a unique body. However, Fernando Coronil propose in the face of his thesis about Venezuela, the idea of two bodies, one of them being allegoric: “As an oil nation, Venezuela was seen as having two bodies, a political body made up of its citizens and a natural body made up of its rich subsoil. Bu condensing within itself the multiple powers dispersed throughout the nation’s two bodies, the state appeared as a single agent endowed with the magical power to remake the nation”. (Coronil, 1997: 4).

estallido de historias e histerias nacionalistas, ideologías del (buen) gusto artístico, represiones sexuales, mitologías latinoamericanas, oficialismos políticos y burocracias de la cultura ministerial” (Richard, 2001: 180). The operation of the body of the nation turned out unbearable and necessarily reprehensible¹³. The severe answer from the Chilean bureaucracy relieved for moments the carnivalization carried out in the Bolivarian body.

Despite the phobic correction by Venezuela and the Bolivarian countries, the postcard by Dávila fell just in the centre of the image of the Nation. The work questioned the race, the gender, the class and the enlightenment —with the obscene gesture by Bolívar— in the virile body, which hegemonizes the Venezuelan identity. Unlike the gay Bolívar in the Brazilian Carnival, the Chilean image momentarily disestablished the nation, questioning and even undressing at the same time the basis of the national body, its mythology and violence. The excluded sensibilities became visible and they left a deep hurt, which, if you want, opens a significant but temporary space, in the body of the nation. The resistance to become metaphor or allegory and the function of the bodies to represent something they are not, constitutes in this way the challenge for the races, classes, sexualities and the different sensibilities excluded in these complex *cultures of the body*.

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13 | Pedro Lemebel coments the polemic in his chronicle “Juan Dávila (la silicona del *Liberator*)” issued in his book *Loco Afán*: “Sin querer echarle leña al fuego, más bien soplando de reojo la hoguera que se armó con la pintura postal del artista Juan Dávila, donde aparecía un Bolívar tetón y ligero de cascos, mostrando las nalgas morenas de la utopía latinoamericana. Y hay que ver cómo volaron plumas y corrieron los secretarios de embajada con la postal del *Liberator* en toples. Como si traficaran una porno donde la historia lucía erótica y coqueta, desempolvada por el bisturí plástico de la Juani” (1996: 135).

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