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Article abstract

Director Alberto Arvelo's 2013 biopic of Simón Bolívar, Libertador, recasts the general as physically handsome in order to use the actor Édgar Ramírez's body to enhance the audience's affective response toward his person, and, by extension, the Venezuelan nation. Curiously, this contemporary film portrayal of Bolívar evokes the use of portraiture during the Virreinato and Independence eras, which stoked nationalistic attachment by synecdoche through using portraits as stand-ins for national heroes such as Bolívar. Libertador thus invokes the past even as it invites spectators of the present to feel something new for its protagonist.

ELISABETH L. AUSTIN

Lusty Nationalism: Image and Affect in Alberto Arvelo's *Libertador* (2013)

El filme Libertador *(2013), del director Alberto Arvelo, reimagina al general Simón Bolívar como un hombre físicamente bello, usando el cuerpo del actor Édgar Ramírez para aumentar la reacción afectiva de los espectadores hacia su persona y, por extensión, hacia la nación venezolana. Curiosamente, esta representación fílmica evoca la práctica del uso de los retratos durante el Virreinato y la Independencia, cuando se avivaba el apego nacionalista empleando la imagen pictórica como sustitución simbólica de héroes como Bolívar. Asimismo,* Libertador *invoca el pasado mientras invita a los espectadores del presente a sentir algo nuevo por su protagonista.*

Palabras clave: Libertador, *Bolívar, imagen, Venezuela, nacionalismo*

Director Alberto Arvelo's 2013 biopic of Simón Bolívar, Libertador, *recasts the general as physically handsome in order to use the actor Édgar Ramírez's body to enhance the audience's affective response toward his person, and, by extension, the Venezuelan nation. Curiously, this contemporary film portrayal of Bolívar evokes the use of portraiture during the Virreinato and Independence eras, which stoked nationalistic attachment by synecdoche through using portraits as stand-ins for national heroes such as Bolívar.* Libertador *thus invokes the past even as it invites spectators of the present to feel something new for its protagonist.*

Keywords: Libertador, *Bolívar, image, Venezuela, nationalism*

> I fell in love with Bolívar again, and not just because Edgar Ramírez is so handsome.
> —Margarita Hernández, quoted in Jorge Rueda's "Venezuelan hero."

> FYI he [Bolívar] was not near [sic] as good looking as Edgar Ramírez.
> —Rachelle Krygier, "El Libertador Film Seen through Venezuelan Eyes."

In the sequence that opens Alberto Arvelo's 2013 epic *Libertador*, Simón Bolívar arrives at the presidential palace in Bogotá on horseback on a foggy night in 1828. A fade-in brings torch lights into focus. The camera tracks the protagonist's broad, uniformed back as he leaps down from his mount and enters the palace, walking quickly through grand halls and past aides who engage him in multiple languages as they update him on items of state. He answers briefly and keeps walking, past doors and up a long set of stairs. He hands his sword to an older manservant and shrugs off his uniform jacket, entrusting it to a female servant with the request that it be ready for him in the morning. The camera follows him while the servant's face remains out of focus. She takes the jacket and, in the margin of the frame, subtly strokes its shoulder epaulet with her hand.

With this delicate caress, Arvelo's film opens a new chapter in Bolivarian cult imagery by introducing the physical appeal of the eponymous *Libertador*.[1] Arvelo's admiring portrayal of independence hero Simón Bolívar (1783-1830) proffers a robust, masculinized image, which contrasts significantly with well-known demystifying narratives of Bolívar from past decades, such as Gabriel García Márquez's *El general en su laberinto* (1989) and the sexualized, nontraditionally-gendered postcard portrait by Chilean artist Juan Dávila (1994) (Conway 1-2; Ríos 175-78). In contradistinction with these texts, Arvelo's film focuses on Bolívar's charisma as the driving force behind American independence, with barely a nod to messy post-war politics or the protagonist's well-known character flaws; instead, the film interprets its hero's life through the rosy lens of utopian socialist democracy.

Projecting a Bolívar intended for contemporary consumption, the film creates a liberal precursor who appeals to the viewer on a physical level. A material makeover of Bolívar, Arvelo's work connects with a long-established tradition of using imagery, especially military and Bolivarian portraiture, to reshape national history and support political regimes currently in power. For, whether the director intended it or not, the film's proto-socialist portrait of its hero recalls the social promise encompassed in Hugo Chávez's *Revolución bolivariana* that, just like this newly fleshed-out image of Bolívar, struggles to defeat imperialist enemies. In addition to evoking and reworking the general's narrative to political advantage, *Libertador* uses physical attraction and erotic desire as hooks for potentially developing an affective attachment toward the nation itself, an imagined community for which Bolívar's body serves as a metonym.[2] While this affective influence might simply be a visceral attraction the international viewer feels toward *Libertador* as a cultural artifact, for a Venezuelan audience primed toward an affective relationship with the film's hero, it

could also encompass a more profound emotional pull. The audience's longing to consume this filmic Bolívar – a version wholly transformed from the slim, mercurial general recorded by history books less taken with the General's charms – could transmute into a desire for the idealized, imagined nation itself: a lusty nationalism.[3] Engaging with the affective potential of the on-screen image, *Libertador* participates in the long history of portraiture, representation, and appropriation of Bolívar and his history and myth, as it works to awaken affective responses in its audience, inviting viewers to feel for the hero and the nation he embodies.[4]

Bolívar has long loomed large in the American imaginary as one of the most beloved and mythologized icons of Spanish-American independence. He led the independence movement in the northern regions of South America but was more famous for his bravery than his military strategy, admired more for his derring-do than his ideas (Chasteen 24; Straka, "Birth" 101). It was Bolívar's dream of uniting South America that led to "La Gran Colombia," the confederation of Colombia, Ecuador, Venezuela, Panama, and Bolivia from 1819-1831. Whether because of personal enmities with rivals, or political ambitions that led him to seek a lifetime presidency and take up dictatorial powers, in less than ten years Bolívar went from the pinnacle of power as the hero of the Latin American wars of independence (Chasteen 23-26) to being reviled, exiling himself before his death in 1830. However, by 1842, when Bolívar's body was exhumed and repatriated to Venezuela for burial with pomp and circumstance, his reputation had been revitalized (Chasteen 26), and liberal historians began to rehabilitate his image (Harwich 10).[5] A skilled and charismatic orator, Bolívar employed spectacle for political ends: John Chasteen argues that he used any and every opportunity, from his prolific letter-writing to organizing heroic parades and theatrical performances at political meetings, as means to promote himself and his political agenda (28-30). Art historian Emily Engel details how he used his name and image to garner support for the independence movement, for example, by commissioning a self-portrait from artist Pedro José Figueroa that was displayed in "ritual contexts" after his victories, employing "official portraiture as a political strategy that could support military efforts to sever the Spanish imperial hold on South America" (31). After his death, Bolívar's name, legacy, and likeness were coopted for others' political purposes beginning in the mid-nineteenth century (Straka, "Birth" 97). Most recently, the late Hugo Chávez (1954-2013) re-appropriated Bolívar to brand the leftist *Revolución bolivariana* that transformed twenty-first-century Venezuela, renamed "La República Bolivariana de Venezuela" in 1999.

As a film intended for a popular audience, Arvelo's *Libertador* brings an affective sensibility to its portrayal of Bolívar to bring history – and perhaps a nascent nationalism – to life for the twenty-first-century viewer. The film opens during the famous assassination attempt at the presidential palace in Colombia in 1828, during which Bolívar's lover, Manuela Sáenz, helps him escape. The story flashes back to recount Bolívar's youth in Spain and a few failed attempts at revolt against the Spanish, emphasizing its hero's developing social conscience in the Colombian rain forest. It stages the writing of the "Carta de Jamaica," Bolívar's plea for Spanish American independence, before portraying a successful campaign over the Andes and into New Granada for the battle of Boyacá. *Libertador* ends with a surprising, and counter-historical, version of Bolívar's apparent demise. Instead of dying of tuberculosis (or even poisoning, following popular conspiracy theories), the protagonist seems to confront assassins in the last sequence,[6] holding his head high as he invites them to fire their weapons. The film opens and closes with political and personal betrayal, a circular narrative structure that highlights Bolívar's brilliance and potential, both destroyed – along with Spanish America's hope for unification – by the political forces that sought to undermine him.

As part of the altered history it depicts, *Libertador* employs the physical attributes of its star actor to recast the story. In the film, Venezuelan actor Édgar Ramírez (1977-) plays Bolívar, and the actor's relative height (5'10") and muscular physique contrast considerably with the slight (5'6") figure of Bolívar that appears in portraits and historical accounts, a disparity noted by reviews that describe Ramírez's "intense virility" (McGovern), "stolid, oak-like physicality" (Kenny), and "earthy, muscular impression as Bolívar" (Mercury News). Even Bolívar biographer Maria Arana notes the discrepancies between the historical figure's "meager chest" and "spindly legs" and the actor Édgar Ramírez, who is "handsome, chunky, hunky" (quoted in Qureshi).

Ramírez appeared in Kathryn Bigelow's critically acclaimed *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012) ("Edgar Ramírez," *IMDb*), and subsequently secured roles in feature films including *The Girl on the Train* (2016) ("Edgar Ramírez," *IMDb*) and the TV series *American Crime Story* (2018). The actor's heartthrob status is confirmed by his regular placement on *People en Español*'s list of "Los 50 más bellos" Hispanic celebrities ("Ellos son los 50;" "Edgar Ramírez," *People* 82). Carl Plantinga points out that casting an attractive actor in a role not only intensifies audience emotion (following a Hitchcock precept) but also "familiarity can breed liking" (31), suggesting that an actor brings to every role the positive associations the audience attaches to his or her face and body as recognizable entities, regardless of the nature of the film. Besides

being tall and broad-shouldered, Ramírez's light, faintly freckled complexion and performance of traditionally-styled masculinity affirm Bolívar's patrician upbringing and identification as part of the creole class.[7] His face becomes notably darker as the film progresses, hinting at a reimagining of race as part of this romanticized narrative of independence. In this instance, and other examples I analyze further on, the film plays with identity markers that have traditionally defined Bolívar (such as whiteness and masculinity).[8] However, it does so in a way that increases the affective bond between the hero and his audience without presenting a transgressive rendition of the general.[9]

Within the film, many close-ups focus on Ramírez's flowing hair, broad (and sometimes naked) chest, and handsome face, creating a physical – and quite sexualized – image of Bolívar. The blocking of the film's first sequence, including the caress to the epaulet, invites the audience to experience a physical desire for the protagonist through a focus on his body. The camera follows Ramírez's broad back climbing stairs and passing through walls. The viewer watches him shed his clothes, like the servant stroking his jacket, as Bolívar throws open the double doors of a bedroom to find a woman inside. His lover, Manuela Sáenz (Juana Acosta), with loose hair and men's clothing, meets him. As they kiss, the camera shifts to show his face for the first time as a lover. She throws her arms around him, murmuring, "Ya te tengo." "¿Qué te estás esperando?" (00:02:28) he whispers, his question directed as much to the audience as to her. The camera witnesses the beginnings of their lovemaking before the scene is cut short by sounds of men on horseback and pistol shots coming from inside the palace. At Sáenz's urging, Bolívar jumps out the window and escapes.

This first sequence appears, at first glance, to emphasize Bolívar's masculinity. While his leap from the balcony falls short of a James-Bond-like grace, he is unhurt and successfully escapes on foot even though his assassins have the advantage of numbers and horses. However, the same narrative focus that represents Ramírez as an action hero also serves to present the general as an object of desire for the viewer. While this sexualized Bolívar displays elements of traditional masculinity, such as strength and physical vigor, a focus on body has historically been associated with the performance of femaleness in contradistinction with the intellectual associations aligned with traditional ideas of masculinity (Buchbinder 123).[10] The film's focus on Bolívar as a physical – and attractive – man, therefore, has the effect of feminizing him as an object of the audience's gaze, according to this traditional cultural construction, with the same scenes that emphasize the maleness of his body. His symbolic feminization is particularly marked in this sequence when he finds himself

trapped inside Manuela's bedroom and bereft of the sword that he had earlier handed to a servant. Before leaping out the window, Bolívar binds a dagger to his hand with a leather strip, the compact weapon representing a strap(ped)-on, a miniature replacement for his missing sword. The sequence hints at the protagonist's objectification and emasculation, from the female servant's sensual stroking of his jacket to his improvised mini-sword/dagger that replaces his traditional sword, and lastly with Manuela, dressed as a man (as she was wont to do), insisting that he jump out the window while she stays behind to confront the attackers.

As he runs from the men on horseback, a flashback shows a young Simón running from his mother's funeral, his tutor pursuing him, yelling, "Simón … [está bien] que llores. Era tu mamá" (00:04:11) ending with a tender hug that breaks with gender stereotypes to authorize the boy's feelings of grief. This message is perhaps meant for the audience as well: permission to emote, an invitation to feel (Podalsky 20). We are encouraged to watch Bolívar's body as he plays horseman, statesman, and lover, flashing back to childhood trauma and returning to the present. This first sequence's somewhat awkward cuts between lovemaking, action, and childhood grief is an aperitif, an invitation to taste of a Bolívar more vulnerable and appealing than we have seen in previous renditions.

This humanization of Bolívar is how the film sells itself: on the film's official (and now defunct) website, and only on the Spanish version, the synopsis read, "Amor, Guerra y traición muestran la vida del LIBERTADOR desde su perfil más humano, recreando un viaje a través del imaginario visual latinoamericano del siglo XIX" ("Sinopsis").[11] This film profile, like Chávez's 2012 portrait of Bolívar that was created from 3-D scans of the Liberator's exhumed body, claims to humanize its subject, turning myth to man by fleshing out the body rather than staying with tradition. Arvelo makes the same assertion: "Me ha interesado mucho el ser humano, el hombre, el héroe solitario" (quoted in Correia), and compliments his leading man on bringing out the role's humanity: "Edgar … se metió en las entrañas del personaje" (ibid). The film's website synopsis highlights "el imaginario visual latinoamericano del siglo XIX," and indeed the film's representation of Bolívar conjures an image of the general in order to provide an object (and opportunity) for veneration, following the tradition of Bolivarian portraiture (Engel 30-34). Not only that, but the film also reimagines history using affective, sensory details, tempting the audience to experience a physical-emotional connection with people and places of the past. Arvelo claims, "I worked quite a bit with … the team, on a raw, credible visual language … We tried to make the battle tell us small stories which would

connect directly with feeling" (quoted in Aguilar). In another interview, Arvelo describes,

> [q]uisiera que el público pudiera recibir la película como un viaje visual y emocional a la Sudamérica del siglo XIX, a través de los ojos de Bolívar. Quisiera que el espectador pueda sentir, por ejemplo, lo que era llegar al Puerto de la Guaira, remontar el Ávila y descubrir desde allí a la Caracas de 1800. (quoted in González Cova)

This film thus "invite[s] spectators to feel" (Podalsky 20) through the sensorial presentation of, and through, the Liberator's body and his own affective experiences.

After the opening scene's exhibition of vulnerability, the protagonist's more traditionally masculine strength is highlighted in the sequences that follow, adding a carnal element to a strength that was historically of character, not of the body. Arvelo's Bolívar is often marked as conspicuously masculine in a traditional sense, even when dressed to the nines while playing lawn tennis, the only man in black, in contrast to the effeminate pastels of a foppish Spanish prince. When leading troops over the frozen Andes, his fortitude outlasts that of his Irish colleagues. In sequences depicting battles, many of which he did not fight but rather commanded as general, Bolívar swings and thrusts his sword with ferocity, vanquishing his enemies. While other characters and actors sometimes share the storyline, such as Antonio José de Sucre (Erich Wildpret) and Bolívar's wife María Teresa (María Valverde), Ramírez's character dominates the screen. The film features repeated close-ups of a long-haired Liberator, highlighting beard stubble to emphasize the masculinity of his visage. There are multiple nude scenes, love sequences with María Teresa and his French lover, Fanny, which serve little narrative purpose except to reveal the protagonist pleasuring beautiful ladies, allowing the audience to imagine Bolívar as a lover as well as a general and statesman. The vulnerable carnality revealed in these intimate moments has the potential of seducing the audience through the idea of Bolívar the tender, and yet rakish lover of women across the globe. His body, white against white sheets in these early shots, submits to the audience's gaze, rendering him – along with his female partners – an object of desire.[12]

Libertador continues to use the camera angle to amplify Bolívar's body, relative to other actors, throughout the film. In one sequence, Bolívar is exiled to the Cartagena jungle after a failed revolt. His growing consciousness of class, race, and privilege is marked at one point by a naked jump into the clear blue water. Ramírez's voice-over describes the protagonist's shame concerning his family's wealth and privilege and then

shifts into revolutionary rhetoric: "Me avergüenzo de mi propia ceguera. El verdadero destino del hombre es la libertad. La voluntad de ser libre es un impulso innato" (00:51:53).

Meanwhile, the actor's naked body sinks for a few seconds into this bright blue water, surrounded by thousands of tiny bubbles that afford him a bit of modesty, as his face and hair float gently. This water bath symbolizes a spiritual rebirth, a revolutionary baptism of sorts: he is suddenly enlightened, aware of his privilege. The water scene is shot from a low angle, the camera giving Bolívar the illusion of greater size even than Ramírez's physicality brings to the role. Significantly, this scene is a visual match to a sequence near the beginning of the film, in which we see young *mestizo* children dive into the blue sea when María Teresa arrives in Venezuela. The children dive into crystal-clear water, suspended for a moment surrounded by bubbles before they begin to swim, and the innocent beauty of this shot is recalled in the following sequence in which Bolívar is cleansed, spiritually, and physically, the change marked by the visual similarity to these *mestizo* youths. At the same time, he is immersed in azure light.[13] His naked body, stripped of signs of class and privilege, marks the vulnerability of an emerging social conscience. Soon after this revolutionary baptism, dressed in ordinary clothes, Bolívar gathers his first army from New Granada.[14]

Bolívar's body is further emphasized in a war sequence that follows his watery rebirth when his rag-tag army has just taken a Spanish garrison. As black revolutionary soldiers drag the Spanish commander away, the vanquished Spaniard turns to Bolívar, astonished, and asks, "¿Quién es usted?" (00:53:58), to which Bolívar responds with bravado, "Yo soy el pueblo" (00:54:00). In this medium close-up, Bolívar towers over the slumped Spanish leader. His respective height, exaggerated by the low camera angle, fills the right half of the screen, and Ramírez's shoulders and mane of hair escape the frame when he leans in to deliver his line. The size and unkempt, hirsute appearance of the Liberator in this shot lends weight to his words; the sequence would have been less impressive if a slim, short, and balding Bolívar had said the same thing to a prisoner of greater height.

In narrating the origins of Spanish-American independence through Bolívar, Arvelo's film reshapes what Hugo Achugar terms the "visual city" (11), a term he uses to establish the important (and often forgotten) role of "*foundational images*" (12) in constructing the national imaginary alongside written texts.[15] *Libertador* is a recent addition to the extensive corpus of martial images and iconography to have emerged since Independence in Venezuela, from Gothic revisions of past martial glory (González-Stephan 93-95) to flattering representations of Simón Bolívar that serve present-day political objectives (Straka, "Efigie" 79, 83).[16] Arvelo himself suggests that his

film has a social, rather than a national, purpose: in an interview, he responds to the question of whether or not "su cine es una manera de aportar visiones constructivas a un país que las necesita" by demurring, "trato de mostrar visiones constructivas o inspiradoras porque me resultan necesarias. Al fin y al cabo estamos haciendo arte, y el arte siempre nos ayuda a la comprensión de nuestra esencia y nuestra realidad" (Correia). Regardless of his intent, many viewers will identify nationalistic and Chavista messages within the film.

As Engel describes it, Bolívar contributed significantly to the foundational images of the Venezuelan post-independence national imaginary when he employed portraiture to create images of authority; she underscores remarkable similarities between his political use of images and colonial-era religious and *virreinal* traditions of using portraiture to signal power (32-34).[17] Bolívar's supporters even sent portraits and busts to take his place when he was not able to visit a location physically, signaling a belief in the representational power of such images (41). Straka further describes "a systemic national imaginary" ("Birth" 104) of Bolivarian symbols that participated in the development of what he terms "memory politics" ("Birth" 97), ideologically charged representations of history centered around a conjured image of Bolívar ("Birth" 97, 109). Therefore, Bolívar's likeness was used after his death to create symbols of national unity that were intended to strengthen the power and position of politicians from José Antonio Páez in 1842, to Antonio Guzmán Blanco in the latter part of the nineteenth century (Straka, "Birth" 102-05). A contemporary example of such use is Chávez's frequent invocation of the Liberator's name, image, and spiritual presence to support his social programs in Venezuela, a "mito patrio bolivariano" (Harwich 19) continued by his *protégé*, Nicolás Maduro.[18] As a modern-day agent of "memory politics," to use Straka's term, *Libertador* stands out as an unusually successful vehicle for bringing the Bolivarian cult to an international audience, being the first Venezuelan film to make it to the shortlist for the 2014 Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film (Kojen).

Libertador's success stems, in part, from its producers' extraordinary investments in the project: the film had an uncommonly large budget of 50 million dollars, the most expensive film made in Latin America to date (Aguilar; Cols; Farrell 373; "Película 'Libertador'"). The project is a Venezuelan and Spanish co-production, with additional funding from German and U.S. producers. However, the film was initially funded by Venezuelan government agencies, including CNAC, an agency tasked with supporting and regulating film production ("Historia"), as well as Fundación Villa del Cine.[19] This government agency supports film production and

access to materials ("Quiénes"). Government critics characterize CNAC and Villa del cine as part of the Venezuelan government's "propaganda infrastructure" (Jonathan Jakubowicz, quoted in Forero). Journalist Juan Forero confirms that "Many of the projects at Villa del cine, or Cinema City, are decidedly political and in tune with the Chavista image of Venezuela as a cutting-edge democracy fighting U.S. imperialism" (Forero). The nationalistic message of *Libertador* resembles previous iterations of memory politics during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, articulating a revolutionary narrative that supports Venezuelan government rhetoric against perceived imperialist enemies.

The political tone of films coming out of Venezuela during the Chávez administration is no accident: the nationalistic potential of the film was the stated reason for the Venezuelan state's increased investment in film production (Farrell 371). Michelle Leigh Farrell quotes Hugo Chávez announcing in 2006 that "Venezuelan film will be for the world, as Bolívar said: 'Weapons of thought' – artillery of our culture, artillery of our essence … we are going to make quality movies!" (371). For Farrell, this reference to Bolívar "explicitly connects domestic filmmaking with the country's independence and original mission celebrating national cultural sovereignty … connecting films with revolutionary discourse" (372). In the same speech, Chávez continues, "[w]e are going to make quality movies to compete with the next Hollywood films" (quoted in Farrell 372), proclaiming that Venezuelan film will challenge Hollywood's domination of the film industry as well as break with the U.S.'s "cultural dictatorship" (372). In this case, competition with the U.S. film market appears to mean that Venezuelan film studios follow Hollywood's recipe for commercial success, resulting in *Libertador*'s blockbuster budget, star-studded cast, and the visceral appeal it works to create for its audience.[20] The film's embrace of a Hollywood approach to history is paradoxical since U.S. politics and culture were frequently eschewed by Chávez as imperialistic; however, *Libertador* might nonetheless have employed Hollywood techniques to craft an ideological "weapon of thought" (as Chávez quotes Bolívar, quoted in Farrell) that might stimulate nationalistic sentiments/sentience intended to consolidate *Chavista* political and cultural power.

As an embodiment of the nation, Ramírez takes center stage throughout the film, rendering performance of corporeal charisma such that his words seem endowed with the substance of his person, rather than vice versa. In telling the story of independence by singling out one individual in a field of war heroes, the film follows a trend in historical film that Laura Podalsky describes as a "contemporary preoccupation with the individual" (79), retelling the independence story through a focus on the person and body of

Bolívar as if he were the lone architect of Spanish American independence. Movie posters support this impression, most featuring his face and shoulders in a medium close-up, a miniature battle scene at his chest, in the midst of which Bolívar is highlighted at the center, the tallest figure in battle.

Ramírez's profile, sporting an Elvis-style pompadour that never made it into the film, dominates the media presentation of the film in the U.S., from posters to DVD jackets, with the tricolor Venezuelan flag rippling in the foreground. In addition to personalizing history, such media images – including movie posters, DVD cases, and the trailer for the film itself – use an affective appeal to create a desire for the film, selling its visual attractiveness as well as its heroic message.[21] Also, the film itself has the potential to engage viewers on a level deeper than simple, passive spectatorship: following Podalsky, "certain works encourage their spectators to feel" (8). Podalsky studies the emotions and affective responses film evokes, as well as the audience reaction to such feeling, and asserts "films' potential to mediate and shape the affective" (12), explaining "how film's sensorial appeals can encourage viewers to consider their roles as historical actors" (23) *vis-à-vis* events of the relatively recent past. Extrapolating from her work, a film like *Libertador*, which establishes a relationship between the audience and the more remote past, has the potential to use the movie screen to encourage feelings and ideas, and even a reconsideration of self, as part of the experience it conveys. González-Stephan describes a certain "disciplina … [de]l cuerpo a través de la mirada" (99) within the moving pictures of nineteenth-century panoramas that held bodies captive as they turned to watch the spectacle, and today's cinema similarly holds its audience in stadium seating – a gentle disciplinary tool – while inviting it to see, and feel, Bolívar. Smaller screens hold willing viewers spellbound in a different but no less compelling way for those who choose to watch the film on their devices. Accordingly, not only does *Libertador* connect with a long tradition of using and manipulating Bolívar's image, but it also does so with an appealing encouragement to feel for the hero as an emblem of the nation.

Complementary to the protagonist's physical attraction is the film's presentation of landscape as *Libertador* attempts to capture the visual beauty of Venezuela, presented as a backdrop to Bolívar but coextensive in its appeal. Arvelo confesses, "me llamó mucho la atención lo visual de todo el fenómeno de la independencia latinoamericana, esas batallas en las montañas, en las selvas, en los llanos, me parecía que había una enorme fuerza visual en todo esto" (García). Arvelo shot his footage of outside spaces and action sequences in different parts of Venezuela, using majestic mountains and valley views to provide the natural scenery for the film's

human spectacle and political drama. For the director, it was a priority to find the right natural spaces through which to showcase the independence struggle. Arvelo explains, "[p]ara mi [sic] fue tan importante el escoger cada uno de esos lugares como seleccionar a los actores" (García), suggesting an equivalency between the visual impact of the landscape and that of the actors in this telling of the independence story.[22]

Besides highlighting the natural spaces that set off the human bodies in the film, the soundtrack appeals aurally to the audience, using a combination of South American and European instruments and styles to create a sound that communicates the idea of American indigeneity while presenting an orchestral sound that would be comfortably familiar to an international audience. Award-winning Venezuelan director Gustavo Dudamel wrote and directed the *Libertador* soundtrack, which prominently features instruments that evoke Latin American sounds, such as pan pipes and indigenous flutes, often set against a background of orchestral percussion. Brass solos and wordless choral and vocal interludes (*a capella*, as well as accompanied by the orchestra,) add a touch of poignancy to moments of reflection and transition in the film.

The prominence of woodwinds and drums throughout the soundtrack may be intended as an homage to the indigenous sounds and rhythms that form an essential part of indigenous cultures in Latin America, within many of which music and rhythm play a vital ritual function. However, the style of this soundtrack could also be interpreted as a relatively stereotypical rendering of Latin American music that employs a few indigenous instruments to make its European classical music style seem culturally authentic to an international audience.[23] Reviews of the soundtrack praise its beauty (Broxton; Manduteanu; Southall; Tillnes): one reviewer cites "ethnic flutes," a "tribal drum section," "heroic horns," and a "majestic choral outburst" (Broxton); and another describes its "tribal percussion," a "faintly liturgical choir" and "evocative ethnic flutes" (Southall). The repetition of "ethnic flutes" and "tribal drums/percussion" in these descriptions suggest that these sonic elements, however they may be intended, conjure a commodified idea of Latin American music for even the more sophisticated listener. Three reviewers compare Dudamel's recording to James Horner's soundtrack for *Avatar*, a film about human encounters with an alien race, finding similarities between Dudamel's and Horner's use of flutes in particular (Broxton; Manduteanu; Southall). James Southall also compares Dudamel's score to Ennio Morricone's *The Mission* in its use of flute, horn, drum, and voice to evoke Guaraní cultures in South America. These comparisons, and their almost identical readings of woodwind and drum use in *Libertador*'s score, strongly suggest that Dudamel makes effective use

of pan pipes and flutes, along with "ethnic" drumbeats, as clichéd musical sounds that mark Latin American cultural otherness in a way that appeals to an international audience's ears.

Alongside the "ethnic" sounds, the mountain panoramas, and the attractive actors featured in the film, Dudamel's high-profile participation in this film project brings additional prestige to the project and evokes a national pride in its renowned composer, who has been Music and Artistic Director of the Los Angeles Philharmonic since 2009, as well as served as Music Director for the celebrated Simón Bolívar Symphony Orchestra in Venezuela since 2000. The film's soundtrack was recorded by the Simón Bolívar Orchestra, an ensemble with such a celebrated national standing that it is chosen to play at prestigious national events such as Hugo Chávez's 2013 funeral. In addition to being an award-winning musician and composer in Venezuela, Dudamel has risen to international stardom since becoming the conductor of the Los Angeles Philharmonic, so his composing and directing the *Libertador* soundtrack – his first – garnered significant media coverage in the U.S. in anticipation of the film's North American release ("Maestro"). Dudamel's collaboration with Arvelo on *Libertador* suggests that he brings his star power to a project of social and national importance.[24]

As a filmic text that seeks to resonate with both national and international audiences, *Libertador* thus produces the sounds of Latin American otherness. At the same time, it amplifies and transforms the visual city of iconic military and political images from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Engel 32). The film evinces striking similarities with the portraiture that informed Bolívar's and his supporters' use of images during and after the wars of independence, in particular through the visual (and now affective) connection the film forges between the past and the present. This imagined link between the nineteenth and twenty-first centuries serves as a nation-building tool by relating not only the visual cultures of those two time periods but also associating the power structures that created them. In the nineteenth century, Bolívar's "body came to visualize the principle of political transformation from Spanish imperial domination toward national republican governments" (Engel 28) as he, and later others (Harwich 10-19), used his likeness to incarnate the possibility and hopes of the revolution. Well, after his death and into the twentieth century, images such as Tito Salas's portraits in the Casa Natal allowed the Venezuelan state to continue to craft a controlled iconography of Bolivarian veneration (Straka, "Efigie" 79, 81).

As part of its appeal to a contemporary audience, *Libertador*'s lusty nationalism and revisionist history frequently gestures toward the Chavista rhetoric of the *pueblo* and the ongoing *Revolución bolivariana*, effectively

legitimizing the current socialist government based on its imagined continuity with the past. An example of this can be seen in the sequence mentioned earlier in which Bolívar declares, "yo soy el pueblo." This line has an extradiegetic resonance, as these words echo a slogan Chávez repeated in the first years of his presidency, "Chávez es el pueblo" (Ríos 125-28). Whether or not this likeness was intentional, such scenes inspired Maduro to declaim of *Libertador*, "es el Bolívar más Chavista que ha existido … Chávez redescubrió a Bolívar y las tesis que él lanzó, [sic] fueron colocadas en la película" (quoted in Parada). Admittedly, elements of the film's nation-building discourse may be lost on the viewer unfamiliar with Venezuelan politics or Spanish American history; however, the affective pull of the film, and its emphasis on the *Chavista* elements of Bolívar's story, potentially inspires sympathy for the current government in any viewer. Its metonymic association between Venezuela and Bolívar's body, as well as the utopian idea of freedom it proclaims, offers a romanticized history of a nation, embodied by this one man, struggling to vanquish the enemies of liberty.[25]

The film's reworking of the Bolívar story participates in the *culto a Bolívar,* a well-worn nation-building phenomenon in Venezuela and other parts of Latin America (Carrera Damas 29-30). The "visual city" that Achugar describes – that is, the images that, along with texts, help construct the national imaginary (28) – works through this film to uphold the *Chavista* narrative through an altered Bolivarian cult history. *Libertador* uses the past to focus on, and celebrate, the present, in a gesture similar to the use of martial images in the nineteenth century: "El creciente fervor del público por estas narrativas no necesariamente estuvo vinculado a una pasión pasatista, sino más bien a la celebración de guerras en curso" (González-Stephan 96). Such narrative sleight-of-hand fulfills a nation-building purpose by employing images that link the visual city of today to revised versions of history; or, in other words, looking to the past to validate the present.

The final sequence of *Libertador* reinforces such a connection between present and past, asserting Bolívar's physical strength until the end and emphasizing his continued influence even from the grave. The sequence begins with a voice-over that dictates a letter to General Urdaneta in which Bolívar declares, "Nuestros enemigos son crueles y poderosos, mucho más de lo que pensábamos." These words end up being predictive, for, rather than portray his exile and death by tuberculosis, *Libertador* appears to depict Bolívar being assassinated before his last voyage to Santa Marta, Colombia, suggesting that his enemies invented the rumor of his illness. The film's final intertitles declare that Bolívar never arrived in Venezuela, that

his death was announced sixteen days later, and that the official cause of death was tuberculosis.

This last sequence adds a messianic dimension to Bolívar's material masculinity. At the beginning of the sequence, he meets a young boy fishing on the dock and finds out that his name is also Simón Bolívar. When the adult Bolívar is confronted by men with guns, he requests that the boy be allowed to leave. The last sequence of the film features several medium close-ups of a somber Bolívar filling the right side of the screen, the dim lighting further darkening his furrowed brow. Defiant, he shouts, "¡Disparen!" (01:50:12), suggesting that he, rather than his murderers, would choose the time of his death. This fantastic rendering of history sustains the image of a Bolívar who is strong until the end, his downfall brought by his enemies, rather than his own diminished political or physical power. This final sequence and its implication of political assassination recall the secretive physical decline of Chávez himself, who succumbed to cancer in 2013 after clandestine surgeries in Cuba and amid rumors of poisoning by international enemies (Cawthorne). This last sequence suggests, through Bolívar's apparent death by treason, a narrative of the ongoing struggle for freedom against oppression that continues beyond the Liberator's grave.[26]

Bolívar's changed physique (through Ramírez's portrayal) in the film, combined with its Hollywood emphasis on lovemaking and violence, allow the protagonist to extend an affective appeal to his audience, inspiring a lusty nationalism – a desire for his body and its revised history – that might create an imagined national community. As spectators self-identify as feeling subjects, they might embrace the film's significant reworking of history, in particular its promotion of a conspiracy theory regarding the true cause of their hero's death. Such a belief in foundational treachery allows Bolívar to take on the symbolic role of prophet and martyr, who helps build the nation through identifying the common enemies that sought Venezuela's downfall. For Venezuela and parts of South America, Bolívar "became the figurative embodiment of the messianic time that would herald in a new epoch of freedom and prosperity for the New World" (Abreu Mendoza 302), and this promise is incorporated into the counterfactual ending to *Libertador*. Indeed, the freeing of young Simón Bolívar suggests that the spirit of the Liberator lives on through the *pueblo* that he liberates, and with which he identifies. Venezuelans might recognize his promise that "yo soy el pueblo" as that of the *Revolución bolivariana*. The film's altered version of Bolívar's apparent death plays into the teleological, transhistorical narrative of the *Chavista* government, which also carries Bolívar's name, and which claims to be his revolutionary heir as it fights the

imperial powers of the U.S. and multinational corporations, its enemies in the age of globalized capital (Chávez xiv-xv).

Not coincidentally, the messianic promise of a material Bolívar was embraced by Chávez in an extraordinary performance toward the end of his life when he ordered the exhumation of the Liberator's body in 2010. In a surprise early-morning television reveal on July 16th of that year, Venezuelans learned that Bolívar's body had been exhumed by a group of scientists to preserve the remains and ascertain whether the General had been poisoned rather than died of tuberculosis. Chávez tweeted about the event and released several videos that showed part of the procedure ("Exhumados"). The team scanned the remains, creating images that were later used to create a 3-dimensional portrait of Bolívar ("A 3-D Look") that appeared less patrician and more *mestizo* than previous renderings – the new Bolívar looking somewhat like the *Comandante* himself (Ríos 128).

Even more remarkable than the unannounced exhumation was Chávez's glorification of the moment on Twitter, typical of his emotive, theatrical style: "¡Qué momentos tan impresionantes hemos vivido esta noche! Hemos visto los restos del gran Bolívar. Confieso que hemos llorado, hemos jurado. Les digo: tiene que ser Bolívar ese esqueleto glorioso pues puede sentirse su llamarada" (López). Although results from the analysis were inconclusive regarding the cause of death ("Confirman"), Chávez was able to conjure Bolívar's image long enough to "sentir … su llamarada" (López), and to distract the public from Venezuela's political and economic turmoil at that time ("Chávez 'resucita'"; López). Indeed, Chávez steered this media event directly into the political-spiritual realm as he continued to tweet, "Díos mío, Díos mío; Cristo mío, Cristo nuestro, mientras oraba en silencio viendo aquellos huesos, ¡pensé en ti! Y cómo hubiese querido y cuánto quise que llegaras y ordenaras como a Lázaro: levántate Simón, que no es tiempo de morir. ¡De inmediato recordé que Bolívar vive!" ("Chávez ordena"). From feeling his flame to proclaiming a Lazarus-like reawakening, Chávez's polemical raising of the dead Bolívar is nothing if not an affective call to engage with the *prócer*, now from/with(in) his new resting place. Abreu Mendoza, citing Elías Pino Iturrieta and Enrique Krauze, describes how Chávez "appropriated Bolívar's feats and slowly transferred the mythical capital of the Liberator to his persona" (303), a shift that allowed him to be the one to call "Simón" back from the dead and "sentir su llamarada." Indeed, Chávez was so successful in bringing Bolívar back in a mystical-material sense that new theories arose of a "maldición de Bolívar," a curse elicited by opening the tomb, that supposedly claimed even the *Comandante* himself in 2013, who joined five others who had died after their involvement with the exhumation ("Chávez, ¿una víctima más?"; Mora).

From the emotional tweetstorm inspired by the exhumation of the Liberator to the creation of a new *mestizo* Bolívar portrait and the subsequent emergence of the *maldición* theory, such phenomena show the Bolívar-Chávez association to be a calculated and media-assisted campaign on the part of Chávez and his government, as digital in its dissemination as it was mystical in content.

Chávez's unexpected demise brought to the fore another similarity with Bolívar: their early deaths allowed both figures to be evoked in a messianic way by acolytes who claim they speak to them from beyond the grave. Chávez used to leave a chair free for Bolívar's spirit at meetings (Marcano and Barrera Tyszka 103), recognizing the power of a visual – imagined – connection with the past, styling himself as a vessel for the Liberator's wisdom. Nicolás Maduro has adopted this idea quite literally, claiming to speak with Chávez in the form of a bird and occasionally sleeping alongside his tomb (Associated Press).

Likewise, the lusty nationalism evoked throughout Arvelo's *Libertador* potentially creates a desire for the heroic protagonist, an embodiment of the ideal future nation that appears through a revision of history. Podalsky and others show how affect and sentiment can be evoked through cultural artifacts such as film as a response to recent history, including multinational capital's dominance over the forms of life (16-17); similarly, the film *Libertador* and *Chavista* political theater such as the exhumation appeal to the senses as an assertion of nationalism to counter the cultural hegemony of the U.S. and other capitalist powers. This sentient nationalism is a nation-building strategy used to discipline the *pueblo* affectively and to divert attention from the problems of past and contemporary Venezuela through a focus on idealized, singular heroes, a diversionary tactic borrowed from the nineteenth century (González-Stephan 98).[27] Following a tradition of ideologically-laden political imagery, *Libertador* seeks to embody the promise of an ideal nation through the appealing, and paradoxically Hollywoodized, form of Ramírez's Bolívar, harnessing memory politics and lusty nationalism to support the state mythologies of *Chavista* politics in Venezuela.

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NOTES

1 Venezuelan director, screenwriter, and producer Alberto Arvelo (1966-) is known for his work as a documentary filmmaker as well as for feature films,

including *Una casa con vista al mar* (2001) and *Cyrano Fernández* (2007), which also starred Édgar Ramírez ("Alberto Arvelo").

2 See Ana Peluffo's *En clave emocional* (2016) for an analysis of the affective component to nationalism and imagined communities in nineteenth-century Spanish America (13-17).

3 This term is informed by Sikata Banerjee's analysis of "muscular nationalism" in the very different context of Indian contemporary film (9). Banerjee's work connects the contemporary muscular form(s) of Indian masculinity, as shown in recent films, to an assertion of nationalism in the face of globalization and consumer capitalism (9-14), incorporating a martial tradition associated with violence (9). Although the national situations are quite different, both cultures associate muscular masculine bodies seen on screen with a nation strengthened against common enemies in a globalized world. "Lusty nationalism" here focuses on the potential effect those muscular bodies have on the audience.

4 Naturally, there is great variation in how Bolívar is presented in historical narratives. For a hagiographic rendering, see Marie Arana's *Bolívar: American Liberator* (2013); for more critical portraits, see David Bushnell's *Simón Bolívar: Liberation and Disappointment* (2004) and John Chasteen's chapter "Simón Bolívar: Man and Myth" from the edited collection *Heroes and Hero Cults in Latin America* (2006). See note 5 for bibliography on the "Culto a Bolívar."

5 Tomás Straka and Nikita Harwich document the changing reception of Bolívar as cultural icon through political historiography in the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries. See also Germán Carrera Damas's seminal work *El culto a Bolívar* (1969), Elías Pino Iturrieta's *El divino Bolívar* (2003), as well as the literary readings of Christopher Conway's *The Cult of Bolívar in Latin American Literature* (2003) and Alicia Ríos's *Nacionalismos banales* (2013).

6 As one of the reviewers of this article noted, this final scene is left open to interpretation, allowing it to coexist with *Chavista* conspiracy theories of poisoning as well as the death by tuberculosis generally accepted by historians. This film's controversial depiction of what seems to (but may not) be Bolívar's death is but one of many details in *Libertador* that deviate from the historical record. Several reviews note the film's numerous inaccuracies, such as its portrayal of Bolívar's family and personal life; the depiction, alteration, and suppression of major characters (including San Martín); not representing major events such as the liberation of Peru or the Cortes de Cádiz in Spain; showing Bolívar cross the Andes into Colombia (rather than Peru); and the final scene suggesting death by firing squad, among other details; see Archerh2, D'Angelo, Qureshi, and Vargas, among others.

7 Ana Peluffo and Ignacio Sánchez Prado assert that the normative ideals of gender used for nation-building in nineteenth-century Spanish America assumed a white, possibly *mestizo* masculinity and allowed no deviations from traditional concepts of gender (10).

8 The gradual darkening of Bolívar's visage is not unlike the darker-skinned portrait that Hugo Chávez unveiled in 2012, after the exhumation of the general's body allowed scanning and a 3-dimensional rendering of his face ("A 3-D Look"). The hero's darker skin in this new portrait makes him look more like the *mestizo* "pueblo" that he – and later Chávez – sought to represent, a reverse *blanqueamiento* of sorts that serves the government's mythological appropriation of Bolívar.

9 In contrast, consider Juan Dávila's postcard portrayal "Simón Bolívar" and the furor it unleashed: Nelly Richard's analysis of the artwork and its hostile reception in 1994 remarks on the portrait's embrace of gendered, racial, and cultural ambiguities (117), elements the work uses to critique and destabilize the implied masculine, white, and elite nature of historical narrative (116). However, she also recognizes that the scandal was contextualized within Chile's transition from dictatorship and responded to political needs of that time (120).

10 Sex refers to biological characteristics and gender denotes the social presentation of identity, whether traditional (male/female) or nontraditional (LGBTQ+); my analysis follows gender studies' accepted notion that genders are performed, fluid, and multiple. Here I refer to traditional ideas of a binary gender system, as it was understood popularly before, and into, the nineteenth and up to the latter part of the twentieth century.

11 In contrast, the English version stated simply, "THE LIBERATOR journeys through the impassioned struggle of Simón Bolívar's (Édgar Ramírez) fight for independence in Latin America from Spain and his vision of a united South American nation" ("Synopsis"). This website is no longer available either in English or Spanish.

12 David Buchbinder describes the commodification of the male body as producing an image that is not only "desire-worthy" (143) but that is also desired by both men and women, regardless of sexual orientation (144).

13 The visual similarities between these water scenes are confirmed by one of the film's trailers that juxtaposes them as it opens with a voice-over by Ramírez in English, extolling the need for independence.

14 Absurdly, after supposedly gaining an awareness of liberty and equality, the film shows Bolívar lecturing on freedom to a group of indigenous and black soldiers – clearly already recruited to the cause – in a sequence that cuts between his speech and battle scenes.

15 Both Achugar and Beatriz González-Stephan foreground the significance of images in the process of nation building during the nineteenth century through studying objects and icons from that period, including coinage and portraiture (Achugar) as well as architecture and panoramas (González-Stephan).

16 González-Stephan describes pictures celebrating wars of the past that served as nation-building tools for nineteenth-century politicians (89-90), while Tomás Straka details how painter Tito Salas's idealized representations of Bolívar in the Casa Natal museum contributed to the "culto a Bolívar" ("Efigie" 58, 61, 64).

17 Beatriz González Aranda analyzes the iconography of power and pro-independence ideology within nineteenth-century portraits of Bolívar in her *Manual del arte del siglo XIX en Colombia* (48-55).

18 See Conway (151-62) and Ríos (123-28) for two (among many) analyses of Chávez's appropriation of Bolívar from a literature/cultural studies perspective.

19 *Libertador*'s beginning credits note only the support from Insurgentes and San Mateo, but Imdb.com ("The Liberator") and Caracas newspaper *El Nacional* ("Cuestionan") report that the film received funding from both CNAC and La villa del cine. Reviews and previews similarly mention government funding at the film's inception; see González Cova, among others.

20 In contrast, the New Latin American Cinema of the 1960s featured "low budget, aesthetically simple films" (Farrell 372) that rejected the Hollywood model.

21 Peluffo remarks on the forgotten affective component of imagined communities, through which affective and sentimental bonds between people function to create an idea of commonality or even nation (16-17).

22 Most landscape scenes feature the Venezuelan countryside, but Arvelo filmed the movie's urban scenes in the Andalucía region of southern Spain in "ciudades hermanas," in which he found it easy to recreate historical cityscapes in well-conserved urban areas (García).

23 My thanks to one of the article's anonymous reviewers for this insight.

24 In addition to his work on the *Libertador* soundtrack, Dudamel had previously collaborated with Arvelo on the 2010 documentary *Dudamel: Let the Children Play*, a flattering portrayal of "El Sistema," the national music program that trained him and that has been successfully reproduced in other countries around the world ("Biography;" "New Documentary").

25 Juan Pablo Dabove analyzes Chávez's use of totalizing narratives of revolution with "un largo linaje de insurgentes" (150), including not only Bolívar but also "Maisanta," Pedro Pérez Delgado, a minor *caudillo* in the late nineteenth century (150-53).

26 Dabove highlights the significance of betrayal within the narrative of Chávez's veneration of Maisanta, who died in captivity (153).

27 "La representación de la guerra en términos panorámicos fabricaba imágenes historiográficas gratificantes que aliviaban los traumas en torno a pasados problemáticos … [y] ofrecía un tropo alternativo para contrarrestar las amenazas de las sublevaciones populares" (González-Stephan 98).

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