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Rhetoric and Imagery of the Caracazo in *La última vez* and its Link to the Political Narrative of Chavismo

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Abstract

The present paper is an analysis of topics related to discourse and imagery as articulated in Héctor Bujanda's novel *La última vez* (2007). Critics broadly regard this work as a modern archetype for a sort of literature that employs apposite sets of images and establishes relevant metaphoric spaces as underpinnings for a historical frame of reference. In the case of this novel, that frame of reference is the wave of unrest known as the *Caracazo* (1989). Strictly speaking, the work's discursive register displays traits and context that revolve around those protests and their aftermath. Due to the manifest political character of the novel's context, it will be necessary to evaluate the characters' idiosyncratic verbalisation of their experiences as emblems of the author's political identity. The article's analytical direction, therefore, is intended initially to identify descriptive patterns that demonstrate the author's political proclivities, starting with the way the city of Caracas is represented as a den of persistent crime, culminating in the events that led to the coup d'état of 1992. It then proposes a reading strategy that should enable critical insight into the demonstrable features of 1990's Venezuelan society. In particular, such insights will shed light on particular contemporary issues linked to *Chavismo* and its methods of governance. Lastly, and in view of this particular novel, I aim to explain the set of aesthetic and ideological tendencies that characterise XXI century Venezuelan narrative and political rhetoric.

Keywords: discourse, *Caracazo*, *Chavismo*, imagery, Venezuelan studies, political rhetoric

Introduction

Although in the novel *La última vez* (2007) the argument seems to refer – exclusively – to the imagery of the *Caracazo* or *Sacudón*¹ turmoil, the course of the narrative also negotiates a timeline that is attuned to the contemporary history of Venezuela. This is accomplished by showcasing, among other issues, the fissures experienced in the nation’s democratic system and the political rhetoric extant during the beginnings of the political process known as *Chavismo*. The pattern of reading that allows us to link *La última vez* discursiveness with the revolutionary rhetoric of the Chavist utopia attends to the following factors that are exhibited in the novel:

- Claims for order and for an iron fist in the exercise of political power
- Denunciation of the economic bourgeoisie forged under the auspices of the Venezuelan “oil democracy”
- A account of the inequalities in the nation’s social framework
- Opposition to traditional political parties
- The appearance of rebel groups (parish/popular borough) of unchallenged legitimacy
- Rejection of the neoliberal policies of capitalism
- An emphasis on the social origin of the insurgents (popular class/proletarians)

Bujanda portrays Caracas through a murky filter of persistent crime and the coup d’état of 1992. The narrative follows the search of one character – the journalist José Ángel Rodríguez – who treks through separate roads of the social topography in two distinct layers: a physical one, leading him into the bowels of the city, and another, symbolic one, – through an intimate past – searching for explanations to justify the *Caracazo*, attempting to understand his life and his country. All of which gives rise to two relevant questions: first, in what way is the novel’s fictional discourse linked to the Chavista Movement’s political narrative? Second, to what extent does José Ángel’s search endorse the rhetoric and imagery connected to the *Caracazo* disorders and thereby echo the Chavista ideological discourse?

Hereafter, to answer the questions posed, an analysis of narrative strategies and relevant depictions will be undertaken.



Caracas. Residencias Junín. Jonathan Méndez on unsplash

¹ In Margarita Lopez Maya’s (2003) opinion “On 27 February 1989 a popular revolt, which was to escalate dramatically, broke out in Venezuela. Both Caracas and most of the main and secondary cities of the country witnessed barricades, road closures, the burning of vehicles, the stoning of shops, shooting and widespread looting. The revolt lasted five days in Caracas, slightly less in the rest of the country. The cost in material losses and human lives was very high; the deaths, numbering almost four hundred, were largely of poor people residing in the capital” (p. 117).

Strategies for Representing the Violence

On the occasion of Ricardo Rodríguez's death – the protagonist/journalist's brother – Bujanda portrays the General Cemetery of the South, a gloomy urban space represented in dark tones. The reference is to a real place located in Santa Rosalia's parish in Caracas that gives its name to the adjoining neighbourhood: El Cementerio. The neighbourhood's description is as follows: "marginal, full of contrasts and threats" (*La última vez*, 2007 p. 24)². According to the plot, Ricardo's body is interred at La Nueva Peste. A spot "wherein almost a hundred nameless execution victims were buried during the social outbreak of February 89" (p. 16)³. We can observe here that La Peste – the real name of the common grave where over 400 victims of the Caracazo were buried (according to COFAVIC figures⁴) – appears renamed as La Nueva Peste.

Bujanda then begins to elaborate a set of intrigues surrounding the death of José Ángel Rodríguez's brother and his father's disappearance, which occurs minutes after the end of the burial. Into the story, we find that the General Cemetery of the South becomes an analogy for the city, with its marginality, desolation and grief. The city overflows its boundaries onto the graveyard; the cemetery sits on "land that had been mistreated by Caracas's excess and incontinence" (p. 22)⁵. The heroes commemorated by statues there had been "immortalised in the marble dream of a Caracas now definitively extinct" (p. 23)⁶. The author, then, is picturing a national state of affairs where national symbols and mythologies no longer play an important part in the public discourse. There is an obligatory antinomy between the moral order envisaged by those heroes, whose statues populate the cemetery, and the national disarray. Thus, the cemetery's geometrical order allows José Ángel to recreate that bygone, conceptual moral order as a lifeless terrain, to "reconstruct the old history of the city by walking through those forgotten streets, conceived as reproductions of the outer city" (p. 23)⁷.

Bujanda's narrator, through dramatic depictions, employs disquieting adjectives to sum up the neighbourhood: "A human garbage dump where those who will never appear in any newspaper obituaries and will never be given fond farewells by honourable government committees end up. More than a place of death, it is a place to abandon refuse" (p. 24)⁸. Similarly, the post-funeral portrayal of the city is that of an inferno: "It was noon: Caracas brought to light the

² *La última vez*, 2007, "marginal, lleno de contrastes y amenazas".

³ *La última vez*, 2007, "donde enterraron a casi una centena de ajusticiados sin nombre durante el estallido social de febrero del 89".

⁴ According to Maye Primera's newspapering work (2018), "In 1995 Cofavic efforts began before the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights to denounce the violations that the Venezuelan State had incurred, between February, and March 1989, in its attempt to quell the known social revolt as The Caracazo, On June 7, 1999, the IACHR applied to the case before the Court and requested that it be declared that in Venezuela, the right to life, individual liberty, personal integrity, and judicial guarantees of 46 of Venezuelans, who were victims of these events. Then, on November 11, 1999, the Court decided in favor of the plaintiffs and ordered the opening of a procedure for reparations" (p. 16). Translation by the author.

⁵ *La última vez*, 2007, "terreno que había sido maltratado por la Caracas desbordada e incontinente".

⁶ *La última vez*, 2007, "inmortalizadas en el sueño marmóreo de una Caracas definitivamente ausente".

⁷ *La última vez*, 2007, "sería relativamente sencillo reconstruir la vieja historia de la ciudad paseando por esas callejuelas olvidadas, concebidas como reproducciones de la ciudad exterior".

⁸ *La última vez*, 2007, "Como un basurero humano al que van a parar los que jamás salen en las notas necrológicas de los diarios, ni son despedidos por honorables comitivas gubernamentales. Más que el de la muerte, éste es el lugar de la ciudad para abandonar bagazos".

apocalyptic magma that has besieged it for so long and has transformed its streets into minor human infernos”⁹ (p. 26).

The above descriptions, which depict the cemetery as a dumping ground for the dispossessed and Caracas as a chaotic city, congested with traffic and choked with the disinherited masses, showcases the literary parallel. It is a narrative resource that, in this context, gives an account of precarious urban spaces, offers a singular rendition of the violence in Caracas, and announces the upheavals known as the Caracazo. These details, centred upon Ricardo’s death from AIDS and the father’s disappearance after the burial, allow the narrator to construct a narrative argumentation that will focus on the violent city, highlighting the uncivil and illegal goings-on that are prevalent in Caracas, and by extension, in Venezuela. In view of the chaos, the writer is making the case for welcoming an iron-fist handling of the situation. “What is lacking, brother, is an iron fist. Open fire on the underworld”¹⁰ (p. 85).

As we observe, the social atmosphere in this fictional country is characterised by marginalization and death, a situation that justifies, for the author, the iron fist as valid and necessary governance principle. If, in the discursive logic of the *La última vez*, the robust authoritarian approach to crisis is a legitimate way to make the city prosper again, does it imply that the author is attempting to legitimise Chavismo’s distinctive ideology?

***La última vez* and its Link with the Political Rhetoric of Chavismo¹¹**

Firstly, it is valid to consider that Héctor Bujanda fiction epitomises the “salvation through exceptional means” rhetoric associated with the role of leadership in Chavismo. The novel’s discourse proposes a messianic leader: a strong man that shall handle the future reigns of government, someone who will bring to fruition a revolutionary utopia through armed revolt. Secondly, it is implied that without radical change the country will not have a pleasant future for generations. The narrative projects into the future, an unfortunate time of suffering that citizens will endure during the Rafael Caldera presidential period (1993-1998). Times when, as the plot goes, assaults and murders of citizens will be the norm.

⁹ *La última vez*, 2007, “Se había hecho mediodía y Caracas sacaba a relucir el magma apocalíptico que la asedia desde hace mucho, y que ha transformado sus calles en pequeños infiernos humanos”.

¹⁰ “[L]o que hace falta, hermano, es mano dura. Plomo al hampa.” Regarding the *Hampa* term, it is frequent to find the translation as the noun *Underworld*; however, *Hampa* could be translated as an array of criminal organizations. Besides, in the Venezuelan case, *Hampa* is linked with the violence in Caracas’s streets. Indeed, the newspapers highlight in their news that somebody has been the victim of the *Hampa* in order to refer to assault or armed robbery.

¹¹ According to Martínez Meucci and Vairberg de Lustgarten (2014), one of the general features of the discursive structure of what they call “Chavismo’s revolutionary narrative” is that: ‘both in the endo-group and the exo-group are associated with 1) a principle, orientation or general ideology (socialism in the endo group vs. capitalism in the exo-group), 2) transcendental sociopolitical subjects (people vs. bourgeoisie/empire) and 3) archetypal characters that function as representations of good and evil (heroes vs. villains). Thus, the discursive construction inherent in this narrative presents and frames the political struggle in Venezuela, not only from a typically revolutionary conception as a whole (in accordance with what Parker maintains in this regard and in the sense of clearly establishing a ‘subject revolutionary’ which opposes another ‘counterrevolutionary’), but it even comes to represent the relationship between both groups/subjects as that of the eternal struggle of good against evil, in a sense of revenge and epic victory over the oppressors” (p. 485). Translation by the author.

In addition, *La última vez* recounts the 1998 presidential campaign, whose protagonists are Irene Saenz, “The 90-60-90 Barbie wants to grab the coroto”¹² (p. 31) and “Chavez going from town to town organising assemblies” (p. 30)¹³. Likewise, the citiscape depicted in the novel is torn between gangs of the Cota 905 – a real place in the city – and motorized collectives. These gangs control the most vulnerable boroughs and often have Caracas in fear due to their violent disputes for turf, weapons and drug traffic. These criminal groups provoke terror in the citizens and have banking and commercial institutions at their mercy. Their usual criminal practices include kidnappings and robbery, among other scourges.

Descriptions above demonstrate that the city, as represented in the novel, serves as a scenario – *justification?* – for the eventual widespread violence linked to insurgencies and popular revolts. It is insinuated that a coup d'état is imminent, given the growing political corruption and the rise of organized crime: “This has gotten screwed up and tangled, you know? Every day a rumour, a military assault, some student bochinchas,¹⁴ some prisoners. Oh, God, I don't know how far this is going to take us” (p. 57).¹⁵

These are a few details recounted by José Ángel in email messages to his sister, who lives in Madrid. Their contents highlight aspects such as “nobody assaults you or kills you to take off your shoes. After living in Caracas, that [Madrid] must be Fantasy Island” (p. 30).¹⁶ “You know that this country is not the same since 1992. Now everyone talks about a coup d'état, about lieutenants conspiring. There is a lot of tension in the street” (p. 30).¹⁷

It can be argued that the narrator makes these interdiscursive insertions – emails within the narrative frame – to reiterate the violent environment that is endemic to the Venezuelan capital in the late nineties, thereby justifying an insurrection. Such uprising is the brainchild of groups of citizens and military men who rebel against the status quo and against government authority. In turn, the comrades' expectations are that there will emerge a “brave man who will put to all those bastards in front of a firing squad and establish order once and for all” (p. 85)¹⁸. The plot's discourse supports this: Venezuela has turned into a country where “[b]eauty queen

¹² “La Barbie 90-60-90 quiere agarrar el coroto”. Coroto usually alludes to personal belongings. To grab the Coroto in this context, means to take presidential power.

¹³ “La Barbie 90-60-90 quiere agarrar el coroto”. “Chávez anda de pueblo en pueblo haciendo asambleas”.

¹⁴ The Dictionary of Spanish Language [Diccionario de la Real Academia Española (23rd ed.). (2014)] defines Bochinchas as follows “1. m. Tumulto, barullo, alboroto, asonada” (Tumult, hubbub, fuss or brouhaha), meaning disordered or loud situation. In this passage, an appropriate definition would be instability, since the Bujanda's narrator describes the political disorder and the absence of law in the country.

¹⁵ Diccionario de la Real Academia Española (23rd ed.). (2014). “esto se ha puesto jodido y enredado, ¿sabe? Todos los días un rumor, una asonada militar, unos bochinchas estudiantiles, unos presos...Ay, Dios, yo no sé hasta dónde vamos a llegar”.

¹⁶ Diccionario de la Real Academia Española (23rd ed.). (2014). “nadie te atraca ni te mata para quitarte unos zapatos. Después de vivir en Caracas, eso debe ser la isla de la fantasía”.

¹⁷ Diccionario de la Real Academia Española (23rd ed.). (2014). “Tú sabes que este país no es el mismo desde el 92. Ahora todo el mundo habla de golpe de estado, de tenientes conspirando (...) hay mucha tensión en la calle”.

¹⁸ Diccionario de la Real Academia Española (23rd ed.). (2014). “un carajo arrecho que pase por el paredón a todos esos... y ponga orden de una buena vez”.

candidates want to be president; the guerrilla fighters, neoliberals; the revolutionary military and the astrologers, subversive”¹⁹ (p. 31), complains Bujanda’s narrator.

In an attempt to avoid a complete affinity with Chavismo rhetoric, the narrator says that the insurgency could be a mistake, since investigations surrounding the rebellion have not yielded accurate results. He insists that the spread of the insurgency might be a consequence of the struggle between the state security bodies, as weapons stolen by the insurgents are a precious booty that has increased the “rivalries between the National Guard and the Scientific Police” (p. 101)²⁰. Bujanda asserts this as part of his intention to untangle the history of the supposed armed uprising. However, we also think that Bujanda recurs to this strategy to cover his rhetorical affiliation with the Chavismo narrative. Perhaps he does not want to make his sympathy for the Bolivarian insurgency or his kinship with the rhetoric associated with it so obviously clear and forceful.

In what seems like a journalistic chronicle, written as an email message to his sister, the narrator character informs the reader of three socio-political events that shook Venezuelans in the last decade of the twentieth century: “In the last seven years everything has happened: a social war, two attempted coup d’états, presidential pardons to drug traffickers and even the bankruptcy of the financial system” (p. 31).²¹ It is important to note that, simultaneously, while the victims of the year 1989 are remembered and vindicated sympathetically in the first part of the novel, Bujanda progressively erects a violent and chaotic framework to the city through the analogy with the El Cementerio neighbourhood, that “miserable parish in the South of the city” (p. 25)²² that infuses Caracas with *Caracazo* imagery.

In this sense, we note that the narrator also reports the widespread chaos that confronts the country when he informs of: (a) the coup d’état/military rebellion of 1992 and the uprisings of November, (b) the pardon of Larry Tovar Acuña during 1993 by President Ramón J. Velazquez and, (c) the fall of the financial system and the 1994 banking crisis; along with the court cases of the Latino Bank, Republic Bank, and The Latin-American Progress Group. By gradually outlining these events that took place from 1989 to 1994, Bujanda appraises several milestones in contemporary Venezuelan socio-political history. It is a temporal insertion that disrupts the development of episodic linearity. But Bujanda does not employ temporary evasions nor does he force narrative digressions. The order of the chapters allows for the cogent unravelling of the novel’s intrigues and the ultimate uncovering of José Ramón Rodríguez’s hiding place: Santa Rosalia Parish. He is there because “the centre of Caracas is the only place where a man can disappear in this city” (p. 46).²³

Exposing the father’s whereabouts allows the reader to consider Bujanda’s tone as he describes one of the city’s characteristic parishes, a place the author presents as the unlawful and uncivil heart of a foundering city. Likewise, José Ramón Rodríguez is one of the keys to unveiling one

¹⁹ “La mises quieren ser presidentes; los guerrilleros, neoliberales; los militares revolucionarios y los astrólogos subversivos”. This last reference is to astrologer José Gómez’s predictions. He was arrested in October 1996 for daring to predict the standing President’s death.

²⁰ *La última vez*, 2007, “rivalidades entre la Guardia Nacional y la Policía Científica”.

²¹ *La última vez*, 2007, “En los últimos siete años ha pasado de todo: una guerra social, dos intentos de golpe de estado, indultos presidenciales a narcotraficantes y hasta la quiebra del sistema financiero”.

²² *La última vez*, 2007, “parroquia miserable del Sur de la ciudad”.

²³ I *La última vez*, 2007, “el centro de Caracas es el único lugar donde puede desaparecer un hombre en esta ciudad”.

of the most newsworthy events in *La última vez*: a military uprising, of which José Ángel keeps track because “he is hunting some history of subversion” (p. 40).²⁴ If we look in more detail, the possible participation of José Ramón in a subversive group attempting to overthrow President Rafael Caldera, who faces a governance crisis, is, to some extent, more than an aesthetic insertion. His disappearance seems to be intimately linked with the rebellion. José Ángel presumes that he is a conspirator, and also the main suspect in the theft of military rifles from Fuerte Tiuna, a Venezuelan military facility.

Bujanda adds a certain enigmatic load onto the fiction, putting the reader on the trail of the potential conspirator and, therefore, participating in the plot. However, the attempt to make the reader an accomplice in following the footsteps of the alleged rebels, makes evident that the novel follows a pattern that is common to stories that support/justify the eventual ascent to power of political groups that are antithetic to the status quo. It is also evident that its inferential bias, that is to say, the perspective from which the author wants the reader to conceptualise the political environment, differs ideologically and aesthetically from the traditional politics of “representative” and “oil” democracy during the period of 1959 -1998 in Venezuela.

As an instance of this practice, *La última vez* sets the year 1996 as a starting point, the point in time that records the emergence of the Bolivarian Movement for Justice subversive group (MBJ in its acronym in Spanish), led presumably by José Ramón Rodríguez. This event demonstrates a peculiar synchronism between the fictional environment and the socio-political events of the period. This is a novel that in a way calls for the emergence of the revolutionary utopia and, moreover, discursively validates the rise of Chavismo. In *La última vez*, the insurgent group is born after the coup attempts of 1992 and, as Bujanda’s narrator informs us, has a political cell in the low-income neighbourhoods of Caracas: El Observatorio and 23 de Enero.

On the other hand, José Ángel Rodríguez’s journalist has before his eyes a noisy, insurgent, foggy, and uncivil city. Bujanda’s plot makes clear that Caracas is the product of urban collapse and, perhaps, the result of neoliberal policies or even the topical failure of capitalism. The solution to the urban conflict seems, then, to demand for the emergence of the revolutionary utopia in order to bring order and offer welfare in a violent cosmos ruled by the military. By contrast, the pre-Chavismo social conditions, with its miserable and poverty-stricken urban spaces, crammed thoroughfares characterized by infernal automotive exhausts and narcotics consumption, “resembled a hell on fire”²⁵ (p. 103).

In summary, as has been shown in the present article, the novel’s content seems to be an endorsement of the revolutionary utopia and therefore of its leader, who is later embodied in the founder of the Fifth Republic Movement²⁶, the eventual candidate of the unitary platform of the forces of the left: Hugo Chávez, flag-bearer of the so-called Patriotic Pole. The endorsement becomes more evident when the narrative, touching upon the 1998 presidential election, includes the following paragraph:

This Caracas is staking its entrance into the 21st century, betting everything it has on a Barbie who believes that with a little nip and tuck here and there, along with a bit of localised anaesthesia, the country will be like new, like everything else around here, fixed with a beauty

²⁴ *La última vez*, 2007, “anda cazando alguna historia de subversiones”.

²⁵ *La última vez*, 2007, “parecían un infierno en llamas”.

²⁶ *La última vez*, 2007, Movimiento Quinta República (MVR)

for the next Miss Universe contest. This Caracas, the dirtier, the more consumed by its blood and its wounds, the more it wants to be governed by a silicone doll (p. 104).²⁷

This silicone doll is Irene Saez, former mayor of the Chacao municipality and pre-candidate for president. She was endorsed by Copei, one of the traditional parties that, together with other allied organizations, will subsequently build a political platform that will be named “The Democratic Pole”²⁸, much caricatured in the novel.

Conclusion

Our validity of our hypothesis regarding the function of *Caracazo* imagery in *La última vez* is self evident because that imagery is recurrent: a view of the violent Caracas that triggered the *Caracazo* upheavals permeates the narrative, demanding a negative view of pre-Chavismo Venezuela from the reader. The Venezuelan capital is endowed with chaotic, marginal and apocalyptic features in a novel that stresses its heterotopic character. The technique employed to construct the narrative becomes an exercise in interdiscursivity due to the constant use of parallels between cemetery and city and the insertion of real events taken from journalistic chronicles, emails, televised programs and legal records.

An outcome of our attempt to relate the novel’s discourse with the political rhetoric of Chavismo would be the explicit ideological positioning of *La última vez* within the field of artistic production. In the Venezuelan case, the cultural field holds two polarities and two sites from which the authors set forth. A first trend includes the novels supporting the emergence of the revolutionary utopia and Chavismo, in full view of the failure of representative democracy. From the other side, there is a set of stories testifying to the violence, tragedy and social fractures occasioned by the policies and control practices of the Chavista regime.

Bujanda adopts narrative strategies that allow for the evocation of revolutionary topics. For example, he is able to portray the misery of the pre-Chavismo city through the search for the narrator’s father. Moreover, the uses of these materials are compelling because, regrettably, many victims of the *Caracazo* have yet to be identified. Many of the physical, emotional, and psychological effects of the *Caracazo* revolt, unfortunately, are still being felt. Secondly, the novelist may appeal to these revolutionary topics because they are current: the February Fourth armed movement and the Chávez election of 1998 perform a relevant role in the present Venezuelan political environment. The rebellion’s protagonists have been in government and have established a political regime based on a one party hegemony for the last two decades.

Indeed, *La última vez* invokes memory construction from the notion of collective remembrance (Candau, 2001) for some of the novelist’s creative purposes. Retro optics of the nineties is important in that it exposes the urban confines of a previous Caracas, which contrasts with the Caracas of the decade under study. Bujanda’s plots offer information on forms of socio-cultural interaction among Venezuelans today after a series of milestones that are related to the

²⁷ *La última vez*, 2007, “Esta Caracas que se juega su entrada al siglo XXI apostando todo lo que tiene por una Barbie que cree que con un poquito de bisturí aquí y allá, y algo de anestesia local, el país queda como nuevo, como todo, una belleza para el próximo Miss Universo. Esta Caracas que mientras más sucia y carcomida está por su sangre y sus heridas, más quiere que la gobierne una muñequita de silicona”.

²⁸ As the records show, the Democratic Pole will in the end have as its candidate for president Mr Enrique Salas Römer, former governor of Carabobo state. He will oppose Hugo Chávez, the eventual victor of the 1998 elections.

Caracazo. These signposts have marked recent political history in Venezuela: February 04, 1992, the 1998 elections and the political exercise of Chavismo for twenty-one years. Accordingly, descriptions and illustrations of these milestones in the city of the text are important, but the reflective potential offered by its representation of the socio-political processes is essential, given that the text offers clues for a “correct” interpretation of them. In other words, we insist that from a literary standpoint the Caracazo is not an event with fixed residence in aesthetic terminology. In *La última vez*, the insertion of its historical referent is more than evident and has a compelling political logic.

Finally, in light of the above, we’ve strived to provide an analysis showing that Venezuelan literature of the 21st century establishes a parallel between the urban narratives that emerged in the first decade of this century and the Chavismo process. Secondly, we’ve tried to demonstrate that the urban novel of the 21st century reinforces the allegorical, symbolic, and illustrative traditions of the Venezuelan cultural dynamics.

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