The Necromantic State

Spectral Remains in the Afterglow of Venezuela's Bolivarian Revolution

IRINA R. TROCONIS

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A los míos

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Introduction

The Necromantic State

> If he loves justice at least, the "scholar" of the future, the "intellectual" of tomorrow should learn it in and from the ghost. He should learn to live by learning not how to make conversation with the ghost but how to talk with him, with her, how to let them speak or how to give them back speech, even if it is in oneself, in the other, in the other in oneself: they are always there, specters, even if they do not exist, even if they are no longer, even if they are not yet. They give us to rethink the "there" as soon as we open our mouths.
>
> Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*

> Similarly, in the city, everything that has happened in some lane, in some piazza, in some street, on some sidewalk along a canal, in some back alley is suddenly condensed and crystallized into a figure that is at once labile and exigent, mute and winking, resentful and distant. Such figure is the specter or genius of the place.
>
> Giorgio Agamben, "On the Uses and Disadvantages of Living among Specters"

Dead Man Walking

On the night of December 8, 2016, a ghost walked among the residents of the central and western areas of Caracas (figure I.1). Tall, ethereal, and luminous, he walked with determination, accompanied by the pulse of an upbeat song that made his haunting entertaining rather than frightening. From the streets, he jumped on top of the Panteón Nacional, the building holding the sacred remains of the heroes of the nation, and moved to the Liberator's Mausoleum, home to Simón Bolívar's remains. There, his ghostly body disappeared, leaving behind only the magnified features of his face: the all-too-familiar face of Hugo Chávez, popularly known as "the colossus, giant, light, supreme, guiding, unique, immense, saintly, undefeated, superior, eternal, immortal, celestial, universal, galactic leader" (Barrera Tyszka 2015, 195) of the Bolivarian Revolution. Challenging the finitude of his death, he addressed his people once again: fragments of the last speech he gave in December 2012played as the soundtrack to a sequence of photographs that showed him alongside his successor, Nicolás Maduro. Those who missed the "live" spectacle of Chávez's ghostly return could witness it online by following the hashtag #PlenoComoLaLunaLlena created by Ernesto Villegas, then the country's minister of popular power for communication and information, who proudly announced on Twitter that a "luminous" Chávez was walking around Caracas.[1]

Chávez's specter was in fact a hologram made with video mapping. Unlike highly sophisticated holograms that hover above the ground seemingly disconnected from the technology that created them, Chávez's hologram was shamelessly rustic: no effort was made to conceal the vehicle that projected it from the street, and his movements were repetitive and simple. As a result, no one seemed shocked or scared at the sight of it. This was not an uncanny apparition unexpectedly showing up to demand a wrong be righted, but the latest iteration of a familiar encounter with a familiar figure. Perhaps

I.1 Chávez's hologram in Caracas. Taken from Colombeia TV 2016.

the most noteworthy emotional reaction to this encounter—other than that of Villegas, who excitedly narrated the ghost's journey on Twitter—was the anger of those who saw this as just another example of the government wasting resources that could be used to alleviate the country's dire economic crisis. Beyond the content of this critique, what is most interesting is what it implies about Chávez's ghost: that it was an expense, a production, a haunting staged and narrated by a state unafraid of taking magic at face value, confident in its belief in ghosts because, well, it could actually *make* them.

This literal, in-your-face, state-manufactured ghost complicates a critical understanding of the ghostly that, in the context of Latin America and particularly since the 1990s, has seen apparitions, ghosts, and specters as uncanny and subversive forces that make us aware of contemporary society's blind spots and of injustices from recent and distant pasts, and that threaten to unsettle the status quo in the name of better, more just futures. Chávez's ghost does not return from oblivion with vengeful determination to unsettle the status quo. If anything, it seems to do the opposite: ensure that things stay, at least in appearance, exactly as they are and as they were when he was alive, and remind everyone who encounters him that he is still there, too animated and too visible to be actually, fully dead.

His spectral presence is evidence of a temporal reality that does not fit so easily into narratives of temporal breaks that have taken place on a continent that has lived through numerous dictatorships, armed conflicts, and

revolutions. Transitions, postdictatorship periods, and, more generally, the recognition that a break, however messy, happened and something new or seemingly new began, reflect ways of understanding time that do not accurately capture the state Venezuela found itself in after Chávez's death. This state is an affectively charged atmosphere—an "afterglow"—of temporal overlaps, political irresolution, and social tensions marked by the stubborn lingering of a past that is at times barely noticeable and at times overwhelmingly present, and that draws our attention and anchors our body and our gaze to the haunted ground where Chávez's specter materializes as a hologram and, as we will see in the following chapters, as things as diverse as a doll, a tattoo, and an omnipresent pair of watchful eyes.

Rather than thinking of that ground—the "there" that Jacques Derrida mentions in the epigraph—as a decontextualized, strictly metaphorical space, Chávez's specter demands that we think of it as a material space where the specter is a presence imbued with political authority, affective purchase, and social dynamism. It also demands that, as scholars, we consider what it means to, in Derrida's terms, "talk to the ghost and let the ghost talk back" when the ghost is not a rhetorical figure, but something—an object, an image—that occupies the same space that we do at the same time. In other words, something that haunts us as we attempt to write about haunting; something that makes it impossible to write about ghosts without writing with them.

The Necromantic State: Spectral Remains in the Afterglow of Venezuela's Bolivarian Revolution is about writing about and with ghosts as much as it is about Chávez's spectral afterlife. My analysis of this afterlife is set in a Venezuela caught in a present that began in 2013 with Chávez's death and that has yet to see a definite ending, for Chávez's haunting, like all hauntings, is ongoing. This period—ten years and counting—has seen the consolidation of an economic, political, and humanitarian crisis unprecedented in the country's modern history.[2] It has also seen an accumulation of objects, images, and performances, which I refer to as Chávez's spectral remains, that infuse the presence of the "Comandante Eterno" (Bastidasa 2022) in public, private, and virtual spaces with dynamism and an ordinary yet powerful sort of magic.

At its core, this book is, in Kathleen Stewart's words, "an experiment, not a judgement" (2007, 1). It is not a judgment in that it does not offer a final verdict on the achievements and failures of the Bolivarian Revolution or of Chávez himself. Many books do, grounded in the authors' expertise in economics, political science, anthropology, sociology, and history—all fields in which groundbreaking work on contemporary Venezuela has been

done in the last two decades.3 This book is instead an experiment in what I propose to call "ghost h(a)unting": a methodological approach grounded in interdisciplinary constellations that juxtapose and merge affect theory, performance studies, memory studies, cultural studies, and media studies; that treats the ghost as a material, social, and political figure rather than as a metaphor; that captures the simultaneous experience of hunting down ghosts and being haunted by them; and that allows us to critically engage with that which remains unresolved and is happening "in the now."

It is also an experiment in conceptualizing the state as a performer, identifying and analyzing how a state might perform its power, ground its legitimacy, and perpetuate its authority through neither violence nor bureaucracy but through ordinary, affective, and often intimate acts of creativity, imagination, and—in the specific case of contemporary Venezuela—necromancy.4 These acts are not awe-inspiring spectacles staged for a passive people to respond with applause or paralysis. They are staged *with* people in a process of cocreation that turns conjuring up ghosts into a collective endeavor that can be empowering but can also circumscribe political imagination, neutralize popular resistance, and limit the vocabularies available to articulate alternative understandings of authority, subjectivity, the power of the past, and the urgency of the future.

With this approach, *The Necromantic State* departs significantly from two scholarly trends that have shaped the academic analysis of the Bolivarian Revolution: the state- and/or Chávez-centered approach, and the history-from-below approach. The former includes works focused on Chávez himself, underscoring his populist, authoritarian, charismatic, and heroic characteristics; and scholarship centered on the operations of the Bolivarian state, most recently in connection with Maduro's regime.5 The latter includes works that center the people in the social movements, community organizing, political activism, alternative economic practices, and cultural production emerging in the barrios, where various popular groups have shifting relationships with state institutions, defined neither by unquestioning obedience nor pure confrontation.6 These "histories from below" reveal the contours of a revolution that was in the making long before Chávez arrived in power and that promised to continue without him if necessary (Ciccariello-Maher 2013, 21). Taken together, these works create a picture of Venezuela during the Bolivarian Revolution riddled with tensions, with the state and the people often at odds.

This book does not follow these paths. It is not a book about Chávez; it is about Chávez's *specter*. It is not a book about the achievements and

shortcomings of the Bolivarian state; it is about the creative, theatrical, and playful operations that allow a state to conjure the dead and mobilize spectral power when the state's authority and legitimacy are in crisis. And it is not a book about the people, an anthropological account of how popular groups choose to remember Chávez. It is instead a book about the spectral remains that populate the space the people routinely traverse and occupy—spectral stuff that demands and shapes behaviors and forms of creative labor, that gives material weight and visibility to certain political vocabularies, making them omnipresent and compelling in ways that, I argue, run the risk of placing invisible yet sturdy confines on popular imaginative acts that rehearse alternative political and social futures and alternative forms of relationality. Focusing on this stuff means renouncing an attempt to identify exactly where the state ends and where civil society begins, and letting the binaries state/people, power/resistance, and even *chavismo*/*oposición* combust—if only for a little while—so we can explore public participation in the perpetuation of state power, and examine the work the people and the state do together that creates norms of worldly existence that are internalized as common sense.

Critically engaging with Chávez's specter allows us to consider the relationship between stately matters and ghostly matters, magic and new technologies, and haunting and political imagination, both in the broader context of the modern state—a state that, Michael Taussig notes, is always "lusting in its spirited magnificence, hungry for soulstuff" (Levi Strauss and Taussig 2005)—and in the specific context of contemporary Venezuela, where the state is "hungry for soulstuff" *and also* trapped in an unprecedented sociopolitical crisis of national and continental implications. This oscillation between the abstract and the concrete, the speculative and the factual, demands a renewal of the vocabularies we have developed to talk about specters, and to classify the everyday nature of our relationship with the male salvific heroes we stubbornly yearn for in Venezuela and elsewhere. Thus, this introduction presents the terms that will be fundamental throughout the book to understand the operations of Chávez's specter and the magical state (and the magical people) that conjures it, and the methodology I have developed to analyze those operations: necromancy, spectral remains, afterglow, and ghost h(a)unting. These terms are inspired by the vast scholarship on the cult of Bolívar developed by numerous Venezuelan historians (Germán Carrera Damas, Luis Castro Leiva, Ana Teresa Torres, Alicia Ríos, Elías Pino Iturrieta, and Rafael Sánchez), Michael Taussig's theorization of the magic of the state, Jacques Derrida's conceptualization of specters, and Avery Gordon's groundbreaking sociological study of

ghostly matters. However, I take this vocabulary of specters, magic, haunting, and the state in new theoretical directions not so much in an effort to identify a new problem but rather to see an old problem in a new way, a task that became urgent the night that Venezuela's most notable dead, tired of the cold stillness of monuments and graves, got up and started walking. *Literally*.

Bolívar, Reloaded

In the early hours of July 16, 2010, Chávez announced on Twitter that Bolívar's remains had been exhumed as part of an investigation that had been initiated, at his request, into whether Bolívar had died of tuberculosis—as historians had asserted throughout the years—or had in fact been poisoned. His tweets read: "Hello, my friends! What amazing moments we've experienced tonight!! We've seen the remains of the great Bolívar! With Neruda, I said: Our Father who art in the earth, in the water, and in the air, you awaken every one hundred years when the pueblo awakens," and then, "I admit that we've cried, we've sworn. I tell you: that glorious skeleton must be Bolívar, you can feel the flame burning in him" (López 2010).

The commission in charge of the exhumation was led by the then vice president Elías Jaua. It took over nineteen hours for Bolívar's coffin to be opened. The numerous cameras recording the event for national and international media outlets showed a group of forensic experts dressed in white sterile suits working ceremoniously to finally reveal the Liberator's body to the sound of the national anthem playing on a continuous loop.[7] It was an uncanny, jarring spectacle: an odd overlap of nationalism and forensics, of religious fervor and scientific rigor, of military rituals and archeological work, of new sterile suits and old dusty bones, of death and life. This last overlap—dead Bolívar and living Bolívar—framed Chávez's tweets and the speech he gave when the exhumation was televised to the Venezuelan people: "Let us not see him as dead, no. Bolívar returned when our people awoke, to paraphrase Pablo Neruda. Let us see these hollows in the skull as eyes that watch us and that from the beyond or from here . . . Bolívar is alive, let us not see him as a dead man, let us not see him as a skeleton, he is like a bolt of lightning, like a sacred flame" (Apolinar Rea 2010).

"Bolívar is alive. Let us not see him as dead, as a skeleton." A difficult command given that, thanks to the exhumation, Bolívar's bones were *right there*, displayed for everyone to see, and yet one that is remarkably easy to comply with in a country where national identity, cultural values, and

political practice have historically been anchored in what Germán Carrera Damas called "the cult of Bolívar." In his groundbreaking book *El culto a Bolívar*, Carrera Damas explains how this cult permeates every aspect of Venezuelan identity, and how it has become an instrument of both political legitimation and political manipulation. He defines it as "the complex historical-ideological formation that has allowed values derived from the figure of the hero to be projected on all aspects of the life of a people" (Carrera Damas [1969] 1973, 21) and ties the need for its emergence and endurance to its having been transformed "[into] an aspect of national unity, in defense of the principle of order; into an aspect of government, as a guiding force behind political inspiration; and into an aspect of national advancement, as the religion of the moral and civic perfection of a people" (43). The cult has led Bolívar to become the ultimate national hero: his qualities, enhanced by the religious admiration his figure awakens, represent the very best of the Venezuelan people, and his accomplishments on the political stage and on the battlefield have set the tone and the goals for every political project and every political leader since his death.[8]

Carrera Damas's work was the first to offer a critical reflection on the Venezuelan nation and people's relationship with the figure of Bolívar, a relationship that, from then on, would be studied in those terms, as a cult.[9] This framing illuminated not only the relationship's religious undertones—which in turn emphasized its peculiar excess—but also its manipulative nature: how politicians had transformed a cult that had originally come *from* the people into a cult *for* the people to generate support for their political agendas. This distinction was further developed by anthropologist Yolanda Salas de Lecuna in *Bolívar y la historia en la conciencia popular* (1987), where she discusses how the hero's life and deeds are narrated in popular history and oral tradition. Salas de Lecuna shows how in the streets, in the countryside, and on Sorte Mountain, Bolívar is sometimes the son of a Black woman, sometimes the reincarnation of Indigenous leader Guaicaipuro, and sometimes as powerful as Jesus Christ; he is almost always endowed with magical powers that come alive in places like Sorte, where practitioners of the cult of María Lionza communicate with his spirit and seek his advice and help.[10]

The spiritual invocation of Bolívar in these peripheral spaces has an equally powerful state-organized counterpart in public spaces like plazas, schools, municipal buildings, and public offices. There, Bolívar is not just present; he is *omnipresent*, a fact that Michael Taussig masterfully captures in *The Magic of the State*:

> His image is everywhere, a controlled frenzy of kitsch across the cultured landscape, the bridges, the bus stops, the money, cigar wrappers . . . not to mention his statue centering every hamlet, village, town and city nailing it to the earth just as his horse spreads its wings skywards. . . . There can be no better form of expression of the culture of the official than the blank nothingness of the eyes looking out at the populace in a conspiracy of silence that it's all a game, a stupid, necessary, terrible, and unholy game. One day he'll wink. The day after we're dead. (Taussig 1997, 112)

This habitual exposure to Bolívar influences how past, present, and future are understood and narrated. As Alicia Ríos points out, "the material and symbolic monument that is erected around the father of the nation capitalizes on social forces and is constructed at the heart of not only the nation's origin story but, above all, of stories about the nation's future" (2013, 35). Bolívar becomes, as she argues, not only somebody who once existed and continues to exist but also someone who is always "about to arrive" (35). Another consequence of this exposure is that Bolívar becomes a unifying force capable of neutralizing, at least in principle, conflicts and differences among the people/his children. As Rafael Sánchez notes:

> The ongoing goal is the saturation of Venezuela's public spaces with as many Bolívar-mirrors—busts, equestrian monuments, oversized portraits—as possible, so that, whenever the need arises, the nation's heterogeneous majorities may be wrested from their dangerous wanderings and, through reflection, made to coalesce in front of those mirrors as a mobilized Bolivarian "people." (Sánchez 2016, 294)

However, Bolívar's power as a unifying figure short-circuited following the night of June 16, 2010, when the exhumation of his remains led to the creation of a new portrait of the Liberator. In 2012, a digital portrait of Bolívar was released to celebrate his 229th birthday with a few but noticeable modifications to the traditional image that had been reproduced in paintings and on the country's currency. The new Bolívar—the "true" one, according to Chávez—was not shockingly different from the old one. His hair seemed curlier, his skin darker, his cheekbones fuller, and his eyes smaller, but, overall, the most unsettling effect came from seeing him as a digital creation, almost too humanlike, too "fleshy," when compared with his likeness that for over a century

was based on oil paintings and nineteenth-century portraits. Nevertheless, the fact that, from then on, Chávez would often appear next to the new portrait—which came to be known as "Chávez's Bolívar"—led to a sort of blurring of features that made it impossible not to start seeing similarities between the two men: not to wonder whether, in fact, Bolívar (reloaded) was supposed to look like Chávez. If so, the portrait would be the climactic culmination of the intimate relationship Chávez had built with Bolívar, one that until then had been rhetorical and performative and that included acts such as Chávez mimicking Bolívar's "Juramento del Monte Sacro" in his "Juramento del Samán de Güere," leaving an empty chair for Bolívar's spirit to oversee the meetings of the members of the mbr–200, repeatedly delivering public addresses to the nation with a portrait of Bolívar near him, and appearing in rudimentary collages that combined his face and Bolívar's body.[11] This time, it was not an overlap but a *fusion* of the two: a continuity performed in the flesh that brought them together as one, that tied Bolívar inextricably to the Bolivarian Revolution so there was no Bolívar left outside it, and that thus further deepened the antagonism of an opposition that was left Bolívar-less.[12]

To be left like that, without Bolívar, was of course unacceptable, and the opposition responded to Chávez's Bolívar with their own Bolívar, which recuperated his likeness from the traditional portrait. What followed was a battle of Bolívars that unfolded most evidently in public buildings—their political affiliation represented by which of the two portraits was displayed—and that carried on after Chávez's death in 2013. At the inauguration of the opposition-led Asamblea Nacional in January 2016, for example, Henry Ramos Allup ordered workers to remove the portraits of Chávez's Bolívar (and of Chávez himself) that adorned the building and replace them with the old ones. Five years later, as the majority in the assembly became once again *chavista*, the discarded portraits were marched back into the building in a procession that was part of a public ceremony in Caracas's Plaza Bolívar and that included a man dressed like Bolívar passionately reciting one of his speeches (figure I.2).

As we watch the video of this procession and notice the deputies of the assembly gathering behind political figures like Diosdado Cabello (former president of the assembly) and Maduro's wife Cilia Flores (first lady) as they hold the framed portraits of Chávez and (the new) Bolívar, who look like they too are moving, gently swaying from side to side, we cannot help but think of Ana Teresa Torres's reflection on the animated and lively nature

I.2 Portraits of Chávez and Bolívar returning to the building of the Asamblea Nacional. Taken from LBRV 2021.

of Venezuela's male salvific heroes, so stubborn in their determination to stay undead:

> But Venezuelan heroes do not rest in the National Pantheon; instead, they roam free. They leap from their canvases and land on the asphalt, dodging cars, they introduce themselves into the internet, they are the protagonists of the press and television, and they threaten us with their omnipresence. . . . "We won't die," they seem to say. "It doesn't matter what you do to make us disappear, or how much time has passed; we will resist." (Torres 2009, 11–12)

Torres's words capture the sort of animation that characterizes the ghost and the omnipresence that turns the occasional apparition of the ghost into an ongoing state of haunting. They also underscore something else: the importance of technology, particularly of new technologies and the internet, in facilitating this animation, in making the omnipresence of the ghost feel lively in a way that departs from the monumental, stable, and stale omnipresence of statues and busts. The ghost here is often an e-ghost: a ghost that is not only animated by the use of technology but that goes viral, blurring the lines between private and public, seeming current in a way no monument

could, seeming alive in a way that the cult of Bolívar—outside peripheral spaces—could not conceive of.

This technological force is one element that made Chávez's relationship with Bolívar stand out in a long history where every president before him was also, in one way or another, Bolivarian. As Ríos argues, "Chávez relies considerably on the media to promote his ideas and outlook, he uses the most advanced marketing campaigns to 'sell' his revolution, in addition to having initially benefitted from the so-called anti-politics" (2013, 88–89). It was then not the fact that Chávez talked to Bolívar, unearthed his remains, and strived to resemble him (all of which had happened before) that made his relationship uncannily peculiar. It was the fact that, thanks to technologies old and new, Bolívar seemed to *talk back*, to acquire an agency that surpassed the historical conceptualization of the cult—so focused on the stillness of monuments, statues, busts, and plaques—and that invites us to consider the nation as haunted and to take the ghost at face value.

We could argue then that, with Chávez, there was a new (old) ghost in town. A stately, familiar, techno-magical ghost that sits uncomfortably amid crowds of Venezuelan and Latin American ghosts demanding justice and challenging the state when it insists on erasing or selectively remembering the past and its violence. There sits Bolívar reloaded, his digital portrait a sign that the magic once kept to the shadows of the state's public domain has flooded into the light, with conjuring, invocation, and spiritual possession now part of the state's repertoire of memory practices. And there sits (and walks and talks) Chávez now too, and we cannot *not* see him, not only because he is everywhere, but because, thanks to the relationship he developed with Bolívar while he was alive, seeing and talking to ghosts is neither spooky nor unusual, neither a metaphor nor a delusion.

Maduro's public conversations with birds and butterflies, which he claims embody Chávez's spirit, are proof of this, as discussed in chapter 4. Hearing Maduro "translate" birdsong for his audience, we cannot help but wonder if the literalness of the president's communication with the dead has changed something in the magic of the state that Taussig so brilliantly theorized. After all, the spirit queen Taussig encountered, with her magic mountain and her lively ghosts, is no longer hidden in the shadows of a periphery accessible only through pilgrimage, set apart from the state's officialdom. She is *right here*: she has become the state (and the state has become her). And we, amid birds and butterflies, animated portraits and walking holograms, have been granted front-row seats to the performance of a state that has

ceased to be secretly and metaphorically possessed and is now unabashedly in conversation with the dead.

The Necromantic State

In *The Magic of the State*, Taussig shows how the magical power of the dead—and, particularly, of Bolívar—is invoked and mobilized both by the practitioners of the María Lionza cult on Venezuela's Sorte Mountain and by the modern state. Unlike the literal acts of spirit invocation that take place at night on Sorte, the state's invocation of the dead occurs in daylight and in public spaces saturated with the state's "artwork": murals, monuments, statues, and slogans that reproduce the image of the Liberator to the point where "the untiring ubiquity of it all" forces the populace to seek out "his empty gaze in a pursuit doomed to eternity" (Taussig 1997, 110–11)In Taussig's analysis, these reproductions both reveal and hide the magic within the state; they are what he calls "*hiddenness performed*" (120; original emphasis), an intermittently exposed public secret that points to the fiction of and within the state, and the dismissal of that fiction for the purposes of maintaining the illusion that the state's authority is built on the cold rationality of officialdom rather than on rituals that allow the dead to literally exist among the living.

Looking at the state's iconography alongside the acts of spirit possession taking place in the state's periphery through Taussig's narrative—a hybrid of fiction and fact that draws attention to "the continuous work of make-believe in art no less than in politics and everyday life" (Levi Strauss and Taussig 2005)—means acknowledging the magical underpinnings of state authority. It also means recognizing the fictional yet powerful boundary that prevents the state from fully merging with the spirit mountain, and the people from fully embodying the dead that the state invokes and embellishes. Taussig hints at this boundary—even as he reveals its make-believe nature—when he mentions how, when the president invokes the spirit of the Liberator on public occasions, "we might, on reflection, want to understand this as figurative, rhetorical, poetic, turn of speech. He doesn't really mean it" (Taussig 1997, 186). He also argues that, while the magic might be in the state, "there's no denying that from there it's just a short step to where people get into the act willingly and are able to make magic from it, allowing their very bodies to blur with the spiritual power of the state in horrendous displays of mimetic excess" (188).

Figurative language and a short step: the gap between Sorte's magical Bolívar and the state's "magical" Bolívar is small—and it is imagined—but

it is there nonetheless. The illusion of separation ensures that the rituals on the magic mountain and those staged in the state's theater of self-praise and self-legitimation do not suddenly merge. The two entities—the state and the magic mountain, the president and the spirit queen—remain separate but in a mode of ongoing exchange where images and "effervescent shocks" circulate between them: "The President deftly follows Ofelia in this, and she follows her President. This is the magic circle" (Taussig 1997, 107).

Enter Chávez.

In *The Magic of the State*, Chávez appears only once, in a photograph showing him in the military uniform he was wearing when he publicly surrendered after the 1992 coup he and the members of the MBR-200 had orchestrated against the then president, Carlos Andrés Pérez. Though the coup failed and Chávez was imprisoned, the event turned him into an iconic figure that fueled growing popular discontent with the establishment. Chávez's revolutionary fervor inspired a prayer that Taussig includes in his text and that modifies the wording of the Lord's Prayer to make it about "*Our Chávez who art in prison*" (1997, 108; original emphasis). The prayer was printed on cards that circulated in Caracas in the early 1990s and again in 2014, when a revised version became popular among *chavistas* who wanted to commemorate Chávez after his death.

Taussig returns to Chávez in a 2005 interview with David Levi Strauss, where he argues that "people today gain magical power not from the dead, but from the state's embellishment of them. And the state, authoritarian and spooky, is as much possessed by the dead as is any individual pilgrim. The current president of Venezuela, Hugo Chávez, is the embodiment of this" (Levi Strauss and Taussig 2005). By 2005, many magical things had taken place between Chávez and Bolívar that prove Taussig right, but none of them as spectacular and shamelessly literal as the public opening of the Liberator's coffin in 2010, which turned Chávez into a sorcerer, a necromancer, and the recipient of the newly risen spirit of Bolívar. Chávez had not yet become ill with cancer, which led, as we will see in chapter 1, to healing ceremonies staged publicly in the presidential palace, rumors about curses and rituals performed to save his life, and a still-growing body of works in different disciplines intent on uncovering Chávez's "black magic" side. In 2005, there were no sets of ghostly eyes looking at people from buildings and T-shirts, no hologram of a dead man wandering around Caracas, no presidents actually talking to magical birds. There was no severe economic and humanitarian crisis, no unprecedented wave of Venezuelans leaving the country; *chavistas* and *opositores* did not love each

other but also did not kill each other back then, and radically new futures still seemed possible.

I highlight these differences because they are the reason why I have chosen to refer to the state that appears in the following chapters as a "necromantic state." This term does not represent a conceptual break with Taussig's theorization of the magical state: the fact that the modern state draws its power from the dead—as Taussig argued—is, if anything, rendered even more explicit in the staging of Chávez's afterlife in contemporary Venezuela. However, the term does allow me to highlight a radicalization in the magic of the state, one that responds to and is shaped by the specific historical context that frames my analysis in this book. This context includes the popularization of new technologies and their use by the state, the political and social crisis that marked the transition from Chávez to Maduro, the still indisputable centrality of Chávez in the rhetoric of the Bolivarian Revolution, Maduro's lack of popular support, the inability of oil—the state's other source of magic—to save the country from the economic crisis that followed Chávez's death, the opposition's failure to provide a viable political alternative, and the confrontations among members of Chávez's political party.[13]

The cumulative effect of these factors on the country required that Chávez stay as alive as possible. First, because he was the only one who could smooth out contradictions in the state's rhetoric and performance and also inspire the sort of loyalty that could keep a failing political project alive. Second, because he represented and continues to represent one of the last things all Venezuelans have in common: the extreme political polarization that has marked the country since his arrival in power having become, paradoxically, the last vestige of a shared political and social language. All modern states have always needed to bring the dead back to life, as Taussig shows; however, the conditions that define the decade following Chávez's death have made this act of resuscitation urgent in Venezuela. So urgent, in fact, that it was not enough for the rituals of spirit possession and the conversation with the dead to be not quite real: the dead had to *actually* walk among the living. Chávez had already proved that this was possible when, in front of cameras and a national audience, he made Bolívar's bones talk, thus demonstrating that a state did not need to outsource the actual magical work to the periphery of the magic mountain and the spirit queen anymore: if the circumstances truly required it, the state could also practice necromancy.

The term "necromancy" rarely appears in contemporary works of political theory, performance, or cultural studies.[14] The overwhelming majority of studies on the topic focus on the practice of necromancy itself—often

referred to as "black magic"—and provide detailed instructions on how to communicate with the dead and inhabit the world of the occult. These studies, along with various dictionary entries that define the term, note that necromancy has traditionally been performed in graveyards and that it sees the corpse that results from a premature or violent death as retaining "some measure of unused vitality," which leads necromancers to use parts of corpses as ingredients and charms while performing their rituals of invocation.15 The dead are brought back to life for use either as weapons or as tools of divination because they are thought to have knowledge of the future.

Understood in this way, the practice of necromancy reflects, with uncanny accuracy, the state's conjuring of the dead during Chávez's and Maduro's presidencies. So much so in fact that, as I note in chapter 1, the term "black magic" was used to talk about the popular and stately rituals performed to save Chávez's life after he was diagnosed with cancer. The power necromancers attribute to the parts of the corpse mirrors the power the state attributed to Chávez's eyes, signature, and miniatures of his body, while the belief that the dead can tell the future grounds Maduro's frequent invoking of Chávez's words as foreshadowing the success of the ongoing revolutionary process. I read these resonances not as coincidence but as evidence that necromancy has become part of the state's magical repertoire of mnemonic practices. If that is true, then the dead that have returned cannot be dismissed as figments of the imagination or understood as metaphors. Thanks to the state taking its role as necromancer seriously, the ghost is now a material, political, and social figure, one that does not metaphorically hover above the present but actually inhabits it alongside the living.

In the context of the Bolivarian Revolution then, the magic of the state acquires a necromantic hue that populates public space not only with more monuments, slogans, and statues, but also with remains that, in necromantic terms, "retain some measure of unused vitality," which allows them to walk (in the case of the hologram), to observe (in the case of Chávez's eyes), to talk (in the case of Maduro's birds and butterflies), to play (in the case of Chávez-themed toys), and to become familial (in the case of the collectible phone cards and Chávez's signature). This animation is not only the work of the state. In the following chapters, we will see how Maduro's invocation of Chávez and the production and circulation of Chávez-themed objects and images take place through a process of cocreation and co-performance where both the people and the state participate in and sustain the operations that allow Chávez to linger as a specter. This joint participation is inevitable partly because of the official rhetoric of the Bolivarian Revolution, which

since its conception under Chávez's leadership has advocated for the development of mechanisms for popular participation that would enable people to shape the operations of state institutions, and which also created a chain of equivalence between the people, Chávez, and the state.[16] Thus, whatever the Bolivarian state did—in terms of social and economic policies but also in terms of creating visual and political vocabularies for the nation—it did for and, most importantly, with the people, in theory if not always in practice.

However, that the people and the state work together to stage Chávez's haunting publicly and often privately does not mean that the state's necromantic performance does not form people's identities, vocabularies, habits, and ways of imagining themselves, political authority, and the state. Quite the contrary. As Diana Taylor reminds us, public spectacles provide a site for individual and state formation, which occurs in part through a complicated exchange of gazes: "looking, being looked at, identification, recognition, mimicry" (1997, 30). Although, as she later argues, not everything that intervenes in individual and state formation is always visible; performative hauntings and specters, she notes, shape what and how we see what is around us. Furthermore, as Achille Mbembe argues, the state's "mastercode"—the "world of meanings" it creates and attempts to institutionalize (2006, 382)—becomes part of people's common sense, thus challenging "binary categories used in standard interpretations of domination (resistance/passivity, subjection/autonomy, state/civil society, hegemony/counterhegemony, totalization/detotalization)" (382). Throughout this book, I argue that being haunted, too, becomes common sense. Thus, I do not use "necromantic state" only to refer to a state that performs necromancy. It also refers to the state in which haunted people live: one where, everywhere you go, you find yourself comfortably trapped in a conversation—at times loud, at times quiet—with the dead.

Of Ghosts, Specters, and Spectral Remains

Throughout this introduction, I have referred to Chávez both as a ghost and as a specter, as if they meant the same thing. However, in this section (and from now on), I will settle on "specter" to talk about Chávez's lingering in the political and social landscape of contemporary Venezuela. The question then becomes: What does it mean to call Chávez a specter? More generally, what exactly is a specter and how can we—why should we—differentiate it from a ghost?

Considering the vast scholarship written on the subject of spectrality, a straightforward definition of the specter should not be too difficult to find.

And yet it is. It seems that the determination to define the specter runs counter to the specter itself, counter to the power it has to unsettle what we take for granted and, in the process, "set heads spinning" (Blanco and Peeren 2013, 1). Let us look, for example, at the following definitions of the specter introduced by Julian Wolfreys and Jacques Derrida:

> Thus, to reiterate the point, the question of spectres is a question of that which presents itself or touches upon itself at and in excess of the limits of definition. . . . Names, conventionally applied, fix the limits of an identity. Yet this "strange name"—*spectre*—names nothing as such, and nothing which can be named as such, while also naming something which is neither something nor nothing; it names something which is neither nothing nor not nothing. (Wolfreys 2013, 71)

> Here is—or rather, there is, over there, an unnameable or almost unnameable thing: something, between something and someone, anyone or anything, some thing, "this thing," but this thing and not any other, this thing that looks at us, that concerns us [*qui nous regarde*], comes to defy semantics as much as ontology, psychoanalysis as much as philosophy. (Derrida 1993, 5)

Something which is neither nothing nor not nothing. Something, between something and someone, anyone or anything. For Wolfreys, the specter is what appears at the very limit of interpretation; as a thing, as "something," it stands beyond binary oppositions, erasing the division between pairings like life and death without attempting to redraw the lines that separate and define them. For Derrida, the specter is not about the supernatural; it is, rather, what María del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren call "a conceptual metaphor" (2013, 1), a system of producing knowledge that engages the scholar of today and tomorrow, placing upon them an ethical demand that requires embracing uncertainty, heterogeneity, and multiplicity, and feeling the weight of a gaze that concerns them. This gaze is key to Derrida's conceptualization of the specter and to the very choice to speak of specters rather than of apparitions, phantoms, or ghosts. As Blanco and Peeren point out, "specter" and "spectrality" evoke "an etymological link to visibility and vision, to that which is both *looked at* (as fascinating spectacle) and *looking* (in the sense of examining), suggesting their suitability for exploring and illuminating phenomena other than the putative return of the dead" (2; original emphasis).

The importance Derrida places on the gaze materializes in what he calls "the visor effect": "The specter is not simply someone we see coming back, it is someone by whom we feel ourselves watched, observed, surveyed, as if by the law: we are 'before the law,' without any possible symmetry, without reciprocity" (Derrida and Stiegler 2002, 120). Central to this definition is the inability to meet the specter's gaze when gazed upon, and the demand made by the "other," which, in Derrida's theory, is often the father/predecessor to whom one is indebted. This debt, this "owing to him and owing him everything," threatens to tie the specter to an authority that, in addition to being patriarchal, becomes incontestable (122). Derrida, however, takes it in a different direction; for him, freedom springs from this responsibility toward the unreachable other whose gaze "is spectrality itself" and demands respect for "the non-living" (123). And not just freedom, but justice, which for him is "a spectral business" and is the very thing that constitutes revolutionary movements.

It is thus unsurprising that Derrida's take on spectrality has been so productive in framing spectral operations that denounce injustices precisely by recognizing the lingering presence of a past that looks at us, that concerns us, and that always produces "something to be done." Yet, Derrida's specter also reflects the operations of a patriarchal form of authority—let us not forget that Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her critique of Derrida's *Specters of Marx* called it a "how-to-mourn-your-father book" (2013, 318). Because the specter's gaze cannot be returned, it becomes oppressive and uncontestable and the "freedom" resulting from finding oneself in his sight is limited, if not entirely illusory. As we read that the specter "is someone by whom we feel ourselves watched, observed, surveyed, as if by the law," would it be too far-fetched to imagine the eyes of George Orwell's Big Brother ([1949] 1950), rendered spectral by their continuing surveillance from telescreens?

Chávez's specter, I argue, exists in this overlap of Derridean/Orwellian eyes and the grin of Lewis Carroll's Cheshire cat as Jean Baudrillard describes it in *Why Hasn't Everything Already Disappeared?*—that is, as something that is continually disappearing, never gone for good, and leaving traces that seep back into our lives "in infinitesimal doses, often more dangerous than the visible authority that ruled over us" ([2007] 2009, 26). Like Derrida's specter, Chávez as specter materializes in a surveilling gaze that, as I will argue in chapter 2, is asymmetrical because it comes from the past—so returning the gaze is never truly possible—and because it comes with a demand that is sometimes clearly articulated and at other times left to the imagination of all those he gazes upon.

Chávez's specter behaves like the Cheshire cat's grin not only because it lingers but because it does so in a way that is not supposed to be frightening—even though many might think, along with Baudrillard, that the Cheshire cat's grin is in fact terrifying. If we think of Chávez's hologram, it is not meant to provoke fear but loyalty, admiration, and comfort in the knowledge that he is still here.[17] These feelings are of course scripted into the state's narrative of Chávez's presence/absence, but that does not mean that they are not the actual feelings of people who wish for Chávez to stay undead. Furthermore, these feelings coexist with the anger, rejection, and even disgust that the hologram triggered in those who do not identify as *chavistas*. Regardless of the spectator/citizen's affective take on the hologram, Chávez's specter is supposed to be entertaining; you can dance to the beat of the song that accompanies his journey as you let yourself be immersed in the fantasy of the revolutionary past that never passed and the promise of a new, radical future that materializes "right here." This authority, distilled in the ethereal luminosity of Chávez's spectral figure, despite looking out through a pair of Orwellian eyes, becomes pop, iconic, inviting, and—dare I say—*friendly*: you do not want to run away from Chávez's specter; if anything, you want to high-five it (if you care to pay attention to it at all).

While the hologram is unique in being the most literal rendition of Chávez's specter, it is only one of the many shapes Chávez's lingering takes in public and private spaces, where it molds the political, social, and affective landscape of the country by, as Baudrillard says, "seeping back into our lives in infinitesimal doses."[18] That process is sometimes assertive—as during official government events where Chávez is often blown up to gigantic proportions—but, most of the time, subtle, the lingering becoming an "unseen and barely audible hum" (Beasley-Murray 2010, 180) we can comfortably ignore and thus live with. Next to the hologram, and outlasting its eventful apparition, is the ever-present stencil of Chávez's eyes watching over people's comings and goings through cities and towns from walls, billboards, streetlights, T-shirts, hats, and phone screens, where it appears in memes shared by both government supporters and the opposition on digital platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook, and Instagram. Often accompanying the stencil of his eyes is his signature, which appears on the walls of the buildings and houses built by the Gran Misión Vivienda Venezuela (figure I.3). His image has been reproduced on clothing, jewelry, collectible phone cards, and toys—all objects that cross over the boundaries separating the public and the private, the stately and the intimate. His performance—his mannerisms, the informality of his speech, the epic tone of his proposals—continues to

I.3 Chávez's signature on a building.

be imitated by Maduro and by candidates from the opposition, becoming a force that dictates what political authority in contemporary Venezuela should look and sound like. These objects, images, and behaviors constitute Chávez's spectral remains.

The word "remains," in the most general sense, brings to mind that which is left behind after something else—the bigger whole—has disappeared. It evokes a materiality that seems to contrast with the specter's immaterial nature. Yet, the specter is not itself a void; it is symptomatic of a void—a void in power, for example—but it is not an ungraspable, empty form. It is, as Jonathan Gil Harris (2011) points out, matter that acts upon and shapes the present.[19] Understanding the specter alongside things and bodies brings us to the spatial/physical nature of haunting, which, in the

context of Venezuela, occurs not abstractly but in a specific place, through the interaction with things, bodies, images, words, and behaviors that represent and re-present Chávez, that constitute that which remains of him and that in which he remains.

Birds, butterflies, coffee cups, holograms, memes, signatures, eyes, red T-shirts, key chains, necklaces, toys, posters, stickers, figurines, hats, collectible phone cards—Chávez's remains are varied and proliferate on a massive scale. They are spectral not only because they enable Chávez to linger—visibly and palpably—but because they themselves behave spectrally. This means that they are unstable, dynamic, and uncontained by either the structure or the logic of institutionalized and preserved archives; they differ from the statues, monuments, and documents typically created to commemorate a bygone figure of power. They appear and disappear suddenly and randomly, they circulate in private and intimate spaces as well as in public and official ones, they are open to alteration and interpretation, and they weave together individual and collective histories, the commonplace and the extraordinary, the people and the state. These remains comprise not only objects but also what Rebecca Schneider calls the "immaterial labor of bodies" engaged in and with an incomplete past. This labor includes "bodies striking poses, making gestures, voicing calls, reading words, singing songs, or standing witness," all acts that evince a "cross- or multi-temporal engagement with im/material understood to belong to the past in the present" (Schneider 2011,33,35). In the case of Chávez's remains, this bodily labor manifests in acts of doubling, mimesis, imitation, and impersonation by the government and its supporters and by the opposition, as we will see in chapter 4.

Many of these remains are also spectral because they are routinely made invisible and rarely taken too seriously; they move around without catching anyone's attention, "forgotten reminders"—to use Michael Billig's term from *Banal Nationalism* (1995, 38)—deemed too commonplace or too absurd to matter. Yet, I propose that it is precisely through those objects that haunting takes place, the invocation of the specter thus exiting the secret domain of the cult and the occult and going beyond official state rhetoric to become part of the everyday that unfolds in the streets, in plain sight. Thus, rather than simply dismissing the circulation of and engagement with these objects as inconsequential or the result of political propaganda, I view their ordinariness as key to how narratives and practices of memory are crafted, and how social, political, and historical relationships are established with Chávez's presence/absence and the authority he (spectrally) embodies.

To talk about specters is thus not only to talk about the sort of lingering that makes time layered, challenging a forward-driven linear temporality and complicating the view of death as irrecoverable loss. It is also to talk about haunted spaces as actual living spaces where people's daily routines are sometimes interrupted by, sometimes mediated by, and sometimes shaped around spectral remains. These remains invite us in and stimulate the imagination. They tempt our eyes to linger on torn posters and graffiti-covered walls, and our hands to hover over knickknacks sold on street vendors' tables—all objects that acquire meaning because we take them for granted, not in spite of the fact that we do. Lastly, these remains and the way they ground the specter and locate it within a specific context prevent it from being reduced to a superficial rhetorical figure. Exploring the dynamics around these remains—rather than limiting ourselves to a discussion of what the specter means—enables us to gain insight into what the specter can do, and what we can and cannot do in its presence and under its gaze.

The presence and circulation of these spectral remains contribute to the creation of an affectively charged and viscous atmosphere of temporal overlaps, political irresolution, social tensions, and magical spectacles that I call an "afterglow." Before turning to this concept in the following section, however, let us return to the distinction between ghosts and specters and to the question of why, in light of the conceptualization of the specter developed so far in relation to Chávez, I want to preserve that distinction. The state, I have argued, produces its own ghosts; these ghosts, *state ghosts*, are what I propose to call specters: figures of the past that linger in the present and lead a socially and politically dynamic afterlife that does not unsettle or challenge the way things are but that instead preserves the status quo with their affective purchase, surveilling gaze, and quotidian omnipresence. The specters of the state are not a metaphor for the violence of the state, which does not mean that they are not violent or, in Baudrillard's words, "more dangerous than the visible authority that rules over us" ([2007] 2009, 26). They are also not premodern figures allergic to new technologies; if anything, their spectrality is often powered by those technologies and the immediacy, virality, and tricks of animation that mediate their operations and our access to them.

Facing stately specters are *ghosts*. This term encompasses the disruptive energies, fragmented voices, and unsettling echoes that signal, as Avery Gordon ([1997] 2008) points out, that a past wrong needs to be righted, that the state needs to be held accountable, that history does not drive us in a straight line toward an innocent, always better future, and that it is possible to challenge militarized and patriarchal powers that thrive on social erasure.

Examples of these ghosts abound in Latin America. Argentina and Chile are haunted by the *desaparecidos* of the mid-twentieth-century dictatorships in the Southern Cone. Peru, Colombia, El Salvador, and Guatemala are haunted by the hundreds of thousands left dead by various armed conflicts. Mexico is brimming with the ghosts of the victims of drug-related violence and the war on drugs, the ghosts of the hundreds of women murdered in Ciudad Juárez, and the ghosts of the migrants who have died attempting to cross the border to the United States. Alongside all these ghosts are those that do not haunt a specific Latin American country but all of them: the ghosts left behind by a long, violent history of colonialism, the ghosts that speak of enduring racial injustice, the ghosts of an ongoing and continental femicide.

The extensive theoretical work developed around these ghosts repeatedly emphasizes their subversive nature when they appear in cultural works or as part of political and social acts of protest. Alberto Ribas-Casasayas and Amanda L. Petersen argue that, in postdictatorial contexts both in Latin America and in Spain, the ghost creates "new versions of the past that subvert official versions of history and recognize those who have been erased from it" (2017a, 3).[20] Juliana Martínez, in turn, proposes the term "spectral realism" to signal how the specter that appears in cultural works transforms narrative by changing how space, time, vision, and ethical concerns are portrayed and understood, ultimately setting the reader "into political, social, or artistic motion" (2020, 20).

Chávez's specter does not behave in this subversive way, as I will show in the following chapters. The substantial differences between the way he operates in the context of contemporary Venezuela and the unsettling way the ghosts mentioned above behave thus becomes an invitation for us to distinguish between ghosts and specters. Ghosts, I propose, show us our historical blind spots; specters encourage us to dismiss them as inconsequential. Ghosts disorient us; specters ensure we always know where we are—under their gaze. Ghosts discomfort us; specters reassure us that everything makes sense. The two figures are not mutually exclusive—ghosts can haunt specters, and specters can haunt ghosts—and they do not represent all the possible ways a past can linger. However, drawing this distinction, as antispectral as it might be—specters, Wolfreys insists, resist binaries—serves as a reminder that not all pasts that linger or are conjured up have subversive potential, even when they come with labels such as "new" or "revolutionary."

Afterglow

The word "afterglow" conjures up that which lingers, be it a gleam that remains after the light has disappeared or the effect or feeling—usually pleasant but not always—that remains after something is experienced or achieved. Thus, it differs from words meant to indicate a historical shift: it lacks the fixity of "the end of," the confidence of "post-," and the compass that often guides a "transition." These words appear out of place in the context of contemporary Venezuela where, as I argue in chapter 1, the alleged end—Chávez's death—was blurred by official and popular narratives that complicated processes of mourning and memorialization. Furthermore, Maduro's time in power has been characterized by an increase in political repression and censorship, the impossibility of holding democratic elections, the worsening of the economic crisis, and the "parallel state" that materialized with Juan Guaidó declaring himself Venezuela's interim president in January 2019, all factors that have made actual institutional change unimaginable.[21] The afterglow captures this state of political irresolution, which sets Venezuela's experience apart from other political changes and transitions that have taken place in contemporary Latin America and that execute more abrupt swings from socialism to military dictatorship to democracy and from far left to far right.

Key to those transitions is a concrete change in the face of power: somebody new arrives promising to govern with an agenda highlighting how things will be different from how they used to be. And while in the context of Venezuela, Maduro—Chávez's handpicked successor—is in fact somebody new, not only was his political agenda's main goal to continue Chávez's plans and dreams for the nation, but his own arrival in power was articulated in terms that made clear that it was not really him people were voting for, but Chávez. The official song of Maduro's 2013 presidential campaign—"Maduro desde mi corazón" (Maduro from my heart)—begins with Chávez's voice declaring that his choice for a successor was, without a doubt, Maduro.[22] The song then repeats slogans that tie Chávez and Maduro together: "Chávez por siempre, Maduro presidente" (Chávez forever, Maduro president); "Con Chávez y Maduro, el pueblo está seguro" (With Chávez and with Maduro, the people are safe); "Chávez, te juro, mi voto es pa' Maduro" (Chávez, I swear to you, my vote is for Maduro). This last slogan also featured prominently in murals and graffiti that popped up during the campaign. Like "Chávez corazón del pueblo" (Chávez, the heart of

the people), the song that repeatedly played on every radio station and at every rally during Chávez's 2012presidential campaign, Maduro's "Maduro desde mi corazón" was also a merengue-reggaeton mix. It was danceable, catchy, and "sticky" both because it invited people to dance in couples, and because it acted as a sort of glue that would adhere Maduro to Chávez to convince people to stick with Maduro, Chávez's vastly less charismatic successor/double/son.

I will return to these words—successor, double, son—and the different relational dynamics they establish between Chávez and Maduro in chapter 4. For now, suffice it to say, the fact that Maduro has performed all three of these roles as he grounds himself as the new leader of the country and the revolution reveals how limited that leadership truly is. There was never a move from Chávez to Maduro. Instead, Chávez remained by Maduro's side—in rhetoric and, as we will see, in practice—as Maduro appeared as the vice president/interpreter of the president's specter. For Lucia Michelutti, this relationship between the two marks a departure from "classical forms of charismatic transitions to power":

> The question is who is leading, Chávez or Maduro. The answer is both. What we are witnessing is the development of a charismatic leadership system that does not fit classical forms of charismatic transitions to power. The charismatic relational bond between the people and the leaders (Chávez and Maduro) needs to be constantly reenacted by public and private performances of revolutionary divine kinship. (Michelutti 2017, 246)

Michelutti defines divine kinship as "descent from common deified revolutionary ancestors" (236), a central trope of Chávez's discourse, which emphasized his connection with Bolívar and other revolutionary figures such as Guaicaipuro and Ezequiel Zamora. For Maduro, however, it is his ideological/familial relationship with Chávez that needed repeated performing, as Michelutti points out. But he is not the only one performing this relationship. Michelutti's study speaks of "mini-Chávezes," local leaders who have "replicated and routinized Chávez's charisma by performing his divine kinship repertoire (made up of words and government programs) at the local level" (241). To this cast of mini-Chávezes we could also add the people who choose to wear clothing and accessories with his face, eyes, or words printed on them, people who dress to look

like him during political rallies, and people who imitate his gestures and speak like him.

In many instances these acts of doubling are articulated through a rhetoric that centers on affective excess: boundless love, infinite gratitude, deeply felt loyalty, all enabling the blending of leader and people that right after Chávez's death became visible in posters with slogans such as "Chávez, más que amor, frenesí" (Chávez, more than love, frenzy) and "Amor con amor se paga" (Love is paid with love). These slogans are representative of the collective nature of Chávez's illness, discussed in chapter 1, and cast new light on Eric Santner's theorization of the "flesh of the sovereign": "the spectral yet visceral surplus immanence" that detaches from the sovereign's "sublime physiology" once they are no longer living to then reattach to "the people," the new subject-bearer of sovereignty (2011,103). For Santner, this surplus immanence triggers forms of biopolitical control over the body by appearing both to bind and to threaten to dissolve the body politic of modern nation-states.

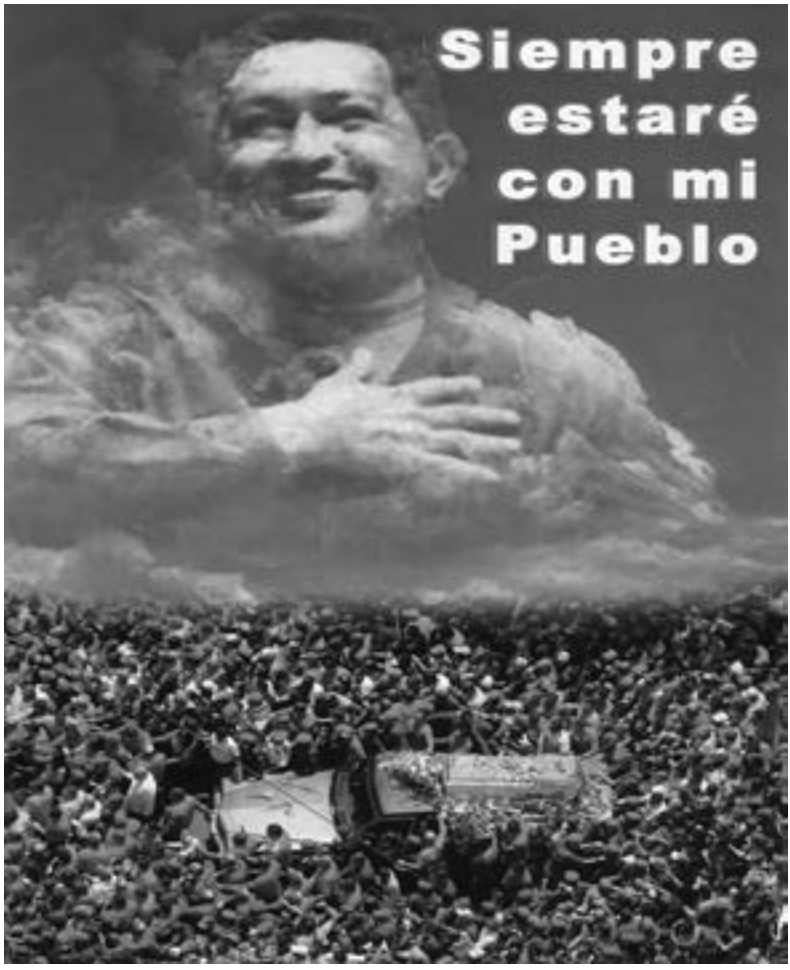
Santner's argument and how it might speak to forms of biopolitical control in contemporary Venezuela merit further discussion; however, for the purposes of this introduction, I would like to linger on the image invoked in Santner's description of the detaching of the sovereign's sublime flesh, a detachment that is best captured in his analysis of Jacques-Louis David's oil painting *The Death of Marat* (1793). The painting depicts the dead body of Marat in the bottom half of the composition and a large, seemingly empty upper half painted in shades of black. For Santner, this upper half—not a vacancy but "the site of an excess of pressure" (2011,93)—represents the flesh that can no longer be figured by the body of the king but that also does not manage to fully represent and adapt to the concept and the body of the people.

This nonvacancy that, as we see in the painting, thickens the atmosphere, making it dense with the weight of something that is and is not there—a sort of ectoplasmic substance—encapsulates the viscosity of the affectively charged afterglow that, I argue, followed Chávez's death. This afterglow becomes visible, in a way that echoes David's painting, in some of the most iconic images that were reproduced on posters after Chávez's death: the famous scene of the speech he gave during the closing of the 2012 presidential elections where, standing on the stage drenched in rain and covered in confetti, he lifts his right arm to people presumably cheering him on (figure I.4), and a photoshopped image that shows him in the form of clouds in

I.4 Poster featuring the closing of Chávez's 2012 presidential campaign.

the sky, watching over the people walking alongside his coffin (figure I.5). In both images, the air is thick: thick because of the combination of rain, sweat, and fog in the case of the former; thick because of the clouds that hover above and envelop the people in the latter. In the previous section, I argued that part of this thickness comes from how Chávez's spectral remains circulate and saturate everyday life, which enable the past to impress itself on the present, giving weight to spectrality. Here, I would propose that, in addition to the physical presence of these remains—and intrinsically connected to how they operate—there is a sort of affective excess that further anchors Chávez's specter in the present.

In figures I.4 and I.5,which have appeared in public spaces (as posters) and in private spaces (as calendar illustrations), this affective excess is shaped by a narrative of gratitude, love, admiration, and a complicated form of nostalgia that captures a longing for the past where Chávez was alive and rejects its pastness by claiming he is still here, not entirely dead.[23]This narrative is essential to the state but does not originate only with the state; people from all social classes and backgrounds, inside and outside Venezuela, continue to feel all sorts of warm feelings for Chávez, particularly since the multidimensional crisis that has affected Venezuela since Chávez's death can so easily be blamed entirely on Maduro, thus leaving Chávez's legacy somewhat intact. Circulating with these feelings are those that arise from an understanding of the Bolivarian Revolution as an aberration, a mistake, and the worst tragedy that could have befallen the country. These feelings



I.5 Poster featuring Chávez's coffin and Chávez's shape in the clouds.

often turn into what Svetlana Boym (2001) calls "restorative nostalgia," a craving for "before" Chávez, a time that, as the crisis worsens, becomes more and more desirable and utopian. The polarization that so frequently defines academic debates and general discussions about Venezuela is fueled by these feelings, which also affect scholars who have made Venezuela the subject of their research. Venezuela as a topic always touches a nerve; writing about it without thinking of family members (and the millions) who have suffered profoundly or perished because of the multidimensional effects of the crisis and without thinking also of the valid claims for justice and social

participation that became rightfully audible and pressing in the years of the revolution is, if not impossible, at the very least extremely difficult. When I speak of affective excess, I speak of these feelings too, excessive because of their intensity and because of their stubborn lingering, because of the way they stick to us and threaten to overcome us.

Afterglow, as I define it here, captures this enhanced sensibility, the rawness of feeling something *a flor de piel*. In that sense, my use of the term points to one of the more erotic meanings of the word: the glow that lingers after a sexual encounter. Here, however, I am not interested in limiting the glow to one kind of, presumably pleasurable, experience but, instead, in viewing the afterglow as a glow/flush that appears on the skin because of the anger, love, sadness, joy, indignation, and many other feelings that the past as embodied by Chávez awakens. The glow is thus evidence of how this past is, in fact, still present, of how it still affects us. In referring to a secondary glow, one which is no longer brightly incandescent but has not disappeared, the term also captures less intense affects, what Jon Beasley-Murray, following Pierre Bourdieu's theorization of habitus, calls a "micropolitics of affect":

> There is, then, a politics of habit, which persists even as ideology wanes. We might consider it a micropolitics of affect, of a regularized low-intensity affect, closely associated with ethics. . . . Habit drives and is driven by the unseen and barely audible hum of micropolitics that pervades our daily routines; it is like background noise in that we are almost oblivious to its ongoing importance, the ways in which it structures our all too familiar, endlessly repeated quotidian activities. (Beasley-Murray 2010, 180–81)

We got a glimpse of this routinized, low-intensity affect in the reaction of the passersby who encountered Chávez's hologram but were not particularly disturbed by its presence. We will get many more glimpses in the following chapters as we linger on the virally reproduced stencil of Chávez's eyes and his magnified signature on the walls of apartment buildings. Both images are so commonplace that ignoring them—passively accepting that they are there—has become part of everyone's daily routine. That normalization, I argue, does not stop these images from shaping habits and the visual vocabularies mobilized in support of the Bolivarian Revolution and in acts of resistance to it.

Lastly, the glow in afterglow is also the glow of computer and cell-phone screens where tweets, WhatsApp messages, Facebook posts, and Instagram

pictures capture the attention of millions of users, trigger strong emotions, enable various forms of political organization and social resistance, archive forgotten events, give hope that things will change, and almost immediately crush that hope. This role that new technologies and social media play in shaping the political landscape of contemporary Venezuela cannot be understood outside Chávez's own use of them, particularly his prolific presence on Twitter.

Using the handle @chavezcandanga, Chávez joined Twitter on April 24, 2010, and four days later, posted his first tweet: "How is everyone? I showed up like I said I would: at midnight. Heading to Brazil. And very happy to be working for Venezuela. We will be victorious!!" (Chávez 2010). Chávez's Twitter presence marked a significant change in the political and technological life of the country. By 2012, Venezuela ranked thirteenth in the world in its number of Twitter users. Moreover, it had the highest proportion of mobile internet usage in Latin America at over 30 percent of total connections because social media use on mobile phones was so widespread (Morales et al. 2015, 7). While alive, Chávez was considered the second most influential world leader on Twitter, preceded only by Barack Obama. The opposition also found on social media a channel to freely speak to their supporters and protest against the government, and, as both Chávez and Maduro censored or shut down the majority of television channels and newspapers that were critical of their policies, the internet progressively became the opposition's "lifeline" (Rendon and Kohan 2019).

Social media platforms—and the internet in general—also became Chávez's digital haunting ground while he was alive and after his death. Citizens-turned-users have seen their home pages and WhatsApp groups flooded with links to YouTube videos, memes, gif s, and stickers featuring Chávez (as well as Maduro, members of the government, and representatives of the opposition), all of them shareable and modifiable, thus encouraging a level of creative participation that has yet to stop growing. In fact, Chávez's death seems to have led to an increase in the production of this sort of digital content; he "afterlives" in an endless stream of memes created by both *chavistas* and *opositores*, who combine in their digital creations political demands and cultural references that are both local and global. Chávez's "memeification" emerges alongside (and feeds off) the creation of digital archives such as Todo Chávez en la Web, which gathers and provides free access to almost everything Chávez ever said or wrote, from his 1,824 tweets to every episode of *Aló Presidente*, to a poem he wrote for his grandmother when she passed away. Yet, unlike this archive, the memes imbue Chávez with movement and

animation, making him feel "current" in spite of his death. The afterglow I have discussed so far thus also encompasses this technological glow emanating from the screens where Chávez continues to be shared, his words and his images still dictating the terms in which the political life of Venezuela is virtually represented, criticized, mocked, and understood.

The glow in "afterglow" therefore has an affective dimension that mixes with, fuels, and is fueled by the luminescence of new technologies and that perpetuates a sort of shared temporal malaise intensified by the presence and circulation of Chávez's spectral remains. This temporal malaise is born out of the suspicion—confirmed over and over by those remains—that the past lingers in a way that is fragmentary and ongoing, which enables it to be dragged into "a negotiated future that is never simply *in front of us* (like the past is never simply behind us) but in a kind of viscous, affective surround" (Schneider 2011,37; original emphasis). The afterglow I have proposed here to characterize the decade following Chávez's death aims to capture that viscous, affective, and cross-temporal surround. It underscores the affective exchanges that continue to take place between Chávez and the people while speaking to the country's state of political irresolution and the various forces that enable the government to stay in place, prolonging the life of a revolution that falls short in responding to the needs of the Venezuelan people as a whole. If we consider the afterglow in relation to the light that lingers in the sky after the sun has set, it suggests a combination of light and shadow, of visibility and invisibility, that invites us to reconsider not only how we experience time but also how we perceive and experience space and what remains in it.

Afterglow, as I have outlined it, is not a hermetic or fixed concept. The following chapters, which will take us through streets and buildings as we pursue different manifestations of Chávez's spectral remains, will offer us ways of understanding time, affect, and technology that will add to and change, however subtly, our understanding of afterglow. Accompanying it, rather than working against it, is what would appear to be its opposite: aftermath. The word, which refers to the consequences or aftereffects of a significant unpleasant event, captures the rhetoric, affective energy, and aesthetic of a corpus of contemporary Venezuelan fiction (and the scholarly works written about it) that fixate on ruins and what was ruined in the years of the Bolivarian Revolution. Gustavo Guerrero, in his analysis of a selection of contemporary Venezuelan poetry that he calls "catastrophic and/or postcatastrophic poetry," speaks of the recurring allusion to "a past that there may not be much to rescue from and a future that seems to relentlessly close in on itself" (2020,

40). This understanding of time, very much in line with aftermaths, becomes particularly pressing in Juan Cristóbal Castro's acclaimed novel *Arqueología sonámbula* (2020), in which fiction, autobiography, essay, and photography overlap, speaking of and showing ruins to the reader who sees spaces that are fractured, stained, abandoned, or simply no more. The possibility of choosing "aftermath" instead of "afterglow" has haunted this project since its very beginnings; this haunting has intensified with the worsening of the crisis and with the frustration at the invisibilization, misinterpretation, and manipulation Venezuela has endured in academic and nonacademic contexts, particularly since Chávez's death. Yet, I insist on afterglow because it contains something aftermaths do not: the possibility of something else taking shape, the memory, however faded, of a relationship, of *relationality* itself, of being with an "other" yet to be known. I will return to this possibility in chapter 5 and in this book's coda. For now, suffice it to say that, as I have worked on researching and developing this project, I have held onto the hope that, even in the suffocation of an all-encompassing afterglow such as this one, something always escapes.

Ghost H(a)unting: The Practice

The specter not as rhetorical device, as the product of a delusion, or as a symptom of trauma: *the specter as a social, political, and material figure*. This is the premise with which we embark on the task of exploring the various dimensions of Chávez's afterlife in contemporary Venezuela. Yet it is still unclear what this means in terms of methodology. Put differently, if the specter is not metaphorical, then shouldn't ghost hunting as a research modality not be metaphorical either? Consistency would demand that we answer yes. That answer, however, does not tell us exactly how we should go about conducting this research-as-ghost-hunting project.

We could follow the anthropological route and, like Taussig did in *The Magic of the State*, go on a pilgrimage that would lead us to the rituals of popular cults that bring Chávez back as a spirit, his apparition witnessed only by those involved, in the privacy of peripheral spaces. We could also track down the people who have claimed to see Chávez's specter and collect their testimonies, perhaps hoping to witness the specter's apparition ourselves. Yet pursuing these alternatives would mean subscribing to the idea that haunting is a private, peripheral, and/or individual phenomenon, an experience that can only be accessed behind closed doors and that does not leave any traces—or if it does, those traces can be dismissed as meaningless,

irrational, or unbelievable by those who, in characterizing them as such, clearly draw a line that separates and protects them from the reality of being haunted. However, I have proposed that, in the afterglow of Chávez and the Bolivarian Revolution, we see haunting as a collective and remains-oriented experience, one mediated by and mediating the relationship between subjects and the social, political, economic, and historical structures that sustain the everyday life of the nation. We are thus not going to hunt for the specter in places hidden from the public eye or in the secret realm of individual imagination. Nor are we going to turn ghost hunting into a study of memory and politics among *chavistas* and *opositores*; this project is not about how one particular group remembers Chávez in one particular place, even if in many ways those group-constructed narratives and practices do shape the spectral afterlife Chávez leads. This is instead an exploration of haunting—in the words of Giorgio Agamben—in "some lane, in some piazza, in some street, on some sidewalk along a canal, in some back alley" (2013, 476).

Agamben is referring to places in Venice, a city he describes as existing in the state of "the specter, of the dead who appears without warning, preferably in the middle of the night, creaking and sending signals, sometimes even speaking, though in a way that is not always intelligible"—a city, he says, that "whispers" (2013, 473). Venezuela is not Venice, though its name, a variation of the Italian *Venezziola*, does coincidentally mean "little Venice." Nevertheless, Agamben's way of characterizing the encounter with the specter of Venice, in terms that bring to mind not so much a determined pursuit but a strolling, casual way of wandering around, is how I propose to approach hunting for Chávez's specter. Some street, some corner, some wall, some building, some back alley; the random "some" locates the spectral anywhere and thus everywhere, for if it is in some object in some street, then it can be in any object, in any street. Randomness thus distances haunting from the temporal and spatial specificity of a single event and turns it into an all-encompassing and shared reality that exists both as a given and as a possibility, and that invites us to embark on ghost hunting some place/any place.

Over the course of three months in the summer of 2016, I traveled between Caracas and Mérida (my hometown) chasing after Chávez's specter by gathering photographic and physical evidence of his material and digital remains. While preparing for the trip, I developed a research agenda that included visits to places I was sure were "haunted" by Chávez: his resting place at the Cuartel de la Montaña, the Biblioteca Nacional, the Panteón Nacional, the Museo Bolivariano, and the headquarters of the Partido So-

cialista Unido de Venezuela (psuv) in Mérida.[24]These places did not disappoint in terms of providing me with a wide selection of materials that spoke to the strength of Chávez's posthumous presence in the country's social and political landscape. However, it was the conversations, unexpected encounters, and accidental findings during the journey from one place to the other that yielded some of the most compelling discoveries. The number of times I accidentally "ran into Chávez" (at the airport, at a bakery, in a traffic jam) was only matched by the number of times I found evidence of his haunting in the form of graffiti, phone cards, and toys because someone—a relative, a friend, an acquaintance, a vendor, a library employee, a curious passerby—told me where to find them. Not only do these "tips" speak to the generosity of the people of Mérida and Caracas, without whom more than half of the spectral remains I analyze in this book would be missing, but they also evince a certain automatism when it came to recalling where Chávez was, one not contingent upon political allegiances. Both people who self-identified as *chavistas* and those who self-identified as *opositores* could think of "some wall, some street, some lamppost" when asked if they had seen graffiti, a poster, or any image of Chávez as they went about their daily routines. I interpret this automatic recall as part of Chávez's spectrality, which, I have proposed, is not confined to the spectacular and eventful but also manifests itself in the ordinary and quotidian.

Embracing the unexpected, random, and seemingly irrelevant as I hunted down Chávez's specter meant that the line separating ghost hunting and ghost haunting was, if not entirely gone, then at least heavily blurred. The result, a hybrid I refer to as "ghost h(a)unting," underscores the particularities of researching objects and practices *in the present*. After all, ghost h(a)unting, when carried out in a nonmetaphorical fashion, cannot be a retrospective practice; the specter does not exist in the past resting in peace but rather stands before and around us, restlessly copresent. Thus, writing about it requires writing *with it*, letting yourself be part of it, affected by it, and—it bears repeating—haunted by it. In practice, this means coming to terms with the fact that, just as specters signal that which is not over and done with, the "nonarchive" of spectral remains that render specters visible and interactive is equally incomplete.[25]New memes featuring Chávez are shared every day via WhatsApp and Facebook, his image reappears every time Maduro addresses the Venezuelan people, and red T-shirts and red hats with the stencil of his eyes continue to multiply in plazas and on streets. Simultaneously the symptom and the source of Chávez's spectrality, the "ongoingness" in the production and circulation of these remains,

makes finding where to put the full stop in this ghost h(a)unting endeavor impossible, at least for the time being.

Also incomplete is the compilation of spectral remains in the following chapters. From the many objects, images, and performances that I encountered in those months of research and the many I have accessed virtually since, only a few have made it into this book. Those included were selected based on how frequently they made an appearance in public spaces (as is the case with the graffiti of Chávez's eyes and the reproduction of his signature), the high value placed on them by the people who collected or wore them (as with the phone cards), their virality (as with Chávez's memes), and, in some instances, the way they stood out as uniquely spectral (as with the hologram). Together, they form a constellation that, in its current configuration, transforms the specter into a point of departure to reflect on questions regarding not just the lingering of the past in the present, but how the copresent past weighs on the future. The spectral remains we will look at and the relationships constructed with and through them link ancestry and posterity in a narrative that defines a way of being in and of the nation; therefore, they engage practices and narratives of memory as much as they engage the act of imagining ourselves, politically and otherwise. Imagination, then, is not invoked to deny the specter its connection to a collectively shared reality—the specter as a "figment of someone's imagination"—but rather to emphasize that connection, ghost h(a)unting thus appearing as a practice that intervenes in the construction of political subjectivity and shared acts of imagination.

This appeal to the imagination is also connected to the stability and "graspability" of spectral remains: to our ability to capture them fully by creating frames that contain them in all aspects of their social and political existence. The reality of ghost h(a)unting calls into question the possibility of putting those frames in place and, more generally, the desirability of having them at all, when what they are meant to capture is, by nature, fleeting. One morning a street vendor would set up a small table with Chávez-themed memorabilia; the following morning the same vendor and his merchandise would be gone. A gigantic poster of Chávez would decorate a plaza in Caracas for an entire week, and the following week it would appear ripped to pieces. In each instance, the specter's appearance, produced by engagement with these kinds of remains, is preceded, followed, and permeated by the inevitability of its disappearance. The specter is, above all, liminal: existing between light and shadow, presence and absence, and visibility and invisibility. To approach it means to acknowledge the voids that define that

liminality and that become pressing when we, for example, wonder what happened to the graffiti we once saw on some wall. These questions point to the "before," the "after," and the "around," of the encounter with Chávez's spectral remains, and while the possibility of pursuing a definite answer is always there, doing so would mean switching the focus from h(a)unting to tracking down and recording the social life of remains that would no longer be spectral, but would instead become objects existing in a stable and clearly outlined temporal trajectory. I thus choose the hybridity of h(a)unting over the paralyzing effect of only being haunted and over the goal-oriented task of hunting down, to preserve the overlap of familiarity and unexpectedness, of certainty and uncertainty, that comes with engaging with rather than capturing and archiving spectral remains—both actions that would flatten them to the point of rendering them inanimate. And, rather than seeing the questions and gaps that come with this engagement as shortcomings, I present them as essential in triggering the exercises of imagination that underlie Chávez's spectral afterlife.

Ghost H(a)unting: The Method

Three months of ghost h(a)unting left me with a flash drive storing over four hundred photographs, two notebooks filled with comments about my encounters with Chávez's specter, a suitcase containing my own personal collection of Chávez's spectral remains (a gifted coffee cup, pin, and flag from the chapel Santo Hugo Chávez del 23, a diy cardboard Chávez, a key chain, and a few posters), and two pressing questions: What theoretical tools and methodological frameworks exist to read such a diverse constellation of objects? And, since the specter haunts me just as it haunts others (though perhaps not in the exact same ways), how can our critical language recognize and engage with the reality that the scholar is as vulnerable to the object (of study) as the object (of study) is vulnerable to the scholar's "reading" of it?

I developed the methodology of this book while attempting to respond to these two questions by drawing on an interdisciplinary corpus that brings together contributions from affect theory, cultural studies, performance studies, media studies, new materialism, and memory studies. Diana Taylor's theorization of performance, archive, and repertoire, and Rebecca Schneider's conceptualization of performing remains have been key referents to think about nonlinear ways of understanding temporality that ultimately allowed me to propose haunting and afterglow as productive categories to

read the affective and material lingering of the past in contemporary Venezuela. Furthermore, Taylor's understanding of performance as a vital act of transfer that transmits "social knowledge, memory, and a sense of identity through reiterated actions" (2016,25) shapes my reflections about a collective state of being haunted that, I propose, is powerful and enduring precisely because it relies on the routine repetition of certain behaviors that create a sense of (individual, collective, national, popular, official, revolutionary) identity grounded in the cohabitation with a familiar specter that those behaviors conjure up and animate. Beyond illuminating the operations of Venezuela's theatrical and necromantic state, performance as a concept and a practice has also allowed me to foreground my understanding of the research that I conducted for this book as performance, and thus as epistemology: a way of knowing, understanding, and theorizing the world—or a corner of it—that takes as a point of departure and as a valuable source my own participation in and performing of the ghost h(a)unting that is my object of study.

Also central to my analysis of the images and objects that make up Chávez's spectral remains is a theoretical approach that acknowledges their ability to "stare back" (as James Elkins [1996] and Marianne Hirsch [(1997) 2012]propose regarding images and photographs) and "do something" (as Bill Brown [2004] and Daniel Miller [2010] suggest regarding things and stuff). I treat Chávez's spectral remains as "actants" that make demands and do things—including routinely bringing Chávez back from the dead—that shape our behaviors, set our expectations, and intervene in how we might imagine ourselves and others.[26]In doing so, I follow the path established by Chiara Bottici, whose work on images, imagination, and the imaginary in *Imaginal Politics* (2014) served as a fundamental referent for one of the key arguments I put forth in this book: that being haunted leads, among other things, to a crisis of political imagination. I also draw inspiration from the work of scholars of new materialism such as Bruno Latour, Karen Barad, and Jane Bennett, as well as by those who pay close attention to the potential contained in the most ordinary of things, including Walter Benjamin, Roland Barthes, and Kathleen Stewart.[27]I take the works of Benjamin, Barthes, and Stewart as models of the kind of thinking I am interested in performing in this book, and also as models of the sort of writing I want to offer the reader who will accompany me in this ghost h(a)unting project: a writing that craves company and close contact, that loses itself in the vibrancy of things, and that, in Stewart's words, leaves both author and reader "with an embodied sense of the world as a dense network of mostly unknown links" (2007, 6).

Establishing dialogues between these theorists and their work allowed me to construct a methodology to read Chávez's spectral remains that reflects a view on interdisciplinarity I first encountered in Avery Gordon's groundbreaking *Ghostly Matters*. Gordon's proposal that we see the ghost as a social figure and haunting as part of our social world leads her to advocate for a new and transformative way of seeing what lies (visibly or invisibly) around us, and a new way of doing things grounded in a "method attentive to what is elusive, fantastic, contingent, and often barely there" ([1997] 2008, 26)—a method that is interdisciplinary not because it gathers three or four disciplines but because it produces a "new object that belongs to no one" but that leaves room to "claim rather than discipline its meaning into existence" (7). It is, without doubt, a method that invites trouble—and Gordon herself admits it has gotten her into some trouble—and the only one that, I believe, allows us to recognize the specter as a powerful social figure (as opposed to a metaphor, a delusion, or another word for trauma). Inspired and guided by Gordon's methodological approach to ghostly matters, my theorization of the specter is also unconcerned with disciplinary boundaries or disciplinary loyalties. I made this choice based on the belief that ghosts, even hypervisible, omnipresent, and state-made ones, rarely obey our methodological rules and our disciplinary organization of social life, and on the conviction that, in Gordon's words, "we need not . . . find the loss of this deluding innocence so terribly frightening" (27).

A Note on Vulnerability

Vulnerability is at the heart of this project and its embrace of ghost h(a)unting as a scholarly practice. The most explicit sign of it is my resistance to give up the "I" as I analyze the images, objects, and behaviors that make up Chávez's spectral afterlife, an analysis that includes and engages with my own personal narrative, my own reactions to the materials both while I was in Venezuela hunting them down and being haunted by them and after I left the country and returned to the United States. My use of the first person highlights my commitment to what Susanna Paasonen calls "self-reflexive scholarly agency": the acknowledgment that "analysis is always directed by one's reactions and values" (2011,23) and that, because of it, as a theorist one is never really outside, above, beyond, or disconnected from that which one investigates. Situating oneself "above" the topics, phenomena, and materials studied is, Paasonen argues, a way of escaping vulnerability, of denying or ignoring resonances and the possibilities they open up. Aboveness "blocks

from view both the power of those materials and the phenomena to move oneself, as well as the ways in which this motion affects acts of interpretation" (23).

I thus write about haunting not as a disembodied and detached scholar—one that can see specters from outside and remain unaffected by them—but as a *haunted* scholar who moves between proximity and distance, affectation and contemplation. I see the vulnerability that comes from this state of being haunted and writing in that state as evidence (and as a frequent reminder) of the agency embedded in the materials I analyze, the power that they exert over those who encounter them whether occasionally or regularly, the forces that they mobilize as they shape and reshape political, social, and urban landscapes. I also see it as an invitation, a hand that reaches out to you, the reader, to bring you in—so that you, too, feel haunted, so that you read about haunting while haunted—but also to remind you that the analysis that follows is one among many, that there is not only one way to be haunted, nor is there only one story that can be told about the spectral remains that we will encounter. Much like Chávez himself, the stencil of his eyes, his signature, the collectible phone cards, the toys and memes mean different things to different people, and the connections that can be drawn between these materials change depending on how they are grouped, each grouping shedding light on something new. What I offer you then is *one* ghost story, *one* set of constellations, *one* way of ghost h(a)unting. Not a point of arrival but a point of departure, the beginning of what I hope will be a long conversation.

Afterlife and Afterdeath

This book has two parts: the first part is a long journey into the afterlife, and the second, much shorter one is a peek into the afterdeath. The afterlife comprises the first four chapters. Chapter 1 analyzes the official and popular narratives that circulated in Venezuela after Chávez was diagnosed with cancer in 2011. I argue that these narratives created an atmosphere of uncertainty that complicated processes of mourning and memorialization and allowed Chávez's death to be "postponed," thus facilitating his spectral lingering in the nation's landscape. In chapters 2, 3, and 4, I develop an analysis of Chávez's spectral remains, which I have organized into three constellations, each illuminating a different dimension of his afterlife.

Chapter 2 focuses on the stencil of Chávez's eyes, which first appeared during Venezuela's 2012 presidential elections. I discuss the ubiquity of the

image of the eyes and connect it to what I call Chávez's "pre-posthumous haunting," a term I use to refer to the excessive reproduction of Chávez's images and words in Venezuela in the years preceding his death as shown in the documentary *FANtasmo*, directed by Jonás Romero García (2009). I then analyze the memory narratives and practices shaping the creation and reproduction of the eyes by members of the government and the opposition, the characteristics of their spectral gaze, and the authority that materializes through them and that operates, I propose, through an act of temporal dislocation.

Chapter 3 engages with collectible phone cards that re-present Chávez's life and that were the result of a collaboration between graphic designer and cartoonist Omar Cruz and the state-owned telecommunications company c a nt v. It also analyzes the afterlife of Chávez's handwriting, focusing on the reproduction of his signature as a tattoo and on the walls of apartment buildings constructed by the Gran Misión Vivienda Venezuela, and on the transformation of his handwriting into a font through the app tc Chavez Pro, developed by the state-sponsored art collective Trinchera Creativa. These objects, I argue, place Chávez's haunting in relation to affect, excess, and acts of collection and recollection, miniaturization and amplification, inhabitation and habituation. I conclude that they create a form of spectral intimacy that locates the future in the past and the past in the future, thus encouraging a form of imagination that operates like déjà vu.

In chapter 4, I analyze the connection between spectrality and acts of mimesis, playfulness, and imagination, in relation to a selection of Chávez's doubles. These doubles include: the hologram that walked around Caracas in December 2016, the bird that Maduro announced was the spirit of Chávez attempting to communicate with him, Maduro himself as he imitates Chávez's rhetoric and mannerisms, a man and a woman who "went viral" because of their uncanny resemblance to Chávez, and the Chávez dolls that appeared on posters placed around Caracas after the announcement of his death. I argue that the official and stately efforts to double, imitate, and reproduce Chávez repeatedly fail and lead to the widening of the gap left by his absence. Threatened with the imminence of its collapse, the state, I propose, appeals to people's playful imagination as a way to reanimate the specter in which it has grounded its legitimacy and authority.

Before reaching the afterdeath, we stop at an interlude that looks back at the specter that took shape in the previous chapters and discusses the central role imagination plays in the way it operates politically, socially, and historically. As an operation of the state, haunting, I argue, requires

rendering the specter and the status quo attached to it comfortable, familial, and intimate. This takes a toll on political imagination and the possibility of testing out new visual and political languages that would go beyond the limits of the specter's gaze and enable forms of resistance that could lead to new political futures and figures. With that argument in mind, I ask: What, then, to do with the specter? To answer this question, I turn to contemporary performance art and, specifically, to the work of Venezuelan artist Deborah Castillo.

In chapter 5, I analyze four of Castillo's performance pieces: *The Emancipatory Kiss*, *Demagogue*, *Slapping Power*, and *The Unnamable* (2013, 2015b, 2015c, 2015d). Castillo, I propose, reckons with the specter by inserting it in an afterdeath where it turns into something material, malleable, and dead. As such, the specter becomes an opportunity to think of the future as an unshaped potentiality, which activates an agency that only exists in the hands of the present and that is born out of an unsettling, uncomfortable, and disloyal relationship with the past.

Lastly, the book's coda takes the unsettling provocations, uncomfortable affects, and calls for a raw kind of imagination found in Castillo's performance work as an opportunity to identify, in the fields of performance art and visual arts and among Venezuelans both inside and outside the country, other instances where, I believe, a certain futurity is articulated that escapes the boundaries established by the spectral gaze of the country's distant and recent revolutionary past. I introduce these examples as vignettes that pay homage to people who are working hard for something that has yet to take shape but that will not be disciplined into form or meaning by either the stale discourse of an epic past that we know has run its course, or the dystopian insistence that in Venezuela there is nothing left but ruins.

NOTES

Introduction

1 Twitter was rebranded as X in July 2023. In this book, I have chosen to refer to it as "Twitter," as that was the name the platform had when the events I discuss were taking place.

2 The UN Refugee Agency estimates that, as of 2022, there were over six million Venezuelan refugees and migrants worldwide, the vast majority in countries within Latin America and the Caribbean. In addition to the migration crisis, the majority of Venezuelans in the country are affected by severe food shortages, skyrocketing poverty, rampant violence, a public health sector collapse, and economic and infrastructural issues resulting from the plummeting of oil production to pre–World War II levels.

3 The scholarly publications on Hugo Chávez and Venezuela's Bolivarian Revolution are too many to list in full. I would, however, highlight Alejandro Velasco's article "The Many Faces of Chavismo" (2022) and the issue of the *NACLA Report*, titled "Chavismo Revisited" (2022), as the most recent sources to engage with Chavismo from a multidisciplinary and critical perspective.

4 My proposal to conceptualize the Venezuelan state as a performer follows the path established by Lisa Blackmore's *Spectacular Modernity* (2017), Fernando Coronil's *The Magical State* (1997), Rafael Sánchez's *Dancing Jacobins* (2016), and Michael Taussig's *The Magic of the State* (1997).

5 These works include Javier Corrales and Michael Penfold's acclaimed *Dragon in the Tropics* ([2011] 2015), Richard Gott's *Hugo Chávez and the Bolivarian Revolution* (2005), Fermín Lares's *El expediente del chavismo* (2014), Cristina Markano and Alberto Barrera Tyszka's *Hugo Chávez* (2007), and David Smilde, Verónica Zubillaga, and Rebecca Hanson's edited volume *The Paradox of Violence in Venezuela* (2022), among others.

6 These works include Luis Fernando Angosto-Ferrández's *Venezuela Reframed* (2015), George Ciccariello-Maher's *We Created Chávez* (2013), Sujatha Fernandes's *Who Can Stop the Drums?* (2010), Naomi Schiller's *Channeling the State* (2018), and Alejandro Velasco's *Barrio Rising* (2015), among others.

7 For an analysis of the exhumation and the overall significance of Bolívar's bones for the founding of the nation, see Luis Duno-Gottberg's "Embodiments and Disembodiments of the Nation, the People, and the State" (2016).

8 "He is not God, but only because it would have been heresy to proclaim that he was. But he is a god, and for his emerging cult, it will be necessary to construct an entire religion, the second religion, called upon to complement in the civil realm the role that the other one carries out in the spiritual and moral realm. A religion that will, above all, have the virtue of responding to the very concrete, urgent demands of a political conflict at the moment when it emerges, but that will preserve this therapeutic quality and will as a result provide more than one useful service to more than one useless cause" (Carrera Damas [1969] 1973, 61).

9 Alicia Ríos argues that, though groundbreaking, Carrera Damas's text ultimately cannot avoid casting Bolívar in a positive light. According to Ríos, Carrera Damas critiqued "how Bolívar, his figure, and his ideas have been used" and not "the problems his own governance and vision might contain" (2013, 48).

10 The cult of María Lionza brings together African, Indigenous, and Catholic beliefs, and it is practiced by members of all Venezuelan social classes. The rites take place on Venezuela's Sorte Mountain, in the state of Yaracuy, and involve invoking a wide variety of spirits—including that of María Lionza herself—who possess the bodies of mediums to provide advice, help, and healing. See Michaelle Ascencio's *De que vuelan, vuelan* (2012).

11 The MBR–200, or Revolutionary Bolivarian Movement-200, was a political and social movement founded by Chávez in 1982. The members of this movement were responsible for the failed 1992 coup against President Carlos Andrés Pérez. The evolution of the relationship between Chávez and Bolívar is most clearly seen if one compares his interview with Agustín Blanco Muñoz in *Venezuela del 04F al 06D-98* (Chávez Frías and Blanco

Muñoz 1998) and his interview with Ignacio Ramonet in *Hugo Chávez* (Ramonet 2013). Muñoz repeatedly goes back to the question of the cult of Bolívar and how it has been manipulated by all the presidents that preceded Chávez; Chávez responds by emphasizing that, while Bolívar is an important referent for him, he is not the only one, nor will his political movement "tie national identity or national consciousness to Bolívar" (Chávez Frías and Blanco Muñoz 1998, 109). His interview with Ramonet goes in the opposite direction. Bolívar and Chávez are elevated, together, to the same mythical realm marked by "eternal returns" (Ramonet 2013, 58) and the intimate connection between the two figures. This bond is exemplified by, among other things, the anecdote of Chávez writing a short story called "Mauricio" about the need for Bolívar's return (422) and the anecdote of the fake bills that were circulating when Chávez was arrested after the 1992 coup decorated with Chávez's face instead of Bolívar's (557).

12 Regarding this fusion, in a speech at the inauguration of Bolívar's new mausoleum on May 14, 2013, Maduro said: "To speak of Bolívar in the twenty-first century is to speak of Hugo Chávez Frías, his great defender . . . Hugo Chávez, the Bolívar of the twenty-first century, the Liberator of the twenty-first century" (Norman 2017, 201). Meanwhile, the sentiment of "losing Bolívar" was further strengthened by Chávez's (and then Maduro's) use of the word *apátrida* to refer to the opposition. More than a reference to the legal status of being stateless, the word—used as an insult—signaled the loss of the *patria*/*pater*, and thus the impossibility of belonging to Venezuela or identifying with Bolívar anymore. In "Magical History," Fernando Coronil argues that the virulence of the opposition against Chávez cannot simply be explained by their exclusion from positions of privilege; rather, it is a result of "a loss of identity, of a sense of place in society, the fear that the future won't belong to them," and the fact that, in the logic of divisions that dictates the history that Chávez created for the nation, "if they are not with Chávez, they are not only [out] of the government, but [out] of history" (2008, 11).

13 For a discussion of the relationship between oil and the magical state, see Fernando Coronil's *The Magical State* (1997).

14 Most studies of necromancy focus on Europe's medieval and early modern periods. In terms of political theory, necromancy is indirectly invoked in Achille Mbembe's *Necropolitics* (2019) and more explicitly developed in Ágnes Horváth's *Political Alchemy* (2021) as well as works on postsocialist countries inspired by Katherine Verdery's *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies* (1999), such as Vladimír Naxera and Petr Krčál's "Post-Socialist Political Necromancy" (2022).

15 *Britannica*, s.v. "necromancy," September 15, 2023, https://www.britannica.com/topic/necromancy.

16 This chain of equivalence was rendered explicit during the official speech Chávez gave in the state of Anzoátegui on July 12, 2012, as part of his presidential campaign, where he claimed: "Chávez became the pueblo . . . that is how I feel, I feel I am incarnated in all of you, as I said and I will repeat it: you too are Chávez, you Venezuelan women; you too are Chávez, Venezuelan men; you too are Chávez, workers, grandmothers, grandfathers; you too are Chávez, little Venezuelan girls and boys; Chávez truly became the people" (Comando Carabobo 2012).

17 The day the hologram appeared, December 8, is the day Maduro's government has officially named "Day of Loyalty and Love for Supreme Commander Hugo Chávez and the Fatherland."

18 The most literal rendition of Chávez's specter would actually be Chávez's spirit invoked in the chapel and on private altars all over the country. A popular prayer repeated to invoke him is the Lord's Prayer, adapted to feature Chávez as the main deity. María Estrella Uribe, a PSUV delegate, recited this prayer on September 1, 2014, at the closing ceremony of the party congress.

19 In "Four Exoskeletons and No Funeral," Jonathan Gil Harris asks: "Is there a specter haunting the discourse of spectrality? And what might this specter be? I would suggest it is matter itself, and more specifically a surplus mineral matter that 'haunts'—though that is perhaps too immaterial a term for what is thoroughly material—the very phrase 'the time is out of joint'" (2011, 619). He proposes to focus not on the temporality of spectrality but on its materiality, and on how the material accumulation and layering of different times in the present creates material specters he calls "exoskeletons." Though his approach centers on mineral matter and mineral duration, I find his insistence on analyzing the matter of haunting central to understanding the specter as a social and material force shaping the present.

20 Ribas-Casasayas and Petersen's edited volume *Espectros* (2017b) offers a wide variety of theoretical approaches to ghostly matters in Latin America. Addressing ghosts of the Spanish Civil War, Jo Labanyi's essays "History and Hauntology" (2000) and "Engaging with Ghosts" (2002) and the work of José Colmeiro ("Nation of Ghosts?" [2011]), Patricia Keller (*Ghostly Landscapes* [2015]), and Joan Ramon Resina (*The Ghost in the Constitution* [2017]) have been central to conceptualizing the ghostly in connection to historical memory and Spanish cultural production.

21 On January 23, 2019, in front of thousands of protesters in Caracas, Juan Guaidó—the thirty-five-year-old leader of Venezuela's then opposition-controlled Asamblea Nacional—declared himself interim president, challenging the results of the May 2018 presidential elections, widely denounced as fraudulent, which led Maduro to begin his second term in office.

22 Chávez's voice also opened Maduro's campaign rallies, which started with a recording of Chávez singing the national anthem or his well-known rendition of the song "Patria querida."

23 The photograph of Chávez in the rain at the closing of his 2012 presidential campaign (figure I.4) appeared in a promotional 2013 calendar (for the month of March) distributed by the PSUV and sponsored by the government and by Venezuela's oil company Petróleos de Venezuela.

24 The Museo Bolivariano is dedicated to Simón Bolívar and holds collections of objects related to his life and to Venezuela's independence battles. The PSUV emerged after Chávez won the 2006 presidential elections. It was the result of the merging of most of the unidentified parties that supported the Bolivarian Revolution. It held its founding congress in early 2008, and Chávez was proclaimed president of the new party on March 14 of that year. The party's website (www.psuv.org.ve/) includes a section dedicated to Chávez's speeches and a gallery featuring several photographs of Chávez. The party's logo, which appears at the top of the home page, features the graffiti of Chávez's eyes. Chávez remains the head of the party, which named him *Comandante Eterno* (Eternal Commander) after his death.

25 I use the term "nonarchive" to signal that Chávez's spectral remains do not exist, stored and cataloged, in an official archive, nor could they and their various iterations be gathered and archived in full, precisely because of their ongoing production and circulation in public, private, and virtual spaces. However, they do appear in archives such as the exhibits put together and displayed in Caracas's Biblioteca Nacional and in the PSUV headquarters in Mérida—both sites that I visited in the summer of 2016 and that held collections of posters and memorabilia featuring Chávez. Moreover, inasmuch as Chávez's spectral remains also include performances such as the acts of doubling, impersonation, and mimesis analyzed in chapter 4, they straddle the (always porous) line separating archives from what performance scholar Diana Taylor calls "repertoire": "embodied and performed acts [that] generate, record, and transmit knowledge" and that, in this particular context, promise to also establish a direct line of communication between the living and the living dead (2005, 21). These remains then complicate any stabilizing conceptualizations of archives and also challenge the archival impulse of this book, which is tasked with both "collecting" them in order to analyze them and acknowledging that the resulting "archive" will always be incomplete.

26 My use of "actant" reflects Latour's definition of the term as "something that acts or to which activity is granted by others" (1996, 373).

27 I am referring specifically to Benjamin's *The Arcades Project* ([1982] 1999), Barthes's *A Lover's Discourse* ([1977] 2010), and Stewart's *Ordinary Affects* (2007).