

The Not-So Bolivarian Republic

Anais Mobarak

In a Tortoiseshell: *In this excerpt of her essay on Hugo Chávez’s mythologization of Simón Bolívar, Anais Mobarak demonstrates how best to establish **scholarly motive** when numerous texts are in conversation. Anais is clear and deft in her explanation of a tension that exists between two scholars, highlighting the relevant points made by each writer. She then **plays peacemaker**, suggesting a new lens through which to view Chávez and his complex relationship to Bolívar.*

Excerpt

In “The Shah of Venezuela,” Enrique Krauze outlines how Hugo Chávez transformed Simón Bolívar into a religious, even divine figure for the Venezuelan public, intertwining the state with Bolívar in a religious context. Krauze states that “the theological-political staging of the Bolivarian ‘resurrection’ has been the ongoing spectacle of his rule, from his rise to power until the present day.” For example, Krauze explains that the renaming of Venezuela into the “Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela” was a “baptism of the nation blessed by the presence of Bolívar incarnate,” indicating how through Krauze’s perspective, Chávez built his government with a specific religious connotation—Bolívar had been resurrected and “blessed” Chávez’s government. For Krauze, a key component of Chávez’s strategy was not only that Chávez portrayed Bolívar as “resurrected” in an almost messiah-like way, but that Chávez inserted himself in the Bolívar narrative. Indeed, Krauze articulates that Chávez’s “most audacious move was to promote the Bolivarian cult by setting himself in the place of High Priest,” illustrating how Chávez, in presenting Bolívar as a religious figure, raised himself to that same level as well. Ultimately, for Krauze, Chávez’s presentation of Bolívar can be encapsulated by Chávez serving as a conduit between the divine—Bolívar—and Venezuela. Thus, both he and Bolívar reached new religious status through Chávez’s portrayal of Bolívar.

Whereas Krauze focuses on the way in which Bolívar is portrayed, Ryan Brading, a political scientist at National Sun Yat-sen University, offers a distinct viewpoint. His evaluation of the relationship between Chávez and Bolívar is directed on the substance of Bolívar that Chávez exhibits. Krauze explains the characteristics of Chávez’s Bolívar, and Brading highlights the political message that Chávez fabricates in Bolívar. Specifically, Brading indicates that

Chávez employed a “repetitive use of Bolívar, seeking to give a meaning to the cause the Chavista camp advocates” (150). Moreover, Brading argues that posing Bolívar “as a national symbol of emancipation” was a “pivotal component in Chávez’s populist discourse” (150). It is evident that the relationship Brading poses between Chávez and Bolívar offers the extra layer of incentive: Chávez fabricated a narrative of Bolívar to support his political ideas, which helped uphold his populist movement by galvanizing the public around the renowned Bolívar. Indeed, Brading concludes that “the fantasy that Chávez has articulated in his political discourse lies very much on the new interpretations of the past he constructs” (156). Thus, Brading describes Chávez’s Bolívar as a political tool that he utilized by constructing a historical version of Bolívar that supported Chávez’s political ideas and objectives.

Both Krauze and Brading agree that Chávez distorted Bolívar, but they disagree on how: Krauze argues that Chávez turned Bolívar into a religious image, while Brading argues that Chávez twisted Bolívar politically. In order to resolve Krauze’s symbolic approach and Brading’s substance-centric approach regarding Chávez’s portrayal and utilization of Bolívar, Tok Thompson, an anthropology professor at the University of Southern California, and Gregory Schrempp, a professor of folklore at Indiana University, offer a unique lens—a theory of myths—that enables a more nuanced understanding of Chávez’s own words and actions. Put simply, Thompson and Schrempp specify that myths “are often narrations of creations—of the cosmos, of the earth, of people...they are stories not of how things might be...but rather how and why things came to be” (17). As such, an integral component of a myth is that it is descriptive in nature and expands into the past. In addition to the relative stage that myths chronicle, Thompson and Schrempp further that the material narrated in a myth is relevant as well, as they reveal that myths entail “symbolic truth, and, for some, literal truth” (13). Thus, myths, as defined by Thompson and Schrempp, present a useful framework for which to combine Krauze and Brading’s approaches, as they incorporate historic recountings with symbolic twists of truth.

Author Commentary

Anais Mobarak

This excerpt is from my R3 for WRI 146: Constructing the Past. When reflecting on the prompt, which invited me to explore a puzzling or unresolved problem pertaining to the constructed past, I knew I wanted to research an instance of revisionist history in politics. I decided to investigate how Hugo Chávez utilized and presented Simón Bolívar in his public messages. Given the broad nature of this concept, I knew that I would have to probe past the level of Chávez's words and actions and into the existing scholarly conversation seeking to explain them.

My intention was to construct an argument about Chávez's actions regarding Bolívar and the existing discussion about them. As such, my arguments would require not only primary sources but also analytical secondary sources, which are the works of historian Enrique Krauze and political scientist Ryan Brading. Including their ideas would enable me to not only make an argument about the existing conversation but also to demonstrate the uniqueness of my argument pertaining to Chávez's utilization of Bolívar. This excerpt exhibits my motive, which is that Krauze and Brading offer two distinct explanations for Chávez's presentation of Bolívar. I later go on to introduce my addition to the conversation: a frame of mythology.

This motive plays an interesting role in my paper, as it is referenced throughout the rest of my paper instead of only serving as a window for my thesis. I later mention Krauze and Brading when I analyze each primary source by applying their theories and indicating their shortcomings. As such, this excerpt demonstrates how I tackle the relationship between Chávez and Bolívar: by first examining existing theories and then resolving their shortcomings with a framework of mythology.

Though I first found my writing seminar to be quite daunting as new terms like motive were introduced, I grew to embrace the new complexities expected in my writing. With the help of my amazing professor and classmates, I developed into a student excited about writing in a comprehensive and structured manner. My R3 is representative of this shift, as I enjoyed reading various sources and tailoring them into a motive.

Editor Commentary

Owen Travis

Perhaps the most essential goal of Princeton's first-year writing program is to teach students about **motive**. Why must this paper be written? How is it different from other writing on the topic? What, exactly, is at stake here? Unless addressed early in a paper, these questions will stick in the back of a reader's mind, growing harder and harder to ignore until, finally, the essay is cast aside, its margins coopted for next week's grocery list.

Anais need not worry about such marginal vandalism. In her essay, a brief discussion of sources and the presentation of her thesis are followed immediately by three paragraphs that effectively establish motive. Published here are those three paragraphs, which ought to be viewed as a case study for how to establish stakes in a paper. In particular, Anais does a remarkable job of keeping readers on their feet as they are introduced to *two* historical figures, *three* interpretive theories, and *four* different scholars. Despite a battle to keep everyone straight (Chávez, Bolívar, Krauze, Brading, Thompson, and Schremmp), the motive shines out clearly: if we are to resolve the disagreement between Krauze and Brading, we must turn to Thompson and Schremmp.

In the Writing Center, we call this strategy "**playing peacemaker**," a term that comes from Mark Gaipa. As peacemaker, Anais first presents an unbiased view of both scholars. She makes precise citations from each text and fills in the gaps with her own bits of interpretation. She then recognizes where the scholars agree and illuminates where they differ. These moves are characteristic of a paper with strong **scholarly motive**. Observe, too, that Anais had no choice but to include all this information; the reader must comprehend the existing discussion if they are to believe in the necessity of Anais' intervention.

Lastly, Anais arrives at her lens: a fresh way of analyzing Chávez. This is the new, the unheard of, the reason that even Chávez experts should continue reading. With a motive established, Anais uses the rest of her paper (not published here) to make a unique argument about the mythologization of Bolívar. However, as Anais rightly noted in her commentary, a well-deployed motive does not fall meekly away after the introduction. Instead, motive persists; the good essayist reminds readers at every turn that this path of thinking must be pursued. In

doing so, Anais makes an eloquent case for taking a fresh look at the “Not-So Bolivarian Republic.”

Works Cited

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Bios

Anais Mobarak, '25 is from Newton, Massachusetts and is interested in concentrating in Chemistry, with certificates in Values and Public Life and Sustainable Energy. She loves hiking, cooking, and reading. Outside of academics, she's involved with the Princeton Debate Panel and Energy Association. Anais wrote this essay as a first-year.

Owen Travis, '24 is a computer science student who is also pursuing certificates in Spanish and Statistics and Machine Learning. Owen is from Evanston, IL and this is his first year as a Writing Center Fellow. In his free time, he enjoys playing the violin, playing soccer, and constructing crossword puzzles for *The New York Times*. Owen wrote this as a sophomore.