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AQ2	Is 'prostrate' OK, given that he is 'seated'?	YES, he is seated
AQ3	Is 'denigrating' correct? Or 'degrading'?	denigrating is correct
AQ4	Main verb missing from sentence beginning 'Our loneliness'	We felt lonely

Somatic Power in the Bolivarian Revolution: Biopolitics and Sacrifice in the Case of Franklin Brito

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Franklin Brito died in August 2010 in a storeroom at the Caracas Military Hospital. On 12 December 2009, a criminal court had issued an order to transfer him to said establishment. A joint police and military unit cleared out the encampment where he had carried out his sixth hunger strike – a mat, a chair and a few belongings – which had been set up on the pavement in front of the doors of the Caracas offices of the Organisation of American States (OAS). Brito was 1.90 metres tall and weighed 60 kilograms when he was arrested after a three-month hunger strike. He could barely walk. The unit that removed him and shoved him into an armoured transport was made up of 60 police officers and some members of the National Guard. Farmer Franklin Brito had undertaken six hunger strikes between October and December 2009; on one of these strikes he mutilated the little finger of his left hand in protest against the confiscation of his farmland and his tractor. During fieldwork in Caracas in 2011, I met Franklin Brito's daughter and wife in order to write the history of his hunger strikes.

In this chapter I will examine the various aspects of the political discursive and symbolic struggle that led Brito to his death, and the existential dimension of the political sense of his ordeal. The analysis of Brito's extreme corporeal action that I present proceeds along three lines. The first addresses what the Brito case tells us about the social conflicts that affect Venezuelan society, in particular access to land, since the conflict that motivated Brito's strike was a land tenancy problem derived from the attempts at agrarian reform during the Bolivarian Revolution led by Hugo Chávez. Initially, Brito was not allied with any political cause; his arrival on the public stage did not result from a collective claim but rather a personal demand for justice.

The second line of inquiry addresses the place Brito occupies in the political sphere, showing the vicissitudes of his trajectory towards being recognised as a legitimate plaintiff. I shall attempt to discern the often invisible and non-explicit mechanisms through which power is exercised progressively to undermine the striker's human condition, ending with his total non-recognition as an individual with rights. The third analytical element developed here relates to the connections between embodiment and biopolitics, in the sense proposed by Michel Foucault at the end of the first volume of his *History of Sexuality* (1978). This chapter draws on my research on Venezuela, which has demonstrated a transformation of the physical body into a political body. My previous publications (2010, 2014) shed light on the configuration of various biopolitics implemented by the Chávez regime, the most significant of which was the displacement of the

1 population and the confinement of the victims of the tragic mudslides of 1999 in Vargas
2 State that affected the Venezuelan coast in 1999.

3 By contrast, in Brito's case his physical body, as well as his voice, are the place and
4 the means of protest. He was reduced to a condition in which he had no voice as a political
5 subject or even as a citizen. Hence, his annihilation as a subject and reduction to a
6 physical body show how he became an individual 'subject to' rather than 'subject of', following
7 the difference that Foucault drew between subjection and subjectivation (1994:
8 556). Tragically, in the self-inflicted ordeal of his hunger strike, Franklin Brito's physical
9 body became a site where the diverse social and political conflicts that characterise the
10 Bolivarian Revolution converged.

11

12

13 **The Brito Case**

14

15 In 1998, on his rise to power through democratic means, Lieutenant Colonel Hugo
16 Chávez convened a Constituent Assembly which one year later drafted and approved
17 a new Constitution. On 30 July 2000 the newly denominated Bolivarian Republic
18 of Venezuela held general elections through which the president was re-elected, and a
19 new National Assembly elected, given that the old Congress and Supreme Court had
20 been dissolved to make way for the new institutions. The government gained the majority
21 of the governorships and seats in the National Assembly. Even though the conditions
22 for Chávez to exercise power could not have been better, in 2001 the National Assembly
23 authorised him to govern by decree for a year. Forty-nine decree-laws were enacted
24 in the framework of the powers granted by the Enabling Law, which affected the distribution
25 and tenancy of land, banking operations, freedom of the press, private property
26 and the regime of oil exploitation. With the Land Law, which was never subjected
27 to parliamentary or public debate, came the first moves in an attempt at agrarian
28 reform which prioritised collective property and gave the National Lands Institute
29 great scope for discretion. In 2006, the Bolivarian project set the goal of achieving
30 what was termed 'Twenty-First-Century Socialism' by means of the Communal State.
31 The Revolution's official discourse held that this state is founded upon participation
32 but, in reality, a profoundly vertical political practice prevails, whereby all power is
33 concentrated in the executive branch. On live television during his visits to every corner
34 of the country, Chávez ordered the expropriation of lands, banks, businesses and hotels.
35 He consolidated a mode of governance without institutional mediation.

36 In 1999, with the intention of developing more resistant strains of *ñame* (yam or
37 *Discorea*), a greatly prized tuber in the Caribbean, Franklin Brito, a farmer, agricultural
38 producer and biologist, acquired 290 hectares from the state under the legal formula of
39 'definitive onerous title' in the Sucre Municipality of Bolívar State, 800 kilometres south
40 of Caracas, in the Guayana region. Brito had some training in agronomy and, although
41 he had not completed his Bachelor's degree, he had studied biology and agronomy at
42 the Universidad Central de Venezuela. He combined work at the farm, which he called
43 'Iguaraya' in honour of his wife's surname, with his job as a biology teacher at the town's
44 secondary school. His wife, Helena, was a primary school teacher. They lived with their
45 three children in a modest house at the farm and had a lorry to transport the produce
46 which they marketed through small distribution networks.

47 For approximately three years Iguaraya was quite productive in watermelon, papaya
48 and yam. The latter thrives best in the forestry reserve zone, where it is very complicated
49 to combat fungus with pesticides. According to Ángela Brito, Franklin's eldest daughter,

1 her father had found out that in Costa Rica they had combated a similar plague to that
2 which attacks yam by planting more resistant seeds. And that is what he proposed: to
3 bring in fungus-resistant seeds. Brito presented a report showing those findings to the
4 Corporación Venezolana de Guayana (CVG), an organisation that fosters the develop-
5 ment of this southern region of the country and draws financing from funds generated
6 by the mining and the steel industries. During the era of ‘Great Venezuela’ in the 1970s
7 oil boom, the CVG was a very powerful corporation that financed large-scale develop-
8 ment projects. What Brito did not know then was that the mayor’s office planned to
9 solve the problem of disease in the plantations with the use of agrochemicals and had
10 already requested financing from the CVG.

11 According to Ángela, her father’s report went through the National Assembly and
12 was evaluated by the Instituto Nacional de Investigaciones Agrícolas (National Institute
13 for Agricultural Research, INIA), the latter having recommended her father’s project.
14 Given this judgment, the CVG declined to finance the mayorality’s project. In the video
15 recorded by Franklin Brito in 2009, on the 93rd day of his hunger strike, he explains
16 what happened in a coherent and structured manner:

17
18 They intended to solve the problem of a disease in the yam fields using
19 agrochemicals and I recommended using a resistant variety. Because of this
20 intervention, the mayor’s project was not financed by the CVG and thus
21 began the harassment against me and my family. (Brito, 5 October 2009)

22 As a result of the report on yam, Brito was dismissed from the state secondary school.
23 Ángela later told me that her father began the hunger strike because he was unjustifiably
24 fired from the school, probably because the headmistress was the mayor’s cousin. One
25 day the doorman shut the door in his face and he was never allowed in again. Brito
26 gathered signatures from all the students, but it was all in vain. A few days later the
27 Britos’ farm was invaded. Alleged farmers occupied the lands through the small road
28 that joins the property to the main highway passes. They were left isolated. Helena
29 remembers the befuddlement at the stripping of their lands:

30
31 Everything depends on the mayorality and agriculture. We depended on the
32 aid of relatives, of my father and my sister-in-law. We made lodged formal
33 complaints, but no one listened to us. We were like that for two years and
34 Franklin was very depressed.

35 Ángela elaborates on the methods used by the ‘neighbour’, the occupier of the land,
36 to impede access to Brito’s property:

37
38 At first they made a fence and then a ditch so we could not pass through
39 the only access. My father would knock down the fence and go through
40 it. Later, the neighbour made a bigger ditch and placed an armed guard
41 there. Another time they hired someone who beat my father in the street.
42 He threatened him and told him that if he crossed again they would kill
43 him. (Interview with Ángela Brito, Caracas, October 2010)

44
45 The enabling laws enacted by Chávez at the start of his mandate created *cartas*
46 *agrarias* (agrarian letters, which provide provisional titles of land property to occu-
47 piers) and with them the legal basis, termed by government itself as provisional, that
48 authorises ‘peasant families’ to occupy state-owned lands administered by the National
49 Lands Institute (INTI). Therefore, if the invaders of Iguaraya farm were in possession

1 of agrarian letters, they were acting with the blessing of the local, and even national,
2 governments.

3 Brito and his family left their land, abandoning their house and crops. Helena remem-
4 bers that, determined to 'take extreme measures to see if anyone listened', they embarked
5 on a long road of seeking justice, which first involved 48-hour vigils outside the gates
6 of the Miraflores Presidential Palace (Interview with Elena Brito, October 2010). From
7 there, they went on to the Vice-Presidency, where the entire family stood guard for eight
8 days. On the ninth day they were driven away.

9 On 10 November 2005, Brito used gardening shears to cut off the phalanges from the
10 little finger of his left hand in front of the Supreme Court in Caracas. He did this after
11 calling some journalists and announcing a peaceful protest. The mutilation was filmed
12 and transmitted on the afternoon newscast. From that point on, President Chávez inter-
13 vened in the matter, designating a commission that would travel with Brito to the farm.
14 Brito came into disagreement with the commission en route, when he realised that its pur-
15 pose was not to revoke the invaders' agrarian letters but to negotiate with them: 'They
16 wanted to return my land physically but not legally and I want them to acknowledge
17 what they did to me' (Brito, 5 October 2009). The reconciliation that Chávez proposed
18 was informal; an arrangement beyond the law and institutions, which was not a matter
19 of justice but of personal will.

20 Brito's case shines a light on the question of lands and the conflicts that arose when
21 the agrarian reform implemented by the Bolivarian Revolution was set in motion. At
22 first, the policy of land distribution was welcomed with some enthusiasm by Venezue-
23 lan society. Many projects were prepared and the government favoured initiatives such
24 as co-operatives and credits. The alarm bells quickly sounded as corruption, diverting
25 of funds and government inefficiency tarnished the possibilities of success of Chávez's
26 policies. But the euphoria generated by Chavismo in Venezuelan society left no room for
27 a critical examination of the 'revolutionary' process.

28
29

30 **Confinement and Biopower**

31

32 Embodiment is a social experience. The concept of 'embodiment' proposed by Marcel
33 Mauss (1999) on the social meaning of the human body in daily life is expounded in
34 his essay on the 'techniques of the body' in the early 1930s. Grounded in a study of the
35 body's use and its heterogeneous modes of action in different societies, Mauss considers
36 the body to be the locus of magic, symbolism and tradition. The body, the self-inflicted
37 ordeal and Franklin Brito's bodily control lend themselves to casuistic analysis, since
38 the Brito case crystallises a series of unresolved conflicts in Venezuelan society. Brito's
39 death throes at the Military Hospital in Caracas lasted several months but little was
40 known about the conditions of his forced hospitalisation in a storage room that also
41 housed the machinery for the building's air-conditioning. During that time there were
42 many restrictions on his receiving visitors and only a photographer from the Venezuelan
43 newspaper *Tal Cual* was able to gain access and take photographs which were published
44 weeks before his death.

45 Brito's family and lawyer Adriana Vigilanza, obtained court authorisation for a Red
46 Cross doctor to visit him but hospital authorities denied him access. Brito then began a
47 six-day thirst strike until the officials responsible finally allowed the Red Cross doctor
48 access. By this time, Brito weighed 43 kilograms. The Red Cross confirmed the precar-
49 ious state of his health and recommended specialised treatment but did not comment

1 on the conflict that had pitted Brito against the authorities. The Venezuelan govern-
2 ment classified Brito as 'suicidal' and 'mentally unbalanced'. On 14 December 2010,
3 five months after the striker's death, the national ombudsman Gabriela Ramírez declared
4 that she would be accusing the Brito family of 'incitement to suicide' (Rodríguez, 2013).
5 Similarly, she assured the press that the farmer 'did not possess the mental conditions
6 to bear out his demands'. These assertions are congruent with those made by Caracas
7 Psychiatric Hospital Director Ángel Arriera, a pro-government political militant and
8 activist, who stated that Brito suffered from 'delusional disorder' and a paranoid person-
9 ality (Rodríguez, 2013). For public opinion manufactured by the government, Brito went
10 from being a hunger striker to a dangerous psychiatric patient manipulated by groups
11 that opposed Chávez's government. This diagnosis was strongly refuted by other psychi-
12 atrists who followed the case, and the Venezuelan Association of Psychiatry published
13 several communiqués that stated that accusing non-conformists of mental illness was
14 tantamount to discrediting protest in the country (Rodríguez, 2013). After the farmer's
15 death his family had to seek legal help in order to defend themselves from the charges
16 of incitement to suicide.

17 During his hunger strikes Brito used a notebook to keep rigorous records of the quan-
18 tity of water he ingested and of urine he passed in order to balance his hydration. When
19 he was locked up in the storeroom, the medical personnel took away his notebook, and
20 without that control he inevitably lost more weight and suffered physical decompensa-
21 tion. Once he lost consciousness and was at the mercy of the hostile medical staff; when
22 he awoke for a few hours he was force fed. According to the medical report, he died of
23 respiratory failure caused by septic shock, but his daughter claims that the shock was
24 caused by abrupt and excessive rehydration. There is no doubt that Brito had already
25 suffered from the irreparable consequences of successive and prolonged hunger strikes.
26 However, the equilibrium between hydration and physiological decompensation that
27 Brito managed to create by controlling his body is worthy of note, since it was a very
28 sophisticated and efficient technique for hunger strikes. Brito's wife explains:

29 The doctors could be there and know how much serum they were admin-
30 istering, but Franklin knew how many electrolytes that serum contained
31 and if his body really needed that amount of electrolytes, because he had
32 been managing hunger strikes for many years back and there was never any
33 decompensation. So, when Franklin's condition got worse, he told them,
34 yelled at them: 'You are murderers, you want to kill me! You're filling
35 me with liquids, you're filling me with sodium!' (Interview with Helena
36 Iguaraya de Brito, Caracas, October 2010)
37

38 Returning to the set of circumstances that led the Brito family to this situation in
39 2005, at the time of the negotiations the family was in an extremely precarious economic
40 situation, so Brito accepted the government proposal of financial compensation in (old)
41 bolivars equivalent to US\$370,000 to make up for the unjustifiable dismissal from the
42 school, the loss of property and damage to the crops. He also received a new tractor.
43 Helena explained to me that they accepted that money in order to pay for the one-room
44 lodgings the family had been residing in for several years and to pay for food.

45 However, the sum is not really as generous as it may seem; amongst other things, it
46 encompassed the exoneration of a credit. In a 2009 testimony Brito clarified that this
47 was '800 million (old) bolivars, since they were received in 2005' (Brito, 5 October
48 2009). According to the exchange rate in place in 2005 (when US\$1 was worth 2150
49 bolivars), the sum was US\$372,093,00. However, the amount has been the object of

1 much speculation and is a sensitive issue for the family. Press reports that revisit the case
2 are confusing, as they were produced after the change in currency from the bolívar to
3 the Bolívar Fuerte (VEF) in January 2008, when the currency lost three zeroes, making
4 1000 bolivars equivalent to one VEF. The compensation was awarded before this change
5 took place, thus reducing the sum in real terms.

6 The government handed over the money in a highly unorthodox manner; Ángela
7 Brito recalls that cash was sent in an envelope from the Ministry for the Interior and
8 Justice to the hospital where Brito lay recovering from one of his hunger strikes and
9 brought by a motorcycle deliveryman and a bodyguard of the Minister for the Interior
10 and Justice, Jesse Chacón. Brito was asked to sign an affidavit stipulating that the pay-
11 ment was non-binding in a court of law and later the family learned that the minister
12 had justified the payment by claiming that Brito had sold him a house. Before returning
13 the farm, they also asked that he sign an affidavit stating that the invasion had never
14 taken place and that the National Lands Institute had never issued the agrarian letters
15 pertaining to his farm. Brito refused to sign this falsehood but, once he had received the
16 money, the government's image was saved and the case closed. At no time was there legal
17 acknowledgement of damages nor were the agrarian letters revoked. Iguaraya's invaders
18 withdrew from the occupied lands when they failed to receive subsidies promised to
19 work the land. Once the most productive in the area, the property in litigation was left
20 in utter abandonment.

21 President Chávez addressed the problem again in 2007 after Brito, with the help of
22 Adriana Vigilanza, a lawyer that he found through COFAVIC (Committee for Families
23 and Victims), took the case before the Inter-American Court of Human Rights. Brito
24 justified the decision to amputate his finger through his belief that it was the only way
25 for Chávez to intercede in his case. Feeling that he was neither heard nor taken into
26 account, he believed the institutional path to be futile. His struggle was for a formality
27 that made no sense within the networks of informal mechanisms of power and of the
28 personal arrangements that he had to establish with those who detained him. Brito's
29 demands were, in a sense, nonsense to the institutional logic of Venezuela's Bolivarian
30 Revolution. In Brito's own words:

31 And so, on 10 November 2005, I amputated my first finger and on 13
32 November 2005 the President publicly commanded the then Minister for
33 Internal Affairs and Justice, Jesse Chacón, to solve my problem in his name.
34 And Minister Chacón committed himself to pay me for the damage to my
35 crops, to pay me and my wife what was owed by the Ministry of Education
36 for three years, to return my farm and to support us through some credits
37 to allow us to begin production anew. Minister Jesse Chacón only fulfilled
38 the promise of paying us for the Ministry of Education's debt and the damage
39 to the crops. The people he tasked with returning the farm said that the
40 only way that they would return the farm was for me to sign an affidavit,
41 with the invader beside me, in front of the invader, saying that this person
42 had never invaded and that the INTI never granted agrarian letters encom-
43 passing my farm and because I would not agree to do that, because it had
44 not been so, they did not return my farm. (Brito 5 October 2009)

46 It was after the amputation that Chávez turned his gaze towards Brito and intervened
47 in the matter. As Brito points out, the president designated a commission, but the purpose
48 of the commission was not to revoke the invaders' agrarian letters but to negotiate with
49 them. Why were agrarian letters issued to occupy lands that were not idle? It was a

1 blatant reprisal by the local authorities against Brito for a technical report showing that
2 it was not necessary to purchase pesticides to combat fungus. This notwithstanding,
3 Brito was not considered a victim, as he demanded, but as a party who had to reach an
4 amicable agreement. The problem was that he was unwilling to negotiate; he considered
5 himself a victim and not a party who had to reach an agreement. This way of posing the
6 matter makes it difficult for other actors to take sides in the conflict, since this discourse
7 is not based on the demands of a group but on the denouncement of an outrage.

10 **Compassionate Militarism**

12 In Chávez's carefully crafted rhetoric, since his failed 1992 coup d'état, the figure
13 of Simón Bolívar has been of paramount importance, mainly because he stands as the
14 symbol of national unity based on the harmonious identification of the armed forces
15 with *el pueblo* (the people). Chavismo – the political movement created by Hugo
16 Chávez in the 1990s – merges with a specific political and cultural tradition in which
17 the armed forces are seen as the only institution with the historical responsibility
18 of organising the nation-state. Furthermore, in his often highly theatrical discourse,
19 Chávez justified the need for the military forces, especially the army, as an institution
20 with an essential role to play in social welfare. A good example of this conception of
21 the armed forces as a 'militia for social assistance' that transpired is Chávez's insistence
22 that the soldiers leave the barracks and get engaged in *the* most important battle to be
23 waged: the battle against poverty.

24 The issue that I want to tease out is the militaristic ethos of Bolivarianism (Carrera
25 Damas, 1989) as a purported national ideology. In other words, the entrenched idea
26 that the armed forces, especially the army, is the *only* institution historically capable
27 of establishing, regulating and maintaining the Republican order, as demonstrated after
28 the turbulent nineteenth century, when Venezuela's political fate was all but subject to
29 the capricious authoritarianism of regional caudillos. In the case of Venezuela's greatest
30 hero, the retelling of his 'victorious' deed, with quasi-mythological undertones, laid the
31 foundations of what has been called a 'Bolivarian theology' (Castro Leiva, 1984) – a
32 conception of Bolívar as a tragic hero whose selfless sacrifice constitutes the principle of
33 both the motherland's redemption from centuries of colonialism and the people's hope of
34 liberation – a secular yet quasi-Christian narrative according to which the armed forces
35 are 'providentially' appointed with the mission of bringing about national emancipation.
36 The political project spearheaded by Chávez is a direct descendant of this tradition.

37 The political use of the Bolivarian myth – its instrumentalisation through ceaseless
38 invocations and ever-present images – follows a strategy of hope renewal and the mobil-
39 isation of strong nationalist sentiments. Chávez's political discourse stood always in
40 stark opposition to traditional political parties. It typified a nationalist version of the
41 civil cult to Bolívar, in which the hero's figure became an ideological buoy to keep his
42 strongly anti-partisan political movement afloat. In fact, it could be argued that as a
43 political faction, Chavismo was founded on a civic-military alliance that was substan-
44 tially more nationalist than revolutionary. At the beginning of 1990s, when the first
45 *Bolivarianos* made their entry onto the political scene, their ideology did not match
46 *at all* that of a progressive discourse or a movement of social transformation. Quite the
47 opposite: when they first arrived on the political scene, the Bolivarian commanders dis-
48 played an unwavering militaristic political identity: a quasi-mystical identity connected
49 to Catholic iconography and also to popular religious imagery, which was intended to

1 invest the Bolivarian leaders (one could say, somewhat successfully) with a quasi divine
2 character, through the deployment of images and symbols regarded as sacred in the
3 political arena.

4 The strategic merger of the civil cult of Bolívar with a radical rhetoric of social trans-
5 formation was effective in bringing about the consolidation of a political consciousness
6 governed by redemptive images, which ultimately helped legitimate the Bolivarian Revo-
7 lution from 1998 until the death of its leader in 2013. As Michael Taussig has shown, by
8 1992 Hugo Chávez had already begun to incarnate for the popular imagination a new
9 sacralised version of the Bolivarian cult, by presenting himself as the emissary of Simón
10 Bolívar's spirit (Taussig, 1997: 108). His failed coup d'état was a message addressed
11 to the people from Bolívar himself, of the beginning of a new and radically powerful
12 chapter in the Gospel of Bolívar, according to Hugo Chávez.

13 The political model implanted when Chávez triumphed in 1998 was founded on an
14 outright rejection of Puntofijismo, the previous political model, considered corrupt and
15 inefficient in many respects as well as unable to guarantee the full exercise of social
16 and political rights, especially for the least-favoured social classes (Rey, 1991). President
17 Chávez's political project was also founded on a rejection of formal, liberal, 'represent-
18 ative democracy', but the creation of a 'participatory democracy' failed; it has never
19 managed to become pluralist in practice (Gómez Calcano and Arenas, 2012). The verti-
20 cal construction of this new bureaucracy through the subsequent creation of an official
21 party, the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV), comes into direct conflict with the
22 pluralist principles of the 1999 Constitution. These structural changes in the institutions
23 gradually resulted in the almost total concentration of power in the executive.

24 The Brito case condenses a political logic and a way of governing that I have labelled
25 'compassionate militarism' (Vásquez Lezama, 2014). An authority, often military, is the
26 one that decides who suffers and who does not, who deserves the attention of the gov-
27 ernment and who is legitimised to present demands. The power that officials bring to
28 bear upon people's daily lives in the political system created by Chavismo is immense.
29 The decisions that those in power make, be they due to corruption or clientelism, are
30 justified through emotions. Brito's refusal to validate the solution proposed by Chávez
31 demonstrates the limits of the revolutionary narrative, of the history that Venezuelan
32 officialdom wanted to write and which, in this particular case, was unable to. In this
33 official discourse, it was Chávez who decided what was fair and what was not. He, and
34 only he, could solve, could resolve and dilute conflict. But Brito wanted legal recogni-
35 tion and rejected any compensation stemming from an amicable arrangement. In this
36 regard, the farmer challenged the entire political edifice that characterises Chavismo:
37 a political system where the military authority decides which social group is suffering
38 and which not; which group, or rather, which discursive construct of a social group
39 devised by Chávez – the 'victims' or the *pueblo soberano* (sovereign people) – will be
40 considered as legitimate plaintiff. This operation is performed not from a legal point of
41 view but from an emotional and affective one, rooted in the relationship that the leader
42 establishes with his followers.

43

44

45 Somatic Culture

46

47 Franklin Brito's suffering physical body provokes particular emotions in a given cul-
48 tural context. This context is part of what has been named 'somatic culture' (Detrez,
49 2002), that is, everything related to the body and translated into the common sphere of

1 social life in a coherent manner. Brito's protest, in fact, was a somatic process, which
2 deployed a particular corporeal practice of extreme degradation of the body, a prac-
3 tice that Venezuelan society rejects on the basis of its cultural principles. The media
4 presence of images of Brito's extremely thin frame, his gaunt visage, his seated, waiting
5 posture, shirtless and prostrate, is deeply troubling in symbolic terms. Brito was neither
6 disenfranchised nor mad. In full knowledge of the facts, Brito placed himself in an unac-
7 ceptable physical state, violating his body's integrity in order to denounce his accusers.
8 The manner in which a culturally repugnant act is transformed into an act of protest is,
9 above all, a political phenomenon.

10 Franklin Brito carried out a total of six hunger strikes, including one with lips sewn
11 shut and the amputation of a phalanx. Reconstructing the Brito case can make it intelli-
12 gible in a context and political process marked by violence. The Brito case is, in effect, a
13 unique case, which generates problems and raises questions. The singularity of the incar-
14 nation of a conflict and the fact that Franklin Brito's was the first death by hunger strike
15 in Venezuelan history, turn him into a sort of disruptive body that appears dramatically
16 in the political sphere without the meaning of his action being fully understood.

17 Violence against oneself and self-inflicted torture are no novelty in Venezuela. How-
18 ever, such manifestations were restricted to closed, confined spaces, situated at the mar-
19 gins of society, particularly in prisons and juvenile detention centres. Franklin Brito's
20 hunger strikes and self-mutilations, carried out in the public space and before the media,
21 mark a before and after in the history of protest in Venezuela. It was towards the end
22 of the 1990s that the Venezuelan press began to mention the 'blood strikes' or 'cutting'
23 of the arms by prisoners with razor blades in order to provoke bloodletting, notably
24 among the prisoners at El Dorado jail, an establishment situated in an isolated zone
25 of the Venezuelan Amazon jungle in the south of the country known for having vio-
26 lent, subhuman conditions of detention (López Maya, 2003). Over the past 30 years
27 conditions in Venezuelan jails have worsened; since 2004, the percentage of prisoners
28 awaiting sentencing has oscillated between 50 and 70 percent and Venezuelan jails have
29 been classified as the most violent in the continent with 498 dead per year in 2008
30 out of a population of 22,000 inmates (Clarembeaux, 2009). Blood strikes have also
31 been reported in juvenile detention centres (Márquez, 1999: 207-208). For those social
32 groups marginalised and subjected to violent institutional treatment, the physical body
33 was a resource that allowed them to be seen and heard, through spectacular and extreme
34 gestures such as self-mutilation.

35 President Chávez's discourse positioned him permanently as a victim: victim of his ill-
36 ness, victim of conspiracies and victim of the repression of his failed coup d'état through
37 his identification with the fallen soldiers of February 1992. Following Girard (1972),
38 sacrifice works to the degree that it is founded upon a mechanism of victimisation: the
39 scapegoat phenomenon makes sense. With these elements to hand, let us see how the
40 logic of sacrifice functions in Bolivarian Venezuela. The fighting between loyalist troops
41 and coup plotters on 4 February 1992 left around 200 dead. The official count, however,
42 is seventeen. Since the coup failed and its leaders surrendered, it was inevitable that the
43 soldiers' deaths should have been perceived as useless. At the time of the surrender they
44 were an unnecessary sacrifice, blood spilt in vain. The political appropriation of these
45 deaths and their reconfiguration as images of sacrifice for the fatherland through com-
46 memoration rituals conceived and orchestrated by the Bolivarian government, would
47 not take place until much later, once Hugo Chávez came to power in December 1998.
48 The depictions of 4 February 1992, presented during official rituals held during Chávez's
49 two administrations, functioned as a very efficient recovery of the language of sacrifice.

1 The transmutation of Bolivarian soldiers into martyrs has been a difficult task for the
2 ideologues of the Bolivarian Revolution and it is worth asking if they have really been
3 efficient at it.

4 But reducing Brito to the figure of martyr is risky, as that invokes the idea of necessary
5 sacrifice and I believe that, in the case of Franklin Brito, we see the configuration of a
6 useless sacrifice to the extent that neither the hate nor rancour dominating the social
7 group were removed, which would be the primordial function of any sacrificial action,
8 following Girard. During this research I also interviewed Vilcar Fernández, a student at
9 Universidad de los Andes in Mérida, who carried out three hunger strikes and stitched
10 his lips shut during the student protests of 2010. The Mérida students met with José
11 Miguel Insulza, Secretary General of the OAS in March 2011. In official media channels
12 such as TELESUR, the students were described as a 'conservative movement'. It could be
13 said that they were able to raise their case via the mass media more efficiently than Brito,
14 since they managed to get the government to sit down repeatedly after holding several
15 hunger strikes between 2009 and 2011. At the time of our interview, Vilcar Fernández
16 believed that he had walked away victorious from his struggle against the government,
17 having reached some agreements, and the hunger strikes had ceased.

18 By contrast, and in spite of COFAVIC's mobilisation before the Inter-American Court
19 of Human Rights, there were no crowds at the doors of the hospital and no mobilisations
20 after Brito's death. His funeral was held at Río Caribe church, very close to Irapa, Sucre
21 State, in the east of the country, the town where he was born in September 1960. Helena
22 Brito's reference to the shame they felt as people and as a family in the face of the
23 profound degradation to which Brito submitted his body is significant and is part of
24 the question of the relationship between culture and emotions. In a society in which the
25 beauty of the body is the mirror of social priorities and aspirations (Gackstetter Nichols,
26 2013), Brito's actions were in fact denigrating:

AQ3 27 The press did not give great coverage nor was there total support. The few
28 journalists that really approached us and did their job properly did it in the
29 knowledge that Franklin deserved full respect and support. In the beginning
30 it was difficult because it was a lonely struggle, a shameful struggle. Our
31 loneliness, though our protests were public and our protest was done in
32 the name of the rights of all Venezuelans and not in the name of the Brito
33 family, and they dared not stand up to the government. (Interview with
34 Helena Iguaraya de Brito, Caracas, October 2010)
35

36 The dominant models of beauty and of bodily care in Venezuela are entrenched in
37 the media space where Brito was exposed. This explains the feelings of shame and lone-
38 liness experienced by his family: the image of a man so physically degraded affords few
39 opportunities for generating reactions other than disgust or repugnance. For Brito to
40 be recognised as someone worthy of at least being heard required immense discursive
41 work, because his image broke, on an aesthetic level, with very strong cultural canons
42 and norms related to the inviolability of the body.

43 44 45 **Conclusion**

46
47 It is a principle of modernity to keep consciousness of the physical body at arm's
48 length. But if there is a place where power manifests itself, it is precisely in the flesh
49 of the individual, to the point that it would not be an exaggeration to speak of the

1 incorporation of power, as shown by Ernst Kantorowicz (1989) in a political theology
2 essay on medieval royalty. Power becomes incarnate, but not just on the side of the
3 powerful, the sovereign, but also on the side of those subjected to his rules. In this
4 regard, Franklin Brito is an example of the way in which the body comes into view: his
5 body is the only truth he had in order to be considered worthy in a given moment of
6 his story.

7 Brito challenged Chavismo's political edifice insofar as it constitutes a military author-
8 ity that decides which social group is suffering and which not, and which will be con-
9 sidered legitimate plaintiffs. Did the concrete systematic elements of the discourse of
10 confrontation that characterised Chávez (Langue, 2014: 122) preclude the resolution of
11 this case? Why was there nothing in Venezuelan public space to transcend and overcome
12 the deep senses of resentment, anger and rancour of Brito's family and all the people that
13 supported him in his struggle? In any event, this case demonstrates the limits of the revo-
14 lutionary narrative, since Brito sought legal recognition and rejected any compensation
15 stemming from an 'amicable' arrangement.

16 In Venezuela, the physical body has become the site for speech by those whose voices
17 no longer correspond to the norms imposed by the state. This form of communication
18 draws on a process of recognition of radical physical alterations as well as the Christian
19 ethos that characterises Latin American societies. Together, these forces of recognition
20 make the body a privileged medium for the expression of individuals' voices. The phys-
21 ical body is at once the place and the instrument of the protest action. Hence, Brito's
22 case is paradigmatic and unique, since it took protest to an extreme never seen before
23 in the country. Even though Brito's struggle was not absorbed by the fight for a col-
24 lective political cause, it had universal transcendence because it condensed a series of
25 institutional ills and incarnated them – literally – in public space. His individual action
26 challenged the institutional system, the political regime, as well as the specific manner
27 in which Chávez's Bolivarian Revolution conceived the power of the state.

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