

Speaking Birds and Cosmic Kites: Belief Narratives and Conspiracy Theories Regarding Latin American Political

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Abstract

This article deals with conspiracy narratives regarding two deceased Latin American leaders from Venezuela and Argentina, Hugo Chávez and Néstor Kirchner. These narratives, circulating on the Internet, are supported by allusions to ritualized communications with the dead, such as the supernatural apparition of Chávez as a speaking bird and of Kirchner as a “cosmic kite.” Such symbols are used as argumentative strategies to legitimate political programs, in narratives whose rhetorical construction is based on a synecdochic logic connected with the global threats to local cultures. These discourses show a folklorization process of these political figures, presented as emblematic metaphors of local identities rooted in the traditional past.

Keywords: belief narratives, conspiracy theories, apocalyptic rhetoric, political folklore, Latin American

Introduction

Hugo Chávez (1954–2013) and Néstor Kirchner (1950–2010) were presidents of the South American Republics of Venezuela and Argentina. In both cases, their death made room to rumours dealing with conspiracy theories, reflected in narrative expressions.¹ These narratives, circulating in Internet, dealt as well with allusions to ritualized communications with the dead, such as the reference of the supernatural apparition of Hugo Chavez as a “speaking bird” and of

¹ This article revisits and updates an oral presentation delivered at the 2016 Joint Meeting of the American Folklore Society and the International Society for Folk Narrative Research, “Unfinished Stories: Folklife and Folk Narrative at the Gateway to the Future” held in Miami, USA, in 2016.

Argentinian President Kirchner in the size of a “cosmic kite.” These allusions made, respectively, by Nicolás Maduro, in one of his initial discourses as the elected president of Venezuela after Hugo Chávez passed away, and by Cristina Kirchner in one of her last discourses as an Argentinian president, refer to social beliefs in the supernatural. On the one hand, such narratives are used in political performances to legitimate political programs. On the other hand, they support explanatory hypothesis dealing with conspiracy actions whose effectiveness is proved by anecdotes such as the one of a hypothetical murder of president Chávez and of Nestor Kirchner provoked by intelligence agencies that have ordered the development of lethal drugs oriented to destroy Latin American popular leaders. The rhetoric construction of these narratives is based on a synecdochic logic connected with global threats to local cultural identities.

In previous research (Palleiro, *Fueunahistoria real* 193–195; Palleiro *La damafantasma*), I dealt with apocalyptic folk narratives such as “Welcome to AIDS club,” considering AIDS as a global pest affecting local identities. In this research, I pointed out that these narratives could relate to apocalyptic prophecies. In this new presentation, I focus my attention in the argumentative use of these narratives to legitimate political discourses, and in the folklorisation process of contemporary political popular leaders, whose roots can be found in the traditional past. In fact, beliefs regarding speaking birds can be found in Mexican *corridos* that mention the supernatural apparition of finches and mockingbirds singing in the grave of the other vernacular leader, Pancho Villa (1878–1923). These *corridos* are popular songs containing traditional motifs whose semantic content deal with zoomorphic representations of the human soul as a bird or as a flying object that can be found in ancient cultures, from Egyptian to aboriginal ones. In short, the aim is to propose an approach to these apocalyptic narratives in contemporary cultures, considered as expressions of global threats to local identities.

Political Folklore in Latin America: A Conceptual Approach

The term “political folklore” can be used as a concept embracing folklore which emerges from the political process, which includes both beliefs and vernacular narratives, as well as images

related to political events (Astapova).² The rhetoric construction is a kernel concept to analyze the texts I deal with in this article dealing with discourse of political leaders, in which social beliefs and vernacular narratives are used to attract the attention (and the votes) of the audience. To discuss this subject, I will begin contextualising this presentation in the frame of the aforesaid previous research, regarding global threats to local identities and metaphoric symbols of collective beliefs.

AIDS, Rhetoric of Illness and Global Threats

In the aforesaid previous research, I dealt with global threats regarding AIDS and other “global pests” (Briggs) such as anthrax. In that opportunity, I worked with oral and virtual narrative versions regarding the spreading of AIDS through sexual rapports or infected syringes (Palleiro, “SIDA, ántrax y Halloween;” Palleiro, *Fueunahistoria real*; Palleiro, *La damafantasma*). In these narratives, a young girl infected by AIDS was presented as a metaphor of exogroupal and global dangers, transmitted to local people through sexual rapports.³ As I have already discussed (Palleiro, *La damafantasma* 113–120), there is a strong connection between warning messages regarding AIDS and those regarding other global threats, such as Covid, in recent times. In these narratives, I pointed out the synecdochic logic of a single case, such as the one of a Brazilian girl having sex with an Argentinian guy, with global consequences such as the one of spreading a global disease (Briggs). According to the constructive process of tradition (Fine), this message connects the present with the recent past, in which the young couple had sex, with a projection to

² Anastasiya Astapova uses these concepts to analyse rumours or conspiracy theories regarding the Soviets who were presumably destroying the Belarusian nation.

³ One of the oral versions regarding AIDS I dealt with is the following, collected in the Argentinian context of Buenos Aires city in 1990, narrated by Nando, a young university student aged 19:

This was told to my sister...That a[n Argentinian] guy went to Brazil, he met a Brazilian girl, a “*garota*.” He invited her to a hotel, they spent the whole night together, they had sex, everything OK...And in the morning, when he woke up, the girl had disappeared, and in the mirror, he found the following message written by the girl with a lipstick: “Welcome to AIDS club” ...Mary–It is said that also in European beaches, there can be found advertisements, fixed in the sand with syringes: “Welcome to AIDS world“. In these versions, AIDS is presented as an exogroupal threat to local Argentinian security, being the young girl who transmitted AIDS through sexual rapports associated with exogroupal places, such as Brazil or Europe. (Palleiro, *Fueunahistoria real*, 193–195)

a future of disease and infection. Apparently irrelevant details (Mukarovsky) such as a message in a mirror announcing “Welcome to AIDS club” have a metaphoric force, which proposes as an interpretative clue a generalization and a linkage between literal and figured semantic spheres. The textual structure of this narrative corresponds to the one of an *exemplum* in which the narrative serves as an argumentative proof supporting a moral affirmation (Welter) regarding the danger of having sex with unknown people. The texture of these narratives, whose semantic content includes warning messages against global illness such as AIDS, deals with a rhetoric of infection, associated with exogroupal dangers. These narratives can include as well allusions to other threats as unknown forces associated with collective beliefs, which cause terrible damages to the social and political order of local communities, according to a synecdochic logic. This synecdochic logic, along with the metaphoric use of symbols regarding illness and death, acts as an argumentative structure, oriented to warn the audience against conspiracy actions associated with global perils.

Cancer and Other Illnesses: Conspiracy Theories regarding Latin American Leaders

A distinctive feature of the construction of a myth around these two deceased Latin American leaders, Hugo Chávez and Néstor Kirchner, is the attribution of their deaths to conspiracy actions, such as murders provoked by global forces such as the CIA. According to the same synecdochic logic regarding AIDS, these conspiracy actions are considered as attacks against local political identities provoked by global forces. These conspiracy narratives, circulating not only in oral versions but also in Internet and even in local newspapers, have been supported by allusions to supernatural communications with the dead, that will be analysed in the following section. In this way, the death of Hugo Chavez has been attributed not only to an illness such as cancer but also to mysterious causes connected with the intervention of intelligence agencies of the USA such as the CIA, as it can be seen in this comment made by Gabriela Rocha, aged 24, student of Folklore of the National University of Arts, Argentina in May 2016:

Nestor Kirchner has been killed by the CIA, as it is said. Have you seen that the USA has a little device which reaches the places where the great Latin American leaders are and it kills them? The same thing with Chávez....Also, Christina has

troubles with her health,withtiroides. Chavez warned her: “They want to kill us”[The last one is an allusion to a hypothetical conversation between Christina Kirchner and Hugo Chávez, held in Argentina in occasion of Néstor Kirchner’s burial]

From an emic standpoint, it is possible to re-construct “contextual definitions” (Magariños 2006 [1998]) of certain expressions, through which a concept can be explained with the same words used by an enunciator to speak about it. According to a contextual definition, conspiracy can be characterized as an action oriented to “kill us” with a “little device” provided by “the CIA”, that is to say, by a global force that puts in danger local leaders, such as Hugo Chávez and Néstor Kirchner (the husband of Christina, who became the president of Argentina after her husband passed away). This is a vernacular definition, provided by the afore named Argentinian young citizen Gabriela Rocha.Both Christina Kirchner and Maduro apply as well to myths and vernacular beliefs, which will be considered in the following section. The semantic content of the term “vernacular” is connected with the everyday order of culture, and developed in person-to-person interaction without the mediation of institutional codes or controls, as a term contrastive to “standard” (Noyes 18). Such a definition of conspiracy has been registered, in fact, in a face-to-face interaction between Gabriela Rocha and me, without any mediation. Latin American leaders are aware of such connotations, when using vernacular culture to address the audience in order to gain popular consensus, and this everyday order of culture is also registered in the local Latin-American press. In this way, conspiracy theories regarding Hugo Chàvez have also been mentioned by the virtual press from Venezuela, as it can be seen in the following link, in which the audio is followed by a written text in Spanish:

Terrible video: “The video that may prove that Hugo Chavez has been killed by the USA has come to light” By Ciber SUR Venezuela:



A mystery surrounds the death of the most powerful man in Latin America and as well as the worldwide leader of socialism Hugo Chavez, opening the possibility of an infection caused by an induced cancer as the same commander Chavez and other Latin American leaders had stated before their death. Top-secret projects of the Defense Department of the USA and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) carried out by the development center in Fort Detrick dealing with biological weapons, could be behind his death in developing a lethal cancer. It is noteworthy that the iron man of Latin America, Hugo Chávez, was considered the enemy number one of the USA, an extremely dangerous leader for their imperial and dominant interests in the world.

NOTE: This article does not indicate as definitive proof material content, it just mentions a strong possibility.

This added note acts as a modalizing clause that presents the “news” just as a “strong possibility.” It is worth noticing here the allusion to biological weapons, as instruments of a global spread of infection, as well as the reference to “imperial and dominant interests” representing global forces such as the one of the CIA, also mentioned by Gabriela Rocha in her discourse regarding Néstor Kirchner. Such allusions may be considered as discursive strategies of a “rhetoric of global illness” based on a synecdochic logic. According to such logic, a single device could cause an illness to the whole world, as it has recently happened with the Covid virus spread by the contact of a human being with an infected bat in a local market place. In the case of Hugo Chávez, such synecdoche has the counterpart of a metaphoric identification of cancer with a global threat to Latin American local identities.

Cosmic Kites, Singing Birds, and Global Threats in Latin American Political Discourse

These conspiracy actions against the Argentinian president Nestor Kirchner and the president of Venezuela Hugo Chavez, has been sustained by rumours grounded in social beliefs. Besides, Argentinian president Kirchner has been also associated with local heroes such as the football player Diego Maradona, mythicized (yet alive) both by the local press and by other political leaders. For instance, Christina Kirchner, who became the Argentinian president after her husband passed away, used the metaphor of the “cosmic kite” attributed by the local sport journalist Victor Hugo Morales to Diego Maradona, to refer to the deceased president Nestor Kirchner.

In a political discourse pronounced at the end of her presidential period, she used such metaphor as an argumentative strategy, oriented to attract the attention of her audience, underlining as well her achievements as a president, inspired by her husband. In a similar way, the candidate to the presidency of Venezuela Nicolás Maduro affirmed having had a communication with the deceased president Hugo Chavez who, according to his narrative, came down from Heaven in the size of a bird to bless him as the future president of the aforesaid South American nation. Both cosmic kites and singing birds act as symbols of communication with the dead, connected with the mythopoetic process of both political leaders, whose death has been attributed to the conspiracy of global forces.

Singing Birds in the Graveyards: The South-American Tradition

The words of Nicolas Maduro when he applied for the presidency of Venezuelaregarding the appearance of deceased president Chavez as a singing bird have been registered in the Latin American Pres in the following terms:

MADURO SAID THAT CHAVEZ APPEARED TO HIM IN THE SIZE OF A LITTLE BIRD AND HE BLESSED HIM:

LAST MOMENT (...)BREAKING NEWS: Maduro said that Chavez has appeared to him in the size of a little bird and he added that this speaking bird blessed him

Wednesday, April 3rd, 2013, 19.19 pm

The officialist candidate to the presidential elections of April 14th affirmed that he felt the presence of the Bolivarian leader who passed away a month ago

CARACAS. The officialist candidate Nicolas Maduro affirmed that the president Hugo Chavez, who passed away a month ago, appeared to him in the size of a little bird and [...] blessed him when he began his career to the presidency. “I felt that he was there, blessing me and saying: “Today the battle begins. Go ahead until the victory. I bless you. I felt this from my soul.” This was what Maduro said in the yard of Chavez’s homeland in Sabaneta, state of Barinas, West Venezuela. Maduro [...], affirmed that, when he went to pray to a small Catholic chapel, all alone, the little bird appeared, and communicated with him whistling: “Suddenly a little singing bird appeared, and he turned around me flying near my head,” he said, pointing out to his head and imitating the movement of the wings. The bird—he went on, full of emotion—stopped near a wooden stick, and he began singing, almost whistling [...], he affirmed. [...] He whistled for a while, he turned round, and he went away, and I felt his spirit, the one of Hugo Chavez,” he explained.⁴

The presence of a singing bird as a demiurgic mediator is connected with social beliefs regarding communications with the dead. According to such beliefs, the bird is presented as a sort of personification of the dead president Chavez, who communicated with candidate Maduro through actions like singing and whistling. Such actions make the presidential candidate “feel” the presence of the dead president, blessing him for his political future. This fluid connection with the supernatural is a distinctive feature of folk discourse, in which dead people can speak by themselves or through other messengers such as objects or mediators. Both the discourse by Christina Kirchner regarding the “cosmic kite” and the one of Maduro regarding the speaking

⁴ <http://www.lanacion.com.ar/1569106-maduro-dice-chavez-se-aparecio-en-forma-de-pajarito-chiquitico-y-lo-bendiyo>

bird show a folklorisation process of the two leaders, Hugo Chávez and Néstor Kirchner, connected with the aforesaid mythopoietic process.

Speaking Birds and Social Beliefs in Latin American Cultures

The political speech of candidate Maduro, addressed to potential voters and supporters of Venezuela, shows a metaphorical identification of the bird with the soul of President Chavez, whose last moments have been referred by his closer relatives, such as her daughters, in religious terms. Actually, one of his daughters, when asked about the health of her father, declared: “He is with Christ.”

It is worth remembering the ancient belief of Aegyptian cultures regarding the *Kah*, which represents a part of the spirit of a dead person, in the size of a bird who leaves the body and flies up to Heaven. Closer to South American cultures, there is an indigenous belief among the Aztecs, spread in the northern part of South America, in the *nahual*, a sort of double of each human being in the animal domain. Such belief can be mixed up with the Catholic belief in an eternal life of the soul after one person dies. In his discourse, President Maduro made an argumentative use of such a syncretic blend of Catholic and indigenous beliefs, by proposing an identification process between him and president Chavez, who had appeared to him in the size of a bird. As Mukarovsky (1977) points out, communicating with the dead is a distinctive feature of folk discourse, whose semantic content deals with the discursive expression of social identities and collective beliefs. In this way, by appealing to folkloric topics, the candidate aimed to guarantee an identification with religious beliefs of his audience. Such identification of the soul of a Latin American political leader with a little bird can also be found in the abovementioned Mexican *corrido* traditions. For instance, one *corrido* regarding Pancho Villa (1878–1923), popular hero of the Mexican Revolution, includes an allusion to such birds singing sadly in his grave, to preserve his memory:

I see many goldfinches and Cenzontls passing by/
But these birds sing so sadly/
They are going to Chiuaua to cry over Parral/
Near the tomb of General Francis Villa//
They cry when they see the tomb/ Where General Villa is resting for ever/
Without any carnation, without any flower/
Only dry leaves left by the

wind//Long life General Francis Villa, long life to his memory! His memory is still alive// No one of his “dorados”[the soldiers of his troupe] wants to remember/That Villa is sleeping below the sky of Chihuahua/Only the birds that are singing near Parral[know that]/They are going to cry over his abandoned grave//Only one of his “dorados” who didn’t forget him/went to his grave to pray/A loyal friend, and a good soldier/wrote on his tomb:“Here I am, my General[...]Francis Villa” [...]//Let’s sing along, goldfinches and cenzotls,/And let their music be heard near the hills/ And when the birds fly over the sky of Parral/Let’s cry for General Francis Villa//Good by, good by, my little birds!/Me too, I want to remember to my countrymen/That Villa is resting there, in Parral,/ Embraced by the earth of his beloved homeland⁵. (My translation from Spanish)

This *corrido* refers to personified birds, able to feel sadness caused by the loneliness of dead people buried in a graveyard, such as the popular Latin American popular leader Francisco Villa. Such personification is connected with vernacular social beliefs regarding identifications between animals and human beings, brought to present by candidate Maduro in his allusion to the appearance of death president Chavez in the size of a singing bird.

The concept of vernacular religion⁶ is related to the religion as lived it, “as humans encounter, understand, interpret and practice it” (Primiano, “Vernacular Religion” 44), and it includes both verbal, material, behavioral expressions of belief in everyday life. Primiano (“Vernacular Religion”) argues against the common concept of official religion, as there is no objective existence of such practice, and not even the seeming authorities of official religion like the Pope or Dalai Lama live a religious life in a pure unadulterated form and, thus, the belief takes as many forms as there are individual believers. These forms of expressing social beliefs regarding the connection of Latin American leaders with the supernatural deals precisely with active creation and intriguing survival considered by Primiano. In Maduro’s case, vernacular beliefs are used to legitimate his political power, based on a Latin American resistance to hegemonic forces. In this sense, as Primiano (“Manifestations of the Religious Vernacular” 384)

⁵ https://youtu.be/GWc_c176dSs

⁶ “Vernacular” is a more general term than “folklore” in that it can refer to anything that is locally or regionally defined (Astapova).

affirms, “vernacular religiosity has a potential to manifest dimensions of both confirmation and contestation, of legitimization of the hegemonic as well as resistance to such societal and cultural manifestations of power.” Besides, individual persons consider their own reactions to the death of the loved ones very special, and not corresponding to the conventional reactions in their communities (Brady30). Nevertheless, there is a distinction that should be done between the individual reaction to the death of loved relatives and the public ones, and the argumentative use of these deaths as a political tool to provoke identification processes in the audience. Political discourses regarding death of Latin American leaders show that, in fact, such apparently counter-hegemonic expressive reactions are used as argumentative resources to gain votes. In vernacular religion, pro- and counter positions do not represent separate and opposite realms, but rather become partners in a symbiotic relationship of vernacular discourse with a multitude of subjective and individual dimensions. Moreover, also the political doctrines—institutionalized or high traditions—are themselves conflicting and not monolithic (Astapova). In fact, Latin American leaders themselves propose a symbiotic relationship of vernacular and institutional dimensions of social beliefs, in a rhetoric discourse oriented to attract the attention of the audience. Latin American political folklore is connected with these social beliefs, dealing in this case with mythopoetic processes of recently deceased leaders, used to support the leadership of the living ones. In this way, myths and folk motifs such as singing birds in an abandoned grave are used in these narratives as argumentative resources, which serve to convince the audience and to provoke apparently counter-hegemonic identification processes, in a sort of manipulation of social beliefs.

Deceased Argentinian President Nestor Kirchner and the “Cosmic Kite”

This flying bird, presented as a metaphoric representation of the deceased president Chavez whose communication with the candidate Maduro acts as a sort of legitimation symbol, is similar in a certain way to the “cosmic kite“ mentioned by Argentinian president Christina Kirchner—wife of the deceased president Néstor Kirchner—in her discourse pronounced also in an electoral period, oriented not only to support her candidate but also to highlight her achievements as a president, based on her husband’s ones. The difference is that Christina alluded as well to other vernacular Argentinian mythology dealing with a popular idol such as the football player Diego

Armando Maradona.⁷ As it will be explained in the next section, this allusion to the cosmic kite has an intertextual connection with the nickname attributed by the Argentinian sport journalist Victor Hugo Morales to Diego Armando Maradona, who can be considered as a sort of a personified national myth. Born as a poor child, Diego Maradona became a popular hero thanks to his extraordinary abilities displayed when playing football. Like candidate Maduro, also Christina Kirchner mixes up in her discourse elements from different semantic domains—football, vernacular popular beliefs and politics—and, in this way, she makes the abovementioned argumentative use of this nickname attributed to Maradona with the Catholic belief in a second life in Heaven, and with the political achievements of her husband's presidency such as the Argentinian satellites *Arsat1* and 2. In a metaphoric condensation, the “cosmic kite” brings to the memory of the audience both the nickname of Diego Maradona and the *Arsat* satellites mixed up with religious beliefs in a second life in Heaven, associated with the deceased president Nestor Kirchner. Like Maduro when he cited deceased president Chávez, Christina also used the image of the death president to legitimate her own image, as it can be seen in the following piece of news:

TN (*TODO NOTICIAS*. All news)—Politics—Christina remembered Nestor [Kirchner]: “He is up above, as a sort of cosmic kite.”

The President named her husband more than one time in her discourse pronounced at Palermo [An Argentinian neighbourhood of Buenos Aires city] (...)

Friday, November 6th, 2015

“COSMIC KITE” Christina used the expression created by the journalist Victor Hugo Morales.

It has been during an official event in which she inaugurated the [...]Scientific and Technologic Pole [...]. In the middle of the discourse, Christina Kirchner looked up above, to the sky, and she remembered his husband: “He [Deceased President Nestor Kirchner] is up there [Christina points up her finger towards the sky], with

⁷For a study of the cult to Argentinian popular idols, see Palleiro (“El Folklore y la narrativa de creencias”) and to the specific cult to Diego Maradona, see Lucero.

the Arsat 1 and Arsat 2 [Two Argentinian satellites] as a cosmic kite, as somebody who had a dream, as somebody who strongly dreamed with a great nation, as somebody who had such a strong dream that his heart did not tolerate his dreams.” That was what Christina said when she inaugurated the Scientific Pole of Buenos Aires city.

Christina Kirchner used the expression created by journalist Victor Hugo Morales to refer to the famous football player Diego Armando Maradona when he managed to win the football match against England with a goal. Christina devoted almost the whole act to underline the achievements of her career as a president and then she criticized the role of the media in the diffusion of some political actions: “The hegemonic media invisibilize everything [...],” she remarked. She also criticized the justice and the opposition [...] [represented by the political group Let’s change!, whose leader Mauricio Macri won the election and became the Argentinian president during the period [2015–2019].

Official political discourses based on hegemonic consensus are contested by counter-hegemonic alternative practices attempting to disrupt current attachments in order to install another form of hegemony based on a new collective will (Astapova). In the Argentinian case, Christina Kirchner made an argumentative rhetoric use both of counter-hegemonic discourses, by attacking the “hegemonic media” and made also an argumentative use of counter hegemonic practices such as vernacular religion, create identification processes with the audience. By mentioning the “cosmic kite” connected with the football player Diego Maradona, an Argentinian symbol of “national and popular” Latin American counter-hegemonic discourse, Christina Kirchner constructed herself as another symbol of this alternative discourse, in opposition to the “great empire” symbolized by British and North America. According to her discourse, that “great Empire” was supported by the candidate of the political opposition, Mauricio Macri. It is worth noticing that the epithetic nickname “cosmic kite,” used to allude to Maradona when he defeated the English football team, metaphorically identified with hegemonic forces, refers to a vernacular mythology oriented to create an identification effect in the audience. To be effective in organizing and mobilizing opinion, a myth must resonate and, in the field of vernacular imagination, mythic elements are charged by means of emotions and thus

gain an expressive and world-altering power (Astapova). As an element of such vernacular mythology, the cosmogonic allusion to the kite made by Christina Kirchner was likely to resonate in the Argentinian audience, since it was charged with emotions perceived by the receivers. In fact, one of the receivers of Christina's discourse, named Virginia, (aged 58, university studies, Buenos Aires, August 2016) affirmed that "Christina's words have a special impact on me... She awakes on me feelings, not only ideas"). This identification effect that appeals to the pathos is also connected with this argumentative usage of vernacular mythology in political discourse.

The Cosmic Kite, Pre-Texts and Intertexts: The Birth of a Vernacular Mythology

The pre-text of the political discourse in which Christina Kirchner used the vernacular metaphor of the "cosmic kite" was, as aforesaid, the retelling that the journalist Víctor Hugo Morales made of a football match in which Argentina defeated the English team in the 1986 World Cup that took place in Mexico. In that occasion, the football player Diego Maradona made a goal that gave the victory to the Argentinian team, and such victory made room to the journalist Víctor Hugo Moralesto said that Maradona was a "cosmic kite." This discourse was reproduced in Internet, in the site "Argentinian Famous sentences" ("*Frasas Argentinas*") on 01/11/2009, with an introductory comment which qualifies this speech as a "mythical" one:

Formulaic sentence pronounced by journalist Victor Hugo Morales, when referring the second goal of Diego Maradona against the English football team:
"Cosmic kite, where are you coming from? Which planet are you coming from?"

Such comment acted as a metapragmatic introduction that highlighted the poetic force of this metaphor regarding the mythification process of the football player. In fact, after Argentina lost the war against English nation for the possession of Falkland Islands in 1982, this victory in a football match had the sense of a metaphoric revenge condensed in the person of Diego Maradona, who became a symbol of nationality inspired by supernatural or even cosmic forces. The force of this metaphor can be seen in the following speech, corresponding to the retelling of this football match, which was the textual context of this allusion to the "cosmic kite:"

The ball is for Diego, here he goes, Maradona, he has the possession of the ball, he goes right, he, the genius of the football of the whole world: Genius, genius, genius, I want to cry! My God, Diego, goal, great goal, Maradona, a memorable goal of all the times, Maradona, a cosmic kite, where did you come from, from which planet, to win against all those English players??? You allow all the people to shout “Argentina!” Argentina 2, England 0 Diego, Diego, Diego Armando Maradona, Thank you! Thanks, Heaven, for the football, for Maradona, for all these tears, for this Argentina 2, England 0. From his own area, Maradona has moved 62 mts in 10 seconds avoiding six English players (Hodde, Reid, Sansom, Butcher, Fenwick and Shilton).⁸

A post-text of this narrative discourse, in which the journalist referred the chronicle of the football match between Argentina and England, that shows as well the mythification process of Diego Maradona, is the following popular song by the popular composer Rodrigo Bueno (1973–2000), with lyrics by Rodrigo Bueno and Alejandro Romero, that alludes as well to the action of winning the football match against the English team by holding the ball with her right hand which, as he himself explained, has been the “hand of God.” The lyrics of the song narrates Maradona’s biography, from his humble birth up to his brilliant career as a football player, and his problems with drugs. The text highlights his heroic triumphs, his talent as a player, and includes as well a comparison of his sufferings with the ones of Jesus Christ, in a mythification process of a man who gave glory to his homeland:

In a villa [poor neighbourhood] he was born, this has been the willing of God, /he had to grow and survive in a humble expression/ To face adversity with the aim of earning the life/ In a *potrero*(yard) he constructed an immortal left/with a thirsty experience of achieving goals/ Since he was *acebollita*[textual translation: “little onion”]⁹/ he dreamt to play in the World Cup/ and to be consecrated in the Champions League/ Maybe in this way he could help his family// As soon as he

⁸The same discourse can nowadays be retrieved from the virtual source: <https://www.elperiodico.com/es/deportes/20100815/barrilete-cosmico-planeta-viniste-436015>.

⁹Vernacular expression used to name an amateur player.

began playing for the first time/ Marad6, Marad6/ The “twelf” [The public of the football stadium] began singing “Marad6, Marad6”/ His dream was a star/full of kicking and goals/ And all folks sang:/ Marad6, Marad6/The hand of God is now born/Marad6, Marad6/ He gave happiness to his people/ he gave glory to this homeland// He hold a cross on his shoulders for being the best/ for having fought against the power/ Curious weakness. If Jesus fell down/ Why not he?/ [...] (“The hand of God” by Rodrigo Bueno)

Both the allusion to “the hand of God”, mentioned in this song and the one of the “cosmic kite” invented by journalist Victor Hugo Morales became nicknames for Diego Maradona, whose mythification process can be seen in this popular song by the Argentinian singer Rodrigo Bueno, that presents Maradona as a sort of popular hero, born in a humble place, who managed to give “glory to his homeland” and then shared the destiny of Jesus Christ, carrying a “cross on his shoulders.” The song alludes as well to the identification of his people with him, as a symbol of Argentinian nation, blessed by the “hand of God” associated, in a metaphoric condensation, with the hand of Maradona helping to make the goal that gave to the Argentinians the victory over the English team in the 1986 World Cup. Such discourses are the pre-texts of the political discourse by Christina Kirchner, in which she identified her deceased husband with a “cosmic kite,” as an argumentative resource to convince the audience about the inspired political achievements of her government.

Hegemony, Counterhegemony and Myth

According to Gramsci (1985), political hegemony can be understood as the predominance of the state obtained through intellectual and moral leadership. Gramsci’s idea is complemented with the additional dichotomy of myth and imaginary. Gramsci’s idea is complemented with the additional dichotomy of myth and imaginary. From this point of departure, hegemony implies a political control resulting from consent rather than force. By using such argumentative strategies connected with vernacular symbols such as Maradona, Christina Kirchner tries to obtain such consensus in her audience. Paradoxically, both Christina Kirchner and Maduro allude in their discourse to counter-hegemonic social beliefs to impose such hegemonic effect of predominance

not only intellectual but also moral leadership. Myth can also be considered as an element of counter-hegemony (Laclau). Both Christina Kirchner and Maduro refer to myths in their political discourses connected with counter-hegemony and, moreover, they propose a mythification process of recently deceased leaders. For a cultural project to resonate with people, it has to be rooted in the “humus of popular culture” (Gramsci 102), and mythopoetic processes such as the one of the “cosmic kite” are part of such humus, that contribute to create a sort of vernacular mythology. The contact of Latin American deceased leaders as Chavez and Kirchner with the supernatural mentioned in political discourse show a sort of popular canonization or sacralization processes. Besides, the allusion to the singing bird speaking to Maduro plays with social beliefs regarding animistic identifications of aboriginal groups, used as argumentative resources to legitimate himself as a candidate to the Presidency of Venezuela. Gramsci (1985) underlines as well the additional dichotomy of myth and imaginary. Despite such predominance of the dichotomies, many theories tend to combine the extremes of hegemony and counter-hegemony into a single metaphor when describing political discourses (Astapova). Both the “singing bird” and the “cosmic kite” can be considered as these single metaphors.

To summarize, mythification processes such as the ones of Nestor Kirchner and Hugo Chávez are connected with hegemony, counter-hegemony, and the role of the state and configuration of nations in South American countries. Gramscian idea of political hegemony as predominance of the state obtained through intellectual and moral leadership can be seen in Christina Kirchner’s discourse, and her argumentative resources to present herself as the metaphorical symbol of progress, welfare as well as a paradigm of the defense of vernacular cultures from foreign global threats. A similar process can be seen regarding President Maduro, whose aim of legitimation dealt with social beliefs and even with vernacular myths. Beliefs and vernacular narratives related to political events are relevant topics of political folklore, which emerges from the political process of nation-building, and these narratives regarding the appearance of the singing bird and the cosmic kite can be considered as vernacular narratives used to legitimate the role of the former Argentinian president as representative of a national (and popular) tradition. This mythification process is also connected with conspiracy actions against popular political leaders, aspect that will be considered in the following section of this article.

Folklore Genres, Political Folklore, and Intertextuality

Choosing to present conspiracy theories as rumours, Astapova affirmed that the stories labelled as rumours can also easily fall into the categories of contemporary legends based on traditional themes and modern motifs that circulate orally in multiple versions and are told as if they are true or at least plausible (Turner 1993: 5). This is the case of conspiracy theories alleging that “a secret, omnipotent individual or group covertly controls the political and social order” (Fenster 1999: 1); such as the CIA in the case of Chavez and even president Kirchner, in Gabriela Rocha’s asseveration. As Tangherlini (7–8) argues, the negotiation of ideology can serve to delimit clearly in-group and out-group membership. As such, the telling of legends should be considered a deeply political act, and these narratives are also deployed to sway others’ actions, according to the narrator’s own goal. This can easily be seen in the allusion to the “cosmic kite” of Cristina Kirchner, that can be understood only by those members of the in-group who are able to connect this allusion with the nickname attributed to Maradona, in an intertextual net of discourses of a vernacular mythology.

The strategies used to construct intertextual relations, ideologically motivated choices between intertextual links provide powerful means for national identity constructions (Astapova). Generic boundaries are never fixed, as Bakhtin (“The Problem of Speech Genres”) points out and Briggs and Bauman underline when arguing that there is a need of an alternative view of genre, that places generic distinctions “not within texts, but in the practices used in creating intertextual relations with other bodies of discourse” (Briggs and Bauman 147, 163). Moreover, the multiplicity of intertextual links and generic precedents results in mixed, blurred, ambiguous, and contradictory generic framings (Briggs and Bauman 163). This is the case of the “cosmic kite” which shows an intertextual blend between the discourse of journalist Víctor Hugo Morales, the songs that present Maradona as a hero, mixed up with the mythification process of Nestor Kirchner in his wife’s discourse, supporting a candidate.

The process of intertextuality itself both reflects and produces power (Briggs and Bauman 1992: 165). Both in the case of rumours regarding cancer in Chavez and Kirchner, the power is associated with the “great Empire” of the USA, threatening local identities of

Venezuela and Argentina. The idea of *carnavalesque* as a mode of subverting the dominant style or atmosphere through humour and chaos and creating a “world upside-down” with the aim of demanding equal dialogic status by resisting the hegemony (Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*), applied by Astapova to Belarusian jokes and rumours, works also to these discourses of Latin American political leaders, who use this sort of carnivalesque style of speaking birds and cosmic kites to attract the interest of the audience. In the example of the cosmic kite regarding deceased president Kirchner and the one of the singing bird regarding Chavez, there is a carnivalesque subverting of the dominant style of politic discourse, which creates an upside-down world in which birds speak and bless the presidential candidates, and cosmic kites legitimate the political actions of presidents supporting a candidate. By criticizing hegemonic discourses, both Maduro and Christina Kirchner tended to make acceptable their discourse, from a position of power which gave them certain influence over the audience.

Believability and the Quest of the Truth in Political Discourses

The relationship of political folklore with the truth leads to the question of believability, and rhetorics employed by the performer to make the story trusted (Astapova; Kalmre 22; Oring; Palleiro, *Yocreo ¿vossabés?*). Besides, supernatural beliefs are rooted in real, somatic experiences and representing logical attempts to understand some experiences (Hufford). Such beliefs can be identified both in Maduro’s and Christina’s discourse regarding blessing birds and cosmic legitimating kites. It is worth remembering that, from a semiotic perspective, Greimas and Courtès characterize belief as a modal expression of certainty, where the true value of a statement depends on a social or interpersonal agreement. Narratives about conspiracy theories regarding Nestor Kirchner and Hugo Chavez are based on a social agreement, while narratives regarding speaking birds and cosmic kites are proposed by politicians to be accepted by the audience, in order to obtain such consensus. Anyway, there is always a quest for believability, supported by argumentative strategies oriented to make them accepted, at least, as possible, and possibility is one of the distinctive features of modality. Moreover, rumours are based on real life and behaviour, being typical reflections of the beliefs, prejudices, values, and stereotypes (Kalmre 131). Likewise, myths can be also considered and experienced as real (Siikala 52), and they can encompass everything from a simple-minded, fictitious, even mendacious

impression to true and sacred accounts, the reality of which outweighs anything that ordinary life offers (Honko 7). In this sense, the allusions to the singing bird in Maduro's discourse brings to the memory of the audience both mythical resonances and historic associations with political orientation of President Chávez from Venezuela, presenting him as a model of an effective local cosmivision, put in danger by global threats that could be avoided by supporting him as a president. In a similar way, the allusion to the vernacular myth of the "cosmic kite" tends to legitimate the political achievements of Argentinian Christina Kirchner's presidency, whose effects in everyday Argentinian life are presented in her discourse as very positive and convenient. The rhetorical weight of these narratives connected with vernacular knowledge dealing with extreme situations make these stories a significant component of political behaviour, inform individuals to negotiate daily life in communities and organizations (Tangherlini 8). This is what happened with Maradona and the "cosmic kite" regarding the lost war of the Falklands against the English, and its revenge winning a football match, and its argumentative use by intertextually, reframed into a metaphor regarding a political leader as Nestor Kirchner. The focus of Astapova's research of political folklore deals with an in-progress observation of political folklore emerging betwixt and between different positions, as a response to the constant negotiation of Belarusian ethnic and political identities (Astapova). Likewise, Argentinian narratives and those from Venezuela serve as a mirror of political identities, used by the leaders as argumentative strategies to convince the audience.

In conspiracy theories such as the ones mentioned regarding Nestor Kirchner and Hugo Chávez, as well as in many other ones, believability is as well a kernel point. Having characterized belief as an intersubjective consensus about certainty, rumours regarding conspiracy theories connected with the death of Latin American political leaders such as Chavez and Kirchner deal with global threats to political figures, which are presented as metaphorical symbols of local identities. These unknown forces connected with terrible illness such as cancer, and even with a sort of sophisticated murder, are presented, according to a synecdochic logic, as global dangers, which acquire both the size of diseases caught by local leaders by means of a mechanism of inoculation of mysterious devices such as the one mentioned by Gabriela Rocha regarding Nestor Kirchner or by the newspaper of Venezuela regarding Chavez. According to the latter narrative, such lethal cancer has been caused by an infection generated by Top-secret projects of the Defense Department of the USA and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)

through the development centre in Fort Detrick dealing with biological weapons. Such allusion to biological weapons acts as a metaphor of this threat to local identities, used to warn the audience against global dangers.¹⁰

Just to Conclude

The aim of this article has been to propose an approach to the role of apocalyptic and conspiracy narratives in contemporary cultures, expressing fears of global threats to local identities, whose roots can be found in the traditional past. It dealt as well with narrative regarding supernatural contacts with dead people, used as argumentative strategies in political discourse. Some of these narratives reveal the negotiation of self-representations of national identities, during times of electoral processes, in which candidates or supporters use social beliefs as rhetoric strategies to address the audience and to provoke identification effects.

Latin American narratives show a mythification process of recently dead leaders as well as mythopoetic process of creating vernacular myths to support local identities. Narratives regarding cosmic kites and singing birds deal with such vernacular myths and social beliefs. In vernacular religions, the interest in belief systems –whether religious or political—is a powerful side of folklore studies. As the supernatural beliefs, political ones also result from actual experiences people have.

There is a complex relationship between belief systems and Latin American political leaders, since they use such beliefs as argumentative strategies to win the attention and the votes of the people. Besides, the study of political narratives allows to realize the potential of folklore to influence thought and history, representing different political and cultural values, illusions, and hopes. Political leaders such as Nicholas Maduro and Christina Kirchner use of such cultural values for their own electoral aims. Other narratives, such as the ones regarding AIDS or cancer,

¹⁰It is worth considering that, in Covid times, Chinese scientists and political leaders had also been deemed as agents of global conspiracy dangers against the rest of the human beings, spreading the virus and the mortal disease all over the world to destroy Western civilizations. For further discussion of this point, see Palleiro (*Juan Zorro*). The rhetoric basis of this conspiracy theories is the same synecdochic logic that considers AIDS, anthrax or cancer as global pests whose power of infection attacks local securities of different vernacular cultures.

also express collective fears, dealing with global dangers or threats to local ways of life. As pointed out in the introduction, on one hand, such narratives are used in political performances as argumentative strategies to legitimate political programs such as the one of President Maduro in Venezuela and President Christina Kirchner in Argentina. On the other hand, they support explanatory hypothesis dealing with conspiracy actions dealing with global threats against vernacular identities of Argentina and Venezuela. The rhetoric construction is based on local symbols and social beliefs used as metaphors of vernacular cosmovisions, such as singing birds or cosmic kites, which politicians manipulate with argumentative strategies, oriented to persuade the audience and to gain votes. Other narratives as the ones regarding AIDS or, nowadays, Covid, are based on a synecdochic logic of global threats to local spaces. All of them, however, reveal differential aspects of vernacular identities, aesthetically elaborated in narrative messages.

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