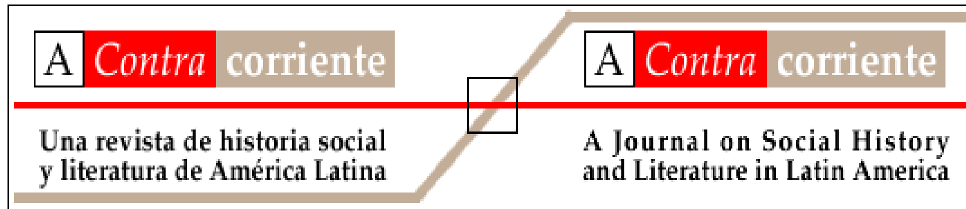

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Review/Reseña

Francisco Morán. *Martí, la justicia infinita: Notas sobre ética y otredad en la escritura martiana (1875-1894).* Madrid: Verbum, 2014.

Demythologizing Martí

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In a review essay on Laura Loma's controversial study *Translating Empire: José Martí, Migrant Latino Subjects, and American Modernities*, which Alfred J. López published in this journal in 2010 (Vol. 7, No. 2, 273-93), he recalls another review that he had published several years earlier on Gayatri Spivak's *Death of a Discipline*. In that text, López had taken issue with Spivak's "woeful misreadings" of José Martí, which he feared would be uncritically accepted by an entire generation of postcolonialists who, because of Spivak's authority in the field, might be tempted to overlook her lack of expertise in Martí and 19th-century Cuba. In his appraisal of Lomas' book, López contends that it also reveals problems that have plagued other postcolonial and New Americanist readings of José Martí; on the one hand, López notes, the author was not sufficiently trained to tackle the enormous

task at hand, while on the other, she disseminated erroneous critical claims that were at least based in part on those by another literary scholar (Spivak) who had made similar observations about an area and an author "outside her field of even secondary expertise."

In the introduction to his recent study *Martí, la justicia infinita: Notas sobre ética y otredad en la escritura martiana (1875-1894)* – a doorstopper of a book at 740 pages – Francisco Morán echoes Alfredo López, as his first order of business is to take issue with Spivak's readings of Martí, which he considers to be "symptomatic" of how leading scholars in fields such as postcolonial and American studies have treated the Cuban author's writings like proverbial goldmines by extracting the brilliant nuggets and forgetting about all that does not glimmer (19, 549). Like López, Morán expresses deep concern with how Spivak makes bold proclamations about José Martí without providing appropriate textual evidence to back them up. According to Morán, Spivak's "disjointed and confused ideas" (17) about the Cuban author underscore something that he already knew: that is, that it is possible to publish on Martí with little or no real understanding of his work and his particular historical, cultural, and socio-political contexts. Morán seems to be echoing López again when he contends that Laura Lomas' *Translating Empire*, is an "engendro" (19) of Spivak's misreadings. Though Morán's critical appraisals of Laura Lomas' study – which are spread throughout his book, but are a central focus of Chapter V – are sometimes insightful and accurate, they made me quite uncomfortable at times, as I will explain later.

Morán is careful to point out in the introduction to *Martí, la justicia infinita* that a number of excellent studies have been published on Martí, and he cites therein many of the critics who were instrumental in his own readings of the Cuban author: Ezequiel Martínez Estrada, Juan Marinello, Ángel Rama, Julio Ramos, Carlos Ripoll, Enrique Mario Santí, Jorge Camacho, Cintio Vitier, among others. However, Morán also contends that a perusal of over one hundred years of critical bibliography on Martí reveals that, despite being the Cuban figure that arouses the most "heated passions" he is also the author of "a monumental literary oeuvre" that, as he puts it, almost no one – not even the immense majority of the self-

proclaimed "martianos" – has read (39). It is in large part because of what Morán perceives as an ever-increasing ignorance and lack of understanding of José Martí and his work that he has penned this expansive, meticulously researched study in which he aims to set the record straight, so to speak, by demonstrating that it is only through close readings of Martí's voluminous work that one can truly understand him as a writer, politician and cultural icon. In the closing remarks to his introduction, Morán assures his readers that despite his study's challenges to popular notions of Martí as anti-imperialist, Latin Americanist, defender of laborers, immigrants, and people of color, that his study does not aim to "desacralize" or "demythologize" José Martí (40). However, Morán's constant attempts to knock Martí off of his proverbial pedestal, and his radical revisions of the image of the Cuban apostle, would seem to belie this point.

In addition to the introduction, Morán's book includes six lengthy chapters, all of which deal in one way or another with the role of the "other" – immigrants, laborers, anarchists, among others – in the life and writings of Martí. As the dates in the book's subtitle indicate, Morán focuses on two decades of Martí's life – 1875-1894 – during which he spent most of his time in exile in Mexico and the United States. The back matter includes an appendix with 32 images – photos, illustrations, reproductions of important documents, etc. –, an impressive list of works cited (which calls attention to the great deal of research that went into this study), and an onomastic index. I should note here that the images have been carefully chosen, they contain informative captions and, for the most part, enhance the overall quality of Moran's study. Unfortunately, however, they are not properly keyed to the text, and it is therefore entirely conceivable that one could read certain sections and not even realize that supporting graphic material is included in an appendix that is buried in the book's back matter.

Chapter One, "Del preso 113 al apóstel del Parque Central: *Hidden Martí*," could best be described as a revision of José Martí's political biography. The chapter consists of four sections and is framed by two well-known images: a photo from 1870 of Martí in chains, and a statue of Martí located in Havana's Parque Central. Morán argues, quite cogently at times, that these and other similar iconic images of Martí – prisoner, exile,

pauper, friend of the humble and enemy of the rich and powerful, patriotic martyr – have been instilled by persistent introduction into the minds of all Cubans, but they are often inaccurate and deceptive. In Morán's own words, both of the images mentioned above and their manipulated and convoluted histories bring us face-to-face with "un Martí no completo y pleno, sino atravesado por secretos, sospechas, contradicciones y ocultamientos" (24). Throughout Chapter One, and the rest of his study for that matter, Morán insists that Martí himself often went to great lengths to fabricate his own image. Morán reveals, for example, how Martí took great care to stress how his time in prison (brief as it was, given that his family managed to arrange an early release), served to symbolize his profound suffering for his country and his unabated patriotism. Parting, then from this photo of Martí and the narrative of his time in prison, which exist in many versions and have been extensively manipulated and altered over the years, Morán demonstrates that Martí and his legacy have been manipulated and exploited to such an extent – by everybody from Cuban "apostle" himself, to Cuban government officials, to contemporary literary scholars – that few have dared to question his reputation as a mythical hero, a saint, and a savior.

As I pointed out above, Morán insists in his introduction that his goal in the study is not to "demythologize" or "desacralize" José Martí (40). Nonetheless, it becomes clear in Chapter One that this is precisely one of Morán's central aims, as he calls attention repeatedly to how Martí identified with the wealthy ("quienes tenían los medios" 44), frequented the opera, dined in New York's finest restaurants, and above all, exaggerated and manipulated the image of himself as a prisoner for his own personal and political gains. A comment buried in one of the books excessively long footnotes, serves to underscore my point: "Pero si Martí usó la estancia en el presidio para realizar su prestigio político, consolidarse como autoridad moral, y endeudar de paso a una nación con su sacrificio, considero que la desmitificación – que no la negación – de ese pasaje de su vida es una tarea necesaria" (n. 15, 67).

Chapters two and three deal broadly with Martí's so-called Mexican period (1875-1876), which, as Morán correctly notes, was decisive in the

formation of his ideas about workers and labor unions. More specifically, Morán focuses in these chapters on Martí's connection to and involvement in two events – a strike among Mexican hat makers ("sombrereros") in 1875 and a fabricated "strike" among printers of the *Revista Universal* – that many previous scholars have either been largely unaware of, or have chosen to ignore because they do not conform with the positive images of Martí that have been crafted and immortalized over that past 100 years or so. Morán's incursion into Martí's connection to and collaboration in these incidents, and his detailed examination of the ambiguous nature of Martí's notions of justice and their relation to his opinions about labor disputes, the proletariat, immigrants, the figure of the anarchist, etc., make for very compelling reading. In my opinion, these are the strongest and most interesting chapters of the book.

In this portion of *Martí, la justicia infinita,* Morán reveals through diligent and at times painstaking archival research, how José Martí, who is almost universally hailed as a defender of the working class often defended capitalist interests, businessmen, the cultural elite, and the ruling class. As a case in point, Morán details through compelling close readings of a series of texts that he includes in a dossier at the end of Chapter 3, how Martí, in duplicitous articles singed "Orestes," the penname that he often used at the time, justified the decision of *Revista Universal* to sack several printers who had "gone on strike." But Morán reveals that this was a false pretense: the truth of the matter was that the workers were sacked because they had attended a meeting of copyists and typographers who had assembled to form the Sociedad Regeneradora del Arte de Gutenberg. This particular section of Morán's study is complex, and would be impossible to summarize in a brief review, but suffice it to say that it is brilliantly written, convincingly argued, and immensely entertaining.

Before moving on to a discussion of the following chapters, I should add here that in order to set the stage for his discussion of Martí's writings on the dispute with the workers at *Revista Universa*l and the hat makers strike in Chapters 2 and 3, Morán provides a series of relevant biographical details regarding Martí's time in Mexico with the expressed purpose of showing how it is necessary to take into account the social status from

which he observed and commented on these issues. According to Morán's mold-breaking readings, Martí did not exactly occupy a subaltern position in Mexico, as some critics would have us believe, but instead associated with the lettered elite and the leaders of liberal power circles. In short, he was, in Morán's opinion, a far cry from the Latino immigrant without a country, as he is portrayed in Laura Lomas' *Translating Empire*.

In Chapter 4 Morán begins with an examination of a little-studied moment of Martí's life, which saw him traveling in January 1875 on The Celtic – a modern ocean liner from the famous White Star Line – from Liverpool to New York en route to Mexico City. This voyage, during which Martí traveled in third class alongside primarily lower-class European immigrants, serves as a point of departure for Morán to examine Martí's complicated and problematic opinions about the "other" in general, and European immigrants in particular. Morán convincingly argues that Martí's own observations about this particular voyage reveal his discomfort with the lower- class immigrants with whom he traveled in the ship's steerage, at the same time that they underscore the lengths to which the Cuban writer went to elevate his own image in order to create distance between himself and the European immigrants with whom he traveled. Indeed, as Morán demonstrates, Martí's recollections several years later of his third-class voyage on The Celtic included references to sickly and starving passengers, dirty plates and silverware, the disgusting sleeping chamber, the suffocating stench of the third-class quarters.

Later in Chapter 4 Morán delves deeper into his exploration of how Martí's supposed anti-immigrant stance – which, as the author argued in Chapters 2-3, had first manifested itself during his stay in Mexico – intensified significantly during his years in New York (1880-1895). Just as Martí had felt a little bit "too close for comfort" (Morán uses this phrase in English) rubbing elbows with the poor European immigrants with whom he shared the third-class quarters, many of his writings from New York, according to Morán, reveal the intense uneasiness he felt with the massive numbers of undereducated, working-class European immigrants who were flooding the streets of his adopted hometown. Here, and even more so in Chapter 5, Morán vociferously takes issue with Laura Lomas' categorization

of Martí as a "Migrant Latino writer," stressing that the Cuban author never used the term immigrant to refer to himself, and much less the term migrant (372). In opposition to Lomas' embracing of Martí as a "Latino migrant" and a "postcolonial subject," then, Morán cites a number of texts in which Martí comes across as plainly prejudicial and disdainful toward immigrants, especially those from Southern Italy, who he particularly despised, according to Morán's reading of several texts, but also the French and the Irish.

Chapter 5, which focuses primarily on texts that Martí published in *La América* in New York, opens with a section titled "Overtura. *Tradutorre, tradittore*: Laura Lomas, lectura y traducción en evidencia." It is here that Morán levies his most direct and, I might add, aggressive accusations against Lomas' *Translating Empire* by offering new evidence, as he puts it, "de los sinsentidos, tergiversaciones y fabricaciones que ahí aparecen" (28). Though Morán is careful to point out that his criticism of Lomas' book is "not motivated by personal animosity" (438), I felt uncomfortable as I read this chapter in which Morán underscores time and again – using accusatory phrases like "moralmente reprensible," "flagrante fabricación," "burda fabricación," "altamente cuestionable" – the "grave" errors in the book, and especially Lomas' "baseless" labeling of Martí as a "Latino migrant" and a postcolonial subject. Even if I do share some of Morán's concerns with Lomas' study, which was awarded the MLA prize for best US Latino/a and Chicano/a Literary and Cultural Studies, I found his criticism in this particular chapter (but also throughout the book) to be unprofessional and hostile at times. Though it pains me to say it – especially because I think that Morán is a brilliant critic and *Martí, La justicia infinita* is major work that could already be considered required reading for Martí scholars – I do not think that an academic monograph is that proper forum for such attacks.

One of the most compelling aspects of Chapter 5 is how Morán skillfully and quite convincingly, I might add, demonstrates that one of the principal veins in Martí's early writings in New York is his anxiety over the uprising of the masses, which he saw manifested through continuous waves of immigration, flourishing labor unions, and the proliferation of workers

strikes and demonstrations throughout the country. According to Morán, Martí's discomfort stemmed at least in part from his fear of the "proximidad y acoso de lo herterogéneo" (511), and the consequential destabilizing democratic push against the lettered elite. Morán further demonstrates, through close readings of texts such as "Las asociaciones obreras" (1883), that the reader is met time and again with the same scenario: when confronted with workers' strikes, labor disputes and demonstrations – "con o sin anarquismo", as Morán puts it (521) – Martí tended to react with suspicion and distrust. Morán cites several examples, for instance, in which Martí suggests that the workers' calls for justice were exaggerated and irrational or, more broadly, that the exaltation of the working class in the light of such demands could only lead to mayhem and violence.

In the 6th and final chapter, Morán focuses on the intriguing history of Martí City, a municipality of Cubans in Ocala, Florida. José Martí visited this enclave, which was home to Cuban exiles and included several Cuban-owned cigar factories, in July and October 1892 with the ostensible aim of raising funds for the revolution that would end Spanish rule in Cuba. Morán posits that Martí City had been financed by US banks in Southern Florida, and Martí's activities there stand out for their capitalist, rather than their patriotic, bent. He goes on to point out, furthermore, that José Martí himself was instrumental in bringing together Cuban and North American business interests in a sort of social and economic experiment that aimed, at least in part, to instill in the Cubans who lived and worked in Martí City a respect for US economic practices and a capitalist mentality that they would bring back to the island once Cuba won its independence. Perhaps Morán's most thought-provoking observation in this very interesting chapter is that in Martí City in 1892, one can already see so many of the problems that would mark the emergence of the Cuban republic in 1902, such as U.S. interventionism, Cuban pandering to the US economic interests, repression of labor unions and striking workers, disdain for things local, etc.

Though *Martí, la justicia infinita* is a well-written book, it does have some stylistic shortcomings that deserve brief mention. First and foremost,

I found Morán's voluminous study to be a bit longwinded at times, especially the last chapter, which might have served to study better in the form of a brief epilogue. One reviewer has noted that Morán's book "could have been three books instead of one" (Pancrazio 137), but I would put it differently: *Martí, la justicia infinita* could have been an even better book (just one, not three) if it had been pared down significantly. The extensive footnotes, I think, are a case in point. Though I appreciated much of the additional information that they provided – some of the notes are truly revelatory – I found a good number of them to be tedious and unnecessary, especially those (and there are many) that come in at well over 1,000 words. On another note, as I made my way through *Martí, la justicia infinita*, I was reminded repeatedly that overuse of italicized words (there are examples on almost every page), can be as unnecessary as it is ineffective.

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In closing, I would like to stress that *Martí, la justicia infinita* is a major piece of literary criticism that will make (indeed, already has made) major waves among Martí scholars, experts on Cuban history and literature, and academics in the fields of postcolonial and American Studies. This impressive study contains many original readings, engages in lively dialogues with previous critics of Martí's massive oeuvre, and offers bold revisions of some of the most widely held images of José Martí: patriotic martyr, apostle, prisoner, exile, friend of the poor and working class and enemy of the rich and powerful, etc. *Martí, la justicia infinita* is an essential and valuable book not so much because of its controversial demythologization of Martí, but because it demonstrates – through meticulous research, and painstaking close readings – that it is always fruitful and often necessary to approach such important figures from new and diverse angles. And while I must admit that I disagree with some of Francisco Morán's readings and take issue with some of his refashioned images of José Martí, in the end, at least for me *Martí, la justicia infinita* has accomplished what all good critical studies out to do: it has deeply

enhanced my own knowledge and understanding of the subject and has inspired me to read further.