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Review/Reseña

Lillian Guerra, *The Myth of José Martí. Conflicting Nationalisms in Early Twentieth-Century Cuba*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005)

The Silent Hero

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At the risk of breaking with academic convention, I open this review with two confessions. The first is that I love José Martí and the study of his life and writings. I can think of few other figures in Latin American cultural, intellectual and political history that are as difficult and as rewarding. The second confession is that I am sometimes impatient with the recent boom in Martí studies among proponents of post-nationalist American Studies, who ecstatically celebrate texts such as “Our America” with little or no engagement with almost a century of critical and not-so-critical conversations among Latin Americans and Latin Americanists about Martí’s

philosophy, politics and aesthetics. I don't think that my complaint reflects the oppositional territorialism of a Latin Americanist who feels threatened by American Studies or Cultural Studies writ large. Rather, it speaks to my belief that historicity, and cultural and linguistic difference, are key for the transnational study of literary and political figures such as José Martí. Enter Lillian Guerra's *The Myth of José Martí: Conflicting Nationalisms in Early Twentieth-Century Cuba* (2005), a welcome riposte, in English and in a beautifully designed, inexpensive paperback, to easy readings of Martí in any and all quarters of academia. Guerra's book strikes a cautionary note for all who continue to use Martí as a political, literary or academic symbol by exploring some of the historical conditions and forces that led to the forging of his myth at the beginning of the twentieth-century. Although Guerra's book does not extend past the 1920's, it very much sets the tone for a critical and historically-minded reappraisal of more modern appropriations of Martí. In this regard, I consider Guerra's book to be, as we say *en español*, "imprescindible."

The Myth of José Martí explores the emergence of competing visions of national identity in early twentieth-century Cuba, specifically in relation to how different ideological interests have used the icon of José Martí either as a conservative, triumphalist symbol or as a rallying cry for fulfilling a more radical social vision. Guerra traces the problem of competing nationalisms and the icon's symbolic role within them as a uniter or divider of Cuban factions to Martí's final years as the guiding force behind the Partido Revolucionario Cubano (PRC). Guerra argues that Martí was pragmatic and circumspect in addressing hot-button issues to different Cuban constituencies in the U.S., allowing all factions to interpret him in a favorable light. In a memorable turn of phrase, Guerra notes that the "silences of Martí" became the preferred site for multiple visions of nation and multiple visions of the meaning of

Martí (41). Moreover, if Martí sought to unite expatriate Cubans through complex rhetorical and symbolical maneuvers that gave each interest group a comforting “silence” through which to manufacture a sympathetic image of message and messenger, he also prefigured his own myth by casting himself in a messianic role (42). Unlike the living Martí, however, who, in Guerra’s estimation, was capable of strategically being everything to everybody, his early twentieth-century political heirs were incapable of cloaking Cuban social divisions and racial prejudices in the name of revolutionary unity.

Guerra returns repeatedly to how the specter of Martí haunted early national Cuba for the purpose of patching over differences and forging rhetorical, national unities. However, *The Myth of José Martí* also proposes two key frames of interest for scholars and students of the emergence of Cuban nationalism. The first is a tri-partite typology of Cuban nationalism: (1) Popular nationalism, which represents the interests and action of the classes that were politically disenfranchised throughout the early republic, and which may be termed radical in its social and political agendas; (2) Revolutionary nationalism, a *caudillista*, “top-down” strand of nationalism defended by socially-minded officers of the liberating army; and (3) Pro-imperialist nationalism, which defined itself along the canonical lines of nineteenth-century Latin American liberalism, specifically a desire to imitate the United States and “whiten” the nation. In a chapter titled “Revolutionizing Cuba Libre, Civilizing the Manigua, 1895-1898,” Guerra provides a fascinating discussion of how these differing nationalisms intersected and entered into tension during the war of liberation. For example, the tactics of the popular nationalists made it the symbolic descendant of nineteenth century banditry and slave revolts, often capturing the essence of the unmediated desires for freedom of the rural poor. The military leaders of the patriot cause, the revolutionary nationalists, sought to both capitalize and contain this phenomenon.

However elite officers may have justified them, the tactics themselves symbolically legitimated acts of class warfare and confirmed that the ultimate authority of the Revolution lay in building an entirely new society on the rubble of the old. These tactics also invited ideological exchange between the popular nationalism of soldiers and the brand of revolutionary nationalisms that patrician officers like Sánchez and his immediate superiors, Generals Maceo and Gómez, espoused. Sometimes revolutionary nationalist officers went as far as to sanction the redistribution of wealth outside of the context of plantation raids by encouraging conscious acts of expropriation from the *pacíficos* they encountered, not all of whom were poor. In doing so, these officers effectively ruptured the boundary between the “gentlemen’s war” they saw themselves to be fighting and the war of social protest that soldiers of the laboring classes were fighting. (53)

Meanwhile, the U.S. based PRC, now in hands of Tomás Estrada Palma, took a hard turn to the right, and privileged appeals to U.S. interests over any real dialogue to the popular and revolutionary nationalists who were actually fighting the war on the ground in Cuba. Later in her book, *Guerra* demonstrates how the pro-imperialist nationalism of the presidency of Estrada Palma self-consciously cultivated an elitist and racist platform for the governance of Cuba against the popular nationalists, who were now largely abandoned by revolutionary nationalists fearful of another U.S. intervention. Thus, whether it was through restricting access to government jobs for black veterans of the war, violently repressing striking workers, or promoting European immigration to whiten the island, the pro-imperialists installed a backward-looking, reactionary regime that, when threatened by other forms of nationalism, was not above unleashing a reign of terror and facilitating another intervention by the United States in 1906.

Of course, the emergence of modern Cuba cannot be understood without exploring the impact of the United States on the island. *Guerra’s* book underscores the ways in which U.S. intervention both limited and contributed to different nationalisms

in early national Cuba. After the War, during the first occupation of Cuba, the Cuban educational system was modernized under the leadership of Alexis Everett Frye, allowing for the introduction of meritocratic protocols in the hiring of teachers, the inclusion of women in the national project, and desegregating the schools. Despite these steps forward, however, the curriculum reflected chauvinistic attitudes about race, and was designed to make Cuban pupils more obedient to North American military rule by censoring the study and commemoration of Cuban heroes. Guerra notes how Cuban teachers constructed spaces of resistance from within the North America system and struggled to create a voice of their own. In the town of Güines, for example, teachers broke with the U.S. officials by celebrating the *Grito de Yara*. In another case, Cuban school officials took the academic calendar assigned to schools—a secular document meant to represent the authority of the imperial state—and ironically renamed it a *santoral*. Perhaps most dramatic is the story of over a thousand teachers who traveled to Harvard in 1900, becoming ambassadors of the Cuban cause and “countercolonizing” U.S. spaces with their presence and the Cuban flag (106). Guerra does not stop here, though. She demonstrates that the interdependence of U.S. empire and Cuban nationalisms continued to manifest itself during the second American intervention, when U.S. Governor Charles Magoon’s conciliatory attitude toward the liberals persecuted by the conservatives, and his refusal to use violence against striking workers, strengthened the resolve of conservative and liberal elites to resist the demands of the popular nationalists after the U.S. left the island again. Thus, Guerra subtly demonstrates that U.S. interventionism did not simply persecute or silence Cuban nationalism but rather served as a pretext for new modulations and adaptations of it.

As an introduction to early national Cuban history, *The Myth of José Martí* is a valuable and accessibly written account that offers

new insight into the variety of Cuban nationalisms at the beginning of the twentieth-century. Guerra's commitment to continuously and consistently exploring the "view from below" makes her book particularly rewarding. For example, Guerra highlights the contributions of Magdalena Peñarredonda y Doley, a patriot activist and spy known as *La Delegada* and *General*, as well as Ritica Suárez del Villar y Suárez del Villar, aka *La Cubanita*, who, during the first occupation, insistently sought to introduce the commemoration of Cuban heroes to her teaching. This welcome inclination to represent the experience and voices of the politically disenfranchised is particularly successful in discussions of the revolutionary war and the different workers' strikes, which took place in the early national period. With regards to methodology, Guerra's dynamic model of interacting, interdependent and ever-changing nationalisms is sophisticated and nuanced. In her own words, "nations and nationalisms may be best defined historically in terms of the relational identities that they invoked and the nature of the state that they posited" (18).

Paradoxically, though, despite the book's primary title, the weakest aspect of Guerra's argument lies in its discussion of "the myth of José Martí" and its articulation to the subject matter of the book's subtitle: *Conflicting Nationalisms in Early Twentieth-Century Cuba*. The introduction to the book is not clear on this point—on the one hand Guerra states that her study hinges on "competing interpretations of José Martí" while also declaring that "an analysis of the evolving images of Martí are not the central story of this book" (3). We may assume that such comments are meant to signal that her study will not attempt an exhaustive catalogue of the different images of Martí, but rather process them through the analytical rubric of the concept and reality of "competing nationalisms." Although I completely agree with this design, I don't believe the book's execution fully realizes its stated aims in this

regard. After the first chapter, the subject of the myth of Martí is repeatedly eclipsed in substance and import by Guerra's discussion of the political fates of Cuban nationalisms. Often, when the subject of Martí's symbolism emerges, it receives too cursory of a discussion. For example, although Guerra states that Martí was known as *El Delegado* in Cuban émigré circles, and Magdalena Peñarredonda y Doley as *La Delegada*, she does not explore the implications of this gendered pairing, despite the inclusion in the book of two illustrations that show the Cuban nation as a woman prostrated before an iconic Martí. Elsewhere, in one of Guerra's most extended discussions of competing versions of Martí, we learn that conservatives focused on the meanings of the hero's death while popular nationalists on the unfinished business of his life. Yet, Guerra offers little detail or explanation of why and how popular nationalists departed from this interpretation. Her argument becomes vague and tentative, populated with uncertain qualifiers like "perhaps," "seems" and "appears" (166-167). Most frustrating for this reader was the discovery, at the end of the book, that Martí's image "often accompanied that of George Washington in popular patriotic expressions and songs" during the first U.S. occupation, even though this fact is never mentioned in the earlier chapter on that period of Cuba's history. Finally, I wish that Guerra had made more use of Ottmar Ette's *José Martí. Apóstol, Poeta Revolucionario: una historia de su recepción* (1992), particularly with reference to the widely disseminated turn-of-the-century image of Martí with Máximo Gómez, and some intriguing pieces of Caribbean oral tradition that date to the period that Guerra studies.

These criticisms aside, Guerra brilliantly links the cult of Martí to the living agent's own rhetorical and political designs. In this context, the "myth of Martí" takes on the meaning of *national unity*, the ideal or myth for which Martí struggled in his political career. In that context, Guerra succeeds in tracing the mythical,

artificial quality of early Cuban nationalisms, the “myth” promoted by Martí, and stays true to the title of her book. Moreover, Guerra engages in some demystifying of her own when she offers a critical reading of “Our America” and takes a long overdue swipe at literary critics who have published so much and said so little about Martí. In closing, I would argue that for Guerra, Martí is never a slogan, academic or otherwise, but rather a mechanism for understanding nationalism. This critical dimension, no matter the shortcomings of some parts of her study, makes the entirety of her book a long overdue intervention in the field of Martí Studies, and a necessary corrective to simplistic celebrations and interpretations of the “Apostle.” It is a compulsively readable work of scholarship that keeps Martí in context as a historical man and a historical symbol, and that teaches us valuable lessons about the divided and violent trajectories of early twentieth-century Cuban nationalisms.