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How I Stopped Worrying and Learned to Love José Martí

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I don't recall even hearing the name of José Martí until I was nearly 12 years old.

If you're not Cuban, or the child of Cuban immigrants, that may not seem a particularly shattering confession. For most Americans, the idea of a grade-school aged kid not knowing about, say, Thomas Jefferson might be an indictment of her schooling, or perhaps just a barometer of his cultural ignorance. But Americans don't have anywhere near the level of identification with any of our founding heroes that Cubans have with Martí.

For Cuban-Americans above a certain age—mostly the children of the original 1960s immigrants—our relationship to Martí is a strange combination of reverence and

intimacy. No matter how many monuments to him we see in Miami or Havana, to us Cuba's greatest founding father still feels like a distant and legendary relative. He's the great uncle who died long before we were born, having lived a short but hyper-eventful life further overstuffed by the mostly apocryphal stories the old guard still tell about him. For many Cubans this is not even a metaphor—I have friends who grew up believing Martí to be a literal ancestor, because their parents had his picture on the wall alongside their real relatives, part of the family gallery.

So it is with some astonishment that I grasp not having even heard of José Martí until I was nearly 12, when my family first came to Miami in the summer of 1974. The immediate reason for the move was my father's declining health, but really we moved because that's just what Cubans of my parents' generation did. In New York City, I had been just one more ethnic

Catholic kid among many others: Italians, Poles, Lebanese, Colombians, Quebecois, Laotian, Ukrainian, Puerto Rican. Cuban. As fellow New Yorkers, we thought of the labels as little more than the vaguely exotic place from which our parents or grandparents had migrated, which most of us had never seen. We were all Catholic, all students at St. Joan of Arc School on 82nd St., all Yankees or Mets fans, all New Yorkers. No one felt particularly ethnic, or discussed the reasons why some of us were darker-skinned, or had flatter noses or wavier hair than others. We all spoke English at school and to each other, and our respective other languages at home, as a matter of course.

All of that changed when we moved. In Miami, being a Cuban among Cubans wasn't just an ethnicity or a nationality, but a higher calling. To be Cuban, whether by birth or parentage, meant inclusion in the Great Fellowship of Exile—of those who had been deprived of their *patria*. For my parents' generation, there was no point to buying a house, registering to vote, or even learning the language. Nearly all the Cubans I knew, including some who had already been in the U.S. for fifteen years, believed they were there only temporarily, just until the Castro regime fell, which they were certain could happen any day. To be truly Cuban in

Miami was to own your exile at every waking moment—the daily experience of living your life on hold. It meant you had to live and breathe a mythology of martyrdom and redemption framed by the life of José Martí, the man who a century before had devoted his life to the cause of Cuban independence.

The intensity and suddenness of my immersion into Miami-style Cubanness may be hard to comprehend for those who did not grow up at that time in that community, but it permeated every level of Cuban exile society. The most sought-after private school at that time was the Lincoln-Martí School. The exile community's favorite AM radio stations, especially the top-rated WQBA ("La Cubanísima"—literally "The Most Cuban") featured quotations from Martí at the top of every hour. All of their talk hosts toed the exile party line, quoted Martí chapter-and-verse, and referred to Fidel Castro as "El Tirano." Statues of Martí and other Cuban heroes abounded, and the parks: Máximo Gómez Park, the Bay of Pigs Memorial, and of course José Martí Park, which hosted its namesake's birthday celebration every year. The city boasted literally dozens of co-designated streets named after Cuban heroes: from Ignacio Agramonte to Lolo Villalobos, every Cuban body who was anybody had their name prominently displayed

on a street sign. (Martí, of course, had two.) Many Cubans in those days kept Martí shrines in their homes, alongside the more conventional ones (by Cuban standards) for patron saints and Afro-Cuban deities. You couldn't even get away from Martí on the radio, as one of the hottest records in the summer of 1976 was an album of Martí poems set to music, by a Spanish group called Laredo. If national or ethnic identification had been a secondary characteristic, practically an afterthought, in New York, in Miami being Cuban was literally about *being*: an existential state with its own consciousness and ways of being in the world. And a crucial component of that consciousness was an immersion in the life, works, and mythology of José Martí.

I was an adolescent nerd at the time of our move, who prided himself on knowing more and having read more than anyone else in the room (including the grownups). It was thus humiliating to discover a historical figure that was utterly familiar to everyone else, who was supposedly crucial to my identity as a Cuban-American, yet about whom I knew absolutely nothing. If you can imagine an English schoolboy moving to Stratford-upon-Avon without having ever heard of William Shakespeare, you will begin to glimpse the sense of alienation and

just plain cultural weirdness I was experiencing.

But even as a 12-year-old I could already discern a curious shared gap among the many Miami exiles espousing their devotion to Martí. While they could readily cite any number of short passages from the master's writings—usually aphorisms or lines of poetry they had apparently memorized as children—few of them had ever read him in any substantive way. It struck me as odd that so many people would extol with such certainty the virtues and literary genius of someone they hadn't actually read. The feeling that something was wrong with *me*, that as a newcomer to Cubanness—and to Martí—I was missing something that seemed an article of faith for nearly everyone I knew, dogged me that first summer.

That first impression only deepened through my high school years. Most of our curriculum was no different from what it would have been anywhere in middle America, the standard grind of math, science, English. Even our social studies classes, with the peculiarly Cuban-American exception of something called "Americanism vs. Communism," didn't particularly emphasize or even mention Cuba or Cubanness.

The glaring exception was Spanish class. Unlike the multiplicity of nationalities and cultures that surrounded me in New York, my Miami classmates were predominantly Cuban-American. Like me, however, they too were reading Martí for the first time, under the watchful eye of the dutiful and very Cuban Mrs. Montes. I found Martí's poems and stories deeply moving in ways that my adolescent mind could not fully articulate. Compounding this initial encounter was my teacher's insistence that Martí's writings defined "us"—the inheritors of our parents' exile as well as their cause. Martí, we were told without a hint of irony, was of far greater importance to us than anything we could ever read in Shakespeare, or Faulkner, or even Cervantes, simply because these writers did not speak to "us:" the citizens of the once and future "true" Cuban nation who, like Martí himself, were exiled from our beloved *patria*.

I felt no more exiled from Cuba than I did from London (I hadn't been there either). Yet I was beginning to understand something of the exile's sense of profound alienation from living immersed in a foreign culture. I responded the way any number of us have when faced with a required subject or class in which we felt no personal investment. I read and studied the required texts, memorized the

appropriate passages and answers for the exam. Then I promptly forgot the whole thing and moved on to the next academic hoop.

It took two decades for me to become a serious reader of Martí, and only then after I got as far away from Miami—geographically and culturally—as I possibly could. As a first-year doctoral student at the University of Iowa, I sat through my first seminar on race studies with a growing sense of panic at the thought of having to write a final paper. I had won one of the university's minority fellowships, which had fueled the vague notion that I should bring my unique (to Iowa, anyway) experience as a Miami-raised Cuban American to bear on my work there whenever possible.

That conviction (based on a misunderstanding of why Midwestern universities recruit minorities in the first place), along with my sense of being utterly rudderless as a grad student, led me to write a paper on ideas of race in José Martí. It was a risky proposition, given that Cuba and its diaspora had received only the most cursory attention in class—and even then only when I broached the topic myself. I had no expectation that a Cuba-focused paper would be particularly welcome. Yet the idea of turning to

Martí at a moment of crisis, far from home and family and, yes, Cubanness, suddenly resonated, again in ways that I did not fully fathom.

Writing about Martí did not turn out to be the intellectual comfort food I had sought. I knew I would need to revisit his canonical writings, in order to give the essay the necessary scholarly heft; glibly quoting Martí out of context may be a Cuban specialty, but this would require a deeper engagement. Yet I remained sanguine about pulling it off. What surprises, after all, could Martí hold for a Cuban kid from Miami, as immersed in Martí as a fish in water?

But of course the fish is always the last to see the water. Now, 1,500 miles from Miami, the resulting weeks of reading—not just the poems and other oft-quoted bits, but letters, journalism, essays on art, politics, music—led me to a Martí utterly alien to the whitewashed Cuban saint I knew—or thought I had known—from childhood.

My Iowa Martí was an unlikely candidate for the title of National Hero. Physically frail, Martí suffered a galaxy of maladies ranging from weak eyesight to a hernia (acquired in prison), a range of respiratory ailments, and even a chronically swollen testicle that had

to be surgically removed. He drank enough to earn the nickname “Ginebrita”—“Little Gin”. Nor was alcohol his only vice: As a young man Martí wrote and published an ode to hashish, and later resorted to a cocaine-infused French wine called Vin Mariani to combat mental or physical duress. The quasi-saintly “Apostle” of my long-ago lessons also turned out to be deeply anti-clerical, and a Mason to boot. I have not found a single instance of a religious holiday greeting in any of the hundreds of letters Martí wrote, or a reference to a religious observance of any kind.

Worse, I realized that Martí had not been nearly as ideologically pure as either his Miami- or Havana-based followers believed. I found ample evidence of his sympathy for certain elements of Marxist thought and disdain for others, a tension that remained unresolved to the end of his life. Martí’s attitude toward the U.S. likewise vacillated between admiration for its history of democratic reforms and a visceral resentment of its emerging imperial power. I encountered what amounted to a parallel universe of Cuban scholars and commentators, whose interpretation of Martí would have been unrecognizable to Mrs. Montes. For those scholars, raised and educated under the Cuban Revolution, Martí had been an atheist, a socialist, and a pan-

Caribbean revolutionary who loathed the U.S. even more than Spain.

Martí was also less than saintly in his private and family life, and made those closest to him pay a high price for his tireless dedication to the cause. Almost without exception, his loved ones came to understand that Cuba—and not they—came first. Martí steadfastly refused to adapt his revolutionary calling to the demands of domestic life, and expected an equal level of commitment and sacrifice from his wife, Carmen. The combination of his rigidity and her deep disdain for both revolutionary politics and New York City, Martí's adopted home in exile, eventually doomed their marriage.

However profound his commitment to the cause, however, this "Apostle" was no monk. Martí took a mistress, Carmita Mantilla, perhaps within a month of arriving in New York, possibly fathering a child with her in the Manhattan boarding house she ran and shared with her husband. Hilariously, Maria Mantilla's 1881 baptismal certificate lists Martí as the child's godfather. He managed to conceal this double life from Carmen for years, even as she repeatedly tried to settle in New York and save their marriage. And when she finally quit New York for good, Martí blamed *her* for the split.

Through all of this, I wondered at Martí's ability to keep political enemies at bay, despite several brushes with scandal. His charmed political life aside, however, how could so many succeeding generations of devotees have failed to render him as a human being in the rush to canonize him? Where was the morally upright, unwaveringly pro-America, God-fearing Hero-of-the-Revolution and Father-of-the-Nation? Had influential or powerful interpreters of Martí knowingly sanitized unwelcome elements of his life in order to protect his legacy?

Martí, the son of Spaniards, launched a war of independence against his father's fatherland. He drank too much, consumed hashish as a young man, kept a mistress, smuggled guns and money. He spent his last years constantly on the run from Spanish spies, Pinkerton agents, and U.S. Customs officials. Martí's last domiciles in New York were a string of safe houses, which he entered after dark and quit before dawn, and in none of which he spent more than one night at a time. He died in battle with a gun in his hand and a book of verses in his vest pocket, handwritten by a young girl who may have been his illegitimate daughter. Who was this guy anyway? Did all the people running around revering him in Miami and Havana *really* know? Did I?

I wondered whether such questions would only further alienate me from a Cuban-American culture that worshipped a man they hardly knew.

It took nearly a decade before my Iowa epiphany would appear in print. I had a degree to finish, and a dissertation to write. So I resolved to fully pursue the Martí mystery once I graduated and found a job.

In 1998, I landed my first tenure-track position at Florida International University in Miami. I was “home” once again, with a proper job, a wife, and a mortgage. By then my mother, who was approaching 80, had taken to gifting long-cherished personal items: old photographs, my old school report cards, and other commemorative or otherwise “valuable” tchotchkes she’d amassed over four decades in the U.S.

Among this detritus was a 1960s-era book called *Album azul de Cuba*. It was obviously a self-financed affair, an assortment of old black-and-white photographs of pre-Fidel Cuba embellished by the kind of blunt editorializing that would have shocked me had I not grown up listening to my parents’ AM radio. Castro was “el tirano.” Cuban exiles were the true wronged heirs of “la patria,” and so

on. It was a relic of the diaspora’s first and most bitter years, a time when every politician and pop singer and local business, Cuban or Anglo, white or black or Mexican or Chinese, was publicly judged by their position on Cuba. The wound of exile was wet and new. Any hint of deviation, of sympathy with the Castro government, especially from a Cuban, made it sting again like the first time, every tiny betrayal a return to the founding scene of their undoing. Subsequent reproaches of the exiles’ outsized reactions to these offenses made no difference, in fact only heightened the community’s sense of victimization and wounded pride. Callers to the local AM talk shows—the 60s Cuban version of today’s AM hate-radio—voiced their indignation at the latest outrage every day, egged on by equally enraged hosts. For perceived transgressors, death threats and hate-mail campaigns were frequent; vandalism and physical assaults—later escalating to bombings—not beyond the pale.

I barely glanced at the old book in my mother’s presence, not wanting to trigger yet another Cuba-inspired rant. But examining it later brought back all the old questions that had dogged me in Iowa. Turning the pages felt like watching an old home movie of my former life that somebody had dug out of some trunk. The book’s virulent hatred of Castro; its

nostalgia for a world already long-gone when the book appeared in 1965; its wistful portrayal of pre-Fidel Cuba as a bourgeois wonderland of stability and wealth—all these seemed comical in hindsight, a cruel self-parody. And there, at the center of it all, was Martí, the national saint in whose name the exile community lived its pain and fought its daily battles, to live for the day when it could go home.

As a second-generation Cuban-American, the original exiles' political passions and religion of "return" had always struck me as something of an abstraction. But turning the *Album azul's* pages, I understood for the first time the pain and longing and rage that had defined a generation. The pain of displacement would have been much fresher in 1965 than it was even when I first experienced it as a child a decade later. In its mawkish, overwrought way, this forgotten little spiral-bound book captured my community's acute, withering agony in all its ugly glory. I sat stupefied, suddenly chastened by the casual, flippant way in which I had often mocked their pain. Bombastic, melodramatic, maudlin, occasionally violent in its intensity, Cuban exile rhetoric had always seemed easy to dismiss as overheated and unreasonable. I was a professional scholar now, after all, and had a responsibility to

educate and inform. To demystify. But holding the *Album azul de Cuba* in my hands, I belatedly grasped that they too had much to teach me about the suffering of a people, about the harsh political and cultural realities of exile.

I had never read a Martí biography that portrayed Cuba's greatest national hero as I had come to know him through my years of reading his work. Perhaps there would be time now to write that biography. And what better place to write it, after all, than Miami?

The realities and pressures of a tenure-track (but as yet untenured) position, however, forced Martí to my back burner yet again. Other professional and personal priorities—publishing my dissertation as a first book, starting a family—pushed Martí back another few years. Surely a biography of the scale that I envisioned, I told myself, would require many years to research and write. I would need time away from teaching, travel funds, and especially money to support my family while developing the book. Grant proposals would also take time. What if my teaching suffers? What if I don't publish enough in the meantime? Whenever I thought of Martí, I could hear the tenure clock ticking. Loudly.

In hindsight, none of these barriers were that significant. The real reason I didn't write the Martí biography in Miami was, frankly, fear, although I wouldn't have admitted it at the time. Whenever my attention turned to Martí, I would quickly find something else—student papers, a book I'd been meaning to read—that demanded my attention. What I had not addressed since returning to Miami was my deep misgivings about the project itself. All the unresolved feelings of a former life slowly but implacably resurfaced: the alienation of that transplanted kid, the creeping conviction that my understanding of Martí was so transgressive as to make me a pariah to the people and the community that had raised me. It didn't help that a Cuban-American colleague at FIU was demonized after he described Miami on *60 Minutes* as “almost a Third World banana republic” and stated that Cuban exiles had “perfected fraud to a fine art.” The resulting feud lingered in the local media for months, with angry exiles calling Prof. Dario Moreno a “sell-out Cuban.” Petitions even circulated demanding that the university fire him. (It didn't.)

I didn't think it likely that FIU would fire me in the event of controversy or other ugliness arising from my work on Martí. If nothing else, the Moreno controversy showed that one could

finally denounce Miami hardliners without fear of retribution. Then again, unlike me, Moreno could snipe at the Miami political establishment from the relative safety of tenure. More importantly, he wasn't taking on the Third Rail of Miami Cubanness, that most sacred of exile cows—The Myth of Martí. To write a humanizing and potentially critical biography of Cuba's greatest hero would likely result in some seriously undesirable consequences, both professionally and personally. Beyond even those risks, however, I deeply feared being disowned by my rabidly anti-Castro, Republican-voting mother.

Olga López is, like so many Cuban exiles, a deeply considerate and kind human being, and her Catholic faith makes her instinctively sympathetic to the sufferings of others. On the subject of Communism, however, she harbors nothing but the utmost hostility. In this my mother is no different from any number of Miami Cubans I have known since adolescence, who take any sympathy for the current regime—especially from a fellow Cuban—as a personal affront. Here there is no room for dialogue, no cordial agreeing to disagree.

A composite of the standard reproaches leveled for decades at any Cuban-American who dares question the community's bedrock

beliefs might read something like this:

How could you ever think such a thing about the thugs who took everything from us, the tyrants who have destroyed our homeland and enslaved its people for more than 50 years and cast the rest of us into exile? Have you forgotten the price we have all had to pay for our freedom—for your freedom?

And so on. The tone and content of these diatribes has varied over the years depending on context: Elian Gonzalez, allowing Cuban musicians to perform in the U.S., renewing U.S.-Cuban relations, etc. But the underlying question is always the same:

What kind of Cuban are you anyway?

For as long as I can remember, my mother and I had tacitly agreed not to discuss politics, and especially any topic involving Cuba. This détente grew largely from my mother's eventual realization that I would never share her political views. It was one thing to have an oddball, left-leaning professor son who voted for Al Gore and supported lifting the trade embargo. But it would be quite another to have a son publicly known for destroying his community's most revered icon: Albert Goldman, Janet Reno, and Hugo Chavez rolled into one

despised body. It would mean the end, not only of any possibility of membership in the Cuban-American community, but of my relationship with my own mother.

By 2000, I had completed and found a publisher for what would be my first book. I had published and not perished, and with tenure all but assured I would be free to pursue my Martí research wholeheartedly.

But I didn't. I blamed the postponement of my "Martí project" on teaching obligations, not to mention the birth of our first child. But the ugly truth was that I had come to dread the prospect of writing about Martí in the midst of his most ardent followers.

That I would never have the courage to write that book while living in Miami should, in hindsight, have been perfectly obvious. But if I was too paralyzed by foreboding and inertia to embrace the book I so desperately wanted to write, I was also too much of a stoic, macho Cuban to admit it. Instead of teaching and publishing the increasingly inescapable conclusions to which my research was leading, I allowed myself to be defeated by my own unresolved fears.

Reader, I folded. Or as we would say in Cuban: *Me apendejé*.

The chance to leave Miami came soon enough: in 2002, I accepted a position at the University of Mississippi, and five years later traded Ole Miss for Purdue. Both schools have generously supported my Martí research, but their greatest gift to me has been the opportunity to pursue that work away from the political and emotional maelstrom of Miami. The Ghosts of Cubanesses Past have not left me, but their visits these days are less frequent. Maybe it's the weather—Indiana winters can't be good for those hot-tempered Cuban poltergeists.

But even in tropical Miami, Cubanness has itself become something of a ghost. In hindsight, the turgid events of 2000—the Elian Gonzalez debacle in April, and later the prominence of Miami Cubans in events surrounding the Presidential election—were a political last hurrah for the hardliners who even then wielded a political influence out of proportion with their actual numbers. It is hard to avoid the creeping sense that Cuban-Americans—especially the hardline variety—have become just another U.S. minority, albeit a noisy one.

Over the last two decades, the rest of Latin America and the Caribbean have poured into Miami—Nicaraguans, Colombians, Venezuelans, Mexicans—swamping

the Cuban population. The resulting Cuban version of white flight has re-diasporized the community once again, as they have scattered to surrounding suburbs and melted into the general populace.

The result is as visibly inescapable as was Miami's Cubanness during my 1970s adolescence: The community's once-ubiquitous AM radio presence has been reduced to a single low-frequency station, ironically dubbed "La Poderosa," the prolixity of family Cuban restaurants has been replaced by tacquerias, arepa stands, Peruvian ceviche, "Latin American" bakeries selling Nicaraguan *tres leches* desserts and Colombian *pan de bono*. Even the street names are diversifying, with Puerto Ricans (José Ferrer, Luis Muñoz Marín) and Argentinians (Carlos Gardel, Libertad Lamarque) now joining the pantheon. Most telling is the transformation of the former Little Havana into an Epcotesque theme park; the exile community's erstwhile Ground Zero now caters mostly to tourists, with gift shops, ice-cream stands and tropical-themed night clubs overrun by white Americans and Europeans with their fanny packs and Little Havana T-shirts. The scene must be all but unrecognizable to the few remaining old-timers, wandering around like the "garrulous outraged baffled ghosts" of Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha.

But those ghosts are sure to find me whenever I visit Miami. I gave a presentation a few years ago at a Cuban Studies conference there and was more or less heckled. My assertion that Martí had never resolved the question of Marxism in his own writings set off a small clutch of older Cuban scholars. The fact that I had carefully demonstrated my thesis using Martí's own writings meant nothing to the Old Guard, keepers of the Martí faith.

Q&A quickly grew heated, as the men—one of whom eerily reminded me of my late uncle Sergio—stood, fingers jabbing emphatically, shouting me (and each other) down from across the room. The intensity and personal nature of their attacks momentarily stunned me. It also didn't help that kind old uncle Sergio had returned from the grave to call out my heresy: "*After all the years we tried to love you, to raise you right, this is how you repay us?*" Maybe at some point I actually did hear those words in my head, hallucinated them coming from someone's twisted, spitting mouth.

What saved me that day was the sudden realization that the strength of my argument or my research didn't matter to these guys. What had whipped these old men into such a violent froth was the fact that I, a Cuban-raised son

of exile, could utter such blasphemies.

Of course in Cuba I would have simply lost my job or been reassigned to manual labor, or perhaps imprisoned. Here I had only to face the ire of my fellows. I also noticed that others in the audience had grown weary of the ongoing disruption. Perhaps too focused on me to notice their effect on the rest of the room, the small, shrill crew persisted. Although the men's rebukes continued to the end of the session, their diatribe had the unintended effect of alienating *them* from the rest of the audience. Even if others were not necessarily sympathetic to my argument, they didn't question my right to make it in a public place.

In some small way, that confrontation, however petty and academic, gave me the courage to prevail. I had exorcized my first ghosts. There would be more, many more. But at least now I knew I could face them down.