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Dionisio Poey Baró

“RACE” AND ANTI-RACISM IN JOSÉ MARTÍ’S “MI RAZA”*

ON APRIL 16, 1893, José Martí’s “Mi raza,” appeared in the newspaper *Patria*; this issue also listed the results of the April 10th elections in which Martí was unanimously re-elected as a national delegate. This work, like Martí’s other literature, is infused with an anti-racism shaped by his life experiences: listening as a young child to talk about the creation of man in God’s image; seeing at the age of nine the hanging of a slave; knowing first-hand the vicissitudes of clandestine human cargo taken through inhospitable places, hidden from public view in the sugar plantations; working alongside and being lashed with slaves in the quarries.

Martí texts, such as “Mi Raza,” dealing with race in Cuba are numerous. Most appeared during the preparatory stages of the 19th century war of independence from Spain. In almost all of his political writings and speeches there are passages intended to demonstrate that in the future republic there would be no place for racial discrimination and that there would be a prevailing spirit of unity, based in the purest and most essential democratic tendencies from the liberation war. He never ceases to repeat that the anti-segregationist measures approved by the Spanish government expressed their fear of the revolution, and their attempts to destabilize it by undermining its social base.

“Mi raza” synthesizes many of the subjects which Martí had discussed in his previous works. The ideas are presented with such depth and intensity that the piece can be considered his most developed work on interracial relations. “Mi Raza” entails a series of original proposals for a solution to racism, as well as an analysis of society in that era. José Martí proclaims a spiritual identity shared by all people, repudiating arguments for racial superiority. For Martí, emphasizing the values of race is only justifiable in order to demonstrate, contrary to affirmations made in his time, that there is absolutely no evidence of the incapacity of a Black person to develop fully.

Believing that transculturation would eliminate racial conflict in Cuba, he writes “El negro que se aísla provoca aislarse al blanco” [“The black person that isolates him or herself provokes the white person to do likewise”] and vice-versa. According to Martí, mestizo identity is the most effective means of perfecting the compactness of Cuban ethnicity. “Deben mezclarse las razas” [“Races should be mixed”], wrote Martí as a final solution to the problem in his personal notes entitled “Para las escenas” [“For the scenes”].¹ This, for him, meant more than a call to action — since he also said “cada cual será libre en lo sagrado de la casa”² [“everyone will be free in the sacredness of the

*Editor’s note: translation by Isabel Valiela.

home”]. Rather, it was the sincere recognition of a truth which he always saw developing in Cuba, one which had to increase as prejudices subsided. Above all, he was convinced that “mestizaje” was more than a voluntary option; it was a natural and undetainable process which would mark the future of the country. He describes the rich fruit from that amalgam: “la masa pujante, — la masa mestiza, hábil y conmovedora del país — la masa inteligente y creadora de blancos y negros”³ [“the strong race, the mestizo masses, talented and movers of the nation, the intelligent and creative masses of Whites and Blacks”] in his posthumous letter to Manuel Mercado.

The mix of cultures, habits, food, gestures, and religions provides a new dimension as the life experiences of different peoples are united. The child of that diversity is a universal being. (“El cubano camina como yoruba” [“The Cuban walks like a Yoruba”], noticed an astonished Wole Soyinka in one of his trips to Cuba). In the paragraphs of “Mi Raza” one perceives a subtle current of indignation at the web of conventionalisms, traditions, economic interests, and psychological factors which constitute as well as maintain racial prejudices.

After independence, Cuban Blacks and Mulattos were theoretically offered the recognition of equality acquired in the war of independence and mandated in the first Mambisa constitution. Martí could not imagine that a meticulously planned social project such as his could be diverted from its course. Perceiving neither official discriminations in the republic nor the need for the formation of parties based on skin color, Martí optimistically writes:

la semejanza de los caracteres, superior como factor de unión a las relaciones internas de un color de hombres graduado, y en sus grados a veces opuesto, decide o impera en la formación de los partidos. La afinidad de los caracteres es más poderosa entre los hombres que la afinidad del color. . . . Los hombres de pompa e interés se irán de un lado blancos o negros; y los hombres generosos y deinteresados, se irán de otro.⁴

[the similarity of character, superior as a unifying factor in the internal relations of men of varying, and sometimes opposite color, decides or dominates the formation of parties. The affinity of character is more powerful among men than the affinity of color. . . . Men of pomp and self-interest will go one way whether they are White or Black; and generous and unselfish men will go the other way.]

Martí’s optimism serves as a recurrent echo:

En Cuba no habrá nunca guerra de razas. La República no se puede volver atrás; y la República, desde el día único de redención del negro en Cuba, desde la primera constitución de la independencia el 10 de abril en Guaimaro, no habló nunca de blancos ni de negros. Los derechos públicos concedidos ya de pura astucia por el gobierno español e iniciados en las costumbres antes de la independencia de

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la Isla, no podrán ser negados, ni por el español que los mantendrá mientras aliene en Cuba, para seguir dividiendo al cubano negro del cubano blanco, ni por la independencia, que no podrá negar en la libertad los derechos que el español reconoció en la servidumbre.⁵

[In Cuba there will never be a race war. The Republic cannot go backwards; and the Republic, since the only day of redemption of Blacks in Cuba, since the first constitution of independence on April 10 in Guaimaro, never spoke of Whites or Blacks. The public rights conceded out of pure cunning by the Spanish government and initiated in customs that existed prior to the independence of the Island, cannot be denied, neither by the Spaniard that that will maintain them while encouraged in Cuba, in order to continue dividing the Black Cuban from the White Cuban, nor by independence, which cannot deny in liberty the rights that the Spaniard recognized in servitude.]

The economic and social transformations that would occur in the Cuba projected by Martí would theoretically improve living conditions for the popular masses and the most discriminated groups, which would be an important step in the elimination of racism. Mass access to education and culture, exercised with a democratic and just spirit, would contribute to human elevation and help eliminate the prejudices impeding full social development.

However, the leadership of the principal parties after independence expressed no real interest in resolving the conflicts inherited from slavery. Blacks and Mestizos were only taken into account as unavoidable public figures for the purpose of giving prestige to a party and attracting clientele [such were the cases of Juan Gualberto Gómez, Martín Morúa Delgado], and above all to feed electoral appetites with their frustrated votes. In the state apparatus there was no principal position for discriminated people of color. Symbolic of those times, then president Tomás Estrada Palma ridiculed the Mambi general Quintín Banderas.⁶ As a response to the racism of the ruling elite, the "Partido Independiente de Color" (PIC) ["Party of the Independentists of Color"] was formed. Attacked from the beginning by other parties, the parliament, the tribunals, and the press, the PIC was compelled to carry out an armed protest in 1912. Although some perceive this as potentially inciting a racial war, paradoxically, the PIC was the only party at the time that called for a solution to racial conflicts and for equal rights. The repression of this party and the Black and Meztizo populations confirmed that the structures of the Republic would never tolerate demands for equal justice.

In pursuit of that equality, Martí rejected the positions sustained by supporters of national unity who opposed racial discrimination, yet were motivated by a certain paternalism towards Blacks. Believing Black Cubans to be inferior and insisting on the idea that "había que elevar al negro" ["Blacks had to be elevated"], some progressive Cubans participated in charity and education projects to improve the living conditions of that social sector. Critical of these assumptions José Martí writes:

El hombre de color en Cuba es ya ente de plena razón que lee en su libro y se conoce la medida de la cintura; sin que necesite que del cielo blanco le caiga el maná culto . . . sino, que los cubanos blancos, . . . den, en la verdad de las costumbres, . . . el ejemplo de la igualdad que ense: a la naturaleza, confirma la vida virtuosa e inteligente del cubano de color y sólo está hoy de disfraz en las falsas leyes. . . . En Cuba no hay que elevar al negro: que a prorrata, valgan verdades, tanto blanco necesita elevación como negros, pudiesen necesitarla. En Cuba, por humanidad y previsión, hay que ser justo.⁷

[The person of color in Cuba is already a fully rational human being that reads his book and knows his waist measure; with no need for the cultured manna to falls from the White sky . . . rather, let the White Cubans, . . . give, in the truth of customs, . . . the example of equality that nature teaches, confirms the virtuous and intelligent life of the Cuban of color and which is disguised today in false laws. . . . In Cuba the Black person does not have to be elevated; proportionately, to tell the truth, as many Whites need elevation as Blacks could need it. In Cuba, out of humanity and foresight, one must be just.]

Understanding that paternalism was rooted in racism, he further noted: “y aún hay quien crea de buena fe al negro incapaz de la inteligencia y corazón del blanco”⁸ [“and there are still those who in good faith still believe that Blacks are incapable of the intelligence and heart of Whites”]. Rather than focus on the alleged lack of culture of the dark skin sector, Martí viewed it as necessary to reeducate everyone to participate fully in a free and decolonized country, whether they were born in a wealthy house or in a slave barracks. If the deficiencies of the slave fall entirely upon the master, those who preach the “elevation of the Black” also need reeducation.

Martí wrote “Mi raza” to demystify not only the ideas of superior and inferior “races,” but the very concept of “race.” For instance his noteworthy phrases on race include the statement that: “El hombre no tiene ningún derecho especial porque pertenezca a una raza u otra: dígame hombre, y ya se dicen todos los derechos.”⁹ [“Man has no special right based on his belonging to one race or another: say man, and you already say all rights.”] He as well asserted: “Hombre es más que blanco, más que mulato, más que negro.”¹⁰ [“Man is more than White, more than Mulatto, more than Black.”] Finally, Martí warned: “Todo lo que divide a los hombres, todo lo que los especifica, aparta o acorrala, es un pecado contra la humanidad.”¹¹ [“Everything that divides men, everything that specifies, sets them apart, or corners them, is a sin against humanity.”]

These universal anti-racist principles expressed 100 years ago are reflected in international law treaties such as the United Nations *Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination* [1963] which maintains that “All doctrine of racial differentiation or superiority is scientifically false, morally condemned, socially unjust, and dangerous, and nothing justifies it either in theory or practice.”¹² The legacy of José

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Martí as an anti-racist writer is evident in the immense cultural production of Cuban scholar Fernando Ortiz who writes:

En cada población humana hay una amplia diversidad genética. No existe en la especie humana una raza pura, por lo menos en el sentido de población genéticamente homogénea.¹³

[In every human population there is a broad genetic diversity. In the human species a pure race does not exist, at least in the sense of a population that is genetically homogeneous.]

In *El engaño de las razas* [*The Race Deception*], Ortiz provides scientific tools for those interested in combating racial prejudice, continuing the labor of illumination begun by Martí. With regard to the often manipulated idea of racial differences, the author, with his own arguments and aided by modern findings in the social sciences, denies the very existence of race and goes forward with his definition of "mestizaje":

Todo individuo humano, por la forzosa disparidad y conjunción de sus genes progenitores, es en rigor un mestizo. Y cuantos más cruzamientos se hayan dado por las vías ancestrales de donde un individuo desciende, más varios podrán ser los genes que éste haya tenido a su disposición en el acervo de sus antepasados para formar su personalidad. Así los cruces del mestizaje aumentan a medida que se suceden las generaciones y, por tanto, son más varios los que en ésta intervienen. El homo sapiens . . . es la más mestiza de todas las criaturas.¹⁴

[Every human individual, because of the strong disparity and the union of ancestral genes, is strictly speaking a mestizo. And the more ancestral crossings there have been, the more varied could be the genes that form his personality. Thus, the crossings of mestizaje increase with succeeding generations, and the genes that intervene become increasingly varied. The homo sapiens is the most mestizo of all creatures.]

Ortiz analyzes homogenetic and polygenetic theories pertaining to human origins.¹⁵ At the center of the anti-racist thinking of Martí exists the homo- or monogeneity of "races." There is, according to Martí, no natural barrier that sets people against each other. Extreme racial barriers are socially constructed by deformed forces. Each person is part of nature which extends over everything in an infinite process of perfection. Therefore all action to liberate and develop the human being is also an action to re-establish harmony and balance in nature. People are not seen by Martí as autonomous individuals, but rather as individuals related to others through social ties:

Observando a los hombres se ve que no es cada uno una entidad definitivamente aislada y con un carácter exclusivo, que venga a ser una combinación natural original de los elementos humanos comunes; sino un tipo de una de las varias especies en que los hombres se dividen, según exista en ellos dominantes el amor de sí, o no exista, o coexista con el amor a los demás, si según, de los accidentes usuales que influyen en los hombres, les haya tocado vivir entre algunos determinados que en personas de cierta manera constituidas han de producir una conocida impresión cierta.

[By observing men one can see that each one is not an isolated entity with an exclusive character, a natural and original combination of common human elements; rather, he is one type of the various species in which men divide themselves, depending on how dominant is their self-love, if it does not exist, or if it co-exists with love for others, if accordingly, of the usual accidents that influence men, they happen to live in determining factors that in people who are constituted in a particular manner will produce a well known true impression.]

Martí considered the human individual to be a unity of matter and spirit, and at the same time a collective of closely related individuals, with all of one nature. Such a being has no other path but that of union; such a being transcends all racial division, Martí surmised:

Siendo una en todos los hombres la naturaleza humana, y uno siempre en torno de ellos el resto de la naturaleza en que el hombre influye, y que influye en él, unos han de ser los actos humanos cada vez que el mismo grupo de datos, el mismo estado nacional, la misma penuria económica, la misma irregularidad política, la misma concurrencia en el espíritu de elementos semejantes se presenten.¹⁶

[Given the fact that there is one human nature in all men, and one nature which surrounds them and in which they exert influence, and which, in turn, influences them, human acts will also be one each time that the same group of facts, the same national state, the same economic penury, the same political irregularity, the same concurrence in the spirit of similar elements present themselves.]

*"Race" and Anti-Racism in José Martí***NOTES**

- ¹ Jose Martí: "Para las Escenas," in *Anuario del Centro de Estudios Martíanos* No. 1 (La Habana: Centro de Estudios Martíanos, 1978).
- ² Jose Martí, *Obras Completas*, Havana, Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 1975, vol.2, 300. (The following references all refer to this edition and only the volume and page number will be indicated.)
- ³ *Ibid.*, vol. 2: 168.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, vol.2: 299.
- ⁵ Martí, *Obras Completas*, vol.2: 300.
- ⁶ When the famous and impoverished general, a prominent figure in the wars of independence asked the President of the Republic for employment, the latter offered him a position as a mailman and 5 pesos as financial assistance.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, vol. 2: 108-109.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, vol. 2: 298.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, vol. 2: 298.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, vol. 2: 299.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, vol. 2: 298.
- ¹² United Nations: *Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination*, cited in Committee for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, *Information Bulletin*, No. 12. (Geneva: Human Rights Center, 1991). (Approved by the General Assembly of the United Nations in 1963).
- ¹³ Fernando Ortiz, *El engaño de las razas* (La Habana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 1975), 10.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 319, 324.
- ¹⁵ Some monogenists tend to conclude that a pure racial type is not possible. Some polygenists see as achievable a pure race in which all the diverse "races" unite to create a new type of race, some polygenists wait patiently for the coming of that future race, perhaps revealing that the constant mixing does not produce a new homogenous type but rather a mixed being infinitely adding more varied elements than those of their progenitors. Still others utilize polygenism rationalize conquest and colonial expansion, considering themselves different from their origins and superior to the ones they dominated.
- ¹⁶ Martí, *Obras Completas*, vol. 15:395-396.