

Black Cubans in the United States

The Havana of Martí's boyhood offered scant opportunity to interact with members of the black population on a basis of equality, and his experience in the Cuban countryside was the one childhood setting where he vividly recorded his contact with slaves. His suffering in prison and at the San Lázaro quarries as an adolescent put him in the proximity of men like Juan de Dios, an ancient black man with the fire of Africa in his eyes, and Tomás, an eleven-year-old *bozal* (newly arrived slave), both of whom he described in the political tract *El presidio político en Cuba* (Political Prison in Cuba), published in Spain in 1871. Residence in Havana in 1879 placed him in frequent communication with the well-educated Afro-Cuban Juan Gualberto Gómez, a co-conspirator in the independence cause, and offered contact with other Cubans of African heritage. It remained for the years of living in the United States, however, to provide sustained connections with Cubans of color. In New York he worked closely with black and mulatto members of the exile community and in Tampa boarded in the home of a black couple, Ruperto and Paulina Pedroso.

New York

When Martí delivered a formal address at Steck Hall in January 1880, his message reached an audience of Cubans that included compatriots of modest means and numerous people of color. For many of those in attendance, the orator was an unfamiliar face, but as his words flowed from the written page, the crowd grew increasingly enthusiastic. He spoke of the past war, of Cuban aspirations, and of the challenges ahead. He applied

lessons of history. If Americans unjustly criticized Spanish American countries for not having achieved what the United States had achieved, one simply needed to note that the circumstances of their founding had been profoundly different. The Puritans came with the plow, and the Spaniards came with the lance, explained Martí, using distinctive images, plow versus lance (farmer versus soldier), to reinforce his contrast. Deftly uniting all Cubans in common resentment of the disdain they suffered in the Anglo-Saxon United States, Martí's message made everyone in the audience feel a little bit like the blacks and mulattoes among his listeners (EC 6: 156).¹

The Steck Hall speech laid out ideas about race that would be the underpinning for Martí's sociopolitical planning over the next fourteen and a half years and that he espoused more than a decade later in *Patria* (EC 6: 157–58). He argued against Spain's promises of a gradual abolition, deplored the mother country's charade of progress, and explained why black Cubans could not trust the colonial ruses. In figurative terms, he cast liberty for Cuba and liberty for the enslaved in the same context: the insurrectionist cause. With subtle but persuasive language he reasoned that the bitterness caused by deep wounds would not easily disappear, but that it would be a grave offense to suppose that most Cuban men of color were harboring toward whites an ill will that they could not contain. He declared that these black Cubans were "as sensible to all that is noble and as capable in the intellectual realm as we are" (EC 6: 157).

To fully understand Martí's writing about race is to understand that he wrote with the creative force of a literary master and was able to synthesize complex concepts with symbolism. His statement, "We must pay with our suffering for the criminal wealth of our grandfathers," called upon all Cubans, not just slave-owners, to atone for having built the wealth of the colony on the backs of Africans (EC 6: 139). His declaration that any faults of a slave fell wholly and exclusively on the owner put the blame for any shortcomings in the Afro-Cuban population squarely on the architects of the Spanish colonial past (EC 6: 156). His lines about the slavery endured by indigenous populations in Mexico as recorded in *La Revista Universal* in 1875 confirm the consistency of his thinking in regard to victims of abuse; the burden and blame do not adhere to the abused but to the abuser: "Having a slave tarnishes the owner: it is shameful to own someone else" (6: 266).



FIGURE 3. Rafael Serra, 1896. By permission of Manuscripts, Archives, and Rare Books Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations (1252500).

In the years he lived in New York, Martí befriended, worked with, and earned the admiration of many Cubans and Puerto Ricans of color. Some contacts were through his revolutionary efforts and some through his many cultural alliances, but a primary engagement was through education. By his educational endeavors Martí showed that he was not reluctant to work with and in racially identified groups. Juan Gualberto Gómez, with whom Martí had conspired in Cuba in 1878, and Martín Morúa Delgado were two Afro-Cuban leaders who disagreed about how people of African heritage should be designated racially and how they should align themselves with associations. Gómez grouped blacks and mulattoes together as belonging to the *raza de color* (people of color), while Morúa Delgado, whose mother was African and father was Basque, insisted that blacks and mulattoes were distinct racial categories (Helg, *Our Rightful Share*, 38–41). Bound up in

such differences was the question of whether those of color, either black or mulatto, should belong to separate groups and also whether any such race-based organizations had the potential to trigger a negative reaction among whites. Morúa Delgado opposed racially identified associations, saying that Cubanness should define all, while Gómez defended such groups.

Gómez's point of view was seen sympathetically by Afro-Cubans in the United States like Rafael Serra, who joined forces with Martí to promote education for people of color through *La Liga* (also called *La Liga de Instrucción*), founded in New York in 1890. Essentially an organization or society that became known as an educational circle with regularly scheduled classes for working-class Afro-Caribbeans, *La Liga* opened its doors on January 22 at 178 Bleeker Street (Helg, *Our Rightful Share*, 41–42). Martí's collaboration with Rafael Serra to found *La Liga* was an important commitment on his part. Classes at *La Liga* were scheduled throughout the week. Tuesdays and Thursdays were set for primary instruction, Wednesdays were for a literary topic, and Fridays twice a month were dedicated to a special lecture. Martí taught at *La Liga*, as well as helping to find teachers and promoting membership, and rushed to his Thursday evening sessions after his work as a Spanish instructor at Central High School on East Sixty-Fourth Street. He took his daughter María with him to *La Liga* on Monday nights.

Patria

Another primary way in which Martí interacted with Cubans and Puerto Ricans of color was through *Patria*, whose first issue appeared in March 1892. The newspaper became a vehicle for writing about race and making connections with Cuba, as planning proceeded for a new revolutionary struggle against Spain, and *Patria*, which allowed Martí to discuss ideas and tackle issues he also addressed in his speeches, contains some of his most famous and familiar statements about race, like the essay "Mi raza." It also gave him a chance to feature images of prominent Afro-Cuban figures like Antonio Maceo and Maceo's mother. Whether *Patria* should be considered an exile press, one that takes advantage of a foreign location to deliver messages to the home country, or an immigrant/ethnic press, one focused on immigrants, is a question that is often raised.² Martí worked

extensively with immigrants, but his purpose was to change the political situation in Cuba, so the exile claim seems stronger.

The 1890s were years of stress and tension for Martí, involving a whirlwind pace of travel, planning, and activities. He had founded the Cuban Revolutionary Party to coordinate the patriotic groups seeking an end to Spanish rule in Cuba, and in 1892 he was elected as its delegate (*Delegado*), that is to say, chief spokesman. He was anxious about Secretary of State James G. Blaine's designs on Spanish America, especially Cuba. The Spanish government, meanwhile, protested his activities and had him followed by Pinkerton's detective service. His wife and son visited in the summer of 1891 but abruptly departed, assisted by the Spanish consul in New York. He was battling those who still sought annexation to the United States, while also teaching and keeping up his extensive correspondence. During these difficult times, Martí channeled energy into *Patria*, where he forcefully countered personal sniping directed at him and heated attacks against the egalitarian republic that the Cuban Revolutionary Party promised. Sotero Figueroa, the Afro-Puerto Rican editor and printer of *La Revista Ilustrada* (The Illustrated Magazine) and Martí's colleague at *La Liga*, was the printer and managing editor for *Patria* and contributed articles to the newspaper. Thus *Patria* served not only as a means to chart a positive path for Cuban race relations but also as a direct personal connection with a prominent Afro-Antillean. It was filled with articles dealing with race, some of which were discussed in chapter 2.

Patria's very first edition put "The Bases of the Cuban Revolutionary Party"—bases that insisted on a unified effort to achieve Cuban independence—on the front page and then repeated them in all but a handful of subsequent issues. The bases also pledged to help Puerto Rico gain its freedom and sought the foundation of a new nation capable of overcoming the "dangers of sudden liberty in a society created on the basis of slavery" (1: 279). Martí led with a piece called "Our Ideas," in which he linked Cuba and Puerto Rico in the quest for liberty and declared the need for and the purposes of the war against Spain. He intimated with careful wording that while the planned revolution would embrace all without regard to color, the social equality envisioned would not mean wishing for or imposing a forced social mingling among races. At the same time, he insisted that social equality between those of equal standing, regardless of color, was

foundational and had its basis in the “visible equity of nature” (1: 320–21). Another article, a year later, revealed how Martí paired freedom for all with freedom for slaves. In describing the 1873 abolition of slavery in Puerto Rico, Martí stated that Cubans had pronounced slaves to be free in 1869, implying that both islands had already resolved the slavery question. But in the article’s conclusion he declared that Puerto Rico, with abolition of slavery but no political emancipation, still was home to many de facto slaves both *black and white* (emphasis mine) (5: 329).

Patria gave Martí a forum for spirited debate and a chance to answer critics. Reacting to patronizing comments from an annexationist in Havana who had disparaged the war effort and was quoted in the U.S. press, Martí took the opportunity to defend black Cubans. The critic had labeled Martí a fine poet and orator but “wildly visionary” and out of touch with life in Cuba. In a backhanded compliment he added that Martí was noble to dedicate himself to the culture and advancement of black Cubans. Martí’s skillful response in *Patria* fully addressed these racial insinuations, characterizing the man of color in Cuba as a person who could reason and read perfectly well for himself “without needing for cultured manna to fall from a white heaven.” Martí further reasoned that there was no need to specify social uplifting solely for the black population in Cuba since proportionately as many whites as blacks might need such elevation (2: 108–9). The positive portrayal continued with a description of the Cuban freedman living in the eastern part of the island. It was a story of progress: a hard-working soul who formerly held only the small plot allotted for slaves to cultivate was now master of his own farm land. He had a good horse, spruced-up clothing, and a rural school paid for through the persistence of the black community (2: 109).³ Martí’s *Patria* account coincides with historical assessments of the same era. As Herbert S. Klein and Ben Vinson note, the Ten Years’ War brought the virtual demise of plantation slavery in the eastern part of the island, with no attempt by the Spanish government to reenslave those emancipated. As a result the region became “a center of a vibrant free colored peasant agriculture that would define the Oriente (Cuba’s Eastern region) to the 20th century” (92).

Throughout the articles in *Patria*, Martí wove and interwove themes of unity: Cubans and Puerto Ricans, blacks and whites, peasant farmers (*guajiros*) and freedmen (*libertos*), slaves seeking freedom from a master and

colonies seeking freedom from a ruler—all were joined in aspiring for a just future. Martí also projected an idealistic scenario. Whites were forgiven and blacks forgiving in the common struggle; *guajiros* and *libertos* would share the same countryside. Men of Spain were not the enemy. He declared in the famous essay “My Race” in *Patria* that to speak of race was to be redundant, that there would be no race war in Cuba, and that to be Cuban meant more than white, more than mulatto, more than black (2: 298–99).

Florida

In the 1890s, as fervor was growing for a new push for independence among the Cuban clubs in Florida, Néstor Carbonell, president of the Ignacio Agramonte Club in Tampa, asked that Martí be invited to speak at a fund-raising event.⁴ The delegate arrived on November 25, 1891, and the following day gave an impassioned speech, “With all and for the good of all,” at the Liceo Cubano. On November 27 the triumph was repeated with “The New Pines” address and engendered such enthusiasm that a *Liga de instrucción*, like *La Liga* in New York, was formed. The *Liga* in Tampa began in the home of a well-regarded Afro-Cuban patriot, Cornelio Brito, and would count thirty members by the time Martí returned to New York. As Nancy Mirabal remarks about the Tampa association: “While on the one hand, Martí believed that ‘everything that divides men, everything that separates or herds men together in categories is a sin against humanity,’ on the other hand he assisted and supported Afro-Cuban clubs like *La Liga*” (58). Among the Cuban clubs, first in Tampa and later in Key West, Martí’s presence was electrifying. His soaring speeches delivered to the Cuban émigré community in Florida won affection and admiration from listeners of all races and were powerful fund-raising devices.

The compatriots Martí met in Florida were part of a mixed-race community that was distinctive in the American South. In the late nineteenth century, the time that Martí was visiting Florida, whites, blacks, and mulattoes all worked in a common space on the cigar factory floors. As Susan Greenbaum’s book *More than Black: Afro-Cubans in Tampa* notes, since cigar-making required specialized skills and its workers were organized, the Afro-Cubans working in cigar factories were better off financially than