

*Under the Volcanoes:  
The Influence of Guatemala on José Martí*

**ABSTRACT**

José Martí, revered as an inspirational figure in the struggle for Cuban independence, lived most of his short but remarkable life in exile. Driven from the shores of colonial Cuba at the age of seventeen, Martí spent the next two decades formulating ideas about what a liberated Cuba might be like by traveling to, residing in, and writing about other countries that had thrown off the imperial yoke. While Mexico and the United States are recognized as having played key roles in Martí's intellectual development, little attention has been paid to Guatemala, where he taught school and mixed in elite circles in 1877 and 1878. This essay examines Martí's experiences in Guatemala and discusses how his time there, by exposing him to the liberal agenda of General Justo Rufino Barrios, furnished him with a concrete example of nation building that Martí not only admired but also was moved to champion.

**RESUMEN**

José Martí, venerado como la gran figura que inspiró la lucha por la independencia cubana, vivió en el exilio la mayor parte de su corta pero extraordinaria vida. Partió de la isla con diecisiete años, empleando las dos siguientes décadas en formular las ideas sobre la libertad de Cuba, lo mismo viajando que residiendo en varias ciudades y escribiendo sobre otros países que se habían liberado del yugo imperial. Mientras que México y los Estados Unidos han sido reconocidos en su importante papel en el desarrollo intelectual de Martí, poca atención se ha prestado a Guatemala, donde se dedicó a la enseñanza, integrándose en los círculos de la élite guatemalteca en 1877 y 1878. Este ensayo examina la experiencia de Martí en Guatemala, y discute cómo en estos años, en el contexto del liberalismo del general Justo Rufino Barrios, conoció un ejemplo concreto de la construcción de una nación. Martí no sólo le demostró admiración, sino que lo tomó como modelo.

José Julián Martí y Pérez (1853–1895) spent most of his short but eventful life in exile. From the age of seventeen, the man now revered as a national icon actually spent very little time in his native Cuba. Driven from its shores in 1870, first to Spain and then to Mexico, he took up residence in New York City in 1880. Thereafter, New York served as the base from which he waged his campaign for Cuban independence, though Martí continued to travel outside

the United States, especially in parts of Latin America sympathetic to, and supportive of, his political views.

Spain, Mexico, and the United States in particular are recognized as having played key roles in Martí's intellectual formation, furnishing him with ideas and experiences he would subsequently apply to envisioning Cuban nationhood and notions of pan-Americanism beyond. Guatemala, however, where he spent a little more than a year between 1877 and 1878, is usually thought of as constituting no more than an ill-fated episode in Martí's love life, immortalized by him in the heart-wrenching verses of "La niña de Guatemala," a poem he penned more than a decade later and one that serves Francisco Goldman with rich material for his evocative depiction of Martí in his novel *The Divine Husband* (Goldman 2004; Martí 1961g). Overlooked — indeed, all but forgotten on account of a tragic tale of unrequited love — is how Guatemala inspired Martí and provided him, in the form of the nation-building agenda of President Justo Rufino Barrios, with an example of nationhood he not only admired but also was moved to champion. Martí's enthusiastic embrace of Barrios, on first inspection, seems at odds with the progressive views we hold of Martí today, for Barrios ruled Guatemala according to the tenets of liberal dictatorship, not liberal democracy. Our goal, however, is to contextualize Martí's time in Guatemala in such a way as to render it both crucial to, and compatible with, his nationalist thinking as it evolved and matured.

The challenge before us is to grapple with the political development of Martí and the multiple influences on his life. All nation-states, and the individuals who help forge them, are not as impartial as some versions of history make them out to be; ideological neutrality, Will Kymlicka (2000) argues, is a myth. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (1983), meanwhile, contend that nation-states, along with their casts of founders and heroes, are laden with invented traditions, as well as riddled with contradictions. These are worthwhile considerations to bear in mind when dealing with the factors that shaped Martí's vision of pan-Americanism, most pertinently (1) liberal ideologies that advanced the separation of church and state; (2) access to, and exploitation of, natural resources; and (3) the pursuit of modernity through technology and science. Although Martí is today incorporated into starkly opposing political discourses, extant literature indicates that he adopted liberal views in Mexico that became increasingly radical during his time in the United States. Martí's more outspoken and substantive works are usually the ones referenced in charting the evolution of his political consciousness.

Why should less analytical, more descriptive writing, a miscellany that does not figure prominently in critical appraisals of Martí's vast output, be slighted (consciously or otherwise) in debates about his philosophy? We maintain that Martí's brief spell in Guatemala, one of his most animated periods of expression, offers insight into his views of the Americas and the nation-

building project within it. Such works as the celebrated *Nuestra América* (1891), which calls for the peoples of the Americas to see themselves as one nation, one culture, related parts of a single historical experience, build on Martí's thoughts and influences in Mexico in 1875 and 1876. We must also take into account, however, his yearlong stay in Guatemala immediately thereafter, a period that saw him assume an active promotional role in the liberal reform movement. Martí's time in Guatemala, for the most part dismissed as a tragic tale of love gone wrong and politics awry, was in fact a giddy combination of personal discovery and professional exposure in a land then wracked by unprecedented change. Martí's writings from Guatemala, including several letters to his friend Manuel Mercado, reveal a eulogy of admiration that echoes his later and more prominent writing.

What was it that took Martí to Guatemala? Upon arrival, what kind of social, political, and cultural milieu did he encounter? What was it about Guatemala and its inhabitants that he so admired and that made such a lasting impression on him? What caused Guatemala to become such a pivotal stop in Martí's search for ideal nationhood? Why did he experience it all the way he did? Our goal is to illuminate the influence that Guatemala exerted on Martí through a critique of some of his lesser-known writings and correspondence. We furnish readers with details of his stay in Guatemala, prefacing it with a discussion of Martí's all-important sojourn in Mexico.

### **By Way of Spain, Arrival in Mexico**

Regarded in present-day Cuba as a national hero, Martí (a prolific author and celebrated teacher) was also an intrepid and relentless traveler. An adventurer at heart, Martí traveled to experience politics and ideas firsthand as a lived reality. Understanding the nature of things, learning from them to become a better, more educated person, was for him above all about being with people. Sent into exile from Cuba on charges of treason against Spain, he journeyed as a student throughout Europe and the Americas. He attended university in Madrid between 1871 and 1874, being awarded a bachelor's degree in civil and canon law and a doctoral degree in philosophy and humanities from the Universidad Central. Upon completing his studies in December 1874, he traveled to Paris, Le Havre, Liverpool, and then on to New York, Havana, El Progreso, Campeche, Veracruz, and finally Mexico City (Shnookal and Muñiz 2000, 2). Martí's insatiable curiosity, combined with his appealing charm and affable manner, gave him the freedom and self-confidence to undertake such travels and make something of them. He regularly found work that complemented his capabilities and was adept at cultivating ties with diverse individuals who fed his political ambitions. For this reason Martí's trip to Guatemala, and his decision to remain there for a while, must be considered a conscious choice to

explore a specific set of circumstances. To understand that decision, it is important to know first about Martí's time in Mexico.

Martí arrived in Mexico City on February 6, 1875. There, family and friends whom he had not seen since his exile from Cuba greeted him. A month later, he began working for the newspaper *La Revista Universal*, rising quickly to assume the role of editor. Soon after this appointment, he founded his own forum, *Boletín*, which covered political affairs in Mexico. Martí's writings expressed support for labor-reform movements, so much so that he was invited to contribute to *El Socialista*, an outlet for the Workers' Circle of Mexico. He was also connected to the Workers' Hope Society in Mexico City (Shnookal and Muñiz 2000, 2). Overall, things went well for Martí in Mexico: he gained respectable employment; participated in anticonservative activism; cultivated strategic friendships; and committed to wed a fellow Cuban exile, one Carmen Zayas Bazán. He also formed a close friendship with the Mexican lawyer Manuel Mercado, in whom he would confide through dozens of letters spanning the rest of his life. Mercado promoted Martí in labor and exile circles and sang his praises as a writer and orator.

Martí's political and social consciousness flourished; he grew intellectually in Mexico, scholars have argued, with greater intensity than during his entire university education in Spain. His activities and interests encouraged him to imagine a new identity for Latin America, one that had roots in the continent itself, not imported from abroad. Exiled from Cuba, out of place in Spain, Mexico offered him a new sense of connectedness with the Latin American family. His writings reflect, John Kirk (1983) argues, a passion to engage a pan-American project, discussing the need for economic partnership between Latin American nations, as did Simón Bolívar before him; he recognized and esteemed especially the worth of indigenous cultures. Martí's Bolivarian sentiments and resistance to North American and European hegemony was a radical contrast to elite acceptance of U.S. imperialism in Mexico and Spanish colonialism in Cuba.

In *Nuestra América*, Martí (1963e, 18) admired how "a priest, a few lieutenants, and a woman raised the Mexican republic on the shoulders of the Indians." His interpretation of the nation-building project of Father Miguel Hidalgo, guerrilla leader José María Morelos, and Doña Josefa Ortiz de Domínguez was testimony of his belief that liberation in the Americas could come from within. He supported the leadership of President Sebastián Lerdo de Tejada, an often-overlooked figure who was the predecessor of Porfirio Díaz. Lerdo de Tejada furthered Mexican liberalism by advocating free press, free speech, and freedom of association, progressive actions that Martí approved of wholeheartedly.

While lauding Mexican liberalism, Martí's *Boletín* showed high regard for the workers' movement and sympathy for the general strike of 1875. Juan

Eugenio Mestas (1985) notes that, for Martí, strike action was a legitimate response to the social injustices of capitalism. Martí railed against the inequalities and imbalances at the heart of capitalism; he believed that Mexico should value its native peoples more and harness its abundant resources and capacities. For Martí, the exploitation, discrimination, and chronic poverty that plagued Mexico were leftovers of colonial times, destructive relics only exacerbated by Mexican dependence on foreign capital. Lerdo de Tejada wanted to reduce that dependence and integrate Mexican Indians into his national vision, ideas that struck a chord with Martí.

As fulfilling as all this was, the Mexican political scene soon veered from any progressive tendency, a detour that troubled Martí deeply. In November 1876, General Porfirio Díaz fought Lerdo de Tejada government loyalists at the battle of Tecuac, thus disrupting scheduled elections. The upstart Díaz then moved quickly to consolidate his grip. His forced march to modernity — driven by the imperatives of *pan o palo*, “bread or the club” — was not to the liking of labor activists like Martí. Emboldened by the relative social calm of the Lerdo de Tejada period, Díaz advocated precipitous change, which meant that diverging opinions were simply not tolerated and their proponents regarded as enemies of the state. It became increasingly risky to publish antiestablishment opinions. In November 1876, the last issue of *Boletín* rolled off the presses. It was time for Martí to move on.

### **A Glimpse of Guatemala**

Exiled from his homeland and feeling unwelcome if not at risk in Mexico, Martí readied himself for pastures new. In the months leading up to Díaz’s coup and consolidation of power, Martí had encountered and gotten to know many other Latin American expatriates in Mexico City. A number of them were Guatemalans who had fled to Mexico to escape the regime of General Justo Rufino Barrios. By the early 1870s, Barrios had gained control of Guatemala’s presidency and had begun to develop the country according to the principles of authoritarian liberalism, which (among other moves) attacked the power and properties of the church. Eduardo Galeano (1987, 214), in one of his trademark vignettes, furnishes us with a memorable glimpse of nineteenth-century liberalism in action:

Justo Rufino Barrios, president of Guatemala, closes his eyes and hears a din of railroads and steam engines violating the silence of the monasteries. There [is] no stopping synthetic dyes in the world’s markets, and no one buys the cochineal and indigo that Guatemala sells. It’s time for coffee. The markets demand coffee and coffee demands lands and hands, trains and ports. *To modernize the country*, Barrios expels the parasitic monks, seizes from the Church its immense properties, and gives them to his closest

friends. Collective property is abolished by decree and compulsory peonage is imposed. *To integrate the Indian into the nation*, the liberal government makes him a serf of the new coffee plantations. The colonial system of forced labor returns.<sup>1</sup>

Galeano's cameo of Barrios, whom he ironically calls "The Civilizer," cuts to the quick of Guatemalan reality in the nineteenth century. After independence from Spain in 1821, prolonged internal conflict ensued between conservatives and liberals for control of government office. The conservative preference was to maintain Spanish-derived institutions that preserved the colonial status quo, with criollos (people of European descent born in the Americas) replacing *peninsulares* (Spaniards born and raised in Spain) in positions of leadership. Liberals, on the other hand, also chiefly criollos in ethnic background, sought to create an entirely new socioeconomic order by promoting capitalist links with the outside world. For the Maya Indian majority, who in the early nineteenth century accounted for four out of five Guatemalans, conservatism meant a continuation of the culture of refuge that native communities had shaped for themselves during colonial times. In contrast, liberalism signaled assimilation into a modern, outward-looking state run not only by criollos but also by mestizos (mixed bloods known in Guatemala as *ladinos*). At the level of the Maya community, conservative ideology represented a cultural buffer, while liberalism's far-reaching interventions stood to alter profoundly age-old ways of living and of working the land (Lovell 1994).

Liberals held the reins of government from 1823 to 1839, but their plans for radical reform were thwarted and then stalled for some three decades when a popular uprising brought conservatives to power, led by the "protector of the people," Rafael Carrera. Carrera's policies undid many of the measures taken by his liberal predecessor, Mariano Gálvez, and kept the outside world at bay. Not until the liberals routed the conservatives in 1871 could they pursue with fervor their goals of modernization (Lovell 1994).

The liberal agenda called for unprecedented assaults on Maya land as well as on Maya labor. Liberals viewed land, for Indians a communal cultural resource, as exclusively an economic resource, one that, properly exploited, would modernize Guatemala and propel it forward into a capitalist future. Liberal notions of how to proceed revolved around the production of coffee, as the country was blessed with ideal growing conditions for the crop, especially along the Pacific piedmont and in the Verapaz highlands. Both these areas of Guatemala had been relatively untapped by the search for a profitable cash crop during colonial times, which elsewhere had seen cacao, cochineal, and indigo enjoy periods of boom and bust. Investment by domestic and foreign capital — much of the latter came from Germany — saw coffee emerge in the second half of the nineteenth century as Guatemala's principal export crop, a dominance it

has enjoyed in the national economy from the time of Barrios until quite recently (Lovell 1994).

Organized and run on a finca or plantation basis, coffee cultivation demands intensive input of labor mostly at harvest time. What fits the needs of coffee planters best, therefore, is a seasonal workforce, one that provides labor when required to do so and that can be dispensed with when not. The native population, women and men, were the perfect complement. Outright coercion of Indian labor in the form of a draft known as *mandamiento* was authorized by Barrios in 1876, by which time the expropriation of Indian land had also begun. A year later, around the time of Martí's arrival in Guatemala, the fate of native communal holdings was sealed when the Barrios regime passed legislation ending the system of exacting rents for the use of land from Indian communities as a whole. Old community titles drawn up during the colonial period were to be replaced by new ones that insisted that individuals, not groups, demonstrate legal private ownership. Unaware or left uninformed of the implications that these changes would have on their key resource, land, Maya communities thus found themselves exposed to a double plunder, one that seized their land in addition to usurping their labor (Lovell 1994).

Particularly in reaction to Barrios's secularization of church-run institutions, a dissident expatriate community had emerged in Mexico City, lobbying against what it regarded as Barrios's sweeping and irreverent acts of reform. Arguably, these critics did not object to the new liberal policies so much as lament their own loss of authority (Soto-Hall 1952, 6).

The small exile group, however, was stridently vocal, and Martí learned of its members' passionate beliefs. He became aware of complaints that portrayed Barrios as "a cannibal, a panther, a satrap, [an] opprobrium of humanity"<sup>2</sup> (Soto-Hall 1952, 6). Rather than accept these accusations at face value, Martí decided to go to Guatemala and judge for himself. Barrios, after all, had supported the Cuban Republican movement of Carlos Manuel de Céspedes and had offered refuge to Cuban Republicans fleeing Spanish authority in the wake of Cuba's first war of independence (1868–1878). The harsh words he heard voiced against Barrios, furthermore, spouted mostly from the mouths of conservatives who supported the Spanish tyranny that had forced Martí into exile. Relieved of his editorial duties, and eager to escape Díaz's tyrannical rule, he packed his bags and left Mexico on December 29, 1876. Guatemala and the Barrios project beckoned.

### **By Way of Cuba, Arrival in Guatemala**

Before journeying to Guatemala, Martí traveled clandestinely to Cuba, where he landed on January 6, 1877, as one Julián Pérez, a combination of his middle

name and his mother's maiden name. He stayed seven weeks, departing for Guatemala on February 24, arriving there after passage to British Honduras, today Belize. He journeyed by mule and horseback from the Caribbean coast at Livingston inland to Zacapa. Further on he observed "high volcanoes and fertile hills" adorned with coffee, as well as lush fields of "robust corn" and sugar cane (Martí 1963c, 118). Guatemala's scenic beauty and the close connection between land and life captivated him, as it did many other travelers at the time, moving Martí (1963c, 117) to write of "a hospitable land, rich and frank." For the most part it was Indians who worked in the fields; their visible exertions struck him as a healthy sign (Martí 1963c, 117, 119). Nature's bounty and the impression of native peoples toiling for national, not imperial, purposes appealed to him. Similarly, the political events that had created this situation intrigued him. David Vela (1954, 255), a distinguished Guatemalan scholar, believes that Martí was attracted to Guatemala because of its nationalist goals and nationalizing regime, one that had brought an end to Spanish absolutism; instead, liberal notions of progress and modernity were promoted. Martí (1963c, 117) begins his memoir *Guatemala* by discussing how, despite centuries of conflict between ethnic groups, he discerns a search for a republic that can be "fertile" and "useful" for all. "In his letters," Vela (1954, 49) writes, "Martí refers to his trip as an experience in which influential suggestions emerged from the country, and without doubt from Guatemalans themselves." A good example of Vela's point surfaces in a letter that Martí wrote to Valero Pujol on November 27, 1877, in which he declares his love for Guatemala (Martí 1963b, 100). In comments later prepared for the Barrios government regarding its education reforms, Martí believed Guatemala to be an example of "nuestra América," a country that was distancing itself from European values and creating a new culture and society (Martí 1963d, 98).

While in Mexico, his correspondence with Manuel Mercado and issues of the *Boletín* spoke out against elitism and exploitation. Martí's activist thrust is toned down or disappears altogether when he writes from Guatemala, his often strident assertions replaced by lyrical, descriptive imagery and lavish praise for the Barrios reforms. Arturo Taracena (1999, 347) also notes Martí's pro-Barrios stance and his failure to record the plight of hard-pressed Maya communities. Martí's basic premise is that Guatemala under Barrios is committed to advance through the development of commercial agriculture; while some "apathetic" Indians may complain, he asserts, "the government respects the good ones" (Martí 1963c, 140).<sup>3</sup>

His blinkered view of the situation, puzzling as it is, needs to be taken into account when coming to terms with our overall image of Martí. Being in Mexico, most unequivocally, intensified his activist tendencies and provoked him to react viscerally against Díaz and his policies; Guatemala affected Martí

quite differently. Someone as politically astute as he was could not fail to see the price paid for progress by the Indian majority; yet Martí chose to accept that the human costs involved were unavoidable, that Barrios and his project were worthy of the sacrifice. He supported the president and his regime without reservation, declaring that “five years of rebirth and rescue are the exclusive work of the liberal government” (Martí 1963c, 123).<sup>4</sup> Whether we interpret Martí’s words as awkward paradox or blatant contradiction, his position on Guatemala only makes the time he spent there all the more intriguing. For a man whose political aspirations were gaining attention in international circles, uncritical acceptance on Martí’s part of Barrios and his regime in the end must be taken as an expression of support for what they stood for.

Martí yearned to meet the man whom conservative Guatemalan exiles in Mexico so despised. A month into his stay, he ventured to introduce himself to various government officials. Already recognized as a talented writer, Martí met Martín Barrundía, Lorenzo Montúfar, and Joaquín Macal, three of Barrios’s top ministers. They responded to his overtures by asking Martí what he thought of a new code of laws then about to come into effect; Martí was effusive in his admiration of them (Lizaso 1953, 124; Martí 1963a, 97). Félix Lizaso (1953, 24) describes Martí’s opinion as constituting a “eulogy of the new forces shaping Guatemala.” Martí went even further, telling Macal that Barrios would create “a grand universal politic” of liberal progress (Martí 1963f, 98). For Martí, these were giddy times, bursting with ways of thinking refreshingly different from the conservative, stultifying doctrines of Europe (Martí 1961a, 356).

Martí goes so far as to attribute to Barrios that most prescient of gifts: knowing what is best for his people. “Everywhere,” Martí (1963c, 134) writes, “more than thinking the good thing, Barrios senses it.”<sup>5</sup> According to Vela (1954, 255), Martí wished that the same model of economic development Barrios envisioned for Guatemala could be applied to Cuba. For Martí, Guatemala was a model example of the successes of a stable and independent nation-state. Barrios’s policies boosted economic growth, secular governance, and a sympathetic attitude toward an independent Cuba, three features that appealed to the young exile.

Martí, in turn, made a favorable impression on Macal and his colleagues. They drafted letters of recommendation for him and arranged a personal audience with Barrios himself (Unión de Periodistas de Cuba, September 2002). On March 26, Martí finally met face-to-face with the president.

Although no official transcript recorded their conversation, it is clear that the two men hit it off. Martí (1963c, 123) later referred to Barrios enthusiastically as an “apóstol.” Aware of the hardships that native peoples had suffered under colonial rule, Martí believed that economic transformation under

Barrios would afford them a much better life. The benefits of mixing two cultures—Indian and Hispanic—to produce a modern, assimilated society seemed rational to Martí, and he praised Barrios for his dedication to that end.

Reality, however, was considerably different. Barrios did not free Indians from poverty; he merely integrated them into another even more oppressive way of life, one born of nineteenth-century development ideals and neocolonial models. To Barrios, it all made sense for a nation trying to create an identity independent of Spanish authority. Martí concurred.

A crucial part of Barrios's reforms involved coffee, the commercial production of which he believed would develop Guatemala. Barrios's promotion of coffee, however, was disastrous for the well-being of Maya communities, as it unleashed an assault on Indian land by opening up communal holdings for private purchase. Many Indians, accustomed to living in the bracing climate of the highlands, fell ill, or died, from working in the more tropical and humid zones of the Pacific piedmont, where Guatemala's coffee plantations were concentrated. Although the Guatemalan state adopted Maya iconography and symbolism in the national flag, in practice Barrios excluded Maya communities from national development. The idealized rhetoric of two cultures blending together actually translated into little more than a powerful criollo clique exploiting and taking advantage of a vulnerable native majority, and poor Ladinos too.

Choosing not to recognize this stark inequality, Martí (1963c, 121) writes: "To the worker, to the intellectual, and to the gentleman, land means life." He pays homage to coffee in particular, referring to it with almost spiritual fervor as "the rich bean that alights blood, animates passions, and moves dreams. It explodes in the veins, its flame and aroma dance in the mind. It is the grain of the gods" (Vela 1954, 103). For Martí (1963c, 134–35), coffee was the ideal crop, one that would propel Guatemala forward and liberate its marginalized Indian population.

Barrios was impressed by Martí's words and suggested that he assume a portfolio at the Normal School, a teacher-training institution in Guatemala City, in the Department of Philosophy and Letters. For Barrios, such keen like-mindedness would come in handy (Lizaso 1953, 124). It also meant that Martí would work alongside another Cuban schoolmaster, José María Izaguirre. He assumed his teaching duties on May 29, 1877. Common bonds ensured that the two exiles became close friends, as Izaguirre had fought alongside rebel Carlos Manuel de Céspedes against Spain.

Izaguirre paved the way for Martí to socialize with the liberal elite in Guatemala City. He met General Miguel García Granados, former president and leader of the 1871 revolution. The house of the ex-president acted as a meeting place for government officials and entrepreneurs. Martí was made welcome and frequented the establishment with Izaguirre, becoming acquainted, in no time at all, with Granados's daughters—Adela, María, Cristina,

Leonor, and Luz. Eventually Izaguirre's need to accompany him and serve as a chaperone became unnecessary. The ebullient Martí found himself infatuated with María (Lizaso 1953, 123). He was, however, already engaged to Carmen, whom he planned to marry in Mexico on his return from Guatemala. Regardless of the pending union, Martí and María pursued their feelings. The sheltered, fifteen-year-old María fell head over heels in love with Martí, himself (at twenty-four) a staunch romantic but nonetheless nine years María's senior, very much (as Francisco Goldman portrays him in *The Divine Husband*) a man of the world.

By mid-1877 Martí enjoyed the good life, as his writings at the time clearly attest. He had a secure job, was admired by the ladies, one impressionable young girl in particular, and was courted by the liberal elite. In late June, Martí was asked by Dr. Antonio Batres Jáuregui, on behalf of the Barrios regime, to write a play that would embody the idea of a new Latin American culture for Guatemala's Independence Day celebrations on September 15. He accepted the commission with gusto and set immediately to work, completing the play *Patria y libertad* (*Homeland and Freedom*) in only five days (Luján Muñoz 1996, 11).

Martí felt he understood the complex cultural dynamics of Guatemala well enough to write about it for others, which he did not only in his play but also in his memoir *Guatemala* (1877). In his memoir he applauds Maya respect for, and connection to, the natural world, as manifest in myths and legends. Martí was especially taken by the story of the resplendent quetzal, now the national symbol of Guatemala, which Mayas treasure for its beauty and its symbolic proclivity to die when held in captivity. In *Guatemala*, Martí's most exuberant tendencies are given unbridled expression toward both nature and politics. Smitten if not intoxicated, Martí could not help but romanticize the Maya lot; he saw Indians as "simple yet mysterious, humble yet arrogant," and Barrios as a philanthropic savior (Martí 1963c, 140; Vela 1954, 131). Martí (1963c, 125) believed that "the president ought to bring into his group poor Indians and poor Ladinos, rounded up from their misery in the countryside so that they may be taught in the new schools of the capital."<sup>6</sup> Gazing at Maya life through an idealized mythic lens, Martí lends his voice to Barrios's rhetorical hype, turning his back on the manifest oppression that native communities endured.

In Guatemala City and the old colonial capital of Antigua, Martí (1963, 130) observed Indians lying around the streets, drunk and lazy, without ambition. He blamed such lethargy on the former conservative ruling class. Martí was of the opinion that Barrios had given Indians an opportunity to earn a useful living and become part of Guatemalan society. He alludes to this directly in *Patria y libertad* (Luján Muñoz 1996, 38). In one scene in the play (Martí 1961f, 16–19) a group of elite Guatemalans discusses what it means to feel part of a nation, when an Indian enters and has his say:

*Don Pedro:* Look — a wretched Indian!

*Indian:* An Indian! Nobody doubts that! Bent is my back, and black my skin! I could be white, if I could shake off four hundreds years of shame. And you! Sacristan of Antigua, you are worse than Castile! You have been whipped also with the leather you kiss; show me the gold that is paid to you for the words from your mouth. . . . With these hands I demolished logs . . . with these hands I cultivated the Earth, with these shoulders I leveled ravines and more trees than there are left in the forest. I cried with these eyes; my spirit always feels new humiliation, while you wave crosses and ships take the fruit of my lands to Spain! The cleverness of the Indians is not dead. . . . Our consciousness is only asleep, and one tremendous day we will shake cathedrals and their gold will embroider the earth.

*People:* Long live the Indian!

*Indian:* Me? No! Long live our homeland!<sup>7</sup>

After the September revelry and the success of *Patria y libertad*, Martí turned his attention to writing his celebrated memoir, which encapsulates Martí's affection for Guatemala, enshrining what he believed to be the benefits of liberal progress under the stewardship of Barrios. His ode, however, is not so much a political defense of Barrios as it is an embodiment of Martí's own feelings for the land, the people, and liberal reform in general, more revealing of Martí's volatile emotions than an accurate reflection of the changes then transforming Guatemala.

### **Sudden Departure**

In December 1877, Martí traveled back to Mexico. He promised the hapless María that he would return to Guatemala in the new year to continue his appointment at the Normal School. During his trip he published his memoir. *Guatemala* immediately proved popular in elite circles and among supporters of liberal republicanism not only in Guatemala but also in Mexico. Around the time of its release, Martí fulfilled his promise to Carmen; he married her on December 20. A month later he returned to Guatemala, now a husband with a wife by his side.

When news of the couple's arrival reached María, she was devastated. Martí treated her, by all accounts, with a very cold shoulder, refusing to meet her or even to write to her. The young girl did not understand the situation. María knew that she loved Martí and believed that he, in turn, loved her. While Martí continued to teach and prosper in Guatemala City, María fell into a lethargic depression. She confined herself to the family home and shunned all visitors.

As María withered with a broken heart, Martí resolved to leave Guatemala and return to Cuba. Many Martí enthusiasts, Deborah Shnookal and Mirta Muñoz (2003, 3) among them, hold that Martí left Guatemala as a protest

against Barrios's heavy-handed rule, especially toward Maya communities. This strikes us as completely off the mark, indeed implausible; for Martí endorsed Barrios's policies and even supported the means by which "The Civilizer" went about creating a new Guatemala. Martí did leave Guatemala in protest against Barrios, but not because of the latter's political agenda. The reasons for Martí's departure are far less grandiose, a mix of personal and professional intrigue escalating to the point of disaster. What went wrong?

Martí's situation began to sour in March 1878. In a letter to Manuel Mercado dated March 8, Martí (1961b, 366) admitted that he was growing restless and wished to leave the country once he had paid off his debts. At the same time, however, he professed that he wanted to start up a newspaper in Guatemala, one aimed at the working class and disenfranchised. By mid-March, Martí was more preoccupied with his financial predicament than with journalistic forays. He complained to Mercado that his house was too cramped for his liking and that he wanted a change of scene (Martí 1961d, 372).

Arrears and debts aside, his place of employment, the Normal School, had come in for a good deal of criticism, and indeed was under attack. Guatemalan teachers alleged that Izaguirre's Cuban ties and activist bent were undermining the school's reputation and pedagogical values. They accused Izaguirre of hiding behind his position of authority and using the school as a platform from which to wage personal vendettas. With Martí teaching there also, rumors claiming that the institution was a hive of Cuban troublemaking quickly spread, eventually reaching Barrios himself (Vela 1954, 206). In a letter dated April 20, Martí vents his frustration to Mercado over the school's Eurocentric focus in philosophy and the arts (Martí 1961c, 378). Martí, who emphasized the home-grown virtues of the Americas, found himself teaching his students in ways that were not approved of. Allegations that the school was a hotbed of Cuban fervor likely stemmed from Martí and Izaguirre's non-European focus when teaching in the classroom.

Proposed changes to the educational system, changes that Martí felt compromised his teaching even further, made his future prospects as schoolmaster decidedly insecure (Martí 1961d, 376). Barrios summoned Izaguirre to a meeting, at which he expressed "his disapproval and his intention of dismissing him" (Lizaso 1953, 129). Izaguirre promptly tendered his resignation. As a gesture of solidarity with Izaguirre, and realizing that his days also were numbered, Martí resigned too, effective April 6 (Vela 1954, 207–9). His relationship with Guatemala, and Barrios, was over.

To make matters worse, María's depression overtook her physically. Soon after Martí's resignation, she developed consumption, which led to the onset of a serious fever. Bedridden for several weeks and unable to regain strength or break the fever, María died on May 10, 1878 (Vela 1954, 346). All Guatemala mourned her passing. Martí remembered her in his own way many years later,

with the now-immortal poem “La niña de Guatemala,” officially titled “Quiero, a la sombra de un ala,” published as part of his *Versos sencillos*. The poem (Martí 1961g, 55–56) is a plaintive and moving lament:

*Ella dió al desmemoriado  
Una almohadilla de olor:  
Él volvió, volvió casado:  
Ella se murió de amor.*

A cushion filled with sweet sprays  
She gave her forgetful lover:  
He returned, returned married:  
She died of love.

*Iban cargándola en andas  
Obispos y embajadores:  
Detrás iba el pueblo en tandas  
Todo cargado de flores.*

Bishops and ambassadors carried  
Her on their shoulders:  
Behind, with flowers laden,  
Came the crowds, wave upon wave.

*Ella, por volverlo a ver,  
Salió a verlo al mirador:  
El volvió con su mujer:  
Ella se murió de amor.*

She turned to look,  
And stepped out to see him:  
He came back with his bride:  
She died of love.

*Como de bronce candente  
Al beso de despedida  
Era su frente ¡la frente  
Que más he amado en mi vida!*

Her forehead was bronze ablaze  
When I kissed her good-bye,  
The forehead that I have  
Loved most in all of my life!

*. . . Se entró de tarde en el río,  
La sacó muerta el doctor:  
Dicen que murió de frío:  
Yo sé que murió de amor.*

. . . One afternoon she entered the river,  
The doctor pulled her out dead:  
They say she died of exposure:  
I know she died of love.

*Allí, en la bóveda helada,  
La pusieron en dos bancos:  
Besé su mano afilada,  
Besé sus zapatos blancos.*

There in the frozen crypt,  
They placed her on two pews:  
I kissed her slender hand,  
I kissed her white shoes.

*Callado, al oscurecer,  
Me llamó el enterrador:  
¡Nunca más he vuelto a ver  
A la que murió de amor!*

Quietly, at dusk,  
The gravedigger called to me:  
Never again will I see  
The one who died of love!

This touching poem, later to become the words of a song generations of Latin American schoolchildren remember all their lives, dominates most depictions of Martí’s time in Guatemala. It certainly narrates a painful experience for him. The heartbreak of María’s death, and his fall from grace with Barrios, left very little for Martí to do in Guatemala. After Cuba’s ten-year war of independence, which concluded in February 1878 with the reassertion of Spanish authority in the guise of the Zanjón pact, exiles were permitted to return. Like many others

of their generation, Martí and Carmen decided it was time to go home. Putting their affairs in order, the couple remained in Guatemala until July 6, 1878, when they sailed to Havana. Carmen was pregnant and, as did her husband, wanted her child to be born in Cuba.

### **On Nationhood and the Guatemalan Odyssey**

Martí's experiences in Guatemala involved a heady mix of romance, success, and sorrow. Although his relationship with María dominates what is written about him while he was there, we are more concerned with how Guatemala influenced Martí's philosophy of nationhood. Clearly, from his interactions with Barrios, and Batres Jáuregui's commission of his play, Martí displayed great admiration of the liberal reforms and how they were supposed to benefit the country and its people. He disregarded the negative impact that Barrios and his authoritarian brand of liberalism had on the native population. Martí's notion of how a new American race could be forged became clearer later on in his life. In some of his more popular articles, ideas of what an independent Cuba might be like reflected the influence of Guatemala, especially in relation to issues of modernization and group segregation.

In 1885, seven years after leaving Guatemala and following time spent in Havana and Venezuela, Martí published "Indians in the United States" in *La Nación* of Buenos Aires. The newspaper piece addresses his concerns with the Mohonk Convention, a government initiative to deal with the Indian question, so called because of a meeting on the subject held at Mohonk Lake in upstate New York. Martí disapproved of U.S. policy toward Indians, specifically the widespread acceptance of the reservation system. He wrote: "Without work or property or hope, deprived of his native land and with no family pleasures other than the purely physical, what can be expected of these reservation Indians but grim, lazy, and sensual men? The unfair and corrupting reservation system must be abolished. We must make national lands available to Indians, fusing them with the white population [so that] they enjoy the rights and share the responsibilities of the rest of the citizenry" (Martí 1961e, 330–331; 2000a, 55–57). Martí's article was fiercely critical of the reservation system, which in his eyes denied Indians any sort of human agency and participation in a national agenda. He, in turn, suggested several ways to enhance native dignity: "To convert [Indians] into useful men and women, and change regions that today are no more than extremely costly prisons into [part of] a peaceful and prosperous country, the government should pay a good price for the lands not apportioned . . . We must train Indians in accordance with their needs and potentialities. They must be convinced—and when necessary compelled—to learn and to work, even if, because of their present condition, they may resist" (Martí 1961e, 330–31; 2000a, 57).

Martí's solution to the Indian "problem" in the United States, then, was a form of supervised conversion—to induct native peoples into a new way of life, as he believed Barrios's regime had achieved in Guatemala. Whereas Barrios forced Indians to labor on large plantations, Martí preferred the option of distributing land for native families to work and benefit from themselves. In both cases, the emphasis is not on fostering or recognizing indigenous rights; rather, Martí calls for the state to steer Indian culture into the arms of a unified nation, one whose guiding principles transcend the vicissitudes of race, class, and heritage.

Later on, when it might be argued that Martí developed more radical political ambitions, his attitude toward Indians in the Americas remained relatively fixed. *Nuestra América* is one of Martí's most important writings in terms of outlining the values of pan-American nationhood. His primary contention is that policies of Manifest Destiny on the part of the United States are dangerous. Reflecting on previous revolutionary and unification movements, he argued that the nations of the Americas south of the Rio Grande need to ally and unite. The role and place of native people remains critical. He writes: "Our America . . . will be saved by its Indians; deserters take up arms in North America [and] drown its Indians in blood . . . [I]n what can men take more pride than our long-suffering American republics, raised up among the silent Indian masses by the bleeding arms of a hundred apostles, to the sounds of battle between the book and the processional candle[?]" (Martí, 1963e, 16–17; 2000b, 112). A decade after his dealings with Barrios and the Guatemalan elite, Martí advocates that the republics of the Americas marshal native energy and resolve. For Martí, Indians in North America were not given the same opportunities in national policy as those in Central America. North America, in his eyes, separated Indians from people of "white" ancestry, whereas Guatemala brought them closer together.

Advocating a new mestizo culture was of paramount importance to Martí. This ideal of ethnic integration mirrors the liberal vision of Barrios. Given that Martí died a martyr's death from Spanish bullets on his first day of battle in the Cuban War of Independence, it is impossible to predict how his beliefs would have unfolded had he lived to see them applied. We are on more solid ground, however, when we turn to more contextualized consideration of what lived experiences shaped his philosophical outlook.

## Conclusion

The year or so that Martí spent in Guatemala calls for us to separate the man from the myth. By so doing, we gain a better understanding of his views of *nuestra América*. No doubt every country that Martí traveled to left an indelible impression on him, but his Guatemalan experience, immediately following his

radical awakening in Mexico, afforded him the opportunity to bear witness to a specific process of liberal reform and national determination. His involvement with the political elite, his enthusiastic embrace of the country, and his active participation in promoting Barrios and his reforms all point to his acceptance of a modernizing, authoritarian regime. If dealt with at all, most scholars of Martí regard Guatemala as little more than a brief if tempestuous stopover in his remarkable intellectual trajectory. We argue, however, that Guatemala had more of an ideological impact on Martí than previously has been acknowledged. That said, his decision to leave the country had more to do with personal anguish than political protest, as our discussion has sought to show. By exploring what Guatemala meant to Martí as a liberal project, a more nuanced framework can be wrought than ascribing to the country and Martí's time there mere inspiration, however tragic the circumstances, for one of Latin America's best-known love poems. We hope to have contributed to a more grounded appreciation of the man and his era and to have enhanced what we know of the ideas Martí brought to Cuban nationhood and independent Latin America as a whole.

## NOTES

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1. For a review of literature that discusses and contextualizes Barrios and his liberal reforms, see W. George Lovell, "The Century after Independence: Land and Life in Guatemala, 1821–1920," *Canadian Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Studies* 19, no. 37–38 (1994): 243–60.

2. *Satrap* is a title for the ancient rulers of Persia.

3. Martí's precise words are as follows: "El país tiene la firme decisión de adelantar: va por buen camino, piensa más en la agricultura que en la política. La política grandiosa es el primer deber; la mezquina el mayor vicio nacional. Ni la pereza, ni la incuria son vicios guatemaltecos. Gocé mucho viendo a un ladino, allá en el fondo de un monte, leer atento, mientras su hijo aderezaba la carga, un libro de muestras de centrífugas. Los indios apáticos se quejan pero el Gobierno respeta a los buenos y pasa por sobre los tercios, raras veces malos."

4. Martí's precise words are as follows: "Cinco años viene este renacimiento salvador . . . es exclusiva obra del gobierno liberal."

5. Martí's precise words are as follows: "En todas partes, Barrios, más que piensa lo bueno, lo presente."

6. Martí's precise words are as follows: "El presidente suele traer entre su escolta pobres indios, pobres ladinos, que recogen por los míseros campos para que sean enseñados en las nuevas escuelas de la capital."

7. Martí's text reads:

*Don Pedro:* ¡Miserable! ¡Un indio!

*Indio:* ¡Un indio! ¡A nadie quede duda! ¡Doblada está mi espalda, mi piel negra! Ni cómo ha de estar blanca . . . ¿si aquí llevo de cuatrocientos años la vergüenza? Tú — más vil que Castilla, porque siendo azotado también el cuero besas, enséñanos el oro que te pegan y en las palabras de tu boca suenan. ¡Sacristán de La Antigua, te conozco! La astucia de los indios, no está muerta . . . Con estas manos derribé maderos . . . con estas manos cultivé la tierra, con estos hombros por barranca y llanos más arrobos llevé que hojas las selvas y más llanto lloré con estos ojos por mi eterna ignominia siempre nueva que ondas cruza la nave robadora que el fruto de mi mal a España lleva . . . Alzar quisisteis catedrales de oro sobre graves cimientos de conciencias, y sobre los sepulcros de una raza, comprar encajes y elevar iglesias. ¡O torpe y fragilísimo cimiento! La conciencia, dormita, no está muerta, y el día que tremenda se sacuda, catedrales y encajes dan en tierra.

*Pueblo:* ¡Viva el indio!

*Indio:* Yo, no. La patria libre.

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