

## Considering José Martí's Politics of Place in the U.S. Literature Survey Classroom

### Module Introduction

When students in U.S. literature survey courses are assigned to read the work of Cuban revolutionary José Martí, typically they analyze one text, his most frequently anthologized essay, “Nuestra América” (“Our America”). “Our America” introduces readers to Martí’s understanding of the threat U.S. expansionism posed to Cuban independence and to Latin American sovereignty at the end of the nineteenth century. Further, the essay emphasizes his position that Latin America must eschew U.S. and European educational, cultural, and also political models in favor of cultivating forms “born from” within: “To govern well, one must attend closely to the reality of the place that is governed” (290).

In U.S. literature survey classes where students also read texts such as Theodore Roosevelt’s *American Ideals*, assigning “Our America” provides a crucial counter perspective regarding Latin American political and cultural autonomy and the dangers of intervention by the “seven-league giant” into Latin American affairs (289). But if syllabi do not include a unit that engages directly U.S. imperial ambitions in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it is likely Martí’s seminal political essay does not appear in those reading schedules, either.

The objective of this teaching module is to offer instructors an alternative for incorporating Martí’s work into U.S. literature survey courses beyond expanding an existing unit on literary representations of U.S. imperialism that might already include “Our America.” While the individual reading selections that are listed below certainly would be suitable in the aforementioned type of unit, or for inclusion in units related to persuasion and polemic or immigration and exile, pairing “Coney Island” and “The Brooklyn Bridge” create a teaching module that centers on the politics of place in late nineteenth-century New York.

### A Note on Structure

This lesson is designed for smaller classrooms that are primarily discussion-based or for large lecture courses that have discussion sections. Time constraints and individual departments’ curricular demands may oblige instructors to cover these materials over the course of a single class period so the module is presented as such, but the reading and discussion activities also lend themselves to a multi-day unit (e.g., one day devoted to an introductory lecture that provides a detailed historical and literary context for the readings; one day to discuss the primary texts; and, depending on class level, one day to discuss the primary texts vis-à-vis a complementary secondary source of the instructor’s choosing).

### Learning Objectives

- Strengthen and refine close reading skills;
- Consider Martí’s essays in relation to basic questions related to the study of place and space;
- Make connections between Martí’s texts and those written by U.S. contemporaries whose works also highlight New York life in the Gilded Age.

### Lesson Activities

The prompts that follow are open-ended to encourage a range of perspectives and contributions to class discussion, but student responses should be rooted in textual analysis. Also, in addition to launching discussion, the prompts could serve as informal writing activities conducted in advance of a formal essay-writing cycle. Last, unless noted otherwise, quotations are from Martí's *Selected Writings*, edited and translated by Esther Allen and introduced by Roberto González Echevarría (Penguin, 2002).

#### “Coney Island” – Discussion Prompts

- Identify moments in the text where Martí directs readers to particular communal areas (such as beachfronts, pavilions, or dining halls) and consider the ways in which or the extent to which those areas are sites of ethnoracial and class conflict or negotiation.
- Martí notes in an ostensibly celebratory fashion that within a short span of four years Coney Island was transformed from “a barren heap of dirt” into “spacious place of relaxation, shelter, and amusement” but elsewhere he seems to disapprove of “this sudden result of human activity...this faculty for progress, this enterprise” (90; 92). Discuss Martí's shift in tone.
- Describe and discuss Martí's representation of an emerging mass culture in “Coney Island” as well as his reactions to that aspect of New York life. To initiate this aspect of the discussion students might be directed to the following quotation: “These people eat quantity; we, class” (93).

#### “The Brooklyn Bridge” – Discussion Prompts

- Many of Martí's chronicles cover multiple topics but in this particular text he focuses on a single subject. Keeping in mind that we're reading only an excerpt—*Selected Writings'* editor and translator Esther Allen omitted five pages of text that detail the bridge's measurements, building materials, and construction history—why do you think Martí devoted so many pages to this physical structure?
  - Note: Martí is a prominent figure in the Latin American literary movement Modernismo, which Roberto González Echevarría notes in the collection's introduction was a reaction to modernity, “the product of the rationalist forces that, through their effect in science and industry, made social life [in growing European, U.S., and Latin American cities] materialistic and crass” (xvii). Modernismo “countered these trends with refinement, spiritual and artistic elitism, and a rejection of the bourgeois life that the world economy engendered” and modernistas deployed their art, which they believed had “transformative [capacities]” to critique “bourgeois values” (xvi-xvii). Students might engage this prompt in relation to Martí's status as a modernista grappling with a new symbol of industrial capitalism while attempting to chronicle the city's rapid transformation into a modern metropolis for a Latin American audience keen to learn more about New York and this “quintessentially modern nation, in which the gadgets and advances of industry were being produced in great volume” (xix).
- In his book, *Place: A Short Introduction*, Tim Cresswell describes roads and structures such as bridges as “spaces of flow” in material landscapes—places—that “we have to negotiate in order to live” (35). Further, he notes that “[l]aws and rules pervade place” and “there are also sets of cultural and social expectations that pervade places” (36). Locate and discuss moments in the text where in this particular space of flow laws and rules (things typically

associated with places) are created, enforced, or break down. Then locate and discuss moments in the text where cultural and social expectations are being created, enforced, or break down in this then-brand-new space.

- Analyze the following quotation: “Bridges are the fortresses of the modern world. Better to bring cities together than to cleave human chests. Today, all men are called upon to be soldiers of the bridge” (144).
- Supplemental activity: students interested in writing a longer analytical essay about this text might research the ways English-language U.S. outlets covered the opening of the Brooklyn Bridge (such as Charles Anderson Dana’s daily, the *New York Sun*) and then compare those texts with Martí’s treatment for his own (Spanish-language, New York-headquartered) magazine, *La América*.

### Extending the Conversation

#### “Impressions of America (By A Very Fresh Spaniard)”

- Remind students that Martí spent most of his adult life based in New York City, that he penned a number of his works there, and, of course, that he wrote frequently about the city and its goings-on. Then have students analyze and discuss the following quotation: “The great heart of America cannot be judged by the distorted, morbid passion, ardent desires and anguishes of New York life. In this turbulent stream, natural currents of life cannot appear...It is necessary to look for it—not in the crowded street, but...in the open-hearted existence of the country” (37).
- The other essays included in this teaching module were published in Spanish-language newspapers with Latin American readerships. However, Martí wrote “Impressions” in English and it was published by Charles Anderson Dana’s New York-based weekly literary magazine, *The Hour*. Esther Allen notes of both the essay’s title and the perspective it advertises, “There is no record of why Martí chose, or was required, to write...in the guise of a ‘Spaniard’—the very nationality he was trying to be rid of. It seems likely that someone ([Dana] or Martí himself) had decided the articles would be better received if they were billed as having been written by a Spaniard—for nineteenth-century U.S. readers were always avid to see their country through European eyes” (420-21). Given that Martí spent the majority of his adult life in exile in the U.S. fighting for the cause of Cuban independence from Spanish colonial rule—and given his awareness that the U.S. very likely would play a role in determining whether Cuba would remain a colony, gain its independence, or be annexed by the U.S.—speculate on the nature of this choice. Does a “European” perspective ever Martí’s narrative? If so, for what purpose(s) beyond those Allen suggests in her endnote?

### General Questions and Making Broader Connections

- José Martí’s “Escenas Norteamericanas” (“North American Scenes”) typically are classified as crónicas, a well-established, hybrid form in Latin American letters that draws on a range of genres; employs a variety of “literary techniques usually associated with fiction in order to create narratives that give historical and narrative depth rather than just [answer] the ‘five w’s’ of conventional journalism;” and that have “narrative and interpretative functions that can be political, investigative, ethnographic, historical, educational, consciousness-raising, and/or denunciatory” (Hanna and Harford Vargas). Using this definition of a crónica as your starting point, what do you perceive to be the chronicler’s role in the works you’ve read thus far? Does your response change knowing Martí was writing primarily for Latin American readers, not for U.S. readers? If so, how?

- Although Martí's texts are classified as a series of crónicas, students might be encouraged to examine the assigned readings in relation to narrative fiction written by other late nineteenth century writers who began their writing careers in journalism, such as Stephen Crane (*Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*), Abraham Cahan (*The Imported Bridegroom and Other Stories of the New York Ghetto*), and Theodore Dreiser (*Sister Carrie*). Students should note similarities or differences in the writers' treatment of New York City life, and the city itself, during the Gilded Age. Students also should consider the question, do Martí and his contemporaries extend or alter the types of writing with which they typically are associated? If so, how?
  - Note: It would be productive to spend some time comparing and contrasting Martí's "Coney Island" or "Impressions of America (By A Very Fresh Spaniard)" with Dreiser's or Crane's texts, particularly with regard to their representations of an emergent mass consumer culture; the ways in which those writers gender that culture; and in terms of teasing out the role of increasingly urban space on those gendered representations of mass culture and consumerism.
- In what ways or to what extent might Martí's status as an exiled Cuban, and as a colonial subject of Spain fighting for Cuban independence, impact his representation—and interpretation—of late nineteenth-century U.S. culture in this or any of his texts?

### Assessment

- Write a short analytical essay (4-5 pages) that explores the significance of a particular passage or two from one of the assigned readings.
  - While students should be encouraged to pursue any aspect of Martí's texts that interests them, the purpose of the restriction—to focus their argument on one or two key passages—is to emphasize sustained close reading as the main means by which students support their claims in an argumentative, thesis-based essay.

### Bibliography

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