Emilio Bejel


The history of José Martí’s afterlife as Cuba’s national hero is a tangled one. When he died in 1895, Martí was considerably less well known and celebrated on the island than fellow revolutionaries Máximo Gómez and Antonio Maceo. It took a new generation of left-leaning nationalists in the 1920s to begin the process of mythification and mystification that culminated in Martí’s enshrinement as Cuba’s secular “Apostle” of independence, not to mention his later repackaging as the Cuban Revolution’s “intellectual author.” Ottmar Ette’s José Martí: Apostel-Dichter-Revolutionär (1991) remains the most comprehensive work explicitly devoted to Martí’s reception history; more recently Lillian Guerra’s The Myth of Martí (2005) focuses more narrowly on Martí’s reputation during Cuba’s first decades as a neocolonial state. But really anyone who has written about Martí since the 1934 abrogation of the Platt Amendment, and certainly after the Cuban Revolution, has done so in the shadow of his myth. The scholar’s only real choices involve whether and how to engage the Martí myth, if not to demystify it, then at least to note the impossibility of doing so.

Emilio Bejel is no stranger to demystification, whether its object is Martí or Cuban nationalism. His Gay Cuban Nation (2001) is a fearless deconstruction of Cuban masculinity as it intersects with Cuban nationalism; its opening chapter, “The Building of a CondemNation,” remains the most substantive study of Martí in a queer-studies context. Bejel’s important new book examines the past and present of Martían iconography, a subject that perhaps pushes fewer and less visceral buttons than Gay Cuban Nation but is no less valuable for it. José Martí: Images of Memory and Mourning offers an ideal introduction for anyone interested in the making of Martí as a visual icon. The book’s introduction and four chapters examine the history of Martían iconography across a range of media, from early photographs and posthumous monuments to contemporary representations of Martí in paintings and film.

If the book has a flaw, it lies in the gap between its methodology and its potential audiences. This problem emerges most clearly in the introduction, which for me is the book’s weakest chapter. Bejel’s core arguments are that viewers of Martían images experience a “retrospective reconstruction” that mediates their understanding of him as a national icon, and that the contents of this reconstruction—or as he describes it, “the history that interposes itself between the visual image and the observer’s present”—fuel the corresponding devotion that such images inspire (pp. 5–6). These claims are both clearly, if broadly, stated and eminently plausible; but the rest of the introduction leaves
them in an awkward middle-ground between overview and the fuller theoretical analysis that the claims would seem to call for. No one would (I hope) dispute the idea that images of iconic historical people and events compel viewers to process them through the lens of received or retroactively-constructed historical narratives; neither is Bejel’s assertion that such histories “are never neutral” really arguable (p. 6). But although later chapters explore and develop these ideas quite elegantly, the introduction itself provides very little further context for them; instead it cites a range of canonical and lesser-known thinkers (e.g. respectively Roland Barthes, Stuart Hall, and W.J.T. Mitchell on the one hand, Andrea Noble and Nancy Wood on the other) as the basis for a more thorough exposition that it doesn’t perform.

The first chapter, which examines the Martián photographic archive in the context of the medium’s development (pun intended) in the nineteenth century, is arguably the book’s strongest. Bejel uses the broader context of photography’s early manifestation in the daguerreotype, as well as the new medium’s commercial establishment and cultural currency, to construct a deeper exploration of Martí’s ambivalent attitudes toward new technologies and modernity in general.

The book’s second chapter, “Battling for the National Icon,” moves into the twentieth century and the history of Martían statues and monuments, successfully integrating his reading of individual monuments into a broader examination of the role that public monuments and shrines have played in Martí’s enshrinement as national icon. Key to this analysis is Bejel’s focus on the political motivations of the various Cuban governments that built the monuments in order to both manipulate his image to their political ends and assert themselves as the “Apostle’s” rightful heirs.

The next two chapters, on contemporary representations of Martí in film and painting, respectively, allow Bejel to more fully explore the relationship between historical image and contemporary viewer, left undeveloped in his introduction. Filmic representations would seem to pose a special challenge for the historicization of a figure as closely associated with writing as Martí; this is perhaps why El ojo del canario [The Canary’s Eye] (2010) uses the recurring visual trope of the adolescent Martí in the act of writing. Bejel wisely focuses on this element of the film to demonstrate how the film’s emphasis on Martí as a writer becomes an integral part of the “retrospective reconstruction” that the interested observer undertakes” of the iconic image, and how that reconstructed, historicized icon in turn produces the “reciprocal gaze” that fuels the viewers engagement with it.

The book’s final chapter and brief epilogue ("Afterthoughts") turn toward the theme of melancholia (specifically “Cuban Melancholia,” as he calls it in
the epilogue), a seeming digression that in retrospect makes sense, as it encapsulates where the book has been heading all along. Melancholia, after all, is a defining essence of Martí as icon, a complex of longing and regret that aligns perfectly with the cultural imaginary that has defined Cuban nationalism since its first full flowering in the Ten Years’ War (1868–1878)—a formative event for the adolescent Martí—and certainly since his death in 1895. The nation’s greatest hero, Martí emerges as the highest expression of a cultural imaginary both sublime in its aspirations and relentlessly, mawkishly morose in its expressions of it.

Bejel then proceeds to a necessarily brief but compelling genealogy of visual representations of Martí—a virtual gallery walk through the history of Martian melancholia—before concluding with an examination of two post-1990 paintings that exemplify the recent turn to “nonconformist representation of Martí’s heroic figure” (p. 108). It would be hard to imagine a more trenchant or more comprehensive analysis of the subject short of devoting an entire monograph to it.

Bejel concludes the book with a call for “resisting Cuban melancholia,” a process that involves producing and maintaining a critical distance from the Martian visual archive in order to pre-empt the “mystifying reverence [and] hegemonic aura” that it has accrued over so many decades. *José Martí: Images of Memory and Mourning* stands in the end as an exegesis of just such resistance, as Bejel does not let his obvious admiration and respect for Martí to stand in the way of his myth’s necessary demystification.

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