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## Cubanazo: José Martí and the Tropicalist Prose Style (Against Postmodernism)

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### Abstract

This article argues that José Martí's brand of tropicalism (unrelated here to the Brazilian artistic movement) transcends the merely ornamental and activates in turn a ratifying device with respect to a deeper notion of Caribbeaness. The reading will contend that his discourse defies in retrospect a construct of the Caribbean fashioned after a postmodernist leveling that runs in tandem with a neoliberal model of globalization, and which he had already predicted and fought beforehand with astonishing accuracy.

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The soaring 19th-century literary figure whose work and leading engagement to the cause of independence also bestows him as the National Hero of his native Cuba, lived most of his short life (1853-95) in exile, mainly in New York City. There he wrote the bulk of his best pages, inaugurated literary modernism in Spanish, and sustained a rather hemispheric involvement while his brilliant career as a journalist set before the eyes of Latin America a truly first in-depth account of the North American society. Yet, whether in Spain as a deported political prisoner and subsequent university student, or as a famed correspondent and consul for Uruguay, Bolivia and Paraguay in the United States, he never ceased to clue that behind his writing and conduct there stood above all a fervent Cuban whose prose style likewise transplants Caribbeaness, operatively, far beyond its spatial limits.

In Spanish literary criticism, the concept of tropicalism began to emerge in the early years of the 20th century as an outwardly candid, descriptive term. At close inspection, it was rather a catchy coinage which coincided with the avant-garde's pursuit to indulge in the exotic and primitive, capable of evoking an *innate* style akin to the exuberant fertility of equatorial lands. Urban artists battered by their cardinally distant and drudging industrial societies could hardly resist the allure of the tropics. Referring in the late 1940s to the jolt that non-torrid poets such as Pablo Neruda and Federico García Lorca experienced upon their first respective visits to Cuba, Juan Marinello observed that there "they found the enriched black rhythms, localized and enhanced by a national way of being". They discovered a "cordial and talkative people", hatched out of "the warm footprints of the pirate, the slave trader, the conspirator and the revolutionary." And above all, the largest of the Greater Antilles "stirred in them the appetite for everything thirst quenching and for the burning sensation of its brilliancy" (286).<sup>(1)</sup>

Meanwhile, other contingent fields of study, especially since Pierre Gourou's unintended French school of "tropical geography" disparaged post-war issues in development and geopolitics (see Raison), applied the supposedly infectious, mind-altering agency of the tropics to validate an equally arguable *innateness*. For those not too anxious for a wild spree into the unknown, the readily given natural wealth of the tropics—a misconception in itself, since not all tropical areas are rich in this way<sup>(2)</sup>—was to blame for the idle attitude of its inhabitants. Overlaid against the material achievements of the First World, the phenomenon explained a festive type of economic aloofness in the Caribbean, a perpetual regeneration of a culture that teeters without end on the brink of poverty amid the illusions of spice and color, of perennial blooming and hot, cadenced sensuality. The term became so contaminated by myth and prejudice that in 1973 José Juan Arrom proposed to banish it from literature altogether, foremost because it implied a "geographic fallacy"—that which classifies style according to where it stands with respect to northern or southern latitudes rather than by qualities inherent to writing (130).

Much tussle about the concept in question shades out that José Martí had sustained its value as a far-reaching revolutionary instrument. In 1934, as Gabriela Mistral tried to pin down his inventive occurrences, she averred by way of a better definition that Martí's "tropicalism" emanates from his "complete nature," which spines the exploit of

an all-embracing critical familiarity with the most advanced thoughts up to his days (42). As tropicalism unfurls by this backing, it eases the integration from other positive domains of influence while minimizing any attrition these may exert on the truthfulness of a distinctive expression. Mistral forestalls in her abiding essay that the notion of a literary Adam, free of any other external sway, stands as a quaint paradox, but it helps to inure an essential feature of Martí's creative character. The fact that he withstood the weight of an immeasurable literary learning while preserving an astounding degree of originality defines him as an author that proceeds chiefly from himself (23), and this homeostatic self is inextricably Cuban, by birth and fierce devotion, as any quick sketch of his short life would show.

Writing from his early political exile in the US, Martí's ache for a free Cuba even transfigures and colors with a daring pitch the way he perceives the northern scenery, honing all at once his tropicalist style with an agenda that cuts beyond hackneyed allegories. Before the eyes of the already famed correspondent whose weekly dispatches to Latin America from his desk in a "sad" and "somber" New York City where winters felt particularly harsh to him, Buffalo Bill leads himself out of captivity by slashing his way through the "jungles." Jesse James seems to him acquainted with the "tough mountain," the "tight mesh of trees," the "secret trails," the "shallow spots of the swamps," and the "hollowed trees" from Missouri and Kansas—places where, as far as anyone can tell, the self-proclaimed warmed-blooded Antillean never visited.

Martí overlaps his known reality to that which is strange to him—the North America reality. Perhaps the term "Wild West," linked as it was to Cody, James and the North American mid-century expansionist adventure, naturally evoked in his mind the Cuban jungle. This jungle was so dear to him not because he then knew about it as he did toward the end of his life, but because it was the Cuban equivalent of an adventure mode, a world of action. Maybe, deep within, Martí is undergoing the idealization that all men of thought and creativity frequently make out of men of action. For this reason, Cody, James and all the North American West turns into what he wishes to see as his own realm of action and struggle: the war set in the Cuban jungle. (Barradas 464-65)

From this wish arises the synesthetic wedging that exalts the oratory skills of the American clergyman and abolitionist Henry Ward Beecher, and through whom Martí, as he writes about him, seems to portray his own artifices. He likens the pastor's eloquence with the "whirling waves that shatter lacelike," a speech "as colorful and melodious as a fresh grove on whose trees climb flowery vines, heavy with red bellflowers, white jasmines, or purple morning glories." "Unfortunately—he adds—sometimes a coarse joke erupted and it seemed as though a hurdy-gurdy had appeared among the flowers; but then, suddenly, like magic, a childish remembrance would fly about like a dove and, after bringing forth tears, hide in a lilac tree" (Baralt ed. 80).

Martí bestows his own "childish remembrance" with ideals that transcend the mere recall of his insular "flowery lush." A comparison with the work of Rubén Darío, another Caribbean master of modernism and contemporary of Martí, would reveal that while their respective tropicalist discourse express a "longing for the origins," only Martí converts it into a promissory perspective for a "free Cuba and a prosperous and strong Latin America" (Schulman 69).

Alfonso Reyes had also highlighted this aim as he singled out and remarked on the "physics" of Martí's tropicalist style—also wielded here as a synonym to "abundance of ideas." In other words, much of what metamorphoses especially at the late stage of his life into a tightly concise prose is literarily due to his physical movement. The method derives in part from the many health problems Martí began to suffer a few years before his death on the battlefield, which included an assassination attempt by poisoning, but mostly due to the extreme fatigue that his struggle for the Cuban independence caused him. Despite this forceful abridgement, he seldom neglects what he quipped as "the pure Aristotelian beauty" [19:51] of his writings, a powerful mishmash that Alfonso Reyes calls "precise tropicalism."

The external velocity of his life corresponds to the internal velocity of his thoughts. He was always in such a rush! Hence, his style, which one could only explain based on this singular condition: a style of continuous shots, of short waves, ultra-short, which are more rigid and penetrating: Therefore, that machine-gun style [...]. Given his unflinchingly ardor—bluish red fire—and his precision, he accomplished this paradox: to show what tropical precision can do." (qtd in Vitier 1978: ix)

What that precision may still achieve in today's literary criticism is to penetrate and render insight into the knotty concept of postmodernity. Having sprung as an ad hoc contraption in the First World (García Berrio), the true footing that demarks this "new age" continues to feint definitions in ways that have become more suspicious than inviting. Martí foresaw the dangers of this predicament and hurried a self-strengthening warning to his fellow Latin Americans: "We must seek to understand the roots of our people," he urges, "who carry their roots where one

cannot see them, and avoid being astounded before these seemingly sudden fashions, and this cohabitation of eminent virtues with rapacious powers" [6:47]. If postmodernism proves not to be just a "sudden fashion" that joins "eminent virtues with rapacious powers," the distrust to date at the periphery still holds all the same.

Decades after liberal rationality dropouts decided to band up by affixing a post to modernism, Cintio Vitier has pointed out that, contrary to all other imported schools of thought, postmodernism has yet to undergo an "analogous conversion" according to the "cultural logic" of Latin America and not of that utterly ingrained in the squelching needs of "late capitalism" (6-7). To what extent do the brisk alterations that befall in the technologically most advanced regions of the world hunker down the less developed ones? What accounts for the measurement of progress? How can a cultural enterprise help close the gap between contrasting cultures and foster mutual enrichment without compromising their distinctive traits of expression? The "cultural logic" of Latin America may have little to gain from the epicenters of neoliberal globalization where axiological thought "logically" wanes as it goads stern relativisms, derides epistemological objectivity, and levels virtual surrogates that stand in for concrete realities, scanting hope all along with respect to the future (see Bennett).

Running hand in hand with the market boom based on the image, postmodernism or the expression of postmodernity had foggily imposed by the 1950s the beginning of a pointless correlation between its society and the arts. As a boastful Norman Mailer once reeked, by the 1970s the image had become "pre-eminent because nothing deeper was going on" (qtd by Pyle), which may explain why many equate postmodernist theory with a murky whorl of gab glib and cliché-mongering, a bricolage of absurdities and refuge for extraneous scholarship. The lack of anything deeper is indeed revealing at the height and highs of the Age of Aquarius. A postwar generation dulled by sugary middle class values, perhaps induced by misreading Aldous Huxley's closing remarks to his 1954 momentous essay entitled *The Doors of Perception*, condemned "systematic reasoning" while neglecting the true "direct perception" he had proposed as an alternative outlet to partake in "total reality." A typological linkage to note in passing is that this notion of totality, complete with its hallucinogenic tinge, bears striking similarities to Martí's "complete nature."<sup>(3)</sup> In his habitual aphorized manner, Martí adheres to the taut adjustment that any holistic tropicalist would follow today in geography: "One must not believe that all recommended fertilizer is good," he alerts, "and perhaps what may be fitting to Martinique may not work well in the island of Trinidad" [8:299]. Likewise, style in Latin America and the Caribbean must obey the teachings of its own Nature—"it must have the waterfall of its stream, the color of its leaves, the majesty of its palm, the lava of its volcano" [22:100].

The chief distinction of the postmodernist "newness" among yesterday's hippies/today's corporate executives consists precisely in that it strives to eviscerate any pre-established system toward this sense of totality. The allusion is not gratuitous, for Martí's tropicalization factors what he called the nation's inmost innards [4:10], at no dearth to its most indispensable "complete nature" and without which advances in science and technology at that moment were driving the world into a "universal disequilibrium" [18:221]. Left on the hands of neoliberal global marketing, nationality, when not lashed out as a curse, becomes useful only as an instantly gratifying and transient commodity—again based on an obscurantist, reterritorialized image. For nations still encroached by the specter of colonialism, this implies stripping nationality of its ability to absorb an intake, which triggers in turn the tendency to clam into often violent, isolationist and culturally self-choking intransigency.<sup>(4)</sup>

The postmodernist's reluctance to accept any connection between Nature and Nation, as Pabón advocates (297-301), hinders a meaningful approach that would otherwise assure in the Caribbean an "analogous conversion" with postmodernist thought. Instead, avid publishers, barefacedly anxious to fetch the quick profits of a market fashioned after a proxy reconstruct of the area, pressure local authors and those on the move abroad to gush out the prefabricated stories that reality-deprived firstworlders seek as guilt-free armchair thrills. Garish paperback covers promise a non-committing mambo of primal conflicts, memoirs of a lost balmy past, all intoned by a self-referential whining devoid of any nation-building resolution, such as Martí denounced over a century ago [7:224].<sup>(5)</sup> Conversely, there are moonlit passages of sylvan eroticism in the war diaries of Martí bursting into such full-fledged visions of radiance and music [e.g., 19:218] that it has become virtually impossible to even ballpark Cubaness without these referential synapses (see Almenas).

Slapdash incantations dodge connectors, as expected in postmodernism, for its theoretical underpinning--not to mention sponsorship--originate from the ideas of Walter Benjamin. By a codified drift, faith on any unifying meta-discourse or ideology, especially concerning a liberating national project, dwindles. Martí had already warned against the "assortment of works devoid of order and harmony, disconnected from each other, with no analogy other than that which comes from the moot imaginations that create them" [7:210]. It would seem that today Caribbean literature could afford even less to evolve via "isolated compositions, without a clear plan, nor a given aim, lacking a tightly knit mechanism and an emphasized patriotic wish" [ibid]. Now deconstruction rules, the ludic method that, while aspiring to maximize interpretative permissiveness, and in the arts, its utmost expressive

capacity, disengages the specific referents from their centers of support. In a word, it often *denaturalizes* the quest of colonized subjects against hetero-determination. “Clearly, dangers exist in the scholarly strategies sometimes called postmodern,” acknowledges Wasserstrom: “Playfulness and self-reflexivity can quickly become self-indulgent ends in themselves. An obsession with questioning all traditional narratives can be paralyzing” (B5). Worst yet, it can shun from the consequences of hasty, if not grossly irresponsible, newness.

Martí’s tropicalism plots a course against this stagnation. It closely ties in with what is *universally beneficial* according to the intrinsic needs of each entity [see 5:468]. His strategy often skates on the rinks of intuition, far from the irrationalist bent expounded by Bergson, Husserl or Losski, but rather based on what Pascal located in the realm of *finesse*, to put it more romantically. That is, his writing also syncretizes the intuitive, and as such, counteracts the linear positivist “logic” that has assisted imperial conquests since the days of Napoleon. Martí’s selective weaving of Spanish idealism with Spencerian radicalism (see Salomon 30, 45-72, especially 51-54) illustrates this point—a narrative ploy that unfolds from many other sources and combinations as well. In this example, Martí’s tropicalism mixes a more germane, active and militant variant of idealism with a “radical liberty” that best fits his ambition to free Cuba, whereby his reading of “radicalism” calls for the search and a commanding grasp of the “roots,” of seeing “deep within” [2:280]. Duly, criticism can no longer reduce his tropicalist style to a purely sappy modernist embellishment. One of the lingering shortcomings in the bulk of studies devoted to Spanish American modernism consists in that it diffuses Martí’s active enactment (Pérus 103). Today this commonplace oversight has become critical, especially concerning the need to create the new only when deemed strictly necessary [see 7:212].

Perhaps no other postmodernist principle differs so much with Martí as the one related to this need. The clash at the heat of the neophilia craze attains many hues, but its overall grounding, appearing in broad, fuzzy brushstrokes, essentially breaks between two factions, namely, a “neo-right” and a “neo-left,” none monolithic, and engaging in such mixed struggles without any given central command that it is no longer feasible to conceptualize them as clear-cut, frontal combat units. Back when both of these factions battled each other without the updating prefix, it was easier to notice how each took rollercoaster rides in their popularity and influence. In the US, especially at the wake of the Vietnam crisis, the right leisurely took control over many universities and managed to cage the renewal of progressive militancy (see also Santiañez 47s). Since the cynosuresque crumbling of the Berlin Wall, heaps of bickering has also fragmented and weakened the left, aside from the sheer “scientific” nonsense denounced, among many others, in the cunning parody of Alan Sokal.

As an object of study, Martí has also found himself drawn in by this overarching and somewhat mitotic division. If forced to judge by face value according to any of the old positions, his work as a whole slants to the left, but such an impervious sorting on many partial yet crucial aspects hardly amounts to a fruitful endeavor today. Mayra Beatriz Martínez shows with compelling acuteness how Martí, notwithstanding his exceptionally progressive stances on a countless number of issues, ceded in public to a traditional westernized male view in his approaches to women, a view once associated with conservative right-wingers, and now under severe flout by feminist schools of thought. In this case, Martínez’ contextual coordinates supersede critical failings from the old guard while setting the stage for further legitimate discussion and research.

The complication regarding this legitimacy arises in what Harold Bloom calls the explosion of “media-universities” (572). Owing to the snort that canonized masterpieces elicit in today’s student/client, these universities hoard the platform to voices questionably “representative” of the voiceless. Under any bequest, such pretension of fairness disguised as “political correctness” really ghettoizes vital lots of the literary landscape and shortchanges the true attainment of the “complete nature” that Martí sought for Latin America and the Caribbean.

A quick survey over the output stemming from approaches meant to subsume an array of alternative expressions reveals a fearsome degree of debunking of anything that brings to mind the Canon, which is often misconstrued to disqualify its best syndetic or connecting attributes. Although we may be witnessing the last breaths in the life of Western culture, its most likely irreversible decline should not debar the tremendous relevance of its work, much of which, incidentally, came from the same hybrid disfranchised stocks that the postcanonical studies camp purports to defend. Martí sensed that the issue was not only about an irritating stance of supremacy, but one of interpretation free from prejudice, and proposed keeping abreast “of the universal movement as it is represented by the great books of all times and places” [7:210]. Caribbeanness without the tropicalist caveats he conceived, without its “complete nature,” becomes incapable of the “progressivism” over which James Davidson Hunter has pondered, in short, the “tendency to resymbolize historic faiths according to the prevailing assumptions of contemporary life” (Pinsker) [see also 13:135].

Although the neologism suits Martí’s tropicalist style perfectly well, as a white man of a bygone century and radical thinker in the Spencerian sense mentioned before, he runs the risk of becoming a period piece retroactively marred by conditioned approaches that may freeze him as a “misoneist,” a “globalphobic,” or any of the hip labeling fads of



the moment. Notwithstanding the advent of “the new,” in good old Spanish the augmentative suffix “-azo” may also stand positively for “great,” or it may denote the sense of “a blow.” Certainly, José Martí was not a common Cuban, but a superlative universal Cuban who, over a century after his death, is still capable of delivering “a blow” —a *cubanazo*— to the “sudden fashions” in which “eminent virtues with rapacious powers” cohabit.

## Notes

1. Literal translation supplied. Henceforth, if not otherwise indicated, the author supplies the translations. Remissions to Martí's *Complete Works* appear in brackets, wherein the first number indicates the number of the volume, and then, followed by a colon, the paging number. [Return](#)
2. “[...] the majority of Latin Americans live in temperate zones, either far from the equator or up in the mountains. Moreover, the tropical zones exhibit a wide variety of experiences and achievements: from a revolution and long-standing socialist government in Cuba to flourishing British-style parliamentary governments in the English-speaking Caribbean. Although climate and geography present challenges in Latin America, we now know that [neither climatic nor racial determinism] determine national development” (Drake and Hilbink 11). [Return](#)
3. Although Martí deplored the marginalizing abuse of hardcore drugs—the modernist's milk of paradise—for a quick sampling, see [23: 63]), he did attribute to lighter stimulants, such as wine and coffee, the “gaining of a spirit” [12:247-48]. In his youth he once noted that coffee in particular was a soul opener for the “reception of mysterious visitors” who, together, can induce to the “utmost audaciousness” [19:56]. A workaholic by his own confession, Martí also admitted producing his best poetry only after dosing himself by an “excess of work” [21:160, 62]. In any case, it was a counter Western motif, namely the “mysterious visitors” of orientalism, then the artist's imaginary Mecca for Decadence, in whom he found inspiration and completeness for his *Ismaelillo* (printed in 1882), the collection of poems credited for initiating in poetry Spanish American modernism. (See also the his poem entitled “Haschisch” (1875) [17:75-81]) [Return](#)
4. Observes Stuart Hall: “When the movements of the margins are so profoundly threatened by the global forces of postmodernity, they can themselves retreat into their own exclusivist and defensive enclaves. And at that point, local ethnicities become as dangerous as national ones. We have seen that happen: the refusal of modernity which takes the form of a return, a rediscovery of identity which constitutes a form of fundamentalism” (qtd in Martínez-San Miguel 155). [Return](#)
5. In Puerto Rico, a protectorate where high subsidy obliges, as in no other place in the Caribbean basin, to “the global forces of postmodernity,” Sotomayor (221-22) wonders if many of the showy embodiments sported especially by performance poets there (or those lodged especially in New York) are nothing more than a rootless aping after the pervasive wants of the US. [Return](#)

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