From an Itinerant Fiction to an Ad Hoc Translation of Modernity: Cultural Vision of Cities by José Martí

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Abstract:
In studying the extended writings of the 19th century Cuban thinker José Martí, scholars in Latin American modernity have identified a number of cultural urban narratives. The most important of these narratives is the result of his almost fifteen years of residing in New York. This narrative, embedded in his journalism, scrap notes, literature, political speeches and etc., has also been identified as an unfinished project of modernity for the newly created Hispanic American nations after their political independence from Spain.

Martí was, obviously, not satisfied with the way political powers in these countries were masking a replication of the colonial cultural mentality through agency in building their national identities. Despite having a contradictory attitude about modern cities, he clearly identifies the urban space as the logical scenario for the process of modernization. José Martí used his very particular ethical, humanistic code and his ingenuity to reinvent his own desired model of urban culture for the new Hispanic American nations.

The rest of the urban cultural narratives (about Ciudad México, Ciudad de Guatemala and Caracas) are connected with his life experience, living in different Hispanic American capital cities before his residence in New York (with the exception of Caracas, which constituted a pause in his North American period).

Based on the textual character of the modern city and the concurrent textual character of culture, this paper will compare these previous narratives with that of the final project. It will also compare the narratives between them. The purpose of this is to reflect upon the connections between these different texts. In other words, we will try to observe whether or not these narratives function as previous steps or drafts to each other, evolving through time and experience until the final foundational account, designed to shape modernity for the nations that he called “los países azules” (the blue countries).

Keywords: Modernity, Cities, 19th Century, Hispanic America, Culture

In studying the extended writings of the 19th century Cuban thinker José Martí, scholars of Latin American modernity have identified a number of cultural urban narratives. The most important of these narratives is the result of Martí’s almost fifteen years of residing in New York. This narrative, embedded in his journalism, scrap notes, literature, political speeches and
other texts, has also been identified as an unfinished project of modernity for the newly created Hispanic American nations after their achievement of political independence from Spain.

Martí was, obviously, not satisfied with the way political powers in these countries were masking a replication of the colonial cultural mentality via the agency of building their national identities. Despite having a contradictory attitude about modern cities, he clearly recognizes the urban space as the logical scenario for the process of modernization (Ramos 73). José Martí used his very particular ethical, humanistic code and his ingenuity to reinvent his own desired model of urban culture for the new Hispanic American nations (Schulman 29).

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In his book *Imagined Communities*; Benedict Anderson selects journalism and novels as documentary sources for re-presenting a nation (25). There is a relative significance in the only novel José Martí ever wrote, *Amistad Funesta* (Fatal Friendship) as a textual resource of interpretation of his urban narratives, but most of this urban account can be found in his written chronicles, intended to be read in important journals in Buenos Aires, Caracas and Mexico City.

We must also bear in mind that these narratives were produced at the moment of history just after the rise of the new Hispanic American nations, but also just when 19th century modernity was materially defined, visually represented and textually reflected in the big cities of Western civilization.

For these narratives, Rafael Rojas chooses the term foundational fiction, coined by Homi Bhabha (5), to name these narratives. He insists in seeing these narratives as inventions (Rojas 89). Therefore, the foundational project contained in the writings of José Martí also qualifies as foundational fiction. Concerning the use of the term ‘fiction’, we must keep in mind that Clifford Geertz considers all cultural interpretations as fictions. He argues that they are not false, but simply the constructs of subjective interpretation.

When I say ‘modernity’, I am talking about the profound cultural changes experienced by Europe and the United States as the consequences of industrialization and the development of capitalism, when technology reached outstanding levels in its effect on social life. All of this material transformation implied, consequently, changes at the symbolic level of culture, such as ideas about religion, philosophy, institutions, and social movements. Matei Calinescu divided 19th century modernity into an opposing pair: a bourgeois idea of modernity and an aesthetic modernity.

The bourgeois side was associated with the idea of progress, the preoccupation with time as a measureable dimension, the worship of reason, the ideal of liberty, and an abstract form of humanism; it also promoted pragmatism and action as a key element for success in a triumphant civilization established by the middle class (Calinescu 41).

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1 All references to José Martí’s writing in this paper are based on the 1975 Edition of his *Complete Works* (Obras completas) by Ciencias sociales. Havana.
On the contrary, aesthetic modernity is inclined, according to Calinescu, to radically anti-bourgeois attitudes. It rejects the bourgeois scale of values, and it expresses this refusal in different ways (42), but all these ways are always centered on an individual driven by his/her intellectual condition to an alienation from bourgeois modernity (42).

The interpretation of any text reflecting the main cultural changes in a city at the end of the 19th century is, without question, an interpretation of its modernity, and therefore, each one of the cultural aspects in which these changes occur can be at the same time, to quote Calinescu again, considered as the “Physiognomic characteristic of modernity (264).

The cultural knowledge of a city implies an understanding of the socio-cultural peculiarities of a nation or a given community. A valid approach to this knowledge could be taken by considering the coincidental textual nature of both the city and the culture.

The city has been seen as a text from different angles and disciplines. Some examples are: Richard Lehan (3) from literary studies; Iris Zabala (254) who connects modernity to the signs of the urban; Henri Lefebvre (44) who considers urban space as crucial for social production; Maurice Aymard (139) and his ideas about the function of the city in the process of civilization; Julio Ramos (112) in his reflections about Hispanic American modernity and, in particular, Ángel Rama in his essay, The Lettered City (La ciudad letrada).

The textual character of culture itself has also been claimed by many voices, among others the semiologist Jurij Lotman (41), the anthropologist Clifford Geertz (5), and Stephen Greenblatt (277). Hence, culture can also be considered as text which, in the case of modernity, also exists at the same time as the urban text in its two manifestations, the physical and the symbolic. It is obvious that this “double” text is absolutely readable.

As for José Martí and his ambiguous attitude towards modernity, he needs these fictional images as a means of political reconciliation between his anti-modern imaginary and his foundational project (Rojas 24). What Rojas calls anti-modern ideology can be also expressed as the ethical-aesthetical component of Martí’s ideas about modernity, which he tries to harmonize with the bourgeois component of the modern era.

Based on the textual character of the modern city and the concurrent textual character of culture, I compare these previous narratives with that of the final project. I also compare the narratives with each other. The purpose of this assessment is to reflect upon the connections between these different texts. In other words, I try to observe whether or not these narratives function as previous steps to or drafts of each other, evolving through time and experience until the final foundational account, designed to shape modernity for the nations that Martí called “los países azules” [the blue countries] (18: 205).

First stage: the symbolic level, Mexico City

By the time José Martí arrives in the city (1875), Mexico City is experiencing an significant process of transformation at the end of the 19th century. It is turning from a viceregal city into a modern capital (Rama 82). Mexico City is important for Martí, not only for being the first available space for the invention of the desired modernity, but also because this space is a real and tangible one.

Generally, each of the cities he describes, except Mexico City, is considered as a cultural person in his writings. In the later cultural narratives of the cities, it is possible to identify in them some
specific style marks, for example the devices he uses profusely, antonomasia and prosopopoemia. The described urban text is often simply called “the city” (la ciudad), as there is not any other city in the world besides this one. The city also has voice and agency. It summarizes all its inhabitants, as in Max Weber’s idea of the city as a community (Rose 432). For example, speaking about New York, Martí writes: “[…] a city that does not love crying, and enjoys or roars.” (10:23); later, he writes “The city prepares itself for activity while nature gets ready for repose” (10: 102)².

Compared to this habit, Martí’s Mexican narrative is atypical. Not only does he rarely use the word ‘city’ itself to refer to the capital’s cultural life, but he neither personifies nor grants agency or voice to it. In fact, there is not any explicit descriptive or evaluative discourse at all. It is just an extended, detailed account of isolated facts in different cultural contexts and situations.

Perhaps the most logical explanation for this type of discourse is that, at this early stage, he is still not conscious of the urban space being a natural operator in situations where cultural changes are to be produced (Lefebvre 117).

When comparing his Mexican account with the rest of his urban narratives, it is obvious that Mexico City must be considered as an exception. His awareness of the city as a key space for modernity will gradually mature into his discourse in a temporal and spatial progression alongside his itinerant life.

Instead of humanizing the city and talking about it, the writing will pick up the span of his personal experience. This type of discourse will legitimize the rest of the coming narratives. The functional balance between his roles as a witness and an actant will favor, for this one time, direct intervention.

Of Martí’s participation in the active life of the city, Pedro Pablo Rodríguez argues: “The abundance of texts written in Mexico indicates, possibly, a double joy: one of providing his opinions [...] and, at the same time, another joy of receiving such experiences. [...] Martí exercised, happily, his condition as a citizen, as he recognized in his last written work in Mexico, in which he proclaimed he would be an alien in the face of the danger [to the nation], but he would be ‘always a citizen’” (140).

This extended, implied and untold story of the most quoted city in all his writings (Avicoli 295), only allows room for the symbolic level of discourse. José Martí sees Mexico City as the place where he identifies the scenario for his project of modernization:

[A foreigner who wrote a book about Mexico] He knows very little about modern Mexico […] He did not stop to see what Mexico has defeated, nor has he measured all the handicaps Mexico was confronting, nor did he calculate what Mexico is going to defeat with its accumulated momentum. He did not see the titanic work of the new men who use their arms while liberty is safe; he did not see the heroic fatigue of the liberal generation which is carrying this resurrected country on its back, they only stop to push away the hands which grab their leather jackets from the shadows. (19: 38)

²² All translations are by Jose Antonio Gonzalez
So far, he clearly identifies the deeds of liberal Mexicans with the modern value of liberty and the implied sense of progress, two of the key elements in the pragmatic (bourgeois) side of his notion of modernity, at the same time, in conflict with his aesthetic anti-modern spirit: “I have earned my bread, let the verse be made” (16:141).

Michel Foucault’s concept of heterotopia is convenient when analyzing this narrative. Let us recall it briefly:

There are also, probably in every culture, in every civilization, real places - places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society - which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality. (∏ 1)

In my examination I have bent Foucault’s definition, for he locates specific points in the space as heterotopias, while I am proposing an interpretation of Martí’s vision of the whole capital of Mexico as one heterotopía in itself. Foucault himself allows a wide range of conceptual flexibility in handling the term.

The symbolism lies in the crucial role that Martí assigns to the Mexican nation, and therefore to its capital city, in the modernization of the Blue Countries: “[Mexico] You will order yourself, you will guide yourself; I will have died, oh Mexico in defending you, but if your hands would weaken and you were not worthy of your continental duty, I would cry, under the ground, with tears which would later turn into veins of iron for the spears –as a son nailed to his coffin, who beholds how a worm eats his mother entrails” (19: 22).

On the other hand, the sui generis condition of this specific narrative allows us to consider Martí’s instinctive cultural notion as the virtual, “simultaneously mythic and real contestation of the space” (Foucault ∏ 3), while I can see the real, tangible Mexico City as a replica of Foucault’s mirror (∏ 1). The idea of the whole city as a heterotopía of modern Hispanic America is a condition sine qua non for the interpretation of the subsequent urban narratives. The values identified with Martí’s axiology, through the symbolic representation of the city, will not become explicit in the urban cultural meta-narrative until the following episodes, in other words, the cultural vision of the cities to come.

Second stage: From symbol to discourse, Guatemala City

There are important changes in style in the next step, the narrative about Guatemala City. The narrator will detach himself from the described-narrated object, the urban culture. He will be more a witness than a protagonist. The urban space itself will take over the leading role. The totality of the inhabitants will turn, by the magic of metonymy, into one cultural person: “the city: Right in this moment the dormant city changes its shape, an active shape for a liberal essence” (7: 120). There are explicit judgments about cultural issues, and these judgments will express the author’s axiological position about those issues.

Angel Rama maintains that the [textual] city contains two lattices, the physical, walkable city; and the symbolic city, which sorts and interprets it for reasoning intelligences, capable of reading
meanings where others would just see blind symptoms (37). It is important to point out that culture is present in both the material and the symbolic lattice of the city as an entity.

All the texts in this narrative are semantically conditioned by a double intention: first Martí has, at least at the beginning of his Guatemalan experience, a positive opinion of President Rufino Barrios’ liberal reforms; second, he assumes the role of the nation’s promoter as a repayment for its generosity towards him. Let us comment briefly on law and architecture alone.

For Martí, a modern vision of the world would require reason, emancipation, and above all, legitimization. Profound legal changes are conditions sine qua non for a conversion to a modern society (Singer 2). This documental condition of modernity is solved, in Martí’s eyes, by the bill for the new civil code, passed by the Guatemalan government in 1877. “Births must correspond amongst them, and new nationalities require new legislations” (7: 90).

He sees this action as a legal and therefore an epistemological step towards modernity. There is in his writing a detailed analysis of the law and an enthusiastic praising of it. He finds the code culturally appropriate, for it is based on the Roman Code and not on the Napoleonic one, as in other Hispanic American nations, (7:90) and it is based on both virtue and democracy, which he considers pillars of the modern ethic.

As liberal ethical foundations of the new law, Martí praises merit, work, equality and democracy. He highlights how modernly and conveniently the code defines the separation of the legislative and executive branches of government. By this time he is teaching literature and philosophy (Montesquieu) in the city’s education college.

Therefore he claims: “Finally, the new spirit has incarnated in the new law! Finally one is what one always wanted to be! Finally one is [Hispanic] American in the Americas!” (7:102)

Through this assessment of the code, Martí predicts the beginning of a culture of modern humanism in Guatemala City. “Having extinguished monarchy, it a universe of monarchs has been established” (7: 99). It is for him the political feasibility for a change in the nation’s social relationships. He summarizes: “in its spirit, the code is modern” (7: 101).

On the other hand, in his later New York writings, he only finds appropriate for his project the adoption of the spirit of the basic American laws (for example the Constitution), but not the letter nor its application, which he finds culturally not adequate for Hispanic countries (2: 24). His assessment of the Guatemalan civil code is perhaps the most mature of all his explicit contributions to his own noetic notion of modernity.

As for architecture, Martí witnesses the physical transformation of the obsolete colonial Guatemala City into an urban liberal plan. In his writings, he re-reads and re-presents what he sees in a perhaps unconscious modern foundational draft before his North American experience (7: 120).

When ancient colonial buildings are refurbished by the regime, he reinvents them through his discourse as centers for the production of wealth destined for the people of the nation, or as schools which will transform youth into modern citizens. “The city, carried by its instinct, overthrows the cloister of Santo Domingo, tomb of souls, and turns it into a goods’ warehouse – wealth’s crib--; it also tears off the orchard from the Church of La Recolección, old mansion of opulent cabbages, and turns it into a polytechnic school, now mansion of rich and vivacious intelligences” (7: 120).
There is a big difference between the real city he walks through and the one being erected in his mind (Rama 115). It is a mental, constructivist reinvention of cultural symbols. This reinvention affects also those parts of the city space untouched by effective changes. For example, the Cartesian monotony of a geometrical urban path is reinterpreted as a balance for lively social life: “Only in our lands is symmetry animated; primitive life, intelligent glow and native vivaciousness prevail, no matter how dormant they are, over any other interest or concept” (7: 122); the green areas, present in the urban space, are seen as very positive, for they bring in the purity of nature. In his conciliation of modernity, an abundance of nature in the city makes it ambivalent (Gonzalez 84).

In his vision of the urban space in Guatemala and New York, Martí assumes very different attitudes. In Guatemala City he resemanticizes the codes; in describing his architectural and urban vision of New York, Martí focuses on locations that have been defined by him with a deliberate meaning of humanistic modernity:

A din is heard; but not a din of muskets; masts are seen, but not the masts of lances; these are the masts of the new war, the slender chimneys of small steam machines, which in the mornings, as soon as day breaks, begin to climb the heights; they don’t stop until the edges of the clouds, these are the material which New York uses to build its gigantic houses. Men are entering through the sky. Babel is all of the earth, only the languages are not confused anymore (10: 81).

In the New York narrative, there is also a great deal of social criticism, as when describing the slums:

In the wretched neighbourhoods, which pour into the big avenues the suffocated people, sick children climb their mothers’ knees as insects climb tree trunks. As soon as sun gets closer to the earth, these children begin to shrink and to vanish, as happens to the swamps in the burning months, these peeled and bloodless children, who exist in these big cities without faith and without peace; as also the brutal women and the ireful and discontent labourers. (10: 59).

The intention is also different, a promotional attitude on one side, and a critical spirit on the other one (a criticism which is not always censorious). How much good could there be in New York as an architectural model for the Blue Countries? A great deal: he sees this city as the center of western urban modernity. On the other hand, many social and economic mechanisms are, in his eyes, not worthy of imitation or not culturally appropriate to be adopted. On the other hand, the narrative of Guatemala City allows the feasibility of the project. It is also the first explicit draft which anticipates it, pointing to the need for a civil, documented reference for modernity.

Third stage: From national to regional dimensions, Caracas

Caracas, the third city, is not only another step towards the final narrative, but both narratives, this one and the depiction of New York, are concurrent. Alternatively, when comparing Martí’s Guatemalan and his Venezuelan writings, both texts share their promotional character and practically nothing else. In the draft of “La Revista Guatemalteca” he composes the profile of an imagined nation, “La Revista Venezolana” centers in Caracas the symbolic space of a continental idea: “I am a child of the Americas and I am devoted to her” (7: 267).
His Guatemalan experience proves useful in Venezuela; it helps him to avoid the identification between the liberal reforms conducted by President Antonio de Guzman Blanco, and Martí’s own ideas about modernity. The narratives are different in scope and intention: “Who says Venezuela, says the Americas” (7: 210).

The heterotopy evolves, from the intuitive symbolism in Mexico City, to a more explicit and physical national paradigm in Guatemala City; and then to a Latin American ubiquity in the Caracas text. Notice that each one of these visions is still a wide, full city-load of meaning.

The mere existence of a democratic new law, as it was in the case of Guatemala, is not enough in his Caracas experience. He resumes Andres Bello’s concern: written laws are not enough to sustain modern societies if the citizens lack respect for democratic institutions. This is a recurrent topic when Martí criticizes American primary elections and caucuses in his New York writings. Martí describes profusely the physicality of Caracas; he praises it, but the vision of the urban is not as enthusiastically reassuring of modernity compared with the way he saw Guatemala City. Perhaps he is by now convinced that modernity demands ideas before focusing on visible shapes.

His cultural vision of Caracas overcomes the previous vision of Guatemala City. This narrative must be seen as kindled to the New York papers in terms of intellectual maturity, it must be also considered as an explicit part of the foundational project because of its territoriality; it is located in the Latin American geography at the very moment of this late modernity which Martí calls “tumultuous age of collapse and renovation” (7:203).

Fourth stage: The unfinished project, translating urban modernity, New York and the Cuban experiment in the cities of Florida.

The narrative representing the culture of New York – the narrative which can be identified as a foundational fiction for Hispanic America – never goes beyond a mere expression of desideratum. Thus, this fiction is a long way from any power-based national project ever executed in history.

We could apply to this regionally-scoped discourse what Rafael Rojas said about his plan for the independence of Cuba; he “was a founder of a nation, not the builder of a state.” (La invención… 140). In the same way, Martí’s wider foundational narrative lacks, at a regional level, details about any practical execution of the project. The totality of his more important reviews of 19th century New York shapes a clear cut holistic image of his cultural vision of the city.

This image shows his appraisal of New York City’s cultural values in terms of selecting precious elements worthy of being adopted to outline his foundational fiction. At the same time it expresses a wish for the improvement of the very city which is the subject of his reflections.

Some monumental sites, such as the Statue of Liberty and Brooklyn Bridge, are spaces where Martí’s discourse intends a reconciliation of the antithetical sides of modernity while identifying them with the humanistic values of democracy, freedom and concord. These sites could be identified in his writing as heterotopias of the universal modern urban (Foucault 179). Compared with the total urban heterotopias of the projected Hispanic American modernity, these specific selected sites in New York City are symbolically loaded with what Martí considers the essential, positive values of modernity.
Martí was selective and flexible. His ability of finding in diverse, and even opposite, sources the civilizing solution for the young Hispanic American nations is assumed as a discursive style in his New York narrative. This inspiration should not be mistaken for a blind fascination with the culture of the other. However, understanding Martí’s talent of identifying himself with otherness (Puertas Moya 276) means understanding that he could not stay indifferent to the destiny of people from the alien society he translated for his own.

I chose the term translation absolutely on purpose (as a metaphor). I am arguing that José Martí made up a project of modern urban culture based on what he sees (reads) in the modern culture of New York; and he “translates” an elective part of it into another prospective cultural text. Translation, as a process, implies both, a selection of meaning and a reshaping of these meanings, and that is exactly what he does.

Returning to our comparison of the cultural vision of different cities, all these urban narratives are interesting, alternative cultural accounts of cities during the second half of the 19th century. Using Clifford Geertz’s terminology, we could call each of them a precipitate of history (5). The ones preceding the New York narrative can be considered as evolving drafts of or stages towards the final one. The New York account must also be seen as a sui generis experiment of partial, selective translation of the culture of Western civilization into a set of cultural signs which could be applicable to the Hispanic American nations.

The very person imagining this foundational fiction was at the same time organizing a war of independence in order to free Cuba from Spain. His political agency caused him to establish a profound rapport with the Cuban émigrés settled in some small cities in Florida (Tampa, Key West and Ocala). A different, interesting set of urban narratives is identifiable in his writings about these facts. This time, these narratives are more evident in his political speeches and articles; and are also visible in his letters and other political documents.

Rafael Rojas argues that, as a founder of a new nation (free Cuba); Martí already had two of the four elements needed in order to create a country:

- The ethical link, with the strongly ingrained idea of a homeland.
- The civil link, the notion of a national community, the idea of a defined identity even before independence and despite being geographically uprooted (128).

Rojas points out the necessary military victory in the war of independence as a requisite for the formal accomplishment of the missing links;

- The spatial link in the real national territory.
- The constitution of a state, after independence from Spain (128).

The civil links reside in these cities of South Florida. They lend their space for a preliminary nationality. Culturally speaking, these cities are not American cities by that time, they are Cuban cities.

Here Martí returns to the national dimension of the subject (as previously in Guatemala City). But this time there is a difference, with Martí depicting an ideal Cuba through his own cultural vision of these cities, and placing it out of the geographical space of the island as an experiment; it is a project of an imagined national community to be finalized after obtaining real political power in the real space of the country (Rojas 140). The national dimension is not a sign of
surrender of the project for the regional foundation, but the completion of a (for Martí) sine qua non condition of its feasibility.

None of these fictions is complete in itself. The big cultural narrative about New York is an elective set of models at the symbolic and the material level of urban culture, with values borrowed from Western modernity at that time. The Cuban urban experiment in South Florida is the setting for a modern, ideal citizenship. But these two narratives lack territoriality. They both extrapolate cultural values out of the physicality of Hispanic America.

On the other hand, the cultural vision of Mexico City, Guatemala City and Caracas provide the geographical space, except that each of them is incomplete and immature and lacks details to be considered as the final text of Martí’s foundational model of urban Latin American modernity.

In that sense, the foundational fiction will only be complete when all the urban narratives can be considered as both important steps and the inevitable pieces of an ideal, regional project of modernity which has never been implemented. Each one of these narratives can be seen also as an alternative cultural vision of these urban spaces.

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