

Walking the Cuban Tightrope

a 53-min documentary by Margaux Ouimet

STUDY GUIDE

Prompt

1. José Martí, **national hero of Cuba**

Film Reference

TC 00:01:05:08 Roberto Navarro, Librarian at Casa de las Americas, states: “In Cuba, when you’re born, you already know José Martí. José Martí is the national hero of Cuba.”

Question

Why is José Martí considered the national hero of Cuba?

José Martí (1853-1895) was a Cuban patriot, one of three leaders (José Martí, Antonio Maceo, Máximo Gomez) who organized and unified the movement for Cuba's independence from Spain. José Martí was a visionary political thinker and a Humanist philosopher who worked for an independent Cuba that was to be a democracy founded on racial and social equality. He died during the third War of Independence (1895-98), on his first day on the battlefield, at the age of 42. His heroic death as a martyr helped create the unquestioned myth of José Martí as Cuba’s messiah, for all competing factions of Cuban nationalists.

“A fervent lover of peace, unity and harmony among men, José Martí did not waver in organizing and initiating the just and necessary war against colonialism, slavery and injustice. His blood was the first to be spilled and his life was the first to be offered up as an indelible symbol of altruism and self-sacrifice.” These are the words of Fidel Castro celebrating the 150th anniversary of José Martí’s birth, in 2003. Though Martí worked feverishly for a democratic republic, Castro’s regime appropriated Martí as the intellectual father of the 1959 Revolution.

In Cuba and Latin America in general, José Martí was the foremost anti-imperialist thinker whose critiques of US-dominated corporate capitalism ring as persuasively today as they did at the time he wrote them (late 1880s - early 1890s).

Reading references

The Myth of José Martí, Conflicting Nationalisms in Early Twentieth-Century Cuba. Lillian Guerra.

JOSÉ MARTÍ Selected Writings, Penguin Classics

Prompt

2. *Yo soy un hombre sincero*. «I am an honest man”. Opening lyrics of *Guantanamera*, from *Versos sencillos/Simple Verses* written by José Martí in 1887.

Film References

TC 00:00:48:22 *Yo soy un hombre sincero de donde crece la palma* / I am an honest man from where the palm trees grow.

TC 00:12:38:12 *La Rosa blanca* / The White Rose is a poem about friendship read in the film by Pete Seeger’s grandson who grew up in Nicaragua.*

TC 00:32:37:13 President Barack Obama quotes Martí: “As Martí said, “**Liberty** is the right of every man to be honest, to think and to speak without hypocrisy.”

TC 00:51:48:05 Ismaël sings a verse from *Gunatanamera* written by José Martí: “I have more than the leopard. I have a good friend.”

Question

Why was it important for Martí to identify himself as an honest man?

In the context of the staggering industrialization and false social progress in the US, and in opposition to the rigid social norms of the Spanish colonial elites, Martí wrote: “Cuba’s Destiny will be rooted in collective truth and liberty, the ultimate authenticity.”

José Martí and other modernist artists were driven by a thirst for authenticity, as an act of rebellion to liberate the stifling norms of his time. Martí was distinguished for his prose and deceptively simple, sincere verse on themes of personal freedom and united Americas.

* The white rose was carried as a peace symbol by the protestors for change and freedom led by playwright Yunion Garcia Aguilera, in November 2021. Garcia was sequestered in his house and held the white rose out through his window

Prompt

3. The Cuban school girl and the US President

Film References

TC 00:02:38:12 A school girl writes about José Martí on the blackboard: “He loved to write **stories for all the children of America.**”

TC 00:32:57:10 President Barack Obama: “Cuba, like the United-States, was **built in part by slaves brought here from Africa.** Like in the United States, the Cuban people can trace their heritage to both slaves and slave owners.”

Question

What does the school girl refer to when she says “America?”

For Martí, **America** does not belong just to the United-States of America. Cubans are Americans, just as are Peruvians, Mexicans, Canadians and all the others who live in the hemisphere. Martí’s **project of hemispheric popular solidarity** embraced all of Latin-America, Puerto Rico, North-America and the Caribbean islands, and their 1 billion inhabitants. A bearer of universal ideas of emancipation, Martí laid the foundations of national unity against the US, while advocating a great pan-Latin-American union that would realize Bolívar's dream of the "Great Homeland".

President Obama underlines common points in the heritage of the peoples of Cuba and the US, the history that Cuba and the US share. What of their future will Cuba and the US share? How will Cuba and the US overcome the “habitual hostility” that has existed for several long centuries and continues today?

The embargo remains hostage to political ambitions in the important electoral state of Florida, home to so many Cuban exiles who retain their claim to José Martí’s true legacy and their hatred of the Castro revolution, harbouring eternal dreams of drawing Cuba once again into the embrace of its mighty American neighbour.

Reading reference

Ada Ferrer: Cuba: An American History

Prompt

4. Martí's apparent contradictions:

Film References

TC 00:13:29:15 “With the poor people of this world, I want to cast my lot, for the little stream of the mountain pleases me more than the ocean.”

TC 00:09:03:13 “To be educated is the only way to be free.
To be prosperous is the best way to be generous.”

TC 00:21:30:17 “...the lynching laws, the Jim Crow segregation is a product of 1892 and there, Martí arrives and he violates all of the laws. He gets to Tampa and the first thing he does is stay with Ruperto and Paulina, this Black couple. ... That was against the local laws, you could not do that. ... the local white officials who are Americans have no idea what to do with these Cubans. And they also live in one area of Tampa called Ybor City that's famous because it's a cigar-making area. But there's another area called West Tampa where basically mostly white wealthier Cubans live. He visits both! And **he has both groups of Cubans joining** in Ybor City to hear him speak, and joining across these different clubs to recruit among them the youth of Tampa to fight in the war.”

Question

Was José Martí a selfless idealist or a ruthless strategist?

It is impossible to pigeonhole Martí into convenient categories. He was both a Humanist and a political revolutionary. As a Humanist, Martí worked for the moral gain and mutual progress of all. As a political strategist, he needed rich and poor, Black and White to support and to fight in his “necessary” war for an independent Cuba, a Cuba that he promised would be “by all and for all”.

Was he for “the poor people of this world”, or was he for being “prosperous” as a way to succeed and be generous? “To be educated is the only way to be free” is a widely known aphorism of José Martí's. “To be prosperous is the best way to be generous.” is rarely seen or heard, as it has been occulted by the Castro Revolution.

When he first moved to New York (1880), Martí admired the dynamic entrepreneurship of the US. He wrote poetically of the building of the Brooklyn Bridge. However, after living “in the belly of the beast” for almost a decade, he began to write about the ugly underbelly of that beast: “Excessive love of wealth gnaws at their intestines like a worm.” He was impressed with the construction of Coney Island out of nothing. However, he also saw it as that pinnacle of materialism where “Americans choose to be ignorant of the suffering that surrounds them. They prefer being surrounded by luxury, even if it is false.”

José Martí united different factions under a common cause, Cuban independence. Martí loved Tampa and its people, and called the city “El Pueblo Fiel” (The Faithful Town). In 1892, he founded the Cuban Revolutionary Party and drafted its basic principles in Tampa.

Reading reference

Letters from New York in *JOSÉ MARTÍ Selected Writings*, Penguin Classics

Prompt

5. IMAGE: *Lagrimas negras* / Black Tears
Portrait of José Martí as a Black man

Film References

TC 00:41:02:02 A portrait of José Martí as a Black man is being painted by Black Cuban artist, Erik Oliveira Rubio.

TC 00:41:13:08 Dr Lillian Guerra: “Very few students have read *Mi Raza* \My Race. I teach it and we have **a wonderful debate** about this idea, you know, what does it mean in the moment when Martí is saying these things, and what does it mean today?” And today, Black Cubans would say, “This idea that we’re going to voluntarily enter into a slavery of colour when we’ve just recently been released from real slavery, that’s ridiculous! Since when did racism not exist? So, why is it not taught?”

TC 00:46:47:09 Visual of young Black men walking by a large wall with the slogan of the Castro Revolution slogan appropriated from Martí: *Patria o Muerte* / Homeland or Death. This image is discoloured as the protest song fades up: ***Patria y Vida!* / Homeland and Life!**

TC 00:47:10:17 Lillian Guerra: “When you show that video, you’re showing the fact that you have two people who participated in making it won the Latin Grammy for Song of the Year and they’re both political prisoners right now. Because they made that song, and because they’re Black! Black activism has always been terrifying to the white political establishment of Cuba.”

Question:

Was José Martí racially blind?

In the film, the artist Erik Oliveira Rubio paints a portrait of José Martí as a Black man as a powerful tribute to Martí’s anti-racist fight for the abolition of slavery. From childhood, Martí was devastated by the suffering of slaves that he witnessed. (cf. poetry)

Everything is about **context**. Martí was a man of his time, influenced by the principles of European of Universal Humanism. We can say that Martí’s form of nationalism was inclusionary but also racially blind. White Cubans and Black Cubans fought together for Cuban independence. Martí extolled this vision of a Cuban nationality built on a foundation of racial and social equality and he thought of that as a gift to the world. He didn't just think about it as a Cuban future he thought it could be a model for the world.

Martí’s legacy in terms of race: “Cubans are more than Black and White” has never, in fact, reflected the lived reality of Black Cubans. It has been used as a proud patriotic notion to bring to bring all Cubans together in Martí’s and Maceo’s war for Independence in 1895, and today it is used to stifle debate and discourse. The Castro Revolution claims to have solved the problem of race in Cuba. To contradict this in any way is to risk being accused of treason.

Reading References

-*Mi raza / My Race* by José Martí in *José Martí, Complete Works*.

-“*Mi raza,*” o *José Martí, el racista bueno*, article by Francisco Morán, Southern Methodist University, May 2015. Link in Researchgate.

-*Baldwin, Styron, and Me*, by Mélikah Abdelmoumen. A XXIst century “martían” viewpoint on the complexities of race and mixed races. This Quebec author looks at Baldwin and Styron’s friendship from her standpoint as a racialized woman, born in Canada to a Tunisian father and Québécoise mother. Abdelmoumen criticizes aggressive radicalism, advocating instead (like Martí) for **dialogue and empathy**. “With the help of Baldwin and Styron, the author allows us to see that

dialogue is not only possible, but necessary.”

Prompt

6. José Martí, the Universal Cuban

Film References

TC 00:01:25:16 The text against the background of an ocean wave: “*All is music and reason. And all, like diamonds, is carbon first, then light.*”

TC 00:08:07:17 Laritza Diversent: Martí said, “I want the first law of my Republic to be the full dignity of each person.”

TC 00:14:46:08 Ismaël speaks of the creation of the song *Guantanamera*: “...verses by José Martí which became familiar to us all, from the prolific works of poetry left to us by this great man, the most universal of all Cubans, José Martí y Pérez.”

TC 00:26:22:17 Rap song lyrics written by Los Aldeanos: “Speak the truth about all that’s missing from the *Complete Works of José Martí*.”

TC 00:26:33:16 Visual of a graffiti print on a Havana neighbourhood wall of José Martí wearing a T-shirt with: I ♥ WiFi. Martí here, in this popular contemporary expression, is speaking for all Cubans who are deprived of access to the internet.

From the outset, this film establishes Martí as a complete human being: a man of heart and reason. An artist. Through his great sensitivity, he perceives transformation from dense matter to electromagnetic light waves, or to the illumination of the spirit.

A thinker who transcended the boundaries of ideologies and politics to seek social justice and freedom for the oppressed of the world, José Martí “contains multitudes”. As a Humanist, José Martí’s nationalism stood up for universal values developed in Enlightenment-era European contexts. But Martí applied them specifically to the Americas, - against Spanish, Portuguese and US colonial imposition, - and against the belief of his time in the “natural” superiority of the white race.

Martí's influence has endured and may be said to embody a message for people of all nations and cultures today. As we see in *Walking the Cuban Tightrope*, Martí is still the #1 cultural reference, the Cuban everyman, depicted by artists in popular culture and in the expressions of everyday people.

Prompt

7. Cuba's Destiny is yet to be fulfilled.

Film References

TC 00:06:46:18 Dr. Lillian Guerra: "History is relevant here because it has yet to be fulfilled. That Destiny that Cuba was searching for is dependent on people being able to continue the struggle for change which translates into understandings of the Past, and very specific ones, that then translate into a project for the Future."

TC 00:47:29:21 Dr Guerra: "Many Cubans are now seeing the struggle of Black people in Cuba as a source for the resurgence of the kind of democracy and true freedom that José Martí and the Black leadership of his time had started to build."

Question

How will Cuba's destiny be fulfilled, and what will it look like?

Lillian Guerra partially answers this question in the above mentioned clip. She elaborated on that elusive destiny in a Zoom interview that is not in the film and that reflects José Martí's uncompromising ideals: "The Destiny that has yet to be fulfilled is really the aspiration that Cubans have to not just simply have a democratic society and a socially just society and a socially just economy. They have aspirations **for Cuba to be the most democratic, the most socially just society in the world!**

Blacks were at the head of those Independence wars. They were the majority of the troops. They were almost half of the leadership corps and effectively, they reflected this notion that was so unusual at that time, really truly radical at that time, of total change, leaving behind 400 years of plantation and slavery and colonialism for **a completely different version of human reality.**

So, Cubans still aspire to that. That's why we are so obsessed with José Martí and Antonio Maceo and our past and fighting the silencing of History

because we believe that we will create this society so long as we continue to aspire to it.”

Since the middle of the 1880s and their struggle to fulfil José Martí’s promise of a republic “with all and for all”, Cubans have believed their historical Destiny to be an exceptional one. José Martí shaped the Cuban imagination to envision and work for a dignified future that would outdo any existing democracy by overcoming white racism and the legacies of slavery. Together with the Black leadership of his time, José Martí had to weave alliances between the civilian and the military, between white insurgents and black radicals.

The anti-colonial struggle against Spain was to be a process of empowerment for all involved. This process was ended in 1898 by the US intervention in Cuba’s third war of independence from Spain.

In his 2003 speech to celebrate the 150th anniversary of José Martí’s birth, Fidel Castro pays tribute to Cuba’s national hero: *“A fervent lover of peace, unity and harmony among men, José Martí did not waver in organizing and initiating the just and necessary war against colonialism, slavery and injustice. His blood was the first to be spilled and his life was the first to be offered up as an indelible symbol of altruism and self-sacrifice.”*

For *Fidelistas*, José Martí is embodied in the Cuban people in their relentless efforts towards socialist construction and in the defence of their revolutionary state. Martí was never for a communist dictatorship.

The Cuban scholar Carlos Rippoll dedicated his life to collecting proof of “the falsification of José Martí in present day Cuba.”

For right-wing Cuban exiles who retain their hatred of the Castro revolution, José Martí was an annexationist.

On November 3, 2023, the United Nations General Assembly voted, for the 30th year, to condemn the US embargo of Cuba. Enacted by President John F. Kennedy, the embargo remains hostage to political ambitions in the important electoral state of Florida, home to so many exiled extremist Cubans who retain their claim to José Martí’s true legacy. Will these extremists succeed in making real their eternal dreams of drawing Cuba once again into the embrace of its mighty American neighbour?

In the Havana Times, Cuban citizen Osmel Ramirez Alvarez brings us away from the fanatics, and back to a balanced view of José Martí's role in helping to shape the future: "The new Cuba, which we should build in the near future, already has a proven guide: Martí. We have our very own mentor here at home, our Maestro who has unfortunately been forgotten in spite of people saying his name every day.

He defended tolerance, freedom, true democracy and a "non-predatory" capitalism. He dreamt and fought for a free and prosperous Cuba "with everyone for everyone's well-being". Here, he envisioned black, white and *mulato* people living together in harmony, in a society which distinguishes people according to their virtues." This opinion piece was written in 2016.

The struggle for a dignified future continues today in Cuba and on behalf of the millions of young Cubans who have fled the Island. The protests that have broken out across the Island since July of 2021, originated in San Isidro, a poor mainly black neighbourhood of Havana where many Black artists and rappers live. This is where was created a new Cuban anthem, the Grammy-winning song ***Patria y Vida!*** / **Homeland and Life!** (No more *Patria o Muerte* / Homeland or Death.)
