

The Texture of Literary Fieldwork

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For a literary critic, doing fieldwork is a strange task.

For an anthropologist, fieldwork means embedding the scholar in her or his object of study. The colorful texture of ethnographic work largely comes from weaving in-depth interviews and observations with other forms of analysis. Some anthropologists are heavier on the theoretical strands; others are heavier on ethnographic strands. But regardless of how thick each of these strands appears in the final work, any anthropologist will tell you that the richness of the work starts with the lived experiences they narrate on each page.

Literary critics, too, do this kind of ethnographic work. For the few literary critics that do fieldwork, in-depth interviews and observations are sometimes key. I conducted fieldwork in Cuba during the summer of 2011, and interviews and observations were crucial to focusing my project. The first few days I spent in La Habana were dedicated solely to sitting down with researchers and vigorously writing down everything they said.

Figure 2. Martí's statue and the facade of the Sociedad Cultural José Martí, on the corner of Calle 17 and Calle 5, El Vedado, La Habana, Cuba. Photograph by Bécquer Seguí.



But since I went there to study Cuba's national political and literary hero José Martí, interviews were also important for shedding the label of an outsider. Needless to say, they take Martí very seriously in Cuba, so much so that there exists an institution called the Centro de Estudios Martianos, dedicated to investigating, editing, and publishing his work. I spent my three weeks of fieldwork there working with the scholar Mauricio Núñez Rodríguez. Initially we effectively interviewed each other; then we began exchanging notes, fielding each other's inquiries, and collaboratively sketching out Martí's relationship with the novel. (Mauricio is probably the foremost expert on Martí's only novel, *Lucía Jerez* [1885].)

Observations were perhaps even more important. Walking through El Vedado, the neighborhood that is home to the Centro and to the place where I was staying, one can't help but notice the quantity and diversity of Martí iconography. Martí's bust appears on several different street corners in a matter of blocks. In addition to the Centro, the National Library, a number of cultural societies, and parks are named in Martí's honor. Moreover, everyone has something to say about the national poet and independence hero. During one memorable conversation about Martí's poetry, I remember interjecting, "Did you know that Martí smoked *maría*?" "No, but that's fascinating!" replied my comrade, before he began a fifteen-minute explication of *Versos sencillos* (1891) based on this new piece of information I'd given him.

Compared to an anthropologist, however, the embedding of a literary critic occurs at a different level. Our object of study, unlike an anthropologist's, is the text itself, not the interactions among people. The interactions of writers and others are, of



Figure 1. Front page of *El Latino-Americano*, May 15, 1885. Martí's only novel, *Lucía Jerez*, originally titled *Amistad funesta*, was published serially under the pseudonym Adelaida Ral in this Spanish-language New York City newspaper from May 15 to September 15, 1885. Photograph by Bécquer Seguí.

course, very important, but it is not necessary (and it is mostly impossible) for the literary critic to witness these interactions firsthand. Who wouldn't have loved to see Marcos Sastre's *salón literario* in late 1830s Argentina, witnessing the likes of Esteban Echeverría, Juan Bautista Alberdi, Juan María Gutiérrez, and a young Domingo Faustino Sarmiento debating politics and literature? Instead of gathering firsthand accounts, we embed ourselves, like historians, in the minutia of everyday life as it has been recorded on the pages of novels, plays, and poems, but also newspapers, pamphlets, government documents, and many other kinds of sources.

The fieldwork of historians is often characterized as a detective story. I often think of my own work in this way: political, theoretical, and critical, but ultimately historical. My own fieldwork took me from Cuba to Mexico City in search of the raw materials for describing the what, why, when, where, and how of Martí's brief stay in the capital from roughly 1875 to 1877. It began with a curious reference: while in Mexico City, Martí seemed to be very involved in the worker's struggles of the day. So much so, in fact, that the preeminent historian Gastón García Cantú, in his monumental work on nineteenth-century leftist thought, *El socialismo en México: Siglo XIX* (1969), unearthed a document that suggested that Martí had represented a group of workers during Mexico's first Worker's Congress in 1876. Though this seems to have little bearing on Martí's overall work, the passing reference stuck with me.

I quickly scoured everything Martí had ever written while he was in Mexico. It turns out that Martí's participation in the Worker's Congress was not a one-off event. Martí wrote extensively about the plight of labor in his largely ignored "Escenas mexicanas." He chronicled student protests, hatmakers' strikes, and insurrectionary violence at a time when only a handful of newspapers (out of many) were paying attention to labor issues. He even served as an editor to *El Socialista*, Mexico's most important nineteenth-century socialist newspaper and the home of the first Spanish translation of Marx and Engels's *Communist Manifesto* (1848). Why was Martí writing about labor? What interested him about the forms of protest that were being used by workers? And, if labor became his social and political concern, what were his more literary concerns at the time and what was the relationship between the two?

These questions led me to look at nineteenth-century Mexican socialism more broadly. Other characters in this story began to emerge. It was in Mexico that Martí met Manuel Mercado, who would remain one of his closest friends until his death in 1895. Through Mercado, he met the most important Mexican writers of the time: Guillermo Prieto, Ignacio Ramírez, Ignacio Manuel Altamirano, and Justo Sierra. Though it would be difficult to characterize any of these writers as anything other than classical liberals, their ideas and politics were all shaped by the emerging socialist movement of their day.

Arguably, one of the most important leaders of this socialist movement was the Greek émigré Plotino Rhodakanaty. Rhodakanaty, a philosopher and pedagogue by training, arrived in Mexico during the 1860s. He largely helped the Mexico City left get organized and was one of the chief intellectual architects of the Worker's Congress that Martí attended. The work of intellectual historian Carlos Illades was one of my bridges to Mexico City's archives and prerevolutionary Mexican history. During the 1990s and early 2000s, he unearthed Rhodakanaty from historical obscurity, describing him as an important part of "the other ideas" that were neither liberal nor conservative but socialist (Illades 2008).

Curiously, however, as much as Martí had been involved in the Mexican socialist movement, he never once referenced Rhodakanaty. (Not even a misspelling!) Martí was silent, but actively so. These silences, however, often work both ways. Rhodakanaty also did not mention Martí once in his oeuvre. How could this happen? What did it mean? How was I to interpret this mutual disregard? Knowing what I had read about Martí and Rhodakanaty, it was inconceivable that

they had not known each other or read each other's work, let alone collaborated in organizing Mexico City's workers.

These are the kinds of fissures in the story that spur the investigative fieldwork of literary critics who are not satisfied by mere close reading or textual analysis. These forms of interpretation still provide the bedrock for most literature departments in the United States, but historically attentive work has become the norm now for any scholar working on Latin American literature before the twentieth century. Even in twentieth-century scholarship, the tide is flowing toward archival work. In an academic world in which digital humanities is all the rage, there exists a place where ink-tinted gloves, quality cameras, and pens and notebooks are the instruments of literary criticism.

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