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## **LAST100: VIDEO 4: “Independence Narratives, Past and Present”**

In our last few videos, we have shown how Latin America--or the elusive *idea* of Latin America--destabilizes our conceptions of geography, history, and identity, that is, space, time, and self. It is hard to say where Latin America is, or when it comes into being (if indeed it has done so yet). Moreover, the place--or, again, the idea--even makes us question who we are. We have described all this as a crisis of representation, whose traces can be found right at the mythic point of Latin American origin, 1492. Moreover, as 1492 is also the founding moment of the modern age, modernity in turn is characterized and affected by this same crisis.

We have looked at this crisis mostly in terms of *aesthetic* representation: the attempt to portray things in words or images (or some other medium). We showed, for instance, how Columbus battles with words and how the *casta* paintings struggle in paint to provide a comprehensive visual record of colonial society and its racialized hierarchies. But there is also *political* representation: the process by which decisions are made or articulated by some people on behalf of others. It is in this sense that we elect “representatives” to parliament, for instance.

These two meanings of the term--the aesthetic and the political, portrait and proxy--are related, in that they both describe one thing standing for another. But they are also distinct, if never fully separable. And it is political representation that comes to the fore at the point at which Latin America (though remember that the name has yet to be invented) comes to throw off its colonial masters.

At issue, in other words, is who gets to make (and enforce) the political, legal, and economic decisions that affect the inhabitants of the Americas, and what rights those

inhabitants have to influence (or resist) such decisions. In the late eighteenth-century, governance, representation, and rights were concerns both sides of the Atlantic.

In the 1750s, aggrieved colonists in North America spread the slogan "No taxation without representation" to protest the fact that economic decisions impacting the British colonies were made without any political input from the colonists themselves. In July 1775, the "Second Continental Congress," meeting in Philadelphia, issued a "Declaration of the Causes and Necessity of Taking Up Arms" to justify the rebellion that had broken out against the Crown earlier that year. Noting that Parliament in Westminster asserted the "right [to] make laws to bind us in all cases whatsoever," the rebels objected that "Not a single man of those who assume [so enormous, so unlimited a power] is chosen by us, or is subject to our control or influence." Almost exactly a year later, the same Congress declared independence for the United States of America.

The American Revolution was an influence, alongside the writings of philosophers such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, on the "Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen," issued by the French National Constituent Assembly in the heat of the Revolution of 1789. This document opens by proclaiming that "Men are born and remain free and equal in rights." The diffuse trans-Atlantic interchange of new ideas and rebellious sentiments then continued as slaves in the French Caribbean colony of Saint Domingue seized on this notion that freedom and equality were sanctioned by a now official discourse of universal rights. In 1791 they rose up against the plantation owners, initiating a revolutionary process that gave birth to the independent Republic of Haiti.

All this is the context to Simón Bolívar's "Letter from Jamaica" of 1815. Like the North American colonists before him, Bolívar complains that the hemisphere's inhabitants have been excluded from the decision-making processes that affect them: "politically they were nonexistent" (22); the Spanish Empire, he asserts, "has kept us in a sort of permanent infancy with regard to public affairs" (23). And like the French, his critique is premised on a discourse of inherent, natural right: "Is it not an outrage and a violation of human rights," he asks, "to expect a land so splendidly endowed, so vast, rich, and populous, to remain merely passive" (23). Then there is a nod to Haiti in

Bolívar's invocations of slavery: "A people is [. . .] enslaved," he tells us, "when the government [. . .] infringes on and usurps the rights of the citizen or subject" (22).

Bolívar's letter translates and interprets for a new context a radical discourse that has ricocheted between the Old World and the New, South and North. He lays the foundation for a tradition that will be revised and reinterpreted by would-be revolutionaries and reformers right up to the present, as Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez's 2004 speech to the G-15 summit shows. In the Jamaica letter, "Bolívar reveals himself," Chávez claims, "as an anti-imperialist leader" (31) whose words resonate both with twentieth-century anti-colonial movements in South Asia and Africa, and also with contemporary struggles against neoliberalism.

But there were other contexts to (and other legacies of) the pronouncements of the so-called "liberators" of the Latin American wars of independence. We might for instance be alert to Bolívar's hyperbolic insistence that the inhabitants of the Americas were "in a position *lower than slavery*" (22; emphasis added). Many of the people whom he was addressing were, after all, themselves *slaveholders*, masters rather than slaves. The creole elite in Spanish America saw the Haitian Revolution as threat as much as inspiration: like the white planters of Saint Domingue, they too might find themselves the losers rather than beneficiaries of any truly radical transformation that took the discourse of rights (let alone a long history of cruelty) too seriously.

Equally, parts of the Americas had been shaken by resurgent indigenous opposition to colonial rule, most spectacularly with the 1780 uprising led by Túpac Amaru II in (what is now) Peru. Such rebellions showed that resistance to the colonial status quo drew not only on lofty European ideas but also on deep-seated resentment of injustices in which local elites were fully complicit. No wonder that Bolívar should also say, in his disillusioned final years, that governing America was like trying to plough the sea. The creole discourse of independence drew on a multitude of sources of protest that it then tried uneasily to rearrange in its own image, according to a logic and order dictated by a privileged minority who saw themselves as the continent's rightful leaders.

To put this another way: if the notion of political representation comes to the fore at the point at which Latin America comes to throw off its colonial masters, this is because the spokesmen of the independence movement were those who most keenly felt its lack. For them, being marginalized from the official hierarchies of political power threatened their economic freedoms (regarding taxation and commerce etc.) but also left them helpless in the face of a crisis of governance in which their own position (much *higher than* slavery) was at risk. For others, rather more basic freedoms were still at stake.

Bolívar's conclusions are ambivalent. He predicts that "we march majestically toward that great prosperity for which South America is destined" (24). Yet he foresees struggles over the political form that the new polities will take. But the Bolivarian dream of a "Patria Grande" or "Great Fatherland," of continental unity under the guidance of inspired visionaries, tends to gloss over these internal fissures and elide the question of who has most and least to gain. Bolívar argues for "paternal governments" (24), for which vast swathes of the population will continue in "permanent infancy."

José Martí's "Our America" is a much more difficult text than either Bolívar or Chávez's, and in many ways (you may be relieved to hear) that's more about him than it is about you. Yet its difficulty perhaps makes it more interesting than the other two.

It is a sign of how hard it is to pin Martí down (but also how important it might be to try) that over a century after his death people are still arguing over his legacy, not least in the homeland from which he was so frequently exiled. He is a hero to the Cuban state, portrayed as a forerunner of Castro's Revolution. But he is also claimed by that state's bitterest opponents: he lends his name to "Radio Martí," the Miami-based radio station dedicated to broadcasting anti-Castro sentiments to the island.

Martí was many things: journalist, poet, translator, diplomat, essayist, political activist, rebel. In "Our America" we see how these different roles contaminate each other. This essay first published in a New York Spanish-language magazine has come to be seen as one of the most important statements of Latin American identity, a rallying call for political movements of all stripes. But its difficulty arises in part because it is also an intensely, sometimes maddeningly, *literary* text.

Take the essay's use of metaphor and allegory. With a metaphor, one thing substitutes for another in order to reveal something new about the (now absent) original. For instance, Shakespeare's famous line "All the world's a stage" replaces world with stage in order to highlight the ubiquity of performance. Allegory then is metaphor extended, as in Shakespeare's following lines, which develop and complicate this idea: "And all the men and women merely players; they have their entrances and exits." In "Our America," we find metaphor and allegory throughout.

If you have the text with you, pause this video now and look at a paragraph or two. Start by identifying (even counting) the metaphors you see. Then think about how they extend into allegories. And ask yourself if they clarify the essay's argument or cloud it. While you do that, I fancy a glass of juice. But I'll be right back.

[Pause]

So what did you find? I hope you noticed that Martí's prose is crawling with metaphors: in the opening paragraph, for instance, the Americas are a "sleepy hometown" and its inhabitants "prideful villager[s]" surrounded by "giants in seven-league boots" (24). With this mention of boots, plus a reference to the villagers' "sleeping cap" (25), begins a series of references to clothing. At the same time, this same paragraph also gives us martial or warlike substitutions, as weapons become pillows and ideas, trenches. And so it goes on: ideas are also clouds; Americans are jealous brothers; nations are fluttering leaves or trees; the trees "form ranks" like soldiers; the soldiers "move in lines" like "veins of silver" (25). And all this only twenty lines in!

Now, it's hard to avoid metaphor at the best of times. Even to say, for instance, that "Our America" is "crawling with metaphors" is already, implicitly, metaphorical, raising images of insects or the like; for metaphors don't literally "crawl." Indeed, in some sense all language is metaphorical in that (as we have seen in earlier videos) it involves the use of signs, words or things that point to something but can't quite take their place. Yet in Martí's case the metaphors are superabundant. Each paragraph is a thicket full of them that impedes our journey through the text.

In part, this is a matter of style. Late nineteenth-century authors and Latin American essayists are classes of writers who tend towards the florid, the digressive, and the ornate. Yet Martí seems to revel in these stylistic quirks, even as he champions the "natural man" who, "strong and indignant, comes and overthrows the authority that is accumulated from books" (27). In short, style and content often here seem to be at odds. No wonder this text has led to such contradictory interpretations!

Are we back at our crisis of representation? Yes, but Martí makes a virtue of it. For despite his appeals to authenticity ("nature" and the "natural man") and his critique of imported adornment ("English trousers, a Parisian waistcoat, a North American overcoat" [28]), his emphasis is less on unveiling some solid reality beneath the artifice than on creativity: "salvation lies in creating. Create is this generation's password" (29). Indeed, continuing the clothing metaphor, it is not that Americans should not dress up, but that they should be more thoughtful about the motley garb with which they drape themselves, open to disjunction rather wishing difference away through fictions of natural (or national) unity. They should combine "the Indian headband and the judicial robe, to undam the Indian, make a place for the able black" (28).

Even freedom is a matter not of innate rights but of judicious dress-making as Martí argues for "tailor[ing] liberty to the bodies of those who rose up and triumphed in its name" (28). And governing is an "art" (26), not an exercise in statistics. The crisis of aesthetic representation will resolve the crisis of politics. Martí wants more and better and more creative narratives of independence. For it is precisely in the fact that words are not fixed to things that the region's liberty is to be found and that Latin America might escape the rising threat that "Our America" identifies as coming from the North.

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