

Laura Lomas. *Translating Empire: José Martí, Migrant Latino Subjects, and American Modernities*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2008. 379 pp.

In the last decade a dramatic increase in the number of studies on the writings and life of José Martí has been published in the fields of American, Cultural, and Latina/o Studies. No longer seen as solely a Latin American writer, scholar, journalist and revolutionary, Martí has come to symbolize the hemispheric potential of what Laura Lomas calls a “Latino Migrant.” Martí was a prolific writer, activist, and revolutionary. His politics, philosophies, and views on life changed as he traveled and witnessed the impact of United States empire-building on Latin America, the Caribbean, as well as the disenfranchised and disempowered populations in the United States.

Martí has been referred to as an ambassador of culture, a theorist of *latinidad*, a revolutionary architect, a source for myth-making, and a transnational figure who moved past limits of the nation-state. And now, in the hands of Laura Lomas, a modernist who not only merits entry into the canon, but whose life and his writings, informed by geographic dislocation, alters our understanding of modernity, space, translation, and migration:

My argument challenges the persistent exclusion of nineteenth century Latino migrant writers from the history of modernism, and aligns itself with the other critical efforts to debunk the view that modernism is politically regressive as compared, for example, to realism. (23)

Lomas’ willingness to reconfigure theoretical and even philosophical understandings of Martí is both impressive and welcome. Knowing full well that Martí does not fit easily into set framework, she instead uses Martí’s writings to question and reset those paradigms. In particular, she defines the multiple modernities that shaped Martí, including “imperial modernity,” a term employed to define the process and “pursuit of political and economic expansion” and “alternative modernities, which Lomas argues was envisioned by Martí as an oppositional strategy to “reject that modernity is of strictly European origin” (5-7).

Furthermore, she employs the nomadic and unsettling term migrant “to refer to a body of writing that is finally beginning to assume its proper place in contemporary discussions of the postcoloniality and planetarity in American cultures” (35). In theorizing movement and choosing to not use the term “immigrant” Lomas privileges a central element in the process and practices of *latinidad*; a geographic connection and link that better defines the experiences of Latin American migrants

in the United States. It is only by contextualizing Martí within a history marked by expansionism and shifting territorialities that we can truly absorb his writings on the Americas, the United States, and the future of the hemisphere.

While Lomas does a brilliant job of problematizing and reassessing terms that we take for granted, she, interestingly enough, does not question the historical uses of Latino. I was left wondering how “Latino” as a term conflicted or influenced nation-based identities, which were so critical to the identity and community formation of the Cuban migrant and exile community. It would have been helpful to have Lomas better explain the relationship between the imagining of nation and nationalist identities as a revolutionary construct with the uses of Latino. Nonetheless, *Translating Empire* is a well-written, exhaustively researched, exciting and innovative look at Martí’s writings. It makes a significant contribution to the field by challenging us to think differently about Martí and how we construct and maintain disciplines and fields of studies. As Lomas writes, “For U.S. Americanists to acknowledge a debt to Martí and to migrant Latino culture may be a first step, but the debt must then provoke an action” (281). I couldn’t agree more.

Nancy Raquel Mirabal
San Francisco State University