

Knowledge Production and Planetaryity in the Latin American Essay: An Ecocritical Reading of *Nuestra América* by José Martí¹

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Abstract

The quest for a genuinely Latin American identity was central to the continent's independence movements and led to one of the most striking entanglements of identitarian discourses and nature narratives in the history of the Americas, namely the seminal essay *Nuestra América* by José Martí. This article argues that *Nuestra América* should be understood as a vital example of decolonial, ecocritical knowledge production from the South, and examines how the essay conceptualises nature as a narrative that contests the anthropocentric, colonial exploitation of the environment and fosters a planetary vision of the human.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, planetaryity, knowledge production, Latin American essay, José Martí.

Resumen

La búsqueda de una identidad genuinamente latinoamericana fue fundamental para los movimientos independentistas del continente y dio lugar a uno de los entrelazamientos más destacados entre discursos identitarios y narrativas sobre la naturaleza: el ensayo seminal *Nuestra América* de José Martí. El presente artículo sostiene que *Nuestra América* debe entenderse como un ejemplo central de producción de conocimiento ecocrítico decolonial desde el Sur, y examina cómo el ensayo conceptualiza la naturaleza como una narrativa que denuncia la explotación colonial antropocéntrica del medio ambiente y fomenta una visión planetaria de lo humano.

Palabras clave: Ecocrítica, planetariedad, producción de conocimiento, ensayo latinoamericano, José Martí.

Knowledges of the South in the Context of the Anthropocene

Knowledge production and narratives about nature are among the central factors that configure and intervene in the pronounced social inequalities notoriously shaping the global environmental crisis and fuelling the conflicts it generates. And it is an essential aspect of this crisis of the Anthropocene that the far-reaching consequences of the lifestyles and consumption patterns of the Global North have their strongest impact in the Global South. Moreover, the concepts of nature underpinning these systems are traditionally thought of in terms from the Global

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North that are strongly tied to categories of colonial character. And these concepts are not only based on the dichotomies of culture-nature and centre-periphery but also on reified notions that still today consider the (former) colonies as territories waiting to be taken possession of in order to be ‘governed’ and ‘developed’.

Discourses from the Global South critically question and confront these kinds of colonial regimes of knowledge on nature, and given that the current research landscape is dominated by contributions formulated from a Northern perspective (DeLoughrey et al. 2), it seems both worthwhile and necessary to turn toward perspectives and cultural knowledge productions from the South. With this in mind, the article examines Southern discourses of nature and explores how the Latin American essay, and concretely José Martí’s *Nuestra América*, conceptualises the New World’s nature as a narrative that grants agency to the South, empowers resistance to the exploitation of nature, and overcomes the colonial nature-culture divide by shaping a planetary understanding of the relationship between humans and nature.

But to talk of the South is, inevitably, to talk of colonisation, and in consequence to remind its tight relationship with the global environmental crisis. Yet it was the colonisation processes that marked the beginning of global trade and made possible European industrialisation (Lewis and Maslin 17), which is commonly agreed to be the beginning of the great environmental decline. Furthermore, as postcolonial theorists such as B. Sousa de Santos (Sousa, *Epistemologies* 149), E. Said (*Orientalism*), H. Bhabha (*The Location*) and G. Spivak (*The Subaltern*) stress, colonisation processes are not restricted to land, goods, and people but include non-material dimensions, such as ideas, knowledge, and knowledge production. In the colonial context, these aspects are strongly linked to questions of territory, environment, and the New World’s nature, which in turn leads to a management and validation of some knowledges alongside the exclusion and disapproval of others. B. Sousa de Santos warns us that this can result in what he calls epistemicide, this is to say “the murder of knowledge” (Sousa, *Epistemologies* 149):

Unequal exchanges among cultures have always implied the death of the knowledge of the subordinated culture, hence the death of the social groups that possessed it. In the most extreme cases, such as that of European expansion, epistemicide was one of the conditions of genocide. (149)

As a form of opposition and resistance to such historical conditions Sousa de Santos proposes the epistemologies of the South. Yet according to the author these epistemologies are defined as “ways of knowing born in the struggle against capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy” (Sousa, *Epistemologies* 371) and aim

to identify and valorise that which often does not even appear as knowledge in the light of the dominant epistemologies, that which emerges instead as part of the struggles of resistance against oppression and against the knowledge that legitimates such oppression. (Sousa, *Cognitive Empire* 2)

These processes result in especially important forms of knowledge about the relationship between humans and nature, as B. de Sousa Santos notes, putting emphasis on experiential epistemologies:

Many such ways of knowing are not thought knowledges but rather lived knowledges. The epistemologies of the South occupy the concept of epistemology in order to resignify it as an instrument for interrupting the dominant politics of knowledge. They are experiential epistemologies. (Sousa, *Cognitive Empire* 2)

This framing resonates with Enrique Leff's idea, who approaches Latin American environmental rationality as a Southern knowledge and "on the basis of ecological potentialities and cultural knowledges that inhabit the regions of the South" (Leff 3). And it is my contention that the essay *Nuestra América* by José Martí is a key example of such a Southern knowledge that contests the colonial regimes' paradigm of nature as a resource to be exploited, and that it is linked to experiential ways of knowing, as well as to a planetary mode of thinking (Chakrabarty, *The Planet*). As I argue, Martí discursively re-appropriates the New World's nature by anchoring Latin American identity in nature, advocating lived knowledges and shaping a planetary understanding of the relationship between humans and nature that fosters a discourse of reinhabitation. Thus, the essay *Nuestra América* marks a milestone in Latin American environmental thought that is inevitably located at the crossroads of postcolonial studies and ecocriticism.

Knowledge Production and the Entanglement of Colonialism and 'Nature'

With regard to the entanglement of colonialism, nature, and knowledge production, it has to be stressed that B. de Sousa Santos postulates nature as the third principal form of imperial Western discovery next to the Orient and "the savage" (Sousa, *Epistemología* 213). According to the author, the discovery of the New World's nature not only entails a power relation between the discoverer and the discovered but includes an empirical and conceptual dimension, being the second one governed by the first one, as "the idea of what is discovered commands the act of the discovery" (Sousa, *Epistemología* 214).

This mechanism of the discovery that is shaped by the idea of the discovery is masterfully exemplified through narratives about the New World's nature, which played an important role in the colonisation process by providing a unique opportunity to impose a European perspective. Yet, representations of the peripheries did not only emerge from the centres themselves (Pratt 4) but aimed "to reinvent America as backwards and neglected [...], as manifestly in need of the rationalised exploitation the Europeans bring" (Pratt 163). For centuries, representations of Latin America's nature portrayed the colonisation process as a successful endeavour (Donavan 42), allowing the region and its inhabitants to be recreated according to wishful imaginings, as a territory in need of civilisation by Europeans, as a land full of exotic dangers and adventures, or as a picturesque landscape full of undiscovered species (Waliszewski n.p.). In consequence, we are dealing with a form of domination over foreign territories (Said 3) in which the conceptual dimension commands the empirical dimension, and thus configures a way to think of the New World's nature as pristine one, whose purpose is to be exploited

until exhaustion (Sousa, *Milenio* 149). Accordingly, this colonial regime of knowledge does not allow for reciprocity but segregates the human from the non-human and shores up the nature-culture divide, which preaches the “ecological superiority of humans and the cultural superiority of men” (Mallory 309). Yet the colonial imaginary of the New World’s nature is based on the premise of “man as the alleged nature of all things” (Braidotti 2) and promotes a model of rationality that, since the Enlightenment, has prevailed in European and Western culture, providing “the basic unit of reference for what counts as human” (Braidotti 22). Nature, however, is postulated “as the excluded and devalued contrast of reason” (Plumwood 19), which therefore corresponds to “the emotions, the body, the passions, animality, the primitive or uncivilised, the non-human world, matter, physicality and sense experience, as well as the sphere of irrationality, of faith and of madness” (Plumwood 19). Conceived in opposition to the human, as well as to culture and rationality, “‘nature’ has been a very broad and shifting category and has encompassed many different sorts of colonization” (Plumwood 1), which among others has led to its nexus with the Anthropocene, the Androcene, colonialism and racism. Val Plumwood pinpoints it when she says:

The category of nature is a field of multiple exclusion and control, not only of non-humans, but of various groups of humans and aspects of human life which are cast as nature. Thus racism, colonialism and sexism have drawn their conceptual strength from casting sexual, racial and ethnic differences as closer to the animal and the body construed as a sphere of inferiority, as a lesser form of humanity lacking the full measure of rationality or culture [...]. (4)

This linkage is illustrated by Santos de Sousa’s thoughts on the discursive construction of ‘the savage’ as that which dwells between the human, the animal, the demon and the monster (Sousa, *Epistemología* 219). Along the same line of thought, Donna Haraway states that those excluded from the master category of reason encompass “the colonized and the enslaved, the marginalized and the non-citizen, the woman and the animal—which all of them are made into Other than rational man” (18). And Rosi Braidotti observes that:

Such rational self-assurance has historically played a major role in the construction of a civilizational model that equated Europe with the universalizing powers of reason and progress. This hegemonic cultural model was instrumental to the colonial ideology of European expansion [...]. Europe as universal consciousness points the power of reason as its distinctive characteristic and humanistic universalism as its particularity. (23)

Promoting the discrimination of the colonised, the natural, and the feminine as non-rational (and in consequence as non-human), this model links postcolonialism, ecocriticism, and feminism, showing how the colonial regime of knowledge represents a position that “tended to view the natural order as servitude, violence, and brutality: nature as the naturalization of inequalities” (Braidotti 23).

Despite the persistence of colonial epistemologies, which still today promote this naturalisation of inequalities, the New World’s nature remains a primary signifier for a genuinely Latin American identity and its meaning has been subjected to

ongoing changes. Depending on the historical moment, narratives about Latin American nature have served different purposes and so it comes that some reproduce colonial power relations, while others have to be considered counter-narratives and contestations to the model of nature propagated by the metropolitan regime. From Columbus' diaries to La Condamine's catalogue, the New World's nature was related to exoticism and celebrated as the discovery of a lost paradise that, in the name of the civilisational mission, had to be explored, measured, tamed, developed and exploited. The paradisiacal and adventurous depictions of European narratives masked the colonial violence and environmental exploitation, and in the centuries that followed, they aimed to shore up colonial power relations. When nation-building processes took over in the nineteenth century, nature became intrinsically related to the nation-state (and later to a Pan-Americanism), turning into one of the main reference points for Latin American identity, which served as a central pillar for the fragile political independence of the Spanish-American nations that needed to consolidated as an autochthonous, genuine culture (Martí, *Claves del pensamiento* XI). This historical moment is of particular importance because it created the foundations for a process of self-determination, in the course of which Latin American identity could be reconceptualised by means of non-European ideas and imaginaries in relation to its natural environment. Guided by the goal of distinguishing themselves from Europe and North America, these identity debates of the nineteenth century coincided with the birth of the Latin American essay (Mansilla 60), which resulted an especially fitting literary genre for reflecting critically on the political and social tasks of the new nations (de Onís 444), assigning central importance to the discourse of nature. *Nuestra América*, by José Martí, was written in the context of the outlined historical circumstances that constitute the essay's backdrop. I consider here how the essay discursively re-appropriates the New World's nature and empowers the resistance against the colonial regimes of knowledge and its exploitation of nature by shaping a planetary understanding of the environment that responds to the colonial territorial paradigm of nature as a resource to be conquered and tamed.

Nuestra América

Written in 1891, *Nuestra América* has become a milestone of Latin American literature and an obligatory reference in postcolonial studies. As a call to arms against North American economic and cultural policies in Latin America this seminal essay lays the foundations for what the following century would call Latin American ecocritical thought. However, as E. Beckman points out, "today, Martí's Latin Americanism is rather consistently associated with anti-economist, anti-imperialist, and anti-capitalist positions [...]" (19), and his writing has primarily been studied in the context of the resistance to the modernization of Latin America, being only rarely read through the lens of ecocriticism. An example for this phenomenon is J. Ramos' notorious *Nuestra América. Arte del buen gobierno* (2003), where he frames Martí's knowledge related to nature as a return to the most basic and elementary, and as a

stabilising function that opposes to the state discourses of modernisation and progress (Ramos 294). This is due to the fact that *Nuestra América* was published in the midst of the *profirato* period, in the official newspaper of that developmentalist state, which opened to foreign capital like no other at that time in history (see Ramos 295). Nevertheless, as Nugent argues, Martí stands out as an ecocritical Latinx thinker and “in the era of the environmental humanities, Martí’s symbols are taking on new meaning as we enter the 2020s, all too-human crises (of colonialism or of capitalism) are more clearly intertwined with their more-than-human counterparts (deforestation, desertification, and so on)” (Nugent 8). In fact, *Nuestra América* is conditioned by José Martí’s exile during the 1880s in the United States, where he “fostered a relationship with several of the seminal thinkers now associated with the ecological movement” (De Vries 167). Thus, like Martí’s other writings (for example the prologue to *Poema de Niágara*, by Juan Antonio Pérez Bonalde [1882]), it strongly echoes North American writers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Walt Whitman. It is therefore unsurprising that nature is not only centre stage in the essay, but that Martí draws on the language of nature (trees, stones, mountains, octopus, jaguar, condor, seeds, etc.) in order to grapple with the then highly topical question of Latin American cultural identity and to foster opposition to foreign intervention. And it results coherent once understood that for Martí, the exploitation of nature is intrinsically related to economic and cultural colonisation processes. Yet, as he explicitly argues, both the just way to govern Latin American territories and resistance against colonisation are rooted in the knowledge of the inhabited land and nature, and in the way that humans relate to their specific environment:

And the able governor in America is not the one who knows how to govern the Germans or the French; he must know the elements that make up his own country, and how to bring them together, using methods and institutions originating within the country, to reach that desirable state where each man can attain self-realization and all may enjoy the abundance that Nature has bestowed in everyone in the nation to enrich with their toil and defend with their lives. Government must originate in the country. The spirit of government must be that of the country. Its structure must conform to rules appropriate to the country. Good government is nothing more than the balance of the country’s natural elements. (Martí, *Our America* n.p.)²

From this perspective, the abundant references to animals and plants³ in Martí’s writings is entirely consistent, even though at first glance this vocabulary may seem strangely juxtaposed to the essay’s central topic—the resistance to North American politics in Latin America. This discursive entanglement of nature and colonisation is not only a result of Martí’s understanding of good governance but a

² El buen gobernante en América no es el que sabe cómo se gobierna el alemán o el francés, sino el que sabe con qué elementos está hecho su país, y cómo puede ir guiándolos en junto, para llegar, por métodos e instituciones nacidas del país mismo, a aquel estado apetecible donde cada hombre se conoce y ejerce, y disfrutan todos de la abundancia que la Naturaleza puso para todos en el pueblo que fecundan con su trabajo y defienden con sus vidas. El gobierno ha de nacer del país. El espíritu del gobierno ha de ser el del país. La forma de gobierno ha de avenirse a la constitución propia del país. El gobierno no es más que el equilibrio de los elementos naturales del país. (Martí, *Obras* 6 17)

³ According to Josefina Toledo (2007), there are more than 300 references to different plants in Martí’s work.

historically motivated one, as we have seen through the thoughts of de Sousa, Haraway, Plumwood, and Braidotti at the beginning of this article. Nature is one of the central sites of colonisation and, in consequence, “plants are imbued with a political edge in Spanish American culture and have been fundamental to the formulation of countercultural forms and expression” (Wylie 7). The trees and the condor in Martí’s *Nuestra América*, which respectively open and close the essay, thus play a pivotal role as central points of reference to Latin American nature and colonial resistance:

We can no longer be a people of leaves, living in the air, our foliage heavy with blooms and crackling or humming at the whim of the sun’s caress, or buffeted and tossed by the storms. The trees must form ranks to keep the giant with seven-league boots from passing! [. ...]

With a single voice the hymn is already being sung; the present generation is carrying industrious America along the road enriched by their sublime fathers; from Rio Grande to the strains of Magellan, the Great Semi, astride its condor, spread the seed of the new America over the romantic nations of the continent and the sorrowful islands of the sea! (Martí, *Our America* n.p.)⁴

As the quote shows, natural elements are put in service of a political language and mindset of resistance. While the condor symbolises freedom and is related to the air, connoting independence, the trees form a metaphorical defensive wall rooted in the earth. Interestingly, we are dealing with elements that play an important role in Indigenous cultures, given that the Great Cemi is a revered spirit of the Taino people, and, as K. Wylie explains, “the redefinition of the relationship between humans and plants in Latin American literature is predicated largely on indigenous American modes of perception, in which the identities of humans and nonhumans are fluid and plants are considered sentient beings that we should respect and nurture” (2020). In this sense, *Nuestra América* reflects how, in the Latin American context, nature is a site of resistance that finds its roots in pre-Columbian cultures. This idea strongly marks Martí’s writings (as will also see in relation with his idea of the ‘natural man’), and references to nature are ubiquitous in his essay. This omnipresence not only characterises the text as an environmental one, according to L. Buell’s definition (51), but turns into a key aspect for defining Latin American cultural identity:

Martí’s reference to the Rio Bravo in the North and the Strait of Magellan in the South constitute landmarks that delineate Latin America’s natural and cultural sphere. These borders are natural formations that run horizontally from east to west, whereas the Andes with their silver veins (“the silver in the depth of the Andes”) [...] run vertically from North to South. Thus, Martí marks the geographic contours of a bioregion or natural space with its distinct culture and inhabitants formed by Latin American nature. (Schwarzman 69)

⁴ Ya no podemos ser el pueblo de hojas, que vive en el aire, con la copa cargada de flor, restallando o zumbando, según la acaricie el capricho de la luz, o la tundan y talen las tempestades; ¡los árboles se han de poner en fila para que no pase el gigante de las siete leguas! [. ...] ¡Porque ya suena el himno unánime; la generación actual lleva a cuestas, por el camino abonado por los padres sublimes, la América trabajadora; del Bravo a Magallanes, sentado en el lomo del cóndor, regó el Gran Semí, por las naciones románticas del continente y por las islas dolorosas del mar, la semilla de la América nueva! (Martí, *Obras* 6 15 and 23)

For Martí, culture goes hand in hand with the natural surroundings and, more interestingly, with bioregions. This is as much of importance as the term ‘bioregion’ not only refers to a geographical terrain but also to “a terrain of consciousness—to a place and the ideas that have developed about how to live in that place” (Berg and Dasmann 399). Schwarzman pinpoints it when he argues:

Martí's ideas expressed in *Nuestra América* bear semblance to the discourse of bioregionalism because they foreground natural factors as a way to envision place. Like the bioregional discourse, Martí proposes that human identity may be constituted by our residence in a larger community of natural elements, our local bioregion, rather than by national or ethnic bases of identity. For Martí, Latin American national identity is based in being born and raised in the natural environment of Latin America. It is nature that defines human identity. (72)

Although the term bioregion captures Martí's idea of the entanglement of cultural identity and nature, I would go a step further and argue that in light of this concept Martí's thinking can be interpreted as a terrain of consciousness that contains a planetary conception of the human-nature relation. The association with a planetary consciousness and planetaryity (Chakrabarty, *The Planet*) seems logical, given that bioregionalism is linked to habitat, which in turn is one of the central aspects of planetaryity. Thus “bioregionalism holds that the planetary future hinges on strengthened allegiance to the ecological unit [...] an allegiance that entails commitment to bioregion as personal habitat [...]” (Buell 420). And simultaneously Dipesh Chakrabarty's conception of planetaryity⁵ touches not only on the Earth system (Chakrabarty, *The Planet* 22) and is linked to a sense of being earthbound (Arendt 264) but primarily refers to habitability: “The planetary mode of thinking asks questions of habitability, and habitability refers to some of the key conditions enabling the existence for various life-forms including *Homo sapiens*” (Chakrabarty, *The Planet* 25). As a central term of a planetary mode of thinking (Chakrabarty, *The Planet* 20), habitability contrasts with sustainability, which is a political, human-centric term that in its version of an anthropocentric idea “puts human concerns first” (Chakrabarty, *The Planet* 19). Habitability, in change, “does not reference humans. Its central concern is life, complex, multicellular life, in general, and what makes that, not humans alone, sustainable” (Chakrabarty, *The Planet* 20). Thus, D. Chakrabarty argues, “the question at the centre of the habitability problem is not what life is or how it is managed in the interest of power but rather what makes a planet friendly to the continuous existence of complex life” (*The Planet* 21). In this sense, Martí does not only depict America in terms of a bioregion but, as I argue, lets shine through a planetary mode of thinking, yet his idea of good governance as well as his comprehension of cultural identity (which, like man himself, is rooted in his natural environment) are congruent with the planetary consciousness of nature as a habitat and the idea of “being of the planet” (Chakrabarty, *On Earth*). In his writings, Martí expresses this understanding that comprehends the human as related to land and

⁵ D. Chakrabarty derives planetaryity from the term ‘planet,’ which he nonetheless distinguishes from that “planet” that “emerges as a category of humanist thought” (*The Planet* 2) and human mastery (*The Planet* 3).

environment as a central one, as also this example from 1882 in *La Opinión Nacional* shows: “Nature inspires, heals, comforts, strengthens and prepares man for virtue. And man is not complete, nor does he reveal himself, nor see the invisible, except in his intimate relationship with nature.”⁶ In this regard, M. Serra asserts that Martí does not separate men from the integral and complex system that nature means to him (13), while J. Toledo observes that “Martí considers man as an integral part of nature” (8). Also, J. Marcone highlights that we are dealing with a model of progress that is in harmony with nature (299), and it can be added that Martí literally locates human identity in nature when he writes of: “[...] the justice of Nature where man’s universal identity springs forth from triumphant love and the turbulent hunger for life” (Martí, *Our America* n.p.).⁷ Martí’s conception of nature traverses everything, as this excerpt from his loose manuscripts on philosophy reveals:

What is nature? The wild pine, the old oak, the rough sea, the rivers that flow to the sea as to Eternity we men go: nature is the ray of light that penetrates the clouds and becomes a rainbow; the human spirit that approaches and rises with the clouds of the soul and becomes blessed. Nature is all that exists, in every form, spirits and bodies; streams enslaved in their channels, roots enslaved in the earth; feet, enslaved like roots; souls less enslaved than feet. The mysterious intimate world, the external sea, all that is, deformed or luminous or dark, near or distant, vast or stunted, liquefied or earthy, everything regular, everything measured except the sky and the soul of men, is nature. (Martí, *Our America* n.p.)⁸

We see that in Martí’s thought nature not only occupies a central place but embraces human, as well as non-human, spirits and bodies. Moreover, the quote shows how Martí tackles the nature-culture divide through his understanding of humans as being part of nature, as being related to the environment, as being of the planet—as Chakrabarty would put it. In *Nuestra América*, this is also reflected in the ‘natural man,’ whose role is that of the good governor who overcomes the European legacy and the growing North American influence in order to rule in accordance to place and nature (González 107).

Rather a concept than a person, the ‘natural man’ is not an individual subject but postulated as a collective, an ‘us’ that refers to the Native Latin American population (Pampín 113). This does not exclude mestizos, yet Martí writes that “Natural men have conquered learned and artificial men. The native half-breed has

⁶ “La naturaleza inspira, cura, consuela, fortalece y prepara para la virtud al hombre. Y el hombre no se halla completo, ni se revela a sí mismo, ni ve lo invisible, sino en su íntima relación con la naturaleza.” (Martí, *Obras* 13 25-26)

⁷ “[...] la justicia de la Naturaleza, donde resalta en el amor victorioso y el apetito turbulento, la identidad universal del hombre.” (Martí, *Obras* 6 22)

⁸ “Qué es la naturaleza? El pino agreste, el viejo roble, el bravo mar, los ríos que van al mar como a la Eternidad vamos los hombres: la naturaleza es el rayo de luz que penetra las nubes y se hace arco iris; el espíritu humano que se acerca y se eleva con las nubes del alma y se hace bienaventurado. Naturaleza es todo lo que existe, en toda forma, espíritus y cuerpos; corrientes esclavas en su cauce, raíces esclavas en la tierra; pies, esclavos como las raíces; almas menos esclavas que los pies. El misterioso mundo íntimo, el mar externo, cuanto es, deforme o luminoso u obscuro, cercano o lejano, vasto o raquítrico, licuoso o terroso, regular todo, medido todo menos el cielo y el alma de los hombres, es naturaleza.” (Martí, *Obras* 19, 364)

conquered the exotic Creole” (Martí, *Our America* n.p.).⁹ Paradoxically, the natural man is “a ‘we,’ of which Martí can be understood as an example in order to reflect on the future and desirable society for the Cuban people” (Pampín 113).¹⁰ This is contradictory because, being a criollo himself, Martí holds Darwinist and racist viewpoints about the native population, and in *Nuestra América* he differentiates between criollos the uncivilised indigenous people. But despite perceiving them as an obstacle to economic progress, he advocated for their assimilation believing in the advancement of human civilisation, and assessed their racial condition in cultural rather than in strictly biological terms (Camacho 29).

At the same time, Martí not only recognised the urge to save “our America by its Indians” (Martí, *Our America* n.p.), that is, to include Indigenous cultures in the nation-building process, but defended that “it would have been the mark of genius to couple the headband and the professors’ gown with the founding fathers’ generosity and courage, to rescue the Indian,” and that “[...] governors, in the Indian republics, learn Indian” (n.p.).¹¹ Above all, however, Martí emphasises their importance and even superiority in regard to traditional methods for working the land (vid. Schwarzman 73). Yet, in contrast to the natural man, the criollos of Spanish descent show an “[...] inability to recognise the true elements¹² of their countries, to derive from them the right kind of government, and to govern accordingly” (Martí, *Our America* n.p.).¹³ In this perspective, Martí stresses once again that Latin America’s natural environment uniquely shapes the identity of its inhabitants, and that the natural man stands in a relation of interdependence and complementarity with the other elements of creation (González 103). To be precise, he considered that “man is not a superb central being, an individual of a unique species, around whom revolve the beings of sky and earth, animals and stars; but the known head of a great zoological order.”¹⁴ And with this quote Martí decisively prints a planetary consciousness of a multi-species conviviality.

In addition to his ideas of the ‘natural man,’ with his concept of ‘natural education,’ he openly opposed the paradigm of a clash between civilisation and barbarism. With regard to this then highly topical debate Martí holds the view that

⁹ “Los hombres naturales han vencido a los letrados artificiales. El mestizo autóctono ha vencido al criollo exótico.” (Martí, *Obras* 6, 17)

¹⁰ “El hombre natural no es un sujeto individual sino que se postula como colectivo, un ‘nosotros’, del que Martí puede plantearse como ejemplo para poder reflexionar sobre la sociedad futura y deseable para el pueblo cubano.” (Pampín 113, my translation)

¹¹ “El genio hubiera estado en hermanar, con la caridad del corazón y con el atrevimiento de los fundadores, la vincha y la toga; en desestancar al indio [. ...] Los gobernadores, en las repúblicas de indios, aprenden indio.” (Martí, *Obras* 6, 20 & 21; my translation)

¹² The elements refer to the natural conditions of the country, such as the consistency of the soil, the weather patterns, the relationship between flora and fauna, the efficient use of water, the natural resources, the knowledge of the best plants with the highest yield, etc. (see Schwarzman 72).

¹³ “[...] la incapacidad para conocer los elementos verdaderos del país, derivar de ellos la forma de gobierno y gobernar con ellos.” (Martí, *Obras* 6 17)

¹⁴ “El hombre no es un soberbio ser central, individuo de especie única, a cuyo alrededor giran los seres del cielo y de la tierra, animales y astros; sino la cabeza conocida de un gran orden zoológico.” (Martí, *Obras* 5 194)

“The struggle is not between civilization and barbarity, but between false erudition and Nature” (Martí, *Our America* n.p.).¹⁵ And, in contrast to the prominent vision of a threatening, destructive, untamed, and violent nature depicted by F. Sarmiento’s *Facundo* (1846), he did not share the view of nature as barbarism and civilisation as virtue but thought that the natural man should have a natural education, learning from nature instead from books: “It is urgent to replace the indirect and sterile knowledge of books with the direct and fruitful knowledge of nature” (Martí, *Our America* n.p.).¹⁶ As De Vries explains, it is by re-imagining “the conflict as a pair of opposites that set bad education against the dictates of nature” that Martí “issues a resounding repudiation of the nineteenth century’s entrenched Sarmentine dialectic” (De Vries 102). This repudiation of nature as barbarism, which links the natural to otherness and means the naturalisation of inequalities, crystallises how Martí contests a conception of nature that promotes a colonial regime of knowledge, by shaping a planetary vision that sees nature as part and source of human life and culture. Besides, the idea that humans should learn from nature instead of books exemplifies how Martí advocates “lived knowledges” (Sousa, *Cognitive Empire* 2) and derives from men being part of nature, from belonging to nature. This kind of belonging roots human identity in the earth we inhabit, and means a way to re-appropriate Latin American nature. In consequence, Martí’s ecological awareness is tightly entangled with decolonisation and his theorisation of the cultural autonomy of Latin America inevitably turns into a discourse of resistance and re-inhabitation. But above all, this entanglement marks Martí’s thinking as one anchored in the colonial South and hence can be considered an example of what Sousa de Santos calls epistemologies from the South. In J. Ramos, we can see additional implications of this idea, when he mentions that Martí postulates the need for an archive of tradition, an alternative and American knowledge (Ramos 293). From today’s perspective, however, we can go a step further by emphasising that Martí’s way of knowing is a planetary one that, as the epistemologies of the South, relays experiential knowledges, and was born in the struggle against colonialism and capitalism. In fact, as F. González explains, it’s already in 1876 that Martí denounced North American colonialism in Mexico (106), and one of his main points of criticism was the establishment of enclave economies linked to extractive activities. And one year earlier, during his stay in Mexico in July 1875, Martí published an article stating, “nothing puts the extractive industry in the place of what it tears out.”¹⁷ This example not only showcases how, in Martí’s thinking, ecological awareness and resistance to colonisation work hand-in-hand, but also emphasises how, as a knowledge from the South, his thinking returns repeatedly to the margins. As we saw in the context of the ‘natural man,’ Martí draws on traditional indigenous practices to recover

¹⁵ “No hay batalla entre la civilización y la barbarie, sino entre la falsa erudición y la naturaleza.” (Martí, *Obras* 6 17)

¹⁶ “[...] urge substituir al conocimiento indirecto y estéril de los libros por el conocimiento directo y fecundo de la naturaleza.” (Martí, *Obras* 8 291)

¹⁷ “Nada pone la industria extractiva en el lugar de lo que arranca.” (Martí, *Obras* 6 268).

marginalised knowledge and highlights that the European-educated governors lack of an understanding of the natural environment. As he argues, they therefore should tap into the wisdom of the indigenous cultures, who had cultivated the land for centuries and possessed valuable knowledge about the utilization of its agricultural potential. In the same way, Martí fought monoculture and deforestation (Marinello 236), reasoning that it is suicidal to entrust one's livelihood to a single fruit.¹⁸ Similarly, in this line of thought, he also recommends that fertilising the earth and preserving the forests can be understood as an act of re-inhabitation. On this matter, his essay on deforestation from 1883 shows that trees play a pivotal role not only in agriculture but also in establishing a wholesome habitat for humans:

The vital issue we are talking about is this: the preservation of forests, where they exist; their improvement, where they exist poorly; their creation, where they do not exist. A region without trees is poor. A city without trees is unhealthy. Land without trees demands little rain and bears toxic fruit. (Martí, *Our América* n.p.)¹⁹

Relating these words to the opening of *Nuestra América*, we may see how in Martí marginalised ecological knowledge and resistance to a colonial regime converge into a political metaphor of resistance. The trees that signify a defensive wall against North American politics in *Nuestra América* represent not only the physical trees and natural resources but also the marginalised ecological knowledge in which the resistance of Latin American autonomy resides. As both S. Herzog (1995) and G. Castro (2018) argue, we are facing a new discourse “in which the natural and the political, nature and culture, fuse into one concept that can't be taken apart” (Herzog 177), and “nature itself is reformulated as a political category, directly associated with the vindication of the non-capitalist sectors as legitimate actors in the political process (Castro 4). Yet as de Vries explains: “Development theory hinges upon the notion that regions should, can, and will experience economic growth through a series of stages usually culminating in globalised trade, but [...] he [Martí] proposes geographies that reject globalized economies in favor of localized and individuated alternatives” (12). In this matter Martí's writings have preserved their vigor until nowadays turning into highly relevant to debates on globalised markets, planetaryity, reinhabitation, and decolonial ecocritical knowledge production.

Conclusion

If nature can be understood as the third principal form of imperial Western discovery and representations of Latin America's nature have shaped a perspective that lives by colonial parameters, J. Martí's *Nuestra América* contests this form of domination through a discourse that roots Latin American identity in nature and intertwines it with an attempt to decolonise. As shown, his foundational essay

¹⁸ “[...] comete suicidio un pueblo que fía su subsistencia a un solo fruto.” (Martí, *Obras* 7 21)

¹⁹ “La cuestión vital de que hablamos es esta: la conservación de los bosques, donde existen; el mejoramiento de ellos, donde existen mal; su creación, donde no existen. Comarca sin árboles es pobre. Ciudad sin árboles es malsana. Terrenos sin árboles llama poca lluvia y da frutos violentos.” (Martí, *Obras* 18 162)

denounces the exploitation of foreign territories, fosters a conception of nature that fuses nature and culture in the context of the quest for a genuinely Latin American identity, and promotes a planetary vision that anchors this identity in the continent's nature. By doing so, Martí opposes the colonial paradigm of a pristine nature that has to be conquered, tamed, and developed, and he discursively re-appropriates the Latin American nature. Against the conceptual dimension of the discovery that configures the way to think of the New World's nature as one full of resources to be exploited, he holds the planetary idea of belonging and re-inhabitation. Thus, in Martí, nature becomes humanity's origin and a space of identitarian and cultural creation that treasures lived knowledges and experiential epistemologies. His writing must therefore be understood as an ecology of knowledges from the South that marries the question of Latin American identity with a decolonial and ecocritical regime of knowledge. And against his own racist viewpoints, it is the planetary consciousness of his writings, as well as his conception of nature as a site of resistance that link his work to a recovery and vindication of indigenous knowledges.

Martí can be considered a pioneer of ecocritical thought in the Americas and *Nuestra América* is a key example of how, in the Latin American context, the literary genre of the essay would shape the question of nature as linked to identitarian discourses. Furthermore, it allows us to

[...] observe how (...) a formative reflection of a conscious discourse of resistance toward 'the other' was being established, before the expansion of industrial capitalism that threatened to change nature and man—that is, we see in Martí's writing our American culture produced the adaptation process of the 'natural man' to his (or her) consubstantial ecological habitat. (Martínez 49)

Finally, it should be put on record that besides drawing on important sources like the writers of the North American ecological movement, Martí's writings are reminiscent of Latin American authors. As G. Horowitz points out: "José Martí, for the thinking of Cuban independence at the end of the nineteenth century, synthesised the various concepts of nature developed by the Latin American independence thinkers before him, once again returning to nature in order to posit Latin American autonomy" (79). In this sense, in what refers to the essay, Martí stands in the tradition of authors such as Andrés Bello and José Victorino Lastarria. Over and above that, he would strongly influence José Enrique Rodó, José Lezama Lima, Édouard Glissant, and forecast the importance of indigenous authors such as A. Krenak, Moira Millán or Antônio Bispo dos Santos, all of them essayists who stress the continuities between people and the natural world, thus tackling the colonial nature-culture divide.

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