

“GOOD FENCES MAKE GOOD NEIGHBORS?” OPEN  
AND CLOSED BORDERS IN THE FICTIONS OF  
PAULE MARSHALL, TONI MORRISON, AND MICHELLE CLIFF,  
AND IN JOSÉ MARTÍ’S “OUR AMERICA”

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ABSTRACT

Paule Marshall, Toni Morrison, and Michelle Cliff have described the Caribbean as a region ravaged by old and new colonialism. But they have also traced some pockets of cultural survival where people can still reconnect with resources left behind by dislocated native Americans or enslaved Africans. Such sources of empowerment defy colonial and post-colonial borders and therefore question Anglo-American definitions of an American identity. These African American and Caribbean writers open up alternative pathways to a hemispheric identity which José Martí’s “Our America” (1891) also intended to construct in a different historical context. Though transgressing some of the colonial boundaries, circumstances forced Martí to formulate a concept both inclusive and exclusive to guarantee a self-determined future for the nations and cultures under attack.

KEYWORDS: “Our America,” José Martí, Paule Marshall, Toni Morrison, Michelle Cliff, American identity, transgression of boundaries, Black Atlantic.

RESUMEN

Paule Marshall, Toni Morrison y Michelle Cliff han descrito el Caribe como una región asolada por el antiguo colonialismo y el neocolonialismo. Pero también han localizado algunos enclaves de supervivencia cultural donde la gente aún puede reconectar con los recursos que dejaron atrás los nativos americanos desplazados o los africanos esclavizados. Dichas fuentes de poder desafían los límites coloniales y poscoloniales y así cuestionan las definiciones anglo-americanas de la identidad americana. Estas escritoras americanas y caribeñas ofrecen caminos alternativos para lograr la identidad hemisférica que el texto “Our America” de José Martí también intentaba construir en un contexto histórico diferente. Aun cuando transgredía algunos de los límites coloniales, las circunstancias obligaron a Martí a formular un concepto tanto inclusivo como exclusivo para garantizar un futuro autodeterminado para aquellas naciones que estaban siendo atacadas.

PALABRAS CLAVE: “Our America”, José Martí, Paule Marshall, Toni Morrison, Michelle Cliff, identidad americana, transgresión de los límites, Atlántico negro.

In the 1980s African American writers published a series of novels entirely or in parts set in the Caribbean, even reaching out further south, deeper into the geography and history of the Americas, returning to the original distribution center of the slave trade, the Caribbean islands as nodal points, as stepping stones between the major parts of the continent defining them as spaces of empowerment, thus transgressing European imperial boundaries. These writers revived a productive exchange between these areas during the Harlem Renaissance, as documented in the literary and ethnographic works of Claude McKay or Zora Neale Hurston (see, for instance, Hathaway). Paule Marshall and Toni Morrison substantially support the revisionist efforts of authors from the region such as the Jamaican Michelle Cliff who have been aware of the destructive effects of old and new colonialism and have tried to combine their analysis with the construction of a vital heritage integrated in concepts like Paul Gilroy's "Black Atlantic" for the modernist period. As Stelamaris Coser suggests the crossing of hitherto respected and undisputed borderlines links these authors with José Martí's "Our America" (1891).<sup>1</sup> These writers

assume an innovatively "American" perspective and break a long tradition of estrangement and suspicion between a whiter "Anglo-America" and the multi-colored "Nuestra America" idealized by José Martí. They now present the two hemispheres as equally multicolored and equally white-dominated... Political boundaries between nation-states still signal separation and difference, but identities and histories overlap and crisscross over and beyond those limits (Coser, x-xi).

Coser concludes that such trends call forth "a dynamic reinterpretation of *New World* myths, traditions, and conflicts" (x). Some aspects of Martí certainly overlap with, others obviously contradict Coser's concept. On both the uncertainties of the modernist context have left their imprint as they challenge the political and cultural dominance of the United States, her position as center with the remainder of the Americas serving as her front- or backyards.

By searching for the transnational African American components in Paule Marshall, Toni Morrison, and Michelle Cliff and by linking them to Martí's redefinitions I am looking for the most inclusive concept with the ultimate, most probably utopian scope to find an American heritage even comprising the origins of the US as an immigrant nation sharing with many other peoples in the Americas a history of dislocation, migration, and persecution, though Fernández-Retamar ("Caliban") has propagated that the histories of the United States and the rest of the hemisphere are so different that the corresponding cultures are incommensurable.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "Our America" (Lauter *et al.*, 821-828). Martí's writings are recently receiving new scholarly attention (see, for instance, Rotker, and Belnap and Fernández).

<sup>2</sup> I am very well aware of the fact that I am comparing a journalistic essay of 1891 with literary texts almost a century younger!

In Robert Frost's words, "But something there is that doesn't love a wall,/That wants it down" ("Mending Wall").

Avey Johnson, the protagonist of Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983), for mysterious reasons leaves a pleasure cruise in Grenada she has booked to overcome the stasis of her life in New York after the death of her husband. What has been planned as a fairly conventional escape and return journey including the unproblematical transgression of political and cultural borderlines eventually provides a new, all-inclusive vision of the Americas establishing strong ties of heritage, communal identity, ceremonial and emotional coherence between Africa, the Caribbean, and the United States. Avey experiences several rites of passage and is gradually drawn into the annual rituals of the inhabitants of the small island of Carriacou coming home from all parts of the American diaspora to celebrate the Big Drum ceremony, the Lavé Tete and The Big Pardon which consist of a cleansing, a reconnecting with the ancestors, a dance of the African nations, and a prayer for forgiveness for the sins of the Americas and the whole world. This experience gives Avey's life a new purpose reinterpreting and linking the tales of her great-aunt Cuney with the annual communal trips to Bear Mountain, the rooted life with her husband Jerome in Brooklyn's Halsey Street, and the relationship to her daughter Marion.

The stories of her great-aunt focus on Tatem and Ibo Landing in the South Carolina tidewater region, on the exclusion from the ring shout and a slave rebellion as central events: When a group of Ibo slaves was taken to the shore, "they seen things that day you and I don't have the power to see. 'Cause those pure-born Africans was peoples my gran' said could see in more ways than one. The kind can tell you 'bout things to come long after they's dead... Those Ibos didn't miss a thing..." (37-38).

After inspecting the scenery and envisioning its tragic potential those Ibos turned round and walked back to Africa on the waters of the Black Atlantic. Halsey Street and the excursions to Bear Mountain represent "confraternity (249)", communal feasting, and participation in the collective struggle of survival. On her return flight to the US Avey ponders about her newly found African tribal identity, the strengths emanating from slave history and her plans to continue her great-aunt's mission handing on ancestral properties to the next generations.

Carriacou as a somewhat neglected small corner of the world where authentic African roots have survived better than in other places of the diaspora functions as a spiritual reservoir, a place of cleansing and empowerment uniting the fragments of Avey's memory to a concept of purposeful conduct based on African collective cultural heritage characterized by its strong sense of responsibility for the well-being of the generations, the community, the Americas, and the whole world.

Toni Morrison's fourth novel *Tar Baby* (1981) focusses on the contradicting or probably complementary rescue missions employed by two lovers to heal the wounds of the colonial past, thus vaguely indicating a new hemispheric identity though "together they could not concentrate on the given world" (198). With a Caribbean island as her main setting, Morrison returns to the Anglo-Saxon and French imperial legacies in the Americas as determined by colonialism in general





and the slave trade in particular. Isle des Chevaliers functions as the retirement home of an American businessman from Philadelphia who has provided Jadine Childs, the Black girl from his servant family, with a European education. While visiting her folks and her sponsor the model and photographer falls in love with Son who has jumped ship and accepted small jobs on the island. Son, deeply rooted in the African American experience of New York City and the Zora-Neale-Hurston-type of a free Black Florida township starts “pressing his dreams into her” (188) while Jadine’s rescue operation tries to persuade him into her own strategy of reconciliation with the colonial past including the acceptance of old dependencies. Her exposure to the materialism, wastefulness, and the deprivations of these American, Caribbean and European places creates a profound uneasiness and eventually results in her escape to Europe. Son acknowledges the failure of his mission and stays on the island which has preserved the colonial past in its social structure and myths. The legend of the 100 French chevaliers “alert but restful in the security of the Napoleonic Code” (177) competes with that of the blind black men in the forests of the island “that, three hundred years ago, had struck slaves blind the moment they saw it” (5) closing them to their cruel fate and the deceptive beauties of tropical nature, thus ensuring survival through non-compliance. Equally alive are the night women in the Sein de Vieilles swamp created by man’s violation of nature, who are holding things together, offer as much empowerment as the tar baby story which also contributes to Jadine’s revelation of the hidden sources of strength opening up for her a glimpse of a reconciliation between the values gained through the necessity of bare survival and those of assimilation to and tricksterlike exploitation of the oppressor’s strategies, promising a potential transformation of double-consciousness into privileged double-vision. Though her own foundations have been shaken up by Son who once accuses her of having “forgotten her ancient properties” (263), she rejects his vision vehemently: “You stay in that medieval slave basket if you want to... you don’t know to forget the past and do better” (233).

The function of the Caribbean island as a meaningful meeting place is defined in Sidney’s, the Black servant’s, remark: “This place dislocates everything” (245). Its particular mixture of closeness to and detachment from the experiences of colonialism and slavery radically exposes the contradictory choices of coping with the past and its continuities creating a vital tension between freedom and entrapment, and thus , produces dangling men and women, a condition applying to all the groups and nationalities involved representing a variety of overlapping cultures disqualifying rootedness along traditional borderlines as incomplete, perfunctory or, at least, fragile constructs.

In her story “Transactions” the Jamaica-born Michelle Cliff portrays a ruptured, inhuman world ravaged by the histories of conquest, colonization, prevailing commercial foreign domination and various shades of racism on a Caribbean island which does not offer sanctuaries from reality in spite of its lush nature and healing waters.

In the story the major failed transactions are linked to American imported goods and attitudes. Michelle Cliff constantly signifies on colonial and post-colonial stereotypes: The salesman Harold “travels into the interior of the island, his car

packed with American goods" (4), "His car is American and he has an American occupation" (4) and "He brings American things into the interior, into the clearing cut from ruinate. Novelties and necessities. Witch hazel. Superman. Band-Aids. Zane Grey. Chili con carne. Cap guns. Coke syrup. Fruit cocktails. Camels" (4). 'Ruinate' is Cliff's term for the reclamation of land, the disruptions of cultivation, civilization, by the uncontrolled, uncontrollable forest. Harold has an eye for the island's natural beauty, even sacrifices to the Arawak gods, but sees himself as a troubadour, free to move around. He has a brown-skinned wife who refuses to bear him children, and who has an affair with another man. To overcome his isolation Harold buys a "blond, blue-eyed child" (3) sitting as a bait in the middle of the road, a scene immediately deconstructed by Cliff. The salesman, however, anxiously clings to his stereotypes perceiving the German mother of the child as "a stranger in this landscape, this century, she of an indentured status, a petty theft" (7).

He takes the child to "a big American woman who runs a restaurant outside Milk River" (9), to bathe her, tend her wounds, and baptize her thus continuing a history of magical healings of colonists as inscribed on its walls: "Lord Salisbury was cured of lowness of spirit / Hamlet, his slave, escaped depraved apprehensions. May 1797, Anno Domini" (12).

Rosalind, the American woman, has "gone native" (13). The "silver bangle around one ankle" (13) links her new island home with her mother country which she has escaped from but which still holds her interest. It also connects her to the salesman and the particular situation he confronts her with. Harold reminds her of "a pirate on the Spanish Main... his galleon of a car... "Footloose and fancy-free"... He seemed like a remnant to her. So many of them did. There was something behind the thickness of green, in the crevices of bone; she wore a sign of it on her ankle" (14-15).

The interpretation of the situation is given to her by the American newspapers Harold brought. One of them advertises "Emmet Till. The Story Inside" and offers the picture of the mutilated body of the slain Civil Rights activist drowned in Pearl River which Emmet's mother insisted on showing to the public. Rosalind starts to cry over this evidence of ongoing slavery and burns the paper to prevent her kitchen help Hamlet VII from seeing "where she came from" (17).

The death of a salesman's dream, his painful shock of recognition comes when the child actually bites him: "Suddenly he felt like a thief, not the savior he preferred..." (16) and he sees the tears in the child's eyes and "would be reflected in them..." (16). When he wakes up the next morning, the child has gone, obviously back to his mother after this exploitation of the colonial mind.

Michelle Cliff's sophisticated parable of the wounds of colonialism and its continuity, crosses the boundaries of nations and gender. It demonstrates the timelessness and universality of these acts of inhumanity without showing a way out, though indicating the acquisition of knowledge of the histories of the Americas, the constitution of a community of people of good will, the vitalization of memory and compassion as means of redemption. The healing potential is indicated in a comment on Harold: "If he looks closer he will enter the island's memory, the petroglyphs of a disappeared people. The birdmen left by the Arawak" (11). Like in Marshall's



novel the disappearance of people indirectly hints at a potential locus amoenus where harmony can be restored.

Cliff's ravaged island world is still far from the redemption Marshall's Avey Johnson could find. It even refuses the unity of contesting visions of dealing with the past and the present like in *Tar Baby*. Things do not fall into place but remain fragmentary, bits and pieces of potential healing and further destruction. The colonial mind unites the Caribbean with the US, the past and the present. The characters remain stranded people forever struggling with stereotypes, pertaining to symbolic gestures and partial insights only.

If Michelle Cliff's post-colonial ruins represent the true condition, how is it possible to imagine a new America resisting the pressure of the neo-colonialist? And although Paule Marshall's protagonist discovers and exploits the available resources of empowerment, her story suggests that Carriacou is not meant for permanence but an endangered island like Morrison's places which bring people together, touch them with their myths and legends but no longer fundamentally change the course of their lives. Nevertheless, there is a potential in these encounters and confrontations as they expand knowledge, yield strong emotions of shame and guilt, power and powerlessness. They produce dynamic tensions constantly questioning easy escape routes and delusive peacefulness. Consequently, strength emanates at the crossroads, in the borderlands where the past connects and overlaps with the present and future in memory and storytelling. And the Caribbean excellently qualifies as a meeting place as long as things remain transparent and free-floating, in a way, chaotic (see also Sagar and Stephenson). Michelle Cliff in *The Land of Look Behind* has defined Jamaica as "a place in which we/they/ connect and disconnect —change place" (76). Earlier in the book she described her job as retrieval and communication, as "retracing the African part of ourselves, reclaiming as our own, and as our subject, a history sunk under the sea, or scattered as potash in the canefields" (14).<sup>3</sup> With its diverse geography and distinct pasts though connected by the European conquest and the slave trade, the Caribbean somewhat seems to resist instant political and cultural takeover and stratification. This situation obviously favors the existence of cultural survivals based on histories of defeat, suffering, heroic resistance, endurance and the preservation of a sense of communal identity as separate from what the new conqueror provides. The seams of these pockets still hold in some places though in others their contents have been spilled and damaged considerably no longer able to be combined to a productive whole which could set free survival rations and healing kits for the challenges of the past and the present on location and in other sections of the Black Atlantic. Marshall's, Morrison's and Cliff's protagonists both profit from the openness of borders and, at the same time, suffer from its results. In all three texts inherited and imported racism and neo-colonial-

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<sup>3</sup> Here Cliff echoes the imagery of Jean Toomer's *Cane* (1923).

ism create a sense of an ending, a distinct note of the transitional character of all escape and rescue missions.

José Martí's "Our America" was conceived as an effort of stemming the tide of neo-colonialism, a defense against the threat of a cyclical repetition of the tragedies of history by constructing a firm platform of resistance based on the lessons of the past and the promises of the present and the future in the Americas. In the larger context of the modernist sense of endings and new beginnings the essay of 1891 establishes new borders though asking for unity in diversity in "Our America" and, at the same time, merely acknowledging a common imperial purpose in "Their America" exclusively defined by the mainstream winners and not by the marginal losers within the dominant nation. In a letter to Manuel Mercado of May 18, 1895 Martí defined his task as follows: "It is my duty... to prevent, with Cuba's independence, the expansion of the United States throughout the Antilles, swallowing up our American lands... to prevent the annexation of Our America, which we defend tooth and nail, to the ruthless and brutal North that disdains us... I have lived in that monster and I am familiar with its entrails: But I've inherited David's slingshot" (quoted in Fernández-Retamar "Our America," 12).

Martí perceives the Caribbean not as a more or less peaceful contact zone but as a frontline on which the future of the Americas is at stake. Thus is primarily dedicated to erect a strong bulwark by exposing the strategies of the aggressor and by assembling the phenomena dividing "Our America" and Anglo-America. Consequently, the connecting lines are systematically neglected as they may serve as one-way-streets of influences. Four years earlier, in his report on "The Monetary Congress of the American Republics" (1891) Martí had already insisted on strict border controls:

They believe in the inferiority of the Negroes whom they enslaved yesterday and are criticizing today, and of the Indians whom they are exterminating. They believe that the Spanish American nations are formed principally of Indians and Negroes. As long as the United States knows no more about Spanish America, and respects it no more, although with the numerous incessant, urgent, and wise explanations of our people and resources it would come to respect us —can this country invite Spanish America to an alliance that would be honest and useful to our Spanish American nations? (372)

Subsequently, Martí refers to the collaborative role of Frederick Douglass as U.S. diplomat in the West Indies and denounces him as a 'scab'.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> In an article in the *North American Review* of September-October 1891 which he added as a sort of conclusion to the 1892 revised edition of his autobiography *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* he vehemently defended his stand and finally took great pride in the fact that both the U.S. and Haiti appointed him as their representative at the World's Columbian Exposition.





“Our America” is pervaded by Martí’s respect of the undisputable predominance of the still rising US, “a nation reared in the hope of ruling the continent (Martí 367).”<sup>5</sup> It is so overwhelming that he deeply distrusts the undermining forces within US borders, the resources of its indigenous population, the liberated slaves or the Mexican population in recently conquered territories. What Marshall, Morrison, and Cliff recognize as inter-American and African-American songlines is merely acknowledged as politically irrelevant or as potential invasion routes for “the formidable neighbor” (Lauter 827). Therefore we can first and foremost understand the essay as an urgent plea against the transgression of boundaries by the US though “Our America” may become so strong that it will not only be able to counterbalance the powers of Anglo-America but eventually send out signals of reconciliation and healing northward, even initiate “tropicalizations” there (see Aparicio and Chávez-Silverman).

“Our America” is unified by the common history of Central and South American nations as having won or as being about to win independence from European rule mainly within the borders established by colonisation. Like most post-colonial writers Martí demonstrates a remarkable respect for these boundaries. Paradoxically enough the bond between these diverse nations is the Spanish language as opposed to English as an imperial lingua franca which ignores all other languages just as Martí tends to disregard indigenous, creole languages, and even Portuguese for his particular purposes. In this respect Martí foreshadows the Hispanidad concept nostalgically glorifying Spain’s colonial role after it had definitely come to an end through liberation movements and the pressure of the US. “In spite of its confusion and fatigue” (Martí 53) he defends Spain and relies on the ties to the former colonizer as welcome stabilizer of the protective shield under construction.

As Toni Morrison’s *Paradise* (1998) illustrates, the establishment of a collective identity apparently requires the drawing of borderlines, often painful exclusions which Martí does not dare to make in his desire to find as many allies as possible in the battle against the necessarily excluded enemy. Struggling with Domingo Faustino Sarmiento’s racist *Facundo, or Civilization and Barbarity* (1845), Martí gives prominence to the idea of Mestizo America as originating in what he calls ‘some half-European powers independent’ insisting on a less rigid separation between the races than the US. He speaks of “learning Indian” (Lauter 826) without specifying this as Simon Bolívar had done in his “Letter from Jamaica” (1815):

Let us bear in mind that our people is neither European nor North American, but a composite of Africa and America rather than an emanation of Europe, for even Spain fails as a European people because of her African blood, her institutions, and her character... The greater part of the native peoples has been annihilated; the

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<sup>5</sup> See Herman Melville’s “Benito Cereno” for its evaluation of the transfer of political power and moral burdens from Spain to the U.S.!



European has mingled with the American and with the African, and the African has mingled with the Indian and with the European. (quoted in Fenández-Retamar "Caliban," 327)

Bolívar's observations include Anglo America as an expert though unadmitted transgressor of racial borderlines whereas Martí exploits his notion of hybridity as yet another major point of distinction for "Our America" as "the authentic mestizo has conquered the exotic creole" (Lauter 823), though "There can be no racial animosity, because there are no races" (827). His urge for separate identities keeps him from focusing on the blatant lack of synchronisation between U.S. foundational myths and operational values.

Martí's ambivalent attitude towards borders also influences his treatment of the city and the countryside. Like more recent post-colonial theorists<sup>6</sup> Martí praises the people of the countryside, the peasants as the more natural and authentic people as opposed to those of the metropolis tending to surrender to bourgeois, non-native, European ideas though his concept of the "natural man" (Lauter 823) which is indebted to Emerson and Whitman remains somewhat obscure. He makes use of terms like "the natural nation" (825) based on "the country's pertinent components" (823), "in keeping with its natural elements" (826) but he also employs more universal definitions like man forever being determined by love, hunger for life, and the will to create stressing process in contrast to the more static concept of holding on to the earth and traditions. These contradictions are evident right from the beginning of his article when he grounds his hemispheric vision on the broadening of the limited, local horizons. But subsequently, again and again, he discloses his deep distrust in too much openness to external influences. And it is the metropolis which seems to provide a breeding ground for uncontrollable mobility, individualization, sophistication, and universalization as opposed to rootedness in the particular. These harmful trends can be perceived in the big cities of "Our America" and they also dominate his personal experience and view of the US as characterized by fast urban growth. In contrast, the countryside emerges as a place of cultural loyalty, as a reservoir for the reconstruction of distinct identities as opposed to the dynamics of alien and unwelcome change. Martí's strategy requires transgression though on a such a limited scale that it does not endanger the firm grip on the particular and the protective function of borderlines. This is also vital for Marshall's setup as mere geography still guarantees the existence of islands of resistance to change asking for rites of passage to cross over into them from the metropolis and immediate 'civilised' Caribbean environment. In Morrison and Cliff an escape from the dynamics of neo-colonialism is no longer possible. It has trans-

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<sup>6</sup> See Anzaldúa who appears to be so much more stringent than e.g. Saldívar, preoccupied with urban contact zones.

gressed all borderlines and erased almost all traces of a retrievable past leaving behind only isolated fragments.

Martí's position not only recalls Jefferson's "agrarian dream" but also the more recent debate about Ariel or Caliban functioning as proper representations of South America. The controversy also hints at the exchangeability and fragility of all concepts of identity.<sup>7</sup> Such contradictory positions certainly reflect the modernists' inconsistencies in their search for a usable past as foundation of new definitions struggling with the complementary functions of stasis and dynamics, of the universal and the local as documented in the choice of Mark Twain as one of their cultural heroes.

Martí also shares their preoccupation with cultural archeology which asks for persons who can look beyond borderlines and who, because of this ability, can also properly evaluate them. Mutual acquisition of knowledge about oneself and the other creates a wholesome interaction between unity and diversity contributing to the formation of separate identities:

one must not attribute, through a provincial antipathy, a fatal and inborn wickedness to the continent's fairskinned nation simply because it does not speak our language, or see the world as we see it, or resemble us in its political defects, so different from ours, or favorably regard the excitable, dark-skinned people, or look charitably from its still uncertain eminence upon those less favored by history, who climb the road of republicanism by heroic stages. The self-evident facts of the problem should not be obscured, because the problem can be resolved, for the peace of centuries to come, by appropriate study, and by tacit and immediate unity in the continental spirit (Lauter 827).

And it is the journalist and the writer, it is, above all, Martí who can claim this privileged perspective as "I have lived inside the monster and know its entrails."

His idea of containment prevents him from moving closer to Marshall's position who suggests that for the individual person the search for identity is going on both inside and outside the monster, in the metropolis and in the secluded areas of cultural survival. And Michelle Cliff's contribution to this argument is that it is also proceeding amongst the ruins of the various waves of colonization: "We are a fragmented people... a culture of Black people riven from each other, my struggle to get wholeness from fragmentation while working within fragmentation" (16).

When Martí set down "Our America" many of these sources were not yet tapped though he envisioned some of them e.g. in his article "Autores americanos

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<sup>7</sup> José Enrique Rodó in his *Ariel* (1900) assigns the idealistic Ariel to his America and the utilitarian, selfish Caliban to the U.S., a setup which Fernández-Retamar in his interpretation of Martí vehemently rejects, claiming Caliban as the more authentic and natural American for "Our America." For me Rodó's line of argument comes very close to that of the Southern Agrarians and their manifesto of 1930, *I'll Take My Stand* exploiting a crisis of the mainstream to revive the values of the defeated South.

aborígenes” (1884). For him African American culture was available as the slave narratives, Frederick Douglass and Harriet B. Jacobs, post-civil war collections of slave songs, Uncle Remus stories, and the Fisk Jubilee Singers on tour. WEB DuBois’s seminal studies were not yet published. This lack of information reinforced the concept of rigid, protective borderlines.

Martí’s attempt to constitute a second political and cultural center suffers from the paradoxical situation that though it was undertaken in times of crisis and change, circumstances were rather unfavorable for a mutual exchange: Intellectuals were asking penetrating questions concerning their national identity, but the U.S. was strong enough politically and culturally to push into the various vacuums south of the border, into regions even more uncertain about their national and the hemispheric values. U.S. national myths effectively covered up the various truths of the past and the present being excavated, suppressed stories of persecution, dislocation, migration, old and new immigration, old and new slavery, colonialism and imperialism, hybridity, the constant crossing of boundaries thus ignoring substantial contributions to a common American history. And it is this situation Martí had to cope with, which forced him to be much more exclusive than the writers of later generations. He also follows the spirit of his times exploiting the dynamics of shaking off the past, the magic of new beginnings, of embracing the now and here along the lines of Emerson and Whitman or of Jean Toomer who more than 30 years later used the death of Black Southern rural culture as a poetic subject, saw the new borderlines in the American eastern metropolis, and, subsequently, dreamed of the fusion of races and cultures in the utopian vision of a synthesis without blotting out distinctions. Martí’s aspiring qualities are nourished by the same enthusiasm though he remains a firm believer in the positive function of well-defined boundaries. And neither Marshall, Morrison or Cliff go as far as Toomer though they hint at a merging of myths and a future redefinition of national identities, a reconciliation of dominant and dominated cultures.

Martí’s heroic effort to construct “Our America” against all odds, his desire to define both distinctions and common denominators by overcoming the many national and regional faultlines quite frequently serving as identity markers. After all, how popular, how attractive, and how useful is a hemispheric identity to someone who is used to think in terms of a small universe with easily defined boundaries as means of orientation in opposition to a continent where histories overlap and crisscross, a large territory where only privileged journalists, writers, businessmen, and politicians can find their way and claim to do this for altruistic purposes.

In spite of his wish to build the image of an other America and present it as a separate, alternative world, Martí’s analysis focuses on the neglected pages of both Americas and thus, indirectly, contributes to what later generations could take up in the more favorable framework of a radical discussion of U.S. national identity after the Civil Rights Movement as yet another attempt to shake the foundations of national myths, to root them deeper in the true American experience. In contrast to Martí’s intention this project includes the U.S. partaking in a peculiar American identity based on the common history of multiple exploitations, collaboration and resistance, the manifestations of the schizophrenic nature of man and history, the





vicious cycles of the victim turning into the victimizer and vice versa, the dialectics of bare survival, suffering and creativity, the interaction of ideal and operational values, defining all the peoples of the Americas as “people of paradox” (Kammen).<sup>8</sup> This is more than what Carlos Fuentes suggests in his 1987 “Prologue” to Rodó’s *Ariel*: “we are both, North and Latin Americans, still projects of history, incomplete societies, working models, not paradigms of perfection” (26-27). Pablo Neruda in the 10th section of *The Heights of Macchu Picchu* (1945) comes closer to this identity when he alludes to the co-existence of beauty as emerging from suffering and destruction, echoing aspects of the Jean Toomer concept. All these approaches, José Martí’s, Paule Marshall’s, Toni Morrison’s, and Michelle Cliff’s, have to be seen as contesting but also as complementary, as productive dislocations and confrontations asking for mutual awareness of the comprehensive picture as set against the selective and exclusive splendors of conquest and liberation, propagating the virtues of interpenetration through often painful contact. Martí figures prominently in Gustavo Pérez Firmat’s 1990 essay collection *Do the Americas Have a Common Literature?* But, significantly enough, Earl E. Fitz’s study of 1991 *Rediscovering the New World: Inter-American Literature in a Comparative Context*, which has a chapter titled “In Quest of an American Identity”, does not mention José Martí. This is also true for Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic* which in its first chapter describes “The Black Atlantic as a Counterculture of Modernity.” Apparently, Martí does not fit into scholarly projects dealing with the transgression of traditional borders. Still, there is no doubt that “Our America” foreshadowed questions like “Who set you flowin’?” asked in Jean Toomer’s *Cane* in reference to the Blacks who have migrated from the South to the Eastern urban centers and which also determine the fate of the protagonists of Marshall, Morrison, and Cliff in the Caribbean and beyond, in the new centers or in the peripheries (see also Griffin).

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<sup>8</sup> Such cultural interaction has also been proposed as an agenda for Latino/a writing. See, for instance, Ramón de la Campa: “...narrating Latinos, particularly after the 1980s, may also require the approach of a border writer or artist —not necessarily a Latino— but one able to remain afloat a bit more in the diaspora of an America with fewer borders, where North Americans, Latinos and Latin Americans are immersed (with others) in a give-and-take process of cultural and economic transformations within the same hemisphere” (as quoted in Smorkaloff 1997, 926).

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