



VILLARREAL EDUCATIONAL ENTERPRISES

ENDEAVORS IN PROGRESS

José Martí: A Life Shaped by Revolution, Exile, and “Our America”

How can education, cultural understanding, and knowledge of our history help people protect their freedom and shape their own future?

A Young Man in a Colony

In 1853, José Julián Martí y Pérez was born in Havana, Cuba. At the time, Cuba was one of Spain's last major colonies in the Americas. Spain controlled the island's government and economy, and Cubans had limited political power. Slavery continued to exist, and Spanish authorities responded harshly to movements calling for greater political freedom or independence.



In 1868, when Martí was fifteen, the **Ten Years' War** began. Cuban revolutionaries rose against Spanish colonial rule, beginning the first major war for Cuban independence.

Martí was too young to fight, but the events around him had a profound effect on the teenager. He watched his homeland struggle with questions of freedom and political power. He also saw the consequences of challenging Spanish authority.

Martí quickly became involved in the independence movement. By the age of sixteen, he was writing for *La*

Patria Libre (“The Free Fatherland”), a newspaper that supported Cuban independence. His writing made his political beliefs clear.

Martí was no longer simply a student. He had become a **young revolutionary**.

Arrested at Sixteen

In October 1869, Spanish authorities arrested Martí.

The evidence against him included a letter criticizing a fellow student who had apparently abandoned the Cuban independence cause. Martí was accused of **infidencia**, a charge used by Spanish authorities against people considered disloyal to Spain.

He was only sixteen years old.

After spending months in prison, Martí was tried by a military tribunal. On March 4, 1870, he was sentenced to **six years of hard labor**.

For a teenager who had recently been studying literature and philosophy, the experience was devastating.

In April, Martí was transferred to the San Lázaro quarries in Havana. He was assigned prisoner number **113** and forced to work in the stone quarries.

The work was brutally physical. Prisoners broke and moved stone and worked around lime kilns. Martí spent long hours working under the Cuban sun. He was forced to wear a chain attached to his ankle, and the work damaged his health.

The lime and dust affected his eyes. He developed a serious injury to his leg and an **inguinal hernia**. The physical consequences of his imprisonment would remain with him for the rest of his life.

Martí later described his experience in his 1871 pamphlet ***El presidio político en Cuba* (Political Imprisonment in Cuba)**.

His writing was not simply a political argument. It was the testimony of a young man who had personally experienced the brutality of colonial imprisonment.

From Prison to Exile

Martí's parents desperately worked to have their son's sentence reduced. After approximately six months of forced labor, the authorities transferred him away from the quarries because of his deteriorating health.

He was eventually sent to **Isla de Pinos**, where he continued to recover from his injuries.

But Martí would not be allowed to return to an ordinary life in Cuba.

In January 1871, when he was still only seventeen, Spanish authorities deported him to Spain. He left Havana and began what would become a lifetime of exile.

Martí had escaped the physical suffering of the prison camp, but he had not escaped its meaning.

His experience had taught him something that would remain central to his life:

Political freedom is not an abstract idea when you have experienced its absence.

Spain: The Prisoner Becomes a Student

In Spain, Martí continued his education at universities in Madrid and Zaragoza. He studied law and philosophy and continued writing about Cuba.

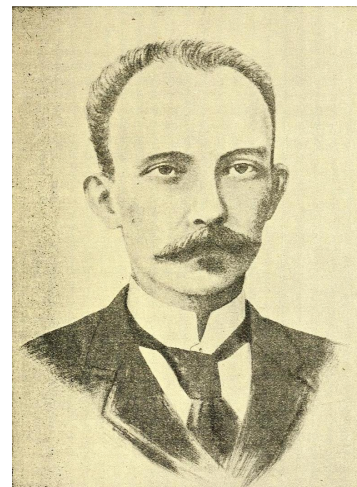
He also wrote ***El presidio político en Cuba***, describing the treatment of prisoners and the suffering he had witnessed.

His years in Spain were important because Martí began transforming his personal experience into a broader understanding of political oppression.

He had been imprisoned by a government because of his ideas.

Now he was studying history, law, philosophy, and politics.

The young prisoner was becoming an intellectual.



But Martí's education would not take place only in classrooms.

His next teachers would be the people and societies he encountered throughout the Americas.

Mexico and Guatemala

After leaving Spain, Martí returned to the Americas.

He lived in **Mexico**, where he worked as a journalist and became involved in the country's intellectual and cultural life. He also spent time in **Guatemala**, where he worked as a teacher of literature and philosophy.

These experiences were important because Martí was beginning to understand that Cuba was part of something much larger.

Mexico and Guatemala had their own histories of colonialism, independence, Indigenous cultures, social divisions, and struggles over political power.

Martí encountered societies that were no longer Spanish colonies, but independence had not magically solved all of their problems.

This was an important lesson.

Winning independence from a colonial power was only the beginning.

A nation still had to decide what kind of society it wanted to become.

Martí began to ask questions that went beyond Cuban independence:

- What does freedom mean for an individual?
- What does freedom mean for a nation?
- Can a country be politically independent but still depend upon foreign ideas or economic power?
- How should people from different racial and cultural backgrounds build a common society?
- How can the nations of Hispano America learn from one another?

These questions would follow Martí for the rest of his life.

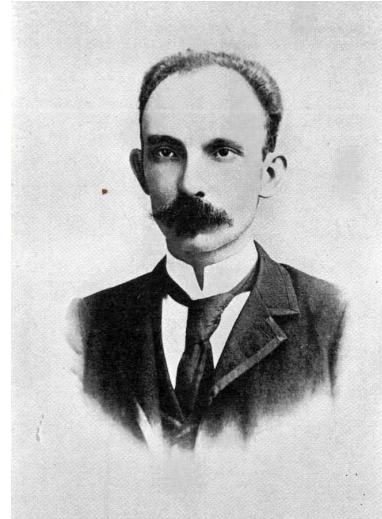
Martí in the United States

In 1881, Martí settled in **New York City**, where he would spend most of the remaining years of his life.

New York exposed Martí to an enormous and rapidly changing society.

He encountered immigrants from Europe, African Americans, Chinese workers, Indigenous peoples, wealthy industrialists, factory workers, political activists, and communities struggling with poverty and discrimination.

Martí admired aspects of the United States, including its energy, economic development, and democratic traditions. But he also saw serious contradictions.



He observed racial discrimination and the continuing consequences of slavery. He wrote about Indigenous peoples who were being pushed from their lands. He watched the growing power of corporations and the struggles of workers. He also became increasingly concerned about the possibility that the United States might extend its political and economic influence over Latin America.

The United States became another important teacher.

Martí was learning that **a nation could call itself free while some of its people remained excluded from that freedom.**

From Cuban Independence to “Our America”

By this point, Martí's vision had expanded.

He still wanted Cuba to become independent from Spain. But he increasingly believed that the future of Cuba could not be separated from the future of the other nations of Hispano America.

In 1891, he published one of his most important essays, *Nuestra América* (“**Our America**”).

Martí argued that the peoples of Latin America needed to understand their own histories and cultures rather than simply copying European or U.S. political models.

He believed that the Americas were shaped by many peoples and histories—including Indigenous, African, European, and mixed communities.

For Martí, this diversity was not something that had to disappear in order for a nation to become united.

Instead, people needed to find ways to **build a common future while recognizing the different histories that had created their societies.**

His thinking about race became particularly clear in his later essay *Mi raza* (“My Race”), published in 1893. Martí rejected the idea that humanity should be divided into superior and inferior races. His years in the United States helped deepen his understanding of racial politics and the experiences of different communities.

Martí was writing in the nineteenth century, so his ideas should not simply be treated as identical to modern concepts of multiculturalism.

But he was wrestling with a question that remains important today:

How can people with different histories, cultures, and racial identities build a society in which everyone belongs?

Independence of the Person

Martí's experiences also invite us to think about **personal independence.**

As a teenager, Martí lost control over his own life. A government arrested him, imprisoned him, forced him to work, and eventually sent him into exile.

But imprisonment did not destroy his ideas.

Instead, Martí continued to write.

He continued to study.

He continued to learn from the societies around him.

And he continued to imagine a different future.

His life suggests that freedom is not only the ability to live without physical chains. It can also involve the ability to **think, learn, question, and develop one's own understanding of the world.**

This helps explain one of Martí's most famous statements:

“Ser culto es el único modo de ser libre.”

“To be educated is the only way to be free.”

For Martí, education could help an individual become intellectually independent.

Independence of a Nation

Martí applied a similar idea to nations.

A country could achieve political independence but remain intellectually or economically dependent upon stronger nations.

That is why Martí wanted the peoples of Hispano America to know their own histories and understand one another.

He envisioned an America that could learn from its differences rather than allowing those differences to divide its people.

This was the meaning behind **“Nuestra América.”**

Martí wanted Cuba to be free.

But he also wanted Cubans to understand that they were part of a larger community of peoples throughout the Americas.

Returning to Cuba

After years of organizing the Cuban independence movement from abroad, Martí finally returned to Cuba in 1895.

He helped organize the **Cuban Revolutionary Party** and worked to unite Cubans living on the island with those living in exile.

The teenager who had once been dragged to the San Lázaro quarries had become the leader of a revolutionary movement.



Martí did not live to see Cuban independence.

On May 19, 1895, he was killed in battle at **Dos Ríos**.

He was only forty-two years old.

His life had taken him from a Cuban prison to Spain, Mexico, Guatemala, Venezuela, and the United States—and ultimately back to Cuba.

Every place he lived added another piece to his understanding of freedom.

Martí's Legacy

José Martí's life was shaped by **repression, exile, education, travel, and encounters with people from many different backgrounds**.

He began as a young Cuban who wanted his homeland to be free from Spanish colonial rule.

His experiences transformed that desire into a much larger vision.

Martí came to believe that freedom required more than changing the government. It required educated people who understood their history, respected the dignity of others, and were capable of thinking for themselves.

He also believed that the peoples of Hispano America should know one another and recognize their shared history without erasing their differences.

That vision remains worth considering today.

Martí's Questions About Independence and “Our America”

For Martí, **winning political independence was only the beginning**. The deeper challenge was creating societies that were truly independent in their ideas, institutions, and understanding of their own people.

Martí saw that some of the newly independent nations of Hispano America continued to carry the habits and inequalities of the colonial period. He worried that leaders might simply replace Spanish ideas with ideas borrowed from other Europeans or the United States rather than developing solutions based on their own histories and circumstances.

As Martí developed his ideas, several important questions emerged:

- What does freedom mean for an individual?
- What does freedom mean for a nation?
- Can a country be politically independent while remaining dependent on foreign ideas, political influence, or economic power?
- How can people of different racial and cultural backgrounds build a society based on equality and shared purpose without denying their different histories?
- How can the nations of Hispano America learn from one another and work together while maintaining their individual identities?

These questions were at the heart of Martí's vision of “**Nuestra América.**” He believed that the peoples of Hispano America needed to know their own histories, understand one another, and develop their own solutions to the challenges they faced.

As Martí wrote in *Nuestra América*:

“The peoples who do not know one another must make haste to get to know one another.”

For Martí, understanding one another was not simply an intellectual exercise. It was part of protecting the independence and future of the Americas.

Key Idea

José Martí's life suggests that **freedom is both personal and collective.**

An individual needs the freedom to think, learn, and determine the direction of their own life.



A nation needs the freedom to determine its own future.

But Martí also believed that freedom carries a responsibility: people must understand their history, respect the humanity of others, and learn from one another.

For Martí, the future of Hispano America depended not only on becoming independent nations, but on **developing a shared understanding of who they were and what they could become together.**

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Discussion Questions: José Martí—Revolution, Exile, and “Our America”

Part I: Understanding Martí's Experiences

1. **What conditions in Cuba during Martí's youth helped lead him to support independence from Spain?**
2. **Martí was arrested when he was only sixteen years old. What does his imprisonment tell us about how the Spanish colonial government responded to opposition?**
3. **How might Martí's experiences as a prisoner in the San Lázaro quarries have shaped his understanding of freedom?**
4. **Why was being sent into exile another form of punishment for Martí? How might being separated from his homeland have affected him?**
5. **What did Martí gain from living in Spain, Mexico, Guatemala, and the United States that he might not have learned if he had remained in Cuba?**

Part II: Independence and Freedom

6. **The reader explains that, for Martí, political independence was only the beginning. What other challenges did a newly independent nation face?**
7. **What is the difference between an individual being free and a nation being independent? How might the two ideas be connected?**
8. **Can a country be politically independent while still being strongly influenced by another country? Explain your answer using an example from history or the modern world.**
9. **Martí believed that nations should understand their own histories and circumstances rather than simply copying foreign models. Why do you think this was important to him?**
10. **What do you think Martí meant when he wrote, “Ser culto es el único modo de ser libre”? Do you agree that education and knowledge are connected to freedom? Why or why not?**

Part III: “Nuestra América”—Unity and Diversity

- 11. How did Martí's experiences in different countries help him develop a broader understanding of Hispano America?**
- 12. Why did Martí believe that the peoples of Hispano America needed to know one another better?**
- 13. Martí wrote that the peoples of the Americas had different histories and backgrounds. How can people recognize their differences while still building a sense of shared community?**
- 14. Why might unity be especially difficult in a region made up of many nations, cultures, racial backgrounds, and historical experiences?**
- 15. What does Martí's idea of “Nuestra América” suggest about the relationship between identity and independence?**

Part IV: Making Connections

- 16. Martí's life was shaped by imprisonment, exile, migration, and encounters with people from many backgrounds. How did these experiences change the way he understood his homeland?**
- 17. Do difficult personal experiences always shape a person's beliefs? How did Martí turn his experiences of suffering and exile into ideas about freedom and the future?**
- 18. The reader suggests that Martí believed people must know themselves and know one another. Why might understanding history and culture be important to building a stronger community?**
- 19. What can Martí's life teach us about the relationship between personal experiences and larger historical movements?**
- 20. Return to the essential question:**

What does it take for a people to be truly free and independent?

Based on José Martí's life and writings, what would Martí's answer be? What is your answer? Use evidence from the reader to support your ideas.