PREFACE

Criticar es Amar: Translation and Self-Criticism

> It is not by chance that we are born in one place and not another, but in order to give testimony.—**Eliseo Diego,** *Por los extraños pueblos*, 1958
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> The world has expanded, the earth is not the center any more. It turns among the infinite multitude of worlds like it.
> —**Gustave Flaubert,** *Bouvard and Pécuchet*, 1881

AS A STATELESS, nonassimilating migrant, a colonized and a linguistically marginalized translator, José Martí elucidates an alternative to the modernity that serves imperial expansion. How does translation, rather than autonomy and originality in the tradition of U.S. American renaissance writers, become the means by which a migrant Latino writer elaborates an alternative modernity? How do Martí's inaugural experiments in modernist form in the Americas articulate the perspective of this journalist, poet, diplomat, and revolutionary born in Cuba, who resided in New York in the 1880s and 1890s? Through the daily labor of making translations of texts from English into Spanish and of interpreting North American culture, Martí developed a literary form adequate to capture the dynamic, sometimes shocking events that he read about and observed firsthand in New York.[1] This formal innovation merits more recognition in contemporary theorizing of American studies, of modernism in the Americas, and in the genealogy of alternative American modernities.

My work as a translator-interpreter between 1989 and 1992 for América Sosa and María Teresa Tula, two representatives of the award-winning Salvadoran human rights organization, the Committee of Mothers of the Disappeared, Assassinated and Political Prisoners (CO-MADRES) made this book possible in many senses. Not only did I really become fluent in Spanish from these eloquent and courageous women; I learned from María and América and from the other members of a community of Salvadoran migrants who lived and worked together in the midst of the final phase of a twelve-year civil war to rethink the understanding of America I'd acquired while growing up in the United States. With their fearless and fierce eloquence in my mouth as I interpreted, or under my fingertips as I translated their analyses of the United States into English, I glimpsed the future of another American studies. In the post–cold war period, Salvadoran activists taught me that U.S. American studies would, sooner or later, have to rethink its relation to the other Americas. A new American studies—or scholarship about the United States and the other Americas—would prompt the United States to see itself through the eyes of people surviving and fighting long-standing policies of military, economic, and political intervention in Latin America and elsewhere. Immediately before joining the staff of CO-MADRES in Washington, D.C., I visited Cuba as part of an international delegation of young people organized by the American Friends Service Committee. I harvested yams, interacted with politically privileged young Communists, marginalized poets, Christians, and disaffected adolescent critics of the revolution (or "freakies"), at a time when the winds of Tiananmen Square and perestroika were already beginning to whistle through the thirty-year old revolutionary regime. I, with my rudimentary Spanish skills during this two-month sojourn, concluded that layers of misconception rendered little hope for translation between Cuba and the United States. It was impossible not to encounter José Martí's remarkable poetry in Cuba, for little children walked around reciting his verses and his name and sculpted image were everywhere. I had the good fortune to bring home a weather-beaten anthology of his sylvan prose from that encounter with pre-special period Cuba, but I did not expect then to spend a decade writing a book about Martí and his interlocutors in the U.S.

It was only in 1991, when I was translating for two feminist academics in El Salvador, that I decided to study the other versions of the United States that emerge in the eyes of readers from Latin America. While undertaking research into the women's movement in El Salvador, our small group

of two feminist academics, a Salvadoran feminist activist, her cousin, and I—the translator—were stopped by the Treasury Police, blindfolded and detained without charge for thirty hours. Upon our detention, we were stripped of our documents, but not our clothes (as was the case for our Salvadoran colleagues, whom I saw in ill-fitting military fatigues); we foreigners (two U.S. and one French citizen) had nothing with which to confront the U.S.-equipped and funded Salvadoran police but our tongues. I had been hired as a translator by the two academics, and I translated the entire interrogation of the U.S woman and then underwent interrogation myself through the night. That experience of interrogation in an underground prison by sixteen-year-olds who told me that they acquired their expertise at U.S. taxpayers' expense at the School of the Americas in Fort Benning, Georgia, and admonishment by the U.S. official upon whom our release depended for associating with "delinquent terrorists" (meaning, my colleagues, the Salvadoran feminist activists) prodded me to begin the research that led to this book. As I read more, I realized that José Martí saw the need for and successfully carried out translations of the not yet readily apparent imperial project of United States for Latin American, Latina/o, and eventually, for U.S. readers.

In one of the letters that the Cuban poet, novelist, and journalist Eliseo Alberto transcribes in his memoir of growing up in Cuba and participating in the 1959 Revolution, *Informe contra mi mismo* (Report against Myself) (1996), his correspondent defines "the true magnitude of *las patrias*" as "the planetary smallness of life."[2] This "planetary smallness," of which Gustave Flaubert, Benedict Anderson, and Walter Benjamin all write, becomes comprehensible through comparative imagining from a specific place in relation to the planet and in relation to a vast human history.[3] Although Alberto's memoir offers an unflinching critique of Cuba's bureaucracy, it also criticizes in no uncertain terms the government of the United States for entering Cuba uninvited in 1898, and for strangling Cuba's economy through its commercial embargo, which since 1961 has placed the island in "the last and most absurd straitjacket of the cold war."[4] Alberto's long history as a member of the cultural elite, and functionary within the Cuban Communist Party, his intense affection for the quotidian aspects of life in Cuba, and his willingness to publish his memoir—despite his friends' begging him not to—prevent his book from becoming reduced to the political agendas of either the official revolution or of Cuban exiles allied with the U.S. government. By this act of political suicide, Alberto

claims to have liberated himself—the person he abandoned when he became complicit with policies with which he profoundly disagreed. *Informe contra mi mismo* expresses respect and love for Cuba's "given" culture through criticism, and specifically, self-criticism.[5] This kind of critical relationship to the nation informs my reconsideration of a selection of Martí's major and minor writings as translations of empire.

Alberto's memoir of his island and of the Cuban Revolution since 1959 represents a complex breaking down of the political divisions that continue to divide Cubans, by calling for a "necessary peace" (40) in the spirit of Martí's "necessary war." Accordingly, he uses Martí's texts against the official Martís on the island, without ceasing to challenge the official Martí of the United States. Much as Alberto emphasizes the fact that Martí did not live on the island for which he so intensely suffered, and that he dignified, defended, and loved as he inscribed it into his prose and poetry, so I, in *Translating Empire* focus on Martí's status as an extranational migrant inside the United States. As Alberto criticizes a revolutionary socialist ethic of "socialismo o muerte" that admits weaknesses of neither mind nor body, so I call attention to the internally divided psychic condition and formal ambiguity in Martí's prose that records ambivalent responses to the culture of U.S. modernity and reveals shifting relations to the veterans of the independence movement. Just as Alberto recalls the role of the transamerican community of Mexicans, Nicaraguans, Venezuelans, Argentines, Puerto Ricans, and New Yorkers who "offered bread and a roof in hours of desperation, in the days when the veteran *mambises* [or soldiers of Cuban independence] looked over [Martí's] shoulders with *militarissimo* disdain" (27), so I present Martí's writing as an expression of a newly multiracial and transnational Latino/a community in the United States, at a moment when the rhetoric of manifest destiny and scientific racism joined forces to besmirch a Latin American grouping that Martí and others referred to sympathetically during this period as his own "Latin" or "Latino" people.[6] This book is thus indebted to Alberto's method, even though my object of study necessarily diverges from his.

How did Martí relate to the United States, to the politics and culture of its mainstream and of its subcultures? While there is no question that Martí absorbed ideas from the United States as he developed genres, literary innovation, and political practices, what interests me more are the ways that through his work as a translator, in carefully measured arguments—and against the recommendations of his editors and influential readers—Martí

critically reworked rather than simply embraced the Anglo-American U.S. culture all around him. In *José Martí: la invención de Cuba*, the exiled Cuban intellectual historian Rafael Rojas shows Martí's debts to models of republican government in Spain, France, Mexico, and, above all, to the post–Civil War United States in developing his political and cultural theory.[7] Whereas Rojas's interpretive emphasis makes sense for his Latin American, Spanish, and perhaps especially Cuban readership (who are unlikely to read Rojas's book and come to the conclusion that for Martí the United States represented the perfect paragon of self-government, democracy, and liberty), my different focus responds to lingering misperceptions about the United States in the United States, misperceptions that Martí's work prompts us to address. Although Martí's journalism, literary criticism, poetry, diaries, fragmentary pieces, epistolary writing, and oratory respect the founding principles of the United States, they also observe imperial modernity working hand in hand to stratify, exclude, and circumscribe access to modernity's key promises. In the context of imperial modernity, liberty had become a special privilege of the United States.

After spending a total of seven months in Cuba as a *Yuma* (U.S. citizen) researcher over the past decade, I could hazard guesses as to why Cubans call for reform and find it necessary to leave, like many other millions from Latin America who migrate to the United States. My forebears have willfully forgotten, in the course of several generations, the dilemmas and traumas of immigration and assimilation—that exile and migration have not cut my life nor my parents' lives in two, as has happened for so many Cubans since the nineteenth century. For this reason, this book does not pretend to marshal Martí's texts to address concerns about Cuba's struggling government and the range of its (disgruntled or enthusiastic) citizens and exiles. Instead, the accident of my birth and the language in which I learned to write demand that I bring Martí's insights to bear on contemporary research in and about the United States, at a time when work at the forefront of the field is at last taking up many of the preoccupations that Martí set out more than a century ago.[8]

Having proposed to read Martí from and for the United States, rather than in relation to Cuba or Latin America, I cannot, and do not wish to, assume a stance of cool, disinterested objectivity. A space for critical interpretation of Martí outside of Cuba is valorized and in fact demanded by Ottmar Ette's comprehensive narrative of the ideological battles over the symbolic capital that is contained in José Martí's writing and persona—

between politicians and literati, between those on the island and those in exile, between readers with socialist and republican commitments.[9] This is the perspective of *Translating Empire*, but such an outsider status, especially given my location in the United States, implicates rather than exempts me from the political networks that began to form in the late nineteenth century and that remain a defining tendency of our age. A U.S. perspective on Cuba that perceives itself as foreign to the struggle over the control of the island and its future neglects the historic assumption that "the law of our national existence is growth," as the New York transplant and Democratic senator of Louisiana, John Slidell, noted in 1859, in proposing legislation to facilitate the acquisition of Cuba. In defending this position, he claimed:

> The tendency of the age is the expansion of the great powers of the world. England, France and Russia, all demonstrate the existence of this pervading principle. Their growth, it is true, only operates by the absorption, partial or total, of weaker powers—generally, of inferior races. So long as this extension of territory is the result of geographical position, a higher civilization, and greater aptitude for government, and is not pursued in a direction to endanger our safety or impede our progress, we have neither the right nor the disposition to find fault with it.[10]

This long history shaped the struggle of Cubans in the 1880s and 1890s, and the sedimented assumptions of this position have not ceased to inform U.S. foreign policy toward Latin America and its migrants in the United States. The self-definition of imperial modernity as grounded on inexorable "natural" facts such as geographical position, "higher" civilization, and "greater" aptitude should still alarm us because such arguments still circulate.

Ette seeks to recontextualize Martí's writings in the historical period and cultural context to avoid reducing Martí's unwieldy and complex corpus to slogans, adages, and epigraphs (often reproduced without date or a textual citation). While I am sympathetic to Ette's goal of demystifying and desanctifying an untouchable, infallible, superhuman Martí, I cannot agree that readings of Martí "en el extranjero" (abroad; that is, in foreign, non-Cuban space) enjoy a privileged objectivity, above conditioning or orienting ideological interests. According to Ette, Martí's readers have erred in an attempt to show Martí's continuing relevance to one ideological agenda or another.[11] Martí's own translations refute this notion of objective inter-

pretation, as I argue in the chapters that follow. Given that the United States has an especially long and involved relationship with Cuba, the idea that noninsular scholarship—in the United States and Europe—is less biased or somehow not complicit with imperial history and contemporary global politics tends to reinforce the occult artistry whereby empire parades behind a mask of democracy.

Translating Empire offers a critique of U.S. American studies from within North America, by recalling Martí's contributions to literary history of modernism and to transamerican literary studies. Against the longstanding construction of Martí as an ally of U.S. policy in the region, my book aims to show the indispensability of Latino migrant translations to the imagining of American cultural and literary history more broadly. If Rafael Rojas and Eliseo Alberto offer testimony that circulates clandestinely in Cuba and addresses a society bracing itself for a transition, underway officially as I write this preface in 2008, *Translating Empire* offers testimony about the United States, the *patria* that North American readers have the option and obligation to interrogate and narrate. I will have failed if the reader takes this book as a new weapon in the by now dusty and yet still overstocked arsenal aimed at Cuba's current government. Through the prism of Martí's translations, I seek to recast U.S. culture and letters, the history of transnational literary modernism, and imperial politics in the humbling light of their planetary smallness, which is to say, their mutability, comparability, heterogeneity, dependence, indebtedness, and responsibility to a larger community of the Americas and the planet.

I am greatly indebted to many friends, teachers, and colleagues whose encouragement, criticism, and support have enabled me to research and write this book. As Gabriela Mistral pointed out, José Martí's writings are an inexhaustible mine in which excavators have been fruitfully digging since he began to publish. Anyone who researches in this field feels an overwhelming debt to all the others who have dedicated years to reading and thinking about his work.

Indeed, this interdisciplinary field of Martí studies forms part of a rich, Latin American and migrant Latino intellectual tradition, my debts to which my bibliography and endnotes can make only inadequate acknowledgment. Seminars and conversations with Sylvia Molloy, Julio Ramos, Licia Fiol-Matta, and Jean Franco—exceptional readers and generous teachers—launched me on the project that eventually became this book. Each of these scholars' rigorous attention to the form of Latin American

and Latino/a culture and politics, inside and outside the academy, has been an inspiration for me.

I have another set of debts to far-flung colleagues and friends who have engaged me in sustaining conversations while I was formulating this project. At the Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina in Florianópolis, Brazil, in 2005 and 2007, I was able to present parts of this book and engage in conversations with Eliana Avila, an astute interlocutor and exemplary practitioner of transamerican cultural translation, and with Sergio Bellei. I thank them both for these opportunities that fundamentally shaped my book. I wish also to thank my colleagues at the Centro de Estudios Martianos and Casa de las Américas, who offered suggestions, guidance, and signposts, and also facilitated access to research materials in the Sala Cubana of the Biblioteca Nacional José Martí, the Instituto de Literatura y Lingüística, and the Centro; among them I thank especially Pedro Pablo Rodríguez, María Caridad Pacheco, Enrique López Mesa, Javier Beltrán, and Luisa Campuzano. ¿Qué he de decir, a esta gente tan generosa que me ha hecho posible este trabajo—y con tanto gusto—en la Habana? A Eladio Moreno Heredia y Noel Martínez Hernández, quienes me brindaron tantas conversaciones, cenas y libros, gracias.

Numerous institutions have enabled me to write this book. I am grateful to Swarthmore College for making it possible for me to imagine writing a book, and to Columbia University for providing me with a remarkable library and an inspiring cohort of coresearchers and financial support. Although this book scarcely resembles the dissertation I wrote under his direction, I thank Robert G. O'Meally for endorsing and nurturing my intuition about where American studies was headed and for teaching me to listen before beginning to theorize.

A National Endowment for the Humanities fellowship released me from teaching during the year in which I completed the research and writing of this book. Through a National Endowment for the Humanities Summer Institute, I met an inspiring interdisciplinary cohort and benefited from meeting the greatest living Martianos, including the institute's director, Ivan Schulman, whose scholarly rigor, energy, and generosity evokes that of Martí himself. Thanks also are due to the Rutgers Research Council for defraying costs associated with research travel and publication, to my students and research assistants at Rutgers Newark, especially Spencer McGrath and Jeffrey González, and to many librarians, especially Ann Watkins and Joyce Watson, for help in accessing books, microforms, and periodicals.

I wrote this book over several years in two stimulating academic settings. I am grateful for the intellectual companionship, support, and friendship of my colleagues at Penn State University and Rutgers Newark, especially Djelal Kadir, Aníbal González-Pérez, Cecilia Novero, Barbara Foley, Fran Bartkowski, and Mara Sidney, who read and commented on portions of the manuscript. For incisive and encouraging comments at conference panels, in seminars, and in other settings as I worked through parts of this book, I thank Kristen Silva Gruesz, David Luis-Brown, Kevin Meehan, Jossiana Arroyo, Tovah Cooper, Chris Walsh, and Raúl Fernández. Lenny Cassuto provided indispensable suggestions, mentorship, and friendship at a crucial juncture in the publication process. I would like to thank my series editor, Donald Pease, the readers of my manuscript at Duke University Press, and my editor, Reynolds Smith, for bringing this project to fruition.

Finally, a project that has absorbed me for so many years would not have been possible without the sustenance, wisdom, and support of my family and friends, my most invaluable critics and teachers. To Sonia Baires and Tim Crouse, thank you for setting the unusual example of thinking without ceasing to pursue justice through political engagement. To my friends Martha Iris Rosas, Lisa Rohleder, Chrissy Fowler, Susanna Morrill, Irvin Moore, Rebecca Cota, and Elisa González, among others: thank you for easing forward the quotidian project of living and writing. I wish to acknowledge my enormous debts to my family, and especially my mother, who valued my education more than anyone else and who taught me at a young age that we are mongrels; my father, who instructed me to love my most demanding tasks by his own inimitable example; and my grandmother, Hildagarde, who is watching me fulfill her dream from beyond the grave. A mi familia lejana, Indan Yola y Gilbert Diogenes, y a mi Tía Elisa, no hay palabras para agradecerles los aportes naturales y supernaturales. A mi hija, Marta Zabina, y a Rubén, sólo les digo que la próxima estrofa del poema será construido y completado. Gracias por mantener la fé en sus pechitos que nadie ni nada sacará.