

Document #14: "My Race," Jose Martí (1893)

Even in the Montecristi Manifesto, Jose Marti makes clear that a war of independence would not degrade into a race war. In this selection from his larger work, Patria, Martí reiterates that claim while making clear that an independent Cuba will be home to both whites and blacks, free of racism. Martí employed the term Negroes, which means blacks in Spanish and does not have a pejorative meaning in that language, as a way of expressing equality of the races.



— Statue of Martí in Cienfuegos, Cuba

"Racist" is a confusing word, and it should be clarified. Men have no special rights simply because they belong to one race or another. When you say "men," you have already imbued them with all their rights. Negroes, because they are black, are not inferior or superior to any other men. Whites who say "my race" commit the sin of redundancy; so do Negroes who say the same. Everything that divides men, everything that specifies, separates or pens them in, is a sin against humanity. To what sensible white person would it occur to be vain about being white, and what do Negroes think about whites who are vain about being white and think they have special rights as a result? What must whites think about Negroes who are vain about their color? To insist on racial divisions, on racial differences, in an already divided people, is to place obstacles in the way of public and individual happiness, which can only be obtained by bringing people together as a nation. Nothing inherent in Negroes prevents them from developing their souls as men, and nothing that happens

to them can limit their innate ability. This fact should be stated and demonstrated, for there is much injustice in this world and ignorant prejudice which passes for wisdom: there are still those who, in good faith, believe that Negroes are not capable of the same intelligence and courage as whites. It

does not matter if you call this defense of Nature racism, because it is no more than natural honesty and heartfelt cry for peace and the country's well being. It is alleged that slavery does not imply inferiority in the enslaved race, since Gauls with blue eyes and blond hair were sold as serfs with shackles around their necks in the markets of Rome. This example helps make ignorant whites less prejudiced. Negroes have the right to maintain and prove that their color does not deny them any of the skills and rights of the rest of the human species.

What right do white racists, who believe their race is superior, have for complaining about black racists, who see something special in their own race? What right do black racists, who see a special character in their race, have for complaining about white racists? White men who think their race makes them superior to black men admit the idea of racial difference and authorize and initiate black racists. Black men who proclaim their race-when what they are really proclaiming is the spiritual identity that distinguishes one ethnic group from another-authorize and incite white racists. Peace demands of Nature the recognition of human rights; discrimination is contrary to Nature and to the enemy of peace. Whites who isolate themselves also isolate Negroes. Negroes who isolate themselves incite and isolate whites.

In Cuba, there is no fear of a racial war. Men are more than whites, mulattos or Negroes. Cubans are more than whites, mulattos or Negroes. On the field of battle, dying for Cuba, the souls of whites and Negroes have risen together into the air. In the daily life of defense, loyalty, brotherhood and shrewdness, Negroes have always been there, alongside whites. Negroes, like whites, are divided by their character-timid or brave, self-sacrificing or selfish-into the diverse parties in which men group themselves. Political parties form around common concerns, aspirations, interests and characters. Essential similarities are sought and found beneath superficial differences; the common purpose is the fusion of that which is basic in the analogous characters, even though they may differ in incidentals. In sum, the similarity of characters, which is a superior uniting factor, outweighs the inner frictions between men of varying color and the difficulties that, at times, result. Affinity of character is more powerful than the affinity of color. Negroes, consigned to the unequal or hostile pursuits of the human spirit, will never be able to join, nor will they want to join, against whites in like position. Negroes are too weary of slavery to enter voluntarily into the slavery of color. Ostentatious men who are governed by self-interest will combine, whether white or black, and the generous and selfless will similarly unite. True men, black and white, will treat one another with loyalty and tenderness, out of a sense of merit and the pride of everyone who honors the land in which we were born, black and white alike. Negroes, who now use the word "racist" in good faith, will stop using it when they realize it is the only apparently valid argument that weak men, who honestly believe that Negroes are inferior, use to deny them the full exercise of their rights as men. White and black racists would be equally guilty of racism. Many whites have already forgotten their color, as have many Negroes. Whites and Negroes are working together to develop men's minds, to spread virtue and to promote the triumph of creative work and sublime charity.

In Cuba, there will never be a racial war. The Republic cannot go backwards. Ever since the day of redemption for Negroes in Cuba, ever since the declaration of independence in Guáimaro on April

10, civil rights, granted by the Spanish Government for political expedience, were already practiced prior to Cuba's independence and cannot now be denied-either by the Spaniards who, as long as they breathe in Cuba, will continue dividing black from white Cubans, or by those fighting for independence, who could never deny in freedom the rights which the Spaniards recognized in servitude.

As for the rest, everyone will be free in the sanctity of his home. Merit, the manifest and continuous evidence of culture, and inexorable trade will eventually unite all men. In Cuba, there is much greatness, in both Negroes and whites.
