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Nuestra América (versión inglés)

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Our América

José Martí,

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Esther Allen

The pompous villager thinks his hometown is the whole world. As long as he can stay on as mayor, humiliate the rival who stole his sweetheart, and watch his nest egg grow in its strongbox, he believes the universe is in good order. He knows nothing of the giants in seven-league boots who can crush him underfoot, the battling comets in the heavens which devour the worlds that lie sleeping in their paths. Whatever is left in América of such drowsy provincialism must awaken. These are not times for lying comfortably in bed. Like Juan de Castellanos'[] men, we must have no other pillow but our weapons—weapons of the mind, which vanquish all others. Fortifications built of ideas are more valuable than those built of stone.

No armored prow can smash through a cloud of ideas. A vital idea brandished before the world at the right moment like the mystic banner of Judgment Day can stop a fleet of battleships. Nations that remain strangers must rush to know one another, like soldiers about to go into battle together. Those who once shook their fists at each other like jealous brothers quarreling over who has the bigger house or who owns a plot of land must now grip each other so tightly that their two hands become one. Those who took land from a conquered brother —a brother punished far in excess of any crime—and who, under protection of a criminal tradition, smeared their swords in the same blood that flows through their own veins must now return their brother's land if they don't want to be known as a nation of plunderers. A man of honor does

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trees must line up to block the giant in his seven-league boots. The hour to muster and march in unison is upon us and our ranks must be as compact as the veins of silver in the depths of the Andes.

Only runts—so stunted they have no faith in their own nation— will fail to find the courage. Lacking courage themselves, they'll deny that other men do have it. Their spindly arms, with clinking bracelets and polished fingernails, shaped by Madrid or Paris, cannot reach the lofty tree, and so they say the tree is unreachable. We must load up the ships with these termites that gnaw away at the core of the patria that nurtured them. If they're Parisians or Madrileños, then let them stroll the Prado by lamplight or take an ice at Tortoni's. These carpenter's sons, ashamed that their father was a carpenter! These men born in América, ashamed of the mother who raised them because she wears an Indian tunic! These scoundrels who disown their sick mother and leave her alone in her sickbed! Who is more truly a man? One who stays with his mother to nurse her through her illness? Or one who curses the bosom that bore him, forces her to work somewhere out of sight, and lives off her sustenance in corrupted lands, sporting a worm for a necktie and a sign that says "traitor" on the back of his paper jacket? These sons of our América, which must save herself through her Indians and is on the rise; these deserters, who ask to take up arms with the forces of North America, which drowns its Indians in blood and is on the wane! These delicate creatures who are men but don't want to do men's work! Did Washington, the founder of their nation, go off to live in England when he saw the English marching against his land? But these incredible creatures drag their honor across foreign soil like the *incroyables* of the French Revolution who danced, primped, and dragged out their Rs.

For what other patria can a man take greater pride in than our long-suffering republics of América? — built by the bloody arms of a hundred apostles, amid mute masses of Indians, to the sound of battle between the book and the monk's candlestick. Never before have such advanced and unified nations been created so rapidly from elements so disparate. The haughty man imagines that because he wields a quick pen and coins vivid phrases the earth was made to be his pedestal; he accuses his native republic of hopeless incapacity because its virgin jungles don't offer him scope for parading about the world like a bigwig, driving Persian ponies and spilling champagne as he goes. The incapacity lies not in the nascent country, which demands forms appropriate to itself and a grandeur that is useful to it, but in those who wish to govern unique populaces, singularly and violently composed, by laws inherited from four centuries of free practice in the United States and nineteen centuries of monarchy in France. [2] A Llanero's bolting colt can't be stopped in its tracks by one of Alexander Hamilton's laws. The sluggish blood of the Indian race can't be quickened with a phrase from Sieyès.[3] He who would govern well must attend closely to the place being governed. In América, a good governor isn't one who knows how to govern a German or a Frenchman. It is, rather, one who knows what elements his own country is made up of, and how best to marshal them so as to achieve, by means and institutions arising from the country itself, that desirable state in which every man knows himself and exercises his talents, and all enjoy the abundance that Nature, for the good of all, has bestowed on the land they make fruitful by their labor and defend with

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than the equilibrium among the country's natural elements.

The natural man has triumphed over the imported book in América; natural men have triumphed over an artificial intelligentsia. The native mestizo has triumphed over the exotic criollo. The battle is not between civilization and barbarity^[4] but between false erudition and nature. The natural man is good and will follow and reward a superior intelligence as long as that intelligence doesn't use his submission against him or offend him by ignoring him, which the natural man finds unforgivable. He is prepared to use force to regain the respect of anyone who has wounded his sensibilities or harmed his interests. The tyrants of América have come to power by taking up the cause of these scorned natural elements, and have fallen as soon as they betrayed them. The republics have cured the former tyrannies of their inability to know the true elements of the country, derive the form of government from them, and govern along with them. *Governor*; in a new nation, means *Creator*.

In nations composed of educated and uneducated elements, the uneducated will govern by their habit of attacking and resolving all doubts with their fists, as long as the educated haven't learned the art of governing. The uneducated masses are lazy and timid in matters of the intellect and want to be well-governed, but if a government injures them they shake it off and govern themselves. How can our governors emerge from our universities when there isn't a university in América that teaches the most basic element of the art of governing: the analysis of all that is unique to the peoples of América? Our young men go out into the world wearing Yankee- or French-colored glasses, and aspire to govern by guesswork over a country about which they know nothing. Men who are unacquainted with the rudiments of politics should be barred from a career in politics. The top academic prizes shouldn't go to the finest ode, but to the best study of the political factors in the country where the student lives. In the newspapers, the lecture halls, and the academies, the study of the country's real factors must advance. Knowing those factors, without blinkers or circumlocution, will suffice. Anyone who deliberately or unknowingly sets aside a part of the truth will ultimately fail because of that missing truth, which expands, under such neglect, to bring down whatever was built without it. Solving a problem in full knowledge of its elements is easier than solving it without knowing them. The natural man, strong and indignant, comes and overthrows an authority accumulated from books because that authority isn't administered in keeping with the manifest needs of the country. To know is to solve. To know the country and govern it in accordance with that knowledge is the only way to free it from tyranny. The European university must yield to the American university. The history of América from the Incas to the present must be taught in its smallest detail, even if the Greek Archons go untaught. Our own Greece is preferable to the Greece that is not ours: we need it more. Statesmen who arise from the nation must replace statesmen who are alien to it. Let the world be grafted onto our republics, but we must be the trunk. And all the vanquished pedants can hold their tongues: there is no patria a man can take greater pride in than our long-suffering American republics.

Our feet upon a rosary, our faces white-skinned, and our bodies a motley of Indian and criollo, we boldly entered the community of nations. Bearing the



liberty to a handful of magnificent students who chose a Spanish general to lead Central America against Spain. Still accustomed to monarchy, but with the sun blazing in their chests, the Venezuelans to the north and the Argentines to the south set out to build nations. When the two heroes clashed^[8] and the continent was about to erupt, one of them, not the lesser of the two, turned back. But heroism is less glorious in peacetime than in war, and thus rarer; it's easier for a man to die with honor than to think in an orderly way. Exalted and unanimous sentiments are more readily governed than the divergent, arrogant, ambitious, and foreign ideas that emerge when the battle is over. Confronted with the population's cat-like wariness and the sheer weight of reality, the same powers once swept up in the epic struggle began to undermine the governing edifice, which had raised the standard of lands sustained by wise governance in the continual practice of reason and freedom above the crude and singular regions of our mestizo América, in lands where bare legs alternate with Parisian dress-coats. The hierarchical character of the colonies resisted the democratic organization of the republic. The capital city, in its elegant cravat, left the countryside, in its horsehide boots, waiting at the door. The redeemers born from books didn't understand that a revolution that triumphed when the soul of the land was unleashed by a savior's voice had to govern with the soul of the land, and not against or without it. For all these reasons, América began enduring and still endures the weary task of reconciling the discordant and hostile elements inherited from its perverse, despotic colonizer with the imported forms and ideas that have, in their lack of local reality, delayed the advent of a logical form of government. Deformed by three centuries of a rule that denied men the right to exercise their reason, and overlooking or refusing to listen to the ignorant masses that helped it redeem itself, the continent entered into new kind of government based on reason— which should have meant the reason of all directed towards things of concern to all, and not the university-schooled reason of the few imposed upon the rustic reason of others. The problem with independence was not the change in form, but the change in spirit.

Common cause had to be made with the oppressed, in order to consolidate a system that opposed the interests and governmental habits of the oppressor. But the tiger frightened away by the flash of gunfire will creep back in the night to find his prey. He will die with flames shooting from his eyes, his claws unsheathed, but now his step is inaudible for he comes on velvet paws, and when the prey awakens, the tiger is upon him. The colony lived on in the republic. But our América is saving itself from its gravest failings—the arrogance of the capital cities, the blind triumph of the scorned campesinos, the excessive importation of foreign ideas and formulas, the wicked and impolitic disdain for the native race—through the superior virtue, authenticated by necessary bloodshed, of the republic that struggles against the colony. The tiger lurks behind every tree, crouches in every corner. He will die, his claws unsheathed, flames shooting from his eyes.

“These countries will save themselves,” as the Argentine Rivadivía, ^[9] who erred on the side of urbanity during uncouth times, once proclaimed. A machete won't fit in a silken scabbard, nor can the *lanzón* be repudiated in a nation won by the *lanzón*,^[10] for the nation will go into a rage and stand at



continent of light. Under the influence of the critical reading which, in Europe, has replaced the blundering ideas about phalansteries^[12] that the previous generation was steeped in, the real man is being born to América in these very real times.

What a sight we were, with an athlete's chest, a dandy's hands, and a child's forehead. We were a veritable fancy dress ball, wearing British trousers, a Parisian waistcoat, and a North American overcoat, topped with a Spanish bullfighter's montera. The Indian circled us mutely and went to the mountaintop to christen his children. The black man, spied upon from above, sang his heart's music in the night, alone and unknown, between waves and wild beasts. The campesinos, men of the land, creators, rose up in blind indignation against the disdainful city, their own creation. We wore military epaulets and judges' robes in countries that came into the world wearing rope sandals and Indian headbands. The wise course would have been to unite—with the charity in our hearts and our founders' audacity—the Indian headband and the judicial robe, to disentrammel the Indian, make a place for the able black, and tailor liberty to the bodies of those who rose up and triumphed in its name. What we had were the judge, the general, the man of letters, and the cleric. Our angelic youth, as if struggling to escape the grasping tentacles of an octopus, cast their minds into the heavens and fell back in sterile glory, crowned in clouds. The natural people, driven by instinct, blind with triumph, overwhelmed their gilded rulers. No Yankee or European book could furnish the key to the Hispano-American enigma. So people tried hatred instead, and each year our countries amounted to less and less. Weary now of useless hatred and the struggle of book against sword, reason against the monk's candlestick, city against countryside, and the quarreling urban castes' impossible empire against the tempestuous or inert natural nation, we begin, almost without realizing it, to try love. The nations arise and salute one another. "What are we?" they ask, and begin telling each other what they are. When a problem arises in Cojimar, the solution is no longer sought in Danzig. The frock-coats are still French but the thinking is starting to be American. The young men of América are rolling up their sleeves and plunging their hands into the dough to make it rise with the leavening of their sweat. They understand that there is too much imitation, that salvation lies in creating. *Create* is the password of this generation. Make wine from plantains. It may be sour, but it is our wine! It is finally understood that a country's form of government must adapt to the country's natural elements, that unless absolute ideas are expressed in relative forms, an error of form will cause them to collapse; that liberty, in order to be viable, must be sincere and complete, that if the republic does not open its arms to all and include all in its progress, it dies. The tiger that lurks inside us attacks through the rents in our social fabric, and the tiger that lurks outside us does, too. The general holds the cavalry to the pace of the infantry; if he leaves the infantry too far behind, the enemy will surround the cavalry. Politics is strategy. Nations must continually criticize themselves—for criticism is health—but with a single heart and a single mind. Go down amidst the unfortunate and raise them up in your arms! Let the heart's fires thaw all that is frozen and motionless in América, and let the country's natural blood surge and throb through its veins! Standing tall, and with the joy of those who work in their eyes, the new men of América salute each other from one country



native characters onstage. Academies debate practical subjects. Poetry snips off its wild, Zorilla-esque locks and leaves its red waistcoat hanging from the tree of past glories.^[13] Prose, polished and gleaming, is replete with ideas. The governors of Indian republics learn Indian languages.^[14]

América is saving herself from all her dangers. Over some republics the octopus sleeps still. Others, by the law of equilibrium, run with mad, sublime speed to the sea, to recover the lost centuries. Others, forgetting that Juárez^[15] traveled in a coach drawn by mules, hitch their coaches to the wind and take soap bubbles as their coachmen— as the poison of luxury, liberty's enemy, corrupts the frivolous and opens the door to foreigners. The virile character of other nations is being refined by the epic spirit of a threatened independence. And others, in rapacious wars against their neighbors, nurture an unruly soldier caste that may one day devour them. But our América may also face another danger, which does not come from within it, but from the differing origins, methods, and interests of the continent's two factions. The hour is near when she will be approached by an enterprising and forceful nation that will demand intimate relations with her, though it does not know her and disdains her. And virile nations, self-made by the rifle and the law, love other virile nations, and only those. The hour of unbridled passion and ambition from which North America may escape by the ascendancy of the purest elements in its blood—or into which its vengeful and sordid masses, its tradition of conquest, and the self-interest of a cunning leader could plunge it—is not yet so near, even to the most apprehensive eye, that there is no time left for it to be confronted and averted by the manifestation of a discreet and unswerving pride. Its dignity as a republic, in the eyes of the watchful nations of the Universe, places a brake upon North America that our América must not remove by puerile provocation, ostentatious arrogance, or patricidal discord. Therefore the urgent duty of our América is to show herself as she is, united in soul and intent, fast overcoming the crushing weight of her past, and stained only with the fertilizing blood shed by hands that do battle against ruins, or by veins opened by our former masters. The disdain of the formidable neighbor who does not know her is the greatest danger that faces our América. It is urgent—for the day of the visit draws close—that her neighbor come to know her, and quickly, so he will not disdain her. Out of ignorance, he may begin to covet her. But when he knows her, he will remove his hands from her in respect. One must have faith in the best in man, and distrust the worst. One must give the best every opportunity to reveal itself and prevail over the worst. For if not, the worst will prevail. Nations should have one special pillory for those who incite them to futile hatreds, and another for those who do not tell them the truth until it is too late.

There is no racial hatred because there are no races. Low, weak minds working in dim light, have cobbled together and kept in circulation the library-shelf races that the honest traveler and cordial observer search for in vain within the justice of Nature, where triumphant love and turbulent appetite demonstrate again and again the universal identity of mankind. The soul, equal and eternal, emanates from bodies that are diverse in form and color. Anyone who promotes and disseminates opposition or hatred among races is committing a sin against humanity. But within the jumble of peoples that lives in close



character, cease to be latent national preoccupations and become a serious threat to the neighboring, isolated and weak lands that the strong country declares to be perishable and inferior. To think is to serve. We must not, out of a villager's antipathy, impute some lethal and congenital wickedness to the continent's light-skinned nation simply because it does not speak our language or share our view of what home life should be or resemble us in its political failings, which are different from ours, or because it does not think highly of quick-tempered, swarthy men, or look with charity, from its still uncertain eminence, upon those less favored by history who, in heroic stages are ascending the path that all republics travel. But neither should we seek to conceal the obvious facts of the problem which can, for the peace of the centuries, be resolved by timely study and the urgent, wordless union of the continental soul. For the hymn of unanimity is already ringing forth. The present generation bears industrious América along the road sanctioned by our sublime forefathers. From the Río Bravo^[16] to the Straits of Magellan, the Great Cemi,^[17] riding high astride a condor, has scattered the seeds of the new América across the romantic nations of the continent and the suffering islands of the sea!

[1] *Juan de Castellanos* (1522-1607): Spanish poet and chronicler of the conquest of New Granada (now Colombia) in which he took part.

[2] *Four centuries*: Curiously, Martí exaggerates the period of "free practice" in the United States by locating the nation's origins at the moment of Columbus's discovery of the Americas in 1492, rather than with the first European settlements on the east coast of North America in the early 1600s (less than three centuries before 1891 when this manifesto is written). He also exaggerates the duration of the French monarchy, which began not at the death of Christ but with the establishment of the Kingdom of the Franks in 486, fourteen centuries earlier and not nineteen, as he states. Perhaps the temporal exaggerations are intended to parody the exaggerated authority conceded to U.S. and French ideas against which Martí protests.

[3] *Emmanuel Joseph Sieyès* (1748-1836): Clergyman, author of the manifesto *What is the Third Estate?* (1789), and leading figure in the French Revolution, who went on to become one of the central instigators of Napoleon's 1799 coup d'état.

[4] *Civilization and barbarity*: Allusion to a key 1845 work by Domingo Faustino Sarmiento titled *Facundo o civilización y barbarie en las pampas argentinas*. In it, Sarmiento, Argentina's president from 1868 to 1874, used a regional caudillo or strongman, Juan Facundo Quiroga, as an example of barbaric forms of government sprung up in the areas beyond the civilization of the capital cities.

[5] *A priest*: Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla (1778-1850), who launched Mexico's war of independence from Spain in 1810.

[6] *A woman*: Josefa Ortíz de Domínguez (1773-1829), also known as *la*



insurgency.

[7] *Spanish cleric*: José María Castillo (1785-1848), who promoted Central American unity, as well as education and equality in Guatemala.

[8] *Two heroes clashed*: General José de San Martín (1778-1850), leader of the revolution against Spanish colonial rule in the Southern Cone, and General Simón Bolívar (1783-1830) who led the revolution in the upper regions of the South American continent. The clash occurred at the famous Guayaquil interview (1822), after which San Martín ceded command of all his forces to Bolívar and left for France, never to return.

[9] Bernardino *Rivadavia* (1780-1845): Argentine politician who defended the Spanish colony against English invaders and subsequently fought Spain for its independence. Elected as the first president of the United Provinces of Río de la Plata in 1826, he was forced to resign by the caudillo Juan Facundo Quiroga (see Note 4 above), and went into exile in Spain.

[10] *Lanzón*: a short, thick spear with a large metal grip used by campesinos to protect their fields.

[11] *Iturbide's Congress*: Agustín de Iturbide (1783-1824) was a general who initially fought with Spain against Mexico's independence movement, then later joined forces with insurgent general Guerrero to assure Mexico's independence. However, instead of the liberal state envisioned by the insurgents, Iturbide ushered in a conservative one. When his soldiers proclaimed him emperor, the newly independent Mexican Congress, angry but cowed, ratified the proclamation (1822). A revolution soon broke out against him and in 1823 he was forced to abdicate.

[12] *Phalansteries*: The French socialist philosopher Charles Fourier (1772-1837) designed a structure called a phalanstery, intended to house self-contained utopian communities of 500-2000 inhabitants. Few of them were ever built.

[13] *Zorilla-esque locks...red waistcoat*: José Zorilla (1817-93) was a Spanish romantic poet. The waistcoat is the famous *gilet rouge* worn by French romantic poet Theophile Gautier (1811-1872) to the opening performance of Victor Hugo's romantic play *Hernani* in 1830. By snipping off the wild locks and abandoning the red waistcoat, Latin American poetry leaves Romanticism behind.

[14] *Learn Indian languages*: Perhaps a tacit reference to Benito Juárez (1806-1872), Mexico's president from 1858 to 1872, who was of Zapotec Indian origins. Juárez's first language was Zapotec; he did not learn Spanish until he went to school.

[15] Benito *Juárez* (1806-1872): See Note 14 above.

[16] *Río Bravo*: Known as the Rio Grande in the United States, and as the *Río Bravo del norte* in Spanish. this river marks a long stretch of the southern



[17] *Cemi*: A deity or ancestral spirit worshiped by the Taino, an indigenous people of the Caribbean. The cemi (or zemi) was often represented as a tricorned clay object, which was believed to house the spirit.

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