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The Natural, the Harmonious, and the United

In “Our America,” José Martí proposes a method by which Latin America should govern and gain respect from other world powers. In this method, he discourages copying foreign ways of governing and stresses that a home grown method of government fit for its constituents is best. To convey this, Martí utilizes many references to nature, which serve to emphasize the ‘natural elements’ that he believes should be used in proper governance. It is these references that illuminate the type of unity that José Martí feels is needed for Latin America to stand up against colonial powers.

Martí uses nature references to enhance the argument that “government is nothing more than the balance of the natural elements of the country”(380) by equating qualities of trees with characteristics Latin American governments should have. Early in the text, Martí states, “We can no longer be a people of leaves that live suspended in air”(379), suggesting that the people in Latin America should not be like the “vain villager” who only looks out for themselves(379). Rather, “The trees must join ranks so that the giant with seven league boots cannot pass!”(379), which through words like ‘join’, emphasizes the stability and unity necessary for ridding itself of the potential threats of colonial control from ‘the giant with seven league boots.’ This potential stability and unity is complicated by the foreign and artificial ideas of governance consuming Latin America, which prevents Latin Americans from grasping the importance of understanding its own populace to govern well. While Martí believes that “exotic politics” are important, they should not take precedence over “national politics,” which is why he believes that the exterior

world should only be grafted onto their republics, “but the trunk must be..[their].. republics”(381).

Martí further uses nature references as a means of emphasizing the harmony a natural government can provide. This harmony is incredibly critical since it embodies the unity Martí values. For example, when talking about a government that understands the innate characteristics of the country, Martí describes it as a “desirable state...where everyone enjoys the abundance that nature gave to all the people that they might make it fertile with their labor and defend it with their lives”(380). Here, Martí describes a natural government as a ‘desirable state’ because the harmony it will bring will allow all to enjoy the country’s resources, while fostering a national identity characterized by love and pride for their own habitat. Martí portrays complete confidence in his solution for Latin America because he says, “These countries will save themselves because a moderate temperament that comes from the harmonious serenity of nature seems to prevail in the continent of light”(381). This implies that having a foreign government fosters more aggressive temperaments, whereas in a natural government, the ‘moderate temperament’ provides for more unity as what happens due ‘the harmonious serenity of nature.’

Towards the end of the text, Martí contrasts nature references with artificial ones. These artificial references illustrate the lack of unity that foreign forms of government create, further strengthening his plea for natural governments. When depicting what Latin America became after colonialism, Martí states “we were a mask, with English trousers, Parisian vest, North American jacket, and Spanish cap”(381), which depicts the state of Latin America as one that was hiding its natural identity through all these foreign clothing not their own. While this is not the case for all people as shown by the fact that “the native mestizo has vanquished the exotic creole”(380), this divide between Latin Americans adopting foreign forms and others re-adopting

their natural form presented conflict since the foreign governing styles were not all inclusive of the present complexity of Latin America at the time. For Martí, there had to be a way to recreate a government accepting of all differences in a nation, for that is the only way that they can prevent the “tiger within” from entering “through the cracks” as well as the tiger from “without”(382). The answer was clear: natural governments.

Overall, Martí uses these nature references to demonstrate the harmony and unity a natural government can provide; this unity being important for Latin American prosperity and respect amongst colonial powers. Martí initially uses these references to equate the qualities of trees with what a natural government should be like. He then clings onto themes of nature and harmony to embody the unity these potential natural governments can have. And lastly, he strategically contrasts the natural with the artificial to successfully reinforce his argument that Latin American countries need natural governments.

Works Cited

Martí, José. "Our America." *Keen's Latin American Civilization: Volume Two: The Modern Era*, edited and translated by Robert M. Buffington and Lila Caimari, Taylor & Francis, 2018, pp. 378-383.

