

Fire and the “Changing Narrative” Thing

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Changing narratives is a new buzz term. I even heard a Distinguished Professor say he can change the narrative about himself. He can't change it much. Narratives are intellectual, depending on concepts that depend on societies. They are ultimately conservative.

This was known in early Buddhism. The Buddha said emotional is the highest form of wisdom, ahead of rationalization, which depends on traditions. He didn't say “narrative change” is useless. But the *merely* intellectual is the status quo, fundamentally.

Toni Morrison referred to the story beneath the story. James Baldwin called it a burning fire. In a letter to Angela Davis, awaiting trial, he wrote:

“we have been told nothing but lies, lies about ourselves and our kinsmen and our past, and about love, life, and death”.

In other words, everything.

Baldwin discovered what “history had made of him”. It happened when he was jailed in Paris with North Africans. He learned he was distinct, not for being black, but for being powerful. Despised in the US, he was a product of US power: a “bastard of the west”. In a new biography, *Living in Fire*,^[i] Bill V. Mullen says Baldwin should be “understood the way we understand Fanon, García Marquez, Assata Shakur”: They wrote outside the US, aware of imperialism: what history has made of us. They knew the fire.

The point is hard, for some. In *Young Castro*,^[ii] Harvard University Senior Lecturer, Jonathen Hansen, offers a sympathetic portrait of Fidel Castro with no such awareness. He mentions the struggle for independence but doesn't explain how and why the “impossible” gripped whole generations.

In Náhuatl culture, of Middle America, fire images refer to truth. You get it by burning up, metaphorically. Volcanic images run through centuries-long traditions from which Castro emerged.

Hansen leaves that out. It's like writing a biography of Stephen Hawking and leaving out collapsing stars and imaginary time. We wouldn't have had Hawking without Hubble, Lemaitre, and Einstein, and Castro couldn't be who he was without Varela, Bolívar, Luz, and Cespedes. He said it repeatedly. Yet Hansen writes about Castro without mentioning any of them. They knew about fire. Hansen doesn't.

Arguably, the most notable “narrative change” in the Americas was by José Martí, 19th century Cuban independence leader. He changed the narrative of US supremacy.

Cuban scholar Juan Marinello says one of the great puzzles about Cuba, for its enemies (and some sympathizers), is how ideas have survived. It's because they weren't "mere thinking", as Einstein put it.

Latin America had no "cultural passport", no identity.^[iii] It had resisted Spanish colonialism for hundreds of years, but the models were English, French or US. Martí was the first, arguably, to set out an idea of Latin Americanness. He said, famously, that ideas are stronger weapons than ones of steel. But Martí's ideas weren't *just* ideas. He proposed "una cultura nueva" (new way of living).^[iv]

It wasn't about *naming* identities and giving some priority. Martí did what Baldwin intended: challenged *the terms* of daily life: "love, life and death". In 1961, Baldwin said "the only hope for this country ... [is] to undermine the standards by which the middle-class American lives". The bridge uniting black people, he wrote, is suffering. He articulated that suffering drawing on his own lived reality.

But Baldwin gets fitted into a contradictory narrative: identity politics. Mullin wonders whether Baldwin at the end of his life recognized black lesbians as political agents or whether he still saw black men as agents of change. It seems a silly question, given what we learn about Baldwin in Mullin's book. Baldwin expressed suffering within the community he knew. He thereby moved his readers to understanding *human* suffering, the place from which we know other people *as people*.

For instance, Palestinians. Baldwin learned, early on, from a "radical, white female mentor" that white people didn't act as they did because they were white but for other reasons. Trying to know those reasons "burned at the core of his political education". It made him an internationalist.

As a result, Baldwin discovered "something of the universal and inevitable human ferment which explodes into what is called a revolution". It's not narrative. It's not identity.

In *Report to Greco*, describing his life-changing reaction to the 10th anniversary of the Russian Revolution, Nikos Kazantzakis writes that

"Beyond all reasoning, beyond learned bickering ... higher than programs, higher than leaders, higher than Russia ... [was a] lightening flash [that] illuminated their minds ... All men are brothers!"

It's connection. Kazantzakis says the "lightening flash" happened as "boundaries were crumbling away, [and] names, countries and races were vanishing". Perhaps it sounds cliché, but it makes a philosophical point. Before identity, and naming, is connection. It *explains* narrative change, when it counts.

Closing the new documentary on her life, Toni Morrison describes how, in an art exhibit, she looks through a mirror and sees someone approaching. She raises her hand to the glass and an unknown figure meets her hand on the other side. Morrison says, "I didn't need to know her name or who she was, or anything about her." The connection was enough.

Imperialism's narratives are about names: "people" and "non-people". The "non-people" are

somehow not like us and our self-image requires knowing them as such. Martí called it “historical logic”, as did Fanon. Hansen plays right into it, assuming about Castro what would never be assumed about Hawking: that his actions are explained by his idiosyncrasies not by a mind rooted in a history moving forward.

He doesn’t know that Castro, like Morrison, can be a “friend of my mind” because he expressed what Martí called “energía original”, and Baldwin called “dignity”. Whatever the name, it must first be felt, like the Náhuatl fire and sun imagery that drove Martí, personally first, and *then* intellectually.

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Notes

[i] Pluto Press, 2019. See review forthcoming at <https://www.nyjournalofbooks.com/>

[ii] <https://www.nyjournalofbooks.com/book-review/young-castro>

[iii] Noel Salomón “José Martí y la toma de conciencia latinoamericana” Anuario del Centro de estudios martianos (4 1972)

[iv] Pedro Pablo Rodríguez, *Los dos Américas*, 5

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