

A Saturday evening full of light

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On a very bright Sunday, in the mid-19th century, the young José Martí walked the streets of Havana alongside his father. Cuban poet Fina García Marruz described that afternoon in a renowned essay, the result of rigorous biographical research.

“The light is golden and ripe, like an orange from Valencia, a pleasure to see... An island breeze blows lightly, amidst the ardor and the intense light of the hour, affectionate like a mother’s message. Only the old man and the child seem to enjoy the innocent stroll,” evoked Fina.

The writer imagined Martí walking along the Alameda de Paula and through the side streets, “where the light no longer expands, but seemed to condense, to solidify.” The neighborhood where he was born was one of the 16 of colonial Havana, well guarded by its walls and its five fortresses surrounded by canyons, which pointed to the sea.

In these streets he probably saw “two soldiers followed by prostitutes. A poor gentleman, with his jacket suitably darned,” an “obese grocer at the door of his store with some volunteers,” a “Creole mother, all gifts and ribbons,” who doesn’t want her son “to play with a black child.”

And the young Martí stopped enjoying his stroll, the light of the afternoon, the colonial houses. That day, his pale Creole face showed “repressed anger,” according to Fina. He knew then that Cuba touched his very soul, faced with “the slightest hint of injustice or vassalage.”

March of the Torches in Havana, 2018. Photo: Ariel Cecilio Lemus

His childhood was key to the hero’s life. The streets that saw him grow, those imagined by the poet and those that exist today, more than a century and a half later, will never forget that child whose memory illuminates the history of Cuba. That is why, on the eve of another anniversary of Martí’s birth (January 28, 1853), thousands of Cubans carried their torches throughout the island’s streets, representing “an army of light.”

Every year, the March of the Torches sees the country's youth march alongside representatives of the Centennial Generation, who began this tradition 65 years ago, and months later attacked the Moncada Garrison, before disembarking from the Granma yacht and leading a triumphant Revolution that made the dreams of the Apostle of Cuban Independence a reality.

Army General Raúl Castro Ruz led the march in Havana, among a crowd that chanted "I am Fidel," sang and raised their torches or their mobile phones, taking selfies, laughing and holding hands.
March of the Torches in Havana, 2018. Photo: Ariel Cecilio Lemus

Thus, this Saturday, January 27, Cuba remembered her National Hero, he who shortly before dying for the independence of his homeland wrote to María Mantilla: "Only light is comparable to my happiness."
