In this chapter I will use a variety of discursive strategies to answer what the relation is between the specific characteristics of José Martí’s photos and the photographic medium as typically employed during this period. It should be noted that on Sunday, January 3, 1841, thanks to George Washington Halsey, Cuba became the second country in the world and the first in Hispanic America to open a public or commercial daguerreotype studio.1 The prediction later made by José Martí in 1885 that “photographers will populate the world!”2 was thus something less than a visionary prophecy since by 1839, more than a decade before his birth, a veritable explosion of enthusiasm for the new daguerreotype technology had begun in Havana. The constant exchange of daguerreotypists among Havana, Paris, and New York was spectacular during these years, and a number of businesses devoted to the daguerreotype also emerged. Several daguerreotypists from the United States, Canada, Italy, England, Spain, France, and Cuba itself participated in the process of invention and commercialization of the daguerreotype in Havana. This period was when Louis Daguerre’s machine began to be perfected to the point that three-minute shots were made possible, and the evolution of the procedure was such that by the mid-1850s, although it was called “daguerreotype on paper,” what was happening in Cuba and some other countries was in fact photography, complete with the power of large-scale reproduction (Del Valle 2004–5, 4–15; Del Valle 2009, 1–6). This historic
situation leads us to a question that guides this chapter: what is the relationship between the historic phenomenon of photography in general and Martí’s iconography in particular?

I bring up this information in order to establish certain historical and ideological basis for the relationship between Martí’s photographic images and the invention of photography. The fact that Martí was born during the age of photography’s rise should be highlighted because of the intimate relationship between his ideas on literary style and the new technological inventions, especially photography. It is not difficult to argue, then, that the success of Martí’s iconicity has been influenced by the fact that he was born precisely in the apogee of photography. After all, as Julio Ramos has articulated, one of Martí’s main contributions as politician and thinker was his enormous effort to find a place for the new Latin American intellectual in the midst of nineteenth century’s expansion of scientism and new technologies (Ramos 1989, 145–243).

As an adult residing in New York in 1881, he wrote enthusiastically and in detail about the invention of photography:

It was an enormous advance to succeed in affixing images obtained in the camera obscura, but it is no less certain that man has not contented himself with all the advances achieved by photography. For nearly a half century the affixation of colors, that is, the obtention of images with their own coloration, has likewise been sought tirelessly. This great invention, whose achievement has been announced repeatedly, but never produced, seems finally resolved by a procedure devised by Messrs. Cros and Carpentier, who just presented, to the Paris Academy of Sciences, photographs of a watercolor, in which the details and colors of the original are reproduced exactly. They were produced on photographs by way of three gravures for each object; gravures obtained respectively through three liquid diaphragms, one orange, one green, and one violet. The opacity and transparency vary from one gravure to another on homologous sections of the image, in order to distribute the relative quantities of red, yellow, and blue (which are the primary colors that form all of nature’s hues), so that all of the model’s shades are composed and reproduced. Once the layer of sensitive collodion is applied to the paper or glass, in order to obtain the negative proofs, it