Connecting to Cuban national identity through literature: an examination of memory, nostalgia, trauma and exile in Oscar Hijuelos's Our House in the Last World and A Simple Habana Melody

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Connecting to Cuban national identity through literature: an examination of memory, nostalgia, trauma and exile in Oscar Hijuelos’s *Our House in the Last World* and *A Simple Habana Melody*

by

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER ONE: <em>OUR HOUSE IN THE LAST WORLD</em></td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER TWO: <em>A SIMPLE HABANA MELODY</em></td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONCLUSION</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction

*Memory: the mental capacity or faculty of retaining and reviving facts, events, impressions, etc., or of recalling or recognizing previous experiences.

*Nostalgia: a wistful desire to return in thought or in fact to a former time in one's life, to one's home or homeland, or to one's family and friends; a sentimental yearning for the happiness of a former place or time.¹

Oscar Hijuelos is a contemporary Cuban American fiction writer who has received a lot of critical attention and notoriety in the past decade or so. Hijuelos won the 1990 Pulitzer Prize for his novel *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love* and the book was later made into a film. Hijuelos’s win—the first Latino to win the prize for fiction—and success was a significant accomplishment within the Latino community as it represented their acceptance into mainstream literature. Hijuelos offers his audience a fresh blend of popular culture, music, Cuban images, and immigrant experiences. Latinos are the fastest growing group in the U.S.² Indeed, immigration itself has been on the minds of many U.S. Americans in the preceding decade and is currently playing a role in this year’s fast-approaching presidential race. Thus it seems apparent that a closer, critical examination of what exactly Hijuelos is doing with his work is in order. How Hijuelos has been able to capture non-Latino audiences

¹ Definitions from Dictionary.com
² An Associated Press article from June 10th, 2005, available on MSNBC online, claims, “Hispanics now one-seventh of U.S. population” and “Census Bureau estimates 41.3 million in fastest-growing ethnic bloc” citing “immigration and a birth rate outstripping that of non-Hispanic blacks and whites” as the reason for the growing population.
during a heated political time (and featuring a country with a sordid history with the U.S.) is certainly something impressive, something worth taking a look at. This exploration of Hijuelos’s work will allow readers a new perspective about U.S. definitions of “immigrant” and “Latino.” A writer such as Hijuelos, with his mainstream appeal yet culturally specific style, content, and narrative devices, makes U.S. audiences rethink the boundaries of American literature.

The U.S. has had a tumultuous relationship with the island of Cuba for decades. Cuba has both social and political significance for the United States for many reasons, but the major issues keeping Cuba on the minds of U.S. politicians and citizens are geographical proximity and Fidel Castro. Cuba is located just 112 miles from the coast of Florida (and about 90 miles from Key West) and yet for the most part remains untouchable by many U.S. Americans initially because of the dictator Batista’s fall to Castro in 1958 and later because of the travel embargo firmly in place since 1962 under John F. Kennedy’s presidency.

Previous to Castro’s takeover, the U.S. was a large presence in Cuba physically, with many American families living there to work for U.S. companies, and in commerce. Jacqueline Kaye writes, “From 1898 onwards the US freely intervened in Cuban affairs, sometimes at the invitation of Cuban politicians” and, it is safe to say, sometimes without invitation (133).

Since JFK’s travel embargo in 1962, tension between the two countries has not lessened much, if at all. Probably because Cuba is a kind of forbidden experience, an untouchable

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3 Batista, in power partly through a coup staged by the U.S. government, had historically favored U.S. companies in Cuba. When Castro took power, he forced all U.S. companies out.
4 The Bay of Pigs invasion likely did not breed amicable feelings between the U.S. and Cuba, either.
5 For a brief overview of the U.S.’s history with Cuba, see Jacqueline Kaye’s essay “Entre Americanos: Cuba and the United States.”
exotic space, for most U.S. citizens, it is logical that they would be curious about Cuban culture and history and thus take an interest in the writing of Cuban Americans.

As for Cubans or Cuban Americans living in the United States, Cuba is likely still untouchable. 6 Most Cuban Americans in the U.S. today are here because their parents or grandparents fled Cuba or voluntarily became exiles in the U.S.—knowing that a return to Cuba was unlikely unless Fidel Castro stepped down or was overthrown from leadership of the country. 7 Because of this voluntary exile, Cuban American feelings toward the island of Cuba are understandably mixed. The island is at once romanticized and viewed as home, tropical, and fondly remembered as well as the site of suffering for some people. For immigrants or exiles, leaving Cuba was experienced as a traumatic break with their homeland—something most would not choose to do if it could be helped—but for the exile the situation in Cuba warranted that traumatic break despite whatever hardships they would face in a new country. Cuban American literature often attempts to unpack this specific trauma and offer readers a view (or multiple views) of what this traumatic break with one’s home can result in. In Cuban American literature, the themes of memory, nostalgia, and working through the idea of what “being Cuban” could mean play prominent roles in the construction of narrative and progress toward the healing of their specific trauma. 8

Hijuelos was born in 1951 in New York City. His family visited Cuba before Castro’s take-over and on one of these trips, Hijuelos became ill and spent some time in a children’s

6 Hereafter “Cubans” refers to those living in the United States specifically but will not read as such for redundancy’s sake. “Cuban Americans” refers to U.S. Cuban Americans.
7 During the writing of this thesis, Castro did indeed step down, during February of 2008, but it remains to be seen if this will affect feelings toward Cuba or travel visas.
8 For example, Cristina Garcia, a commercially and critically successful Cuban American writer also takes on this topic in her fiction.
hospital in Connecticut. He graduated from the City University of New York and worked in advertising and later became a professor of English. Hijuelos, to date, has published six novels, *Our House in the Last World* (1983), *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love* (1990), *The Fourteen Sisters of Emilio Montez O’Brien* (1993), *Mr. Ives’ Christmas* (1995), *Empress of the Splendid Season* (1999), and *Simple Habana Melody (from when the world was good)* (2002), and an as yet unreleased novel *Just Around the Corner, a Thousand Miles Away* (September 2008). Because Hijuelos himself probably only knew stories of Cuba passed down through his family, it influenced his desire to create “memories” of Cuba through literature. It is likely that Hijuelos is writing from the perspective of only knowing Cuba in the past-tense. Cuban exile María de los Angeles Torres agrees: “Indeed, our relationship to Cuba could only be with the past. Cuba had always been a memory; it didn’t exist outside the horror stories we heard from relatives” (31). While I am not suggesting that all Hijuelos heard were “horror” stories, I do believe his access solely to second hand memories, not first hand experiences, affected his narratives of Cuba. This motivation for creativity becomes important in trying to understand one’s cultural heritage when all a person has known are the memories and stories of others. For Hijuelos, literature is his place to re-create events and spaces and put them together as he imagines them. More than half of Hijuelos’s fiction is evidence of his attempt to re-create. Hijuelos’s *Mambo Kings* and *The 14 Sisters of Emilio Montez O’Brien*, for example, are both told from the present and into the past and feature very memorable relics of memory like old television episodes and photographs.

In this thesis, I will examine two of Hijuelos’s novels, *Our House in the Last World*, his first novel, published in 1983, and *A Simple Habana Melody (from when the world was*
good) which was published in 2002. Although these two novels have received noticeably less critical attention than his Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, they illustrate how Hijuelos uses and constructs memory and nostalgia as a way towards healing or creation and are thus significant contributions to understanding narratives of Cuban identity in the U.S. 

Additionally, I believe these two novels to be excellent examples of a very specific Cuban American cultural practice: remembering.

**Trauma, Memory, and Cultural Practices**

“Our memory is our coherence, our reason, our feeling, even our action. Without it, we are nothing.” -Luis Buñuel

A traumatic event is arguably defined as an event “in which a person feels utterly helpless in the face of a force that is perceived to be life-threatening” (Brison 40). Trauma is “[…] a blow […] to the tissues of the mind […] that results in injury or some other disturbance” (Erikson 183). Exile, as encountered in Hijuelos’s novel *A Simple Habana Melody*, is traumatic. In addition to being forced to leave one’s country, though, there is the question of a foreseeable return. On the subject of exile and nostalgia, de los Angeles Torres offers, “[[…] our nostalgia was constricted by the impossibility of return and consequently became frozen in the past: la cultura conjelada” (31). Exiles become stuck, “frozen” because they are

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9 Critics who have published on these two novels include Maya Socolovsky and Gustavo Pérez-Firmat, and both novels received *New York Times* book reviews but Hijuelos’s other works, most notably *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love*, have been published on much more widely. For more on Mambo Kings, see Richard Patteson’s “Oscar Hijuelos: ‘Eternal Homesickness’ and the Music of Memory,” Lise Waxter’s “Of Mambo Kings and Songs of Love,” Pérez-Firmat’s numerous articles and books, and many others.

10 This quotation appears at the beginning of Susan J. Brison’s essay “Trauma Narratives and the Remaking of the Self” in the book *Acts of Memory*, and is taken from there.
unable to get back home. Even if they are voluntary exiles, such as the Santinio family in Hijuelos’s *Our House in the Last World*, the inability to return is still a traumatic experience. There is still family left in Cuba and still a life left behind (sometimes by choice) and it is unknown whether a person will get to visit either ever again. Perhaps the “unknown” is the most troubling part of a possible return. For Cuban immigrants or exiles, return is a proverbial question mark because of tense political relations between the U.S. and Cuba. A trip back to Cuba is almost a definitive “no” but not quite, because politics can change and legislation is not permanent. The situation is open-ended and perhaps more painful or traumatizing because of it.

For some ethnic groups, memory and trauma become fully engrained into the collective psyche because “trauma unsettles and forces us to rethink our notions of experience, and of communication” (Caruth 4). Trauma affects the way people interact and communicate with each other, especially if that trauma is experienced by many in a given community. Remembering trauma becomes so engrained in the collective consciousness, that it becomes a cultural practice.\(^{11}\) For Cuban Americans, the act of remembering has become a cultural practice—that is, it has become part of actually being Cuban. It is a marker. “The traumatic event is experienced as culturally embedded […] is remembered as such […] and is shaped and reshaped in memory over time according, at least in part, to how others in the survivor’s culture respond” (Brison 42). For Cubans or Cuban Americans, the shared event of exile and a politically charged or unsafe Cuba along with an inability to return to the island are what cause this cultural practice to occur. It creates a collective memory and a collective strife

\(^{11}\) Evidence of this is visible in Jewish American culture, veteran culture, as well as Cuban/Cuban American culture, as I assert here.
that act as grounding points for their cultural identity to revolve around. The collective strife causes shared memories of both good and bad to surface and forces the rememberer to extract good memories from their homeland to get through present day problems.

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is a “symptom of history”; it is caused by specific events (Caruth 5). In the case of the Cuban or Cuban American community, this makes perfect sense because of traumatic events in their communal past: exile and an inability to return. “The term cultural memory signifies that memory can be understood as a cultural phenomenon as well as an individual or social one” (Bal vii, emphasis original). The theory of cultural memory easily applies to the Cuban American community because memory is such a big part of it. Bal goes on to say that “cultural memory […] links the past to the present and future” (vii). In Hijuelos’s work, it is easy to see this connection for his characters. In the two novels that I examine, the characters move uneasily through time, interrupting it with memories and stories; present day and the past are mixed together and impact the future that each character will have because it shapes the way he or she views the world.

There is research that examines “traumatized communities”—when an entire community suffers a traumatic event—and asserts that “trauma can create a community” because of a shared traumatic event (Erikson 185). This is also my assertion about the Cuban American community: that they have engrained memory into their culture so deeply, due to a shared trauma, that it has become part of who they are. Taking this idea further, it stands to argue that if a person cannot generate memories, as Hector in Our House in the Last World cannot, then this person could feel less than connected to his or her community because “shared experience becomes almost like a common culture, a source of kinship” (Erikson 190). A
lack of connectedness can cause all sorts of problems for a person, especially if they have experienced trauma. If a person cannot generate memories, then these cannot be shared and therefore cannot be witnessed, which is a crucial part of overcoming the trauma and becoming a survivor. Individuals create memories, even if they are shared ones. Ernst van Alphen offers that, “Memory is not something we have, but something we produce as *individuals sharing a culture*. Memory is, then, the mutually constitutive interaction between the past and the present, shared as a culture but acted out by each of us as an individual” (37, emphasis original). A person’s ability to act on this cultural practice is of prominent importance if they are to feel part of their community. Without it, they are unable to share their culture and would therefore feel outside of the community.

Memory, though culturally engrained and important, is not static, which makes it a variable *practice*. It is not a passive occurrence. Memories are made and maintained. “Memory is an action: essentially it is the act of telling a story” (van der Hart 175). Memories are able to change over time—details are lost, new ones inserted, whole events created. It is this malleability and storytelling aspect of it that makes memory intriguing as a narrative and social act. Memory is different from nostalgia. While memories can be happy and can be created or changed (to make them better/easier for the rememberer), nostalgia is a fondness for the past mixed with a longing to get back there. In a way, memory fits inside of nostalgia because without memory, one cannot wish for the past. If a person cannot remember the past, then she cannot desire to go back. Without memory, nostalgia is

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12 There are theoretical distinctions between types of memory: narrative memory (memories that can be told) and traumatic memories (memories that are acted out in a sort of hypnotic state but cannot be made into a verbal story). This thesis is concerned with narrative memory that stems from a specific trauma. For more reading on trauma, see the essay collections *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* and *Acts of Memory* cited in the bibliography.
impossible. But both are important to the Cuban and Cuban American culture and both are used by the characters in Hijuelos’s novels as a means of escape or a way to return to Cuba.

In this thesis, I argue that in Hijuelos’s *Our House in the Last World* and *A Simple Habana Melody* Cuban national identity is shaped by trauma, exile, and remembering. These traits define what it means to be Cuban—and it is more varied and complicated than perhaps it initially seems. National identity can be defined in many ways, through racial identification, cultural practices, language, traditions, or politics. Certainly there is evidence that Cuban national identity is shaped by these factors *inside* Cuba, but my emphasis within Hijuelos’s two novels is that these factors shape Cubans *outside* of Cuba. Hijuelos writes about the Cuba before Fidel Castro assumed power and before the Cuban Revolution that most other Cuban American writers concern their literature with, which makes him quite an anomaly. The fact that Hijuelos does not singularly concern himself with the Cuban Revolution and its effects means he is treating Cuban and Cuban American identity and history in a more varied fashion than other Cuban American authors. The history and identity that Hijuelos offers a reader is much broader and longer than the history most U.S. audiences are familiar with. This forces most readers to understand Cuban or Cuban American identity in new, and perhaps much richer, terms. By introducing a more complete Cuban history to his readers, Hijuelos makes it clear that Cubans have both memory and trauma that extend beyond Castro, and thus the result is an even stronger emphasis on memory as a vital part of *being* Cuban.
Chapter One: Our House in the Last World

Hijuelos’s first novel, Our House in the Last World, is commonly read as loosely autobiographical. The author says as much in notes for newer editions of the book.\textsuperscript{13} It is through this book that a reader feels Hijuelos’s preoccupation with Cuba and memories from a personal standpoint. This might not have been the case had Hijuelos not written the biographical introduction for later editions. The introduction assures the reader that Hijuelos’s re-creations of Cuba are more than just fiction. Trauma literature confirms, “There is, in each survivor, an imperative need to tell and thus to come to know one’s story […] One has to know one’s buried truth in order to be able to live one’s life” (Laub 63, emphasis original). If a reader takes this novel as a glimpse into Hijuelos’s childhood and life into his early twenties, then the trauma in his life becomes evident: abuse, parental preoccupation with self-imposed exile, and figuring out his “Cubanness.” Hijuelos the author seems sincere and as though he is trying to put together the pieces of his cultural past, feel connections to Cuba through memory, and perhaps work towards healing his traumas, as trauma theory suggests.

Of the featured family in Our House in the Last World, Hijuelos writes, “Ultimately memories of Cuba always seem to loom over the Santinio household like an unattainable ‘last world,’ a fount of happiness to which one can never return” (8). To remember is never a neutral practice. Scholarship in the field of remembering offers that there are many different

\textsuperscript{13} Earlier versions of the novel do not have this sort of autobiographical “disclaimer.” It is possible that Hijuelos was not being received as convincingly “Cuban” by critics, and thus he offered his readers some sort of credentials of his “Cubanness” to improve his ethos. The introduction appeared in 2002, after Mambo Kings was so well received and his literary career was well-established; perhaps Hijuelos felt that people might now, as they might not earlier, be interested in him as a person. However, it was this first novel that was critically, and not commercially, successful, which probably led to his winning a National Endowment of the Arts fellowship in 1985.
kinds of memory and that each serves a purpose. In this statement, Hijuelos has given memory a positive spin and made the memories of this family something to “return to”; he has engaged memories and transformed them into nostalgia by giving the Santino family’s memories the rosy tint of “better days” to get back to. The idea of a better time is not something foreign to U.S. Americans nor is it foreign to exiles and immigrants. The idea of the past as a wonderful time (despite the fact that many fled their country during a time of economic strife or political unrest) seems to be a general sentiment among many Cuban exiles or Cuban Americans. In *Our House in the Last World*, however, Hijuelos uses memory as a narrative tool that enables a return, of sorts. Each character experiences memory as their way to get back to Cuba or deal with their current life—even if they have only been to the island once. Through memory and nostalgia, the characters offer their stories, emotions, and points of view to the reader. The novel also clearly illustrates the main character Hector’s traumatic break with Cuba and it is logical that these memories, nostalgic feelings, and a desire to return to Cuba are symptoms of this break.

*Our House in the Last World* focuses on the Santino family. At the beginning of the novel, Alejo Santinio and Mercedes Sorrea are newly married and looking for adventure when they set out for the United States. They choose to leave, to escape, Alejo feeling that he is bored in Cuba and wanting to avoid the hard work of his family’s ranch, and Mercedes wishing to be with Alejo and to escape the ghosts of life in Cuba. They emigrate to New York City, where they stay, for the duration of the novel and their lives. They have two sons, Horacio and Hector. Alejo becomes violent, melancholy, a heavy drinker, and employed as a cook in a fancy hotel downtown. Mercedes is shrieky, nervous, and the means by which their sons acquire most of their knowledge about Cuba. She is the storyteller, but not the
narrator. The third person narrator is presumably Hijuelos as Hector because the novel ends with Hector having graduated community college and writing down his experiences and memories in “a black-and-white composition notebook” (226-227). Hector is the main character of the novel and Hijuelos’s representation, to an extent. Horacio serves as contrast to Hector because he is everything that Hector is not: strong, able, smooth, handsome. The reader is privy to the everyday struggles of the Santinio household: their acute poverty, their difficulties learning English, adjusting to the U.S., their domestic abuse, growing up, and figuring out the future.

Memory in this book is carried like a merit-badge. Each character carries heavy memories around with them and to not be able to conjure up fond memories of Cuba is a distinguishing characteristic in the novel. Hector cannot remember much of his visit to Cuba as a small child and struggles with his Cuban identity because of this and other factors like the loss of his Spanish language and not feeling “Cuban enough.” Mercedes, his mother, Alejo, his father, and Horacio, his older brother each carry around memories and “Cubanness” in their own ways and use memory in different capacities. Memory works as a coping mechanism during hard times and allows the characters to feel connected to lives outside of their small, New York apartment. Memory keeps most of the characters connected to Cuba and each other, above all else.

**Inherited Memory and a Means to Escape**

Mercedes is constantly remembering Cuba and her happy years growing up there, despite her memories of childhood abuse. After a few years in New York, she often wishes she had never met Alejo because of the way he treats her in the present. She remembers their courtship fondly, but these memories are often starkly contrasted with her current life in New
York City, one she does not relish in the least. Mercedes’s happy memories of Cuba are tied more to the love she received from her father and contrasted with the unhappy situation with her husband Alejo, but her memories of her father are themselves fabricated in the form of dreams and often fictional and selective. According to Mercedes, in Cuba, young Mercedes won composition contests and showed much promise and talent. “One day Hector and his older brother Horacio would hear all the different stories, and it would amaze them that for all her ability and talent their mother ended up tearing tickets off a spool and pushing them out under the window of a gold painted booth” (18). Hijuelos simultaneously lets the reader know of Mercedes’s talents and sets her up as storyteller to her sons. Mercedes remembers her father beating her for staying out in the rain, and recalls a dream she has about being a flower and her father carrying her around wherever he went. In her dream, her father treats her like a precious flower and it is in contrast to how he really treated her. Mercedes’s memory works like the memory of an exile: she chooses to leave out the parts about how unfulfilling her relationship with her father was and chooses to remember her family’s wealth. She contrasts her family’s wealth in Cuba with the contemptible conditions she and her family live in now, in New York. Mercedes does not want to remember her past as negative because then she has nothing in this world, no fond past to look back on, no happy present to take her mind off of an unpleasant past, and seemingly no hope that the future will be any better than the present. This situation for Mercedes is exactly what Bal argues about memory linking the past, present, and future together.

Mercedes’s love for Cuba and her memorializing her life there is perhaps an inherited cultural practice. Her Spanish mother, Doña Maria, was the same way in Cuba all through Mercedes’s life: “The only emotion she seemed to show was sadness, which had been her
way since she first came to Cuba” (21). Mercedes is also miserable almost all the time once she leaves Cuba, while Doña Maria “never got over leaving Spain for Cuba” (162). It is logical that Mercedes would miss Cuba of her own volition if it were indeed the place “where Mercedes had once lived a life of style and dignity and happiness” and “the land of happy courtship with Alejo” (160). It does seem probable that Mercedes has glorified Cuba because she is the storyteller and has control over the details. It is possible that Alejo was only bad to her once in the U.S., but it seems unlikely.

In New York, “[Mercedes] always found someone else from Cuba” (Hijuelos 110). After a trauma, “people are drawn to others similarly marked,” and thus Mercedes seeks out Cubans in New York to find a level of comfort in her new surroundings (Erikson 186). Emphasizing this inherited attachment to the homeland, Mercedes’s sister, Luisa, brings a tin filled with “soil from Holguín, Oriente Provice, Cuba” when she comes to live with the Santinio family in New York. Luisa refuses to forget Cuba and, “It was Luisa’s ambition to ignore America and the reality of her situation completely. So she kept taking Mercedes back to the old days” through storytelling and sharing memories (166). Like Mercedes, Luisa uses memories of Cuba as a way to avoid her current life, a means to escape it. Here the reader sees that it is not just Mercedes that has inherited this love of homeland from their mother, validating the theory that it can be an inherited practice, which is, in a way, a socially and culturally engrained practice because they are all part of the Cuban culture. In the essay “Donde los Fantasmas Bailan Guaguancó,” María de los Angeles Torres, a Cuban exile since the age of six who has visited Cuba many times since then, writes about her desire to return to Cuba as being so strong that it was “inherited” by her daughters and describes herself as “being in love with an island” (24). She also comments on memories belonging to physical
spaces and being “located in geography” (24). Mercedes fits into this perspective three-fold. She has inherited her love of a place from her own mother, will pass it on to her sons through stories, and has distinctly different (but all intense) experiences in physical spaces, leading a reader to believe that space impacts her greatly.

In their NYC apartment, Mercedes is attacked by her husband, disrespected by her children and sister-in-law, and speaks to ghosts. Memories of Cuba help Mercedes escape, even if she fictionalizes memories to reflect happier times than she actually experienced there. When she is on the ship traveling to the U.S., Mercedes laments leaving “a serene Cuba she would never know again” (34). This foreshadows the unhappy, violent life she would live in New York. Even before Mercedes arrives in the U.S., she is nostalgic for Cuba. Mercedes attempts to use her memories as a means of escape from her daily life. While at the Coney Island amusement park, the whole family is enjoying themselves, people go on rides, eat fried food and drink beers, “And Mercedes was dreaming about the old times in the park near the Neptuna” because she feels ignored by her family and uses her memories to find a happy place (72). She also tells the children stories from Cuba to teach them lessons and refers to Cuba to get Alejo’s or the children’s respect. When Alejo “disappeared for two or three days” Mercedes “would tell Horacio stories” to pass the time (55). She attempts to take them both out of their current, sad situation to somewhere better, somewhere in the past, in Cuba. Her storytelling is also a way to pass on affection for Cuba, to help her sons inherit her attachment to place and indeed, Hector states at the very end of the novel that he “still live[s] in the same noisy [NYC] neighborhood,” just a few blocks from his mother’s apartment, and that he is happy to live there; clearly he has inherited his mother’s attachment to place (227).
Part of the way Mercedes stays so connected to place, to Cuba as more than just a destination of memory, is through ghosts. Mercedes always saw ghosts in Cuba and continues to see them in New York. The ghosts she sees represent a few different things in the novel. Seeing these ghosts is a way for Mercedes to stay connected to her family even after they die. It is a way to keep people together. Many characters in the novel see ghosts, Alejo, Horacio, and Hector included (although Hector’s experiences with them are not positive at all). Ghosts are how Cuba stays with everyone in the U.S., despite their actual distance from the island. When Alejo dies, Mercedes sees his ghost every night. He courts her, “a regular suitor with gifts [...] He would sit on the bed, touch her face and hair with his thick fingers” (220). She does not let go of his spirit, much to the dismay of her sons. The ghosts are only possible because of Mercedes’s deep longing for Cuba and the past. Her nostalgia keeps people in her life that would otherwise have passed from it. Mercedes uses her “memory as resistance” from her present life and nostalgia is a way for Mercedes to survive her present state (Dimova 79).

While Mercedes uses memory to escape her present and is the most obvious example of inherited nostalgia, Alejo remembers Cuba as a way to rationalize his current situations. He uses memories of himself in Cuba to try to make sense of his life in the U.S. His memories hedge on a way to escape, but never fully get him there, the way they do for Mercedes. Alejo’s present disappoints him enough that he wonders about the past, confounded by his own decisions. It was Alejo’s idea to leave Cuba and emigrate to the United States. He preferred not to work too hard, and thus wanted nothing to do with the family ranch, run by his brother. He worked “only when he felt the urge” (23). Thinking of the U.S. as a young man’s adventure, he set off with his new bride. While the U.S. was not exactly the
“promised land” for Alejo, he did have aspirations about his life there. Often, images of Cuba are mixed up with U.S. hopes and the idea that he would return to Cuba someday: “Somehow he would find Cubans in New York […] to point him toward prosperity […] Somehow he would triumphantly return to San Pedro with gifts […] for everyone” (33).

Alejo felt there was nothing for him in his small town in Cuba and wants to be a great success in the United States. His U.S. success, though, is intertwined with showing that success to his family in Cuba. Cuba is the ultimate destination while the U.S. is viewed as temporary, an adventure, at the start, and turns into the family’s final destination not by choice but because of economic circumstance.

Most of Alejo’s nostalgia for the past in Cuba has to do with wanting freedom from his wife and family and perhaps access to more space. He feels tied down and associates this with the U.S., perhaps because this is where he has children and his responsibilities increase dramatically. He thinks, “In Cuba, a man could truly have his way” unlike in the U.S. (63). He feels that too much is expected of him in the U.S. and that his family “should have respect” (63). Even in terms of his home, he is trapped. The apartment is described as “circular” which implies that people are kept inside it, going around and around without escape (77). Alejo remarks about feeling cramped into their New York apartment, too, and says that “in the small apartments of New York, you see the kids all the time,” meaning he sees them too much (62). There is no space in their apartment, no privacy or place to be alone, for him at least. He laments, “In Cuba, they know how to raise the children so that the man doesn’t get involved” (62). Clearly he is feeling suffocated by his role as provider and patriarch, unable to adjust to what he surely views as an “American” way of coexisting with his family. The familial construction is different than he imagined (or from the reality of the
situation for families in Cuba) and thus he longs for Cuba or at least for Cuban sentiments, ideals, or ways of doing things. The dilemma for Alejo is one of cultural differences: he transports or translates aspects of Cuban life to New York, but cannot make these things work in New York the way they would in Cuba. He feels at home with these ideas, and they cannot be successfully transported into U.S. culture and life here.

Alejo is a cook at a hotel in downtown New York. When he first comes to the U.S. he has big ideas of how he will make lots of money, but all of his investments fall through. He declines his brother-in-law’s offer to sell him part of his successful business early on in his days in New York. The narrator marvels at Alejo’s ability to fail because he does not make sound decisions. Even when Miami (which is presented as very similar to Cuba in the text) is offered to him by his sister, Buita, Alejo does not make a move. The narrator states,

There were more opportunities in Florida [than in New York]. […] Sweet with flower smells and a pleasant ocean wind, it was warm like Cuba and had no harsh winters. […] But either Alejo didn’t have the money or Mercedes talked him out of it. Or he was stupid. Who knows? But he didn’t take any of Buita’s advice. (52-53).

The narrator goes on to describe many of Alejo’s failed attempts at making something of himself: buying swampland in New Jersey and “shares in a nonexistent light-bulb company” (53). Alejo is just not of the mindset to have to work for anything yet or make a big change; he still believes in his ways in Cuba: working when he felt like it and living off of his modest inheritance without any inconvenience (like moving to Florida) to himself. But later there are times when Alejo desires to open a “little grocery store” and even looks into real estate and speaks with food suppliers (120). His desire to open this store has more to do with
recreating Cuba in the U.S. than making a living. He describes the details of his store quite vividly, but as always, images of the U.S. and Cuba are mixed together for Alejo:

It would be a little general store where the local people would come by and chat with him [...] He would find a small town with calm afternoons. The work would not be hard or rushed [...] It would be [...] just like Cuba of the old days. [...] In the small towns [in Cuba] all the drinking went on in the general stores. [...] On the way home from work or on an empty afternoon friends and neighbors gathered, could have a few laughs. (172).

He hopes his store will bring Cuba to the U.S.—the way of life, his feelings of togetherness, connectedness, a slower pace (real or imagined), and happiness. However, Alejo gets a hernia at work from lifting a pot, spends some time in the hospital, and decides he is too close to retirement to risk it all on such a venture. Likely, this represents Alejo’s understanding that the United States is not and could never be his Cuba. No matter how many ways he tries to make life in the U.S. more like Cuba, or how many good times from Cuba he remembers, it just does not work. It is not possible.

Forgetting and Gatekeeping

Horacio, unlike most of the characters in the novel, would choose to forget most things, if he could. He would rather forget that his brother is an embarrassment like his father (both for different reasons) and that his mother is too much work to be around. He would choose to forget his poverty-level New York City apartment youth and so he joins the Air Force to escape a pregnant girlfriend. Joining a branch of the U.S. armed forces is a familiar immigrant story—the Air Force promises to help Horacio financially or with paying for school and Horacio sees job security and a way to provide for a future family. With an enlistment in the Air Force, Horacio also achieves a higher immigrant status. Through
enlisting, he is a more “legitimate” part of American life because he has chosen to “defend” it even during times of peace. Because of the Air Force, he can leave his meager upbringing and immigrant status behind, travels abroad to London and other places, and expands his vision of the world.

Horacio’s enlistment into the Air Force is certainly significant because it creates the possibility for him to leave the Santinio’s neighborhood and move to suburban Queens, NY and marry a nice Italian girl. By the end of the novel, Horacio has moved away from urban New York City and does not visit the old apartment much because Mercedes’s grief is too much for him to handle. He tries to place physical space between himself and his past and it seems to work. Ultimately, he comes to terms with Alejo’s death and is at peace with his past. For Horacio, remembering and living are about choice, rather than instinct, like his parents. His emphasis on choice is a marker of his Americanness. Alejo and Mercedes remember because they were taught to remember and because they think they had it better in the past. Horacio knows he had a violent, loud upbringing and he knows he can forget it if he remembers it selectively. He thinks at the very end, “I did not turn out to be a bad man, and it was because Pop, deep down, really loved the family” even though there is evidence to the contrary: Alejo’s philandering, drinking, and his abuse of Mercedes and both boys (225).

As for Cuba, Horacio “did not see Cuba as a place of romance” the way Mercedes and even toddler Hector did on their visit back there in 1954 (pre Castro); instead “He could see under and through things” (75). Here, Horacio is set up as the realistic Santinio. He is the one who can see and report the truth faithfully, without omitting details, and it seems that he is probably aware of this. He uses his “accurate” memories often to set people straight about what they think they remember. Hector is often reminded of details by Horacio as if Horacio
is trying to keep details accurate, honest, and to prevent Hector from romanticizing anything about his own life, perhaps the way Mercedes and Alejo do (because it seems to get them nowhere). Horacio is also the person who reminds Hector of his father’s absence during Hector’s illness. “‘Sure, Pop came every week,’ [Hector] would say [...] to Horacio. ‘He never came to see you’” (93). And later Horacio reminds Hector, “‘Brother, I told you. He never went’” (214). In this way, Horacio uses memory to create a true reality for Hector, who has mis-remembered the events. The narrator tells us Hector’s intentions in regards to remembering Alejo’s presence at the hospital, that he “wanted to see Alejo because he remembered the good days before the illness” (93). So if Horacio is using memory to keep Hector from romanticizing and being nostalgic, his work is exactly accurate in guessing Hector’s intentions. Hector would prefer to remember his father visiting him during an extended illness because he does not want to address the question of why he would not visit. It seems like Hector and Horacio would be at odds here, but that is not the case. Luckhurst offers,

But memory and forgetting are not opposing things; rather they are an interplay of the same process. It was the peculiarities of what an individual forgets and the invention of a new pathology of amnesia [...] that led Victorian psychologists to privilege memory as the locus of identity. (Luckhurst 83).

It seems that Horacio’s job is not to forget and that memory is given a new purpose: to ensure the accurate recording of events. His inability to forget is as significant as Hector’s inability to remember. Both “disabilities” shape who the boys are and how they process information and deal with the world around them.
Further evidence of Horacio as a gatekeeper to memories is when Hector is trying to talk to Horacio about their trip to Cuba, asking him if he remembers certain things. Hector is excited that he feels he can remember details. Horacio puts him in his place rather abruptly, as always, and says, “‘You can’t remember anything. Don’t fool yourself.’ […] But Hector could not stop himself [from remembering]” (162). Horacio challenges Hector’s ability to remember and it is not entirely clear why. It is perhaps because Horacio sees himself as the only person who can remember correctly, and in this way he is the keeper of the memories, and by extension, keeper of the Cubanness, their family culture, their past. However, Horacio cannot be the storyteller, as Hector can. It is possible that Horacio is aware that, “[m]emory can tyrannically bind you and impose a determining identity you might wish to resist; active forgetting can be liberation from the dead weight of memorial history” (Luckhurst 84). Horacio perhaps does not want Hector tied down by memories and believes Hector is better off not being able to remember anything of Cuba, and thus not being bound to it the way the rest of the family is—and the rest of the family is miserable with memories. Through the success of Luisa’s children, we learn that forgetting is a component of success, because “[t]hey would work like dogs, raise children, prosper. They did not allow the old world, the past, to hinder them” in the U.S.—unlike unsuccessful Alejo and Mercedes (168). Mercedes accuses Alejo, “‘They’re going to have everything, and we… what will we have?’” and “‘What about the pennies I saved? What about us?’” (169). Their inability to forget kept them unsuccessful and economically oppressed. However, Horacio fails to see that Hector’s lack of memories is debilitating in its own way and keeps Hector from his culture and prevents full connections to his family. Both boys “[oscillate] between the terrors of too little memory, or too much” (Luckhurst 91). Horacio is proud to be strong and Cuban, but he does
not relish memories of his family. Horacio’s desire to forget (but perhaps his inability to do so) single him out as different from the rest of his family.

**Cubanness, Memory, and a Cultural Disconnect**

For Hector, everything associated with being Cuban is traumatic because he often feels he does not measure up, that he is not a “real” Cuban. Hector is described, as a child, as “a little blondie, a sickly, fair-skinned Cuban who was not speaking Spanish” (97). His appearance is an instant marker. In short, “Hector’s lightness stood out” when it came to fitting in with his family (68). Furthermore, during a childhood illness, Hector stops speaking Spanish and becomes fluent in English. He understands Spanish completely, but does not speak it much. Early on, this separates him, like his looks do, from his family and later language takes on more significance for him. Hector is different, quiet, eternally haunted by images of the dead and of Cuba. He wants to feel connected to his brother and other Cubans, but he feels he cannot connect without the Spanish language and the Cuban ethnic look to match. Because of an inability to remember his language or much of his trip to Cuba, he cannot take part in the social/cultural practice of memory with other Cubans. He is forever outside the culture.

Language is a big part of Hector’s loss. Hector can understand Spanish fluently, but he cannot or will not speak much Spanish and if he does, he speaks with an accent. Hector “lost” his ability to speak Spanish at an early age when he was hospitalized in Connecticut for an infection he developed after his only trip to Cuba. More accurately, his language is forced out or taken from him by the nurses in the children’s hospital. He is locked in a closet until he asks to be let out, in English, admonished violently for mixing English and Spanish together in a sentence, and kissed when he speaks English correctly (94-95). Years later, in
Miami’s “Little Havana,” he is told, “You speak good Spanish, for an American” (186). The loss of and break from Cuba for Hector occur because he does not have firm memories of the family’s visit to Cuba except for very few, “like a splintering film,” and because Cuba, in a sense, is the reason Hector became sick and he lost his language and his sense of “Cubanness” (78). In the introduction, Hijuelos writes, “The Spanish language itself, a language of pleasurable and sad memories and emotions, emerges as a kind of spirit that provides solace and comfort to the Santinios” (8). But for Hector Santinio, this is not true. It is instead a language that isolates him from his peers and his family and causes him a great deal of internal turmoil throughout the novel. The poet Celan states that “only in one’s mother tongue can one express one’s own truth,” and if this is true, not being able to speak Spanish impacts Hector’s ability to express himself fully and to “sketch out reality” for himself (Felman 33-34). Language allows a person to understand his reality, and thus without his first language, Spanish, Hector cannot understand or explain his reality to others. Hector’s connections to others, and indeed, to himself, are impeded by his lack of Spanish language.

Everyday events highlight Hector’s inability or unwillingness to speak Spanish and take on greater meaning than the one of the moment. He is embarrassed by his inability to speak and is therefore often quiet. His cousins ask him, “‘Why are you so quiet?’ And sometimes Horacio answered for him, saying: ‘He’s just dumb when it comes to being Cuban’” (165). Here Hector’s “quietness” is associated, by his brother, with not knowing how to be Cuban—an important connection where the reader learns that there is a lot at stake because Hector’s identity is, at least partly, wrapped up in language. Hector clearly feels inferior, and these feelings of inferiority are perhaps caused by his knowledge that “language and the use of
[l]anguage [is] a litmus test of one’s latinidad” (Nanko-Fernández 267). He is aware of what is at stake when others discover this detail about him. Hector does not speak because he fears sounding “unCuban” or having an English-speaking accent in Spanish. He is embarrassed and isolated from the world of Cubans around him; he is devastated and distraught over this issue. Hector’s feelings about the Spanish language fluctuate like his feelings about Cubanness. While he wishes he spoke Spanish with confidence, he also feels that “Spanish is the language of memory, of violence and sadness” (118). Language is not a home for Hector the way it is for many people in countries other than their native land. Language is a connection to cultural roots or family, and Hector does not have this the way other characters in the book do. After all, “language is not neutral,” argues Carmen M. Nanko-Fernández. She continues, quoting Juan González, “[l]anguage, after all, is at the heart of an individual’s social identity. It is the vehicle through which the songs, folklore, and customs of any group are preserved and transmitted to its descendants” (266). Hector therefore has a tumultuous relationship with his culture because of his lack of Spanish-speaking ability and his ambiguous knowledge of Spanish.

Hector’s desire to be fluent in Spanish is intertwined with his romanticization of Cuba, which is expressed many times in the novel. He adores Cuba and Cubanness; he envies the memories his family members have, the Spanish that they speak, and the Cubanness he sees expressed in their appearances. Horacio, Hector’s brother, is described and admired by Hector as the epitome of Cubanness. Horacio is strong and manly; he speaks Spanish and is successful in wooing women (like Alejo); he is physically fit and attractive. These are all

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14 Many Latino/a or Caribbean authors tackle this issue of language as a home, notably Judith Ortiz Cofer and Paule Marshall.
things Hector feels that he, himself, is not. He wonders, “What could [he] do to be more like the suave, lanky, young Cubans […]?” (185). Hector is large, like his father, and often feels out of place. He feels he does not fit the quota of what a Cuban man should be. Alejo’s “physical immensity” combined with his ability to attract women confuses Hector because Hector views his own size as a negative attribute. At one point in the novel, the narrator states, “[Hector] wanted to be somewhere else, be someone else, a Cuban” (167). Here the reader sees that Hector does not view himself as “a Cuban.” He places value on their character traits and always sees himself in contrast to those traits. He spends his time “fantasiz[ing] about Cuba […] as if memory and imagination would make him more of a man, a Cuban man” (161). He associates Cuba with good things and tries to reach it through memory and imagination. He also clearly associates Cuba with manhood. Hector views Cuba as positive most of the time because it was “the land where men did not fall down” like Alejo does in the U.S. and Cuba represents a better life, a beginning, a past (160). Hector was “sick at heart for being so Americanized […] His Spanish unpracticed, practically nonexistent” (160). He wants to be Cuban but feels there is so much keeping him from it.

But these positive feelings about Cubanness are complicated by a fear and distrust of Cuba and Cuban things. The nurse in the children’s hospital “made him suspicious of Spanish” because she would lock him in a closet until he spoke English and “in time he believed Spanish was an enemy” (95). Hector also remembers, “A few times he yelled out, ‘Cuba, Cuba.’ But no one and nothing came to save him” in the closet (95). Hector feels abandoned by Cuba and left to fend for himself. He tells the reader that “Cuba had become the mysterious and cruel phantasm standing behind the door,” clearly illustrating his fear of it. Hector’s “diseased kidneys […] were shaped like the island of Cuba on maps” (96). His
body becomes the place of Cuba, but it is a decidedly negative change, as the place is described as “diseased.” There are so many negative things that Hector associates with Cuba and Cubanness, and yet he still wishes to be a part of it. In Miami, Hector admits that he wishes “To crawl out of his skin, get a tan, get healthy, be Cuban, forget the shit” which only seems possible, according to Hector, in Miami and in fact, Miami is where Luisa’s family was able to forget as well (187).

It seems likely that Hector’s desire to be Cuban stems from his traumatic break with Cuba. Mercedes attributes Hector’s illness to “micróbios” that he presumably ingested from water in Cuba—either a puddle or the ocean, it is ambiguous in the text. Hector longs to go to Cuba or visit family members in tropical, bright Miami as a way to become “more Cuban.” When Hector is in Miami, a place that operates as a sort of “second Cuba” where people can forget and succeed, with his aunt and uncle, he is invited to a secret meeting: “The men drank and reminisced about the old days, hissed like snakes with the pain of nostalgia” and “Although Hector said not a word in the discussions, he felt himself part of an inner circle, around strong Cuban men” (180). Clearly, Hector wants to be like the Cuban men he sees around him. He wants to have or at least successfully imitate their Cuban masculinity. His desire to fit in to this Cuban world stems from the fact that this is his life: Hector is Cuban. If he is not what he is labeled, then what is he? Hector needs an identity and he wants the one he sees valued around him. He is a product of his cultural environment like anyone else. Hector never felt Cuban and this lack informed his desire to be Cuban. He “lost” his ability to speak Spanish very young and never grew into the strong, charismatic men his father and brother are. In many ways, Hector probably felt like he never was Cuban.
Hector’s break with Cuba is significant because he does not have many memories to carry around. The ultimate evidence of Hector’s break comes later in the novel, when his mother’s sister, Luisa, and her children move in with the Santinio family in their New York City apartment. Luisa’s family leaves Cuba after Castro assumes power and their lives become hard according to Luisa’s letters. She writes, “As usual I ask for your prayers and to send us whatever you can by way of clothing, food, and medicine. Aspirins and penicillin are almost impossible to find these days, as are most other things” and details the family’s loss of jobs or new appointments to government mandated positions (157). Once Castro assumes power, Cuba is inaccessible due to political constraints in the U.S. and Cuba. Now, Hector cannot go back to Cuba and discover anything for himself; he cannot create any new memories. Now he is truly cut off from the island. Hector’s one clear memory of Cuba is of his visit there as a child and he associates it with his aunt Luisa’s affections and a special drink she made for him while he was there. He describes the drink as “Cuban magic potion” added to milk, “with deep chocolate and nut flavors and traces of orange and mango, the bitter with the sweet, the liquid went down his throat, so delicious” (163). To the reader, it sounds like a distinctly Cuban drink with tropical flavors mixed in with chocolate. However, years later when Luisa is visiting, Hector finally asks her what the drink was, and he discovers something entirely unsettling. He asks her,

‘Auntie […] do you remember a drink that you used to make for me in the afternoons in Cuba? What was it? It was the most delicious chocolate but with Cuban spices.’ She thought about it. ‘Chocolate drink in the afternoon? Let me see […] And it was chocolate?’ ‘It was Cuban chocolate. What was it?’ She thought on it again and her eyes grew big and she laughed, slapping her knee. ‘Ai, bobo. It was Hershey syrup and
milk!’ (165). Hector is earnest in his desire to hold onto this one memory of Cuba and perhaps recreate it in New York if he can get the recipe. He is thwarted, though, when his aunt reveals there was nothing entirely “Cuban” about the drink after all. In fact the drink was especially “American,” the flavor coming from Hershey syrup. Hector had already lost his language and now his one good memory of Cuba has been unproven or made unspecial by its lack of validity. Hector decides not to ask his aunt “any more questions” after that (165). This suggests that, at least for Hector, there is no authentic Cubanness he can hold onto. His search continues, but he never finds anything he can claim as his own piece of Cuba or Cubanness.

Hector’s memories of Cuba are described as a “splintering film” and mostly involve sensory details rather than full scenes or situations. Because he only remembers pieces, Hector’s memory is not the most trustworthy—not that any of the characters’ are. The narrator and Mercedes tell much of Hector’s story in Cuba. He does have a memory of drinking from a puddle in Cuba. Mercedes reveals that she believes Hector’s sickness was caused from a day at the beach when Hector swallowed a lot of sea water. Cuba made Hector sick. This further distances Hector from Cuba because it works as a betrayal. That is, Cuba rejected Hector from its shores and caused the boy to become sick. If Hector was “truly” Cuban, it stands to argue, he would not have gotten sick from the Cuban “micróbios.” The rest of his family left Cuba unharmed; it was only Hector who was affected by the “micróbios.” Later, Hector visits Coney Island beach with Alejo and Hector swims around in the water, unharmed, and even “swallowed the dirty seawater with its salt and piss” (141). Hector never falls ill from this visit to the beach; it is only Cuban water that Hector cannot
digest and rejects him, creating his “Cuban diseased body,” further emphasizing his disconnect from Cuba (176). It is this sickness that causes Hector to be hospitalized for a year or so at a very young age. Hijuelos writes in the introductory notes, “[Hector’s] central childhood trauma revolves around an early illness that separates him from both his family and his ‘Cubaness’” (7). Cuba makes it so Hector cannot thrive in the physical space of the island and then later works to eject him from the cultural space of his family through an extended illness. Fatima Mujcinovic paraphrases Edward Said to state, “a rift between a human being and a native place often results in an alienation from the self” (168). Because of “this absence of a strong grounding,” Hector experiences feelings of “uprootedness and non-belonging, endangering [his] personal sense of being and propelling [him] into perpetual solitude and nostalgia” (Mujcinovic 168). Hector’s insecurities about being “Cuban enough” affect how he sees himself and how he interacts with others. Hector often spends time alone or doing drugs to “escape.” He avoids Alejo because they look so much alike and Hector is embarrassed by this. Hector has only negative traits associated with his Cubanness: Alejo’s size and seeing ghosts.

By the end of the novel, there is a distinctive shift in Hector’s psychological and emotional state. He is attending community college and writing down the stories his mother tells him and enjoys visiting her, unlike earlier in the novel. He seems to enjoy his mother and her stories rather than envy her ability to remember. He likes to think of Aunt Luisa and experiences (real or imagined) in Cuba; there is a lot of sun and light in these memories, unlike the earlier, dark memories and experiences in the Santinio apartment in New York. He says he feels “mesmerized by this notion of the past. I want it forever in my house, but it fades away” signifying his desire to remember certain aspects of his life and enjoy them—
even wish to get back to them, but also that he has created a particular version of the past that
he purposely remembers (226, emphasis mine). By the end, Hector has some power over his
memories, as he molds them into stories in his notebook and picks and chooses which events
to remember.

Even though Hector speaks English, he does not feel completely comfortable in the
United States until perhaps the very end of the novel. He never seems to find a place where
he feels he fits in—whether in New York or Miami—until he begins to write and record his
life. In New York, unlike Miami, he can remember and write and these abilities are, by the
end, positive for Hector. As for Hector’s lack of peace before he discovers writing, it is
likely that his traumatic break with Cuba and his self-described lack of Cubanness cause this
painful, uncomfortable state for him:

The inability to find a stable and complete meaning provokes a crisis of self, a
fragmented subjectivity placed in a continuous state of lack. Denied home and integrity in
both the homeland and the immigrant location, exiles become confined to the space of
absence and loss, or what Said calls ‘a perilous territory of not-belonging.’ (Mujcinovic
168).

But if the reader is to take Hijuelos’s novel as semi-autobiographical, and indeed the last
parts about community college in New York City and writing do match up, then the reader is
able to believe that Hector does find a place to belong to. Through writing, Hector was able
to create a comfortable space for himself and figure out how to be less “fragmented” and
possibly solve this “crisis of self” that he started out with. Writing is commonly part of
healing from a trauma as it is a form of testimony that has a witness, an audience. Like I
quoted earlier, “there is, in each survivor, an imperative need to tell and […] know one’s
story, unimpeded by ghosts from the past against which one has to protect oneself. One has to know one’s buried truth in order to live one’s life” (Laub 63, emphasis original). Hector is certainly surrounded by ghosts of the past and old feelings of not being “Cuban enough,” but by the end it seems like he is heading in a positive direction. For Hector/Hijuelos, it seems, does need to tell his story in order to survive and even flourish after the trauma of being exiled from Cuba through illness and his violent upbringing.
Chapter Two: *A Simple Habana Melody (from when the world was good)*

“There are few things more devastating to the human spirit than being forced to flee from home.” --Peter I. Rose

Cuba mostly, and sometimes only, exists in memory for many Cubans and Cuban Americans, and therefore it is intangible and unreachable. Cuba remains a place that many displaced Cuban Americans speak of returning to but do not. This is probably because the Cuba in their minds does not, or never did, exist. Like any place, Cuba continues to change and would likely not be the Cuba that exiles remember. For many Cuban Americans, Cuba (and specific cities and towns therein—notably Havana) exists as a “cultural landscape, deterritorialized, diasporic—an idea of a city and place less [...] connected to its geographical location and ever more tenuously dependent on the vicissitudes of personal, familial, and cultural memory” (Hirsch and Spitzer 256). It is precisely this dispersing of Cubans and Cuban Americans that makes a cultural landscape and memory outside of Cuba viable. The significance of cultural memory lies in its ability to change actual memories into stories rather than real events and to allow foods, music, smells, and photographs to take the place of an actual, geographical place. Dalia Kandiyoti points out that “in contemporary times, return to place or past ways of life may be impossible or inconvenient. As a result, the need for strong cultural identities is fulfilled through the purchase of foods, clothes, [and] crafts” (82). Cuba is no longer the literal island; instead, it is all of those tactile and sensory details that help memories exist and thrive within one’s consciousness, especially if the person cannot return to Cuba. Additionally, Kandiyoti is describing a person’s drive to seek out these lost sensory details through purchasing them, thus emphasizing their importance in a person’s life and implying that anything, even cultural heritage, can be bought or sold. In
the U.S., the marketing of Cuban memories (foods, products, artwork) is a profitable business because Cuba is so unreachable for displaced Cubans and Cuban Americans.

Oscar Hijuelos’s *A Simple Habana Melody*, published in 2002, offers the reader romantic pictures of Cuba: old men shuffling down sidewalks, street-vendors, the smells of food emanating from road-side cafés, and beautiful women and landscapes. This Cuban imagery is common in Cuban American literature and sets Cuba up as a sort of picturesque place where romanticism runs rampant and life is musical, delicious, and good.\(^{15}\) The Cuba of this literature is the same as the one countless generations of Cuban Americans seek out in the form of “la Cuba de ayer,” the Cuba of the past in their collective memory; the literature mirrors the cultural act of collective remembering (Ortiz 74). Mercedes puts it succinctly in *Our House in the Last World* when she says, “That was when Cuba was Cuba” implying that the Cuba of the present is never as authentic or desirable as the Cuba of the past (110). In Hijuelos’s *A Simple Habana Melody*, this romanticized view of Cuba is taken a step further and placed firmly in memory. Cuba exists only in memory—in music and street-sounds, in croquettes and cafés, in rum and curvaceous women—and this is symptomatic of both the narrative structure of the novel and, for both characters in the novel and actual Cuban exiles or Cuban Americans, it is symptomatic of a traumatic break with Cuba. In *A Simple Habana Melody*, the main character’s traumatic break with Cuba is his exile in Europe and further, his subsequent internment under the Nazis during WWII.

*A Simple Habana Melody* begins in the year 1947 with Israel Levis, now a man “not yet sixty,” although appearing older than his years, returning to Cuba, his home, after years in

\(^{15}\) For similar pictures and descriptions about Cuba, see Cuban American writers Cristina García and Ana Menéndez. García, Menéndez, and Hijuelos contribute to and participate in the U.S.’s continual literary creation of Cuba outside its borders.
Europe both playing music abroad as a free man and as an inmate of the Nazi internment camp Buchenwald (5). Israel flees Cuba, fearing retribution for his political actions (all innocent enough in Israel’s eyes: valuing indigenous Cuban history by composing music and opera about it, signing a petition to stay well-liked by more political friends) from dictator Gerardo Machado. Israel lives in Paris quite happily for some years, touring with his music and composing, before he is mistaken for a Jew and taken away to Buchenwald. He is described, like Hector in Our House in the Last World, as over-fed, blond-haired as a child, and over-protected due to the early deaths of two of his siblings and his own illness, a “slight asthmatic condition” (52-53). Israel is a composer; his song “Rosas Puras,” conceived in a very short amount of time for his dear friend, performer, and long time love interest, Rita Valladares, has done very well internationally (including in the U.S.) by the time Israel returns to Cuba. Formerly a sweet, jovial, obese man, upon his return Israel is a shrunken, surly version of his older self whose only worldly possessions that remain after the war are a white linen suit and some letters, “whose nostalgic significance and worth increased” as World War II grew closer and closer to him in Europe (8). Although the novel begins in 1947 in the present, it moves back and forth through time through describing Israel’s childhood, Israel’s memories, story-telling, and Israel’s own interjections from the present into the past, which appear in italics.

The character of Israel Levis is loosely based on an actual Cuban composer who was interned in Europe during WWII, Moisés Simons. Hijuelos writes, Simons’s song, “El Manisero” or “‘The Peanut Vendor’ was at the heart of the world’s first infatuation with Cuban music and is largely credited with having set off the rumba dance craze that swept the
United States and Europe in the late 1920s and 1930s.” 16 Hijuelos writes about the real composer in a post-script in later editions of the novel, perhaps another marketing issue meant to authenticate his work—similar to the autobiographical notes that appear in newer editions of Our House in the Last World. Simons’s internment by the Nazis during WWII “became the basis for this novel’s convergence with the Holocaust.” (343).

**Narrative Sign-Posts of Memory**

For Hijuelos, the American-born child of Cuban parents, the situation with Cuban memory is even more complicated. He is both privy to stories of Cuba and the situations that lead to exile, but also unable to have lived those stories himself, which creates tension between first- and second-hand experiences/memory. Hijuelos has never experienced Cuba first-hand, and therefore perhaps his need to create or translate a second-hand narrative experience of Cuba is more urgent. Hijuelos is once removed from the events and land of Cuba and performs through *A Simple Habana Melody* what Hirsch and Spitzer call “rootless nostalgia” (261). 17 Hijuelos is “rootless” because his nostalgia for Cuba stems from second-hand stories and not from the first-hand experience of growing up in Cuba or fleeing it. It is perhaps because of this “postmemory […] [or] belated memory mediated by stories, images, and behaviors […] which never added up to a complete picture or linear tale” that Hijuelos writes the way he does: jumping through time and memory in his narrative (Hirsch and Spitzer 262). Hijuelos’s experiences with “postmemory” seem to have affected his own story-telling techniques. There is much left out of Israel’s story; it is fragmented, and it is not told in a strictly linear narrative. Instead, the story moves from place to place and shifts

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16 This postscript appears in the Harper Perennial, 2003 edition of the book, but not in earlier ones.
17 *Our House in the Last World* is a more autobiographical look into this “rootless nostalgia” felt by Hijuelos’s generation of Cuban Americans: where it comes from and how it plays out in everyday life.
between different points in Israel’s life. The novel is constructed as time within time—all at once Israel can be in the present, leaning on the handrail of a ship back to Cuba in 1947 and then he is lost in a memory, taken to another place and time, only to be brought back to the present by an interruption of his thoughts—so the reader is aware of this layering. Because of the layering and time shifting, the novel reads more like the way a person would actually recount a story orally—or piece one back together using the fragments discovered at family gatherings or in photo-albums—thus more realistic and natural because of Hijuelos’s Cuban Americanism and his epistemology about Cuba. Hijuelos has only story and narrative to learn about or know Cuba and his narrative structure mirrors that of Hirsch and Spitzer’s definition of second generation postmemory. Hijuelos effectively translates experiences from the distant past and distant place into narrative.

Hijuelos’s main character, Israel Levis—a Cuban-Catholic with an obviously Jewish name—is the subject of the main narrative. Israel’s story is told from the third-person present (“The funny thing was that, as he would remember […]”) and moves the past with a few first-person, italicized comments interspersed throughout (“On gloomy and chilled days, I would think about Manny Cortez and fall into long periods of silence;”) (214-15, emphasis original). Because of this, the reader is mainly and quite literally exposed to Cuba in the past tense. Even when those first-person accounts from Israel are included, they are rarely longer than a line and always seem to come from present or future insights analyzing or commenting on the past. The reader is given information about the Cuba of the 1920s and 30s—including details about Machado, whose presence in the book is certainly negative and ominous, and also romanticized details about the beauty of life in Cuba: songs, food, streets bustling with vendors and people out enjoying themselves, recitals and salons in the Levis
family home—always through story and through Israel’s personal memory or letters he received in the past. Israel does receive letters in the present, 1947 Cuba, but the letters he receives always reference the past because they are from old friends or letters asking him to perform his old songs for contemporary audiences or attend re-stagings of his work. After his return to Cuba in 1947, Israel does not answer these letters—“He passed his afternoon awaiting the mail, and he received many letters that he opened but rarely answered”—and in a way, by not answering them, he is refusing the present, refusing to have present contact with many people and the music world (28). Similarly, a phone call or two from Rita when Israel has first returned to Cuba reference the past by bringing up stories of “old times” spent together. Rita says, “Once I am back in Habana, we will get together, as we used to…” thus she glorifies the past by implying that she would like to get back there with Israel (33). Rita attempts to make the past a place they can return to. Because of the lens of memory, Cuba is always beautiful, perfect, and a great place to be despite evidence to the contrary. Ana Maria Dopico describes these images of Cuba as “yield[ing] nostalgia for ruins, for times suspended” thus implying their inaccuracy or at least a people’s united unwillingness to realize that times and places change—the cultural practice of remembering and stopping-time that seems so integral to Cuban cultural identity (453).

It is the story-telling and sentiment dripping with nostalgia that form the reader’s views on Cuba and Cuban national identity. Since Cuba is presented only as this idealistic utopia, it is impossible—or at least difficult—for a reader to see it any other way. Dopico points out that a “utopia’s ‘ideal’ depends on its invention beyond a literal ‘no place,’ and [beyond] imagined geography with a relation of direct or invented analogy to real social spaces and times” (457). Thus, Cuba exists in memories as a utopia—forever beautiful, warm, and
idealized—because the memories have been effectively torn from the actual land and place and they occur, or are created, at a distance. No longer do these “memories” of Cuba actually connect to any tangible place; instead they serve to connect Cubans and Cuban Americans to each other, creating community through collective memory. Because of the “collective memory,” national identity becomes more about memory than an actual place. For a reader this is an effective narrative tool because it shapes the reader’s ability to intellectualize Cuba. The narrative forces the reader to see Cuba as the characters present it and compels the reader to feel connected to happy memories of Cuba—memories that do not belong to the reader—and have the same hopes or resolution in mind that Israel does: that a return to Cuba will resolve or heal Israel.

Self-Preservation Through Remembering

Israel’s story is told through the lenses of tragedy and return and this severely affects the story-telling and remembering of Cuba. Memory is also apparent in the narrative as a survival tool. Israel encountered great trauma while he was imprisoned during the Holocaust and it is likely that any memories pre-Holocaust would become the stories and pictures that he held onto during the harder times. Because memories of Cuba became what kept him going through concentration-camp-life, Cuba became valorized as a place of hope and safety (despite information to the contrary: Israel flees Cuba because his more political friends are being murdered by Machado’s regime and he fears for his safety). Cuba becomes what Israel remembers as a time when his life was better—or as the subtitle of the first edition of the novel states, “from when the world was good.”18 Now, in 1947, Cuba is a place to return to

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18 The 2003 Harper Perennial paperback version of the book does not have the same parenthetical phrase included in the title. Perhaps publishers thought that referencing music and simplicity (thus perhaps referencing
only to die, to end his story. The narrator states, “Besides, he believed, simply, that he was returning to Cuba to die in what peace he could find” (15). There is no way to tell if Cuba actually existed the way Israel describes and remembers it in the present-day of the novel before the Holocaust because the story is told strictly from post-Holocaust (post-exile, post-trauma) consciousness. All of Israel’s memories and stories are affected by his trauma. He does not speak of his time in the concentration camp to anyone in his family—“saddened by a knowledge of things that he could not express”—only to the reader, which does not entirely fit with the trauma theory of a need for testimony in order to heal (19). Israel does not want to tell his story to an outsider (anyone outside of himself), and testimony, according to Holocaust trauma theory, is a big part of the healing process, and healing is seemingly the reason Israel returns to Cuba. Of course Hijuelos knows (or hopes) his book will be read. The two sides of this testimony issue meet in the fact that Israel tells his story through memory, even if he does not imagine an audience for his life. Hijuelos complicates Israel’s point of view by making his performer no longer wish to perform, even in the story-telling sense.

Instead, the reader learns of Israel’s stay in Buchenwald and his use of memory as a survival tool from the narrator. He uses his memories to remove him from his traumatic present—incarcerated and starving—to a better place: Cuba. Israel spent time during the Holocaust in Buchenwald, which is described as “a munitions complex that was not a ‘death camp,’ but a place in whose harsh conditions and punitive regimens many perished, anyway. And for the next fourteen months, the maestro did not believe the things he saw, nor the

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the past) was enough detail for readers to understand what the book was about without pushing too hard by including the parenthetical phrase.
sounds he heard” (298). Theodore Adorno wrote that there can be no more poetry after Auschwitz, thus implying that the Holocaust is beyond representation. Through Israel’s disbelief at the things he sees, Hijuelos offers a reader a popular view of the Holocaust: that it defies representation. By doing this, Hijuelos is tying his own Cuban American fiction into the genre of Holocaust fiction. Israel is not sent to a death camp because of his skills as a pianist. He is routinely taken from his camp barracks into the city to play for Nazi officers and high-society Germans. During his performances, Israel escapes to another place in his mind, likely to spare himself the knowledge that he is entertaining the same people who are responsible for so much death and torture. One such performance is described:

The Germans attend to their reception, with champagne glasses […] in hand, and, later, as [Israel] plays, he cannot believe that he is their lounge pianist, and though they are in the same room, […] all of that falls away, and he is on the stage of the Teatro Martí in Habana, circa 1922, where his friends and family and fellow composers and musicians sit in the audience, listening to his little recital with appreciation and good wishes. (303). Clearly, Israel is escaping time and place through his memories of Habana, friends, and family. It is the music, more than anything, that enables his escape into memory. He is awoken from this dream only when “some rather drunk commander disrupts his thoughts” by proposing a toast (304). Later, the reader learns that Israel “takes an even greater solace in his memory of music, recounting scores note by note from heart” (305). Once back in Habana, though, music and memories no longer help him feel better or escape anything.

Israel’s clear preoccupation with the past and memory signal something more significant to the reader: his use of nostalgia and memory are more positive and a means to heal than it initially seems. Hirsch and Spitzer claim that “nostalgic memory has also been seen […] as a
resistant relationship to the present, a ‘critical utopianism’ that imagines a better future” (258). Because of this “resistance” to the present, Israel’s memories of Cuba help him survive his Holocaust internment while he undergoes it; they are a way for Israel to survive the trauma in the present moment. Later, though, his memories of the Holocaust trauma make his life wholly unlivable. Due to his trauma, it is also possible that Israel preferred the past to his more difficult present because “the absent is […] somehow better, simpler, less fragmented, and more comprehensible than its alternative in the present” (Hirsch and Spitzer 258). It is easier to interpret and love the past because it is gone and can be pieced together in an attractive way; the past is narratable, malleable, and thus has meaning. The present is more difficult because a person lacks an amount of control over their situation and has no idea what the future brings. The present is unpredictable and can therefore be both exhilarating and terrifying. This is especially true for Israel as he generally has trouble making decisions. The activity of looking to the past is something he can control—even if that was not the case at the time; he can control his narrative, his remembrance, of the past.

Additionally, because Israel left Cuba—“not the Cuba that American tourists were flocking to […] but the Habana of the secret police, of murders, kidnappings and mutilations”—under tense circumstances, “exhausted by worries over the sad political situation in Cuba, then under the control of dictator Gerardo Machado,” his memories will always be a mix of homesickness and nostalgia because he was forced out (175, 91). Dopico mentions that “for exiles, Havana [is] instantly frozen into the moment of departure, nostalgic and utopian” (459). For Israel, this means that his memories of Cuba will always be good ones—the ones he made before times got too bad for him to stay there—because Cuba cannot change for him when he receives little news of Cuba outside of letters from
family. Mary McCarthy defines an exile as “essentially a political figure […] the exile waits for a change of government […] which will allow him to come home” (49). Because Israel was an exile from Cuba in many ways—too many careless comments to newspapers criticizing Machado’s regime and secret police following him around Habana—his story also becomes that of an exile. His memories are viewed through the lens of a hopeful and actual return to Cuba.

As an exile in Paris, Israel is without the presence of many parts of Cuba that he so loves. He cannot roam “along the Prado at night, taking the air, amid the crowds, the tips of their cigarettes and cigars glaring like fireflies, the murmur of voices around him, the distant sound of music coming from some plaza, swallows darting through the air” (95). An exile is “someone who has been stripped of everything […] a way of life, the smell of the air and the color of the sky, the familiarity of the home and the street […] of cafes with friends and newspapers and music and walks through the city” (Cortazar 172-3). This is exactly what has happened to Israel: he has been forced away and out of touch with the smells, tastes, sounds, and sights that he grew up with and associates with Cuba. Israel is separated from people, places, and a history he knows so well and is thus disassociated from that place—so much so that he is believed to be a European Jew rather than the Cuban Catholic that he actually is, a blatant symbol from Hijuelos that Israel is completely removed from the island.¹⁹ Vassily Aksyonov points out that “besides the cultural, historical and geographical notions of homesickness, there is also a certain biochemical nostalgia which includes of

¹⁹ There may or may not be Jewish ancestry in the Levis family: “The family name, Levis, originated with some distant Catalan ancestor, who may or may not have had some Jewish blood, but nothing was made of that […]” (49). There were many Jewish Spaniards before the Inquisition, and after, too, therefore it is logical that when the Spanish took over Cuba, some of the immigrants to the island were Jews, thus creating Cuban Jews. With this information, Hijuelos explores the idea of national identity and complicates it by expressing that being Cuban is not so simple as being Cuban Catholic. Cuban ethnicity or identity is as varied as any other culture.
course a great number of gastronomical and olfactory matters” (235). Aksyonov implies that there is something natural and even biological about Israel’s nostalgia for Cuba, thereby validating it as a cultural practice, if biology is a validating marker. Israel misses the ways of Cuba as much as he misses the food and familiarity of it all. This is not to say that Israel is not happy abroad but simply that because he was forced to leave Cuba, his memories are that much more important and intense—especially for a man who loves Cuban food and life so much. All of the images of Cuba are so romantic and lovely that a reader understands their appeal for Israel (or anyone, for that matter) but their loveliness is perhaps so much that the reader may begin to question the reliability of Israel’s memory.

Memories, especially sensory ones, are not entirely trustworthy. Sensory memories are only details and not entire stories. They are, as Hijuelos describes in Our House in the Last World, “like a splintering film” and thus only pieces to the story, the past life, remembered. Polina Dimova cites the writers Anna Seghers and Iosif Brodsky when she cautions against relying on memories which contain only details. She states,

Seghers and Brodsky recognize the deficiency and futility of memory containing only ‘details, not the whole picture,’ but they put their creativity at the service of their failing memory—which is also associated with death and sickness—so as to prevent history from repeating the mistakes of the past. (Dimova 80).

Israel, and even Hijuelos himself, both suffer from a “deficiency” of memory. Israel clings mostly to sensory details, splintered moments, more than he cares for entire scenes from his past. Because of the splintering, chronology and time are affected along with accuracy.

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20 Anna Seghers, the German Jewish writer of the short story “The Excursion of the Dead Girls” (1946) explores narrative and memory in exile from Germany in Mexico (Dimova 70).
21 “In his essay ‘Less than One,’ the Russian exile poet Joseph Brodsky theorizes about memory in relation to realism” (Dimova 76).
Hijuelos, writing from his own perspective as a Cuban American who has not visited the island, does not have first-hand memories of Cuba and thus invents them and holds onto details that have been shared with him through family, which are presumably mostly food, smell, and certain image memories. Both Israel and his creator, Hijuelos, are creative people: Israel composes music and Hijuelos obviously writes novels. The sickness and deathly aspects of “memory containing only ‘details’” are clearly represented in Israel, who cannot speak about his time in Buchenwald and only wishes to return to Cuba to die as well as in Hector, from *Our House in the Last World*, who is sick from a “Cuban illness” and does not have many memories of his one trip to the island. There is a definite lack of control over sensory memories whereas chronological, “complete,” memories offer the person doing the remembering a form of control over their thoughts: they can be composed rather than details and pictures floating in and out of their mind. Hector, Israel, and Hijuelos all seek control in their lives through memory. Ultimately, whether through choice or circumstance, their memories are incomplete and remain mostly details.

Complicating the idea that Israel views Cuba as a utopia of positivity and hope is the fact that he travels to Cuba multiple times during his stay in Paris. At first, the fact that he has visited the island is mentioned in passing, in a very brief section titled “His Journeys Back to Cuba and Other Travels, 1934-1936” (224). Cuba is lumped in with “other travels” which implies its lack of importance. After Machado’s fall from power in 1933, Israel would have been perfectly safe to return to Cuba, but the narrator points out, “That he would stay there [in Paris], however, for the next decade, long after the fall of Machado […] had, in part, to do with the allurements of the artistic ambience and elegance of that city” (212). Through these lines, the reader is aware that Israel chooses Paris over Cuba at some point. This seemed so
impossible at the beginning of the novel, when Cuba is valorized as the only place Israel could return to for healing. Israel is described as missing “his family, miss[ing] Cuba itself” and that although “When his head filled with the most lovely memories of the little pleasures of the life that he seemed to have left behind, his sadness was great,” he did not return to the island very much (236, 237). The reader learns that Israel’s memories of his dear friend Manny Cortez, who was murdered by Machado’s corrupt police, somewhat prevent his return. Israel has vivid images of Manny’s corpse “laying stretched out on a Habana street with two bullets through is head, and like a character out of an Edgar Allen Poe story, he would come back from the dead and cry out mournfully to Levis, ‘It was life on this godforsaken island that did this to me’” (237). This image is a strong hint that Cuba is not the perfect place it was formerly imagined to be. If the island ruined Manny, it could easily ruin Israel if he returns there. Besides, Israel was having much too good of a time in Paris and from where he stood then, before WWII touched him, Cuba “seemed so staid and ordinary when compared to the great city in France” (240). Israel “began to take a different view of his own country, as a backward, socially static place” that did not allow him the freedoms that France did (240). Clearly, Israel’s affection for Cuba is entirely flappable. When times in Paris are good, Israel does not wish to return to Cuba. Once times turn sour, however, his desire to return to Cuba and all of its trauma-induced, unmistakable perfection (even if it is newly realized) is enormous.

**Seeking Resolution/Healing Through Return**

Israel’s nostalgia is due to his exile from Cuba but also to the traumatic events he suffered in Europe during the Holocaust. His situation in Buchenwald is so bleak and terrible that his past in Cuba becomes a sort of dream-like promised land. Cuba, with all of its problems that
caused Israel to leave in the first place, becomes a location to get back to, a place where his life will be good again because it is a place (presumably) untainted by WWII. Cuba is a place of mostly positive memories for Israel once his life in Paris begins to change for the worse and the Germans place restrictions on his freedoms by labeling him a Jew, prior to his internment in Buchenwald. Israel’s wish to return to Cuba is based on his desire to get there and die. Israel, “believed, simply, that he was returning to Cuba to die in what peace he could find” (15). Because Hijuelos is careful to include the phrase “what peace he could find,” the reader is aware that Israel is, in fact, searching for resolution. Hijuelos shows the reader Israel’s hope and search again when, upon his return to Cuba, just off the ship, Israel’s eyes are described as “seem[ing] lost” and later they are described as “soft and searching” as Israel looks into the mirror (5 and 32). His return to Cuba at what he views as the end of his life is a way for Israel to find, or at least look for, closure, hope, and healing. His return is also Hijuelos’s way of expressing that he believes Israel can find these things in Cuba and nowhere else. In Cuba, he hopes to find “the quiet and unspectacular finale to his days” (21). The supposed “cure for the disease” of nostalgia is returning home to find the “restorative ending” (Hirsch and Spitzer 258). Hirsch and Spitzer add that place is integral to memory and realization of the past, that “the location authenticates the narrative […] [and] makes it real” (271). Thus, Israel has to go home to validate everything that has ever happened to him in his entire life. It is home that “authenticates” his story of flight, pain, trauma, loss, and success. Israel “set[s] out from [his] exile on a nostalgic search for [his] lost homeland” believing that finding home, if that is at all possible, is the resolution to his pain and suffering (Cortazar 173). Because Israel’s return was something he had to hope and wait for, and
seemed utterly impossible at times, it only strengthened his desire and resolve to get back there; because he could not have it, he wanted it more.

Israel’s actual return, though, is not the healing experience he imagined it would be. He returns to Cuba and realizes that things are the same, but different for him. He sees familiar sights, reacquaints himself with familiar sounds, smells, and places. Israel is “surprised to find himself feeling sentimental over the rediscovery of certain objects” like his sister’s dolls or his father’s medical books (27). There is a great deal of confusion and internal conflict upon Israel’s return. The narrator questions, “And why was it that even as he felt a great enthusiasm—even joy—and a nostalgia for life in Habana, and a true affection for his family and those of his friends that remained, there existed within him a numbness to feeling?” (24).

Israel finds that he can no longer appreciate “the chortling of parrots” or the “singsong of vendors on the street”—specific sounds that formerly inspired his own compositions (29). The very details and aspects of Habana that preserved Israel through his internment at Buchenwald—memories of family, friends, sights and sounds associated with Cuba—now do nothing for him. The text offers, at least, that “music still cheered him, as long as [Antonio] did not play ‘Rosas Puras’” (29). Certain sounds that formerly excited him or roused his spirits, like hearing “Rosas Puras” on the radio, now cause Israel deep discomfort and cause him to become irritable and short-tempered with friends or employees.

To the reader, Israel’s return initially seems overly complicated. The reader wonders why finally reaching home after years abroad and time interned in Buchenwald does not instantly heal Israel. But Israel’s inability to find “closure” and healing post-Holocaust keeps with Holocaust-trauma literary findings and representations: the ghosts of Holocaust trauma do not simply disappear and, instead, they follow the survivor home. The reality of his return is
that his memories cannot preserve him any longer. He is free of his Holocaust trauma physically—although still clearly marked with “seven numbers in green ink”—but never emotionally or mentally (23). He is removed from the geographical space of his trauma, but not from the psychological space the trauma will always inhabit. Trauma has rendered Israel’s memories of Cuba useless now that he is not desperately trying to survive. In fact, Israel’s only wish upon his return to Cuba is to die there. He is no longer trying to live and therefore his memories are only sources of pain for him. His formerly good memories have been replaced by bad ones acquired in Buchenwald. Now all those aspects of Habana that formerly helped him survive only remind him of the time he needed to use them. Good memories are transformed into reminders of his trauma and are thus things Israel would rather forget. Cuba has become “an ideal only in memory, rather than in actuality” for Israel, and now only reflects his suffering during the Holocaust (Socolovsky 120). His return does not heal him and this conflict probably stems from the fact that Hijuelos has no real way of knowing whether a trip back home to Cuba could heal anyone. Perhaps Cuba’s healing powers are more family lore than real. Hijuelos only offers readers a slight resolution to this conflict: Israel’s death.

When Israel finally dies, details of his memories become images like brief scenes from a film and musical notes in a composition literally seem as though they are floating around him. His memories have finally come to escort him to his death, which is perhaps his only salvation from his trauma. As he lies dying, Israel sees his deceased family members and good friends and is swept from situation to situation, reliving pieces of his life. One moment he is composing with Manny Cortez, and then he is on a train in Europe, being sent to a Nazi concentration camp. As the train moves along it begins to take Israel along the coast of
Cuba, instead of through Europe, and this time, dying, Israel knows “that he [is] somehow heading back to Habana again, to a more peaceful time, long before the horrors had come into the world” (336). Clearly Israel still believes that Cuba is the place he can heal because Cuba lives on as an island of purity somehow, but only if Israel can travel far enough into the past. Only through these moments just before death can Israel ever return to the Cuba of his memories (real or not). But this dreamlike-Cuba has been altered to suit Israel’s most ardent wishes: in his moments before death, he sees himself and Rita Valladares, the missed-chances love of his life, walking “arm in arm through Habana, their own plump little children eating mani—‘peanuts’—out of paper cones trailing behind them, their family, living blissfully forever” (336, emphasis original). Israel’s ability to mold and shape his narrative just before his death and his desire for this image to live on forever are perfect examples of the way memory and nostalgia work. As Roger Luckhurst writes, “The historical past is irrecoverable; memory alone is the only access to it, and memory is a malleable narrative always open to retroactive re-description” and thus, over time, Israel’s memories have changed because of trauma, but he is also willing to attempt to recreate the past, perhaps the way it should have been (in his opinion), and wants that particular image to live on the way nostalgic longings, sometimes fictitious stories, can (91). Again, Israel’s memories act as something that tie him to place even in the moments before his death. His memories define him as Cuban more than his mistaken Jewish identity or his Catholicism.

Hijuelos offers the reader some resolution, healing, and hope for Israel just before his death through Pilar and Antonio. Pilar is a promising young singer whom Israel takes on as a student after much refusal to do anything with music. Israel does not compose, but he begins teaching again as he used to, very long ago, with Rita Valladares. Antonio, the young
Spaniard, displaced by WWII, who Israel brings with him on the ship back to Cuba and Pilar will eventually wed and presumably live happily ever after. Israel views Pilar and Antonio as the future of and the perpetuation of Cuban culture, music, youth and Israel imagines only happy things for them, even though his own life ends in myriad images of what he could have done better and memories of times happier than his post-Holocaust days. A reader knows, however, what the future brings for Cuba in the coming years: Castro’s eventual take-over, revolution, and the new economic and political reality for Cubans and, later, Cuban Americans.
Conclusion

Memory and nostalgia are significant components of Cuban national identity, and Hijuelos embraces those aspects in his writing. He confronts definitions of national identity that confine Cubans to the labels of Spanish and Catholic by offering a broader, larger view of what it means to be Cuban or Cuban American. Hijuelos argues, through his fiction, that it is possible to be Cuban outside of Cuba. By framing Cuban identity around memory, he allows Cubans and Cuban Americans who have different ancestry than Spanish/Catholic (Jewish, Afro-Cuban, U.S. American) to be validated in their “Cubanness.” As Maya Socolovsky writes, “In giving us a Catholic Cuban composer and putting him through a concentration camp, Hijuelos seems to be collapsing worlds and confusing the reader’s expectations of what a ‘Cuban-American’ voice should or can produce” (120). She goes on to cite reviews of Hijuelos’s writing, written by reviewers that are offended by Hijuelos’s “use” of the Holocaust and the fact that *A Simple Habana Melody* “stray[s] even further away than usual from suitable ‘Cuban’ themes and that by invoking the Holocaust he is beckoning towards an entirely separate ethnic-American literary tradition” (120, emphasis mine).

Mainstream reviewers from *Publisher’s Weekly* and the *New York Times* feel that Hijuelos is straying from “suitable” Cuban themes, and by writing such things implies that there are certain subjects a Cuban American writer is expected to—perhaps allowed to—write about. Hijuelos certainly leaves this tradition behind, but I argue this is a positive move, not offensive or at all negative. It is likely that Hijuelos does this because he, himself, is outside of Cuba and thus narrating from a second-hand perspective.

Although Oscar Hijuelos is not an exiled writer, he does exist outside the Cuban culture. He has not so much as been *exiled* from that culture as forced to exist outside it due to the
circumstance of being a Cuban American. Hijuelos’s position is similar to that of an exiled writer because of his preoccupation with recreating the past. Polina Dimova, writing about the exiled writer Iosif Brodsky, states, “Brodsky insists on the importance of memory in exile literature and depicts the exile writer as an atavistic creature whose existence is directed by the past. Thus the writer becomes ‘a retrospective and retroactive being’” (77). Hijuelos, as evidenced in his work, is also very much directed by the past and focuses his writing on recreating it. Hijuelos’s action is what makes him similar to what Brodsky is describing; Hijuelos not only thinks into the past but acts in it by creating actions that exist in the past. Hijuelos creates “narrative memories” with an “emotional aura”—showing that memories affect people and how they live their lives, effectively tying past, present, and future together—in both *Our House in the Last World* and *A Simple Habana Melody* (Bal viii). He writes a pre-Cuban Revolution history in an attempt to connect with and understand the Cuba of previous generations.

A further issue for both Hijuelos and other Cuban Americans is the struggle for a “true” Cuban identity. This becomes a major issue for Hijuelos because he is part of popular literary culture, thus under the scrutiny of both the U.S. Latino/a community and the rest of the U.S. literary community. Hijuelos’s representation of Cuban nostalgia in his novels is not a singular act; Nostalgia is recognized as “ubiquitous in Cuban American literature” (Kandiyoti 81). Since Cuban culture is recognized as a place for nostalgia to live and grow, then Hijuelos, as a Cuban American writer, must make a decision about the inclusion of nostalgia and memory in his own work. In *Our House in the Last World* and *A Simple*...

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22 See “An Interview with Cristina García” by Ylce Irizarry. García notes the struggle for Cuban identity and the controversy over being an “authentic” Cuban, as though there is a litmus test, composed of varied factors (Traveled to Cuba? Speaks Spanish?) to determine one’s Cubanness.
*Habana Melody*, nostalgia is obviously rampant and obviously a part of composing national identity. Kandiyoti points out that nostalgia is “a corollary of the exile identity that much of Cuban America has claimed” (81). This statement and theory affects both Hijuelos as a second generation “exile” of Cuba and the characters in his novels. It is Hijuelos’s choice to represent Cuban nostalgia in his work as it is a large part of Cuban exile and Cuban American identity. Israel, from *A Simple Habana Melody*, and the Santinio family of *Our House in the Last World* are representative of this common preoccupation with memories and nostalgia for Cuba; he and the Santinio family are perhaps symbols of the Cuban condition—if there is such a thing.

For Cuban Americans, finding this “true” Cuban identity is complicated by nostalgia and memory as well as what Lori Ween describes as “the physical and psychological distance between Cuba and the United States” (127). The U.S. is often where Cuban exiles emigrate to and yet the history between the U.S. and Cuba has left the U.S. less than home-like for these Cubans. For a Cuban American, then, Cuba is often viewed through the lenses of loss and the possibility of return (though not guaranteed) to the island. This undoubtedly affects the Cuban American perception of self and identity, which in turn affects Hijuelos as a writer. Cuba as something that exists only in memory and as a story is an accurate portrayal of the Cuba that Hijuelos probably knows. The collective Cuban exile and Cuban American consciousness is affected by this lack of a tangible home—or a new home that is rather hostile (through history and present) at times.

*A Simple Habana Melody* is narrated from the present into the past through stories and memories while *Our House in the Last World* meanders through time with the memories and perspectives of different characters also through storytelling. Because of these narrative
techniques, Cuba only exists as a memory for the reader and characters within the novels’ pages. Due to a traumatic break with Cuba during tense political times or a second-generation view of Cuba due to stories of this break, Cuba also exists only in memory for Cuban exiles and Cuban Americans as well. Israel exemplifies this Cuban American condition for readers in *A Simple Habana Melody*. It is Israel that suffers a break with Cuba and tells his story to an audience. Without the definite possibility of return (or even with the possibility), Cubans and Cuban Americans only truly have their memories and various cultural artifacts to hold on to. Also due to a lack of possibility surrounding return to Cuba, it is easier to glorify and romanticize one’s memories of the island as there is no way to ever be proven wrong by a visit in the present.²³ Hijuelos and *A Simple Habana Melody* perpetuate the idea of Cuba only as a memory because of the narrative structure and the evidence of a traumatic break with Cuba within the novel.

Hijuelos takes this idea of trauma a bit further into the future with *Our House in the Last World*. The Santinios left Cuba by choice, under no political duress, and the novel follows their lives in the U.S. and how Cuba affects their lives there. Memory is still a big part of their everyday lives. Inversely, not having many memories of Cuba is a big part of Hector’s life as he struggles with figuring out what it means to be Cuban. The Santinios live in a time closer to our present day and offer the reader a look into the lives of Cuban immigrants in the U.S.

²³ Ana Menéndez’s short story “Her Mother’s House” explores what happens when someone does return to the island and uncovers the truth they did not even know was there.
It is obvious that memory due to a specific trauma is a significant facet of Cuban national identity outside of Cuba. Cuban American literature mirrors this cultural practice of remembering to the point where it seems to be a pivotal, if not definitive, convention in the writing. Oscar Hijuelos is a Cuban American writer who has reached great success writing with memory and nostalgia in mind. His other novels, not analyzed here, received more critical attention, but *Our House in the Last World* and *A Simple Habana Melody* are also significant works because they continue to showcase the Cuban American literary convention of a preoccupation with memory but with an emphasis on creation, healing, and Cuban identity in the United States.

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24 Though not explored here, Cubans in Cuba still probably have this nostalgic longing for “la Cuba de ayer” because of Castro’s takeover in 1958/59 and the trauma associated with this revolution.
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