

## Imagining Cuba in Hijuelos's *A Simple Habana Melody*

By Jeremy L. Cass

At first glance, Oscar Hijuelos's sixth novel, *A Simple Habana Melody* (2002), seems to be a repeat. The tale comprises a lengthy series of short chapters, each with its own newspaper-like headline, that pieces together the topsy-turvy life story of fictional Cuban composer Israel Levis. We follow Levis's meteoric rise to fame after the 1928 release of his rumba, "Rosas Puras," an overnight sensation that quickly becomes synonymous with Cuban music the world over. The tangle of brief installments mixes the diegetic present—Levis's return to Cuba after the Second World War—with a collage of memories about "Rosas Puras"—its composition, its early performances by life-long love interest Rita Valladares, and its reception in and out of Cuba. The narrator tells us that even Levis himself "could not have imagined that this little piece of music would not only outlast him, but that it would seep through time, like a ghost, and reach innumerable hearts and souls" (68). Thus we read another Hijuelos novel about Cuban musicians and the frenzied consumption of Cuban music worldwide.

Like other Hijuelos works, *A Simple Habana Melody* functions as an exercise in nostalgia. And in case we miss the thematic orientation, Hijuelos appends a subtitle: *from when the world was good*. We learn through the patchwork of episodes that Levis is at his best in pre-Machado Cuba, a time of exciting artistic collaboration, binge eating (he is quite large), and boundless sexual conquests. While during his Havana heyday Levis freely moves about his favorite spots and consumes as he pleases, Hijuelos forces his protagonist upon three settings that constrict his freedoms: Machado's Cuba (1925-1933), Paris during the Nazi Occupation of France (1940-1944), and eventually the Buchenwald concentration camp in Germany. Aside

from another brief period of freedom and relative artistic success in Paris (before the occupation), these spaces become for the protagonist unproductive creative environs in which Levis is not able to produce new music. In one of the narrative's not-so-subtle ironic nods to the displacement idea, regardless of where his perils lead him, Levis constantly hears "Rosas Puras" and is continually identified as the rumba's author.

His renown follows him to Europe, so that even when he is creatively spent, the famous rumba serves as a nagging reminder of his former artistic life. Fame even allows him to earn his preference of concentration camp when the Nazis mistake him for a Jew and detain him in Paris; a high-ranking general, it seems, has certain proclivities towards his music.<sup>1</sup> In fact, in what *New York Times* reviewer Daniel Zalewski calls "the novel's most misguided and contrived move," Levis is only saved from Buchenwald by "agreeing to perform his famous song—which, it is unsurprising to learn, rather sours his feelings about it" (2).<sup>2</sup> Narrative design complements thematic constitution to such an extent that the episodic arrangement accentuates the juxtaposition of past glory with present decline. In this way we learn that Levis's time has come and gone, his musical inspiration has all but dried up, and when we meet him at the beginning of

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<sup>1</sup> Levis's name naturally raises Nazi suspicions. Despite his attempts to have his name cleared from the register of Jews by presenting evidence of his Cuban citizenship and Catholic upbringing, he does not convince the authorities: "The police were amused—how could any man with a name like Israel Levis be anything but a Jew, no matter what he protests?" (275). The narrative also fictionalizes the well-known Nazi general, Helmut Knochen (1910-2003), who informs Levis: "'I have arranged that you will be transported to the Weimar Station, to a place near Ettersberg. It's quite lovely there. *Un lugar muy maravilloso.*' Uncertain as to whether he should thank the general or not, Levis did not say a word. Then Knochen told him: 'It's not something that I do for everyone—but I have very much enjoyed your musicianship'" (295-296).

<sup>2</sup> Maya Socolovsky highlights the effects of the Holocaust motif on the narrative's larger meditations on Cuban and Cuban-American identity. On the one hand, "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). On the other hand, Socolovsky points to how Hijuelos's use of the Holocaust in *A Simple Habana Melody* "emerges out of his own and previous writers' attempts to write a return to Cuba" (120).

the novel, he is clearly a shell of his former self. If Hijuelos's very premise is nostalgic—and the gushy subtitle seems to reinforce that idea—then the linear tale that we reconstruct through the anachronistic vignettes is ultimately centered on the circumstances that separate Levis from Cuba and the resultant effects of that separation on his creative talent. My aim in this study is to offer an examination of the novel's centering on nostalgia, in particular, how such a makeup operates within a novelistic world that displaces, at every turn, the Cuban artist from his homeland.

It should now be clear that the novel has much in common with Hijuelos's most acclaimed piece, *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love* (1989), and also with a more recent novel like *Beautiful María of My Soul* (2010), the supposed sequel to *Mambo Kings* that uses that first novel's most famous song as its own title. The musical world does seem to be a benchmark-ofsorts for Hijuelos, who has gotten much mileage out of the displaced artist motif. He has even claimed in an interview that he conceived of *A Simple Habana Melody* as “something like a prequel” to the Cuban music boom so thoroughly explored in *Mambo Kings* (Suarez 1). He clarifies in that interview that the fictional Israel Levis is “very loosely based” on the Cuban composer Moisés Simmons (1889-1945), writer of the famous tune “El manisero” (“The Peanut Vendor”), a song which, in Hijuelos’s estimation, “introduced Latin music in effect to the world” (1). Simmons allegedly ended up in a concentration camp himself (hence the historical basis for the Levis plot line [1]). Such musical novels fictionalize both Cuban music itself and the superstar personas of the composers that bring that music to the world.

If Cesar from *Mambo Kings* rubs elbows with Desi Arnaz, then it should not be shocking that Hijuelos crafts a world in which Levis casually converses with Charlie Chaplin, jokes with Gerswhin in a bar, or sits for a sketch by Pablo Picasso. The fictionalization of the musical world does thematically bind these and other Hijuelos novels; such works at once posit the exile

experience and the need for creating, disseminating, and recreating Cuban spaces through artistic expression. However, *A Simple Habana Melody* at once resonates with and disengages from the *Mambo Kings* premise. The Cuban music scene in *Mambo Kings* is, for all intents and purposes, a Cuban space, regardless of the geographical displacement from the island itself. The simulacrum of Cuba in the United States functions as a uniquely Cuban setting in which both producers and consumers operate Cuban terms. *A Simple Habana Melody*, on the other hand, highlights the distinction between Cuban and non-Cuban spaces and the spin-off effects on artistic inspiration and production. As such, Hijuelos goes out of his way to relegate the young, productive, and inspirational Israel Levis to public Cuban spaces such as restaurants, bars, concert halls, and brothels. The fictional national hero might use his study for composing *zarzuelas* and *boleros* (he is apparently a stickler for routine), but he does almost all of his writing in the local Campana Bar, “famous for its croquettes, a theatrical hangout on the intersection of Virtudes and Consolado streets” (68). Going so far as to identify the specific intersection on which the bar rests, I read Hijuelos’s insistence on spatial orientation as a forceful, if not clunky, narrative declaration. Levis’s best compositions are penned from within Cuba, in open, public spaces with which other Cubans can readily identify.

Cultural geographers like Mike Crang (1998) have demonstrated that the narrative presentation of landscapes involves a so-called process of signification, that is, the mechanism through which writers—or composers—create a “sense of place through their writings” (45). Crang conceives of textual composition as a spatial exercise that privileges the “profoundly geographical construction of a text. One of the standard geographies of a text... is the creation of a home” (47). The narrative presentation of landscapes, of familiar places, is a means through which spaces acquire meaning. Hijuelos’s brand of spatial orientation not only involves the

recreation of landscapes, but seems to depend on displacement as a thematic clutch. On one level, novels like *Mambo Kings* are peppered with the textual recreation of spaces, of Cuban landscapes in which characters find solace. In Richard Patteson's words, "remembering and imagining such an island (in this case a Cuba increasingly receding into myth) become an essential element in the composition of an evolving, present-day, and very American reality" (38). Hijuelos repeatedly turns to such spatial delineations as a conceptual underpinning for his musings on the Cuban-American exile experience, in essence crafting novelistic worlds in which fictional characters create their own national/artistic discourses in order to recall home. In other words, the works are not only about the recreation of Cuban spaces, but the fictional creation of artistic traditions within those spaces. Maya Socolovsky observes in Hijuelos's writing an ever-present tension between the "Edenic allure of Cuba" (118) and "the sense that one's voice cannot articulate a return to the island" (118). In *A Simple Habana Melody*, she notes, Cuba becomes for Levis "a provisional, fleeting space that cannot be grasped" (118). Such a setup, steeped in national devotion, only furthers Hijuelos's penchant for nostalgia.<sup>3</sup> The nostalgic reconstruction of Levis's former Cuban life, for example, is at odds with his present decline, which the novel metaphorically reduces to a rudimentary imaginary system in which his real Cuba exists only in the past and in which exile (both within and outside of Cuba) deprives artistic and creative potential. (In many ways, this is a contravention of the spatial demarcation of artistic production in *Mambo Kings*.)

No matter where we encounter Levis, he seems eager to recreate the Cuban space in which he was able to produce music. As Gustavo Pérez-Firmat has established in his seminal

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<sup>3</sup> There is another effect that compounds the nostalgic return to Cuba: the craze with which non-Cubans consume Cuban music. The *Mambo Kings* band therefore boasts success precisely because of the nostalgic inclinations of its audience—the Cuban-American community—and the non-Cuban audience that is simply riding the tropical jazz bandwagon.

*Life on the Hyphen: The Cuban American Way* (1994), the exiled Cuban “is someone who thinks imagination is a place. The problem is, imagination is not a place. You can’t live there, you can’t buy a house there, you can’t raise your children there. Grounded in compensatory substitutions, the recreation of Havana in Miami is an act of imagination” (10). Though Pérez-Firmat is clearly discussing Cuban Miami, I think the conceptual connection with *A Simple Habana Melody* merits further reflection, for Hijuelos makes clear that Levis is a character who perpetually attempts to recreate his former Cuban environ. I read the more uncomfortable elements of Levis’s own exile life—in particular, his concentration camp experience—as forceful declarations of this very idea. If Buchenwald is for Levis a “compensatory substitution,” it is a forced one; and his being forced to perform his Cuban music within that space is certainly an overt symbolic gesture about forced displacement. Hijuelos’s acquiescence to this motif is revealed in the series of plot details that require his protagonist to continue to articulate his Cuban identity even outside of authentic Cuban spaces like Havana or the simulacrum of Cuban artistic life that Levis enjoys in Paris. Just as Pérez-Firmat reiterates that when complete isolation from the homeland “become[s] habitual, the substitutive fantasy collapses” (9), Levis’s artistic dry spell—the most cogent symptom of his forced displacement from Cuba—is for all intents and purposes a collapsed reality.

The novel opens with an aging Levis remembering a life of musical celebrity as he returns to Cuba after convalescing in Madrid following the war and his concentration camp internment. The nostalgia is palpable, if not overwhelming: “Often he daydreamed, the horizon turning upside down; at once he was seeing his beloved Habana again, the city dense with winding streets, great mansions and horses and carriages and Packard automobiles, and with its alleys and courtyards in which the *rumberos* gathered past midnight; Habana, as it had been,

floating in the sky” (11). Hijuelos frames Levis’s daydream with a gesture of geographic destabilization—the flipping of the horizon. Such a move highlights the lack of spatial footing, so much so that the Havana of old is not rooted anywhere but is rather “floating in the sky.” Levis, unable to effectively recreate the Havana of his prime, is forced to think about the geographical markers of his old home and his memories of meeting with other composers. The opening concession that these daydreams were a regular occurrence only underscores the nostalgic bent.

By mid novel we learn that Levis’s Cuban prime is in fact an exciting time of music writing, partying, and sexual consumption. He is a man about town in 1920s Havana. Clearly planted in a Cuban space, Levis is a prominent Havana socialite who dines and drinks at all the local places and has his own room at the best bordello. So in the most basic metaphorical sense, if the novel is about nostalgia, then it stands to reason that the buzzing pre-Machado Cuba is nationally productive, for in this environment Levis penned “Rosas Puras,” “that most famous of rumbas” (5). Hijuelos thereby fashions within Levis a complex fusion of unquenchable consumption, reveling in the delights of home, and the production of nationally beneficial music. The not-so-subtle narrator later clarifies that nation and art exist in symbiosis for Levis: “That he became a composer was the natural outcome of his love for music and his own patriotic feelings about Cuba” (106). Each of Levis’s memories about the composition of Cuba’s most famous fictional song is therefore imbued with patriotic overtures; Cuba’s most quintessential musician is just as concerned with country as he is with music.<sup>4</sup> It should not be surprising, then, that we

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<sup>4</sup> This is not to say that Levis was necessarily politically inclined. He is exiled from Cuba not because of any thoughtful articulation of resistance to the Machado regime, but rather because of a series of accidental or haphazard moves that brought him under the suspicion of authorities. “Without intending to he had aligned himself with certain movements, notably the Grupo Minorista, a group that, in proclaiming affinity with the island’s African past, called for a change

eventually learn that one of Israel Levis's greatest accomplishments was his so-called 'Cubanization' of the Spanish *zarzuela*. The narrator characterizes Levis's motivations in clear nationalist terms, noting that Levis dedicated himself "to the mastery of every form and finding ways to express through music Cuba's emerging national soul" (107).<sup>5</sup> Such a national and nostalgic constitution is only amplified by a host of plot details that (over) accentuate Levis's transformation from hip young artist to the dilapidated man who meets countless misfortunes in Cuba, Paris, and Germany. To this end, Hijuelos crafts what I view as a tripartite symbolic transformation in Israel Levis, in which we witness the evolution of his physical stature and presence, his sexual energy, and his creative viability. The three symbolic demarcations work in chorus to drive home Hijuelos's larger commentary on the nostalgic marriage between "Cuba's emerging national soul," artistic production, and Levis's overall wellbeing.

As we piece together Levis's story, we learn that he navigates the Havana of his glory days as a large man with an impressive persona. The narrator describes Levis as "corpulent," "tall," and "beset with a heavily jowled, Catalan-Gallego face" (69). He was also a consumer: "Moderation was not in his heart. Well known for quantities of food and brandy he could consume at a single setting, he was the subject of something of a myth that came about because of a few candid remarks uttered by the *celestinas* of the city's brothels: that he was as virile as his waistline was expansive" (69). So the old Levis not only eats and imbibes liberally, he is also a macho force that patrols the Havana streets naturally radiating confidence and charm. Indeed,

in racial policies and a 'new society,' with which the government did not agree" (125). "He did not know that he was being watched, that he was placidly getting himself into trouble, signing petitions and letters against the government" (124). It is interesting that these plot details essentially allow Hijuelos to not take sides in the polemic surrounding Levis's exit from Cuba.

<sup>5</sup> In his accurate depiction of the intellectual and artistic climate of Republican, pre-Machado Cuba, Hijuelos seems to be channeling the nationalist efforts of Fernando Ortiz to delineate the concept of *cubanidad*.

Levis could “effortlessly command the attention of a room; not just because of his physical immensity, for he often towered over others, nor because he moved through the world in a cloud of kindly emanations, for he had friends everywhere, but because he exuded such creative—and thereby virile—energies that his presence was always preceded by a wave of recognition” (69). Of utmost significance here is how Hijuelos insists on melding artistic innovation with sexual energy. Connecting creativity and virility—actually, the cause and effect relationship the narrator establishes between the two with the qualifier “thereby”—becomes an important assertion: the artistically productive citizen is also an emblem of the macho persona that Levis embodies in his brothel life. When Levis is a consumer—of food, alcohol, and sex—he is capable of penning nationally viable anthems the likes of “Rosas Puras.”

The narrative takes very seriously the task of articulating differences between the old and new Levis, and accentuating the physical changes that he undergoes before and after his Nazi internment proves to be a powerful symbol of his decline. For when we meet Levis at the novel’s beginning, set in 1947, his former confidence and security has all but vanished. From his ship, as he gazes at his former stomping grounds:

Peering out at the world through the distortions of his thick-lensed wire-rim glasses, his eyes seemed lost, as if under water, and he was gaunt, perhaps too frail, his expression careworn, and, in any event, beyond easy recognition—a bit of a joke because during his heyday in the Habana of the 1920s and 1930s he had been quite tall and broad-shouldered and so corpulent that while walking along the narrow sidewalks of Habana... he would have to stand aside, his back pressed flatly against a wall, or duck into a doorway, to allow the ladies with their *parasoles* to pass. So great was his girth and imposing physicality that with his

trademark mustache he reminded his friends of the silent-film comedian Oliver Hardy. (6)

Hijuelos again opts for a contrapuntal depiction in which the concurrence of Levis's old and new lives serves only to accentuate the loss of creative talent and, by extension, the inability to produce nationally viable art. Again relying on memories of his spatial situation in pre-Machado Havana, Hijuelos posits descriptors like "gaunt," "frail," and "beyond easy recognition" as contraventions of his former self. In this way, the image of a rotund Levis lumbering down the streets, his very presence imposing upon passersby, becomes a distant memory; the nostalgic retrospection is accompanied by a host of physical changes that only reinforce his downfall. The magnitude of his emotional despair is only magnified by the circumstances of this daydream. No longer imagining a floating Havana on the horizon, this time, Levis envisions the past from a city-side perspective. This should be a time of celebration for Levis who, his troubles over, is finally re-entering familiar space; however the view of the city only conjures the same types of visions he had when apart from Cuba.

In addition to his former physical stature, and the instant recognition it affords him, Levis is also known in his prime as an insatiable sexual consumer. It is therefore no surprise that Hijuelos details Levis's brothel life in more than one episode. On one such occasion, when Levis visits his favorite spot, we see how his sexual world and his musical persona collide. Hijuelos begins this vignette with a spatial delineation of the room itself, "which opened to a patio, was crowded—American and French sailors, businessmen, many Cuban fellows lounging about small tables, drinking, each with a woman by his side. The proprietress, an older Spaniard of faded beauty, wearing a mantilla and a comb in her hair, greeted Levis and snapped her fingers at the bartender, who poured him a Carlos Quinto brandy. 'Don Israel,' she said. 'Perhaps you will

play for us later?" He always did" (130). The narrator's final commentary here reiterates that this is a common scene for Levis, who, despite the crowd, gets the star treatment. I think it is important to recognize that the characters within the fictional bordello certainly conceive of Levis as both a sexual and musical man; these two identities operate in tandem with one another, again representing the Levis of his heyday as a man in which libido and musicality coexist, the one nurturing the other.

To top it all off, Hijuelos seems to insist on pairing Levis's sexual consumption with big meals, apparently making every effort to accentuate the protagonist's consumerist persona prior to his displacement from Cuba. After the play-by-play narrative detailing of one of his many sexual encounters, the narrator confirms both Levis's familiarity as a local musical celebrity and his penchant for eating massive meals: "As he always did, he later performed a bit of Chopin on the brothel piano—but the truth was that, aside from the delights of his carnal dalliance, what he most enjoyed that evening came later: a platter of paella, dense with shrimp, mussels and chunks of chorizo, that he, after leaving the brothel, devoured on the patio of a little restaurant overlooking the harbor" (133). I read the symbolic pairing of sexual activity with eating as an overt narrative strategy meant to emphasize his ability to freely expend the resources that Havana provides him. Whether describing paella ingredients or the physical features of his latest brothel conquest, the narrator seems bent on equating this era of Levis's life with free movement and uninhibited consumption. Moreover, the geographical situation of his meal in the postcar Havana locale—the harbor—provides a spatial repertoire of distinctly Cuban signifiers. Such luxuries only accentuate the severity of his downfall.

The narrator confirms that Levis was, for the most part, pleased with his bachelor's life: "Evenhanded and respectful of others, particularly women, and so grateful for what gifts that

God had given him, as his mother had told him time and time again, he never really lamented his solitary bachelor's state; as he saw it, the niceties of dining and drink and the pleasures of the brothel were enough—most of the time” (75). However Hijuelos certainly complicates his protagonist's sexual and masculine identities, not only through a series of references that point to Levis's latent homosexuality, but also through the painstaking details of his romantic obsessions and failed relationships. Indeed, Levis's love troubles are constant, regardless of where he finds himself. He is tormented by the unrequited love of Rita Valladares, the singer who first performed and recorded “Rosas Puras,” about whom he obsesses for most of his life. Despite a life of romantic obsessions and counterproductive fixations on the unattainable Rita Valladares, he does find somewhat of a meaningful love interest in Sarah Rubenstein, a Parisian companion with whom Levis collaborates on a libretto project (the adaptation of Zola's *Germinale*). But the invading Nazis dash the hopes of that relationship as Sarah, a Jew, is forcefully displaced from the Parisian artistic paradise. That turn of fate ultimately upends Levis, who in turn is made to suffer romantic frustration/loss on both sides of the Atlantic.<sup>6</sup> We learn of the pervasiveness of his propensity for debilitating romantic obsessions in an unsent love letter, dated 1947. After receiving a major award for “furthering the cause of Cuban music” (157), what should have been a happy reminder of his triumphs, he writes to Rita: “It's as if you are the only person that I have in the world to confide in, the last link to my youth and to the good times. Anyone looking at me now only feels pity” (157). The cogent reminder of his gloried past—the award—is tempered by

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<sup>6</sup> This should not suggest that his Paris experience was entirely negative. Before the occupation, Levis certainly establishes himself as an artistic presence in the city, experiencing a professional rebirth of sorts: “His comforts in Paris and the demands for his services were so great that his temporary stay in the city of light became more and more prolonged. He discovered a second life there—as a concertizer, performing in auditoriums and theaters here and there in Europe, as a symphonic composer and conductor, as the presenter of his own zarzuelas and lyric comedies” (229).

the embarrassment he communicates to Rita. His ruin has been indeed so complete that even re-immersing himself in Havana, his old stomping grounds, does not exercise any therapeutic benefit.<sup>7</sup> To address this conundrum, which seems to upend the novel's spatial formation, we must turn to the narrator's reflection on the emotional toll of his concentration camp internment: "Until the years of his internment in the camp, he had no doubts about his life as a composer. That torment had not only been a slap from God, but had disemboweled and humiliated the grant deity before his very eyes, unraveling over a course of so many dangerous and disheartening days that sweet love of life..." (42). Ascribing a spiritual dimension to his plight, Levis reveals that Buchenwald has altered his core identity, no longer conceiving of himself as a composer. The symbolic persistence of physical descriptors—disembowelment as a trimming exercise—and emotional stresses—his "disheartening"—confirms that his internment is indeed a crisis for him.

Perhaps Hijuelos's biggest aesthetic and conceptual triumph in the novel is the penultimate episode, which melds previously recounted memories to cast an imaginary account of Levis's death. The last date the narrative gives us regarding Levis's storyline is 1953, just six years after his return to Cuba. Levis's bright spot in these dark times is his new student, Pilar Blanca, whom he meets with regularly for music lessons. If the overt symbolic gesture of equipping the next musical generation seems a bit of a slap in the reader's face, the Pilar Blanca subplot serves as a masterful setup for the fantastic portrayal of Levis's death. Having regained a bit of his celebrity, despite the changing of musical currents (recall the lifetime achievement

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<sup>7</sup> In another unsent love letter, which Levis also penned upon his return to Havana in 1947, indicates just how deeply rooted his obsession with and admiration of Valladares was: "And now? What is an hour but something that passes in a flash.... Why I am thinking of time I cannot say, but now that I am back in Cuba I have been awaiting your return, fascinated by how in that context time once again goes quite slowly...." (48).

award of sorts about which he wrote to Rita), he seems to settle into a regular routine. Then, out of nowhere, we read—again—about his trip to Buchenwald: “As the Nazi soldiers corralled these poor souls into freight cars, Levis was singled out and escorted to a first-class coach at the front of the train. The velvet-covered seats were so comfortable that he nearly dozed, half-expecting a porter to come through with champagne and caviar” (335-336). This is a bit of an unsettling move, for some of these phrases are repeats from previously recounted episodes. Reader’s confusion aside, Levis’s memories of the train to the concentration camp intertwine with his apparent death, for after getting on the train to the camp, he is suddenly roaming the streets of Havana with Rita: “Now they strolled arm in arm through Habana, their own plump little children eating *maní*—“peanuts”—out of paper cones trailing behind them, the two of them, their family, living blissfully forever” (336).<sup>8</sup> This fantastic space is an idyllic musical world, with a “piano on every street corner, handsome singers and beautiful female dancers in every alley. Orchestras performing in every park” (337). The nostalgic tension seems to resolve in a most unexpected manner; the very episode that leads to Levis’s lowest point is forced upon what becomes Levis’s happiest, albeit imaginary, moment. Though the invented progeny clarify that this is a fantastic aside and not an actual memory, I read the fantasy Havana, steeped in the very musical ideals that Levis espoused in his heyday, as the ultimate nostalgic concoction. The spatial disorientation is reminiscent of Levis’s visions of the old Havana on his transatlantic return to his country, yet instead of dancing inverted on the horizon, this Havana is for Levis a more fruitful imaginative exercise in that in this world, his relationship with Rita Valladares was

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<sup>8</sup> This is most likely a nod to the Moisés Simmons, the historical basis for the Israel Levis character, whose “El Manisero” (“The Peanut Vendor”) is the real-life equivalent of the fictional “Rosas Puras.”

not one of frustration, but rather one of stability and production, a point emphasized by the couple's imaginary children following them, "living blissfully forever."

The sequence concludes with the spectral Levis looking over the Havana buildings to a billboard, the sight of which fills "his heart with both joy and terror: RITA VALLADARES SINGS 'ROSAS PURAS'" (337). The dream world in which Levis marries Rita and fathers her children seems to turn to memories of his rise to fame. We are thus introduced to the artist on the eve of his zenith; Hijuelos gives us the chance to understand Levis's emotional coming to grips with what's about to happen, that is, the "joy and terror" of his musical stardom. The reader is not completely clued in to what's really happening until the narrator brusquely clarifies the mysterious fantastic episode: "The radio stations of Cuba played his music for days; his funeral procession to the Cementerio Colón, where he would be forever united with his family, drew thousands, among them Rita Valladares, whose photograph, in mourning, appeared in the Habana newspapers" (337). Hijuelos's final spatial exercise, which clearly situates Levis's remains in an identifiable geographical environ within Havana, becomes an emblem of the tension that the novel worked so hard to tease out. The imaginative world in which Levis's memories meld with his ideal fantasy of a musical Havana is brought back to earth, quite literally, with his final movement through his beloved city—the funeral procession to his permanent resting place.

That Levis's reunion with the Cuba of his heyday—*from when the world was good*—can only be achieved as an imaginary act bolsters Hijuelos's larger point about exile and national artistic culture and, as such, lends credence to the narrative's nostalgic constitution. Levis hails from another time, and the series of circumstances that he is forced to confront during exile accentuates the deterioration of both the rumba writer and the homeland that displaced him.

Having forced his protagonist to conjure fantasies of his former Havana glories during his trials in Europe and during the general depression that characterized his post-war existence in Havana, Hijuelos only allows for his fictional national hero to truly reunite with his homeland in death. *A Simple Habana Melody*, then, while at times overbearing in its nostalgic designs, effectuates a subtle and compelling exegesis on the exiled artist's plight. If the string of circumstances that lead to Levis's demise and the fictional national hero's insistence on living in the past might seem contrived or even mildly tedious as a trope within the novel's plot development, Hijuelos leaves us with a rather irreconcilable conclusion that masterfully encapsulates the grim reality of the Cuban exile experience.

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