

## OSCAR HIJUELOS PLAYS SONGS OF SISTERLY LOVE

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(Resumen)

La concesión de un Premio Pulitzer representa, cuando menos, la popularización del galardonado; sin embargo, el futuro de la obra en cuestión, desvanecido su momento de gloria, puede no pasar de una referencia bibliográfica más. Cuando en 1990 se concedió el Pulitzer a *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love* su autor apenas si era (re)conocido en el mundo de las letras. Su primer libro *Our House in the Last World* (1983) ya apuntaba algunos de los problemas que aparecerán en obras sucesivas. El presente ensayo interrelaciona las distintas obras de este autor de ascendencia cubana, señalando las derivaciones existentes entre *Mambo Kings* y su novela más reciente, *The Fourteen Sisters of Emilio Montez O'Brien*. El tema de la emigración será en todos los casos el punto de arranque, pero el tratamiento de los personajes femeninos adquirirá progresivamente una novedosa dimensión.

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A Pulitzer Prize in Fiction means immediate fame and fortune, but it does not guarantee immortality. No one but the author's kinfolk is likely now to recall Ernest Poole's *His Family*, which won in 1918, the same year that Willa Cather's *My Antonia* appeared. Harold L. Davis's *Honey in the Horn* has lost its savor since 1936, when it won the Pulitzer and William Faulkner's *Absalom Absalom!* did not. Who is now minding *The Store*, the novel that earned T. S. Stribling a Pulitzer in 1933? When the Pulitzer jury chose *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love* for its 1990 award, the boisterous and bawdy new book seemed destined to be at least as long-playing as the fictional 1956 recording from which it takes its title. Written by Oscar Hijuelos, who was born, in New York in 1951, to Cuban immigrants, *Mambo Kings* recounts the foiled ambitions of Cesar and Nestor Castillo, who arrive in New York from Havana in 1949, hungry for success. It is not a Pulitzer but rather a shot on the *I Love Lucy* show that provides the Castillo brothers with their single instant of grandeur. Nothing ever again lives up to the luminous moment in 1955 when Cesar and Nestor put in a brief, musical cameo as fictional cousins of Desi Arnaz on the popular TV program. Most of *The Mambo Kings* is an elaborate flashback from a night in 1980 that the sexagenarian Cesar spends in the Hotel Splendour, a Manhattan flophouse that has deteriorated as much as he has. It is here, during his final, boozy hours, that Cesar listens to the recording he made in 1956 and recalls erotic escapades in that same room with Vanna Vane, Miss Mambo of June, 1954. At the end of the day, he reconstructs a thwarted life whose themes are sex, love, memory, and music.

Its sole transcendent episode was the one appearance on *I Love Lucy*, an event replayed not only in memory but in numerous broadcast reruns. Catching one of those, Eugenio, Nestor's only son, marvels, Proust-like, at art's power to immortalize, to overcome Nestor's death and Cesar's self-destructive, alcoholic self-pity and preserve

them in their moment of musical triumph. For Eugenio, the cathode tube has performed a veritably Christian miracle: "the resurrection of a man, Our Lord's promise which I then believed, with its release from pain, release from the troubles of this world." Hijuelos's debut book, *Our House in the Last World* (1983), is also filled with troubles, and its characters seek release from pain through contact with celebrity. A Bildungsroman and Künstlerroman about an unhappy family of Cuban immigrants struggling in Spanish Harlem, Hijuelos's first published novel culminates with Hector Santinio's declaration of redemptive literary ambition: "I think that one day I would like to write a book, something that would so please my mother and my Pop, if he was still alive." His Pop is dead by this point, and the *only touch of grace in the elder's trajectory of failure* came in 1961, with an unexpected visitor to the hotel kitchen where Alejo Santinio drudged. Like the *LUCY* videotape that perpetuates the broadcast beatification of Cesar and Nestor Castillo, a journalistic snapshot arrests Alejo's wretched life during its "brief moment of glory. In the newspaper picture Alejo and his friend Diego were in their best dress whites standing before a glittering cart of desserts. Beside them was a fat, cheery beaming face, the Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev, who was attending a luncheon in his honor at the hotel." Like the segment on the *Lucy* show, the photo of Alejo with Khrushchev transforms and immortalizes an otherwise banal life.

*The Mambo Kings*, which was soon made into an indifferent movie starring Armand Assante and Antonio Banderas, transformed its author into a celebrity, the kind of person who, like Arnaz and Khrushchev, radiates gilt by association to those sanctified by his presence. Hijuelos suddenly found himself bearing the burden of being the official culture's anointed Latino author at a time when those of Cuban, Mexican, and Puerto Rican background were increasingly laying claim to the attention of the nation. Yet, despite the author's apotheosis, the power of Hijuelos's first two books derived from his sympathy for the bedeviled, for immigrants from Oriente Province who come to New York and grief.

In *Our House in the Last World*, Alejo Santinio courts his future wife Mercedes at the Neptuna movie theater, where she works as the ticket girl, but the glamorous images on the local screen in Holguín, Cuba, do not prepare them for a drab and disappointing life on 125th Street. *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love*, a riff on the American Dream as scored for trumpet and conga drum, is a much more effective study in unfulfilled desire—not merely the priapic Cesar's grotesque satyriasis but also the unrequited love that Nestor translates into the Mambo Kings' most enduring creation, the haunting song that the Castillo brothers perform for Desi Arnaz during their enchanted visit to his TV set. Called "Bellísima María de mi Alma/Beautiful Maria of My Soul," it is an aching evocation of the ravishing woman who never ceases to haunt the amorous young Nestor, years after she abruptly and mysteriously abandoned him in Cuba. Like the Vinteuil sonata in Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* or the jazz tune "Some of These Days" in Sartre's *Nausea*, it is both a monument to mutability and frustration and a tribute to the redemptive might of art.

Were it not for chance, the ambitious Castillo brothers might have been contenders. For a while, they move as peers among Tito Puente, Machito, Pérez Prado, and other renowned--and real--Latino musicians. But, shortly after Desi elevates them to the empyrean of popular culture, Nestor is killed in an automobile accident and a suicidal mood, and Cesar, who works in a meat-packing plant and then as superintendent of an apartment house, gives up playing songs of love. That surviving Mambo King dies alone--inebriated, in obscurity and in a dilapidated hotel room.

Though it might equally well have served for *Our House in the Last World*, *The Secrets of a Poor Man's Life* was the author's working title for *The Mambo Kings*, the prosperous book that precluded Hijuelos from being a poor man or an obscure one. The secrets in his latest novel, *The Fourteen Sisters of Emilio Montez O'Brien*, are less those of poverty than, again, of ambition. It resumes Hijuelos's project of divulging the sordid secret that all lives are impoverished by the treachery of desire. A romanticized memory of their house in the last world--the lost world of pre-Castro Cuba--was a constant source of torment for the Santimios in Manhattan; and Eugenio Castillo, like his late father and uncle, pined for the unattainable goal of "a world of pure affection, before torment, before loss, before awareness." Hijuelos suffuses his newest novel with the melancholy of futile desire. As a B-movie actor, Emilio Montez O'Brien exploits the desires of those who gaze at his bright image in darkened theaters, but his first disastrous marriage occurs when Emilio himself succumbs to the wiles of an opportunistic fan--"once again he had allowed himself to be taken in by his own desire," observes the narrator, explaining both Emilio's seduction by Sally Monroe and a general law of the Hijuelos universe.

In *The Mambo Kings*, desire was largely male, centered in the sexual athlete Cesar's large and insistent penis. Hijuelos does create sympathy for the thwarted longings of Delores Fuentes, the bookish woman Nestor marries merely as a surrogate for his missing Maria. However, one could still argue--as Nick Hornby did in *The Listener*--that "The novel suffers from the absence of a strong female character with whom we can sympathise." As if to appease his critic's desire, Hijuelos now offers a world populated and dominated mostly by women. *The Fourteen Sisters of Emilio Montez O'Brien* matches the machismo of its predecessor with an attempt at representing feminine sensibilities.

As the opening sentence proclaims, "The house in which the fourteen sisters of Emilio Montez O'Brien lived radiated femininity." That radiation is powerful enough to cause horses to throw their riders, cars to skid into ditches, and a plane to fall from the sky. Hijuelos invokes a Marquezian mysticism to endow his gynocratic household--in Cobbleton, Pennsylvania--with magical realities. One of the sisters, Patricia, is explicitly clairvoyant, adept at divining the fates of her many siblings; recognizing a rival to his narrative authority, Hijuelos, however, relegates Patricia Montez O'Brien to a minor role and characterizes her as reluctant to indulge in prophecy anyway. Patriarch Nelson O'Brien senses himself condemned to solitude in his own crowded home, and his proficiency at generating daughters perplexes and

perturbs him. We are told that he feels "a kind of spiritual torpor as if he were a tourist in a very strange country." Nelson rejoices when that country is populated by another of his kind, when his final, fifteenth, child turns out to be a son. For Emilio, surrounded and coddled by a mother and fourteen sisters, woman sets the standard--"What was ugly in life, he thought male."

As a title, *The Fourteen Sisters of Emilio Montez O'Brien* is a misnomer, or at least misleading. With an expansive, rhapsodic style, the novel does indeed celebrate fecundity, but it does not give equal time or attention to all fourteen sisters. And Emilio, though not born until the 181st of 484 pages, is the object of as much narrative interest as any of the other O'Brien offspring. Their prolific matriarch Mariela warns her oldest daughter Margarita: "Don't forget that family is all that matters." But the focus on family matters in Hijuelos's third novel, which begins with a chart listing all the O'Brien children and their years of birth, is not evenly distributed among every member of the clan. The chronicle is partial to Margarita (b. 1902) and Emilio (b. 1925). The first O'Brien child is old enough to be mother to the youngest, whom she in fact suckles as an infant. Like Nestor in *Mambo Kings* and Hector in *Our House*, Margarita is a creature of exquisite, insatiable longing, through sexual and romantic trials that span the twentieth century. Like Nestor's brother Cesar, Emilio is an Olympic philanderer whose brief brush with vulgar glamour--he makes forty-two B movies in five years before his Hollywood career is over--suffuses the story with melancholy over mutability. Like the Castillos and their encounter with Desi Arnaz, he is graced by an acquaintance with Errol Flynn and enshrined in celluloid, in a print of *Tarzan in the Land of No Return*. Most of the other O'Briens are Theophrastian "characters," for whom a simple set of traits suffices: Helen is a beauty, Irene "ever-plump" and omnivorous, Veronica compassionate, Violeta "pleasure-bound and promiscuous." It would take more than nine Muses to inspire detailed, distinct, and absorbing accounts of fourteen separate sisters.

Early movies are a primal influence on the O'Brien children, whose father Nelson owns and operates Cobbleton's Jewel Box Movie Theater. In an incident that recalls Alejo Santinio's courtship of Mercedes Sorrea at Holguin's Neptuna Theater, twenty-one-year old Margarita is working at the candy counter of the Jewel Box while Elmo Lincoln's *Tarzan of the Apes* is playing--when her future first husband, Lester Thompson, first speaks to her. Her own parents came together through still film; in Santiago, in the summer of 1900, sixteen-year-old Mariela Montez is brought by her father to sit for a portrait in Nelson O'Brien's photography studio.

The epigraph that begins *The Fourteen Sisters of Emilio Montez O'Brien* is an apologia by Nelson to his son Emilio for the archaic shuttered, folding-bellows camera that, as late as 1937, he still prefers to use: "Not to take anything away from the Kodak Brownie, mind you--it makes pictures nice enough to frame, but this apparatus, in my opinion, captures not only the superficial qualities of its subjects but also, because of the time it takes to properly collect light, their feelings, as they settle on the subjects' expressions; sadness and joy and worry, with variations therein, are collected on the plate." It is a metafictional moment, a manifest analogy to Hijuelos's own device for

arresting the fleeting images of existence--the sadness and joy and worry, with variations therein, experienced by each of the O'Briens. *The Fourteen Sisters* is an old-fashioned collation of life studies, a patient record of moments from ten decades. Photography often provides its pretext for narration.

When, at various stages of their lives, Nelson, who continues with his camera work even after opening the Jewel Box, assembles his family for a group portrait, Hijuelos proceeds to tell us the story behind the picture. After retiring as an actor, Emilio, following in his father's line of work, becomes "photographer of the stars" in Los Angeles, and much of the rest of the story is generated by either the new prints that Emilio produces or the old ones that he ponders. While Nestor and Cesar Castillo gaze at us forever from fictive footage of the *Lucy* show, and Alejo Santinio lives on beside Nikita Khrushchev in a snapshot of the two, the O'Brien girls and boy are also apprehended through a lens. If Proustian memory and narrative are gustatory, provoked by the taste of cake and tea, Hijuelos's are eidetic. For him, memory is photographic, if imperfect, and his storytelling is inspired by and analogous to Joseph Nicéphore Niépce's dream of retaining traces of light--and life--on paper.

As Cesar Castillo, green from Havana, walks about the streets of 1949 New York, he is unnerved by its polyglot clatter--"a constant *ruido*--a noise--the whirling, garbled English language, spoken in Jewish, Irish, German, Polish, Italian, Spanish accents, complicated and unmelodic to his ear." But *The Mambo Kings*, like *Our House in the Last World*, focuses on the community of first- and second-generation Cubans living in New York in the decades after World War II. An Irish landlady named Shannon is a minor exception, but Bernardito Mandelbaum, an American Jew who embraces *cubanismo*, in spirit is not. To the rich tradition of immigration fiction that includes Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep* and O. E. Rølvaa's *Giants in the Earth*, Hijuelos offers a Caribbean perspective and a voice with Spanish echoes. He has emerged at precisely the moment when publishing and criticism began to be driven by Eurofugal forces, when Asia, Africa, and Latin America have become the continents of choice for fashionable literary influence. Ethnicity is now a cardinal category for defining North American authors, and salsa has been flavor of the month for many *menses*. Like Mexican-Americans Sandra Cisneros and Richard Rodriguez, Hijuelos owes his public success not only to talent but to a Latino identity as well. Attention must be paid to our most prominent Cuban-American author, though it is impossible to predict whether that attention will prove as ephemeral as the renown of Ernest Poole, Harold L. Davis, and T. S. Stripling. Will *Our House in the Last World* and *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love* become--like Alejo's kitchen Khrushchev photo and the Castillos' *Lucy* rerun--merely mementos of a vanished era? Or are they enduring testimonials to the evanescence of all eras?

In *Our House*, Hector's older brother Horacio has an Irish-American girlfriend named Kathleen whose family refuses to allow him past their door because he is Cuban. Hijuelos populates the neighborhood with Irish and Puerto Rican street gangs, but they are always seen from outside. His second novel gained popularity and respect as a sumptuous evocation of the food, music, idioms, memories, hopes, and

disappointments of Cuban émigré performers. But, with his third book, *Hijuelos* seems to be chafing under the chaplet of Cuban-American laureate, even as he moves his literary camera from Spanish Harlem to rural Pennsylvania.

It is true that in *Hijuelos's* first book Hector Santinio had associated Cuba with an illness contracted on a visit to his mother's family, and he came to stammer when forced to speak Spanish. But now Emilio and his fourteen sisters are as much Irish as they are Cuban, fair-skinned, freckled children of a father who, in 1896, at age eighteen, departed Dublin Harbor. As a freelance photographer, Nelson O'Brien later sails with American troops en route to battle in the Spanish-American War. When he returns to the United States, Nelson is accompanied by the former Mariela Montez, a young Cuban bride mystified and terrified by the prospect of life in a town called Cobbleton, where only one other person, a Puerto Rican butler named Herman Garcia, speaks Spanish, the only language she is ever comfortable or fluent in. Decades later, when she visits her daughters in Manhattan, it is, like the worlds of *Hijuelos's* first two novels, an island now dotted with *bodegas*, *boticas*, and *iglesias*, and she reflects on how when she, a lonely pioneer immigrant, first arrived in New York in 1902, it had virtually no Hispanic community.

"I want you to know," Nelson warns his eldest daughter, "that I expect you to address me always in my tongue, and that's English, you understand"? And that's for your own good, 'cause in this country it's been my observation that Spanish will be of little use to you, certainly useless to you as far as gainful employment and one day finding yourself a husband." Though Margarita becomes a Spanish teacher and Isabel marries a Cuban pharmacist and moves to Santiago, the youngest of the siblings learn little or none of their mother's mother tongue. When Montez meets O'Brien, O'Brien is the final word in *The Fourteen Sisters of Emilio Montez O'Brien*. Yet in the confluence of Yankee optimism and Latin fatalism, the sanguine blood does not win out. Publicly exuberant, Nelson takes to private tipping, as insulation against his chronic melancholy, the same sort of anguish over the vanity of human wishes with which Cesar Castillo's life concludes. "Ally yourself with progress and tomorrow!" exhorts *Forward America*, the inspirational manual that is Cesar's vade mecum soon after his arrival in New York. "The confident, self-assured man looks to the future and never backwards to the past." *Hijuelos's* theme, like that of Hawthorne, Melville, Faulkner, and so much else of classic American fiction, is the revenge of the past on the self-assured man.

Even in "A Backward Glance O'er Traveled Roads," Walt Whitman, convinced that "the strongest and sweetest songs yet remain to be sung," was buoyant about the future of the United States. In his 1855 Preface to *Leaves of Grass*, hailed the glorious prospects for the hybrid new nation and its authors. "The American poets are to enclose old and new for America is the race of races," he proclaimed, in a vision of universal synthesis. In his latest novel, *Hijuelos* enlarges his earlier gene pool to Whitmanesque proportions. The union of Montez and O'Brien, we are told, is a matter of global dimensions. The copulations that procreate Emilio (whose screen name is Montgomery) and his fourteen sisters are more than the mingling of Gaelic

sperm with Cuban ovum--they blend "continents of blood and memory--from Saracen to Celtic, Scythian to Phoenician, Roman to pagan Iberian, African to Dane, a thousand female and male ancestors, their histories of sorrow and joy, of devastated suffering and paradisiacal pleasures linked by the progression of the blood." Such grandiosity for now exceeds Hijuelos's accomplishment. But what, through three strong books, the forty-one-year-old author has been creating is a wistful, wise reminder that ninety miles separate Cuba and the United States and that a sea of trouble divides ambition from accomplishment.

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