ABSTRACT

MULATA MOTHERS: GENDER REPRESENTATION IN OSCAR HIJUELOS’ NOVELS

by Karen Lee Dillon

This thesis focuses on gender representation through the figure of the mulata mother in the novels *A Simple Habana Melody*, *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love*, and *The Fourteen Sisters of Emilio Montez O’Brien* by Oscar Hijuelos. These novels and their representations of women and hybrid identities are studied by historically contextualizing the texts and their fictive content, and by viewing them through the perspectives of Cuban and American mulatez, tropicalization, cultural hybridity, and feminist critique.
MULATA MOTHERS:
GENDER REPRESENTATION IN OSCAR HIJUELOS’ NOVELS

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Mulata Mothers: Gender Representation in Oscar Hijuelos’ Novels

Introduction

In the opening pages of Oscar Hijuelos’ most recent novel, A Simple Habana Melody, Rita Valladares, the central female character, is introduced to the reader as “La Chiquita,” as composer Israel Levis reminisces over a photograph of her in which she is “smiling, her eyes emanating life and love, a kind of music, like that of a fandango.”¹ The comparison of Israel’s “beloved” Rita to a provocative Spanish/Spanish-American dance and music of courtship is intriguingly significant and appropriate for the role that she plays in the novel as Israel’s muse and object of desire, but mostly so in her identity as a Cuban mulata. That the fandango is a type of music that came to Cuba as a result of Spanish imperialist infiltration connects conveniently with the mulata’s presence in Cuba as a result of the same colonialism. The image of musical courtship illustrates the sexual and nostalgic power of the mulata performer to invoke for men like Israel the smoky romanticism of the night clubs of pre-revolutionary Cuba, but it also represents (European/American) outsiders’ fascination with and desire to gaze upon or sexually colonize the mulata’s seemingly exotic body. Although the figure of the mulata does not factor prominently in Hijuelos’ novels in that she does not play a title role and the complexities of her hybrid identity status are not explored psychologically or historically, illuminating and investigating the full implications of her character allow for an entirely new reading of Hijuelos’ texts.

Literary studies regarding the hybrid identity of the mulata reach across cultures, genres, and centuries. Eduardo González refers to the rhetoric of mulatez as a “parasitic and erotic racism” whereby black or mulatta female bodies become both utilitarian in their use by Anglo men and eroticized because of the same sexual connotation.² Jennifer DeVere Brody’s book Impossible Purities merges the seemingly exclusive fields of Victorian Studies and African

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¹ Oscar Hijuelos, A Simple Habana Melody (New York: Harper Collins, 2002) 8. All references to this novel will be hereafter cited parenthetically.
American studies with the goal of exposing English literature’s racist discourse of miscegenation in the construction of English purity. Brody analyzes the Victorian literary tropes of hybridity and miscegenation that imply a prior existence of racial and sanguine purity to show both the falsity of that purity and to look at how it was historically deployed as a means of constructing boundaries. Impossible Purities examines texts that display fears of the monstrous or beastly threats of blackness and hybridity to English purity and subjectivity, invoking the theriomorphic origins of the term mulatez. The connotation of the mulata in Hijuelos’ novels differs from Brody’s work in that racist claims to purity are not an issue, nor is the mulata used as a sign of unnatural coupling; rather, she is used in a celebratory and idealized way because of her hybrid quality.

Mulatta characters in the North American literary tradition are part of what Susan Gillman terms the “American race melodrama”—which includes texts like William Wells Brown’s Clotel and Francis Harper’s Iola Leroy. The mulatta’s tale in this tradition becomes either tragic or romantic; tragic when her racial identity is established because of her kinship to the African-American race as in Clotel, and romantic when she uses her racial identity to establish kinship and communal ties as in Iola Leroy. According to Gillman, “the one-dimensional North American tragic mulatto moves passively, though inexorably, toward her fated death” as a victim of the institution of slavery. A beautiful white medium between the races and an agent for the politics of abolitionism, the North American mulatta’s story is not wholly for or against miscegenation, but is concerned with the perils of slavery. Although Hijuelos’ novels are not explorations of the conditions of the mulatta, nor are they textual fronts to the institution of slavery, they do invoke the historical context of the Cuban mulata that involves the politics of slavery and colonialism even though the mulata plays a seemingly ancillary role. What separates Hijuelos’ mulata characters from the traditional North American mulatta is that the cult of the mulata invoked by Hijuelos is culturally specific to Cuba.

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5 Gillman, 242.
Cirilo Villaverde’s nineteenth-century novel Cecilia Valdés is perhaps the most prolific invocation of the Cuban cult of the mulata as “Cuba’s greatest cultural heroine” and arguably the figure responsible for “the construction of Cuban national identity” through Cuban literature. The novel can be linked to the North American tradition of the mulatta because of its status as a “transnational text” due to the fact that Villaverde was writing from and exiled position in New York, “destabiliz[ing] both US and Cuban national insularity.”

Cecilia Valdés’ title mulata is a sexual being who signifies the colonial history of Cuba by recounting the physical, moral, and social conditions of the island through a historical framework, in essence “creat[ing] nineteenth-century Cuba.” Since the nature of mixed-race identity is necessarily “mapped out on the body of a woman because thinking about racial mixture inevitably leads to questions of sex and reproduction,” the Cuban mulata then becomes the primary site for what is essentially Cuban. Cuban literature in the tradition of Cecilia Valdés offers Cuba an “alternative mythic foundation in the Cuban cult of the mulata,” and the mulata, who at once was seen as a threat to racial stratification, is now seen as a national signifier of Cubanness. It is to this cult of the mulata that Hijuelos’ work harkens, both in his portrayal of the mulata and the grounding of his fictional contexts in real historical context, and through which a fresh reading of his texts can be made.

According to Rodrigo Lazo, the “symbolic construction of Cecilia as Cuban woman is accomplished by presenting her within ‘a multitude of true events.’” These true events that Cecilia Valdés and Cuba’s cult of the mulata rest upon must be traced back to the beginning of mestizaje in Cuba because the history and culture of the Americas cannot be separated from colonialism and its consequences. Cuba had been a Spanish colony since the fifteenth century due to the importance and exploitation of the tobacco and sugar industry to consumers and Imperial powers. A 1791 slave revolt in the French colony of St. Domingue, one of if not the wealthiest and largest producers of coffee, sugar, tobacco, and dye in the Caribbean, opened the door for a new leading producer in the New World, and Cuba answered the demand in sugar production. The years following the revolt left Spain engaged in war with both France and

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9 Lazo, 13.
10 Bost, 2.
11 Lazo, 14.
England, and Cuba had the opportunity for trade with North America. In 1818, Spain opened up Cuba to free world trade, expanding the Cuban economy beyond the limits of the Spanish empire. Cuban production of sugar in the nineteenth century “heralded the transformation of all Cuba:” geographically, technologically, culturally, but most importantly racially. In 1827, the slave population accounted for 40 percent of Cuba’s total population, and the combined slave and free black population totaled half of the overall population; whites became the minority in the first half of the nineteenth century and Cuban society was defined by stratification, having “at one and the same time a labor force essential to their [Cuban] existence and a social force capable of their destruction.” Cuba’s booming economy and racially and culturally diverse population finally forced the abolition of slavery in Cuba in 1886, and eventual independence from Spain in 1902, which began a new era of US pseudo-imperialism.

Hijuelos’ mulata figures could easily comprise a chapter in Suzanne Bost’s recent book *Mulattas and Mestizas*, a study of the representation of hybrid identities in the literature of the Americas from the mid-nineteenth century to the present, but as in many other critical studies of hybrid identities, Hijuelos is excluded. Although there has been relatively little critical work done on Hijuelos’ novels, what critics have focused on are the role of performance, identity, the reconstruction of the past, and the cultural translation of his characters into America—all primarily written about his most popular novel *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love*. Few critics who write about Hijuelos give sustained attention to the women characters, and none to the mulata figure. Gustavo Pérez Firmat has written extensively about Hijuelos and the narrative function of his novels, the familial ties between a Cuban past and an American present, and the historical context within the novels, theorizing mainly within the framework of transculturation. Firmat’s discussion of *Mambo Kings* mentions women only briefly, and when he does mention Maria, he reduces her role to being simply the muse for Nestor’s nostalgic bolero, a role that eclipses the implications and importance of her mulata identity.

In her book on identity and performance in Latino/a fiction, Karen Christianson discusses Hijuelos’ stereotypical gendering in *Mambo Kings Play* as an example of performance to escape restrictive identity paradigms present in Latin culture (an argument that can easily be applied to

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13 Pérez, 84.
14 Pérez, 76.
15 Pérez, 86-87, 102.
almost all of Hijuelos’ other novels). Her argument ultimately praises Hijuelos for revealing the illusions of essential cultural and gender identities through the “repetition of performative acts.”

The *Mambo Kings*’ obsession with Cesar’s machismo and the virility and magnitude of his penis (a ubiquitous phenomenon in almost all of Hijuelos’ other novels) does seem to poke fun at the insistence and validity of machismo in Latino culture through the degrading and atrophic way that Cesar’s spirit and body waste away at the end of the story, but to assert that this “parody” of gender essentialism is a skillful subversion on Hijuelos’ part is highly speculative. Christianson claims that Hijuelos escapes a restrictive identity structure for both his female and male characters by their performance of stereotypical gender roles, but this assertion implies knowledge of authorial intent of which no critic can ever be certain. Most importantly, Christianson’s analysis of the women in *Mambo Kings* does not even mention the character of Maria, a *mulata* who is the key to the Castillo brothers’ success as the muse for their famous bolero “Beautiful Maria of My Soul.” Christina Maria Tourino supports the claim that Hijuelos’ essentializing in *Mambo Kings* cannot be relegated to intentional parody because she asserts that although he does unveil the pitfalls of machismo and “although some women in the text are angered by machismo, they are as often gratified” by it, claiming that machismo is ultimately justified rather than challenged.  

Tourino states that Hijuelos narrates stories “that depend upon a male colonization of women” because the spaces of Cuban and masculinity occupy the same narrative site of identity. Cuban culture is reproduced in *Mambo Kings*, but only through the exclusion of women as they are “contained through seduction or ignored as irrelevant;” however, even in this strictly feminist critique of Hijuelos’ work, Tourino too makes no mention of the *mulata* Maria.

Through close textual readings of *A Simple Habana Melody*, *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love*, and *The Fourteen Sisters of Emilio Montez O’Brien*, this study intends to give full attention to the women in Hijuelos’ novels that critics have ignored, primarily the figure of the *mulata*. This study adds Hijuelos to the expanding field of American and Latin American studies where current conversations on hybrid identities are occurring. Hybridity studies

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combines race, gender, sexuality, class, and nation as a means of exploring how literary representations of *mulatas* and other hybrid identities figure in the construction of national/cultural identity. Gender must be separated from and factored into the study of cultural identity in Hijuelos’ novels because they are male dominated and at times blatantly phallocentric, and without considering gender as an exclusive site within cultural identity, Hijuelos’ women get consumed by the male characters and by Anglo cultural consumers of exotic Cuban exports. The figure of the Cuban *mulata* that Hijuelos invokes should be included in the broader space of hybridity studies because the three novels analyzed here display a unique triumvirate paradigm of meaning incorporating the *mulata*, the mother figure, and Cuba, each representation encapsulating the others, essentializing their natures and roles as they work together to recapture a Cuba remembered.

In the three aforementioned novels, the *mulata* and the mother are the portals through which Israel, Cesar and Nestor, and Emilio reach Cuba. At times during the three novels, the *mulata* and the mother figures fuse together as embodiments of both the physical land of Cuba and also the essence of Cuba, but what specifically always brings the three together is the realm of religion. Often through the juxtaposition of the cult of the *mulata* and the cult of the Virgin or the Afro-Cuban religion of Santeria, Hijuelos’ novels cast the *mulata* and the mother as mother figures of Cuba who have the ability to heal and nurture according to their idealized representations, becoming symbolic containers of Cuba for the male characters who revolve around them.
Chapter One

The Mulata Mother in A Simple Habana Melody

In A Simple Habana Melody, Rita is described as “an octoroon: that is, like so many Cubans, one-eighth black, due to a distant ancestor (though she would always be thought of as a ‘mulata’); her skin the color of curled cinnamon bark” (93). Pilar, who is a kind of second coming of Rita for Israel at the end of the novel, is also a “pretty mulata,” and as such, the quality of the women’s blood restricts their identities and makes them extremely appealing as exotic sites upon which to gaze (93, 322). As Cuban mulatas, Rita and Pilar are inextricably linked to a sugar discourse that harkens to the colonial past of the plantations that gave birth to the mulata. Rita and Israel travel and perform “in the small towns of Cuba and all through the provinces, at sugar mills and tobacco plantations” (317). Pilar, too, inspires a connection with sugar, for Israel cannot often “resist the idea of buying her gifts of candy” (324). The classic mulata harkens to the odors of the “sugar mill refinery and tobacco leaves,” but Sarah Rubenstein also commands definition in a sugar discourse because Israel defines her through the eyes of a colonial gazer and wishes their past together were specific to Habana rather than Paris; Israel notices “the light that beamed in through her [Sarah’s] windows was reminiscent of Habana, taking him back to his youth, and he’d wished to God that he had met her in the Habana of 1922” (335, 265).

Referred to as “la Chiquita” by Israel, Rita acts as a Carmen Miranda-like ambassador of Cuba when she performs the zarzuela inspired by her, “Rosas Puras.” Rita is billed as:

The Queen of the Tropical Swoon and The Greatest Female Singer from Cuba!

Though she considered such hyperbole necessary to the brisk sale of tickets (for her costume in such advertisements showed Rita in tinsel shorts and a gold silk brassiere over which was draped a gauzy gown—so that she almost resembled a stripper), she found that persona a source of irritation (140-1).

Europeans and other whites cannot help but be attracted to the lure of the exotic mulata, for Parisians, “eternally in search of ‘le chic’[…]heartily welcomed the new Cuban diva. In fact,
they were so obsessed by the sexual allure of cocoa-colored skin” that Rita becomes an “object of adulation” (171). Hijuelos’ use of Paris as a site of Cuban cultural consumption is interesting when considering María Teresa Marrero’s discussion of Parisian fascination with Afro-Cuban culture. Marrero mentions the publication of a volume of Afro-Cuban tales by Lydia Cabrera in 1936 in Paris before it was translated into Spanish, and the time spent there by Afro-Chinese-Cuban painter Wifredo Lam and novelist Alejo Carpentier. Marrero writes, “Paris was ‘burning’ with desire to duplicate and re-create an idealized African ‘essence from decontextualized objets d’art.’” Rita, then, is the idealized objet d’art after which Parisians lust.

Rita’s performance of the zarzuela and her role as a Cuban commodity is summed up in a newspaper review stating, “that dark Cuban dame brought down the house with a great tune” (151). Rita’s identity as a mulata necessarily entails a “particular kind of rhythmic movement, whose sexual connotations can hardly be missed,” facilitating a flirtatious, fandango-like courtship of non-Cubans with Cuba.

In order to think about Rita’s portrayal as sexy tropical queen, the idea of “tropicalization” must be considered. As discussed in the essays contained in the book Tropicalizations: Transcultural Representations of Latinidad, tropicalizations is similar to Said’s theory of Orientalism, only placed now in the Caribbean. Tropicalization is “the system of ideological fictions with which the dominant (Anglo and European) cultures trope Latin American and US Latino/a identities and cultures.” David Romàn’s chapter “Tropical Fruit” shows that tropicalization is not confined to US writers in his discussion of the construction of the Latin/o gay man by other Latino/a writers. For purposes here, the mulata would play the role of the “tropical fruit” as she is the means by which men link themselves to Cuba and hers is the identity being constructed. It is worthwhile to consider whether Hijuelos may be guilty of such troping in his depiction of the mulata characters, because Romàn reveals that “Cuban-Americans, when writing either about a homeland from which they have been exiled to the US, or about their assumed identity as Cuban-Americans, either inadvertently reproduce the

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21 Marrero, 146.
22 Marrero, 146.
24 Aparico and Chávez-Silverman, 1.
tropicalization of the Caribbean in/from the U.S. or paradoxically engage the very terms with which the West had delimited and limited the Caribbean.”

*Habana Melody* presents a tropicalized Cuba based on Israel’s memory because tropicalization becomes a coping mechanism for Israel to deal with trauma he has experienced. On Israel’s last night in Cuba before traveling to Europe, the secret police raid his house and he realizes that the Cuba in which such things can occur is “the Cuba hidden under a mountain of risqué postcards, of maracas decorated with palm trees, of aromatic cigars, rumba bands, troubadours, handsome singers and spectacular female dancers—the Cuba that the world did not know,” and this is the Cuba that Israel desires to maintain (186). The juxtaposition of Israel’s knowledge that the Cuba he wants to remember is one of postcard images with his experience in a Nazi concentration camp also reveals that Hijuelos is not simply adhering to the tropes of tropicalization, but rather Israel is choosing them in order to deal with what personally happens to him and what is politically happening in Cuba. That Rita finds her persona a “source of irritation” also reveals that Hijuelos is not simply replicating the stereotype because if Rita is cognizant of her own tropicalization out of necessity to court non-Cubans, then Hijuelos must be aware as her creator; however, Hijuelos seems content with awareness rather than a challenge to the trope. At the end of the novel Pilar merely replaces Rita as a *mulata* performer and muse, and even Sarah Rubenstein, who is not a *mulata* but a white Jew, gets objectified and idealized as if she were. Upon first meeting Sarah Rubenstein, Israel is “so taken by her appearance, as if she were a queen from the time of Solomon,” and he is reminded of a “water-color from the Orientalist school he had once seen in a Paris gallery, of a feast in a harem” (243). Picturing Sarah “half-naked upon a pile of silken pillows,” Israel gazes upon her as if she is a woman in a harem, her only duty a sexual one, and he imagines himself as “some long-bearded Persian or Hebrew Lord, about to take his pleasures with her” (243). This kind of colonial discourse places Sarah in the role of the colonized while Israel is the gaze of the colonizer, creating a *mulata*-like representation of Sarah. When visiting Sarah, Israel approaches her door “with a box of chocolates or a bouquet of flowers in hand,” and while making love with her he describes “her expanded nipple” as “tasting of strawberries and wine” (283, 334). Sugar accompanies Sarah as it does Rita and Pilar.

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Not only does the sexual quality of Rita herself as an entertainer exemplify the history and role of the *mulata*, but the zarzuela, of which Rita is a performer, is a vehicle for “identity construction” in Cuba.26 Due to the prosperity of the sugar and tobacco plantations, “Cuba enjoyed a prosperity that allowed it to exert considerable influence throughout the Hispanic world,” and Habana became the most influential and famous proponent of the zarzuela.27 Importantly, Hijuelos’s novel takes place at the height of an internal Cuban political struggle during World War II, and at a time when Cuba “witnessed an explosion of popular enthusiasm for zarzuela.”28 Coincidently, the most famous Cuban zarzuela composer, Ernesto Lecuona, who is mentioned in the novel, composed two of his most famous zarzuelas under the titles *Ninã Rita* (Child Rita) in 1927 and *El Batey* (The Sugar Factory) in 1929.29 Hijuelos purposely contextualizes Rita during a time of Cuban history from which he could have drawn his fascination and understanding of the cult of the *mulata* through the music of Ernesto Lecuona.

Israel’s own zarzuela “Rosas Puras,” inspired and represented by Rita, is not only specific to the characteristics of the cult of the *mulata*, but it also reveals the illusory ideality of the *mulata*’s signification.

Pure roses of Habana
Beautiful and fragrant
So sweetly tender
Stars of my Cuban soil
Mirrors of your love
If you’re craving love, come over here
I have some pretty roses for you
Doesn’t matter if you’re tired of life
Once you buy these roses of love
You’ll soon get married[…] (150, 302-3)

Here Rita sings a song of courtship, beckoning Cuban men to her body and outsiders to Cuba. The “pure roses of Habana” are Cuban women as represented by Rita. The word “pure” rings ironically and even humorously because it is precisely the supposed impurity of blood that

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27 Sturman, 47.
29 Webber, 288.
stereotypes the mulata. Jennifer Devere Brody’s Impossible Purities speaks to the fact that as a product of miscegenation from a violently colonial context, the female body “becomes the main vessel through which contamination occurs[…]such feminized penetrated figures are the vehicles for impurity.”

Beautiful and sexual, the mulata literally stems from the land of Cuba as a star of Cuban soil, but her performance as something uniquely Cuban works as “an iconic sign of miscegenation whose sign summarizes otherwise unspeakable acts”—the unspeakable acts of rape, violence, domination, and other consequences of colonialism are not only summarized, but glossed over in the novel in order for Rita and “Rosas Puras” to signify what is exotic, beautiful, and ever present as a source of comfort to the male consumers who wish to remember and remain in a romanticized version of Habana.

As a “song for courtship,” Rita and “Rosas Puras” engage in a sexual flirtation with their audience that invokes a romantic image of Cuba (50). On his return to Habana, Israel hears street musicians performing “Rosas Puras” as “they entertained and flirted with the tourists…being amorously aroused by the romantic enchantments of that city [Habana]” (301-2). The narrator reveals that “Rosas Puras” conveys “those very images of Cuban life and spirit that Americans then believed in: Habana on a balmy afternoon, perfume, sunlight and birds, beautiful women and courtly men (like Levis himself) tipping their hats, enamored or on the verge of love, and all to a jaunty rhythm, a caravel of delight”—the postcard image of Cuba (150). As Israel looks out the window of the train on his way to a Nazi camp, he sees “Rita Valladares’s face, high up over the buildings and treetops of Habana, looking down over the city from a billboard, filling his heart both with joy and terror: RITA VILLADARES SINGS “ROSAS PURAS;” although the zarzuela is Israel’s greatest achievement, “that very same melody brought the saddest thoughts” (337, 302). Israel’s sad thoughts derive from the knowledge that Cuba is not the image that “Rosas Puras” conveys, the image that tourists want to consume.

Reminiscing about his life before his internment in a Nazi camp, Israel thinks “day in and day out” about “both Rita Valladeres and Sarah Rubenstein, who somehow become interchangeable in his mind, he dreams of a concept that is so much a part of Cuban life—that music is good!—and he clings to that thought tenaciously throughout many of his days” (305). Women and music hold a romantic shield before Israel that blocks the political and social
realities of what is happening in Cuba and in Europe at the time. Israel’s desire to remain in a world where only the beauty of a woman and the perfection of a musical composition matter demonstrate his longing for images, but these images come with a price for the women around whom the illusions center. The tropes of tropicalization help Israel cope, but it makes Rita the tropicalized vehicle for Israel’s coping and leaves her with an identity that is defined and determined by the stereotyped tropes of that tropicalization, making her only a Carmen Miranda-like reproduction.

Israel hopes that “the noble motivations of the artist would shut out the bad of the world,” and so he constructs his own portraits of women that block their identities save for the one that serves his own romantic notions; Israel’s portrait of women is primarily sexual, objectified, idealized, fragmented, and wholly silent, because in order to maintain the image, the object must remain pure (277). Israel’s model for the ideal image of a woman is his mother, and her role in the novel is a strictly religious one, and one that becomes integrated with the image of Rita, creating the figure of the mulata mother. Everything associated with Doña Concepción originates in religion. Israel’s parents first meet “one Sunday morning on the steps of the church of Espíritu Santo,” a “crucifix hangs over his mother and father’s canopied bed,” his parents “keep crucifixes and santos in the house (56, 49, 51). “In their mutual devotions to the passions of Christ,” Israel’s parents embark “on the course of a devout and sound family life, in a manner befitting such a pious Catholic couple” (56). Israel indeed seems born of religious devotion set by the example of his mother, and her idealized purity comes together in one scene with the objectified idealization of the mulata. Sometimes in his mother’s company, as Israel “would kneel before Doña Concepción, as she sat in a wicker chair, rubbing the soles of her feet after a long stroll through the city, he would think about Rita,” bringing the two idealizations together in one image of a woman who can take Israel back to a time when the world was good (167). The mulata mother then serves as the ultimate trope through which Israel can maintain a picture-perfect image of the Cuba he wants to remember.
Chapter Two

The Mulata Mother in *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love* and *The Fourteen Sisters of Emilio Montez O’Brien*

Unlike Rita in *Habana Melody* who is linked to Israel’s mother through his idealization and devotion to both women, the mulata and the mother in *Mambo Kings* are portrayed as physical landscapes in which the Castillo brothers make a home that brings back a memory of Cuba. The women’s bodies become colonized and inhabited as if they are only vehicles for men’s nostalgia. The *mulata* figure in *Mambo Kings* is played by Maria, Nestor’s past lover in Cuba and about whom the Castillo brothers’ most famous song “Beautiful Maria of My Soul” is written. Maria is a “*mulata* beauty with the high cheekbones of a starlet of the forties, a pouty, seductive double for Rita Hayworth” (97). Rita works “in the chorus line of the Havana Hilton, as one in a line of ten ‘beautiful cream-and-coffee-colored dancers’” (102). Cesar describes Maria as a “*femme fatale*” due to her physical beauty, and Nestor feels “triumphant” when all eyes are on his Maria as he lists in strictly sexual and reductive detail the amenities of her body to which only he has access (102). Maria occupies a primarily sexual role in that her power comes from her *mulata* looks, and that power manifests in Nestor’s obsession with her in composing “Beautiful Maria of My Soul,” the song that catapults the Castillo brothers to stardom and lands them an appearance on the *I Love Lucy Show*.

Since parting from Maria, Nestor remains “plagued with memory, the way his brother Cesar Castillo would be twenty-five years later, the man with the delusion that the composition of a song about Maria would bring her back” (44). Maria not only haunts Nestor because of his love for her, but because her body is a landscape that he cannot and does not want to forget. Maria’s body gives off “an aromatic female scent, somewhat between meat and perfume and ocean air, that assailed Nestor’s nostrils, sank down into his body like mercury, and twisted in his gut like Cupid’s naughty arrow;” Nestor and Maria “feasted on each other for months” (97, 100). Maria’s body is as powerful here as those of the “dark” prostitutes that fascinate white male patrons that Cesar remembers in Cuba, some of whom are *mulatas*. 
Cesar reminisces that back in Cuba, “white men used to form lines into the houses of prostitution so that they might sleep with a black woman, the blacker her skin the better the pleasure. They believed that if they slept with a black woman at that time of year, their penises deep inside those magical wombs, they would be purified” (242). The dark-skinned woman not only possesses some sort of magic associated with her female nature, but her specific black nature. Her body provides an exotic, colonial adventure for white men, as if her body were land itself. Cesar goes on to remember, “At that time the white prostitutes sulked because business fell off for them, while the mulatas and the black queens swam in rivers of saliva and sperm, their legs wide open, taking in one man after the other, each man’s bodily hunger sated, each man’s soul cleansed” (242). Here the dark female body becomes powerful in its ability to “cleanse” the white man’s soul, but it is strictly a power assigned by the colonizer. The novel presents the exotic or Other woman as actively taking pleasure in her own colonization as it is she who swims in rivers of saliva and sperm and she who does the “taking in.” The power relations have seemingly been reversed in that the mulata receives both power and pleasure in her pleasing of the colonizer, but the power has not shifted. The mulata figure’s “subjectivity and power thus correspond to their willingness to act as sexual objects. Repeating the model of Cecilia Valdés, mulattas continue to perform a sexual function for light-skinned men, reassuring the men that sexual power ultimately remains in their hands.”

In the aforementioned scene, Hijuelos erases colonial history and accountability for the signification of the mulata, and her body is not only a descendant of colonization, but becomes a renewed site of colonization as a twice removed symbol of a Cuba lost.

There is no mistaking the fact that the novel equates Maria from “Beautiful Maria of My Soul” to Nestor and Cesar’s mother; Nestor remarks about Maria, “Funny, that was their mother’s name too. Maria. Maria” (103). These two women and what they represent are the source of Nestor’s melancholia, and he cannot escape it or thoughts of them. The more Nestor thinks about Maria, “the more mythic she became” (43). A “surge of melancholia” comes from Nestor’s lovemaking with his wife Delores, “and out of this would come Maria…his feelings of hopelessness always led him back to Maria, and thoughts of Maria led him back to hopelessness” (116, 117). With Delores, Nestor “closed his eyes and no longer saw her face, he was kissing the

32 Bost, 109.
33 Kutzinski, 7.
breast of the Beautiful Maria of His Soul, licking her skin…he closed his eyes again and felt the worst sadness about Maria,” but the Maria he imagines here becomes convoluted with thoughts of his mother (90). In this passage when Nestor pictures Maria, “he pictured her in a room, and in that room a doorway through which could be seen the sickbed of his youth and himself, unable to move, calling out, ‘Mama!’ […] and he’d open his eyes again […] thinking about the other and almost slipped a few times, almost uttered, ‘Maria, Maria’” (90, 91). Nestor equates his feelings of longing for Maria with those for his mother, and one cannot be sure exactly to which Maria Nestor calls.

True love for Nestor is complicated because it is not exclusive to Maria his mother or Maria his lover, but rather to the image that the two Marias together represent. In one moment, Nestor transitions from Maria the lover to Maria his mother, saying, “Every ounce of love he’d received in his short life was captured and swallowed up by the image of Maria. (Mama, I wanted Maria the way I wanted you when I was a baby feeling helpless in that bed, with welts covering my chest, and lungs stuffed with thick cotton. I couldn’t breathe, Mama, remember how I used to call you?)” (43). In another moment, Nestor’s mother’s affection is so strong that “he had an insight into love: pure unity. That’s all she became in those moments, the will to love, the principle of love, the protectiveness of love, the grandeur of love […] for a few moments he felt released from this pain… felt as if his mother was an open field of wildflowers through which he could run” (209). Here Maria the mother has the ability to release Nestor from the pain from which Delores desperately wants to release him, but cannot. Maria the mother also becomes “an open field of wildflowers” that Nestor has the privilege and capability of running through, as if her body is a metaphorical landscape of comfort for Nestor, echoing the colonized landscape of the mulata’s body discussed earlier in the chapter.

Nestor connects the image and body of his mother with the physical land so that they become indistinguishable from one another because both contain each other in their identities. Thinking of his mother, Nestor sees “[her] loving face, indistinguishable in memory from the stars he’d watch from the porch at night in Cuba;” and years later “as a man, kissing women’s privates, he’d tremble with the recollection of how he’d imagined the whole world inside his mother’s womb” (387, 388). Cuba is represented by the mother and the mother is Cuba—both are a homeland for Nestor. The Castillo brother’s mother houses the essence of Cuba for them in the very essence of her femaleness. This idea of landscapes housed in the female womb is
discussed earlier when Cesar recalls the magical wombs of the dark-skinned and mulata prostitutes in Cuba, and it is an image that recurs in Habana Melody and Fourteen Sisters. For Nestor, the idea of romance with his mother, as mediated through the mulata Maria, is a romance with Cuba.

Gustavo Pérez Firmat asserts that “Nestor’s song of love [Beautiful Maria of My Soul], the book’s preeminent statement on loss, is transcribed in a language that itself has been lost…and Nestor’s beautiful Maria may then be an emblem for the maternal language that was left behind in Cuba”. Firmat’s assertion that Maria the lover could represent Nestor and Cesar’s lost language (not surprisingly Firmat’s only mention of women in his chapter on Mambo Kings) supports the argument that Maria the mulata and Maria the mother are one representation by ascribing the lost language to the “maternal.” Nestor laments that he has “only known peaceful sleep in is mother’s arms when he was a baby[…]the peaceful sleep in his mother’s arms was the sleep he missed,” and he wishes “that he never left Las Piñas or the loving grip of his mother,” saying, “If I had remained with Maria, I would have found my happiness” (95, 116). The Maria with whom happiness lies can be construed as either mulata or mother, but it does not seem to matter because both Marias are intimately tied to Cuba through their bodies.

When before it is longing for Maria his lover who plagues Nestor with melancholia, it becomes apparent that deep down it is longing for his mother that renders Nestor ever nostalgic. From New York, Nestor sends “his mother in Cuba tender letters written in his simple script, speaking about his love for her and the family; heartsick letters nostalgic for the security of the home he had—or thought he had—in Cuba[…]He’d forget about the terrors of his solitude and dwell upon all the kisses from his mother[…],” not the kisses of Maria (114). In a similar moment of nostalgia, the Castillo brothers and Desi Arnaz connect on an intimate level when they reminisce about Cuba by beginning a tune together, and the tune they strum is the type of song that “a loving mother would sing at bedtime to her children, and that was why the two Mambo Kings remembered wonderful things about their mother, and why Arnaz shut his eyes in pleasant contemplation of his own loving mother in Cuba[…]and those little thoughts made the

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three men feel like crying” (135). The mother seems to be the most primal connection to these men’s Cuban identity.

Firmat offers support for the notion of reaching a lost Cuba through the figure of the mother when he describes a scene from the *I Love Lucy Show* in which Lucy attempts to re-create Cuba for Ricky. Lucy fears Ricky has become bored with her and so she decides the best way to re-interest him in the sexual is to mother him and surround him with things from his childhood. Lucy turns the living room into a “flea-market of Cuban icons, or of items that Lucy thinks are Cuban,” and “since Ricky’s mother was a ‘famous singer and dancer,’ Lucy herself dresses up as Carmen Miranda, fruit-hat and all.” Ricky eases Lucy’s mind by telling her the reason he married her is because she is so different than anyone he has known before, and that if he wanted things Cuban he would have stayed in Havana; in choosing difference by marrying an American woman, Ricky must distance himself “from the maternal,” which is also Cuba. Firmat suggests that Lucy’s actions in this episode echo “that which made Cuban exiles endeavor to reproduce Cuba in Miami. Both are exercises in substitution”—replacing a real presence in Cuba with things that represent Cuba, like memories of the mother or a fascination with a *mulata* woman. “Lucy offers Ricky the possibility of a fantasy return to his mother and his mother country,” which is in essence a return to the mother’s womb, which as seen before seems to encompass a man’s entire Cuban past. Ricky wants “to keep his mother at a distance; he realizes that she belongs in Cuba,” suggesting that there can be no return to Cuba after leaving, only a substitutive attempt based on performance; “when Ricky falls into Lucy’s non-Cuban, nonmaternal arms[…]what he loses is his primitive sense of self as his mother’s son; there is no denying that by loving Lucy, Ricky distances himself from his native language and culture; in this respect he becomes ‘less’ Cuban.” What was once Cuban must now become Cuban-American because the removal from the mother and motherland removes the seeming essence of one’s Cuban identity.

*The Fourteen Sisters of Emilio Montez O’Brien* has a vastly different context than the two novels previously discussed because the principal characters are the first generation American children of immigrant parents. There is not an issue of retaining or reclaiming a lost Cuba

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35 Firmat, 38.
36 Firmat, 39.
37 Firmat, 39.
38 Firmat, 39.
39 Firmat, 40, 44.
because the Montez O’Brien children know Cuba only through their mother, and almost all of them save Margarita do not speak Spanish. Although the sisters in The Fourteen Sisters of Emilio Montez O’Brien are not mulatas in the sense that they are of partly African descent and have ties to the colonial history of Cuba, they play a similar role in that they are products of miscegenation between European and Cuban blood—Nelson O’Brien is Irish and Mariela is Cuban. The sisters, especially Margarita, are constantly aware of their difference from the community at large, and they are treated accordingly as exotic and sexual because of their darker skin. As a model, Helen’s Cuban coloring furthers her career, dropping the O’Brien from her name to be billed as the more exotic Helen Montez, but the oldest sister Margarita, through whom the majority of the novel filters, is always keenly aware of the social consequences of her darker skin.

Of all the sisters, Margarita most resembles her mother who has “a great head of dark hair and olive skin that gave her the air of a gypsy” (16). Margarita feels the “liability of her Cuban looks” and at times would “detest the tint of her skin, the curliness of her hair,” always looking for a “remedy for her feelings of feminine and immigrant inferiority” (134). The pin-up-girl look of Hollywood and advertising causes a sense of hopefulness in Margarita because she sees “images of herself, or suggestions of her own hopeful feminine beauty, so often repeated—on coins, stamps, magazine ads, movie posters,” but when the pilot she repeatedly fantasizes about marries “a little blond, a sweet farm girl,” her sense of inferiority returns as she knows she will never fit that image (41, 71). Margarita has internalized the white standard of beauty that blond is better, and instead of challenging that hierarchy, she desires to rise in it. Even though the alienation Margarita feels seems to displace the nationalistic myth of the mulata as a harmonious aesthetic object, the challenge is thwarted by Margarita’s own adherence to a racially determined social hierarchy when she refuses to court Rafael Garcia.

Due to her marginal status in the community, Margarita feels “a second-classness anger, a skin-darker-than-what-people-were-used-to-in-these-parts anger, a female-wanting-to-be-taken-seriously anger,” but she displays the same kind of racial prejudice that so angers her toward a potential suitor (12). Even though Margarita feels her own sense of isolation from the larger community because of her Cuban heritage and skin color, she nonetheless assimilates herself to the discriminatory practices of American culture by rejecting a suitor because of his racial make-up. Rafael Garcia is a sensitively poetic law student in love with Margarita, but he
has inherited “the Negro blood of a grandmother[...]and she did not like the feeling that people might find new ways to look down on her[...]she sometimes thought that, were he a few shades lighter and more handsome, she might entertain the idea of a romance with him” (46). Instead of breaking down the barrier that classes racial make-up, Margarita ironically marries a white man infatuated with her “gypsy darkness,” and who is reminded of a “beautiful Parisian whore” he once loved (158-9).

Emilio reveals a strange attraction to his mulata-like sister Margarita that revolves around her representation as a mother figure. Emilio loves being near Margarita because she is always “so tender with him, and sometimes staring so deep into his eyes that he would feel she was trying to enter inside” (220). According to sister Gloria, Margarita has a “seductiveness with Emilio” as she appears in her parlor “just closing the buttons of her blouse or hitching up her skirt, so that something of her very female body could be seen” [her body being “very female” because of the curves and the good figure, as if a more attractive woman is essentially more feminine] (224). The prostitute Emilio visits as a boy is “so dark and deliciously proportioned” that she reminds him “of his older sister, Margarita” (219). The prostitute has the word “WOMAN” written “between her thighs and stretching across her feminine opening,” and Emilio, “thinking of his sister,” becomes “paralyzed” with “guilt” (221). Even his future wife Jessica strikes him because she reminds him “of his oldest sister, Margarita, not so much in her looks—but because she was bookish and tried to stay informed about the world” (341).

What draws Emilio to Margarita is that she seems to be the perfect “WOMAN” in his eyes, exotic like the mulata, informed about the world, but most importantly is that she takes on the role of mother. Margarita “may have been too casual around the boy,” the narrator reveals that “she never entertained any sensual thoughts about him,” and is only “careless in the way of a racy aunt” (227). In reality, Margarita feels “almost maternal toward him. She was the sister who had once allowed him to suckle her” (227). In a spontaneous moment, Margarita is caring for her baby brother when she decides to nurse him:

Feeling sorry for the little creature, who was so hungry and innocent, she decided to undo the buttons of her blouse, exposing her breast. Years later she would remember the Y-shaped vein that seemed to lie below the skin of her breast, its plumpness and the womanly fibers leading to his mouth[...]she deemed it inappropriate, but better, so much better, than the suckling of her husband” (190).
Margarita becomes a mother figure to Emilio, complicating his strange desire for her. Margarita is not only mother to Emilio, but in her adult relationships with men, descriptions of suckling are always included. Lester Thompson, her husband, “loved to suckle her breasts,” he “shifted her clothes so that he could suckle her breasts, which he did for a long time,” and in another moment says to her, “‘You may be my little dark rose, but to my mother and father you’re a thorn.’ He told her this while suckling her breasts and fondling her bottom” (158, 146, 185). During a one time tryst with a military officer after she is divorced from Lester, the narrator says of the officer, “he was virile, suckling her breasts like a hungry baby” (259). Although Margarita rarely seems to enjoy these suckling moments with lovers like she does with Emilio, she becomes a mother figure in other ways as well. Margarita takes great joy in becoming the caretaker to many children when she reads to them at the library, one time even taking a troubled boy home. She allows nieces and nephews to stay with her at different times, and she also teaches the local children Spanish and English (436). Margarita’s love of children stems from her inability to conceive a child during her marriage to Lester, a fact which causes her to be always “self-doubting—after all, she had been incapable of bearing him children” (364). Since Margarita cannot be a mother in the literal way, she is always substituting to fulfill that perceived lack, and therefore represents the mulata mother figure around which Emilio’s oscillates.
Chapter Three

Gender Representation in *Mambo Kings, Habana Melody,*

and *Fourteen Sisters*

The previous two chapters discussed the tripartite relationship between the *mulata,* the mother, and Cuba and its unique contribution to the critical work on both Hijuelos and hybrid identities, but the other women in Hijuelos’ texts who are also ignored by critics have as much to contribute to an overall discussion of gender as the *mulata.* The framework of meaning in which Hijuelos’ *mulata* mothers exist parallels the overall representation of the female gender in his novels. Hijuelos’ other female characters are strictly sexual, largely silent, and seem to be incapable of having an independent identity. In *Habana Melody,* women are juxtaposed and intertwined so frequently with music that the women’s bodies become fragmented parts like a composition. *Mambo Kings*’ women are all lovers, described by body parts rather than character, and Emilio’s sisters in *Fourteen Sisters* adore and idolize their brother so much that for some their very existence depends upon his livelihood. When women’s identities do not rely upon an outside entity, they are essentialized and colonized as landscapes in a complete objectification of the female body.

One obvious exception to the restrictive and stereotypical portraits of Oscar Hijuelos’ female characters is the *Empress of the Splendid Season.* Unlike *Fourteen Sisters* in which Emilio truly owns the story, Lydia España genuinely plays the central role in Hijuelos’ only novel to place a woman in the title position. *Empress* takes an episodic look at Lydia’s once affluent youth in Cuba to her struggle to work, remain prideful, and raise a family in America. Forced to work as a maid to the privileged after her husband’s heart attack, Lydia’s life interweaves with those she works for as the reader is privy to her fantasies, thoughts, and feelings about her life in Cuba and America. Although Lydia is vastly different from the female characters about to be discussed in other Hijuelos’ novels, there are subtle hints in *Empress* that relate the seemingly different Lydia to Hijuelos’ *mulata* characters. In one scene in Lydia’s

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employer Mr. Osprey (interestingly also the name of a bird of prey) calls Lydia into a private room to show her a picture of himself as a boy posing with a maid in his uncle’s house. The woman is described as “a lovely-looking mulata woman of about thirty, in a maid’s outfit,” while Mr. Osprey “leans devilishly forward, hands in pocket with a cocky smile and a self-satisfied glint in his eyes” (65). Mr. Osprey tells Lydia that Maria-Luisa was “pure dulzura,” and after the encounter, Lydia proceeds to daydream about a sexual encounter between Mr. Osprey and his favorite maid (65). Mr. Osprey thinks the mulata maid to be the embodiment of “pure sweetness,” and when reading this scene one cannot help but replace Lydia with Maria-Luisa because of the sexual tension that exists between Osprey and Lydia throughout the book and because Lydia often has romantic and sexual fantasies about Osprey. Although Empress and Lydia are truly welcome diversions from Hijuelos’ other novels and female characters, he returns to his usual stereotypical portrayal of women after the publication of Empress.

Concerning Habana Melody, women are described in generalizing and objectifying terms, and always in a sexual connotation as potential lovers or objects of male consumption. Israel tells Antonio on their arrival in Habana that he “will find the Cuban women unbelievable,” and later the “the young ladies of Habana” are described as “well-bred but fun-loving, and, in fact, searching for future husbands[…]” (15, 86). To understand more completely the validity of representation and the nature of characterization, the narrative perception must be examined because the narrative voice is filtered through Israel, and the particulars of his perception support his need to compose and idealize images of women. The opening prose of the novel concerning the zarzuela sets up the continuous parallel between music and the love of women by positioning Israel as a descendant of the courtly love tradition of medieval Europe. The zarzuela “has its origins in those entertainments of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries when traveling musicians and actors would appear in the lodges and palaces of their noble lords in Spain,” and the bits of poetry and song performed “could be organized around the concept of a simple and capricious plot—usually one of love.”41 Like musicians of the zarzuela, troubadours were European, mainly French, singers and musicians of lyrics and poetry who traveled to medieval courts singing love lyrics and stories of court society, inspiring the literary genre of courtly love that arose in the late eleventh century court of Eleanor of Aquitaine in Provençal France. As a descendant of the oral tradition of sixteenth century traveling musicians of Muslim Spain, the

zarzuela is also a descendant of courtly love poetry, which was strongly influenced if not formed by the early rhymed verse of Muslim Spain, thus pushing its influence into Cuba as a Spanish colony of that time.

According to the Hispano-Arabic theory of the origin of courtly love, scholars believe, “courtly love was either imported into the south of France from Muslim Spain, or was strongly influenced by the culture, poetry and philosophy of the Arabs.” The Muslim Arabic inhabitation of the Iberian Peninsula lasted around seven centuries, and much Arabic and Islamic culture was brought into Spain and left a lasting influence on the arts and culture; it was in the “refined and artistically innovative courts of Islamic Spain” that the “roots of and inspiration for what would become the most renowned poetry of Europe” were found. Arabic scholarship in Spain served “as a medium for the transmission of Greek classical texts is widely acknowledged” — texts like Ovid’s *Ars Amatoria*, (The Art of Love) which was widely read and highly influential of courtly love lyrics at medieval courts due to a revival of Classical ancient texts like Virgil and Ovid. At the medieval courts of Spain, “Arabian musical treatises were translated into Latin at Toledo and elsewhere,” and zarzuelas “used mythological subjects from classical literature” like what was being translated and revived at court. Not only did the Crusades facilitate “the interchange of ideas” and “chivalric practices” between Europe and Muslim Spain, but the Provençal troubadours carried ideas from Spanish medieval courts, as “most of the early troubadours including Guilhem [William] IX [...] frequented the courts of Aragon and Castile,” courts which “employed Moorish musicians.”

As a composer of the zarzuela, Israel can be tied to the troubadours of medieval Europe who composed courtly love lyrics from which the zarzuela tradition probably originated, and Israel is repeatedly described with a courtly discourse. Israel is “nearly medieval in his Catholic beliefs,” and in his dealings with women he possesses a “courtly nature” and a “courtly manner” (73, 75, 102). His charm rises from his “gallant manner” and the expression of “courtly behavior” as he “bow[s] gallantly” (7, 244). Although the characteristics of courtly love are many and can be phrased in various ways, the principle features that Israel manifests as a

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44 Boase, 63.
45 Boase, 72, Sturman, 2.
46 Boase, 70, 72.
“courtly” gentleman are the “insatiability of desire” and “the elevation of the lady into an object of worship”—both represented by Rita.\textsuperscript{47}

Israel expresses an insatiable desire throughout the novel, engaging in continuous sexual liaisons, but mostly because he idolizes Rita Valladares and because his great love for her is never consummated. Thoughts of Rita haunt Israel his entire life and he is truly a slave to his memory of her, even closing a letter to her with “your servant;” the entire representation of women in the novel is based on this idealization (195). Always appearing as a “beautiful image” to Israel, Rita possesses the kind of physical beauty that he idealizes (8). Israel feels “envy and admiration” for “these favored daughters and sons of life” who embody the “very qualities of beauty that he had always aspired to through his music” (7). To attain the beauty that Rita possesses would require sexual intimacy between Israel and the object of worship and desire (Rita), but to do so would penetrate that ideal image of her; thus Israel worships from afar, objectifying Rita as the object he cannot have.

Since medieval (courtly) love is based solely on the eyes, on physical beauty, then the validity of Israel’s love and vision of Rita and the other female characters must be questioned since his sight is physically damaged. Israel peers “out at the world through the distortions of his thick-lensed wire-rim glasses” and “his eyes [seem] lost” (5). When writing down his compositions, “the notes tended to blur and dance about, his kindly eyes often grew bleary as he tried to keep track of them,” but Israel pays no heed to his strained optical condition (90-91). Israel has “amorous fantasies” and “romantic delusions” about Rita because their lives “never intersected in ways that allowed their romance to blossom,” but also because his sight cannot be trusted (99, 93, 20). On the day he composes the song “Rosas Puras,” his greatest achievement and what the entire novel centers around, Israel sees Rita, his inspiration, through a “blurry peripheral maze,” and she later “disappear[s] into the shadows” (103). Everything in Israel’s life revolves around this melody and this woman and both are based on a faulty perception; due to his failed vision, Israel is forced to re-compose his knowledge of the women in his life like he would a musical composition, and this fact tempers the novel’s entire representation of women’s identities.

With the exception of the Castillo brothers’ mother (who will be discussed later in the chapter), the female characters in \textit{Mambo Kings} function primarily as lovers and little more; the

\textsuperscript{47} Boase, 63.
novel serves as a detailed accumulation of Cesar’s sexual exploits in which the women are interchangeable and identity-less in their desire for Cesar. When Cesar performs his music in New York nightclubs, he appeals to every type of woman in the crowd. The narrative voice describes the scene without the use of articles: “Woman in a strapless dress dancing a slow, grinding rumba, staring at Cesar Castillo. Old woman with hair coiffed upward in a heavenly spiral, staring at Cesar. Teenage girl[…]staring at Cesar Castillo. Old ladies’ skin heating up, hips moving like young girls hips, eyes wide open with admiration and delight” for Cesar (29). There are no names, not even an “a” or “the” to distinguish one woman from another, but if there were it wouldn’t matter, “whenever he felt pain in his life,” Cesar “would find himself a woman,” and this happens so frequently that they become interchangeable in his mind and nameless to the reader (109). At any moment Cesar could have “a champagne glass in one hand and, in the other, the soft, curvaceous shoulder of an unidentified girl—Paulita? Roxanne? Xiomara?—looking a lot like Rita Hayworth, her nice breasts pushed up into the top of her dress[…]” (23). Women such as these are interchangeable for Cesar and for the narrative because they have no purpose other than to reiterate Cesar’s virility; women “fe[e]d upon him” as if they are “small creature[s] of the forest, seeking honey from a hive” (288). Cesar even dreams of “hundreds of naked women, bursting with youth and femininity, arms out to him imploringly and some would lie back on the ground with their legs spread wide and he’d want them so bad, daydreaming about making love to one hundred women at a time, as if that would make him immortal” (373). Although it is not his virility but his appearance on the I Love Lucy show that will make Cesar immortal, he has an insatiable sexual appetite that leaves no room for a relationship with a woman outside of the sexual.

The album cover of the Castillo brothers’ record Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love features a similar image with a girlfriend of Cesar’s, Vanna Vane, whose name harkens to the superficial purpose and quality of her character. “Winsome and beautiful Miss Mambo pinup girls” accompany each of the Castillo brothers’ records, tying their musical success to success with women and sexual accomplishment (15). The album cover shows Cesar “with a wolfish grin, a conga drum strapped around his neck, his hand raised and coming down on the drum, his mouth open in a laugh, and his whole body bending toward Miss Vane. Her hands were clasped together by her face, her mouth forming an ‘Ooooh’ of excitement, her legs bent for dancing, part of her garter showing…..” (14). The use of Vanna Vane on the album cover represents
status; America will be accepting of the Castillo brothers because a beautiful blond is aroused by them, because “to be seen with a woman like Vanna was prestigious as a passport, a high-school diploma, a full-time job, a record contract, a 1951 DeSoto” (19). Having access to a certain type of female body illustrates a successful conquest. Vanna Vane is to Cesar as Lucy is to Desi, the ultimate translation into becoming Cuban-American through the social ability of being involved with the ultimate American woman (necessarily a white woman); it is a symbol of acceptance into and by the American public.

The comparison of women to a DeSoto is interesting not only because it is cliché, but because the narrator describes two opposing relationships between Cesar and his car. In one instance, Cesar loves his DeSoto for “its female roundness and sheeny cream-white skin, bumper guards that protruded like breasts and dimpled hood, curvy like a fine female rump” (123). Here the comparison between the value of a fancy car and the value of having a white woman on one’s arm is evident, the car possessing “cream-White skin” like Vanna Vane. In a second instance, Cesar says loves his DeSoto because “it was big. It was splendid. It was smooth. It had turbo-thrust and was fifteen feet long. It was so fabulous-looking that no woman could resist smiling when she saw it” (167). Here the image is extremely phallic when before it was so feminized, but perhaps taken together the value of the DeSoto or a woman like Vanna Vane means not only acceptance, but power and a new kind of virility to penetrate the mainstream of America.

In Cesar’s mind, even his estranged wife and daughter whom he left back in Cuba are useful only in support of him. Cesar claims to love his wife Luisa, but he fears the repetition of the machismo he learns from his father’s transgressions. Cesar sees “himself pacing in circles and cursing everyone around him, as did his father…he felt that abuse and discontent boiled in his blood and he did not want to hurt [Luisa]” (52). Even the “family affliction” of philandering that Cesar feels he cannot escape seems to be tied to the machismo of his father (54). Cesar mentally addresses his wife and explains that his cruelty is the result of “just being a man and doing as I saw fit, Luisa, but you didn’t know, didn’t know my restlessness and my disbelief in such simple things as a tranquil married life” (53). Cesar seems to lament the lack of a romanticized image of Cuban marriage present on the *I Love Lucy Show*, a comparison that seems appropriate considering Cesar’s physical and autobiographical likeness to character Desi.
At one point Cesar says to his mentor Julian Garcia, “I love Luisa with all my heart,” and later thinking about his daughter, “he believed that he would feel some new happiness if Mariela came up from Cuba to live with him…then she’d look after him, cook his meals, help keep house, and, above all, would receive and give him love, and this love would wrap around his heart like a gentle silk bow, protecting it from all harm” (52, 265). Luisa’s nominal likeness to Lucy and the “heart like a gentle silk bow” invoke the icon of the *I Love Lucy Show*, and Cesar seems desperately to want that romantic image of a happy Cuban and his wife.

Fulfilling such a restrictive identity framework is the wife of the Castillo brother’s cousin Pablo, a minor character who has no name other than “Pablo’s wife.” She represents the quintessential role of the Cuban wife and woman, repeating the phrase, “a family and love, that’s what makes a man happy, not just playing the mambo” (35). Pablo’s wife is present to keep domestic life steady and welcoming for her husband and his friends so they can hold on to the warmth and memory of Cuba a bit longer; New York is at first depressing for the men, but the “warmth of Pablo’s household: the music[…]the aroma of cooking[…]and] the affection and kisses from Pablo’s wife and his three children made them happier” (36). The narrator describes Pablo’s wife as “a practical and kindhearted woman from Oriente, for whom marriage and children were the great events in her life[…]she sighed a lot, but immediately after sighing, she smiled, a statement of fortitude[…]that was what she was like, a clock, marking her day with her chores, her sighs punctuating the hours” (35). And this is where Pablo’s wife is left in the story. She has no agency, no story, nothing of her own life except sighs with which she seems content; she has only a function to further the transition from Cuba to America for the male characters.

One female character that seemingly breaks free from the novel’s restrictive identities for women is Delores, Nestor’s wife. Besides minor character Celia who defies Cesar by refusing him, Delores is the only female character who asserts any kind of autonomy by refusing Cesar’s advances after Nestor’s death and putting herself through college, but however different Delores may appear to be from the other female characters who play mainly sexual roles, her character too resides between parameters set by the male characters. When Delores accompanies her father to America, her mother and sister remain behind in Cuba by choice, and Delores finds herself inheriting her mother’s role in the house. Delores cooks for her father “in imitation of her

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48 Firmat outlines Cesar’s likeness to Desi Arnaz on page 146 of *Life on the Hyphen*, claiming, “Cesar is Desi without Lucy.”
mother in Havana,” she looks after him and waits at home for him when he spends his evenings out, and soon she finds “herself feeling what her mother must have felt. All those nights of shouting in the house hadn’t turned into air. She had the shouts inside her” (64, 68). Delores finally understands the painful frustration and suffocating situation of her mother back in Cuba, remembering how she “would sit, her arms crossed tight over her lap, the posture of anger that her mother adopted in the days when her papa used to do as he pleased,” because now in America she is the one sitting “with her arms crossed tight over her lap, waiting to hear her father’s footsteps in the hall, and wanting to shout at him” (69). The perfect opportunity exists here for Delores to become a different kind of woman than her mother, but instead of allowing her to act for herself, Hijuelos forces her into the same old role, because instead of acting or becoming angry at her father, Delores “always softened and took care of him instead” (69).

Delores literally inherits her mother’s role as caretaker and observer of her father, but she also manifests a physical, even sexual desire to be near him. Delores finds her father sleeping naked in his bed one night in a state of arousal, but “despite her fear, Delores wanted to pick up his thing and pull it like a lever; she wanted to lie down beside him and put her hand down there, releasing him from pain;” in another instance she “watched his powerful body, virile and frightening, and felt confused by her tender feelings toward him” (65, 67). Although Delores feels a “strange, nearly unbearable desire to release him from his pain by lying naked beside him on his bed,” she knows she “would never do it a million years, but felt like she should” (65). The novel equates comfort with sex as a woman’s obligation, not matter her relationship, to men.

Delores only feels a sense of release from this duty when one night she follows her father out and she sees him dancing and happy, then she decides to go out on her own when an American man in the dance hall tells her she could be in a beauty contest. She forgives her father’s transgressions when she sees an outward manifestation of his pleasure even though it causes her unhappiness to lose him. Delores’ desire to release her father from pain overshadows her own pain and loneliness because for her the world is “veiled by a melancholia which emanated from her poor father’s sadness” (69). Her father’s sadness and not her own loneliness makes the world melancholic for her, making the dynamics of her life contingent upon that of a man. Delores repeats the desire to release the male figure in her life from his pain with her husband Nestor. After their first sexual encounter, Delores proclaims, “My Lord, this is a man,” and she “felt so grateful to him that she did everything he wanted…when she heard his moans of
pleasure and saw an expression of ecstatic release on his face, a new sense of purpose descended upon her: to release this young musician from his pain” (90). Delores’ mission then is to break Nestor’s melancholia as it is with her father.

During Delores’ first attack (she is raped twice in the novel), she thinks about her own helplessness and chastises herself for being too trusting, and she even admires the ardor of her rapist, but those feelings turn to pity when she sees the small size of the man’s penis, and she thinks back to her father. The word “virile” floats through Delores’ thoughts, “brushed like a silk scarf against the edge of sexual speculation about her father” (76-77). Delores thinks how she will look back on her father’s life after this and see him as a real man, and a good man different from the one abusing her, and “all these thoughts turned into a feeling of overwhelming sadness about being a woman” (76). Christina Tourino writes about this scene, “That Delores can be endeared by her date’s passion even in the context of rape, and that she loses this feeling only upon seeing the size of his penis, suggests her acquiescence to a standard of masculinity that uses the penis as the ultimate index measure.”

Delores’ sadness about being a woman is no surprise considering the destiny that seems set for her. Although Delores displays definite layers of complexity that the previously mentioned female characters do not have, Hijuelos fails in this attempt to create a seemingly independent woman character because her identity too is wrapped up in her father’s and Nestor’s. Delores is raped twice, and her love/worship of her father and Nestor seems to be in tandem with their sexual virility. As will be shown later in *Fourteen Sisters* through the sisters worship of Emilio’s “may-pole,” Hijuelos’ women characters seem to inevitably desire and need the masculinity, measured by the biological presence and quality of a penis.

More so than in the other two books, *The Fourteen Sisters of Emilio Montez O’Brien* portrays a kind of essential femininity through the portraits (or lack thereof) of the sisters, and in their position as exotic others in a small Pennsylvania town. *Fourteen Sisters* is Hijuelos’ only novel besides *Empress* where female characters take center stage, but as will soon be seen that is not the case with this book, as even the title of the novel frames the women in relation to their brother. At least half the book is occupied by Emilio’s life separate from his sisters, his time as a soldier, in Hollywood, and his loves and sexual escapades. As with Emilio, to whom “it wouldn’t much matter that the faces of his sisters seemed interchangeable,” the sisters barely

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49 Tourino, 4.
stand out from one another because of their shallow portraits and the endless detail that chronicle their lives (195). A brief catalogue of the sisters is necessary to see the pedestrian or stock-like character that each sister represents.

Marta and Carmen are portrayed as the spinsters; “homebodies for the most part, who seemed destined to live quietly forever in their town,” but eventually they follow their brother out to California to work at Disneyland (212). Maria, Olga, and Jacqueline are known as “the Chanteuses,” living together their entire lives in New York as the cosmopolitan sisters who have performed around the world. Violeta is “the naughty sister” (200). Their mother Mariela worries about Violeta’s youth spent as a “free-spirit…dancing in front of the juke box—she in her tight sweaters…trying to arouse the attention of the GIs” (200). Veronica is the saint whose kindness never wanes and who abides by her religious name. She is “the most compassionate sister…she was so aware of the meaning of her name that she had torn out the page of a religious magazine, putting above her bed…a lovely rendering of St. Veronica placing the renowned veil over the face of Jesus” (210-11). Helen is the beauty queen who passes “her teenage years in a revelry of male adulation” and whose exotic appeal allows her a modeling career, but her vanity follows her into old age (206). Before marriage, Isabel is “on the verge of matronhood, twenty-eight and still a virgin,” until she meets her future husband in Cuba (201). The content housewife, Isabel leaves her sisters’ house, ‘having found herself a husband…taking work as a seamstress and falling more deeply in love—with Antonio and with Cuba” (201). Like Isabel, Irene is the fat content housewife, described as “corpulent and happy with her husband, their butcher shop and little babies” (202). Patricia is the clairvoyant with the ability “to see and hear things,” and Sarah, the unknown sister, is a lawyer’s wife who is barely mentioned at all throughout the novel (203).

The two sisters occupying the greatest amount of space in the novel are Gloria, the sickly dependent sister, and Margarita, the mother figure. Gloria has a strange and unhealthy attachment to her brother, so much so that her very existence seems tinged upon her brother’s. When Emilio matures and leaves the sisters’ home, Gloria feels “as if she were now locked up, as if her brother’s emergence into the world had confined her to a small and narrow closet” (244). The oldest sister Margarita, through whom the majority of the novel is filtered, is the most independent of the sisters. She takes care of all her younger siblings, even breast feeding her brother in one scene, and the reader does become of aware of her inner thoughts much more
so than the other sisters. Interestingly, every sister marryates at some point in her life, even
Margarita, who “would often tell herself[…] that she did not need a man to find happiness (363).
Margarita rests her body in the tub, “daydreaming about the days when a man would possess her
and she would feel a certain terror and elation,” and at the age of ninety she finds contentment in
a second marriage, feeling “the ancient pride of a woman satisfying her man” (463, 468). The
sisters, who cannot live forever to satisfy their brother, all finally replace him with another man,
as if there must be a “masculine” presence in their lives.

Women and Music

Women in *A Simple Habana Melody* are inseparable from and characterized by the
disjointed and also harmonious quality of musical compositions, and as such it is necessary for
the novel to compose its representations of women because they are based on Israel’s perception.
Like Maria and “Beautiful Maria of My Soul” from *Mambo Kings, Habana Melody* revolves
around Rita and “Rosas Puras” as both present a romantic image of Cuba that Israel needs
desperately to maintain. The story so frequently juxtaposes women and Israel’s memory of
women with descriptions or mentions of music that they become inseparable entities, and Israel
composes the women in his life as he composes melodies, because for him, “like music, sex and
love were matters of the imagination” (312). Some women are “glorious sarabands, their dark
and intense eyes mysterious as the deepest tones of an operatic aria,” while others, the “cheap
women,” are “jaunty rumbas, the wild gyrations of the Charleston” (7). Here the narrator reveals
a Bourdieu-like classification of music and women that situates a woman’s physical beauty and
type of sexual appeal in relation to a cultural hierarchy of music.50

The novel does not associate music only with women, because even men, to whom Israel
is also attracted, are compared to the tango and to the waltz; rather, music is intimately connected
to sex and sexuality, which Israel expresses only with women. While making love with Sarah
Rubenstein, Israel hears “the music of her pleasurable moans” as they “engag[e] in four different
acts of love simultaneously” (334). Like the harmony of a composition in which simultaneous
melodies come together, Israel and Sarah’s love making becomes four musical rhythms that

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Publishers, 1998). Bourdieu theorizes that categorization and appreciation of the arts is educationally and culturally
based. For example, classical music ranks highest and popular music ranks lowest. In *Habana Melody*, good or
classy women are operatic arias while low class women like prostitutes are jaunty rumbas.
synchronize in one melody, a feat that realistically may not be possible, adding to the contrived image of the scene. In a moment of nostalgia, Israel pictures himself back in one of his favorite brothels, “resting back naked, music forming spontaneously in his thoughts, even as his majestic virility was making a young girl of about sixteen... marvel at his humble and gentlemanly demeanor” (332). Any kind of sexual pleasure or remembrance involving sexuality necessarily involves or conjures the thought of music, which idealistically and stereotypically involves the women’s adulation of Israel’s carnal talents.

Like the individual notes that make up a musical composition, women are often described in parts rather than a whole, highlighting their disjointed physical bodies as representations of their sexuality or their essence as women. Israel has a passion for “long-legged women in red garters,” and remembers only the “red nipples” of Gigi, his favorite prostitute in a Paris brothel (43, 37). In another scene Israel hears a “voice,” a “rattle of bracelets and anklet jewelry,” he “smells a lemon-scented perfume,” hears the “brisk clatter of high heels” and then Rita “appear[s] before him” (317-8). As the most important piece of music in the novel is definitely Israel’s most famous zarzuela, “Rosas Puras,” it too represents the sexuality of a woman. “Rosas Puras” is a “song for courtship... embodying the emotions of a man, stunned by the apparition of a shapely pretty woman” (150-1). Rita and “Rosas Puras” are “inseparable” in Israel’s mind, but also how they function in the novel (43). When composing “Rosas Puras,” Israel uses different notes to represent parts of Rita’s body as the two define one another in a way that physically disjoints Rita. In the composition of “Rosas Puras,” the “E” represents “Rita’s lovely eyes; F, her fulsome lips; F#, her delicate cheek; G, her pearly teeth; A_, her tongue, plump, moist, set back in a laugh; B_, her brow; C, her shapely breasts; B_, her compact rump—then whistling the tune” (128). Rita is broken down into pieces like fragments of memory, reducing her identity to bodily parts construed only as sexual.

Israel hopes to produce a kind of “cubist music,” leading him to “create pieces that, while using Cuban modalities, were layered like montages. These played upon the ear of the listener in the way that memory played upon the mind, or as in a swirl of singing voices in a dream” (253). Similarly, Israel’s “life with Rita with its infinite moments, reduced like the converging lines and planes of a cubist painting, dense with music notes and memories, inside Israel’s head” (319). Like the subject of a cubist painting and the layers of Israel’s music, Rita’s body is fragmented like cubist geometric shapes without a realistic coherence, stressing the abstract and the sexual
rather than the real. Israel’s philosophy on women calls attention to that of Cubist painting, a movement that directly precedes the historical time of the novel. Cubism emphasizes the flat surface of the plane, rejecting depth and perspective, in essence rejecting reality. Cubism represents the artist’s own reality, one that is not bound by convention, giving power solely to the artist and their vision of reality. Placing the women in *A Simple Habana Melody* in conversation with Cubist philosophy (which the text itself obviously does), the women have no agency in the story because it is wholly Israel’s, and he is in charge of their identities.

**Colonizing the Female Body**

The narratives in *Habana Melody* and *Fourteen Sisters* classify women in terms of an object of the male gaze, or as physical bodies only for men’s sexual consumption. Israel describes Rita in a manner which ascribes her to a sexually defining role, thinking her “beautiful and mysterious[…] like a Persian concubine” (138). Before having the image of Rita to rely on, Israel “often relied upon a favorite sepia-toned ‘artistic’ photograph, circa 1902, of a Cuban girl wearing only a headband of feathers and a beaded belt around her naked waist, bending over a sailor, his trouser pulled down to his knees” in order to “facilitate the fleshly exercises of his youth” (310). As Israel uses the image of a Cuban girl who supposedly has the exotic quality of a Native American woman as a tool for self-gratification, so does the erotic pose and exotic character of the girl in the photograph serve as propaganda to represent and sell Cuba through the “serialization” of the Cuban woman for the viewer. The sailor in the photograph indicates that the audience for such propaganda reaches wider than just Cuban men. When commerce was opened up so that Cuba could trade with countries other than Spain in the nineteenth century, “La Havana was often the first foreign port of call.”

As a “major Caribbean harbor for European trade,” Habana “was an important refueling port for ships bound for the Americas,” and “merchants found an ever growing market in the U.S. for Cuban sugar and tobacco.”

Cynthia Enloe discusses the use of the postcard featuring objectifying and alluring poses of native women as a justification for colonial domination in her book *Bananas, Beaches and*

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51 Webber, 287.
The exotic woman is used as a site to promote friendly relations between the colony and the colonizing country abroad. Similar to the postcard’s job of promoting the exotic is Franklin Roosevelt’s enactment of the Good Neighbor Policy, which was implemented to promote friendly race relations between the U.S. and Latin America so as to ensure the U.S’s dominant presence in the importing of sugar, bananas, rubber, tea, tobacco, and other necessary commodities. In both scenes it is not the fact that women are exploited as sex objects that is important (for we can expect that in Hijuelos’ novels), but that they are particularly exoticized or Othered sex objects.

The text furthers the spectrum of colonial discourse by directly tying the female body to the physical land of Cuba. In David Spurr’s book *The Rhetoric of Empire*, he discusses colonial justification through the eroticization of the colonized nation by feminizing the description of the land and seeing the colonized nation as a lover or mistress. In a similar way, Hijuelos’ novel connects the female body to the actual land of Cuba as a justification for Israel’s indulgence in a romantic nostalgia of Cuba prior to the changes that occur due to World War II through his occupation of the female body. Upon his return to Cuba after his detainment in a concentration camp, Israel “remembers” witnessing “the phenomenon of a woman turning into an acacia tree” (279). At another time looking out at the Cuban countryside, Israel “could see in the fields great stacks of hay, lovely and rounded as breasts,[…]the horizon itself with its hills and dipping, shadow-centered meadows, as beautiful as a woman’s hips” (336). Israel remembers Cuba through the images of women, and women are landscaped into the image of an exotic tree that is a holy representation to the Bedouin tribe of Africa. The holiness of the acacia tree recalls Israel’s idealization and idolization of women, but it also naturalizes the essence of the female body in a way that denies her a “subjective identity.”

The novel not only feminizes the land of Cuba, but it also places nature and the Cuban landscape inside of the womb. While having sex with a prostitute, Israel senses the “dim flow of a forest stream; and the scent of her, like flowers after a meadow rain, and of dampened clay red earth[…] as if this young girl had within her the fecundity of the world itself, as if from her

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54 Enloe, chapter 6.
56 Spurr, 176.
skin[...could not only sprout laurel sprigs and branches and roots, but would give forth, as if at the creation, the skies and waters and stars[...]” (132). In this passage, Cuban land itself is found in the essence of the female body, which is fertile and fecund as any field of sugar or tobacco, almost godly in its ability to give life and to create. Here the woman is literally the mother of Cuban land, and as such, she is intimately connected to the genesis of the mulata figure through Cuba’s history of colonial production.

In Fourteen Sisters, Nelson is in the photography business and spends many hours in his studio documenting the growth of his daughters, but sometimes he takes pictures using his daughters as models for a calendar that he produces, and in this venue in which he carefully poses the girls for elaborate shots, he unwittingly “Others” his daughters through the camera’s gaze, which is a masculine one. For one photograph Nelson positions the girls “with umbrellas against an Oriental landscape, trees in the distance laden with snow;” in another shot Nelson poses them in front of “isolated waterfalls that send up rainbowed mists, his daughters in proper lace dresses spread out on rocks, parasols behind them, the white water flowing around them, as if this was the most natural thing in the world[...] or they would go to a lake, where the girls could pull up their skirts and go wading in their bloomers in the water” (57). Although the photographs here have no venue so large as nationalism, tourism, or commercialism as the colonial postcards discussed by Enloe, Nelson O’Brien takes on the role of colonizer as he documents his family through portraits like he once documented history as a photographer in Cuba during the Spanish American War. Whether Nelson Orientalizes his daughters with umbrellas in front of snowy trees or sexualizes them in lacy dresses lying on rocks, he casts them in the passive role of the colonized subject by placing himself behind the gaze of the camera that seeks to encapsulate some kind of picturesque [idealistic] and static feminine identity.

By penetrating Mariela, Nelson feels “a kind of spiritual torpor as if he were a tourist in a very strange country” (153). Here Mariela’s body is naturalized as a landscape of Cuban history, her womb containing fragments of its historical and cultural bloodlines, and Nelson is the colonizer who literally inhabits the body and looks upon it as a source of pleasure. When Nelson and Mariela are in the act of conceiving another child, the narrative likens it to the joining of two lineages of racial and cultural history through the body: “Irish sperm would join a Cuban ovum (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)” (152-3). Mariela’s body seems to contain the entire history of Cuba, as a woman and as a mother, making history herself by giving birth and adding to the ancestry.

Furthermore, the history making that Mariela takes part in and embodies is not complete or valid when it involves a female child. One day Nelson takes refuge in a saloon when the femininity of the household, “what would one day be called the psychology of women, perhaps,” makes him feel “very much alone,” but the solitude lifts away when “he’d find himself feeling ‘manly’ among men” (153). There, “he’d listen to their tales of conquest and struggle, beer froth on his lips,” and join in by telling of his experiences in Cuba during the Spanish American War, but he feels “convinced that he had not measured up as a man; because he’d not had a son” (153). Even though Nelson populates Mariela’s “country” with his lineage, and her body seems to be the genesis of a kind of history, their own personal history cannot be complete without a male child to validate it.

**Essentialized Gender Paradigms and Naturalization**

In the Montez O’Brien household, femininity is not just a characteristic of a woman, but it is a powerful presence that overwhelms and at times threatens the masculinity of the men in the house. Margarita remembers “the days, during the painted-glass years, when the feminine influence of the house was so strong that automobiles would sometimes run off the road and skid into the thick oak tree in their yard” (400). The femininity of her sisters manifests in Margarita’s dreams as “wiry ivy, entangled and dense on a wall, as a piece of rope knotted many times into itself, or as a spool of yarn being pummeled and drawn through the legs of chairs and tables by a playful cat” (8). All the dolls in the house “simply hopped to their feet, turned into figures of flesh, bone, and blood, and, as in a fairy tale, became, quite simply, her sisters” (9). Even the pilot that appears stranded in the beginning of the novel at the sisters’ house is “lured down by the femininity of the household” (20). The femininity of the sisters does not emanate from any quality or characteristic—physical, sexual, or mental—it radiates simply because they are women, and their nature is so essentially feminine and different that it threatens the livelihood of the masculine presences in the house.

Nelson O’Brien is never completely content in the house due to his daughters’ “sometimes overwhelming femininity” (89). He is uncomfortable around women, and
throughout the novel he remains in a state of near melancholia, but it is unclear as to what loss his desire harkens. Close to his death, Mariela asks the doctor, “What is he suffering from?,” to which the doctor replies nothing but old age, but clearly like Nestor Castillo and his perpetual melancholy, Nelson has been suffering from something his entire life (359). Beginning in his youth, Nelson does not understand the allure of women or how happiness can come from and endure with a woman. He marvels at his friend because he “could not understand why the sight of a woman with a nice bosom hidden under layers of dress and coat would make Jim whistle and blush, or why he was rambunctious in pursuit of a pretty girl…why he would eventually marry her and seem the happiest man in the world” (101). Nelson senses a power in women that he shies away from, but he supposes “that he might have felt differently if he’d been closer to his mother while growing up” (102).

Nelson’s discomfort around his daughters stems from the fact that he did not have a close relationship with his own mother. His mother Margaret is a sickly woman who dies when Nelson is five, but his memories of her are cold and wooden instead of warm and soft. When his mother tries to pinch his cheeks lovingly, she does so too hard, “as if her fingers were made of wood,” and when she hugs him to her sickly body it is warm, “but also almost wooden” (102). The next memory Nelson has of his mother is of her in the kitchen, but blurs quickly into her funeral, and he views his mother “asleep in a box of dark wood” (102). Because of this disassociation with his mother, Nelson forever feels “a deflation of the heart, a miasmic ebbing in that part of his soul that had to do with love,” and he constantly struggles with “a queasiness, having to do with women” (102). The text draws the connection between the ability to love and the mother, essentializing the qualities of love and affection as feminine.

During his childhood, Nelson lives with an abusive father and an alcoholic uncle, similar to the situation that the Castillo brothers grow up with in *Mambo Kings*. Cesar learns machismo from his abusive father, whose “manliness was such that it permeated the household with a scent of meat, tobacco, and homemade rum. It was thick enough that their mother, Maria, would fill the house with flowers, which she put in vases everywhere” (214). The machismo (stereotypically represented with liquor, smoke, and meat) is such a ubiquitous presence that Cesar’s mother has to combat it with her own stereotypical feminine performance of placing flowers around the house. Cesar’s father beat machismo into him and forced him to erect a “macho wall between himself and his feelings” that would prevent him from truly loving and
render him sexually insatiable the rest of his life (58). Nestor, who was also abused by their father, takes the opposite path of Cesar and becomes emotionally insatiable as he “fears that he could never be a real macho in the kingdom of machos” (97). Cesar’s advice to Nestor concerning a woman is to “treat her good sometimes, but don’t let her get too used to it. Let her know that you are the man. A little abuse never hurt a romance. Women like to know who’s the boss” (103). Cesar grows up in a macho world so strong that he feels he cannot escape it.

Like Cesar, Nelson O’Brien receives nothing from his father except a hard image of what it is to be a man; but unlike Cesar and Nestor who learn and know love only from their mother, Nelson is left with a void because his mother could not provide him with the experience of how to deal with women. Here it seems that Hijuelos leaves us with a formula for a character’s psychological development toward love and gender. Because he does not have a close relationship with his mother, Nelson cannot be comfortable around the femininity of any woman. Due to his own insecurity about the power of femininity, Nelson fears that the presence of his fourteen daughters around Emilio will somehow emasculate him. Nelson “had always been squeamish about the boy’s masculinity. It had startled him that Emilio, his flesh and blood, felt so at ease around the females of the house, that the boy seemed so to enjoy their company” (194). To assure himself that so many females do not ruin the “maleness” of his son, Nelson takes Emilio to a brothel early in his pubescent years.

At times Emilio exhibits the same attitude as his father toward the threat of his sisters’ femininity. Thinking about his sisters’ influence and their adoration of him, Emilio considers how it could affect him:

He had felt, over the years, softened and pampered by all this. It would make him a little annoyed to see the picture his father had taken of him a few months after his birth, when the sisters had dressed him up in the most lacy and sweet-looking clothes, his baby face so bright-featured that he resembled a little girl instead of a male. He’d sometimes swear that his bones and limbs and organs were somehow softer—and thanked God for the healthy recourse of the bordello, where he could prove himself, the ladies always impressed (238).

The physical appearance of what Emilio considers to be femininity makes him fear an actual transformation into being less masculine, and only by performing his sexual virility can he assuage his fears. He worries that his sisters’ influence on his life might make him “go fairy”
like Mr. Belvedere, a music shop owner who Emilio wonders if “he had been raised with a powerful female influence” (239). Emilio uses his penis to prove his masculinity, assuming that sexuality validates gender.

According to Hijuelos’ logic, Emilio is the complete opposite of his father because he grows up surrounded by women, and therefore is comfortable and open to femininity, in fact is drawn to it, as he has a “tendency to feel easy attractions and to fall in love too quickly” with women (243). Emilio not only feels the femininity of his sisters, but it is a force that seems to pour out of everything which with he comes in contact. Emilio consistently falls “under the spell of the feminine influence and swear[s] that the world and everything in it emanate[s] from a female source” (291). He regards everything as “rounded and curvaceous:” the “undulating and fancy script of a menu,” the “circular motion of a rather devastated, street-worn pigeon,” the “ovularity of the toilet’s shape,” the “architecture of a street lamp, its petal-like ridges, its blossoming rims, female,” and “the moon over the rooftops, a cat in heat…all female” (291). Everything circular and soft belongs to the feminine, and one can only stipulate that things hard, straight, and rigid belong to the masculine, essentializing both genders to the representations of their sex.

Emilio seems to follow in his father’s footsteps in his unusual attachment to his sister Margarita. Perhaps the inexplicable thing that Nelson O’Brien searches for in his old age and the catalyst for his melancholia is a desire for his sister, Kate. In his old age, Nelson “walks about the house looking for someone,” and at night “when Nelson’s thoughts sometime turn to his sister” and “thinking that she might still be around, he would wander in the hall looking for his sister Kate, and then remember that she had died in 1897 and grow sad” (360, 380). Nelson and Kate travel to America together before Nelson meets Mariela, and Kate acts as a substitute for Nelson’s mother because she is the only female he loves and is close to before his wife, and Kate too, “like his mother[…] was not always in the best of health,” dying shortly after their arrival in Pennsylvania (98). Similar to Nestor Castillo’s interchanging of his lover Maria and his mother Maria in *Mambo Kings*, Nelson too has an amorous bond with Kate. Sensing her husband’s deep love for his deceased sister, Mariela laments to herself that she feels “a sadness while sleeping in her canopied bed with Nelson, as it was in that room, years before, in 1897, that her husband’s sister, Kate O’Brien, died from pneumonia” (203-4). Although the sisters never reveal any thoughts about their father’s closeness to his sister, Patricia, the clairvoyant sister, has the
“suspicion that Aunt Kate was not in truth an ‘aunt,’ and that her father had been not a brother suffering the loss of a sister but a widower” (204).

As there seems to be an undiscovered sexual tension between Nelson and his sister Kate, Emilio’s sisters display an unnatural affection for him. Emilio is ultimately adored by all of his sisters, but the adoration is not equally distributed. Close as children, Gloria idolizes her younger brother and wants to be his closest relationship. When Emilio’s maturation becomes evident to his sisters, Gloria finds herself “desiring contact with that strength[…]she could not get rid of certain thoughts that might not be considered ‘normal,’ and berated herself for them,” but nonetheless she dreams of “joining her brother in bed so that they could ‘embrace’ as they used to as children, and she would reach down and touch him” (225). In Gloria’s fantasy, Emilio would “spy her breasts through her silk gown and, parting the top buttons, take one of her nipples into his mouth” (322). Violeta too spies her brother’s maturity one day and “blushed and laughed[…thinking, ‘My goodness’” (225). This fascination with their brother’s penis leads to a kind May Pole-like worship of it.

Emilio does not merely notice feminine touches in everyday things, but femininity emanates from nature, as if the whole world were a woman there to care for him. Alone and on vacation, Emilio senses the “pure comfort” that awaits him on shore as he feels that “the sunlight beating down on his eyes was human, female. The warmth of the water, and the pull of the current on his hand, which he was dangling over the side, possessed a kind of female nature” (325). Nature itself takes on the attributes of a woman, as if Emilio is the center of the universe and “the world seemed quite simply a female invention intended to bring him affection and pleasure” (194). He recalls the blueness “from an illustration in the Arabian Nights: a tower, phallic and powerful, at the summit of a hilly Arab town, cutting into the horizon, and the sky a deep and mysterious blue, dotted with feminine, adoring stars” (300). Here Emilio sees himself as a tower, represented by his penis, over which his sisters look after and adore, like dancers around a May Pole. In a similar instance of female worship of the penis, Margarita masturbates to a dream of consummating a marriage with the pilot who crashes into their backyard in which she wears a “veil that gave her the mysterious air of a harem girl, a Salome,” her hair coiffed as it had been “at a May Festival” (23). The worship of penises is not a rare occurrence in this novel as it is not in the others previously discussed. In a photograph Nelson takes of his daughters, he readies them for “fanciful shots in the spring, their hair garlanded with flowers, and in little
tunics, tossing petals out of a basket as they danced about a Maypole” (152). In the world of Emilio and his fourteen sisters, women are adornments of nature, present as a support system for his emergence into the world.
Chapter Four

Mulata Mothers and Religion

In Habana Melody, Mambo Kings, and Fourteen Sisters, the realm where the mother, the mulata, and their embodiment of Cuba come together is always religious devotion, facilitated through the cult of the Virgin. According to Vera Kutzinski, Cuba’s national identity encodes itself in the “iconic figure of the mulata—that of the Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre, the coppery Virgin of Charity who is Cuba’s patron saint.” By invoking the Virgin of Charity and thus Virgin Mary, Hijuelos elevates the mulata mother to patroness of Cuba. In The Fourteen Sisters, Emilio experiences a kind of religious fascination during his time as a soldier in Italy during World War II, and his fascination manifests by reducing the women in his life into one image, bringing the mulata figure and the mother together in the image of the Madonna. While in Italy, Emilio becomes “fond of a certain kind of fresco that adorned many a church—depicting the Holy Mother and the infant Jesus,” and this image compels his feelings for a woman he hardly knows (254). Emilio walks everyday past his favorite church, and one day when he passes, he hears “the clatter of utensils, looked up: there, framed in the window of a medieval house, stood a beautiful and serene woman [… ] hair falling down over her shoulders, a baby in her arms, the child reaching up and touching her face” (252). Then, “as the heavy bronze bells of the church in the central piazza of the town had started to clang,” he hears voices and “learns Antonella’s name” (253). Emilio becomes captivated with Antonella and wonders “how he could have fallen in love with her, when really all she was a pretty woman framed in the window of a medieval house, holding a child” (257). Emilio invents in his memory a relationship with her:

Years later, when remembering that night, his mind fogged by drink, he would not only have shared a tender kiss with Antonella but believe that she, too, had fallen in love with him. In that invention of memory, when he left the house she went walking with him toward the church, and there, in its back garden, among the pear and the fig trees, she rested on the ground and he covered her with kisses (257).

57 Kutzinski, 7.
Emilio is mesmerized by the Madonna quality of Antonella as he sees her for the first time framed in a picturesque way in a widow, holding her infant son.

What Emilio loves and identifies with about the Madonna and child image is the “expression of pure affection” and the “absolute love and compassion” of Mary for her infant son” (254, 255). He knows too well what it is to be the adored child of a woman, of fourteen women, and his birth serves as a sort of coming of Christ, being the first and only son and the last child, and whose arrival finally makes Nelson O’Brien feel as if he has completed his duty as a man. Emilio feels “an odd empathy for the scene, thinking that women (his sisters and his mother) were delegated to the comforting of men before the storm that would be their lives” (255). As Emilio’s mother, Mariela has “religious devotion” in her blood, scripting her role as a pure and pious woman:

She was said to resemble her maternal great-aunt Benedicta, a saintly woman whose good deeds and exemplary life in Spain in the first part of the 19th century were of such merit that she had been elevated by the Pope into the hagiographic enclave in 1870[…]miracles were attributed to her, and she’d also experienced, during a time of great good acts, a visitation by the Holy Mother” (124, 122).

Emilio is the Christ child and it seems as if all women are destined to adore and idolize him.

Perhaps the most significant way the figures of the mulata and the mother merge in Mambo Kings is through the Afro-Cuban religion of Santería, a hybrid like the mulata herself. As a Spanish colony, Spain dealt with racial and cultural diversity in Cuba by imposing Roman Catholicism as a state religion, thus trying to create a unifying ideology. A sizeable African population became noticeable in Cuba in the 15th century and reached its culmination in the 19th century, but had been present in Spain since the Moors occupied the Iberian Peninsula in the 8th century, allowing for the inevitability of the absorption of African culture. Spanish Catholicism divides between the traditional cult of the seven sacraments and the cult of personages, specialized cults of Jesus, the Virgin Mary, and the saints; “the cult of personages (especially Mary and the saints) were open to folk interpretation,” and thus the cult of the Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre arose. In order to promote Catholicism, the Spanish Church sponsored cabildos, religious brotherhoods that indoctrinated the Cuban indigenous members to Catholic

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58 George Brandon, Santería from Africa to the New World (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993).
59 Brandon, 46.
principles, including veneration of specific saints, and holy days and festivals in honor of those saints. The cabildos accommodated “African customs to the church’s worship” around the 17th century, allowing African customs to merge with Catholicism.60 Santeria is the Cuban variant of the Yoruba-based religious forms that exist in the Caribbean and the Americas, a mix of Spanish folk Catholicism and the traditional African religion of Orisha (deity) worship of the Yoruba of Nigeria.61 Cuba’s Virgin became “syncretized in Santeria with the Yoruba goddess Oshun,” Goddess of Love, whose attributes include the rule of money, yellow metals, sex, and marriage.62 The Virgin de la Caridad’s racial make-up is mulata, African, European, and Indian—that of racially historical Cuba. Santeria, like the mulata, is a product of slavery and colonialism.

In his study of Santeria’s beginnings in Cuba, George Brandon discusses a painting in a Havana church just before the turn of the century. The painting portrays a Spanish slaughter of Indians, and in the center of the painting is “a wooden cross on the transverse arm of which sat the Virgin Mary holding the infant Jesus,” and the inscription relays how the Virgin Mary protected the Spanish conquerors during their slaughter of the Indians.63 This painting demonstrates how the Spanish colonialists manipulated the cult of the Virgin Mary as a justification for colonialism, and so the fusion of Cuba’s Virgin of Charity with African religion “subordinates and decenders Spanish culture, effacing its original features and transforming them through island practices, Cuban mixture reflects the synthesis of Spanish, African, and native beliefs and subverts the myth of a ‘Spanish’ Cuba.”64 Gloria Anzaldúa describes a similar manipulation of the cult of the Virgin with Guadalupe from the Mexican tradition. Anzaldúa claims the Spanish colonialists in Mexico “desexed Guadalupe, taking Coatlalopeuh, the serpent/sexuality, out of her…making la Virgen de Guadalupe/Virgen María into chaste virgins.”65 The Virgin of Guadalupe became “the chaste protective mother, the defender of the Mexican people.”66 In both examples, the Spanish colonialists manipulated the cult of the Virgin so that it validated their conquest, and in both cases the cult of the Virgin reflects Cuba’s mulata Virgin of Charity’s role as healer, nurturer, and ultimate mother of independent Cuba.

60 Brandon, 70-1.
61 Brandon, 2.
62 Brandon, 51, 77.
63 Brandon, 49.
64 Bost, 102.
66 Anzaldúa, 50.
Both Cesar and Nestor visit local *santeras* in New York for the same reason, for a nostalgic spiritual cleansing, but it also is a medium of cultural identity for them. Maria Marrero suggests that “the practice of incorporating Santeria in works of fiction by Cubans and Latinos in the US[…]suggest[s] the creation and negotiation of a new cultural space for Latino self-identity.” Here the brothers are able to reach back to Cuba to a place where their self-identity was not in question, and as exiles in New York they reach back through the cult of the Virgin. Cesar is “quite friendly with some *santeras*, really nice ladies who had come from Oriente Province[…]if he felt depressed about the fact that he still had to work in a meat-packing plant to maintain his flamboyant life-style, or when he felt guilty about his daughter down in Cuba, he would go see his friends for a little magical rehauling” (114-5). Cesar would ring a “magic bell (which symbolized his goddess, Caridad, or charity) and pay homage to the goddess Mayari, for whom these women were intermediaries[…]going to confessions at the Catholic Church did the same job” (115). Nestor receives a similar feeling from these sessions, remembering “how he would kneel on the cool stone floors of the church in Las Piñas beside his mother, and pray to Christ and all his saints and to the Holy Mother, […]trembling with the effort to make a connection to God” (115). Nestor’s invocation of the Virgin of Charity also recalls for him a memory of his mother, with whom he prayed to the Virgin back in Cuba.

The spiritual “rehauling” and comfort that Nestor and Cesar feel when visiting the *santeras* is no different than that which they find through memories and fascination with the two Marias, whose nominal likeness to Mary (Virgin Mary/Virgen Marías) invokes their powers has healers and mothers from the cult of the Virgin Mary. In either case, the figure of the *mulata* and that of the mother represent for Cesar and Nestor the same thing that the *Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre* represents to Cuba—a distinct identity for the individual Cuban man that is wrapped up in the historical and racial condition of the cult of the *mulata*. These three figures together represent what is specifically and independently Cuban about the past, an identity that cannot be retained outside of the arms of the mother and the motherland. The Castillo brothers can only recall what these figures represent rather than what is individual about them, but it is in the romantic or idealized representation that they find comfort and pieces of their own identity.

In *Habana Melody*, Israel must construct and maintain idealized images of both women and Cuba because he cannot reconcile the polarities of beauty and shit in the same world; he has

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67 Marrero, 141.
“no stomach for suffering” and he prefers “life before his notions of God had gone out the window” (40, 42). Israel believes in the “sovereignty of beauty” to protect from the evil of the world, and like the violent genesis of the mulata figure is erased in Israel and other consumers’ iconic signification of her, Israel clings desperately to the purity of his romantic visions of women (38). Since his internment in a Nazi camp, Israel cannot make sense of God, his body, art, or sex, rendering him nostalgic for the romantic vision of Habana embodied by Rita and “Rosas Puras,” and Israel nurtures his idealization of women by merging their images with religion.

Israel becomes offended if a woman screams “Oh God!” or makes some other religious allusion during sex because he feels “that a Holy rule had been violated, and then, feeling ashamed by the situation, he would abruptly lose his carnal interest” (228). A woman cannot engage in both sexuality and religiosity because Israel feels the former will taint the purity of the other, but for himself there is redemption when the two coincide. When pondering his own engagement in sexual activity that he feels necessarily conflicts with his existence as a devoted Catholic, Israel thanks God that he can “rejoin life with a cleansed soul and walk alongside his mother, on their way to church, knowing well that if the world were to end in that moment, that he and his mother would rise up to join the throngs of the devoted and saintly” (310). Israel is able to have sex and be religious simply because he is a man, and his image of woman, which is based on the standard of purity and piety he believes his mother possesses, must be nothing less than perfect; therefore, a woman, who must remain ideal and pure, must either be whore or virgin, they cannot be both.

Israel’s pure and pious image of his mother stems from his memories of his mother’s face “lowered in the devotion of prayer,” and he wishes to “emulate the devotions of Doña Concepción, who could not pass by the parlor table on which their Bible rested without touching her fingertips to its gilded cover, giving it a kiss and making the sign of the cross” (291, 50). Sex cannot coincide with the identity of Israel’s mother, an idealization in itself because of the fact of Israel’s very existence, but as a woman religiously devoted to God and to Israel, Doña Concepción remains a pure and whole image, unlike the fragmented presentations of all the other women in the text who are necessarily sexual beings. Perhaps Israel never consummates his desire for Rita because she does not possess the purity of his mother, and there are several instances where Israel tries to elevate Rita to the idealized purity of his mother through religion.
Israel claims that his “devotion to his mother” keeps him from a relationship with Rita;” after all, “he was one of those Cubans whose greatest love was for his pious mother[…] she was, after all, his first muse and a widow,” but Israel wants Rita to be as seemingly Virgin-like as his mother (21, 76). Hoping to “win a measure of affection” from Rita, “Israel tries to act “as a religious adviser of sorts, extolling the virtues of God and the good deeds of Christ as a model. He gave her a crucifix as a memento one Navidad and urged her to attend Mass” (97). On another occasion, Israel gives Rita a “rosary whose crucifix bore the bone chip of a saint, said to be Judas, which he found in an antique shop” (173). He even gives Sarah Rubenstein “a black-beaded rosary that he had picked up in one of the shops outside the Cathedral of Notre-Dame,” telling her, “It can’t hurt, can it?” (267).

Israel tries to create for himself the fiction of ideal women based on his mother by bringing religion to the women he idealizes, because the image of the Virgin is the ultimate representation of what is good, holy, and adoring; she is the ultimate guardian of the “sovereignty of beauty.” Since the mother and the mulata both represent a Cuban essence, by fusing the representative beauty of Rita with the Virgin-like adoration of his mother, Israel creates the portal through which to attain a stable illusion of his Cuba remembered. In an interview about how he composes music such as “Rosas Puras,” Israel states, “Manny, this is going to be a song about the trolleys. Or this is music about a girl who sees an apparition of the Virgin. Whatever. That was the case with “Rosas Puras.” I had a melody that came instantly to me, arranged with the assistance of that unseen and underappreciated inspiration which can only come from God” (342). It is appropriate that Israel should end the book and sum up his experience composing “Rosas Puras” with the image of a girl and the apparition of the Virgin, for one cannot help but assign the role to Rita, the beautiful mulata who has a vision of the Virgin, and then perhaps proceeds to emulate her. And it is not an impossibility to consider this because, after all, it is Israel’s composition and he who creates the boundaries for women’s identities.

The virgin/whore dichotomy that Israel sets up for women is a useful lens through which to view all the representations of women in Habana Melody, Mambo Kings, and Fourteen Sisters because it sums up Hijuelos’ representation of women, yet ultimately contradicts itself in the figure of the mulata mother. Women in these three texts are foremost lovers of men, and the ones who are not described in sexual terms are silent, nameless wives who support men. The
mother figures, who are the ultimate lovers and supporters of men, are incorporated into sexuality through their association with the *mulata*, and the *mulata* mother, who is at once idealized, sexual, and pious, cannot be dichotomized by men because it is they who create, use, and need the *mulata* mother figure. Even the *Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre*, the ultimate mother figure, becomes the ultimate *mulata* mother figure because of her identity as a *mulata* and because Israel, Cesar and Nestor, and Emilio invoke her as the paramount vision of adoration and idealization. Although the *mulata* mother’s identity is tinged upon and manipulated by the men who use her body as a vehicle for their own physical and emotional gratification, perhaps she triumphs yet because it is around her that the male characters in the three novels center their lives.
Epilogue

Although born in the United States, Oscar Hijuelos is close enough to what Firmat calls the “one-and-a-half generation” to write from and within both Cuban and American perspectives, writing from “the point of view of a hyphenated but anglophone American;” his writing is a kind of farewell to Cuban culture as a product of a Cuban-American perspective. As works of a culturally hyphenated author, Hijuelos’ novels engage the struggles of cultural transformation and assimilation, but they are none the less involved in a kind of nostalgia for what has been lost. Regardless of the social or historical context of the novel, Hijuelos’ characters participate in a necessary reconstruction of their Cuban pasts in order to reiterate the depth of their loss and come to terms with who they are as Cuban Americans or Cubans from the “glory days” of Cuba before the Revolution. When examining the historical, social, and cultural complexity of Hijuelos’ *mulata* mothers, it becomes evident that although they do not take center stage in his novels, the lives of Israel, Cesar, and Emilio in *A Simple Habana Melody, The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love*, and *The Fourteen Sisters of Emilio Montez O’Brien* center around her figure, and it is through her that each character tries desperately to construct for himself a Cuba remembered.

Hijuelos’ *mulata* mothers are crucial to understanding the historical and cultural implications of his texts, but they are also pertinent to a fuller understanding of the way he represents the female gender as a whole. As a Cuban-American writer, Hijuelos “aims to explain Cuban culture to non-Cubans,” and in doing so his characters look back to a Cuba that for reasons cultural or political has become unreachable, and it is this looking back that is intimately and intricately tied to the female body. As a hyphenated author and “cultural emissary” between Cuba and America, Hijuelos’ work aims to bring what is “Cuban” to the non-Cuban masses, the character representations must be accessible, and so therefore they rely on “the same old stereotypes, which never seem to change. Cuba is the land of sweet sugar and hot rhythms.” If the representations are unintelligible (too Cuban), then the product will not sell to an outside audience, it is too ethnic; on the converse, being highly intelligible (too stereotypical)

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68 In *Life on the Hyphen*, Firmat labels the 1.5 generation as Cubans who “spent their childhood or adolescence abroad but grew into adults in America” (4).
69 Firmat, 136.
70 Firmat, 129.
means using tropes of tropicalization and losing the validity of a true representation—both avenues necessitate a gross manipulation of the product, and a misrepresentation of women.

In her chapter in the book *Tropicalizations*, Silvia Spitta suggests that the “I/eye” of the Cuban-American is split. She claims that “identity, which was defined hand in hand with a sense of belonging [neither here (America) nor there (Cuba), a sense of place, and a tie to the land that ‘I’ cultivate, can no longer be assumed.”71 Since Hijuelos casts the figure of the *mulata* mother as a metaphorical and sometimes literal landscape of Cuba, she, then, becomes the land that the “I” cultivates, causing the duality of being that the Cuban-American experiences occurs ten-fold for the *mulata* mother. As the medium of identity with Cuba for Cuban and Cuban-American men in Hijuelos’ novels, the *mulata* mother thus in a way becomes identity-less herself. Even though Hijuelos is guilty of stereotypical gendering and at times engaging the terms of tropicalization that Rita finds disturbing, to dismiss him as a sexist or masculine centered writer would be an injustice. He has escaped the kinds of representations of women criticized and outlined here before with his novel *Empress of the Splendid Season*, and there are many moments in these three novels, although few and brief, where Hijuelos hints at a challenge to the kind of representations that he engages. In order to make an informed critical assertion about Hijuelos’ novels, the complexities and contradictions of his gender representations must be included in broader discussions of gender and hybrid identities so that Hijuelos’ unique contribution to the field can be understood and considered. The distinctive *mulata* mother figure that Hijuelos creates forces the critic of his work to consider his relationship and his characters’ relationships to both Cuba and America in order to understand their positions in both cultures and literary histories, forging a bridge between the two seemingly exclusive literatures realms and creating a new perspective from the space of the Cuban-American.

71 Silvia Spitta, “Transculturation, the Caribbean, and the Cuban-American Imaginary,” from *Tropicalizations*, 172.