Remembering Ybor City: The Life and Work of Jose Yglesias

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Jose Yglesias left Ybor City in 1937, but Ybor City never left him. Several years before he died in 1995, he explained that “in all my work as a writer I . . . tried to make American readers aware of Ybor City and its Latin cigarmakers.”¹ His memories of growing up in Tampa’s Latin community provided Yglesias with the material for numerous books, articles, essays, short stories, and plays. Although he never returned to live in Tampa, he kept track of local
developments through correspondence with relatives and frequent visits. Thus, time did not stand still in 1937, and he recorded life in Ybor City not only during its heyday in the 1920s and 1930s, but also in the postwar period when it steadily declined and its Latin residents dispersed after the collapse of the cigar industry and the devastation wrought by urban renewal. Even as the remarkable community he had known disappeared, Yglesias put it on the map, documenting its lively past and bringing its rich ethnic heritage to the attention of a national audience. Just as the novels of James T. Ferrell and Henry Roth preserved an insider’s view of early twentieth-century Chicago and New York, so too the writing of Jose Yglesias captured the drama of Tampa’s Latin community.

Sadly, Yglesias’s achievement has gone largely unnoticed in his hometown. No self-promoter, he expected his writing to speak for itself. However, the audience for his novels, as well as nonfiction that appeared in places like the *Nation*, the *New Yorker*, and the *New York Times Magazine*, was more likely to be in New York, his adopted home, rather than in Tampa. Nevertheless, his literary output and the recognition it received warrant calling him the best writer produced by Tampa. His local significance is all the more noteworthy because Tampa and its Latin community formed his primary subject. Even his two books about Spain and two others about Latin America have links to Ybor City, which provided Yglesias with the inspiration and knowledge to report the lives of Spanish-speaking people wherever he found them.

His international concerns were motivated by family and politics – the two touchstones in his life and work. In one of his novels, Yglesias has a member of an extended Ybor City family say pointedly, “The ties of family are the strongest there are, aren’t they?” Family meant dozens of Latin relatives in Ybor City and West Tampa, all of whom traced their roots back to Cuba and Spain. He first traveled to Cuba as a small boy to see his ailing father, who had sought medical treatment in Havana. In the 1960s Yglesias went to Spain in search of the place where his father had died.

In addition to his strong sense of family, Jose Yglesias had a passion for politics, which he inherited from his parents, both of whom were Ybor City cigarmakers. “My background was very class-conscious radical,” he told an interviewer in 1990. “You know how people say ‘I vote Republican because my parents did’? I’m a socialist because my parents were socialist.” When asked about his politics, he once cavalierly responded, “Should like to overthrow capitalism.” On another occasion, he reflected privately: “I don’t think I’ve ever called myself a marxist; at first because I didn’t think I was smart enough to be one; later because it seemed meaningless.” He added, “In fiction you’re no good if you don’t know life is complicated . . . . I enjoy my Cuban friend Miguel Barnet when he tells me, ‘No, no, no, I don’t need to be a marxist!’ Whereas being anticapitalist and pro-socialist is something tangible and that I’ll always say I am. What was good enough for my folks is good enough for me.”

Although he never concealed his left-wing sympathies, Yglesias was no propagandist. Independently minded, he loathed phoniness. In one of his last novels, he complained: “We drown in the half-baked, imprecise, lying words of the mediocre and the hustlers.”

Yglesias valued honesty and frankness more than any political line. These qualities explain why he provided a platform even for people with whom he disagreed politically. In his novels
and extended interviews that became books, he recorded the words of people across the political spectrum, and they all ring true to their sources. As a result, “Mr. Yglesias himself comes across as a nice guy,” one book reviewer observed. “We like him, as much for what he restrains himself from saying – his personal views on property, on rhetoric, on heroism – as for his enthusiasm for the people he meets. He is a kind skeptic.”

In a similar vein, another reviewer commented that he “interprets his subjects’ emotions with eloquent objectivity.” Yglesias himself declared: “[I] should like in my work to bring into clear view the moral views and approach to experience of workers, something which seems to me missing from most fiction.”

As with his family and politics, this concern with workers' views and experience had its roots in Ybor City, “a Latin island in the South,” as he often referred to it. Yglesias arrived there in 1921 at the age of two when his family moved from West Tampa, Tampa’s other Latin community, where he was born on November 29, 1919, the second child (his sister Dalia was born in 1914) of Georgia and José Yglesias. His mother and sister were also native Tampans, and his father was from Galicia, the northern province of Spain that sent so many emigrants abroad that it became known as “the goodbye land.” In the late nineteenth century, thousands of Gallegos (natives of Galicia) and Asturianos from the neighboring Spanish province of Asturias found their way to Cuba and the United States, both of which offered jobs in the booming cigar industry. One of these was the Gallego José Yglesias who at the age of thirteen left his village in
about 1902, traveled to Havana, learned the craft of cigarmaking, and eventually made his way to Tampa, where he met and married Georgia Milián in 1913.  

The elder Yglesias worked as a cigarmaker along with some 8,000 Cubans, Spaniards, and Italians in Tampa. They produced expensive, hand-rolled cigars that rivaled those from Cuba. They also possessed a work culture and union traditions that placed them among the most radical workers in America. They fought owners over control of the factories on issues that ranged from wages to the quality of tobacco and the amount of supervision that factory foremen were allowed to exercise. These disputes led to long strikes that closed down Tampa’s factories in 1901 and 1910 and for ten months in 1920.  

José Yglesias, the father, had a reputation as a good worker (“un buen obrero”) and a strong union man. Thus, when he suffered a creeping paralysis that prevented him from working soon after his son’s birth, fellow workers contributed funds for him to seek treatment in Havana. The severity of his illness kept him from returning to Tampa, so his wife and two young children traveled to Cuba to visit him in 1925. There they stayed with relatives for several months while Georgia regularly visited her husband in a Havana hospital. With the senior Yglesias unable to accompany his family back to the U.S., Georgia and the children returned to Tampa, never to see their husband and father again. In search of a cure, he went back to Galicia, where he died in 1940.  

Dalia, the sister of Jose Yglesias, with their father José. in about 1916.  

Rafael Milián, maternal grandfather of Jose Yglesias, lived with the family until his death in the 1940s.
1931. The story of this family tragedy is told in the book, *The Goodbye Land*, which Jose Yglesias wrote in the 1960s.  

As a twenty-eight-year-old, single parent with two small children, Georgia worked as a cigarmaker in Ybor City. At least as important as her job, she had a support network of family—“A family as protective and serene as a giant oak,” according to her son. Her father, Rafael Milián, was a widowed cigarmaker who lived with the family and contributed financially and emotionally to their well-being. Nearby lived various aunts (Georgia had four older sisters, including one with twelve children!), uncles, and dozens of cousins. All shared an ethnic and working-class culture based on mutual aid fostered by the local Latin population of over 30,000 immigrants and their descendants. Ybor City’s Centro Español, for instance, gave Georgia Yglesias fifteen dollars a month as a benefit for her ailing husband, a long-time club member.

As a product of this extraordinary Spanish-speaking enclave, Jose Yglesias always remembered its diversity and solidarity. “The workers who settled the swampy area that Tampa officials turned over to the cigar manufacturers [in the 1880s] were not only Cuban,” Yglesias noted in 1977. “They were also Spanish and Sicilian. A typical Ybor City Tampan of my generation has, like me, a mother of Cuban parentage and a father from Galicia, uncles from Asturias and Cuba, at least one cousin or sister or brother married to a Sicilian. In Ybor City there is a Círculo Cubano and a Centro Español and a Centro Asturiano and Sociedad Italiana. They were wonderfully active cultural centers, for those cigarmakers knew how to organize more
than trade unions, and two of them built hospitals for their members, the best in Tampa at the
time.” Moreover, Yglesias emphasized, “These social clubs all had libraries, auditoriums, gyms,
dance halls, and canteens where the men gathered in the evening. At the Centro Asturiano we
saw zarzuelas performed by local amateurs. . . . I remember as a boy going to a free art class
summer evenings at the Círculo Cubano.” Most importantly, Yglesias emphasized, “All the clubs
were organized and run by the cigarmakers. All their officers and committees were
democratically elected, and no one was paid for his troubles.”

The young Jose Yglesias (nicknamed “Pepito” by his family and called “Pini” by his mother)
was clearly precocious. Although he did not speak English until he went to V.M. Ybor Grammar
School, he quickly mastered the language and became a voracious reader. From his earliest years
as a public school student, he devoured whatever literature he could obtain. His mother even
took to hiding his books because he stayed inside to read rather than going out to play in the
fresh air. His health prompted concern because at the age of five he had been confined to bed for
several months due to a persistent low-grade fever, apparently caused by a malarial disease.
Overcoming this illness, he grew up to become a physically imposing figure, reaching a height of
six feet, four inches.

His intellectual prowess won him recognition in the Anglo-American community, where he
was determined to compete successfully. “When an American got mad at any Latin, he called
him a ‘Cuban nigger,’” Yglesias later recalled. “This was one of the first feelings I remember: I
want to be an American. You become ashamed of your community.” Reflecting his decidedly
mixed feelings as a bilingual teenager caught between two cultures, he wrote in 1946: “I wanted
to be Spanish, but I didn't want to be Ybor Cityish. And so I always felt held in.”

His academic achievements brought him many honors, including an American Legion award
for leadership, service, and scholarship. In both junior and senior high school he was selected to
speak at graduation ceremonies. At Hillsborough High School, he was one of the most active
students, serving as a member of the student council and as managing editor of the school
newspaper, The Red and Black. Editors of the high school’s yearbook dubbed him “brightest” in
his class and added that “Jose has the ability to excel and the will to persevere.”

His closest friends were American students involved in similar activities, especially the newspaper.
“I was sixteen and no longer hung around my family,” he later wrote, “because I was in high school and
had a lot of American friends.” He noted that he “was stubbornly intent on being American.”
He certainly had no time for sports. Instead he dreamed of a different escape from Tampa. “The
future would be, I told myself when I thought of it, what it indeed became. I would live in New
York, travel on assignment for magazines and newspapers, see my name in print and my books
reviewed. I'd never hide my background, of course, from the friends I’d make, the intellectual
leaders of my generation; no, it would give me a certain glamour, though I would make certain
that my accent would be intransigently American.”

In addition to dreaming and attending school, Yglesias helped support his family by delivering
groceries for an Ybor City cooperative. This experience brought him into contact with an older
Latin worker who helped initiate the teenager into the adult world. He taught Yglesias to drive
the delivery truck, a truck that figured prominently in Yglesias’s life (and later in his short stories
and novels), because it provided much-needed transportation for family emergencies like getting a sick relative to the hospital.25

His desire to become an American did not stop Yglesias from continuing to absorb the Latin culture that infused Ybor City. As a twelve-year-old, he observed the 1931 readers’ strike, in which cigarworkers walked off the job to protest the removal of the reader (el lector), who had long been hired by the workers to read to them while they silently rolled cigars. Factory owners accused the readers of selecting radical texts, a specious charge considering that cigarmakers themselves chose the reading material through a democratic process. “The strike left a psychological scar on me,” Yglesias told an interviewer years later. “I was in junior high school and a member of the student patrol. I wore an arm band. During the strike, workers marched into the schools to close them down, bring the children out. The principal closed the gates, and had the student patrols guard them. If they come, what do I do? My mother was in the strike.”26 Yglesias ultimately overcame these conflicting loyalties, and forty years later he wrote an autobiographical novel, The Truth About Them, that featured the defeat of the readers’ strike as a central event.

If the readers’ strike aroused ambiguous feelings in the twelve-year-old, the Spanish Civil War represented a political coming of age for the teenager. When the military, under the leadership of General Francisco Franco, launched the three-year civil war to overthrow the constitutional government that included Communists and Socialists, radicals around the world rallied to the cause of the Spanish Republic in 1936, and Ybor City residents were in the forefront of that movement, collecting funds and staging marches. As Yglesias recalled, “The cigarmakers in my

Jose Yglesias (upper right-hand corner) with high school friends.
Jose Yglesias in about 1930.
hometown – whether Spanish or Cuban – organized themselves into a solid block of support for the Spanish Republic because its enemies – the aristocracy, the Church, the military – were also the forces that had ordinarily led the Spanish to emigrate and the Cubans to fight for independence.”

He always carried with him the memory of learning “No Pasarán,” the song sung by Spanish Republicans and their supporters in places like Ybor City and New York City.

Pursuing his dream of becoming a writer, Yglesias left Tampa for New York within a few days of his graduation from high school in 1937. (“In America all writers leave their hometowns,” he once observed.) New York had become a Mecca for Tampa Latins, including his sister Dalia, who sought refuge and opportunity there in the midst of the depression which had hit the sale of cigars – a luxury product – especially hard. Once the first Tampa migrants found jobs in New York City, word spread to Ybor City and other Latins followed. They clustered in apartments on Manhattan’s West Side. Yglesias initially lived on West 100th Street with his sister, and then they moved to a large apartment on 163rd Street in Washington Heights, where they were joined by their mother and other relatives.

“Almost all my family were in New York by 1937,” Yglesias recalled. “There, we all stayed together. The only place people didn’t sleep in was the kitchen. A bed was even in the foyer.” At times, as many as twelve people lived in the crowded apartment, and they earned money at a variety of jobs. Dalia Yglesias worked in a W.T. Grant’s five-and-dime store, and she got involved in helping organize fellow employees, who went on strike for higher pay.

Jose found a job as a dishwasher in a cafeteria, and the experience tested his sense of ethnicity. “In one of those ratty employment agencies where you could buy a dishwasher’s job for $5,” he later wrote, “they were willing to send me down to a cafeteria on 14th Street but only . . . if I called myself something American. ‘Moran,’ I replied, thinking of a surname that was both Irish and Spanish; but by the time I reached the cafeteria on 14th Street I was so appalled by my self-betrayal that the first thing I blurted out was that Moran was not my real name and that I had taken it because the agency had thought it wise. ‘I don’t care what you are,’ the man who hired me said, but I suspected he did.” Reflecting on the incident, Yglesias noted, “I like to think it was Ybor City that inoculated me against ‘passing,’ that at 17 I was sufficiently appreciative of the unique community where I was reared not to deny it by changing my name.”

Despite taking pride in his name – and the culture it reflected – Yglesias Americanized his first name by always omitting the accent mark on “Jose.” He considered himself an American of Latin descent, which meant that he wrote in English for an American audience, but his subject matter was definitely and defiantly Latin. Emphasizing that “assimilation does not mean abandoning our past, but enriching an already very rich mix,” he once summarized his credo as follows: “To me, assimilation has meant that in all my work as a writer I had tried to make American readers aware of the existence of Ybor City and its Latin cigarmakers.” In another reflection on the question of assimilation, he observed: “If to be American is to be some sort of homogenized descendant of Great Britain and northern Europe, you can’t qualify with the background I’ve got without turning into some kind of ghost. And you can only question the homogenization if you have a useable past.”

Ybor City provided that past, and it served Yglesias well. His 1937 entree into the world of New York politics had a decidedly Latin connection. “The first time my Cuban grandfather and I
went to a Madison Square Garden meeting for the Spanish Republic, I thought the top of my head would come off – to see that enormous gathering come to its feet. . . . Incredible! With New York accents, the audience of americanos chanted, “No pasarán!”

Despite such reminders of life in Ybor City, Yglesias claimed that New York opened up a new world for him. “I left Tampa, Fla., for New York City, too late by a few months for Nazimova in ‘Hedda Gabler,’ but in time for Helen Hayes in ‘Victoria Regina,’ whose posters I could see as my bus maneuvered into the station. . . . In those pre-air-conditioning days, some seven plays made it through the summer (the theater was always in trouble), and I saw them all for 55 cents a balcony seat.” Walking around Times Square, Yglesias “never gave a thought to Tampa and its special Latin enclave, Ybor City; I had put them behind me.” Or so he thought at the time.

The next four years, prior to U. S entry into World War II, he spent working long hours, soaking up New York culture, and socializing with relatives and friends. Family snapshots from those years show a debonair and seemingly carefree young man, posing with his elegant-looking sister Dalia. As the economy steadily improved, so too did his employment opportunities. On the eve of war, he worked on an assembly line at an Emerson radio factory, where he joined the United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America, a CIO union led by Communists and Socialists. Yglesias’s memories of these years are reflected in the words of a supposedly fictional artist from Ybor City who says in the novel, A Wake In Ybor City: “I went to New York when I was seventeen. I got a job and met a lot of artistic and political young people, and so I got excited about ideas and girls, although I spent most of my time just working to make a living. That went on until the war.”
Jose and Dalia Yglesias in New York in the late 1930s.
In 1942, Yglesias enlisted in the Navy. For him, this was a political act. “The draft board had classified me 3A because I was my mother’s support,” he wrote in a fictionalized account, “but I volunteered anyway because I believed in the war, in the popular front against fascism, in the New Deal, in socialism and the brotherhood of man. . . .” Enlisting in New York City, he served over three years, primarily in the Mediterranean in support of Allied landings in Italy and France. He became a naval aviation radioman-gunner. Stationed aboard an old cruiser, he flew with a pilot as part of a two-man crew in an old Navy biplane that was catapulted off the cruiser in order to seek out targets for the ship’s heavy guns. For his wartime service, he was awarded the Navy Citation of Merit. He subsequently wrote a long, autobiographical short story, entitled *One German Dead* and published as a limited edition book in 1988, relating the exploits of an aviation radioman-gunner who volunteered in 1944 for a commando raid on the southern coast of France.

With the end of the war in 1945, Yglesias – like millions of other servicemen – returned to an uncertain life as a civilian. Veterans’ benefits gave him access to his only formal education after graduation from high school. As he once pointed out, “There was a time in our country when the children of workers did not go to college.” The GI Bill of Rights provided him with that opportunity. In 1945, two months out of the military, he went to Black Mountain College, a radical experiment in North Carolina that qualified as a college in name only. Established in 1933 by a small group of iconoclastic professors committed to a communal approach to education, Black Mountain featured a nonstructured learning environment with no required courses, no formal grades, and few examinations. Encouraged to develop individual programs of study and then present themselves for exams when they felt ready, most students never formally progressed far enough to graduate, but Black Mountain gained a reputation for nurturing artists. Over the years it attracted a number of very talented people, such as Josef Albers, John Cage, Buckminster Fuller, and Willem de Kooning, who were, or became, luminaries in their fields.

For Jose Yglesias, a budding writer, Black Mountain College represented “a haven where I could, at the government’s expense, spend my time reading and writing. At long last.” In 1945, Black Mountain had some twenty-five faculty and over seventy students, and all shared in running the college. “Ah,” Yglesias recalled, “the pleasure of jumping up and down in a silo to pack down the feed for the cattle on the college’s ranch. Repairing a manhole in the sewage system was less pleasurable, but there was a certain exhilaration in doing this task, noses to the wind, with your political science professor. Whom you addressed by his first name, of course.” In some ways, Black Mountain proved a liberating experience for Yglesias. “Until then, if I was asked what I did, I answered busboy or stock boy or aviation radioman-gunner. Now, following an embarrassed exchange during the first week with another student, I learned I could reply, ‘Writer.’ The wish became a fact and that was wonderfully self-liberating.”

However, disenchantment soon set in. Discussions in the community (“one soon stopped using the world college”) turned ugly when Yglesias suggested that more black students be admitted. “This and less overtly political issues – such as the kind of building additions proposed – became a matter for taking sides, subjects of furious discussion in a community where discussion was all, and I could begin to see that the apoliticals in command of the college were indeed political.” Feeling “irritated and bored” by the end of the first year, he “left as from a burning building.”
He did not leave empty-handed. While at Black Mountain, he had written a short story, “Un Buen Obrero,” that became his first publication. Appearing in *New Masses* in November 1946, the autobiographical tale is set in Ybor City and tells about a Latin teenager who learns about his long-dead father while delivering groceries with an older man, known as El Isleño (“the Islander”) because he came from the Canary Islands. “El Isleño made me feel proud of my father,” the story’s narrator says, “and for the first time I was able to see him as a man, not as a wound or a pitiful thing I carried in me.”\(^{45}\) (See page 46.)

Following the year at Black Mountain, Yglesias returned to New York. During his four-year absence, most of his family, including his mother and sister, had returned to Ybor City to work again in the cigar factories that underwent a temporary revival. In 1948, Dalia Yglesias married Jose Corro, an Ybor City resident from Asturias, and her mother lived with them in Ybor City until her death in 1979.\(^{46}\)

The postwar years in New York could not have been easy for Yglesias. In one of his novels, he has a character resembling himself say, “I lived in a furnished, windowless, tiny room in the badlands west of Central Park and sat under the skylight and wrote miserable stories. I did not know who I was and I had not found a girl that year to tell me.” He survived on veterans’ payments.\(^{47}\)
In 1948, he managed to combine his interests in writing and left-wing politics, taking over as film critic for the Daily Worker. In a two-year period, he wrote hundreds of reviews that were filled with sharp criticism, interesting insights, and biting humor. Reviewing an Italian movie, entitled The Spirit and the Flesh, he warned, “don’t let the title fool you....the movie is quite a bore.” Set in the seventeenth century, the black-and-white film was “chock full of reactionary nonsense,” and he concluded, “When it comes to historical nonsense, we’ll take Hollywood. They have technicolor.” However, in another column, he condemned “the bankruptcy of the Hollywood mind in pursuit of Art.” Too often, it produced “pretentious, boring hokum, poison to the American people who need to get a straight, unflinching look at the world.”

Despite what some readers of the Communist newspaper may have thought, the Russians also turned out some clinkers, according to Yglesias. In one of his first reviews, he attacked Admiral Nakhimov, a Soviet epic about the Crimean War, which he dismissed as “a ponderous, lifeless and meaningless film” and “on the whole for Americans [a] pointless story.” This critique created some controversy. One reader complained that the review was “shocking” and that Yglesias “failed to realize the political significance of this film in relation to contemporary history.” Other readers praised Yglesias, including one who wrote, “We are enjoying his well-balanced, keen and well-written reviews, and feel we can trust his judgment.”

He remained on the staff of the Daily Worker until 1950, during a time when Cold War hysteria claimed its first victims. Anyone associated with the left was suspect and subject to blacklisting in employment. Yglesias later wore his refusal to be silenced as a badge of honor, even though he undoubtedly paid a price for it. He had, for instance, nothing published between 1950 and 1962. In his novel A Wake in Ybor City, which is set in 1958, a character resembling Yglesias confesses to his wife: “The Red scare has frightened me. They have cut off my balls.”

During the 1950s, new responsibilities preoccupied him. In 1950, he married Helen Bassine, a writer who had two children, Tamar and Lewis Cole, from a previous marriage. The family of four increased to five in 1954 with the birth of a son, Rafael. To support his family, Yglesias went to work for the pharmaceutical firm of Merck, Sharp & Dohme International. Beginning in 1953 with an entry-level job doing translations, he moved up to an executive position, as assistant to the vice president. Taking an enormous risk, he left Merck in 1963 to devote himself full-time to his dream of writing.

His first success came in 1962 with the publication of two recent books by Spanish writers that he translated into English – Island of Women by Juan Goytisolo and Villa Milo by Xavier Domingo.

Yglesias’s big breakthrough came in 1963, when his first novel appeared. Issued by Holt, Rinehart and Winston, a leading New York publisher, A Wake in Ybor City was clearly based on his life. The character resembling the author is Roberto Moran (the surname Yglesias had used briefly when he arrived in New York in 1937). The novel focuses on the Ybor City family of Roberto, a Tampa-born artist who went to New York in 1937 and returns in 1958 with his wife and children to spend the summer with relatives in Ybor City. Disillusioned with left-wing politics (“in New York radicals never do much more than sign petitions and distribute leaflets”) and frustrated by his own lack of artistic success (“I’m afraid the truth is that I’m just not talented”), Roberto finds himself renewed by Ybor City relatives, who have managed to preserve
their culture and working-class politics in spite of adversity and some defections, such as the cousin Elena who cries out, “The difference between you – all of you! – and me is that you love this mudhole, whereas I hate it!” On the eve of Castro’s victory, she refers to Cuban revolutionaries as “fools.” “You are wrong,” Roberto responds. “Those young rebels may be fools, but they are in the right, like the cigar makers were fools to go on strikes that they never won.” Roberto himself acts on his beliefs by agreeing to drive a truck from Tampa to Sarasota, knowing that it is loaded with guns destined for Cuban rebels. This act makes him feel he “can go back to New York feeling as young as when I first left Tampa.”

The year after publication of his first novel, Yglesias embarked on a pilgrimage to Spain, where he spent a year with his wife Helen and eleven-year-old son Rafael. He went in search of information about his father, carrying with him a copy of his father’s baptismal records and the last letter his Galician grandmother had written in 1933, two years after her son’s death. Family papers indicated that the father was a native of a village in Galicia that Jose Yglesias referred to as “Miamán” in his writing. Although certain that he had no more relatives in Galicia because his grandmother had never mentioned any, Yglesias was on a family mission: “I promised my mother and sister to go to Galicia, look up Miamán, find Father’s grave, and talk to people in the aldea who might remember Father or the old woman [his grandmother]; I had a camera and I planned to take pictures to send back to them in Tampa and thus lay to rest this ghost which haunted all three of us.”

Yglesias located his father’s village and, to his surprise, encountered cousins he didn’t know existed. He wrote about the search and his year in Spain in a book entitled *The Goodbye Land* that was serialized in the *New Yorker* and published by Pantheon in 1967 (see page 29 for an excerpt).

By the time *The Goodbye Land* appeared, Yglesias was deeply engaged in a project that took him to another part of the Spanish-speaking world where he also had roots. This time it was Cuba, and he spent three months in early 1967 living in a small village in the eastern province of Oriente. His purpose was to conduct research for a book that was to be part of a “village” series financed by Pantheon, which had already published works by Jan Myrdal on China and Studs Terkel on Chicago. Going alone, with “no tape recorder and no sociological disciplines,” Yglesias interviewed ordinary people about their lives in socialist Cuba. The result was his
second nonfiction book, which appeared in 1968. Entitled *In the Fist of the Revolution: Life in a Cuban Country Town*, the book was hailed as “a thoroughly charming, affectionate, but nonetheless critical account of day-to-day country life in Cuba.” Another reviewer said it “reads like a very good, very low-keyed novel.” This may explain why it found a wide audience in this country and was translated into a number of languages, including French, German, Dutch, Spanish, Italian, Swedish, and Japanese.

Yglesias moved back and forth between writing fiction and nonfiction. Indeed, only a fine line separates the two in much of his work. His novels read like history and his books of nonfiction read like novels. The success of *The Goodbye Land* and *In the Fist of the Revolution* led to requests by leading newspapers and magazines for journalistic pieces, but he also continued to write fiction. “I write to have my say,” he once confessed. “There are feelings and ideas that conversations and speeches and articles and reviews will not accommodate; these are the things that fiction, always so undiscriminating, finds room for. I thank God for the novel form.”

In 1968, he published his second novel, *An Orderly Life*. Relating the story of Rafael Sabas, the son of a Tampa cigarmaker, who moves to New York in the late 1930s, joins the Navy, and goes on to a career as a business executive, the novel contains some obvious autobiographical details, but it seems also designed to be a pot-boiler since it emphasizes Rafael’s use of sex to advance himself. This probably explains why it brought Yglesias more money than any of his more overtly political novels.
During the late 1960s and early 1970s, Yglesias wrote regularly for several magazines and the New York Times. In addition to frequently reviewing books for the Nation and the New York Review of Books, he went on assignment as a journalist to cover a variety of subjects, ranging from Martin Luther King, Jr., whom he interviewed shortly before his death, to the Chinese ping-gong players who toured the U.S. in 1972. However, Latin America remained a special interest, and in 1969 the New York Times Magazine sent him there to chronicle developments in four countries – Cuba, Brazil, Peru, and Chile. The resulting articles were later published as a book, Down There, which opens with an insightful introduction that describes his feelings about Latin America and its relation to Ybor City.

Having published books about Spain and Latin America after writing A Wake in Ybor City, Yglesias returned to Tampa for the subject of his third novel, The Truth About Them, parts of which first appeared in the New Yorker in 1971. Perhaps his most revealing work and arguably his best novel, The Truth About Them depicts three generations of an Ybor City family, and it also provides an anecdotal history of Tampa’s Latin community. Indeed, the book apparently began as a work of nonfiction, but once again, Yglesias found he could relate the truth better in a novel.

Yglesias wrote two more novels in the 1970s before returning briefly to nonfiction. Both Double, Double (1974) and The Kill Price (1976) focus on characters that have no direct connection to Ybor City, although The Kill Price features a Chicano from El Paso who wrestles with conflicts between his Latin heritage and dominant American values, a theme that resonates throughout Yglesias’s work.65

In 1975 and 1976, Yglesias returned to Spain to conduct interviews about life under long-time dictator Francisco Franco. In an eerie turn of events, Franco died while Yglesias was there, giving the author an opportunity to observe Spain during a period of transition. The resulting book, The Franco Years, was hailed by one reviewer as “a powerful work about survivors who found strength in their oppression.”66

After the appearance of The Franco Years in 1977, Yglesias did not publish another book for a decade. This silence was not for want of effort. He continued to write but had no success finding a publisher until Arbor House accepted Home Again in 1987. This novel – his sixth – follows a retired novelist back to Ybor City after fifty years of working in New York. Wanting nothing
more than to be left alone, he is drawn into the intrigues of his Latin relatives. What results is some bizarre, often comical adventures that give the novelist-narrator an opportunity to reflect on his life, his work, and his community. At one point he observes with a touch of bitterness that Tampa “made me forget who I was. In this town I am only somebody’s cousin. . . . But what the hell, everybody forgot who I was anyway.”

Two years later, another Ybor City-based novel appeared, entitled *Tristan and the Hispanics* (1989). In this revealing book Yglesias deals with his own mortality and his legacy – both literary and familial. He does this by imagining reactions to the death of a famous Latin writer from Ybor City. The main character is the fictional writer’s grandson, Tristan, a Yale College student who travels to Tampa to settle the estate and arrange for burial. In Ybor City he meets Latin relatives who try to outwit each other and Tristan in a series of hilarious and moving encounters. Gradually, Tristan discovers more about his relatives and, above all, his grandfather. In a document written shortly before his death in Tampa and left to be discovered by Tristan, the aging (fictional!) novelist exclaimed: “I believe literature is the grand repository of our best feelings and ideas, I believe the working class will yet liberate us all, I live in hope and die here and mix my bones with theirs. Human goodness supervenes.”

During the 1980s, Yglesias turned to playwriting as another means of dramatizing his Ybor City. He felt that “the theater’s immediacy, its unmediated confrontation with the audience’s sensibilities, is the best vehicle for those Latins from Ybor City.” By 1989, he had completed a trilogy of plays that trace three generations of an Ybor City family called Milián (the maiden name of his mother). The first play is set in 1912, the second in 1920, and the third in the present. The plays await full productions, but they received staged readings (with no costumes or sets) at Miami’s Coconut Grove Playhouse in 1989. Each of the three separate readings was followed by a panel discussion that included Yglesias and several professors who had written about Ybor City and Cuban Americans. “What an extraordinary issue,” Yglesias reflected afterwards. “Ybor City was not only not forgotten but was the subject of sympathetic and scientific research from the men beside me.” He wondered what his grandfather Rafael Milián, an Ybor City cigarmaker, would have said. “He might well have cautioned wariness at first,” Yglesias suggested, “for he had known many defeats, but he would have been pleased, and might finally have felt redeemed.”

Yglesias himself undoubtedly felt redeemed. As Ybor City became a subject of scholarly concern, his own work received more recognition, even in Tampa, where it had been ignored for so long. Significantly, the attention came from newcomers to the city – professors at the University of South Florida (USF), who began studying Ybor City and discovered Yglesias’s novels. This helped lead to the university’s awarding him an honorary doctorate of humane letters in 1989. Although long overdue, this recognition of his achievement certainly pleased him.

His first contacts with the University of South Florida actually dated back to 1963. Three years after the first students entered the university, Yglesias visited the fledgling institution following the publication of *A Wake in Ybor City*. He met with students and faculty, answered questions in a “Meet the Author” program, and signed copies of his novel. When asked how he could write about a town he had left over twenty-five years earlier, he responded that he kept in touch
through wonderful letters from his mother and frequent visits to Ybor City. “Thomas Wolfe is wrong,” he said. “You can go home again.”

Subsequently, he incorporated references to USF into his novels. In The Truth About Them, the narrator notes in passing that the children of a cousin were students at USF and his sister attended peace rallies there. In the novel Tristan and the Hispanics, a USF professor praises a deceased Latin writer resembling Yglesias himself.

In 1992, Yglesias publicly paid tribute to scholars at the university. In a lecture delivered at a conference on José Martí, sponsored by USF and held in Ybor City, Yglesias speculated about where Martí might have gotten the idea for his central metaphor of pinos nuevos (“new pines”) to describe the generation of rebels fighting for Cuban independence from Spain in the 1890s. “The image of seedling pines growing among the fallen ones in the acid soil they prefer is much more typical of Florida than of Cuba. Did he look out the window of his train and see such a sight before he got to Union Station?” asked Yglesias, referring to Martí’s first trip to Tampa to rally Ybor City cigarworkers in 1891. “Perhaps in North Tampa where the University of South Florida now stands, a university that has done the most to give him and Ybor City back to us.”
Yglesias’s association with USF grew closer in the 1990s. He worked with a class of creative-writing students in the Department of English and delivered occasional lectures at the university. Under the direction of Professor Denis Calandra, the Theater Department staged a reading of his play “Chattahootchee” at the Ritz Theater in Ybor City, and in 1993 he scripted Studs Terkel’s book *Race* for a stage play produced by the Theater Department. Yglesias clearly enjoyed this interaction with students and faculty; it not only provided him a measure of recognition, but it also brought him home again.

His last visit was in 1994. Already suffering from cancer, a fact he concealed (even from his sister), he spent a week at Clearwater Beach, which he had first visited with his family in the 1920s. Returning to New York, he continued to write and plan future projects, all the while undergoing treatment for his terminal illness. He finally succumbed on November 7, 1995, the anniversary of the Russian Revolution and a date that had once energized Ybor City cigarworkers. His passing brought notices in the *New York Times* and *Time* magazine, as well as the local press in Tampa. However, as columnist Steve Otto pointed out in the *Tampa Tribune*, “Most of us in Tampa really didn’t know Yglesias. He was better known in New York and around the world than in his hometown.” Speculating on the reason for that, Otto suggested, “Maybe it was the biting bluntness of Yglesias that kept him from being beloved in his own hometown.”
Never forgetting his native soil, Yglesias left explicit instructions that he be buried in a plain pine box at Tampa’s Centro Asturiano Cemetery, where his mother is interred. He also willed that there be no funeral and that only a friend (a USF professor) speak at the cemetery (see page 102).

Yglesias left a literary legacy that is not yet complete. A new novel, entitled *Break-In* and published by Arte Publico at the University of Houston, appears this year, as will a new collection of his short stories, under the title *Guns in the Closet*. Set in north Tampa, *Break-In* tells the story of an aging Latin who strikes up an unusual friendship with a black teenager. Their relationship reflects the kind of hope that Yglesias always clung to.

Jose Yglesias achieved what he set out to do – become a writer and preserve his memories of Ybor City so that Tampa’s Latin community would not be forgotten, even though it died out. His work remains a permanent testament to his success, and he lived to see recognition of his accomplishment, even in his hometown. As *Tampa Magazine* succinctly declared in 1981, “Jose Yglesias is the best fiction writer Tampa has produced, if not the best writer, period.”

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5 Yglesias to José Marcelo Garza, April 27, 1984, in José M. Garza, “‘Deaths I Have Known’: The Literary Radicalism of Jose Yglesias” (Ph.D. dissertation: University of Iowa, 1986), 341.


7 John Leonard quoted in “Yglesias” entry in *Contemporary Authors*, 793.

8 Robert Stephen Spitz, review of *The Franco Years*, *Saturday Review* (November 12, 1977), 28

9 “Yglesias” entry in *Contemporary Authors*, 793.

10 Interview with Dalia Corro, February 7, 1996.


15 Interview with Dalia Corro.


Interview with Dalia Corro; Yglesias, *The Truth About Them*, 100.


*The Hilsborean* (Tampa: 1937), 56.

A newspaper story lists the names of the staff of the *Red and the Black*, and Yglesias is the only one with a Spanish name. *Tampa Daily Times*, October 2, 1936, p. 22.


Ibid., 171.

See, for example, Yglesias, “Un Buen Obrero.”


Interview with Dalia Corro.

Yglesias quoted by Terkel, *Hard Times*, 111.

Interview with Dalia Corro.


Ibid.

Yglesias, “Playwright Home Again,” 5.

Interview with Dalia Corro.


Ibid.; “Yglesias” entry in *Contemporary Authors*, 793.

Yglesias, “Coming Down from Black Mountain” (a review of *Black Mountain College* by Martin Duberman), *University Review*, December 1972, clipping in possession of Dalia Corro.


44 Ibid., 15-16.


46 Interview with Dalia Corro.


48 Daily Worker, November 2, 1948.

49 Ibid., April 1, 1949.

50 Ibid., November 25, 1948.
51 Ibid., December 2, 1948.

52 Ibid., November 30, 1948.

53 Yglesias, A Wake in Ybor City, 175.

54 “Yglesias” entry in Contemporary Authors, 792-93.


56 Yglesias, A Wake in Ybor City, 83 (second quotation), 143 (first quotation), 275 (third quotation).

57 Ibid., 276.

58 Ibid., 280.


62 Copies of the translations in possession of Dalia Corro.


66 Spitz, review of The Franco Years, 28.


68 Yglesias, Tristan and the Hispanics, 250-51.


71 Tampa Times, August 5, 1963.


73 Yglesias, Tristan and the Hispanics, 116.


77 “Jose Yglesias Is One of Our Own,” Tampa Magazine, 1 (October 1981), 74.