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FROM THE EDITORS

For Tampa’s Latins the path to fame - and occasionally a measure of fortune - has often been through sports. The sons and grandsons of Cuban, Spanish, and Italian immigrants have won a name for themselves in sports, especially baseball as evidenced by Al Lopez, Lou Pinella, and Tony LaRussa. One reason Latins-and others-have pursued this particular road is that Americans place greater value on sports than the arts, and when the latter bring success, it often goes unnoticed. Who in Tampa knows, for example, that Adel Sanchez, the son of a Tampa cigarmaker, is the principal trumpet player for Washington’s National Symphony?

Jose Yglesias, another native son of Tampa cigarworkers, achieved national - and even international - recognition as a writer, yet he is little known in his hometown. His death last November, at the age of seventy-five, provides an occasion to review his life and work, which includes eight novels, four books of nonfiction, four plays, and countless short stories, essays, articles, and reviews. Yglesias's significance for the Tampa area transcends the mere accident of his being born in West Tampa and growing up in Ybor City. More importantly, he drew his inspiration from this background and incorporated it into most of his writing. As he once said, he "tried to make American readers aware of Ybor City and its Latin cigarmakers."

This issue of Tampa Bay History is dedicated to Jose Yglesias and his legacy. The bulk of the pieces reproduced here were written by Yglesias himself over a fifty-year period, and they provide an introduction to his work, revealing the role of family and community, as well as history and memory, in both his fiction and nonfiction. The one short story included is "Un Buen Obrero" and it deserves reprinting in a publication devoted to local history because it captures the essence of Latin experiences in Tampa. All the other articles are nonfiction.

The issue also features five pieces about Yglesias. The opening article by Robert P. Ingalls and the concluding one by José Marcelo Garza examine the nature and significance of Yglesias's contribution. In addition, an article by Alberto Avendaño, translated from the Galician language, gives a Spanish view of this Latin writer of Galician descent. Finally, the issue closes with two eulogies - one delivered at his burial in Tampa and the other (a poem) written by one of Cuba's leading novelists, Pablo Armando Fernández.

The editors wish to acknowledge their debt to Dalia Corro, Jose Yglesias's sister, who generously provided most of the photographs used as illustrations. Only those photographs from other sources have individual credits.

We hope readers enjoy this unusual issue, which memorializes the most important writer yet produced by Tampa.
REMEMBERING YBOR CITY:
THE LIFE AND WORK OF JOSE YGLESIAS
by Robert P. Ingalls

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 1928.
1931. The story of this family tragedy is told in the book, *The Goodbye Land*, which Jose Yglesias wrote in the 1960s.\textsuperscript{13}

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.\textsuperscript{14} 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.\textsuperscript{15} 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.\textsuperscript{16}

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 Asturian 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 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. Yglesías’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.”  

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.

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.
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.

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.”

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.”

1 Jose Yglesias, “Buscando un Sueño de Tampa a Nueva York,” Mas, 3 (July-August, 1991), 61 (translation by Ana Varela-Lago).


4 “Jose Yglesias,” entry in Contemporary Authors, ed. by Ann Evory (Detroit: Gale Research, 1979), vols 41-44, p. 792.

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.


9 “Yglesias” entry in Contemporary Authors, 793.

10 Interview with Dalia Corro, February 7, 1996.


15 Interview with Dalia Corro.


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


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

22 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.


24 Ibid., 171.

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


29 Interview with Dalia Corro.

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

31 Interview with Dalia Corro.


35 Ibid.

36 Yglesias, “Playwright Home Again,” 5.

37 Interview with Dalia Corro.

38 Yglesias, *A Wake in Ybor City*, 83.


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

41 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.

47 Yglesias, _The Truth About Them_, 182.

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.


Tampa Times, August 5, 1963.


Yglesias, Tristan and the Hispanics, 116.


When I was five, the cigarmakers in the Latin section of Tampa, Florida, held a collection on payday to send my mother, my sister and me to Havana to see my father. Four years earlier, he had become ill with encephalitis – the Sleeping Sickness, they called it then – and when he got over the first attack, he began to wander away from home for the second time in his life. When he was thirteen, he had left the province of Galicia in northern Spain, accompanied by a cousin the same age and from the same tiny aldea in the mountains. First, he went to Havana, where he spent four years as an apprentice in a cigar factory, like a young Dickens hero. From there, already the owner of a dark suit with thin gray stripes, high starched collars and a straw hat, he went to Tampa to work in the cigar factories; and at a Wednesday night social of the West Tampa Methodist Church, run by missionaries who quite rightly considered they were bringing the gospel to virgin territory, he met my mother when she was not quite sixteen. They got married and, of course, never went back to church. My grandfather’s pleasure of having the youngest and last to marry of his five daughters safely given away was soon dampened by my father’s sociable and gay habits: having come of age in Havana, my father liked to stop at the cafe on his way home for his espresso and to return after dinner to talk and play dominoes. Not at all like Grandfather’s other Galician son-in-law, a sober-minded man, not given to leaving the house after work, which was what you were to expect of Galicians. Father first got sick on the eve of what was to be the ten-months strike of 1920 – a watershed in the Latin community of Tampa, from which a generation now dying out dates most events in their lives – and the crippling fever did not make him as anxious as did his knowledge that he could not be at the factory the next day. He had been chosen by the strike committee for all the factories to get up from his worktable at the secretly appointed hour, and call down the block-long floor of rows of closely packed tables, in a voice that hundreds could hear, “Outside, comrades, outside!” He had already received the folded piece of paper and read the date and the hour he was to do this; he kept it in the back pocket of his brown pants, the one with the button-down flap. Months later, when the strike was over and he could not go back to work because his right hand without warning would open spasmodically, he still kept the piece of paper with him when he left for Havana. He was a member of the Centro Español, a mutual aid society of cigarmakers for which there was a counterpart in Havana, and although the cigarmakers in Tampa had months to go yet before they could pay the grocer's bills accumulated during the strike, they held a collection, as they did for us later, to pay for Father’s trip to Cuba: surely the doctors of the Centro in Havana would know how to cure his creeping paralysis. It affected not only his hand but his right leg, which he dragged behind him, and his throat, which would suddenly cause him to stutter or be unable to swallow. The doctors did not cure him, of course, and Father began to believe that if he could once more breathe the air of Galicia and eat the food they grew in their tiny farms along the mountainside, and if he could do that for a few months, he would surely get well. There was still some money left from the collection, to which he could add the fifteen dollars a month the Centro in Tampa gave Mother and which she passed on to him, so he went back to Galicia to visit his mother and sister in the aldea. His sister had just been widowed, and for a while he helped them work the land, and he answered, Do not worry, to Mother’s letters reminding him that since he was a resident alien in the States he must return before the year was out. It turned

out that Mother was right to worry, for Father contracted typhoid in Spain and did not make it back in time. Weak but desperate, he arranged to be smuggled back to Cuba on the regular liner which left from Vigo, and, like hundreds of others, would have gotten into Cuba illegally had not a recurrence of the typhoid on board ship made him very ill: the ship’s officers would not take the risk and turned him over to the Cuban authorities when they came on board on their routine visit. He was transferred to a hospital for infectious diseases in Havana, and that was when Mother (who was twenty-eight and had never been out of Tampa) and my sister and I went to Havana in the hope that we would, somehow, bring him back with us. I remember vividly the slum street where we stayed with Father’s uncle; but I did not know that Mother, besides seeing Father at the hospital every day (she took him a bottle of milk because the diet there was bad), spent her time seeing the Cuban authorities, the Spanish embassy, and the American embassy. She took me to the hospital only once, and when I saw my sister run ahead to one of the long rows of beds, I went after her, looked at the man she kissed, and asked if he was my father. He smiled and I jumped on the bed and kissed him too, not to be outdone by my sister who saw him almost every day. He had not shaved in several days and his beard was scratchy; that is all I remember of him, but the story of how I instinctively knew who he was and how eagerly I kissed him has been retold often by my Tampa aunts, always to my glory. Mother failed; neither Cuba nor the United States would have him, and the Cuban authorities were only waiting for him to get over the attack of typhoid or the Sleeping Sickness – they were not sure what he had – to put him on a ship back to Galicia. The Spanish ambassador, who could afford to be candid, told
Mother, “Madam, if you or your family were wealthy, you would have no problem with your country’s immigration laws.” Mother waited until she was sure there was nothing else to be done to tell Father, and then only when the sailing date of his ship was near. “I do not want to go back,” he said. “If they put me on that ship, I shall jump overboard when it is in the middle of the ocean. I do not want to live.” “Man, what are you saying! You must not be in your right mind,” Mother argued. “You know I am going back to Tampa and that our whole family will work to bring you back. We shall write to Washington, you shall see.” It was a coincidence that the ship for Spain left on the same day as ours for Tampa. I was sorry that the voyage to Tampa lasted only a day, for we had a cunning little cabin with two berths and I liked the idea of sleeping with Mother in the lower one. When we went to bed, Mother called up to my sister and told us for the first time that Father was on his way to Spain and that she wanted us to pray with her for his safe trip. Then she began to pray, and I was so astonished to hear her speak English that I could not respond. “Our Father who art in Heaven,” said Mother, remembering those Wednesday night meetings at the West Tampa Methodist Church, and my sister, who was nine years old and knew English, echoed from the upper berth, “Our Father who art in Heaven.” At first I did not like it, and I interrupted Mother to tell her I did not know English, and she said, “That is all right, you listen and wish your father well.” Lying on my side, absorbing my mother’s warmth and watching the moonlight coming in the porthole, I felt good, and went off to sleep, as on Christmas Eve, certain that when morning came some aunt or uncle or sister or cousin – not Santa Claus – would have made my good wishes come true. Forty years later, in the spring of 1965, I went to Galicia to see the country where my father was born and died, feeling excited at the prospect, emotions which were but a slight resurgence of my childhood feelings, for intellectually I was cool now: I had long ago assimilated the knowledge that the goodbyes of the poor are forever, their ten-months strikes are never won, and the letters they write to Washington are not read but weighed.

My father went back to Miamán, the little aldea on the mountainside, writing seldom and then not at all when the paralysis got worse; after a year, he was good only to take care of the cows, getting up before dawn to lead them up to the forest where, if the flies bit, they could not run into fields under cultivation. When he could not do that, he lay at home, and when the women could no longer take care of him, they took him to the hospital at Santiago de Compostela; the hospital kept him a few weeks only, until they realized that he was incurable and could only be given nursing care, so they arranged to transfer him to a charity home; there he spent the last three
years of his life. Just before I left for Europe in the summer of 1964, I asked Mother what she had heard about his stay there and what was the name of the place. “Well, you can imagine, his mother could not see him often. They were poor and the city was far away. I remember that she said – or the man who used to write the letters for her – anyway, she wrote that he did not talk to her. She did not know whether it was the paralysis or whether he just did not wish to talk.” Mother rubbed the lobe of her right ear between two fingers, a habit with her when pensive, and said, “Your father was a very sociable man.”

Mother came to New York to see me and my wife and our eleven-year-old son off to Europe, and she brought a copy of Father’s baptismal papers for me; also, the last letter she received from Miamán, two years after Father died, announcing the death of his widowed sister. After that the old woman, which is how we always referred to Father’s mother, never had another letter written to her daughter-in-law in America; that last letter was written in 1933, so I knew I had no more relatives in Galicia, for the old woman had never mentioned any. I planned to spend a year in Spain, however, and 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; 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.

“And so,” I said to Mother, “you did not write again after the old woman didn’t answer your last letter?”

Mother sighed, as if the memory of those years were a hard rock so imbedded in the past that it was too much to drag it up now. “Oh no, I wrote several times. Though not too often, for I liked to send ten dollars or at least five with each letter and – and, you know.”

There it was, the old uncrushable rock of guilt: the old woman had had an invalid son dumped on her and what had we done to help? My sister and I had gone over the situation many times in the past: the old woman had been widowed before Father left Galicia at the age of thirteen, so was her daughter by the time Father returned, life in Galicia was hard, and in her old age the old woman had without warning to take care of an invalid son and a sick daughter. And it had been her terrible task to turn him over to hospitals and charity homes. Charity homes! We knew what they were in our country and could imagine how much worse in Spain. Even after the war, when my sister and I had married and had less pity for ourselves (for anyone could see that we had
survived the terrible blow to ourselves) we would often sit out on the porch, after the others had
gone to bed, and talk about what must have happened after Father’s ship reached Vigo with him
still – thank God! – on board. By the time we recounted the last visit the old woman paid him,
walking many miles to Santiago only to sit before a mute man who simply stared ahead, we
would decide it was foolish to lacerate ourselves that way: we were kids, after all, when it
happened, and Mother did send what little money she could find.

One of the reasons we still thought about the old woman after the war was that Mother
regularly mailed packages of clothes to a Spanish family in Toulouse. They were one of
thousands who crossed into France when the north of Spain fell to Franco’s army, and the
cigarmakers in Tampa, supporters of the Republic, passed around to each other the names of
families in exile now suffering at the hands of the French. Galicia had immediately fallen when
the civil war broke out, and often my sister would say, “What a problem! What if Father had
lived or the old woman? We would have been sending things to the fascist side!” And when I
decided to go to Spain, my sister said on the long-distance phone, “You know – isn’t it funny?
you may be able to find records of the old woman and Father because they say nothing was
destroyed during the war. It wasn’t like Asturias where people who go back can’t find records at
the churches or city halls.”

We left in October and entered Spain at Hendaye, for we had a week before we were due in
Barcelona and there was time to take a quick look at the north before settling down for the
winter. I had a year in Spain ahead of me: no need to hurry to do anything. But I did want to see the north first because my family in the main came from there. Besides my father and my Galician uncle, there were uncles who came from Asturias; my brother-in-law had spent several years in a country village in Asturias, and he gave me letters to people there. The Spain that most drew me was not the one everyone had heard about: not Madrid, Barcelona, Andalusia, but Asturias and Galicia. Asturias because it is rebellious, Galicia because it is my father’s province.
I was born and raised in Tampa, or rather, in a section of the city called Ybor City, where only Spanish was spoken. My father, a peasant from Galicia, immigrated to Havana as an adolescent to work as an apprentice in a cigar factory. When he became a cigarmaker, he moved to Tampa to search for work in the cigar factories of Ybor City. Ybor City was a Latin island in the South of the United States, and I did not speak a word of English when I entered public school. There, we students spoke Spanish among ourselves and broken English with the teachers. Ybor City had its own Spanish press, theaters, and mutual aid societies, with dance halls, libraries, gyms and medical services. It was a self-sufficient world, a wonderful community that I left behind when I headed for New York, at seventeen, to discover the great American world, feeling as American as any other white adolescent. Why?

I would not have asked myself that question then. I do it now because the past twenty years have seen the rise on the national scene of the “Hispanic” minority, a group with such a strong separatist culture that it can use the word “Hispanic” without irony, something still impossible for my generation.

The playwright George Bernard Shaw said that Englishmen and Americans were a people divided by a common language. He said it jokingly but to make us think. His irony, it seems to me now, is even more appropriate for our new Hispanic family. We Latins are sometimes as much Mayas, Incas and Africans of various nations as we are Iberians. And our Spanish language reflects this variety. In classifying our new immigrants as Hispanics we take for granted that their countries and cultures are cut from the same cloth. And it is forgotten that we Latins have a long historical presence in what is today the United States and that we are already part of its history.

We do not even have to turn to the West, where Mexicans preceded everyone else, except for the indigenous nations. In my own town of New York the Hispanic tradition existed before I arrived in 1937. Castelao, the father of “galleguismo” [Galician nationalism], lived and wrote in the neighborhood of Chelsea. José Martí, the Cuban nationalist hero, organized from New York the Cuban movement for independence in the 1880s. And Arthur Schomburg, who gave his name to the noted African-American cultural center in Harlem, was of Puerto Rican origin.

In separating ourselves from the American world we become accomplices to the American historians who, with their prejudices, have ignored this history. How many Latins will there be in the United States who are bothered by this new separatist label of “Hispanic”? It bothers me so much that I forget the most important question: Why do the New Latin immigrants feel this way?

The answer is known to other ethnic groups in the United States, because almost without exception, we have not been welcomed. When I came to New York in 1937, I walked along...
Sixth Avenue where the employment agencies were located and went into one where for five dollars I could buy a job as a waiter. The man who took my money and gave me a piece of paper with the name and address of a popular coffee shop exclaimed, upon seeing my name, that I would not get work. If I wanted the job, I would have to make up an American name. “You can give them any name as long as you use the same social security number.”

I was so shocked that I did not object. I thought of the name of a Tampa neighbor that sounded more or less Irish: Moran. When I got to the job, I was so angry for what I had been asked to do that I immediately gave my real name to the person who was interviewing me. I said with rage: “They told me I would have to change it to...” The man did not let me finish. “I don’t care what your name is.” And he hired me. I will never forget his name: Peck. He was Jewish. He had probably changed his name and knew how I felt. He was my first ally in the defense of my “americanismo.”

Well, not exactly. In Tampa, Ybor City Latins did not go to school with the “americanos” until we got to high school. My third grade teacher was a beautiful non-Latin young woman and I, of course, was in love with her. One day, when I was turning in a test, she said to me: “You have a beautiful name. Never change it.” I have been loyal to her all my life.

I had – and still have – to pay for this loyalty. For years, my name filled with anxiety potential landlords. They only calmed down when they spoke with my wife, who was not Latin.

I will never forget the time when I returned to Tampa from New York, on leave from my ship in the Navy during World War II. I stayed talking in the club car with two other servicemen. Believing that I was a New Yorker, they praised the virtues of Tampa. The only warning they gave me was about Ybor City: “Don’t go, it’s a dangerous place, full of ‘spics.’” Those prejudices were nothing new to me. I had always known that was what the “americanos” in Tampa thought of us.

Then, why did I feel as American as anyone else when I left Tampa at seventeen? The prejudices were then even stronger than they are now, but a light shined like a halo – the American dream of equality. Franklin Delano Roosevelt was the nation’s president. Fiorello La Guardia was New York City’s mayor. In Europe, Fascism was on the rise or already in power, but we were excited with the fervor of the labor movement, and crossed ethnic boundaries to fight against the elite who held power at that time.
Nowadays, perhaps immigrants from all over the world may be well received. But, more than anything, what they are offered is the opportunity to earn money, fill our shopping centers, and with time, get that little piece of plastic that has become more important than the citizenship papers. If that is all the United States has to offer, then it is right for us to cling to our Spanish language and our customs, and to resist accepting the lifestyle prevalent here. The United States has to convince us if we are to abandon all we brought with us.

Other immigrants resisted too. In the 1930s, when I first came to the north, the city of New York was full of ethnic neighborhoods. They were the ones who would not surrender. Almost all those neighborhoods have disappeared. Latins do not surrender either, and sometimes it seems that our neighborhoods grow instead of them being abandoned. It is not our fault, it is the stars’, and the northern star has lost its shine, I believe. However, the star shines from time to time, offering equality. In the past, other immigrants used this egalitarian ideal as a wedge to get ahead, and even today it is a useful tool.

I believe that for those of us who live in the United States, assimilation does not mean abandoning our past, but enriching an already very rich mix. Hispanics (whatever we may choose to call them) newly arrived to this country are like the proverbial father of the bride: they do not lose Bolívar or Martí, but gain Jefferson and Lincoln. 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. It is a fact that Ybor City is already part of America’s own history.

And my assimilation does not mean that I do not take pleasure hearing how Andy Garcia (in the film Internal Affairs), playing the role of a policeman, the prototypical American hero, speaks in Spanish to another Latin unexpectedly, without preparing the public. Here we are, that is what assimilation means: We are American. I like when jazz and salsa mix, and every time they mix more and more.
THE DEPRESSION YEARS IN YBOR CITY*
by Jose Yglesias

In the sunlit town, the Depression came imperceptibly. The realization came to me when Aunt Lila said there’s no food in the house. My aunt, who owned the house we lived in, would no longer charge rent. It would be shameful to charge rent with $9 a week coming in.

The grocery man would come by and take a little order, which he would bring the next day. When my mother would not order anything because she owed, he’d insist: Why are you cutting down on the beans?

There was a certain difference between the Depression in my home town than elsewhere. There weren’t dark, satanic mills. The streets were not like a city ghetto. There were poor homes, that hadn’t been painted in years. But it was out in the open. You played in the sunlight. I don’t remember real deprivation.

Ybor City was an island in the South. When an American got mad at any Latin, he called him a Cuban nigger. This was one of the first feelings I remember: I want to be an American. you become ashamed of the community. I was an ardent supporter of Henry Ford at the age of twelve.

The strike of 1931 revolved around readers in the factory. The workers themselves used to pay twenty-five to fifty cents a week and would hire a man to read to them during work. A cigar factory is one enormous open area, with tables at which people work. A platform would be erected, so that he’d look down at the cigar makers as he read to them some four hours a day. He would read from newspapers and magazines and a book would be read as a serial. The choice of the book was democratically decided. Some of the readers were marvelous natural actors. They wouldn’t just read a book. They’d act out the scenes. Consequently, many cigar makers, who were illiterate, knew the novels of Zola and Dickens and Cervantes and Tolstoy. The works of the anarchist, Kropotkin. Among the newspapers read were The Daily Worker and the Socialist Call.

The factory owners decided to put an end to this, though it didn’t cost them a penny. Everyone went on strike when they arrived one morning and found the lecture platform torn down. The strike was lost. Every strike in my home town was always lost. The readers never came back.

My uncle was a foreman. He was ill-equipped for the job because he couldn’t bear to fire anybody. He would discuss it with his wife: We have to cut off so many people. What am I going to do? My aunt would say: You can’t fire him. They have twelve children. You’d hear a great deal of talk. You knew things were getting worse. No more apprentices were taken in. My sister was in the last batch.

The strike left a psychological scar on me. 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.

One member of the top strike committee was a woman. That day I stood patrol, she was taken off to jail. Her daughter was kept in the principal’s office. I remember walking home from school, about a block behind her, trying to decide whether to tell her of my sympathies, to ask about her mother. I never got to say it. I used to feel bad about that. Years later, in New York, at a meeting for Loyalist Spain, I met her and told her.

Everybody gave ten percent of their pay for the Republic. It was wild. The total community was with Loyalist Spain. They used to send enormous amounts of things. It was totally organized. The song “No pasarán” that was taken to be Spanish was really by a Tampa cigar maker.

It was an extraordinarily radical strike. The cigar makers tried to march to City Hall with red flags, singing the old Italian anarchist song, “Avanti popolo,” “Scarlet Banner.” I thought it was Spanish because we used to sing “Avanza pueblo.” You see, the bonus march made them feel the revolution was here.

It was a Latin town. Men didn’t sit at home. They went to cafes, on street corners, at the Labor Temple, which they built themselves. It was very radical talk. The factory owners acted out of
fright. The 1931 strike was openly radical. By then, there was a Communist Party in Ybor City. Leaflets would be distributed by people whom you knew. (Laughs.) They’d come down the street in the car (whispers) with their headlights off. And then onto each porch. Everybody knew who it was. They’d say, “Oh, comó está, Manuel.” (Laughs.)

During the strike, the KKK would come into the Labor Temple with guns, and break up meetings. Very frequently, they were police in hoods. Though they were called the Citizens’ Committee, everybody would call them Los Cuckoo Klan. (Laughs.) The picket lines would hold hands, and the KKK would beat them and cart them off.

The strike was a ghastly one. When the factories opened, they cut off many workers. There was one really hated manager, a Spaniard. They would say, “It takes a Spaniard to be that cruel to his fellow man.” He stood at the top of the stairs. He’d hum “The Scarlet Banner”: “You-you can come in.” Then he’d hum “The Internationale”: “You-you can come in.” Then he’d turn his back on the others. They weren’t hired. Nobody begged him, though.

When the strike was lost, the Tampa paper published a full page, in large type: the names of all the members of the strike committee. They were indicted for conspiracy and spent a year in jail. None of them got their jobs back.
The readers’ strike lasted only a couple of weeks: La huelga de los lectores. I just don’t know how they kept up their militancy. There were, of course, many little wildcat strikes. Cigar makers were just incredible. If they were given a leaf that would crumble: “Too dry – out!” When cigar makers walked out, they didn’t just walk out at the end of a day. They’d walk out on the day the tobacco had been moistened, laid out. The manufacturer lost a few hundred dollars, in some cases, a thousand.

There were attempts to organize the CIO. I remember one of my older cousins going around in a very secretive manner. You’d think he was planning the assassination of the czar. He was trying to sign people up for the CIO. The AF of L International was very conservative and always considered as an enemy. They never gave the strike any support. It was considered the work of agitators.

People began to go off to New York to look for jobs. Almost all my family were in New York by 1937. You’d take that bus far to New York. There, we all stayed together. The only place people didn’t sleep in was the kitchen. A bed was even in the foyer. People would show up from Tampa, and you’d put them up. We were the Puerto Rican immigrants of that time. In any cafeteria, in the kitchen, the busboys, the dishwashers, you were bound to find at least two from Ybor City.

Some would drift back as jobs would open up again in Tampa. Some went on the WPA. People would put off governmental aid as long as possible. Aunt Lila and her husband were the first in our family, and the last, to go on WPA. This was considered a terrible tragedy, because it was charity. You did not mention it to them.

That didn’t mean you didn’t accept another thing. There was no payday in any cigar factory that there wasn’t a collection for anyone in trouble. If a father died, there was a collection for the funeral. When my father went to Havana for an operation, there was a collection. That was all right. You yourself didn’t ask. Someone said: “Listen, so and so’s in trouble.” When Havana cigar makers would go on strike, it was a matter of honor: you sent money to them. It has to do with the Spanish-Cuban tradition.

Neighbors have always helped one another. The community has always been that way. There was a solidarity. There was just something very nice.

People working in the cigar industry no longer have the intellectual horizons that my parents had, and my aunts and uncles. They were an extraordinarily cultivated people. It makes it very difficult for me today to read political analysts, even those of the New Left, who talk in a derogatory way of the “glorification” of the working class. The working class I knew was just great.
**LA NOCHEBUENA: THE BEST OF NIGHTS***
by Jose Yglesias

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Nochebuena. I have never been able to find out how Christmas Eve came to be named this by Spaniards, but in Ybor City, the Latin section of Tampa, it was truly a good night. Indeed, it was the best of nights. Why this was so is difficult to explain. After all, there were other occasions that should have been more exciting for me and my cousins and the other kids on the block - children’s day at the State Fair, outings to the beach in summer, the times the Ringling Bros. Circus came to town, the training games of the Cincinnati Reds. Our happiness was not due either to the expectation of gifts left by our bedside while we slept that night; there was no Christmas tree and hardly any toys in the 20s and 30s, not for the children of workers. The gifts we did receive were mostly clothes, and we had a pretty good idea of what those would be. Why then was Nochebuena so special that it has left me with the finest of gifts - the belief that like most Latinos I was given a touchstone for true gaiety and good feeling?

Let me describe it. For us it was a secular holiday. True, some Latinos went to the Catholic Church for midnight mass, *la misa del gallo*, but these were mostly the few who attended the parochial school and it was another way of not letting go of the day, for Nochebuena was the one night when we were allowed to stay up as long as we could. The younger kids were carried off to bed when they turned into little heaps of sleep, and the older ones were guided there in their stumbling daze. I don't remember ever wanting to cross the backyard that joined my aunt's house, where we all gathered, to our own, but I never walked the few yards home, while my Cuban grandfather firmly grasped my elbow, with any energy left to spare or any room in my bloated belly for another mouthful of *turrón*. I once said to him, "I stole a third glass of wine when no one was looking, " and he replied, "Aha!" in a tone I heard myself use years later with my son when I pretended to have been taken in by some maneuver of his.

When I think back about Nochebuena in Ybor City, I can see that although it was not a religious occasion it was certainly a reverent one. Our altar was the dinner table. All the preparations and expectations and excitement of the day led to that marvelous feast. We sat down to it at least four or five hours later than our usual 6:30 dinner, reverting in this way, by a kind of racial memory, to the right time for a proper Castilian *cena*. The very timing creates suspense: in any Spanish city, even today, you can observe the happy buzz of anticipation that invades the people out for the *paseo*. Whether they are dashing out on last-minute errands or meeting friends at cafes or simply strolling down the main street, they are all really preparing for the *cena*.

The cantina of Ybor City's Centro Español with members playing dominoes in 1941. Photograph courtesy of USF Special Collections.

But whereas the Spaniards in the cities are somewhat blasé about their *paseos* and *cenas*, we in Ybor City never could be about Nochebuena. Ours was a cigarmaking community that kept U.S. working hours, and although on ordinary days the men went after dinner to the canteens at the Cuban, Spanish, Asturian, and Italian clubs to play dominoes and chat and have a second cup of *café solo* with perhaps a *trago* of cognac, everyone was back home and ready for bed at eleven o'clock. On Nochebuena this was reversed: about six o'clock, when they were assured that there
were no more errands to do - the pork well on its way to being perfectly done, the house stocked with wine and liquor, the long Cuban loaves brought home from the last freshly baked batch at the bakery - the men of the family went off in little groups to make the rounds of the cafes and the homes of friends. We boys would see our fathers and uncles leave and we longed for the day when we too could go off to be treated (making the women a little anxious that we might return too drunk to appreciate the dinner) and come back four hours later flushed and happy, sneaking dimes and quarters to the kids.

Not that the men were uninterested in the preparation of the dinner. In Ybor City families, they took no part in shopping for food or in preparing meals on ordinary days, except, of course, to make the café solo when dinner was done: handling the colador was a man’s job. But Nochebuena was another matter. A week earlier began the discussions of where to buy the big fresh hams that, crisp on the outside, juicy inside, are the great baked wonder of the meal. Sometimes it was the men who cooked it too. I was startled out of bed one Christmas Eve morning by agonized squeals coming from the backyard and ran to help whoever was in trouble. Mother yelled from the kitchen, "Don't go there!" Too late. The men of the family were struggling with a pig, and I was just in time to see Cousin Viola’s husband, who had been reared in the Cuban countryside, plunge the knife. I was rooted to the back steps by curiosity, and I did not turn away despite the blood and my mother’s calls, because it would have been unmanly.

The pig had to be degutted, scrubbed with boiling water, and its hair plucked, while others dug a pit for the charcoal fire. It took much work and discussion to do all this and set the dressed pig on a spit. Also, many swigs from the gallon of wine. Cousin Pancho had prepared a huge pot of the mojo, made with sour orange juice, garlic, and paprika, and during the long hours ahead there were always two men there to turn the pig and baste it with mojo. After the novelty of this had worn off for them, I was allowed to dip the new paint brush into the delicious-smelling pot and coat the now unscarifying pig. My mother and aunts no longer live in those three houses on Ybor Street with a common backyard. Some have died and all have scattered to better homes, but to this day Cousin Pancho, now in his mid-seventies, prepares the mojo on the 23rd and takes it round in half-gallon jars to three or four of our family’s homes. He insists on personally puncturing the legs of pork to show the women, who are certainly no novices, just how to soak mojo into these interstices.

That Nochebuena they cooked an entire pig because we were sharing it with neighbors. Otherwise, two hams (eighteen pounds each) cooked at two stoves will do. We were never less than two dozen at dinner. Some families took their pork to the bakery to be done. On our block there were always variations of this sort from family to family, but what made Nochebuena a true rite was that the menu never changed. There were (and are) no surprises in that - only confirmed delights. The menu was black beans, white rice (each grain firm and separate), sweet potatoes, yuca, salads, chicken baked in lemon and garlic sauce (in families with closer ties to Spain than Cuba, this might be substituted by whole red snappers in escabeche) and the pork. The hams were not brought to the table whole. They were sliced in the kitchen, the brown crisp skin put to one side, and the slices and drippings placed in long pans and given a last turn in the oven just before being served with the crackling skin as garnish. On the table was red wine and sangría.
This menu rolls off the tongue so easily that I forget how complicated is the preparation of the least dish. Take the black beans; they must be soaked overnight, fortified with garlic, onions, green peppers sauteed in fine olive oil, along with oregano, wine, and hot pepper, and simmered for hours. These ingredients are added at careful intervals so that the sauce will coagulate while the beans remain whole and firm. No mean trick. No less than getting the white rice perfect and hot to the table. One Nochebuena the rice was ruined because at the last moment, when the men were already late from their rounds of the clubs, two empty homes behind our alley burst into flames. So suddenly, so thoroughly, that we all knew without being told that the fires had been set. It was 1932, the Depression was well under way, and the insurance would come in handy. What a memorable Nochebuena that was for us kids - what a disaster for the cooks!

Of course, no one owned a dining table that could seat 24, and kitchen tables were brought from the other houses, placed in a row, and made to seem one by overlapping tablecloths. Our excitement was already at a high pitch by the time we sat down at it, but the very novelty of so long a table made for further happiness. Also, the tolerance and good humor that prevailed. We children did not cease to be children, and our mothers and aunts yelled at us when we threatened to get out of hand, especially when the table was cleared and the turrones and guava paste and cream cheese and flans and brazos gitanos, brought out for dessert; but the admonishments carried no threats: everything the adults said, and especially the laughter of the men, contained a license for our youthful mischief, so long as it was harmless. After all, it was Nochebuena.

There was enough of everything for everyone. On this one night we were the privileged of the earth. Or so that groaning board made us feel. Only the adults knew what sacrifices it may have taken to provide this plenitude, but I believe that even they when they sat at the table felt they had achieved the good life. Not just for themselves, nor for what in the non-Latino world is called the immediate family, but for the whole of the family - the least cousin or in-law - and the neighbors on the block and that island of Latinos called Ybor City. If an americano had wandered down our street, we should have gathered him unto us with a whole heart.

There is not much left of my home town. It is scattered and broken up, and its old ambiente seems to me almost entirely gone. I am bitterly sad about it, but three years ago my wife and I were down there for Christmas and our two grown sons, who are New Yorkers, joined us there. Mother got up at six on the morning of Christmas Eve to start the pork cooking, and we three fellows got out of the way by driving to the beaches 40 minutes away and spending the day with the tourists from up north. It was after six when we started back, so interested in our talk that we had no sense of what day it was. As our car approached Nebraska Avenue, the outer rim of old Ybor City, the car was invaded by a new odor. "What's that?" one of them asked, and I immediately recognized it - pork baking in that pungent mojo. Heavenly pollution, may no wind ever waft it away.
UN BUEN OBRERO: A SHORT STORY*
by Jose Yglesias

El Isleño drove the truck for El Bien Publico when I first started to work there. It was my first job. I was to help him deliver groceries and for working every afternoon and all day Saturday I was to get two and a half dollars a week. El Bien Publico was a cooperative grocery store and meat market. About thirty cigarmakers owned it collectively and took turns working as salesmen and at the cash register. Since it did not open until the afternoon on week days the system worked well. However, there was nothing impersonal about it. It was not a business concern. Everyone seemed to have a hand in everything; when the wives of members came to shop they moved about as if they were in a well-stocked kitchen of their own. That last bothered me. I was in high school and had absorbed some of the American mores. Ybor City, that section of Tampa where the Spaniards and Italians who worked in the cigar factories lived, made me impatient when it did not make me feel ashamed. It was an anomaly, an island of Latins in the South.

El Isleño was a member of the store but he got paid for his work as driver because he did it regularly. He was a large dark man and he moved slowly. I liked him a lot but I was also a little contemptuous of his ways. I certainly would not have wanted to meet any of my high school friends when I was with him. He could not speak English, and he seemed a little dirty to me. My high school friends, all of whom belonged to the part of Tampa that was not Ybor City, would not have said it but they would have thought him greasy. Perhaps they would have thought him peculiar. Since I was Spanish I always suspected that their lighthearted talk about Latins hid a contempt from which I just barely escaped. But then no one, I think, liked El Isleño very much.

He was called El Isleño because he came from the Canary Isles, and his temperament was not like that of other Spaniards. He seemed a sullen man. He, too, seemed ashamed of something. With me he was frank and even talkative, and I sometimes felt that I was his confidant. He never talked about his family in the store, and he never went by his home when I was with him. Yet once he volunteered, “My boy is sick.”

“What's wrong with him?” I asked, remembering the five-year-old boy who came with him once to the store.

“Hemophilia.”

I had seen a glamorous movie about a noble Russian family, and I was lost in wonder that in Ybor City one could find diseases of the great.

“The kings left us ignorance and poverty and disease,” he said. “It keeps us weak.”

He was always kind. He never was one who would ask me to do little errands that kept me on the run. Though the other members liked my industriousness they put my good intentions to a great test: perhaps it was thoughtlessness but there were a thousand little things that they did not hesitate to ask me to do because I always seemed so willing.

* Reprinted from New Masses, 61 (November 26, 1946), 17-19. [46]
El Isleño would stop them. “He is my assistant and he isn’t going to run around doing what you fat asses can easily do.” Then when we were out in the truck he would say, “Don’t let them order you around. They don’t pay you enough. All day long they kowtow to the foremen and then they come here and want to play boss.” El Isleño did not like them much either.

I liked him, you see, because he said the things that I felt but could not say if I were to be polite as my mother had taught me, or successful in the manner that school, with the essays of Elbert Hubbard, had also instructed me. With El Isleño I felt a freedom that I had never felt with anyone. At home, how could I be free? I was too close to it to see anything but the contrast to the American life that my friends in school lived naturally. At school I always felt that I was different in a shameful way. It was true, I reflected, though I never said it, that I was beginning to think in English. But my name was always going to be undeniably Spanish. I wanted to be Spanish, but I didn’t want to be Ybor Cityish. And so I seemed always held in. but El Isleño was critical of both and so relieved me of my guilt concerning these ways of life that pulled me in what I thought were opposite directions. There was always home to go to after work and school the next day, but while we were in the delivery truck we were on ground.

El Isleño treated me as an equal because he let me argue with him. It was not the equality of the simple-minded who is older only in body, nor yet the conscious levelling of natural differences
that the well-meaning educated attempt with the young. He taunted me and ridiculed my opinions, but he took me seriously, for he wanted to teach me things. And he respected my intelligence: he knew I was a bright student in school and all Spaniards in Ybor City respect that.

He taught me how to drive the truck, and he walked me home the first time I got drunk. It was with him that I first began to feel like a man. To be a man in Ybor City meant for most that one had finally visited a whorehouse and could then join in the conversations of the men at the cafes and street corners.

One Saturday noon we were so busy that we were still out with the truck long past the time that we should have gone home for lunch. We passed a brewery and El Isleño asked me if I wanted some beer. We were both thirsty, and since the store bought beer from that particular brewery, we could go in any time and drink beer from the big, cooled barrels they kept for thirsty wholesale customers. We drank two large glasses and went back to the truck.

The bright hot sun seemed to dim and light up as we drove back. I looked at the people and the narrow, short streets of Ybor City, and I seemed not to recognize either. The streets seemed very long, the afternoon strange, and I could not remember what I was doing in the truck. I looked at El Isleño, and I felt very giddy, seeing him stolid and heavy at the wheel. I was glad I was not driving, and I kept quiet so that he would not know that two glasses of beer had so unsteadied me. The long journey ended abruptly. He let me off home instead of taking me to the store.

“I’ll come by,” he said, “to pick you up after I have lunch.” I stood grinning at him until he drove away. Inside there were sandwiches my mother left for me. I ran to the bedroom to see how I looked in the mirror when I was drunk. My face was a little flushed and I laughed at the sight. Then I walked back to the kitchen very soberly, the thought that El Isleño might have noticed my face bracing me up a bit.

“What happened?” I asked, a little startled when he shook me as I lay on the porch swing. “What is it?” I looked at the clock on the factory tower two blocks away. I had slept three hours.

“You were asleep,” he said, “I guess that the work and the beer helped.” He had come to get me, but seeing me asleep he had worked all afternoon by himself.

“You should have awakened me!”

“That’s all right. You had worked enough. I felt better after I had lunch myself. I didn’t want to tell you, but the beer made me feel very strange. It gave me a kind of fatigue. That’s why I drove so slowly.”

That day we worked very well together. On Saturdays the store was open until midnight, and every time we were out with the truck El Isleño talked and argued with me. That evening he told me that he had known my father. “There were very few people in Tampa who remembered him. Once in a while a visitor who had known my family for a long time mentioned him. That would happen when I was called in to be exhibited to them. I was very tall for my age and I would stand awkwardly and listen to their comments about me.
“He doesn’t look like Julian,” they would say, then add as if to remind me of someone I must not forget, “He was a good young man.” El Isleño said something else, “El era un buen obrero.” That meant not just that he was a good worker but that he was a union man. The “good” referred to his relationship with workers as a group.

Always before when I had been reminded of my father by other people it had been a sad thing, and although he said it with solemnity, there was something of grandeur in El Isleño’s tone.

The others reminded me that I had been left fatherless when I was three, that I had a great debt to pay my mother, and that when my father had left Ybor City to go to hospitals in Cuba there had been collections in the factories to pay his passage and expenses. That we had to accept charity was what their remembrance of my father meant to me. El Isleño made me feel proud of my father, and for the first time I was able to see him as a man, not as a wound or pitiful thing I carried in me.

“In those days,” El Isleño told me, “the cigarmakers were no so Americanized. In those days the manufacturers had respect for us. Now look at them. Look how glad they are to have San Martin, who is a foreman, in the cooperative.”

“But my uncle is a foreman, and he’s a good man. He’s very friendly and he doesn’t act like San Martin.”
“Ha!” he exhaled ironically, “that is what you think because he is your uncle. He’s just as arrogant as the others. Don’t think he doesn't like adulation, he is just as puffed up at the factory as the manufacturers.”

“That’s not true. It’s only the Italians who flatter him, but he doesn’t like it. They used to leave chickens on his porch because they thought that would help them keep their jobs but he stopped them.”

I was surprised by El Isleño. No one had ever said a bad thing about my uncle, and I had always felt proud that he was a foreman in a factory with the power to hire and fire cigarmakers. If I believed El Isleño, I could no longer feel good that he was a foreman, and, therefore, important in Ybor City. I would lose importance in my own eyes if I lost such belief. One knows a lot about vanity when one is young.

“All right, all right, he is better than the others,” El Isleño conceded. But he made me see the difference in behavior that existed among the cigarmakers in Ybor City. A foreman was always treated with friendliness wherever he went. The rough jibes that Spaniards cast at each other were never aimed at the two or three that came to *El Bien Publico*. When they came to the store they and their families, even their children, were never treated matter-of-factly. A stranger would not have noticed the difference, just as I, who had not known the life in the factories, was unaware of the subtle humiliation that was involved until El Isleño began to point out specific instances.

Why did no one say anything to Segunda when she walked through the store sampling vegetables and fruit? She was a greedy woman who covered her miserliness with banter and good humor. Before she arrived at the cash register with her purchases she usually had eaten a tomato, an apple, a banana; but that was never included in the bill she signed. Her husband was president of the cooperative but he did not really owe the dignified aura surrounding him to his position, nor to his dyspeptic manner. His brother had until about two years before been in general charge of one of the cigar factories. The brother was dead but an air of privilege still lingered about his family, and so Segunda could exercise her appetite with impunity.

When I was not out with the truck I helped the women with their groceries, weighed their purchases and carried their bags up to the desk where the cash register and adding machine were. Segunda liked to have me along with her when she came to buy. She knew my family and she always made me tell her about them while she devoured the green peppers and plums.

In Ybor City one was taught when very young to ask about the health and well-being of the family of whomever one met, and every encounter was ended by each asking the other to be remembered to their respective families. This was a fine point in good behavior, and with this solicitude Segunda hid her scavenging while I helped her shop. Besides, young people were not to correct adults. She felt safe with me. I told El Isleño about her and he simply nodded his head: he did not insist when he saw I was learning his lessons.

That Saturday night Segunda and I made our little tour of the store, she eating and asking me questions and complimenting me, I being weighed down with bags. There were a lot of people in
the store Saturday nights and she was safer from detection then than at other times. It seemed to me that she looked at the potatoes longingly and was a little resentful that they could not be eaten there.

When we arrived at the desk, she had eaten more than usual. Her husband was on duty at the register that night, and he began to add up the items on a machine. The procedure was to get the slip signed by the purchasing member for totalling later into a weekly bill. Segunda’s husband was a very meticulous man. He always paused after he had punched each separate item and asked, “What else?”

“Two pears,” I said when he repeated the ritual for his wife. Segunda’s perpetual grin vanished.

“But they were samples!” she expostulated when her husband shifted his questioning stare from me to her.

“Did you eat them?” he asked. She grimaced, and he punched the adding machine.

“One apple,” I said again before he totalled the list. He punched the machine again.

“Two plums,” I told him, a little clearer-voiced this time. Segunda hurrumphed as the machine figured them in.

“What else?” This time her husband looked at me. Several other members were also looking and I was too excited to remember the banana with which she had begun.

“Come,” El Isleño said to me loudly. “We have four boxes to deliver.” He had been standing by, and I realized in that brief moment, when the aftermath of what I had planned was on me and I was lost as to what to do next, that I had done this because of him and for him. And that he was coming to my rescue. It was if he were saying: you have done well, let me take over now.

We loaded the boxes of groceries in the truck quickly and in silence, but as soon as we drove away he smiled widely at me as I had never seen him smile before. Like a proud father. “They may fill your head with poison about Henry Ford at school,” he said, “but you are going to be a good worker.”
THE BITTERSWEET LEGACY OF
LA MADRE PATRIA*
by Jose Yglesias

When someone asks if I am of Spanish descent, I sometimes say, “No, Cuban.” Or I reply, with strict truthfulness, “My father was born in Spain, my mother here of Cuban parents.” Often I add to this last statement, “My father was a gallego.” There is a common denominator to all those replies, and I dare say only a Latino knows without further explanation the emotion obliquely expressed by my responses. It is this: I don’t want to gain anyone’s favor by going along with snobbish, and often racist, notions about differences between Spaniards and Latin Americans. The question about my background could very well be innocent, but there are any number of non-Latins whose smidgin of knowledge about us leads them to believe, sometimes without admitting it to themselves, that Spaniards are more culturally elevated and racially purer than Latin Americans.

Indeed, such people ask if you’re Spanish only when they have decided that you’re a superior specimen of the human race and are certain that when you speak Spanish you lisp the c’s and never pronounce them as s’s. (Some of the more foolish Hispanophiles even lisp their s’s.) They have already, of course, decided that there is no dubious Indian or Black among your antecedents, and they have probably conferred on you at least middle-class status. I won’t be of Spanish descent on those terms, and I pity any Latino who would. That is why when I admit my father was born in Spain I add that he was from Galicia, which is to say that he came from the poorest of the poor, from a province which has always been the source of supply of cheap labor for the big cities of Spain, as well as for the colonies in the Americas. A gallego is as far removed from the Castilian hidalgo as it is possible to be and still be born in the Iberian peninsula.

But to me Galician is beautiful. Sometimes Spanish is not beautiful, and those sometimes occur when I suspect that the virtues of hispanidad are exclusive, virtues like Castilian speech that the rest of us Latinos cannot claim since we are not to the manor born. It is then I like to point out that, just as everyone in Great Britain does not speak with an Oxford accent, neither do all Spaniards speak with a Castilian one. Accents seem to be a matter of geography and climate. Early in life I had noticed that the people of the Caribbean shared the same quickness and lightness of speech, and it seemed somehow right when as an adult I first went ashore in the Canary Islands, on the other side of the Atlantic from Puerto Rico, Santo Domingo, and Cuba, that these island people did not lisp their c’s either and spoke as fast as the Cubans in my family.

The other prejudice that lurks in the invidious comparisons of Latin Americans with Spaniards is the belief that in the new world there has been too much traffic with the Indians and Africans for their descendants to qualify for the ethnic purity of the Spaniard. What a laugh! For all the thousands of years that make up what we know of history, most of Europe and much of Africa has been in and out of Spain as conquerors and procreators. Out of it all has come a country that only a few centuries ago was still called las Españas in acknowledgment of its diversity. Spain’s kings and dictators have in modern times obscured this among non-Latins, but it is impossible

today to ignore the fact that Catalonia, the Basque country, and Galicia, with their distinctive languages and traditions, are separate nations within the peninsula; and Andalusia too is demanding autonomy from the central government. So much for racial purity and cultural unity.

Oh, there are many things that make me uneasy about claiming Spanish descent. I think of the depredations of the Spaniards in the Americas and don’t want to be associated with them. One image never leaves me: the account in Bernal Diaz’s diaries of Cortés’s men melting down the great sculptures and ornaments and jewels of the court of Montezuma into gold bars. To me this act stands for the destruction of peoples and cultures – ones as great as the Aztec and the Inca. Ah, the arrogance of the Spaniard when he dominated the world. If I were a Chicano, a lisped c would make me flinch. If I were a Black from South America, I should feel enormous skepticism about the historic values of Hispanicism. I should want, also, to oppose the single Spanish cultural tradition, the casticismo of Castile that snobs among Latinos wish us to claim as our only one, with the greater richness of the mixed culture that in reality is ours.

This last is as true for Spain as for the Americas. I remember one Corpus Christi Day in Redondela, a small town in Galicia, where this holy day is always celebrated by an open-air mass held in the plaza in front of the town’s best church. It was a centuries-old ceremony, and the local bishop came down for it. He and the priest and altar boys stood in their brilliant vestments in the doorway of the church and watched a primitive dance which traditionally precedes the mass. Danced by young men of the town, wearing white pants and shirts and red sashes, it was a
frantically physical affair in which the men, tied hand to hand with swords, wove intricate patterns with their turnings, all to the accompaniment of drums and bagpipes. In the middle of every pattern that the young men completed, there would always turn up one woman holding on her shoulders a young girl dressed as an angel. This child, with arms held high, moved her hands graciously as if blessing all of us below her-priests and laymen alike.

No one knew the origins of the dance, nor when it began to be performed in Redondela as part of the celebration of Corpus Christi, nor what its connection with the Eucharist might be. But from the nature of the music it could be placed in pre-Christian Celtic times. It certainly made for a more exhilarating Corpus Christi than the strictly Catholic one. Another example: I do not think I should have cared much for Santa Bárbara had I not seen in Cuba that she is also Chango, one of the great gods of the Yoruba religion. Everywhere in Cuba they make altars for her, even in the nightclubs, and, on the stroke of midnight of December 4th, they start bringing her flowers. I shall never forget the first time I saw this happen, nor when I first heard the great Celina sing to the Virgin of Regla, whom she calls virgencita negra, “¡Ay, mi Yemayá, quítame lo malo, quítame lo malo y échalo en el mar!” If the Virgin is also Yemaya, I might well be moved to turn to her in times of trouble, and if I were a catholic, I should reinforce my Hail Marys with African bead necklaces to ward off evils.

There is a whole body of humor among Latinos about the attempts of some of us to be old-world Spanish. I remember in my hometown of Ybor City in Tampa the jokes about cigarmakers who returned from a short trip to Spain lisping more strongly than the Bourbon kings and pronouncing every consonant with as much precision as those careful people who teach Spanish on language records. “Oh, yes,” people said about them, “they now eat bacalado and hail from Marianado.” I am sure that throughout Latin America people defined themselves by refusing to take on Spanish mannerisms. I know I did; my father died when I was very young, and I took my speech and loyalties from my Cuban grandfather rather than my Spanish uncles. I hope it saved me from some affectations, for there were still the pitfalls of the English language and the American environment outside my particular barrio to tempt me with all sorts of phoniness.

Indeed, for a while I put both my Cuban and Spanish heritages behind me: I was out to be as American as all those americanos in the Tampa high school, and that meant downgrading everything I had picked up in Ybor City. If possible, obliterating it. In fact, this was exactly what was urged on me when at 17 I looked for my first job in New York. In one of those ratty employment agencies where you could buy a dishwasher’s job for $5, they were willing to send me down to a cafeteria on 14th Street but only, they insisted when I gave them my name, 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 myself-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.

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. But there was another factor: It was 1937, and I had seen in Ybor City and now in
New York how people responded to the outbreak of civil war in Spain. The Spaniards were heroes in both worlds. The cigarmakers in my 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 originally led the Spanish to emigrate and the Cubans to fight for independence. And in New York, as throughout the country, the Spaniards commanded respect and admiration because they were the first to resist the rise of fascism in Europe. Their brave example created antifascists everywhere, and young men of all nations illegally crossed the Pyrenees, eluding the French border police, to join the soldiers of the Republic. It was all this that made me take pride in whatever Spanish heritage I could claim.

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 during the playing of the Himno de Ribeto and again when Fernando de los Ríos, the Republic’s ambassador in Washington, got up to speak. Incredible! With New York accents, the audience of americanos chanted, “No pasarán!” They meant that the fascist forces of General Franco would not enter Madrid. Why? Because these stubborn, heroic Spanish democrats would not allow it. They would die first. Well, they did die, and the fascists did take Madrid and stayed for thirty-seven years. But they were never able to dislodge the real Spain from my heart.

The real Spain. This is a distinction of my own making. Arbitrary, some will say, unreasoning, for, after all, Franco and those generals and the Church and that nobility were Spanish too. Yes,
they were, but I exclude them from my real Spain, as I do the snobs who think the lisped c is a sign of superiority. The real Spain is the one we Latinos can use. I will not be exclusive about this – the real Spain can enrich everyone – but it particularly strengthened me. 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 useable past.

I began, then, to find in New York the Spain I could use. At first, without doing anything, Spain gained me a kind of reflected glory: My new friends looked at me with wonder simply because of the authentic way I could pronounce the names which were the coins of our currency – García Lorca, Antonio Machado, Negrín, Del Vayo, La Pasionaria. But I also read Spanish for the first time, a language I had refused to study in high school, and discovered those first two poets for myself, as well as the novelists, like Perez Galdós, Palacios Valdés, Valle Inclán, whom the cigarmakers in Ybor City spoke about but whom I had disdained. I learned in this way some Spanish history and marveled at the fight against Napoleon, the anarchist movement, the long struggle for republican government. What an extraordinary people were the people of the Iberian peninsula.

And because of the Civil War, I also read the Peruvian César Vallejo, the Cuban Nicolás Guillen, the Chilean Pablo Neruda, the Guatemalan Miguel Angel Asturias – all of whom where strong supporters of the Republic. So it was that because of Spain I gained a bit of knowledge of Latin America. Indeed, many also were the American writers I first read, beginning with Hemingway and including as unlikely ones as Van Wyck Brooks and Edna St. Vincent Millay, because they too were for Loyalist Spain. It was through Spain that I, like many of my generation, began to know and judge the world.

In my newfound pride, I was forced to think about those Spaniards I knew in Ybor City and to see if they matched up to the heroes of the Civil War. I decided that these unschooled cigarmakers were Spanish in their sense of community, in the way they had organized social and medical societies and trade unions, built hospitals and held strikes, and educated themselves with readers in the factories. There are no people more loyal to their ideals than the Spaniards. They do not give them up because, for the moment, they do not work or find acceptance. They are not pragmatists. I think of Pablo Casals refusing to play so long as Franco reigned and only relenting when his concerts could advance his ideals; he was as Spanish as the refugees in the south of France swelling the ranks of the maquis as a prelude, they hoped, to deposing Franco. Don Quixotes all, we particularly need them in the U. S.

Over the years, I have come to realize, too, that the courteousness of Spaniards, seemingly inappropriate in our rough-and-ready American environment, is also a valuable heritage for Latinos. I was going to call this care for one another’s feelings “courtliness,” but the point of the bone-deep politeness of Spaniards is that it cuts across the classes and is not simply the surface good manners that one expects only as one ascends the social scale. In Spain you are apt to notice it more in the peasantry and city workers. It has its source, I believe, in the Spaniard’s pride in himself, which inevitably becomes appreciation of the inviolability of the others’ individuality. For all the violence and cruelty one finds in Spanish history, this strain of respect for others never gives out. For example, not until the late 18th Century did it occur to any
significant section of humankind that slavery was wrong; yet, unlike the colonists of North American, the Spaniards did not deny to their slaves in South America the sacraments of the Church. In the sense that the slave was allowed marriage and participation in Church ceremonies, their equality with whites in the eyes of God was patent, and this heritage has made a great difference in the relations between Blacks and Europeans throughout Latin America.

And when all is said and done about Spain’s value to the world and to us, I must also admit that I need Spain for myself alone. I am almost ashamed to say it, but Goya’s *Dos de Mayo*, Picasso’s *Guernica* – they are like achievements of mine. I won’t give them up, no more than I can give up a Valencian *paella*, a Castilian *lechoncito*, an Asturian *fabada*, a *caldo gallego*, or a *butifarra catalana*. Just the sound of a *taconeo* makes my heart leap, and I simply cannot explain to anyone the ineffable joy of opening the book with which modern storytelling begins and reading, “En un lugar de la Mancha de cuyo nombre no quiero acordarme....” I can no more explain why I should feel less than whole without these things, why any of us Latinos without Spain is diminished, than I can fathom why we were put on this earth. It is a state of being I am happy to accept. Olé!
JOSE MARTÍ IN YBOR CITY*

by Jose Yglesias

One of the many writers who have had their say about José Martí points out that it is a stylistic habit of Martí’s to present the object of his sentences ahead of the subject and verb, to give his conclusion first rather than the nominative and that part of the predicate by which the sentence arrives at its objective. Let me go a bit further with this tradition of Marti’s, and state immediately, as object not of a sentence alone but of all I say tonight, without working up to it like a good orator or laying the foundation for my denouement carefully and piling up my own little insights into a statement at the end of this talk that I should hope would bring you to your feet in thundering agreement – let me say it immediately: the reason everyone comes to love José Martí is that without question he is the person we all dream of being, the man that in our moments of optimism, although the prospects may be disheartening and all common sense against us, the man we believe we will yet become. We love him because he keeps that vision of fulfillment alive in us – to be a whole man like him: a brave uncomplaining young rebel though the jailing he suffered broke his health, a loving father to his little son, a father to his nation (the very idea of Cuba being a nation seems his), a great poet, a great journalist, a superb prose stylist, an unexcelled organizer and teacher, an utterly sincere and honest and forthright friend and correspondent, one of the few major revolutionary leaders of modern times.

He is none of these things separately. They are not attributes of his. Together they are him. Take one away and the whole edifice might crumble. What’s left would not be Martí. Could Martí be Martí if we did not have that enchanting Mary Cassatt double portrait of him and his son to be found in Ismaelillo, the poem called Mi caballero in which he plays with his infant son? Could we say we knew him well if we had not read his superb social and cultural reportage, from his wonderful articles on Ulysses S. Grant and Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman to those on Coney Island and the Kansas land rush? Could we take him seriously as a revolutionary if he were not the ground-breaking poet he was? That is, a poet who was a revolutionary in that field as well – the father of modernism.

I can easily go on this way, extending my metaphor to every corner of his achievements. He is indeed the person whom we dream of becoming because there is not a facet of personality that he did not bring to fruition in his own indivisible whole. Do you think I am exaggerating? Does all this sound utterly hyperbolic to you? This is a problem for anyone who tries to tell others about Martí. We all appear guilty of overstatement. At second hand any description of him sounds like, as young people say nowadays, too much. When I first read about Martí (I did not then – this was during my youth – count my family as a reliable source of serious knowledge about him – but more about that later) it bothered me then that everyone referred to him in such adoring perfervid phrases. No one took him lightly. Not a joke at his expense in all the literature on Martí, not a slightly ironic comment, either. No gibes, and you certainly couldn’t do a Kitty Kelley on him. God knows, Martí is the only Cuban that Cubans do not joke about. El choteo stops right there with him. No one crosses that line.

I must add that when one shakes off all that reverent talk and one approaches him directly again and sees his various roles unfold, as a historical figure, as poet, as author of extraordinary essays on cultural, political and social subjects, as orator of speeches of soaring eloquence, one begins – at least I do, ineluctably, it seems – to adopt the same tone as others who have been star-struck by him. Yes, we cannot help but adore him like a saint and hope to be like him.

Yet why? It shouldn’t follow. His was not what we call a happy life. He did not come to the end of a full life as a *paterfamilias* with any number of generations of his family about him, and also abundantly surrounding him, a large circle of friends who knew they were in the presence of greatness. Martí died at the age of 42 in an encampment at Dos Ríos in Oriente, killed by a band of Spanish soldiers who came upon him unknowingly, a month after he landed with a reduced, somewhat bungling expeditionary force led by Máximo Gómez. On the face of it, his was a terribly humiliating end. There is, as that great Catholic poet Cintio Vitier has said, a pervasive sadness in all his life and work, and the optimism that he never failed to project and pass on to his people and his audiences (he knew how to bring them to their feet for a thundering finale) is always tinged with his pitying knowledge of the unhappy difficulties and disappointments of humanity’s struggles. One cannot fault him for it: he went through terrible years after being jailed as a teenager. Exiled, living hand to mouth in various countries, losing his son when his wife broke up their marriage and returned to Cuba, where he was legally forbidden to follow. The turbulent emotions attendant on all this is evident in *Versos libres*, the volume of poetry not published until two decades after his death, whose poems were obviously influenced by Whitman. Here he lashes out and questions the unhappy difficulties and disappointments I cited. Yet although he is openly distraught, he is always positive about existence. One could make this point with any number of the poems of this period. Here are a few lines from “*Odio al mar (I Hate the Sea)*:

Que voy muerto es claro; a nadie importa
Ni siquiera a mi: pero por bella,
Ignea, varía, inmortal amo la vida.

(That I seem dead is clear; no one cares,
Not even I; but because she is beautiful,
Fiery, various, immortal, I love life.)

There is, believe me, no distancing oneself from this man.
An aside: I have always – or almost always – enjoyed *el choteo*, that scathing pitiless scorn that Cubans direct at accepted mores and values. It has to be funny to be effective, or it would otherwise often be simple cruelty. It can also be what we call off-the-wall fooling and can have the effect of belittling all subjects with what seems like mere fun, as in the style of Groucho Marx. *El choteo* is native to Cuba; the word itself gained its full meaning there. Its bitter humor clears the air: it says we are not fooled by humbug. It is a great weapon of self-defense in our world, and I daresay I am not the first to whom it has occurred that *el choteo* was born in Cuba after their revolutionary struggle for independence ended as badly as it did. For it did end badly and not simply because Martí died so early in the war. It was at the expense of that heroic movement for independence that we – the United States of America, as we call ourselves – made our debut as an imperial power. Well... if we don’t count the Mexican-American war fifty years earlier. I’m also not mentioning the Philippines and Puerto Rico. Nor our treatment of native Americans. In fact, I think I shall leave this whole subject alone, this conquering interfering history of ours. End of aside.

There is another kind of humor in Martí, the kind which a newly-articulated truth most often inspires. For all his romantic élan, Martí is a close observer of the ordinary life we all lead and he sees things in their wholeness – one could almost say that his personal odyssey and struggle was a striving for wholeness – and it is because he does see all the sides of a situation or of a person that one responds with a smile of recognition. Yes, we say to ourselves, we have experienced something of the sort or known some one like that. Yes, but not as acutely, nor could we have been able to describe the whole thing so justly until we read it in Martí. There follows, then, a sense of enjoyment when we read him or read about him which comes from the gentle, unembittered irony we share with him. I think that all these elements, plus others I have not mentioned, make him the kind of figure that does earn him the title which his countrymen have given him of *El Apóstol*.

The Apostle! I was put off the first time I came upon that epithet. It had religious overtones I didn’t care for, but it does not bother me now. I don’t know whether I have realized that the word does generically describe what Martí did or whether I have, when it comes to religion, decided to give the other fellow the benefit of his doubt of what the real world is. Religious faith, it appears to me, is based on uncertainties, but there is none of that in Martí. He did have an unswerving, often declared faith in the power and beauty of love. He believed in love as a principle of aesthetics, as a way to understand the world, as the best means of changing it: it was, perhaps, his most deeply held belief.

I approach this particular tenet of his ideology gingerly: love of everyone as programmatic politics seems to me impossible to bring into being without selfconsciousness. I didn’t much care for it in Tolstoy and Ghandi, and it has echoes for me of the mindless flower children of the Sixties. Even in the case of literature, loving everyone you write about is a problem for me: did Shakespeare love Iago? But, to get back to politics, Martí was not confronting the juggernaut power of late capitalism and he was not planning to place daisies in the barrels of the Spanish army’s rifles. He was not asking us to do anything more than to make love a principle of our conduct and vision, and he pierces one to the heart whenever he so pleads.
In any case, Martí was an apostle even if he was not a proselytizer for any religious sect. He certainly was not a member of any congregation, for very likely he never entered a church except for those two or three occasions when it is de rigueur for a latino to do so. Truthfully, I repeat, he was an apostle. He came to teach, he had the answers, he pointed the way, and he died for it. He did not seek death but he was ready for it. His letters, his poetry, his speeches tell us that.

I like to think that the last and the greatest period of his apostleship began – indeed, was triggered – by his first trip to Tampa, an event of a century ago which we are here to celebrate, joyously, with gladness of heart, with minds open to what he had to say to us. And with – to be true to him – a certain sadness. His encounter with the workers of Ybor City and West Tampa confirmed for him what he had been learning all his life in exile. He had now arrived at this knowledge with a full heart and his whole being and he expressed it directly. “Lo que tengo que decir, antes de que se me apague la voz y mi corazón cese de latir, es que mi patria posee todas las virtudes necesarias para la conquista y el mantenimiento de la libertad.”

This is what he reported to a meeting in New York City that he had learned in Tampa, that his people were ready to conquer liberty and to uphold it, and he embarked immediately on the unceasing work of organizing the Revolutionary Party – the famous Resolutions setting it up were drafted in Tampa and voted on before he left for New York City – and of preparing for the armed struggle by which independence was to be gained. Ybor City’s welcome sets the tone for Pinos nuevos, the speech he gave his second night in Ybor City in which he embraces the death of heroes: “That tree bears the best fruit that is fed by a dead man,” said this non-violent man. In three short years he himself was dead.

An inexpressible tragedy, the extent of which took years to comprehend.

I understand, but only through my readings about him, that Martí’s stature in all the fields in which he moved, and, indeed, as father of his country, was not really appreciated for what it was during thirty years or more following his death. I say that it was only through reading that I learned this surprising fact because in my family throughout the years of my growing up – from the Twenties on – Martí was a living presence. They had heard him speak, and my Cuban grandfather, Rafael Milián, had lived in New York and Key West, too, in the years that Martí had worked and lived in one and visited the other. By the time I came along Martí was already like some one, now dead, who had been a member of the family. En paz descanse. But he did not rest in peace: his ideas and actions had to be fought for.

In my family every aspect of the Cuban national struggle was discussed and chewed over. It was not unusual, to give an example I remember, for a long and lively discussion to ensue from my aunt Juanita saying, “Yes, but do you believe Martínez Campos was really sincere?” (Need I explain to this gathering that General Martínez Campos led the Spanish Crown’s armies during the Ten Years War and as colonial rulers go was not a bad man?) I remember too the many nights on the porch on Ybor Street when the relative merits of Maceo and Máximo Gómez were gone into at length. I was a partisan of Maceo because my grandfather was. Whether Martí should have gone to Cuba and lived the life of a guerrilla was the subject for embittered talk about the treacherousness and spite of people with political ambitions who had taunted him because of the envy that genius inspires in the mean-spirited.
I can laugh about all this, now that remembering the family of my childhood calls up my love for them and not my exasperation with their obsessive concerns. God knows, I had no idea who Martínez Campos was, except that my Cuban grandmother’s string of surnames included Campos among them and I had a vague notion whenever Martínez Campos was mentioned that he must be my great grandfather. In a family such as mine Martí would, of course, have received his due, but I like to think that ours was not different from the other Cuban émigré families in West Tampa and Ybor City. Indeed, I am sure it was not. It’s a telling comment on the sadness of the outcome of the struggle for Cuban independence that these workers who had gathered round Martí (as had my grandparents first in Key West and then West Tampa) – these workers who first inspired him to believe that the time was ripe for revolution did not go back to the island when, as my grandfather used to say, *el politiqueo* began; that is, after the constitution with its Platt Amendment was in place and presidential elections began. Politicking, yes, that is what our brand of democracy has mostly meant to Latin Americans.

How I wish I could live that childhood again. I would not be so thoughtless as to fail to write down everything those cigarmakers said and did. Now I would be sure to ask my grandfather about the welcoming committee for Martí in Key West of which he was a member. Or the committee here in Tampa, later. At which gathering was it – in Key West or here at a picnic at Ballast Point? – that my Aunt Lila as a girl of four or five was given the honor of welcoming Martí by reciting a quatrain at the end of which she brought forward a homemade Cuban flag? The quatrain was also handmade, but probably not by her.

She last recited it to me when she was in her late seventies, sitting on the porch of her old house on Grace Street and going through the motions of hiding the small flag behind her back until she had finished the verse - and I was still so thoughtless in middle age as not to have made a copy of that quatrain. I hope someone will forgive me for not knowing even then that those cigarmakers of Ybor City and West Tampa were the significant makers of our history, not the Teddy Roosevelts and the Rough Riders and the Martínez Camposes. That what my aunt Lila recited was of the greatest importance to a truthful recreation of history.

Another aside: Maceo, the great revolutionary general, the Hero of Bronze as Cubans called this black giant, was not and is not known by Americans – but he was known by blacks in the terrible Reconstruction years, particularly by Southern blacks who had few safe opportunities to express their pride in themselves. They named their boys Maceo and gave it the American pronunciation: May-see-oh. This was a secret pleasure and there are American blacks today who do not know how they have come to be named Maceo.

Martí never made the mistake of ignoring or misapprehending or denigrating the role of the poor, for he was not looking at them like a reporter or scholar or artist – though he was all of these – but as a revolutionary gauging carefully the forces that could liberate his nation. You could say that he could not afford mistakes that others so airily commit. Life was too serious, also, to toss off opinions simply for effect or to work off momentary irritations. His appreciation of the working class, however, went deeper than calculation. By the time he came to Tampa he was totally concerned with what had to be done for Cuba: he had quit the jobs that he held as consul for some South American nations, he had accepted the fact that he had lost his family, he was devoting all his time to the making of the revolution. He had gone through his crucible.
He had acted and observed and pondered – and grown – all through that battering decade of the eighties. He had made difficult decisions – remember that he had refused then to join in the military venture that the generals had proposed because he thought the time was not ripe and he was worried about Máximo Gómez’s stand. As a result of those years he arrived at his mature vision of life so exquisitely displayed in Versos sencillos, published not too long before he answered the Agramonte invitation to come to Tampa. Gone is the Whitmanesque turbulence of Versos libres. In Versos sencillos, simple only in their accessibility, all is classical composure. He was assured in what he said and sang.

He was not one who denigrated any group – he would not yield on the wrongfulness of hating the Spaniards – and, as his article on the memorial meeting at Cooper Union on Karl Marx makes clear, he did not believe in violence to effect economic reform, much as he admired Marx. He looked beyond the ruling ideologies of his time to a society just to all and devoted to ends quite different than those he saw about him. Con todos y pares el bien de todos is the title and theme of his first speech here in Tampa, exemplifying the thrust of all his work – With Everyone and For the Good of Everyone – a unifying work bringing people together and leading them to common action. Like Versos sencillos it is a leap of major proportions.

And yet the Martí who came to Tampa was the one who, having known and appreciated all the social and class components of Cuban society, had finally concluded with the serenity that characterizes all of Versos sencillos, that con los pobres de la tierra quiero yo mi suerte echar. And in his very moving eulogy to the student martyrs – Pinos nuevos – delivered on his second night in Ybor City he enthroned death as life when it comes in the fight for liberty. The speech reminds me of Martin Luther King saying that if you are not afraid to die you can do anything. Taking the side of one class and praising death seem alien to Martí’s whole outlook but they co-exist in his thinking with his classless non-violent ideals, despite the seeming contradiction. A Marxist – or a Hegelian, if you prefer – would understand that dialectical unity.

Martí was ripe, as I said, for the workers of Ybor City. And, God knows, they were ready for him. He knew with his heart and mind that their eventual loving, comradely response was a possibility, but when it took place that first night at the Liceo, it came as an epiphany for him. He wrote to others about these cigarmakers and said immediately afterwards at the meeting in New York reporting on his trip that his time in Tampa were “three days of immaculate moral beauty,” and he reiterated these deep feelings when a month later he went to Key West and again came to
Tampa. He was always to refer to the latino community of Tampa as “the eagle,” to the invitation that brought him here as “the call of the eagle.”

A year later, after another trip here, he was to write to a colleague from Ocala: “I don’t think I have told you about the grand emotions of my last day in Tampa, when in front of the Liceo which had flowed out into the street to hear us, a procession of Spaniards, hundreds of them, paraded in favor of Cuban independence. Extraordinary times are getting nearer. They paraded in the shade with their white banners. There were all sorts of dangers in the act, due to excessive trade unionism and allusions to local matters and anarchist slogans. I spoke the truth, boldly and treating everyone equally, and I was acclaimed. A magnificent night! Thousands of souls; the occasion a most solemn one, of the few that can shake the human soul to its roots.”

In a year these Spaniards in Ybor City were being fired for their views, and the Cuban cigarmakers went on sympathy strike. In another year Key West asked the Spanish government to let them import Spaniards to replace the Cuban revolutionaries the manufacturers were firing. I know some young writer will one day come along to write a dramatic account of Marti’s adventures with these workers of Tampa and Key West. Perhaps, a novel. Better, a film script. It has all the elements of a great movie, visually, romantically, ideologically – plus contemporary relevance.
The special role that Tampa played in Martí’s life and in that of Cuban history has not been entirely ignored by historians. (We are here because of that, after all.) Perhaps I give it more emphasis than most, but the god that looks out for the destiny of my forefathers will forgive me. Still, I am obliged to point out that I learned the details of it from my reading, intuited the rest from my family. I remember my start of pleasure many years ago when revising the translation of Miguel Barnet’s *Cimarron, the History of a Runaway Slave* I came upon the century-old Cuban slave, Esteban Montejo, who is the hero and narrator of Barnet’s extraordinary book, referring to Martí as “el pro feta de Tampa.” And he did not get that from any reading whatsoever.

Some of those who do comment on the transfiguring rapport between Martí and his Ybor City audience call those cigarmakers *los humildes* and invariably quote a Cuban black as saying, “We don’t understand him, but we are ready to die for him.” These writers are good-hearted, they are on the side of the angels, there is no question about that. They mean to show that people of humble social position can see the political destiny of Cuba more clearly than the colonials back on the island who at that time were in the main for autonomy, a status for Cuba as a nation as castrating as the one we Americans have held Puerto Rico to throughout this century. But I suspect that if indeed some Cuban black in Ybor City or Key West said “We don’t understand him, but we are ready to die for him,” he was trying to please some one outside his class or his caste, just as American blacks for years kept out of trouble by telling whites what they wanted to hear.

It is true that Ybor City as a community was not quite six years old when Martí came here, but those cigarmakers were not born yesterday, they were already well organized and they had not only their native intelligence and experience of life with which to judge a speech of Martí’s – they had also the experience of listening to their readers in the factories for four hours of each working day, a phenomenon I must always talk about when my hometown is mentioned. What they learned from listening to the *lectores* read to them from newspapers and books went hand in hand with the lessons that working for a living gives a worker. (Think how cultivated our middle class would be today if it devoted four hours each day to reading.) And those *lectores* were not a class or a caste apart but persons the cigarmakers elected and employed and lived in community with. If we are able to talk with confidence about what Martí said during those two nights in Ybor City that are now history, it is because a *lector* named Francisco María González took down his speeches in shorthand.

My great uncle, Francisco Milián, was a *lector*, too. Perhaps the best *lector* West Tampa ever had, if popularity is the criterion. He was deported to Cuba forcibly by the leaders of the Tampa community disguised as the Ku Klux Klan for his part in what was then called “labor unrest,” but he returned to a tumultuous welcome at Port Tampa to become eventually mayor of West Tampa. You can read the whole story in Gary Mormino’s book on the immigrant world of Ybor City and more about such depradations against latino workers in Robert Ingalls’ book on vigilantism. It is my belief that West Tampa was incorporated into Tampa in order to prevent any other men like Panchito, as my mother called him, becoming its mayor. He was one of seven or eight children of a cigarmaker from the Canary Islands who (via Matanzas) moved to Key West as soon as the Civil War was over. All those children were brought up there as my grandfather
was. And you can imagine how many institutions of higher learning Key West must have had then.

*Los humildes*, indeed. They are not to be patronized, not even by friends.

Certainly when Martí traveled to Ybor City he did not lodge somewhere away from the community like a visiting politician, but lived right in its midst as he did with the émigré community in New York, struggling to make a living like everyone else, without ceasing his many activities. We have all heard that he stayed with the Pedrosos in the house on Eighth Avenue across from the Martínez Ybor factory, where now that tacky white plaster statue of him stands. Only in the last couple of decades has it been emphasized that the Pedrosos were black, the point apparently being that blacks too played their part in backing Cuban independence, a seemingly generous ideological concession. It is, however, what I call a contribution to the obvious, for that struggle cannot be divorced from the struggle to end slavery, and there are still differences among historians about whether the revolutionary armies were forty or sixty percent black.

To me, the significance of Martí’s close relationship with blacks such as the Pedrosos lies in Martí’s opposition not only to slavery but to all prejudice that would keep him at any distance from friends such as they. He had first met them in Key West and then again here, for they were active in the independence movement in both places. When in a 1893 visit to Tampa Martí was poisoned, Paulina and her husband insisted on taking him into their home. They kept boarders
and they argued that he would be safer there. At night, Señor Pedroso guarded Martí by sleeping on the floor at the door to his room.

I am not certain whether it was on this trip that having heard that there was tension between Cuban blacks and some whites, he immediately upon his arrival gave Paulina his arm and insisted on their walking up and down the streets of Ybor City together to greet his friends. He was making sure everyone knew where he stood. He never compromised on matters of human equality – and specifically on the rights of Cuban blacks – and he made his point in ways that aroused no anger in anyone. I may be stretching a point here on his not ruffling any feathers – he did get poisoned in Ybor City. Somebody must not have been enchanted with him. In any case, I like to think that Martí believed in affirmative action.

We must make the effort to see this egalitarian stance of his in the context of the time. What courage it must have taken to insist on racial equality in the years of the failed Reconstruction in the United States, a time of intensified persecution for blacks rather than restitution for centuries of exploitation. Parenthetically, it must be said that colonials who were won over to autonomy for Cuba within the Spanish system had two fears – of annexation by the United States and of their own blacks’ possible power in a republican form of government. But it was, in a sense, more dangerous to hold Martí’s views in the United States than in Cuba. The Jim Crow laws were in effect and violence was the order of the day for white supremacists. It could not, for example, have been legal for a white man to live with blacks, no more than it was legal for blacks and whites to marry. Especially in the South where you invited lynch mobs by the slightest variation in white-black relations.

Indeed, I believe Martí’s leadership of the Cuban revolutionary party delayed the infiltration in Ybor City and West Tampa of American racist views and ways of living. The colony here was young, there had not been time perhaps to take on mores that were not natural to Cubans, racist though their own society on the island was. The subject of this last is a large one, for there are many differences between American racism and that in Latin America; but my point here has only to do with the effect of American racist laws and beliefs on a working class community not yet infected with our own native, more fearful, more irrational racism.

In time, all Cubans could not meet together at the Liceo, as they did for Martí. In time, black Cubans were forced to form the Martí-Maceo Society because the Cuban clubs here could not allow them membership that was not surreptitious and humiliating. In time, only the old-timers among Cuban blacks still worked elbow to elbow with whites in the cigar factories. They were the first to be fired, and no new apprentices were taken on from the Cuban black families: they were pushed down to the level of native-born American blacks. In time, finally, the cigarmaker’s children took on the racism of the crackers. I shall apologize for the use of that reprehensible term for poor whites when a black becomes governor of Florida with a smashing majority, not simply the mayor of a large urban center who has squeaked into office because the city is being abandoned by middle-class whites.

Is it any wonder that remembering Martí is full of sadness?

Is it fair to ask if Martí could have made a difference if he had lived?
Racism is the great issue in American life, the traumatic shame of our national psyche, the great road block to realizing the equality our Declaration of Independence says is our inalienable right. Sometimes when it surfaces to its most insane peak, it seems we shall never be able to end racism’s degrading life. If we overcome it, Martí’s hope for the world might become a reality.

Let me tell you another anecdote about my great uncle Francisco Milián, the kind that seldom gets into the history books, only into novels. One of Francisco Milián’s wives was a black Cuban woman – I don’t think he could have married her unless they had sneaked back to Cuba, as a few did, gotten married and then sneaked back – and with her he had two sons to whom he gave his surname. In time, he left her and remarried, but my mother and aunts never ceased to treat her as their aunt. Her sons were members of the Círculo Cubano, and one night when they were young men and accustomed to attending the wonderful Saturday night dances of the club, one of them was turned back and not allowed to enter. It was a time, again, of “labor unrest” and the club was fearful that the authorities who were keeping a close watch those days might take action. They were fearful of that, or using it as an excuse. In my family this event was discussed in hushed tones, not as passionately as Cuban independence and not on the porch; but the wound went deep.

Is it any wonder that the descendants of Ybor City should be among those who now carry the infection as virulently as those whom my family called “the barbarians on the other side of Nebraska Avenue.” They worry these days just like the worst of white Americans of other
backgrounds that blacks want everything, that they are taking over – when it is obvious that their situation worsens everywhere. One century after Martí walked the Ybor City streets with Paulina Pedroso – one hundred years and blacks are no more integrated in American life than they were then. Maybe less?

Perhaps Martí could have made a difference here had he lived, here, right here, where he first found a community to support him in his revolutionary call. Perhaps racism would have been totally eradicated in his own Cuba. Perhaps there would have existed for at least as long as my parents’ generation lived an island of equality in Florida. Perhaps there would have been many to extend an arm to my great uncle’s sons and accompany them all the way up the stairs to the ballroom of the Cuban Club – and perhaps there would have been many to walk arm in arm with all the blacks of the region to show where they stood.

That’s the trouble with reading Martí and thinking about what he wrote – you not only take on his style, you begin to dream as he did. Let us try to give our dreams life. How can we use Martí? Sartre asked that question about Jean Genet towards the end of his brilliant book on him and Genet was then a male hustler and thief who had published disturbing works that attacked most of France’s values. We may surely then ask this utilitarian question about a saintly man and his works, and feel, as he himself did about everything he wrote and spoke about, that we do not do violence to his sensibilities – or to literature – by putting them to use.

(I have not touched on a subject that Martí’s poetry and literary criticism immediately places in the foreground – the indivisibility of art and life. We have our own critics to do battle against those who try to convince us that literature is merely words, and art only formal relationships, but sometimes, as has happened in the academy in the decades after the second world war, the philistines are in the ascendancy. We need Martí because it is not only his writing but his very life that refutes them.)

Let us use his ideals as a measure for our society. Let us come to feel as he did in the lines in *Odio al mar* that follow on the ones I quoted earlier:

\[
\text{Lo que me duele no es vivir; me duele,} \\
\text{Vivir sin hacer bien.} \\
\text{(It is not living that pains me; it pains} \\
\text{Me to live without doing good.)}
\]

Let us begin, then, by officially incorporating him into American history. He is already there – there’s nothing we can do about that – but he is a man whose time among us must be better known by Americans. He spent more than a third of his life with us, the most productive and creative period of his life, and he paid us attention of the best kind, incorporating into his work elements of our national and local life. The major intellectual influences in his life were, I think, Emerson and Whitman.

I also like to think that he got the central metaphor of *Pinos nuevos* during his trip here two days before he gave his speech. 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? 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. I like to think this is so, because like him I mean to be an optimist: I want Martí’s life and Ybor City’s history to be all fortuitous happy endings.
Ybor City is not a place where time has stood still, but a town ravaged by time and lost social struggles. This doesn’t mean there is nothing to celebrate about the special contributions this Latino community has made to Floridian and Cuban history – indeed, there are many more than the article suggests but if it was inevitable that its special ambiente die out, the truth about it must not.

Let me say it right out – Ybor City was a radical, trade-union town. Sr. Martínez Ybor began a cigarmaking industry there in the 1880’s to get away from the labor problems that plagued him in Havana. He found an equally humid climate in Tampa (necessary then to cigarmaking), but he made the mistake of hiring the same skilled workers from Cuba. The short trip across the Gulf of Mexico did not serve as ideological fumigation: even before his factory officially opened, his workers went on strike. For this reason, a New York colleague whom Martínez Ybor had persuaded to build a factory there got the credit for first producing habanos and not the man for whom that ward of Tampa was named.

The workers who settled the swampy area that Tampa officials turned over to the cigar manufacturers were not only Cuban. They were also Spanish and Sicilian. A typical Ybor City Tampan of my generation (I am 57) has, like me, a mother of Cuban parentage and a father from Galicia, uncles from Asturias and Cuba, and 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 also built hospitals for their members, the best in Tampa at the time. All of them maintained a staff of doctors who served the members at no cost other than the monthly dues, and the American Medical Association bitterly fought these practices. The societies had to import most of their doctors, but there was one americano who fought the AMA ban, a marvelous surgeon named Dr. Winton whose first name, que Dios me perdone, I can’t remember now.

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. When great international performers, like Caruso, came to Tampa, it was the cigarmakers who booked them, not the americanos on the other side of Nebraska Avenue. Saturday nights young people (properly chaperoned) went from one dance to another at the four social clubs. I remember as a boy going to a free art class summer evenings at the Círculo Cubano. 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.

(There was a fifth club – the Marti-Maceo – and its formation is, perhaps, the worst example of the compromises Ybor City felt were necessary with the mores and laws of Florida. The members of this club were, in the main, black Cubans whom Jim Crow kept out of the others.

*Reprinted from Nuestro, 1 (August 1977), where the essay appeared as “a letter in response to a galling view of Ybor City,” according to Yglesias.
They worked side by side with whites in the cigar factories and they were sometimes surreptitiously accepted as members of the Círculo Cubano, but they could not attend social functions at any or be hospitalized at the Español and Asturiano.)

What gave those Latins that kind of conciencia? Most will tell you that it was the result of an innovation that Ybor City cigar makers can claim as their own – the readers in the factories. They thought of it, not the factory owners. Each worker paid about 25 cents a week to hire an experienced lector to read to them during four hours of the working day. Two hours of newspapers and periodicals, two hours of a novel or non-fiction. The workers voted not only for the reader to be hired but also for the book to be read. Many of them may well have been functional illiterates, but they were well read in the great literature of the Spanish language and in authors like Tolstoy, Zola, and Balzac.

They kept alive the Cuban revolutionary tradition (José Martí gave some of his most important political speeches there) and also the Spanish and Italian anarchist ones. Anarchist newspapers were read by the lectores until the United States entered the First World War. After the Bolshevik revolution, Communist papers were read, too, including the New York Daily Worker, which the lector translated at sight. Today there would be grants from many a foundation to help a community with so original and effective a program for adult education; but in Ybor City the readers irked the factory owners and during the Depression, they summarily did away with them. The cigarmakers went on strike. Ever heard of workers anywhere striking for culture?

The Círculo Cubano (Cuban Club) built this lavish building in 1918, and it featured a theater, cantina, pharmacy, library, and a huge dance floor.

Photograph courtesy of USF Special Collections.
Of course, Ybor City workers were used to going on strike. With their own contributions that had built a Labor Temple where they could organize without endangering their social clubs. The American trade-union movement (the AFL) would not support them, but the Havana cigarmakers sent over contributions, just as the Ybor City ones collected money for their Havana brothers when they went on strike. They marked the passage of time in Ybor City by some of the biggest walkouts: the twelve-month strike of 1910, the ten-month strike of 1920. But although they held out and fought hard, they never won a strike. It could not be otherwise – they were a radical Latin island in the south – and when they were not starved out, the authorities sent in the KKK.

The Depression hit a luxury industry like Ybor City’s hard, and the new generations were being weaned away. With the second World War the industry rallied, and it did well too, in the postwar years. Although the readers were no longer in the factories, there was still political struggle; during the Spanish Civil War the town was almost, one might say, on a war footing to help the Republic. In the postwar period, the factory owners did finally negotiate with their CIO representatives, but in the days of Joe McCarthy the radical leaders were blacklisted – nothing new for Ybor City: there had always been blacklists after a strike.

The final blow came with the revolution in Cuba. You could not make first-rate cigars with tobacco from the Vuelta Abajo area of Pinar del Río. That’s that. And our embargo cut it off. Most Latins in Ybor City were fidelistas, and they did not hold it against “el caballo” that the end
had come. For the old-timers the embargo was further proof of the barbarity of americanos – the “crackers” with hair on their teeth who once broke up their union meetings and called them “Cuban niggers.” The new Cuban exiles were for them new indeed – they were counterrevolutionary. And that (although no stranger will hear this from them) makes them untrustworthy. They remember reactionaries who denounced them to the FBI and with impunity, like that of the old nightriders, flung buckets of red paint at their homes.

I thought your readers should know some of the history and thoughts of those women and men in the photographs in the photo-essay. Those old men playing dominoes well know what Ybor City was like. The reason the sign in the window of a bar, so well caught by the photographer, says it closes at 10 p.m. is that in the last 15 years many have been mugged on the way home and no one now lingers on dear old Seventh Avenue when the sun goes down. If the photographer had moved his camera one block away, we could have seen, in some cases, the empty fields high with weeds where once stood the clapboard houses in which they lived, bulldozed now, awaiting new real-estate entrepreneurs. The moral: we Latins are not necessarily of a piece.
JOSE YGLESIAS: “I AM A GALLEGO”*  
by Alberto Avendaño  
translated from Galician by Ana Varela-Lago

The story begins in a public library in Fort Worth-Dallas (Texas), where I was taken by my friend Zunilda, searching for the book through which she had discovered Galicia. Zunilda had read that book when she was living in Chicago and she never thought that she would end up meeting a flesh-and-blood Galician, as I never though that I would meet an American writer to whom Galicians were a theme, an atmosphere, an intimate landscape.

In the library’s computer I entered that mysterious, yet full of resonance, name: Yglesias, Jose. Title: The Goodbye Land. The screen told me how to get it. The book, now out-of-print, is one of my most precious photocopies. My goal since then has been to translate it into Galician, something that will happen if the “bad fairies” do not interfere.

The Goodbye Land is the story of a man searching for his roots – the hallucinated and hallucinating narration of an American who decides to discover the land of a father whom he barely knew. For Yglesias is the son of a Galician emigrant who falls in love and marries in Tampa (Florida) where he worked in a cigar factory. A place of strong labor activism and solidarity, as shown by the 1920 strike and, later, its support for the Spanish Republic. But that man falls very ill and decides – so it is with Galicians! – that the air and the food of Galicia would cure him. As a resident alien, he had to return to the United States within a year, so he boards a ship in Vigo to go to Cuba and during the trip he falls ill with typhoid fever. It is in a Havana hospital where Yglesias sees his father for the last time, for shortly thereafter the family returned to Tampa while the father was sent back to Galicia where he would die years later.

In the summer of 1964 Jose Yglesias comes to Galicia as a detective of life and finds in Miamán (Ordes-A Coruña) relatives who put together the pieces of the past. He gets in touch with the Galicia of Franco and learns to appreciate the ways of these people who are as rooted in the wet and dark earth they step on as if they were trees. His book deals with emotion and discovery and it clearly shows his profound respect for our language. From the conversations and the situations experienced with his Galician relatives in Miamán, Santiago and Vigo, we can see both the miseries and the greatness of a simple people, at times brutally rooted in the landscape. It is like an etching portrait without tremendismo [a technique employed by several 20th-century Spanish novelists, giving an accumulation of gory detail in a heavy and relentless manner], as real as the very country that still lives on-religious and sacrilegious, conservative and at the same time able of the most vitally progressive attitude, bacchic but suddenly filled with a disturbing sobriety, tremendously generous and yet interested because their interest is in direct relation to that degree of mistrust always hidden in a little corner of the melancholic heart of a gallego.

At the end of the book, Yglesias promises to return and, in fact, his book The Franco Years dates from the time of the political transition in Spain. This time it is a set of articles about the nationalities and regions of Iberia, and its chapter 13 is titled “Galicia: The Unknown Nation.”

*Reprinted from A Nosa Terra (June 1, 1989).
Here, he again tells the American reader about our language, our culture, our political reality at that time. He interviews Ramón Piñeiro, Doctor [of Medicine] García Sabell, Professor Xosé Manuel Beiras, Don Antonio Fraguas. He talks about the Partido Galeguista [a Galician Nationalist Party] and the Galician Popular National Assembly, about the Galician Studies Seminar, and about all that was lost with the military uprising of 1936. He talks about the Galaxia group, about the Europe-ism started by the so-called historical galeguismo, about the translations of Heidegger and Joyce into Galician in its time....

When I got the letter from Yglesias in my Texas apartment, I could read warmth and galeguismo through the English language. He said that he [used English because he] was finding it difficult to express himself in Spanish. Moreover, since he could not write in Galician, he preferred to do it in English. He was telling me, in case I did not know it, that Hemingway had sent dispatches from Vigo when he worked for a Toronto journal. He asked me whether the trolley was still in use that used to run on the coast from Vigo to Bayona for 2 pesetas at that time. He was full of morriña [melancholy], warmth and pride in being a gallego.

In his last novel, entitled *Tristan and the Hispanics* (Simon & Schuster, New York, 1989), which accompanied that precious letter, one of the characters says in English: “I’m a Gallego.” And later on: “My mother had the good sense of marrying a man from Galicia.”

I must admit that these things soften even the hardest heart.
I remembered then, what Jose Yglesias used to tell about his first meeting with Ramón Piñeiro. Don Ramón shook his hand and praised him for his book on Galicia. Our American friend confessed his surprise, since *The Goodbye Land* was not known in Spain. It was then that Beiras showed him a long article about the book which included extracts from the book translated into Galician, and which had appeared in the journal *Grial* in the 1970s. “It was not author’s vanity,” he said “it was seeing my work written in the language of my father which brought tears to my eyes.” He learned then that his name was Xosé.
JOSE YGLESIAS, 1919-1995: A EULOGY DELIVERED AT HIS BURIAL
by Robert P. Ingalls

We’re here because Jose planned it that way. A true activist, he always tried to influence events – as much as he could. Through sheer will, he even continued to work until the end. In his last days in a hospice, his son found him working with the night nurses to help them with their writing. He was always active, never passive. So we should not be surprised that he left specific instructions about the arrangements he wanted following his death. He asked that I speak here, and I feel honored to do so.

I can’t speak for him, but I know he would be pleased that so many of you are here today – family and friends meant everything to him. He would also appreciate the recognition of his accomplishments that came this week in articles in the New York Times, the Tampa Tribune and the St. Pete Times. But he would be quick to point out the errors: In its headline the New York Times put an accent mark on the “e” in Jose and misspelled Dalia’s name; the Tribune reported he has two books coming out next year, but the number is actually three. He would have written the stories differently. In fact he did.

In a recent novel (Tristan and the Hispanics), he imagined the events following the death of a Tampa-born writer of Cuban-Spanish heritage who wrote about Ybor City and lived in New York. When the body is returned to Tampa for burial, Jose has a University of South Florida professor say to the press: “He was the best Hispanic writer in America, and he left an account of Ybor City that is not likely to be surpassed.” The professor then has to explain to relatives why they are being hounded by the media, and he says: “I called the TV station because I thought they should carry some notice of the death of the most important writer Tampa has produced.” A cousin of the writer puts it more bluntly: “He was the greatest man ever to come outa Ybor City! Out of Tampa too. The greatest. Everybody wants to get outa Ybor City and forget it. Not him.... He didn’t forget us. He wrote books, big books – you oughta read them – all about this place. About us Latins. He knew, he was brought up on this street and he played ball on the corner and ... he read every book that was ever written. They’re never gonna make them any smarter than him.” The writer’s son adds that his father was “An essentially sweet man who loved people.” A woman cousin says, “he was a real gentleman. Especially with the ladies. He never said an objectionable word in front of a lady.... He never fought with anyone. He was always so agreeable.... Never a mean word, never.” But then “In a tone more concerned with truth than reverence,” another cousin protests, “I wouldn’t go so far.... The bourgeoisie. He hated them. And the capitalists. And a few others.... Fools, ... [He hated] all fools. And he was right, right?”

At another point in the book, Jose has a grandson say that the writer was “vinegary.” Jose himself once wrote: “I’m not a Romantic-poet type, not me. I look for the worm in the apple.” A book reviewer once called Jose “a kind skeptic.”

That skepticism meant no funeral for him. However, he has a character in a 1989 book suggest burial in the Centro Asturiano Cemetery, noting “There doesn’t have to be a funeral. He could
just be buried there without any fuss....no religion either.... At the Centro Asturiano [Cemetery he’ll be] with lots of family and people he knew and that knew him.”

Jose is already missed by those who knew him. There will be no more of his postcards, letters, phone calls, visits to Tampa. But he left us so much – his books, short stories, articles, essays, plays, reviews. And more is to come with two novels and a book of short stories to be published next year. (He recently said he had never been more in demand.) As important as his books, Jose left us wonderful memories. Like his books, our memories will keep him alive in images and words.

My own memories go back to 1979, when I first met him. I had arrived at the University of South Florida five years earlier, ignorant of Ybor City and its history. But I learned quickly about it and about him. We were first brought together by family and Cuba – two of the things that mattered most to him. On a 1978 trip to Cuba, I met one of his cousins and his wife – Florencio and Alfonsina Alfonso – who were on the same tour. Several months after our return, the Alfonso’s invited my wife and me to a dinner party, where I met Jose, his mother Georgia, his sister Dalia and her husband Jose. That first meeting slowly blossomed into a friendship that helped me understand that his writing does in fact reveal “the truth about them” – his family and his community. He preserved your history and your memories with remarkable accuracy, eloquence, humor, and love. As a reminder of his legacy, I would like to read some short excerpts from his writings. All the words that follow are his, drawn from various works.

“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, and at least one cousin or sister or [brother] married to a Sicilian.”

“The moment I wrote and published my first story – immediately after the [World] War ...Ybor City, the Latin island in Tampa,...was my subject.”

“These cigarmakers never thought of America as a place they had come to for freedom and democracy. Indeed, they were the civilized; the Americans, as an aunt used to say, were barbarians with hair on their teeth.... [Ybor City’s cigarmakers] provided me with an inexhaustible source of material. In my case, I had to write about them, for I feared that this community, which of necessity had to die out, would be forgotten, a part of America no one would get to know.”

“I have a clipping about me] from Who’s Who.... It lists the most important people in the United States. Every couple of years they revise it.... It’s a lot of foolishness. [But] at least I didn’t buy the book. I cut [this clipping] out of the one in the library – when no one was looking. You’d think I was a kid, not an old man.... But it’s not really simply vanity. I am deeply gratified that [my mother] and father appear in Who’s Who. Even in such tiny print. It’s a symbol of what I wanted to do with my writing. I set out to memorialize Ybor City. My little country, as the Spaniards say.... You know that when I was a young man and at least as leftwing as you that this was what I wanted to do. Put Ybor City on the map. Next to Dickens’ Whitechapel and Victor Hugo’s Paris.... I would make sure that Ybor City wouldn’t be forgotten in American history.
That these radical cigarmakers would be known for what they were...the best organized group of workers in America.”

“If you look [today] at Ybor City or West Tampa, where those unfashionable anarchists and communists lived, you see mostly mugging and decay. If you look at me, you see a battered old has-been, visited now and then by cousins and their children, none of whom has read a single book of mine. I admit I enjoy these visits. I sit on the porch and sometimes think that I was wrong to believe that literature was my grand irreplaceable vocation, inseparable from my life, my aorta. I tell myself that it is not now and probably never could have been. What a liberating discovery to make on my old porch where all my interest in stories began!... 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.”

Finally, on the last page of his last book, Jose wrote the following lines to conclude a eulogy for a not-so-fictional writer we knew and loved:

“the son of a cigarmaker, [he] went out into the world and became famous. Isn’t it right that having done his work he came home?”

The plaque on Jose Milián Yglesias’s final resting place in the Centro Asturiano Cemetery.
A ROSE BATTERED BY STERN OCTOBER*
for José Yglesias
by Pablo Armando Fernández

But now, José, that you belong
to the true fist of the Revolution,
to its pulse, I wonder
where for the first time we met and how.
I’m totally convinced
that you are related
to my inmost being, feelings
and memories of long past centuries,
in which we always shared love, faith and hope.
I know that you as oft before,
have always come to me, my brother.
It was Miguel Barnet
who brought the sad, inconsolable news.
I heard him in the throes of desperation.
He didn’t know how to tell us that you, José,
were on a long, long lasting journey,
away into the far horizon’s light,
your land of promise. Tampa?, New York?
That lot given to us at birth, or the chosen one?
A place to fight and dream. For you, a place to rest in peace?
No. As always, you are immersed
in the world’s chorus, hymns, symphonies and odes.
José, at times, we talked in either language or both, the one of the ancestors’ blood or the one learned at school, in a classroom, in books.
It happens to any child of the Diaspora.
Was the José we love, gallego-cubano de Tampa?
Yes, sí. Sí, yes, weaving the truth about them and us.
There as we sat, my brother and I, made one,
knew that once again we’d meet to search for all the secrets of the unsearchable.

* Reprinted from *Cuba Update* (January/February 1999), 36.
Where it began! It has no end, José, no end. We’ll always chat and laugh and, at times, write letters and books to find the truth about us all, the truth, José, the truth. and yet you’ll have to give a title to my novels, according to the metaphor.
And I, for as long as I remain here, will have your letters and your books searching for all the secrets of the unsearchable.
The good work done, you are where you belong, in the true fist of the Revolution.

(La Habana, December 16, 1995)

Jose Yglesias in 1989.

Photograph by James Salzano.
A BIBLIOGRAPHY OF WORKS BY JOSE YGLESIAS

BOOKS: NOVELS


BOOKS: NONFICTION


ARTICLES


**SHORT STORIES**


**UNPUBLISHED PLAYS**

1988 "Chatahoochee"

1988 "The Dictatorship of the Proletariat"
1988 "You Don't Remember?"

1990 "New York 1937"
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JOSE YGLESIAS, the son of cigarmakers, left Tampa in 1937 and became a writer of numerous books, articles, and plays about Ybor City. He died on November 7, 1995 and is buried at the Centro Asturiano Cemetery in Tampa.
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COVER: Jose Yglesias standing in front of the Ybor City house (on 19th Avenue) where he grew up. Photograph courtesy of the Florida Humanities Council.
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