On Diasporas’ Cultural Identity in *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love*

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Oscar Hijuelos (1951-2013), one of the outstanding Cuban-American writers in America, has drawn much attention from critics and scholars. His second novel, *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love* published in 1989, helps him win the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1990, making Hijuelos the first Hispanic author awarded Pulitzer Prize. The novel becomes an international bestseller soon after its publication, and wins high praise from reviewers and critics for its vivid description of the New York Latin music scene of 1940s and 50s as well as its lush language. Oscar Hijuelos concerns the cultural identity dilemma of Cuban Americans. In *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love*, he probes into the art form of music, memory and history which is closely associated with identity issues. Through depicting Arnaz’s disperse experience, Hijuelos advises diasporas to negotiate between two cultures and adopt an intercultural approach to construct a fluid and hybrid cultural identity. The hybridity of Arnaz’s cultural identity can been seen from the following three aspects, that is, the coexistence of American and Cuban cultures, Arnaz’s flexible conversion
between American actor and Cuban musician as well as his negotiation between Cuban past and American present.

I. Coexistence of American and Cuban Cultures

Unlike Cesar who gains his sense of identification via American culture, and Nestor who attempts to restore his pure Cuban cultural identity, Arnaz is a “cultural hybrid”, for Arnaz’s cultural identity reflects the coexistence of American and Cuban cultures (Shirley 74). Arnaz actively embraces American culture, and meanwhile maintains his Cuban origin. He blends the two cultures into a hybrid one, which we can tell from his language habits, marriage and his attitude towards Cuban community in The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love.

Arnaz asserts his hybrid cultural identity through his unique language habits, a mixture of English and Spanish, which signifies a coexistence of Cuban and American culture. In the I Love Lucy show, Desi Arnaz has a thick accent, and “rolled his rrrrrrrr, said ‘jo-jo’ instead of ‘yo-yo’ and ‘tink’, not ‘think’” (Hijuelos, Mambo Kings 38). This unique accent is a mixture of English and Spanish, which makes his language comprehensible for Anglo audience, and at the same time, makes him recognizable from the other principal characters of I Love Lucy. Besides, Arnaz’s famous mispronunciation and sometimes full retreat into Spanish serve primarily as a comedic function, which accelerates his course of getting access to white audiences. In his work Language and Culture, Kramsh points out that language is a symbol of people’s identity, and people distinguish themselves from others through their use of language (3). Arnaz’s bilingual habits allow him to exhibit his Cuban culture without violating the dominated Anglo audiences.

Arnaz’s marriage shows the alliance of American and Cuban cultures. In the I Love Lucy show as well as in reality, Desi Arnaz and Lucy is a happy couple. The union of the Cuban man and American white woman symbolizes the alliance between Cuban and American cultures. The plot structure of I Love Lucy is narrated around Lucy’s desire to be in Arnaz’s show business and Ricky’s resistance to Lucy’s desire. The famous tug-of-war between the couple might even be read as a metaphor of the tension between American and Cuban cultures. In Chicano Narrative: The Dialectics of Difference, Ramon Saldivar states that what distinguishes Chicano narrative is the power to demystify the relations between hegemonic and minority cultures (5). While Gustavo argues that “rather than dealing with the relations between hegemonic and minority cultures, Mambo Kings
focuses on the transactions between two cultures, each of which exerts its own particular kind of hegemony” (68). In the *I Love Lucy* show, the tension between American and Cuban cultures also reflects the particular hegemony of each of them. To some extent, Arnaz and Lucy’s “tag-of-war” in the show is their fighting for hegemony. However, this “tag-of-war” always ends in a comic situation which signifies the reconciliation between the two cultures. Therefore, the marriage of Arnaz and Lucy incarnates the alliance between the two cultures which further indicates to the coexistence of the two cultures.

Arnaz’s attitude towards Cuban-American community reflects his Cuban nostalgia in American reality. In the text, Cuban-American community is depicted as the one full of friendliness, hospitality and willingness to help fellow Cubans. In the community “every Cuban knew every Cuban” (*Hijuelos, Mambo Kings* 37). At that time, some apartments always fill with “travelers or cousins or friend from Cuban—just the way it always happened on the *I Love Lucy* show when Cubans came to visit Ricky in the new York, turning up at the door, hat in hand[...]” (37). Not only Ricky, the role that Arnaz plays in the show, is such a friendly person, but also Arnaz conveys these cultural values of Cuban-American community. In the novel, the connection between Arnaz and the Castillo brothers is based on their common identity as the Cubans living in the United States. For instance, on the night when the brothers meet Arnaz, they find that they are from the same province of Oriente in Cuba. As the three men reminisce about the dance hall scene back in Oriente, they discover that they have all worked for the famous Julian Garcia and his Orchestra. They soon convince themselves that they have met before: “And then in the way that Cubans get really friendly, Arnaz and Castillo brothers reinvented their past so that, in fact, they had probably been good friend” (72). In the heyday of the *I Love Lucy* show Arnaz is quite the tycoon, but this episode shows him as a down-to-earth man eager to indulge his nostalgia for Cuba and the company of other Cubans. Arnaz reinvents the past with the Castillo brothers to enhance the intimacy of the present moment. After this gathering, he invites the Castillo brothers to perform in the *I Love Lucy* show. Arnaz’s hospitality and kindness to his fellow Cuban Americans as well as his nostalgia for Cuba reveal his attachment to Cuban cultural root.

From the above analysis, it is evident that blending heterogeneous cultures into a hybrid one is the optimal approach in a multi-culture society. Hijuelos exhibits his unique writing strategy of cultural identity through depicting the coexistence of
American and Cuban cultures in Arnaz’s cultural identity, and therefore he reveals that it is of vital importance to accomplish a hybrid cultural identity so as to survive in the “melting pot”. Concerning “hybridity”, Homi Bhabha gives its definition in *Location of Culture*. “Hybridity is a problematic of colonial representation and individuation that reverse the effects of the colonialist disavowal, so the other ‘denied’ knowledge enter upon the dominant discourse and estrange the basis of its authority—its rules of recognition” (114). He holds that hybridity offers the marginalized diaspora the possibility of access to the mainstream culture. From the perspective of hybridity, Hijuelos, as one of the representatives of Hispanic writers, concerns Cuban diasporas’ cultural identity, and thinks that Cuban culture and American culture can coexist in the diasporas’ cultural identification mirrors that Homi Bhabha puts forward as “the hybridity subverts the binary opposition between the self and the other, between the inside and the outside” (156).

II. Flexible Conversion Between American Actor and Cuban Musician

In *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love*, Desi Arnaz, as a historical character, is of great significance in the narration. First of all, he contributes to the verisimilitude of literary narration by depending on the reader’s knowledge to supply fiction with real historical events, and by creating the tension between what the reader expects and what the narration actually delivers. Second, the real historical name Desi Arnaz appears in reference to the *I Love Lucy* show in the novel evoking profound cultural significance. Fictional identities often blend, as the reader of *The Mambo Kings Play Song of Love* encounters the references to Desi Arnaz (fictionalized historical person) and then Ricky Ricardo (fictional television character played by Arnaz) as if no boundary—the real and fictional exists between them. This suggests that as if Desi Arnaz plays himself in the series, which blurs the boundary between the performing self and non-performing self. For the television audience, Desi and Ricky Ricardo is definitely the same object, and for the reader of *The Mambo Kings*, there is also no difference between them. Through the ambiguity of Desi/ Ricky identity in the narration, Hijuelos attempts to elucidate the fluid identity of Desi Arnaz.

In *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love*, Arnaz represents the emblem of American Dream. In the Mambo boom of thirties and forties, the Castillo brothers came to the United States to pursue their American Dream. For them, Arnaz is “the most famous success story” (Hijuelos, *Mambo Kings* 33). In the history of the U.S.,
Arnaz is a celebrated crossover performer and a tremendously successful example of a Latino. He comes to America with nothing, just like Cesar and Nestor. He starts his music career from a singer with a group. After a train of fortunate events, he becomes a popular nightclub singer and conga player in New York. Before his appearance in the *I Love Lucy* show, he has already enjoyed some fame in the American entertainment field. But it is with the *I Love Lucy* show that he becomes a nationwide idol recognizable to everyone. At that time when Cuban singers and musicians swarmed into America, the market for those singers was saturated and highly competitive. Therefore, very few of the Latino singers and musicians who came to the United States during this period achieved great success outside of Latino communities. One of the reasons that Arnaz achieves his enduring fame is his crossover from Cuban singer to American Actor. From then on, Arnaz starts his journey of switching between the roles of Cuban singer and American Actor. His identity is also in a fluid state. Hall in his “Cultural Identity and Diaspora” claims that “diaspora identity are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference” (Hall, Cultural Identity and Diaspora 235). Through the “transformation” of his social roles, Arnaz’s cultural identity undergoes a transformation from a fixed Cuban identity to a fluid cultural identity which displays the hybridity of American and Cuban cultures.

Arnaz’s code switching between Spanish and English reveals his hybrid cultural identity. In the *I Love Lucy* show, he swiftly switches his language. While communicating with Cuban fellows, he switches to Spanish. For example, in the episode that when the Castillo brothers perform their song “The Beautiful Maria of My Soul”, after a short chat with Lucy in English, shaking his head, Arnaz “started speaking rapidly in Spanish to the brothers” (Hijuelos, *Mambo Kings* 33). Code-switching is not merely a communicative strategy, and also reflects the speaker’s different self-awareness. Through switching to Spanish, Arnaz underlines his ethnic identity. Although performing in an American TV program whose major audiences are the white people, Arnaz maintains his Cubanness. In doing so, Arnaz’s cultural identity comes to possess a nature of hybridity, which later accelerates his course of earning a place in the field of American popular culture. Besides, to some extent, the television show *I Love Lucy* itself is also a hybrid entity of American and Cuban cultures, for it succeeds in presenting a fantastic world composed by these two cultures to the audiences. In the show, American actor juxtaposes with Cuban singer, and Cuban Mambo music culture blends with
American sitcom television culture. As a member of ethnic minorities, Arnaz appears in the *I Love Lucy* show, the epitome of white’s popular culture, which conveys symbolic meaning of cultural fusion.

Long after Cesar has abandoned his music career, he is interviewed by a radio show, and his praise for Desi Arnaz gives rise to the response of the emcee: “But no one has ever considered him very authentic or original” (Hijuelos, *Mambo Kings* 339). Cesar replies, “Bueno, I think what he did was difficult. For me, he is very Cuban, and the music he played in those days was good and Cuban enough for me. You know, he sang a lot of old Cuban ballads on that show” (339). The statement, “Cuban enough”, makes it clear why Castillo brothers have failed to realize the same American Dream as Arnaz has ever achieved, largely because Arnaz is ethnic but not too ethnic, and his cultural identity is a fluid and hybrid one. Thereby, he can not only get the recognition of American mainstream society, but also maintain his Cuban traits. His hybrid identity helps him earn a significant place in the American television medium as a member of ethnic minority.

After Cesar’s death, Eugenio visits Desi Arnaz at his estate. The dual identity of Arnaz reappears briefly when Eugenio approaches Arnaz’s house, and momentarily expects to hear the *I Love Lucy* theme song, and when he at first mistakes Arnaz for a gardener. Then, the gardener smiles and “the young Arnaz’s face revealed itself” (Hijuelos, *Mambo Kings* 400). Through involving the Desi/Ricky identity conundrum, Hijuelos demystifies the American Dream embodied in Desi Arnaz. The success of Arnaz’s American Dream is based on his hybrid cultural identity. His role as an American actor allows him to get access to American mainstream, and his role as a Cuban player allows him to preserve his Cuban heritage. Furthermore, his flexible conversion between the two roles endows his cultural identity a trait of hybridity.

III. Negotiation Between Cuban Past and American Present

As mentioned in the two aspects above, Nestor and Cesar in *The Mambo Kings* fail to achieve the same American Dream as Arnaz does. A fundamental reason is their problematic cultural identity. Both of them are unable to figure out an appropriate solution to their problematic cultural identity. They haven’t recognized that there is no need to identify with either identity by negating the other. Both Nestor and Cesar can’t handle the conflicts generated by the difference between Cuban and American cultures. The conclusion that we can draw from the Castillo
brothers’ failure is that it is necessary to negotiate between the two cultures, as Bhabha holds that “cultural negotiation and translation make it possible for marginalized to identify with the center through identification” (Bhabha, The Location of Culture 45).

In The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love, Arnaz’s dual identity of American actor and Cuban singer provides him with “the advantage of in-betweenness, the straddling of two culture and the consequent ability to negotiate the difference” (Hoogvelt 158). In the Epilogue, Eugenio’s visiting Arnaz after his uncle Cesar’s death is of significant meaning. This episode reveals Arnaz’s negotiation between American and Cuban cultures, which is one of the remarkable features of his hybrid cultural identity. In addition, in this episode, Arnaz also helps Eugenio negotiate his American present and Cuban past.

The sharp contrast between American urban and Cuban rural lifestyle is one of the manifestations of cultural conflicts. Arnaz negotiates the conflict through preserving these reminders of his Cuban past, and recreates some living surroundings that resemble the environment of Cuba. In Arnaz’s estate, the reminders of Cuban past are everywhere, for instance, a stone wall covered with bougainvillea, like the flower covered walls of Cuba, and a framed 1952 map of Cuban, photographs of a glamorous Lucille Ball, Desi Arnaz with the Mambo Kings. These emblems of the past reveal Arnaz’s longing for Cuba. Although Arnaz has become the renowned icon in the United States and has successfully assimilated himself into American society, he still maintains his Cuban consciousness. During the nostalgic conversation with Eugenio, Arnaz tells the reason that he chooses to live in California is that the climate there reminds him of Cuba, “here grow many of the same plants and flower” (Hijuelos, Mambo Kings 402). He even builds a little patio garden modeled after one of his favorite little plazas in Cuba. He also tells Eugenio that he has retired recently and sometimes still does a little television show, but mainly likes to spend his time with his children or in his garden. And then, he says, “... But I can’t complain. I love my flowers and little plants” (401). The phrase “can’t complain” shows that in some way Arnaz has found the balance between his Cubanness and Americanness.

Arnaz’s hybrid cultural identity embodied in his negotiation between two cultures also exerts a far-reaching influence on Eugenio who as a second-generation immigrant often feels confused about his cultural identity for he is unable to figure out which culture he should identify with. Shortly after Eugenio’s arriving at
Arnaz’s estate, Arnaz says “Ah, you must be hungry. Would you like a sandwich? Or a steak?” (Hijuelos, *Mambo Kings* 400). Just as the choice between “sandwich”, the typical American food, and “steak”, the traditional Cuban food, Eugenio also faces the choice between American and Cuban identity. Through the visit to Arnaz’s estate and the conversation with him, Eugenio realizes that there is a third choice, that is, to negotiate the conflicts between the two cultures, and hence to construct a hybrid cultural identity. For Eugenio, the American-born Cuban diaspora, his father and his uncle are the only bond that connects him with his Cuban past. After the death of his father and uncle, Eugenio loses his connection with Cuba, and therefore he feels a sense of rootlessness. In the nostalgic conversation, Arnaz asks Eugenio whether he has ever been to Cuba. Eugenio gives a negative answer, and then Arnaz replies, “Well, what a shame” (402). For Arnaz, Cuban culture is the indispensable component of Cuban American’s cultural identity. Attempting to provide Eugenio with a glimpse of Cuba, Arnaz decides to show Eugenio the garden that he models after one of his favorite little plazas in Santiago. With the help of Arnaz, Eugenio realizes both Cuban and American cultures are the indispensable parts of his cultural identity, and he should not reject either of them.

At the later part of the epilogue, with the influence of Arnaz, Eugenio starts his journey of reconnecting his father who symbolizes the bond that links him to Cuba. Sitting in Arnaz’s living room and recalling the *I Love Lucy* show, Eugenio finds himself actually in the show. This dreamlike episode helps him to reconnect his father whose heart brims with the memory of his Cuban past. When his father smiles to him, Eugenio walks towards him: “Embracing him, I started to feel myself falling through an endless space, my father’s heart. Not the heart of flesh and blood that had stopped beating, but this other heart filled with light and music, and I felt myself being pulled back into a world of pure affection, before torment, before loss, before awareness” (Hijuelos, *Mambo Kings* 404). This embrace is what Eugenio has been waiting for a long time to bring into his life. In the sense, he fuses the past with the present.

In the second part of the dreamlike episode, Eugenio finds himself sitting in the Tropicana Club. As he watches the Castillo brothers performing “Beautiful Maria of My Soul”, the vision switches to another, in which Eugenio sees his uncle’s heart swelling into the size of the stain heart on the *I Love Lucy* show, and floating over on La Salle Street toward the church where Cardinal Spellman is going to administer confirmation to the sixth-graders. Then, the confirmation ceremony
shifts dreamlike to a funeral. When the organist starts to play, “except, out of each key, instead of pipe-organist starts to play, instead of Bach, what sounds is a mambo trumpet” (Hijuelos, *Mambo Kings* 406). There is “a full-blown mambo orchestra straight out of 1952 playing a languid bolero” (407). When the coffin is carried outside the church, “another stain heart escapes” (407) rising out of the wood, and finally the two hearts, Cesar’s and Nestor’s, ascend into the sky and float away together.

Although the dream episode takes place in Eugenio’s imagination, the scene that the two Castillo brothers’ hearts join together and fly away symbolizes Eugenio eventually fuses his Cubanness and Americanness into a hybrid one. In this way, Hijuelos designates Arnaz as a mediator and connector. Arnaz not only mediates the conflicts between Cuban and American cultures, but also connects the second generation with the first one, and therefore, he bridges the rupture between the two generations, between Cuban past and American present. Besides, by juxtaposing the religious ceremony performed in the church which represents American orthodox culture with “Mambo orchestra” which signifies Cuban culture, Hijuelos skillfully expresses his hybrid cultural identity strategy (Hijuelos, *Mambo Kings* 407).

**Conclusion**

The hybrid cultural identity shown by Arnaz is the one that integrates the two cultures into a hybrid one, which emphasizes the negotiation between the two cultures as well as the uncertainty and complexity of the boundary between the two cultures. Arnaz’s hybrid identity allows him to take full advantage of his in-between position to stage the negotiation between two cultures, which also provides guidance for the next generation. Eugenio therefore internalizes the Cuban past of the elder generation, recognizes the importance of reconciling the conflicts between two cultures, and integrates Cuban and American cultures into a hybrid one so as to achieve a hybrid identity. Through the exploration of diaspora’s cultural identity, Hijuelos demonstrates that diasporas should neither forsake nor be enslaved by their original culture, but instead, Cuban and American cultures are supposed to coexist in diasporas’ cultural identities. Therefore, Hijuelos suggests a hybrid cultural identity as a solution to their problematic one.
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