

MANUEL RAMOS.

THE GOLDEN HAVANA NIGHT. A SHERLOCK HOMIE MYSTERY

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He's back! Following his introduction in *Desperado* (2013) and his apprenticeship into the world of the private investigator in *My Bad* (2016) at the hands of Luiz Montez, Agustín Corral now takes center stage in *The Golden Havana Night*. No longer subtitled "A Mile High Noir" in honor of the Denver environs that serves as both backdrop and character, the "Sherlock Homie" subtitle marks a clear separation between "Gus" Corral and his now retired mentor as he builds his business and his life after serving time in prison. Denver is still there, with its people, barrios, rush-hour traffic, and "hell-bent gentrification" (161), but the shift points to Gus who the reader now follows as he attempts to regain his footing with his friends, family and the city that he sometimes has a difficult time recognizing.

The plot of the novel is two-pronged. On the one hand, we have the case that is alluded to in the title: Cuban-defector, and now Denver Rockies' all-star slugger, Joaquín "Kino" Machaco's past catches up to him and Gus is hired to travel to Cuba to see that the situation is resolved. Though initially there is little detection involved in this matter as Gus is clearly hired to make sure that payment meant to put an end to the Machaco family debt is made, things get more complicated as people begin to die, the money is stolen, and betrayal rears its ugly head. Cuba is no Denver, and Gus is clearly out of his element as he strives to understand its people, history, politics, and traditions. "You are a long way from home, Mr. Corral," says Lourdes Machaco as they drive from Havana to Trinidad seeking refuge from those that would do them harm, and his response is clear: "Yeah. Cuba is nothing like Denver" (90).

The second case is that of Leo Hudgens, a remorseful former Denver cop who was involved in a case of police brutality and

corruption years prior. As he is packing up to fly to Cuba, a downtrodden Hudgens arrives at Gus' door to ask his help in tracking down his former partner. Both, it turns out, murdered a young African American during a routine traffic stop but were cleared of wrongdoing by the District Attorney's office after "an appropriate investigation" (39). Hudgens, riddled with guilt and living a downspiralizing existence, wants to find his former partner to set things straight. Unbeknownst to Gus however, Hudgens doesn't intend to let justice run its course, as he is determined to take matters into his own hands by killing his former partner.

Both cases are kept mostly separate as Gus travels to Cuba and then returns to Denver where he begrudgingly helps Hudgens whom he categorizes a "worthless piece of humanity" (132). Despite the distance that Ramos maintains between these two, one cannot help but notice the similarities. On the one hand, as Gus is closing shop for his trip to Cuba, Hudgens' appearance at his door triggers in him and the reader memory of the many episodes of excessive force employed by police and the resulting absolution of any wrongdoing by what some deem to be an unjust legal system. No need to mention any names, but the entire Black Lives Matter (that is passingly referenced in the novel) was birthed as response to cases like the one Hudgens and his partner perpetrated. Hudgens' plea for help from Gus as he is leaving for Cuba then prepares the reader for the official corruption we witness upon arrival in Havana. The result is clear: even though Gus says that "Cuba is nothing like Denver," he soon after is forced to amend this statement, even if just to himself: "The feeling was familiar. Except my location, I could have said, 'Same old, same old'" (96). While Cuba may appear to be backwards in its living conditions and disparities between its well-to-do citizenry (its new entrepreneur class, government officials) and its masses, its social ills are to some extent relatable to those that Gus witnesses and experiences first-hand in the United States.

Though this is not the time nor place for such considerations, one has to wonder how much of what Cubans express about their island would be at home in characters like Gus' sister Corrine, a progressive community activist and leader, when they state that despite the current state of affairs "We still love our country. We still believe in our country... And the Revolution" (99). Given the not-so-veiled commentary on

today's national politics that the novel offers, it is for love of country, despite its national leaders and accusations of misguided political allegiance, that characters like Corrine carry on and continue to fight to right the social ills that affect the downtrodden.

The novel ends with both cases resolved, but its conclusion leaves much uncertainty about the fate of the "Northside Denver Cholo" turned detective. In the middle of the violent Machaco family squabble that ensues after the truths are revealed about how Kino was swindled by those he trusted most, Gus' forehead is smashed with a baseball bat and he loses consciousness. The novel comes to a close with a simple ominous line: "I drifted into darkness." Will Manuel Ramos awaken Gus from this or has Sherlock Homie completed his cycle? Fans of Chicano literature and noir fiction will have to wait and see.

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