

Cuba's Political
and Sexual Outlaw
Reinaldo Arenas

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Introduction

Cuban revolutionary ideology called forth a redirection of the national literary aesthetics in step with radical changes in the country's sociopolitical and economic platforms. As cultural structures took on a likeness to the new state ideals, art, in its didactic character, became a functional agency. Its primary role was the support of official aspirations in the development of the so-called socialist man, as Ernesto "Che" Guevara announced in 1965 in his *El socialismo y el hombre en Cuba* (*Socialism and Man in Cuba*). With the triumph of the Cuban Revolution in 1959 the revolutionary government started literary reforms within a strong didactic movement. For instance, campaigns against illiteracy, beginning in 1961, became the first step in the advancement of basic political ideals, aimed in particular at the illiterate peasant masses. An incipient cultural bureaucracy provided parameters for the new cultural practices and instilled in intellectuals a call for social responsibility in support of revolutionary aesthetics and ideology. Writers, as integral components of the campaigns against illiteracy, took on the task of spreading ideological platforms of the revolutionary sociopolitical structures. Thus began a long evolution that extends into current literary production: committed art as a political weapon.

Reinaldo Arenas stands out among the notable writers arising within the earliest pedagogical phase of political indoctrination. On March 13, 1961, as Cuba declared that the 1959 "Agricultural and Anti-imperialist Revolution" was a socialist movement, Arenas, a young peasant from rural Holguín, province of Oriente, welcomed the ideological and agricultural trade training made available to him as a member of a destitute social class. As he stated in his posthumously published autobiography, *Antes que anochezca* (1992; *Before Night Falls*, 1993), Arenas, barely sixteen, participated in public welcoming celebrations. He had been involved in some of

the guerrilla activities of the "26 de Julio" rebel army, which had deployed forces close to Holguín. Whether Arenas's revolutionary education started in his short residence in a rebel camp is not known, but he admitted that he saw in the Revolution his way out of a stifling rural environment. He underwent ideological training and became a "cadre," a member of a political group aimed at young people. He also received training in the various aspects of farm management. Arenas disliked farm work, however, and displayed a strong inclination to become a writer.

Transferred to Havana in 1962 for further vocational instruction, he found his way into literary circles. In 1963 he entered a literary contest and, although he did not win, came to the attention of distinguished writers on the jury, who invited him to join the staff at the National Library. Arenas accepted, glad to give up his agricultural training and, above all, to stay in the glitzy capital of Havana. The city captivated the young peasant, who would never return to live in rural Holguín. This was the beginning of a career working for various cultural institutions, and of his literary self-education. Without formal training, in 1965 he published his first three short stories in *Revista Unión*, the prestigious journal founded in 1962 by the writers' guild, Unión Nacional de Escritores y Artistas Cubanos (UNEAC).

Though Arenas may have owed his first publications to his status as a promising young writer rescued by revolutionary cultural institutions from semiliterate peasantry, these initial short stories fell short of displaying a commitment to the revolutionary cause. The pieces, three short vignettes set against a rural background of poverty and despair, are connected by the figure of a child who attempts to escape dreary reality by means of his imagination. The stories reflect clearly a young writer in training, but they also foretell Arenas's interest in aesthetic experimentation. They anticipate, too, his repeated use of child and adolescent characters in the autobiographically oriented novels *Celestino antes del alba* (1967; *Singing From the Well*, 1987), and *El palacio de las blanquísimas mofetas* (1980; *The Palace of the White Skunks*, 1990).

Arenas's lack of a significant commitment to the official "revolutionary realism" is evident early on. This is the case in *Celestino antes del alba*, a highly experimental novel that he produced at age twenty-two and entered in the first literary contest sponsored by UNEAC in 1965. It was a daring novel: *Celestino* tells the story of an impoverished Cuban peasant child facing the social stigma of suspected homosexual tendencies. The references to his childhood experiences were barely disguised. Arenas was

bold in venturing into this taboo subject matter, which includes graphic descriptions of homophobic violence, since eyewitnesses have pointed to a systematic persecution of homosexuals in Cuba as early as 1961. Indeed, *Celestino* created controversy in Cuba. Some of the jury members refused on ideological grounds to award Arenas's work the first prize. Instead it received an honorable mention. Such a prize still qualified the novel for publication, but publication of *Celestino* was clearly stalled. It did not appear until two years later, and only in a limited edition—this in spite of a heavy national publishing program. *Celestino* would be Arenas's only novel published in Cuba.

Arenas, a young and rising writer, dared to take upon himself a fight against the critical establishment, following the delayed publication of *Celestino*. He assumed an aggressive activist stance when only two lukewarm reviews of the novel appeared in Cuba. In his critical article "Celestino y yo" (Celestino and I), published in 1967 in UNEAC's *Revista Unión*, Arenas openly defined his concept of "realism" within the parameters of the experimental aesthetics of his novel. His tone toward Cuban critics was strong and insulting, forecasting his defiant attitude years later as an iconoclast of political symbology. It was a brave action. Arenas was fully aware that a more committed approach to revolutionary ideology would have guaranteed the publication of his increasing backlog of short narratives and novels (he was a prolific writer of poetry as well). Even so, he resisted at length any softening of his political dissension, as reflected in the interviews, few but fierce, published at the peak of his short literary career in Cuba. His confrontational attitude was also visible in a handful of articles, mainly book reviews of Cuban literary works. Not surprisingly, when he was put on trial on charges of corruption of minors, Arenas did not find support from the cultural institutions where he had previously worked.

With his second novel, *El mundo alucinante* (1969; *Hallucinations*, 1971; retranslated as *The Ill-Fated Peregrinations of Fray Servando*, 1987), an historical re-creation of the Dominican friar Servando Teresa de Mier Noriega y Guerra (1773–1827) of Mexico, Arenas established a strong reputation abroad as Cuba's newest literary rebel. Like *Celestino*, the novel won only an honorable mention in Cuba. Some jury members demanded that Arenas be awarded first prize, but no novel received that honor. *El mundo alucinante*, unlike *Celestino*, was not published in Cuba—a violation of UNEAC's guidelines for award winners. Arenas had to seek interested publishing houses abroad, a move that in turn violated the internal

procedures at UNEAC, which holds full control of any literary work produced by a member. Arenas's decision to smuggle the novel out to France was, therefore, a daring action for a young writer without an established international reputation. Published in French translation in 1969 by the prestigious publishing house Editions du Seuil, *Le monde hallucinant* won a prize as the best foreign novel in translation published in France that year. Although the Bibliothèque Nationale listing dates the publication of *Le monde* as 1969, Arenas indicated 1968 as the publication date. He stressed, therefore, that the novel was published in French translation before it appeared in the original Spanish in Mexico in 1969 (Soto, *Pentagonía* 140).

Since Arenas saw that publication of his work was stalled in Cuba, he initiated a complex process to smuggle out of the country completed or partial manuscripts of his short-story collection *Con los ojos cerrados* (Montevideo, 1972) and five novels—*El palacio de las blanquísimas mofetas* (Barcelona, 1982; *The Palace of the White Skunks*, 1990), *Otra vez el mar* (Barcelona, 1982; *Farewell to the Sea*, 1986), *El asalto* (Miami, 1990; *The Assault*, 1994), *Viaje a La Habana* (Madrid, 1990), and *El color del verano* (Miami, 1991; *The Color of Summer*, 2000)—as well as two volumes of poems, *El central* (Barcelona, 1981), and *Leprosorio* (Madrid, 1990), and a play, *Persecución* (Miami, 1986). Perhaps because of their highly antirevolutionary content, only a handful of these works appeared while Arenas remained in Cuba: *Con los ojos cerrados*, followed by Editions du Seuil's French translations of *Celestino* (*Le Puits*, 1973) and *El palacio* (*Le palais des très blanches mouffettes*, 1975), the latter appearing during Arenas's controversial imprisonment. He displayed a bold attitude in his plan to make his work known in international circles. This is the case with his novelette *La Vieja Rosa*, which had been published as part of *Con los ojos cerrados* and was republished in Venezuela in 1980. It appeared along with an interview with Arenas by the editor, conducted in Havana before Arenas's arrival in the United States that same year. Although highly coded, the interview stands out today as his testimony in opposition to revolutionary ideological impositions upon the free development of his literary production. This profuse and systematically smuggled literary production may make him Cuba's first underground writer of international exposure.

In spite of his difficulty in securing publication of his works in Cuba, Arenas partially succeeded in maintaining a national reputation through publication of five short stories in official Cuban literary journals from

1966 to 1969. It is clear, however, that by 1968 Arenas's work was being blacklisted, a fact corroborated by his failure to secure publication of his short-story collection *Con los ojos cerrados*, which did not take a prize in that year's literary competition.

Arenas's literary production while in Cuba reflects an interest in experimentation with autobiographical memory, whether within the structure of traditional literary formats, such as the bildungsroman, or the officially promoted *testimonio*. Indeed, his earliest novels, *Celestino* and *El palacio*, display a well-developed literary plan of autobiographical documentation of his memories of growing up on a rural farm and later in a small provincial town, themes that are already present in his early short stories. This detailed attention to a literary plan is significant because Arenas came to Havana only partially literate and devoid of a significant literary education. As Arenas pointed out in his autobiography, his literary training was self-taught; it took place as he worked at the National Library in his readings of literary masters and in his friendship with famous writers. As I shall discuss in detail, Arenas's experimentation with revolutionary testimony and socialist realism also includes his focus on the bildungsroman as his way to explore his autobiographical memories from the perspective of a gay man. I argue that this open treatment of homoeroticism and not his literary experimentation may have caused the heavy censorship that he encountered in Cuba.

By the early seventies, according to his autobiography, Arenas was the constant target of police harassment, culminating in an arrest. "The Reinaldo Arenas Case" did not have, however, the international coverage of poet Heberto Padilla's brief incarceration in 1971. Arenas's arrest in 1973 on charges of "corruption of minors," he vehemently claimed, came in retaliation for his publication abroad. According to his version, he was the victim of police entrapment while in the company of a man whom until that point Arenas had called his personal friend. Arenas insisted in his autobiography that his arrest was an organized police entrapment, centered on his allegedly documented attraction to adolescents. He was then living a picaresque life, struggling for survival, even using a sham marriage in 1973 in a vain effort to gain possession of an apartment in Havana. After a second arrest in 1974 and an escape from a local police precinct, Arenas remained a fugitive from justice for forty-five days, finding refuge in Lenin Park on the outskirts of Havana. From the park he smuggled a document that denounced an organized government persecution. Although he intended it to be published abroad, friends in France, Jorge and Margarita