Jorge Olivares


*Becoming Reinaldo Arenas* is an exemplary work of literary criticism. Using biographical criticism, intertextuality, and queer theory, Jorge Olivares presents a comprehensive study of Arenas’s literary work that balances careful readings of a number of short stories and novels with readings of his autobiography, unpublished correspondence, and drafts. Most importantly, he puts into perspective Arenas’s much read autobiography and his penchant for parodic rewriting, refocusing attention on one of the fundamental narrative devices running through his literary works, the Freudian family romance; here, the erotic attraction to an absent father and an obsession with a sexually repressive dominant mother (who may take the guise of Fidel Castro) turn eventually to his suffering from AIDS and suicide. Different from other Arenas studies, this one does not privilege one singular perspective—Arenas’s sexuality, his opposition to the Cuban Revolution, or his exile. Rather it traces his literary strategies and obsessions against the horizon of contemporary Cuban and Latin American literature.

There is no doubt that Arenas was a product of the Cuban Revolution. As Olivares shows in his first chapter, he became a writer thanks to the Cuban Revolution, his sexual life unfolding and then being increasingly restricted by it, his own political stance developing only gradually. While he lived his homosexuality openly, he conformed to the official government line in other respects, as when he published in *La gaceta de Cuba* a letter denouncing the Latin American journal *Mundo Nuevo* for having published without his consent excerpts from his novel *El mundo alucinante*. (*Mundo Nuevo* was accused of being funded by the CIA.) Olivares sees in Arenas’s publications of that period a “rhetoric of indirection” at work, whereby he conformed to political demands yet identified his own point of view with seemingly unrelated authors like José Martí and Robert Musil. In Olivares’s account, it was only later, when it came to the publication in Cuba and abroad of *El mundo alucinante* that Arenas began to run into difficulties with the Cuban government. Its publication in 1968 in France and Mexico, without Cuban authorization, was followed by his demotion at the UNEAC and secret service vigilance, and finally, in 1974, his arrest and incarceration for fondling two boys. Arenas’s departure from Cuba in 1980 during the Mariel boatlift and subsequent exile in New York is movingly told in his autobiography and in the film based on it, *Before Night Falls* by Julian Schnabel. We learn from Olivares’s book that what sustained him throughout his years of alienation in New York, at odds with the Cuban exile and the Latino
and gay communities there, was his identification of the erotic with the literary that had marked his early “revolutionary” years in Cuba, whereby “the body needs to feel satisfied to give free rein to the spirit” (p. 33).

The following chapters detail Arenas’s inscription of primal fantasies in his literature. Chapter 2 interprets the family tree as a leitmotif running through his novel *El palacio de las blanquísimas mofetas*, referenced as well in his first unpublished novel, which was based on a radio soap opera. In Chapter 3, the primal fantasy of paternal seduction motivates Olivares’s reading of two episodes of the autobiography, *Antes que anochezca*, as well as the novel *Viaje a La Habana*. Chapter 4 offers a reading of a short story written in 1986, “El Cometa Halley,” as a rewrite of Federico García Lorca’s *La casa de Bernarda Alba*, turning the tale of a repressive matriarch into a fantasy of a wild and liberating mother. Finally, in Chapter 5, the short story “Mona,” written one year before Arenas’s official diagnosis of AIDS, is presented as a tale of fear of the disease, where a wild love affair with a nymphomaniac multimillionaire turns out to be an allegorical representation of a misogynist, homophobic narrative of HIV. Similarly, in *El color del verano*, a late novel, the promiscuous painter Clara stands in for the writer’s horror at his decaying body, declaring “ya yo no soy yo.” The epilogue of the book comments on Arenas’s publishing difficulties in life and his posthumous fame and selective appropriation in Cuba. It offers readings of the “selective recovery ceremony” that has occurred in the case of Arenas, giving at the same time testimony to how much Arenas has become entrenched in Cuban literary imagination, as for example in the work of Ronaldo Menéndez.

Arenas’s work has often been read through the lens of history, be it that of his life, the history of sexuality in Cuba, or Arenas’s historical novels (*El mundo alucinante, La loma del angel*). Yet, what Olivares shows us is an Arenas who was above all a visceral writer, where the inscription of the writer’s body is inevitably tied to the incorporation into his fiction of his readings. Olivares conclusively argues, despite Arenas’s denial, that *Palacio de las blanquísimas mofetas* is a rewrite of Galdós’s *Fortunata y Jacinta*; “El Cometa Halley” rewrites *La casa de Bernarda Alba*, and “Mona” turns out to be the tale of Leonardo da Vinci’s travesty as Mona Lisa. Arenas’s autobiography is therefore only the last instance of a lifetime of mining his body, his family, and his readings of other works, to be translated into the body of literature that eventually survived him.

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