

“The Making of a Gay Activist: Reinaldo Arenas”¹
Rafael Ocasio, Charles A. Dana Professor of Spanish
Agnes Scott College

Shortly after his arrival in the United States by means of the Mariel boatlift in 1980, Reinaldo Arenas became one of the most vocal figures among the political activists opposed to the Castro regime. His self-promoted public image was first that of a “Marielito,” as these new waves of Cuban immigrants became known, and second that of a homosexual, in the term used in the early part of the eighties. In spite of the negative connotation associated with the Mariel boatlift, during his exile period, one year in Miami and nine in New York City, Arenas never sought to abandon his Marielito background. He often took upon himself the plight of the common Marielito refugee, perhaps because his humble, rural origins and his criminal record allowed him to align himself with these underdog immigrants. Even toward the end of his life, he remained attached to his preferred image as a poor Marielito, dying in humble conditions in his apartment in New York City’s “Hell’s Kitchen.”

This presentation examines Arenas’s first public attempt to discuss openly not only his own homosexuality,

¹ This presentation is from my forthcoming book, A Gay Cuban Activist in Exile: Reinaldo Arenas (University Press of Florida, September 2007).

but also his desire to use the outing of Cuban intellectuals as part of his attack on systematized revolutionary homophobia. I examine here his first recorded statements in 1980, in an interview with the Cuban-American scholar Ana Roca. In the interview he related his life in Cuba as an out-of-the-closet intellectual, which led to his imprisonment in the grim Morro castle-prison. Later in this interview he was emphatic in his outing of fellow writers still living in Cuba who had suffered police persecution for their homosexual activities. I trace here too Arenas's initial hesitance to disclose details about his arrest on charges of corruption of male minors, a criminal record which facilitated his exit from Cuba through the Mariel boatlift as a felon and not as a counterrevolutionary writer.

Arenas attempted to make public his homosexuality immediately after his arrival in the United States. In his conversation in 1980 with Cuban-American scholar Ana Roca, one of Arenas's first interviewers, they spoke, according to a letter from Roca to Arenas, about "Cuba, politics, and gays." Roca was apologetic, however, that the journal that

had accepted the interview for publication (Américas) had censored out sections from the published version.²

Roca, today a professor at Florida International University, revealed to me the excised fragments of her interview with Arenas, which had taken place in two days, on December 16 and 17, 1980, in Miami, and she commented about how she came to do an interview with Arenas. Arenas was living on Seventh Street N.W and 57th Avenue, in the heart of Miami's Cuban-American enclave, in a humble apartment without much furniture or decoration. Roca, surprised that Arenas was living in such poor conditions, was also confused when Arenas revealed that he had not yet been able to claim royalties for the publication abroad of his literary texts. He was living close to Florida International University, where he was teaching a course on Cuban literature, but he still needed to use public transportation or, as Roca stated, he depended on friends such as herself for car rides. In the words of Roca, Arenas was still in awe of the cultural differences around him, particularly in regard to a thriving and open gay community readily accessible in Miami. She remembered that she and a group of friends took Arenas to his first all-gay restaurant, "The Candle Light," on 97th Avenue, where Arenas

² "A Word with Arenas, Author in Exile." Américas 33 (September 1981): 36-38.

was "in shock" about the concept of an elegant and gay establishment.

Although Arenas's comments to Roca in their interview were not extraordinary, since later he would make similar statements, they are relevant today. First, they reflect his early desire to continue his counterrevolutionary opposition to the Castro regime. Second, they reveal inconsistencies to be found again in future interviews about his imprisonment and his silence about his legal case as an alleged pedophile. Speaking about the reasons for his exile, Arenas told Roca that it came about because his literary works were openly politically uncommitted: "My work was not a work that supported the system. It was, rather, an imaginative work, free of political cant, because I have always detested any type of tyranny and I never praised it, at any time." In reference to his arrest, however, Arenas made no ideological connection with his counterrevolutionary literary production. He simply stated that, "I was arrested," adding a vague reference to moral values: "I was not a person who fulfilled the moral canons. I was completely reactionary to that system. Thus, I satisfied all the conditions for being a negative political figure there. I had none of the basic requirements to fit into a fascist society."

As in other interviews, Arenas spoke at length about the "Law of Dangerousness," which, as he explained, punished "anybody who does not observe the completely bourgeois morality institutionalized in Cuba, or rather, any person who is homosexual comes under that Law of Dangerousness." According to this statement, his incarceration was due to his violation of the "Law of Dangerousness," but he made no statement about the kind of infraction. He maintained only a vague reference to his crime, in spite of Roca's pressing questions to pinpoint the nature of his legal case, which he stated was just for being gay and a counterrevolutionary writer: "I had in my character every calamity because besides [being gay], I wrote, and I wrote things hostile to the system."

His experience in jail was preceded by a close official monitoring of his activities, where he was "simply watched, guarded, often forced to make reports about my person, constantly checked." An interesting omission from this statement is the identity of these secret informants. In future interviews he would dwell at length on that subject and insist that often they were friends or acquaintances. He revealed them fully in his autobiography.

With Roca, Arenas spoke at length about official mistreatment of homosexuals, referring to his imprisonment in an unnamed prison, perhaps the Morro because of its proximity to the ocean. Although it is not clear whether he was referring to his own incarceration, he spoke about the gay cell as "the last one, which is almost beside the sea." About this crowded cell, he would make his most controversial statement about violations of the human rights of gays: "And there was everybody together, even if they were dying, because at times the tide came up all the way to the cell." Arenas's testimonial accounts of mistreatment of prisoners remained in rather vague terms in spite of his claims of deaths of gays incarcerated in jails or of those in forced labor camps: "There were seventeen cells and they [gays] were in the last one, where the water came in and came up to the neck, sometimes at high tide. Many died. And many committed suicide in the forced-labor camps."

Another key element in this first interview is Arenas's earliest interest in denouncing Cuban intellectuals presumably affected by an official, systematized homophobia. It is unclear, however, whether the writers were imprisoned because of their presumed homosexuality. He spoke about René Ariza, who had been a

personal friend, and of Emilio Ballagas, both with jail sentences, according to Arenas, because Ariza had sent manuscripts abroad without official permission and because Ballagas had maintained a correspondence with the American poet Allen Ginsberg after Ginsberg's visit to and expulsion from Cuba in 1965. At the time of that interview, both Ariza and Ballagas were residing in the United States, a fact that Roca promptly inserted into their conversation.

In the interview Arenas mentioned another Cuban intellectual, who was residing in Cuba, as an example of a gay individual, who, because his out-of-the-closet behavior, had been kept out of official literary circles. Speaking about this acquaintance of his, whom Arenas identified by name, he claimed that because of laws that prohibit homosexuals from having access to any type of work of the "intellectual, creative" kind, this individual was unable to write: "I know even the case of a homosexual called... who lives in Cuba, who wanted to be a revolutionary. He used to go to voluntary labor and everything, and they accepted his gathering potatoes, his cutting down cane, but when the time came to evaluate him as just one more human being, they did not find him acceptable. He could never publish one page, nor could he ever do the work of his own choice." Cuba's censorship, Arenas continued, often created a double

life in which homosexuals played a straight role (he provided no examples) with often terrible consequences:

"There are many who have to live that double life, completely masked in order to maintain a status, to be able to live, in order to be able to eat, in order to be able to survive. They have to renounce themselves. That is very typical. And, besides, the government, which is very macabre in this type of persecution, and very subtle, arranges secret investigators, persons who pretend to be flirts but are really government agents to detect whether a person is a homosexual, because it is an offense, a crime. There have been cases of terrible scandals of high-ranking officials who suddenly have been discovered to be homosexuals in a private house, in a hotel, on a beach, and that has provoked imprisonment of the person and, furthermore, expulsion from his position. For them, that is a crime." Arenas would often refer to how widespread this life was on the "down low," to use a modern term.

Today it is easy to understand why in 1980 an American publisher might be reluctant to deal openly with Arenas's charges of Cuban revolutionary homophobia, with his charges of violation of their human rights and many times of their deaths. Even more so, when Arenas left some of his most serious accusations unsubstantiated, or in those instances

when he mentioned names of victims of these violations, a publisher would probably hesitate to support the charges or even to reveal the identity of people still living in Cuba. Publishers might have been careful even in revealing names of victims living in the United States, at the time recovering from right wing, anti-homosexual religious campaigns, such as that of Anita Bryant in Florida in 1977.

Arenas did not record his reaction to editorial censorship of his interview with Roca. It is significant that he had already planned to start an outing campaign immediately upon his arrival in the United States in 1980. In this Arenas was not an exception; other writers and activists in the United States had started in the early eighties to speak publicly about other people's closets. Although Arenas's early decision to out fellow Cuban writers may have been independent from similar events taking place in the mainstream news media, he was the first Latin American writer living in the United States to come out publicly. Two other famous authors living abroad, the Cuban Severo Sarduy, in Paris, and the Argentine Manuel Puig, in New York, were friends of Arenas and, as their letters to him indicate, they were living gay lives, although closeted from the public eye.

Arenas's outing practices became part of his political campaign against a systematized revolutionary homophobia. In speaking about revolutionary homophobia, Arenas often outed fellow Cuban intellectuals, whether residing on the island or abroad, in statements that often sounded more like a personal vendetta than like a political argument against the Castro regime. For an activist willing to speak about his or others' sexual life, he remained rather cautious about his own criminal case, selecting details that often contradicted his previous statements. One plausible explanation was Arenas's fear of encountering problems with the law as an admitted "entrant" into the United States who finally achieved the status of "refugee" in 1983. At the time of his death Arenas had initiated the process for citizenship. His careful concealment of his liking to engage in sexual activities with male minors is fully documented only in his posthumously published autobiography. Significantly, even there he made no reference to his having had such sexual activities in New York City.

Clearly, Arenas placed more attention to his outing campaign as part of his counterrevolutionary campaign. As a self-made, clumsy activist, he often hesitated between the political and the sexual aspects of his own case,

particularly avoiding direct statements about the circumstances surrounding an alleged police entrapment in 1973 and his subsequent arrest in 1974.

To conclude, although Arenas continued to speak about the issue of revolutionary homophobia in Cuba until his death, he often veered away from his own legal case to explore other, perhaps less controversial cases. Some of the individuals involved were his friends—or had been his friends—and they were residing in Cuba or in the United States. Arenas never spoke about his reasons for these outings. Nor did he keep letters from anyone who protested misrepresentation of his case. His self-outing about his incarceration on charges of pedophilia was also brief in interviews. It can be argued, however, that not only was Arenas a pioneer gay activist—both in the Latino and mainstream gay circles—but that even today he is among the handful of Latin American writers to have been willing to discuss issues pertaining to sexual orientation.