

Jorge Olivares, *Becoming Reinaldo Arenas*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2013. 241 pp.; ISBN 978-0-8223-5396-6

Jorge Olivares's study of the life and work of Reinaldo Arenas contributes to a decisive shift in how we think about one of Cuba's most notoriously controversial writers. Combining criticism and biography, Olivares' makes it clear that a deep reading of Arenas' life and vast body of work offers critical new ways of understanding how issues of exile, sexuality, and family have intersected in Post-Revolutionary Cuban social, cultural, and political life. Taking seriously Arenas's claim that all literature is autobiographical, Olivares take his subjects life story and literary production as inseparable. This is important, as Olivares attests, because although the Cuban literary establishment has finally begun paying homage to Arenas's work, this new respect is predicated on the depoliticization of the author, the erasure of his intellectual history, and the marginalization of many diatribes against Castro. In so doing, they have been able to safely appropriate Arenas as a Cuban literary icon without acknowledging the full content of his life and work.

Widely regarded as one of the most brilliant and enigmatic writers to come out of the Cuban Revolution, Arenas's life story only heightens his intrigue. Abandoned by his father while still an infant, Arenas was raised by his mother in the rural and impoverished Cuban countryside. While still a teenager, poor and fatherless, Arenas joined Castro's revolution against Fulgencio Batista. After the revolution, Arenas relocated to Havana to study and ultimately pursue writing. After receiving a job at the Biblioteca Nacional, he seized the opportunity to write, and it paid off. However, after submitting his work to several literary contests, his prose was deemed counterrevolutionary and condemned for its supposedly immoral sexual themes. An openly gay man who refused to celebrate the revolution in his work, Arenas violated the central conceits of Cuban revolutionary masculinity most famously articulated by Che Guevara in 1965, promulgated by law, and perpetuated by many of the country's writers. In 1973, after having sex with some men at the beach, Arenas and a friend were arrested for public lewdness and the corruption of minors, despite everyone being of legal age. After trying unsuccessfully to escape the island by inner tube, he was ultimately imprisoned at El Morro prison in Havana. After he was released in 1976, Arenas spent the next four years homeless and alone. In 1980, he made his way to the Miami as part of the Mariel boatlift; however, just as he had been denounced in Cuba, he was once again condemned by leftist thinkers in the United States for his criticisms of Cuba. As a result, he soon left for New York City where, despite initial optimism and excitement, he found himself once again lonely and alienated.

Olivares possesses an impressive mastery of Arenas's oeuvre and he notes at the outset that the book is deeply personal. Olivares has dedicated his career to Arenas and it shows. The book itself is the product of vast personal knowledge, deep analytic readings of Arenas's well-known texts, interviews, and many years of conversations with friends and colleagues. Although writing primarily from a Freudian theoretical perspective, he largely avoids unnecessary academic jargon. Composed of five chronological chapters, he traces Arenas's development from a poor fatherless peasant child in the Cuban countryside, through his initial participation in and ultimate disillusionment with the Cuban Revolution, and his final days as an exiled writer in New York City who ultimately took his own life in 1990 after years of living with AIDS. Throughout the book, Olivares explores the full breadth of cultural and ideological forces that shaped Arenas's literary output. Themes touching on Arenas's family life and lack of a father, his sexuality and its consequences in Cuba, and finally his exile in the United States figure prominently throughout. In the first

chapter, Olivares offers a straightforward biography of the writer in Cuba until 1980, contextualizing his life and literary development during these years by paying particular attention to the broader cultural and sexual ideologies that shaped social and political life during the period. The body of the book both flushes out and complicates this picture, focusing precisely on the sexual and familial themes that echo across Arenas's body of literature.

Throughout the book, Olivares concentrates on the intertextual dialogs with which Arenas was engaged and through which he sought constantly to write and rewrite his self, family, and history. Although others have acknowledged the ways in which Arenas's works are rewrites of works by other authors, Olivares focuses instead on the particular ways Arenas focused on texts that were structured around a father figure. He goes on to argue that Arenas's own lack of a father, which proved such a powerful motif in much of his writing, became emotionally intertwined with his estrangement from his fatherland as an exile in New York, constituting what he describes as Arenas's "eroticized nostalgia." Indeed, emphasizing the constant interplay of the familial and the sexual, he argues that it is precisely such "'paternal erotics' that are at the core of Arenas's literary production" (5). For example, in the book's third chapter, Olivares shows how *padre* and *patria* were intertwined through a close reading of Arenas's novella *Viaje a la Habana*, which he argues is a rewrite of Countess Merlin's own nineteenth century work *Viaje a La Habana*. Typically regarded as a straightforward, if controversial, narrative about an exiled father who returns to Cuba and, unbeknownst to him, has sex with his estranged son, Olivares argues that Arenas's work should be seen instead as a fantasy of both the protagonist, as well as Arenas himself, who longed so desperately for an intimate connection to a father he would never know and a fatherland to which he would never return.

Both a provocative analysis and novelistic account, *Becoming Reinaldo Arenas* is both a necessary and timely contribution to the study of Cuban literature and that of Latin America and the Caribbean more broadly. In digging deeper into Arenas's words, in recovering and rearticulating his extraordinary life, Olivares's book continues Arenas's work by complicating our understanding of the Cuban Revolution, exposing the sexual politics of Post-Revolutionary Cuba, and reaffirming the intimate and productive relationship between life and art.

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