

TRIPLE MARGINALIZATION IN ANTES QUE ANOCHEZCA (1992): CONTEXTUALIZING REINALDO ARENAS'S MEMOIRS BEFORE AND AFTER THE 1959 CUBAN REVOLUTION

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Abstract

This article contextualizes Cuban writer Reinaldo Arenas's narrative in his autobiography *Antes que anochezca* (1992). The author presents himself as a marginalized character living in a rural, poor area since childhood under the dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista (1952–1959). Likewise, the writer presents himself equally misunderstood in adulthood, both during Fidel Castro's 1959 rise to power and during his 1980 exile to the United States. Analysis of Arenas's progressive disenchantment focuses on his revolutionary ideals, the Revolution's impact on his sexual and intellectual life, and the sociopolitical environment observed before and after the Cuban Revolution's triumph, including his exile. The article's objectives are to answer the following: What can we learn from the memoirs of this young "guajiro" raised in rural Holguín? When does Arenas begin to feel excluded from Castro's revolutionary project? Lastly, does Arenas find moral and economic support as a political refugee in the United States?

Introduction

By publishing his manuscripts outside of Cuba without first obtaining government permission, Cuban writer, Reinaldo Arenas, was a fugitive in his own country living in fear of persecution and incarceration. According to Arenas, after escaping prison in the seventies and attempting to flee the area, he had limited options once police grew suspicious of two of his friends, Joris Lagarde and Juan Abreu, who had planned to help Arenas escape via boat. Unfortunately, boats had been prohibited and Castro's soldiers were aware of their suspicious activities (*Antes que anochezca* 196). Instead, Arenas hid in the Parque Lenin, where he began writing his autobiography in the empty notebook pages gifted to him by Abreu. Arenas states that the title of his autobiography *Antes que anochezca* (*Before Night Falls*) is appropriate because he "...escribía hasta que llegaba la noche, y en espera de la otra noche que me aguardaba cuando fuera encontrado por la policía. Tenía que apurarme en hacerlo antes de que oscureciera," (198). However, he claims losing his original manuscript when he was arrested by the police and it was confiscated and reports that he retained its original content in memory (*Antes que anochezca* 11).¹

If what Arenas says is true, then the loss of his original manuscript in 1974 contributes to the complex

nature of his autobiography caused by circumstance and timeframe variants. Therefore, determining the distinction between fact and fiction proves extremely challenging, as he claims to have resumed his writing during his exile to the United States in 1987. The lapse of time in conjunction with his deteriorating health due to AIDS most certainly contributed to a change in his attitudes and perspectives – both of which influenced his memories and his presentation of these memories. For example, death is a recurring theme throughout his memory recollections, from his first experience with his mother contemplating suicide to when he himself began to consider suicide in the Parque Lenin (*Antes que anochezca* 19, 201).

In addition to this, when the AIDS virus prevented him from writing, Arenas was forced to record himself to finish his memoirs. These recordings were later transcribed by his friends Antonio Valle and Lázaro Gómez (11). It is possible that Valle and Gómez inserted elaborations of Arenas's memories into his autobiography – suggesting that his autobiography is, in actuality, a combination of voices from his past and present selves as well as the voices of his transcribers and editors.

What Arenas recalls in his autobiography is by no means a historical account; rather, a personal perspective of what happened. However, in describing his life story, it is evident that Arenas suffered a triple marginality both before and after Fidel Castro's Cuban Revolution just as he did throughout his exile in the United States. According to Jonathan Crewe, "Historically, our discourse of the marginal can be seen as one response to widespread political violence done during the sixties and early seventies and as a cause/effect of radical upheavals and ideological destabilizations during that period," (121). This statement is especially true for Arenas. His marginality was the result of a combination of factors including low economic status, pursuing a writing career, and being homosexual in the sixties and seventies, but his marginality continued into the eighties and nineties as well. Understanding the effects of the political circumstances on these factors in each stage of Arenas's journey is pertinent to realize the profound impact societal perceptions had on his growth as an individual. In Arenas's case, there are several factors that contributed to what can be seen as a character reflecting multiple layers of marginality, including: poverty

prominent during his childhood under dictator Fulgencio Batista; homophobic encounters in adolescence; and adulthood before and under Fidel Castro's government; and limited success of his writing and political views in the United States.

As this topic appears to be lacking literature specifically concerning Arenas's life, it is important to analyze and understand to what extent triple marginality can be used to explain the series of difficult situations he faced. Upon exploring Arenas's life struggles, the objective is to answer the following: What do we learn of the memoirs of this young peasant raised in the rural area of Holguín? In what moment does Arenas begin to feel excluded from Castro's revolutionary project? Lastly, does Arenas find moral and economic support in the United States?

Theoretical Framework

According to Arthur A. Cohen, marginality is defined as "...a psychic condition of self-deprecation, another instrument of importing nervousness, ambiguity, uncertainty into an otherwise sufficiently difficult enterprise," (316). Considering the many struggles in Arenas's life as well as the negative psychological impact it had on his life from causing him to worry about his own safety to changing his name, it is understandable why this subject pertains to him so much. Living under Castro's government, there were multiple struggles like poor nutrition and a worsening economy awaiting Cuban citizens. According to *The Cuban Revolution* (1977) by Hugh Thomas, by 1958 sales dropped and shop owners minimized their turnover (228). Starting in 1963, economic production was believed to have decreased about 0.5% per year, though lack of reliable statistics makes the exact figures unknown (Thomas 676). But Arenas, being both a homosexual and a provocative writer had to face even more persecution than the average person at the time. Negative social stigma against homosexuals caused him to live in fear of being found and incarcerated, as well as having to write under strict government regulations and requirements that led to his constant worry that his "unacceptable" manuscripts would be found. From this, it is clear to see that he was a marginalized character.

However, the extent of his marginality has primarily to do with the way in which Arenas presents himself in his autobiography. Sectioning off categories of his life and paying careful attention to his opinions and word choice suggests the presence of triple marginality. The existence of Arenas's layers of marginality has been developed in this article using a framework from the ideas explored in *Gay Cuban Nation* (2001) by Emilio Bejel and *Becoming Reinaldo Arenas* (2013) by Jorge Olivares.

During his analysis to support an interpretation of Arenas's text as a struggle between desire, power, dissidence, and transgression (140), Bejel mentions "...every stage in the narrator-protagonist's life has been a move from one oppression to another. Rather than a story of progressive liberation, the text narrates

a process of increasing, ever-worsening oppression..." (146). However, Bejel takes a thematic approach, stating this suggests another perspective that Arenas's portrayal of himself is quite simply the consistency of struggles whereas triple marginality could be an alternative explanation to these occurrences. In addition, the understanding that there is a worsening of oppression adds another aspect to this marginalization theory with regards to Arenas, in that Arenas wants his readers to view his struggle as constant and ongoing, which grows worse with time. This can be seen by Arenas's description of the moon as a symbol of a miracle that he believes saved him throughout his life, but that shatters as he is contemplating his dream of a beach vacation during his exile: "Y ahora, súbitamente, Luna, estallas en pedazos delante de mi cama. Ya estoy solo. Es de noche" (340).

Bejel's ideas provide the framework for the consistency of marginalization in Arenas's text, but it is Olivares's ideas that suggest the importance of recognizing continuity and the influences of the past that are affecting the future. Olivares understands *Antes que anochezca* "...as a portrait of a mortally ill, exiled Cuban writer who, on his deathbed, writes the story of his life, a life that is about to end far from his father and fatherland" (66).

While his analysis mainly parallels the symbolic similarities between Homer's *Iliad* and Arenas's autobiography, Olivares does state, "Certainly, however, Arenas's erotic awakening in the countryside sets the course for his adult sexual life, initially in Havana and later in exile..." (72). Olivares's idea that consequences in the present are rooted in the past when applied to the perspective of Arenas's marginality yields itself to another ideological perspective. This is an idea that while Arenas suffered in multiple ways, each of his experiences, including his suffering, are connected in some way to the past. For example, his first homophobic experience in school leads to further reinforcement that to be a homosexual is to be an outcast from society.

This is still relevant later in his life during exile when he must not only hide his sexuality to survive but also hide his AIDS diagnosis. AIDS is a sexually transmitted disease, although he was not aware, Arenas suffered from it likely due to the numerous sexual encounters he had with other men. This diagnosis in 1987 results in his suffering both physically and mentally, as he is dependent on others around him to complete everyday tasks and he is left feeling lonely when they leave: "Los dolores eran terribles y el cansancio inmenso. A los pocos minutos, llegó René Cifuentes y me ayudó a limpiar la casa y comprar algo de comer. Después me quedé solo" (*Antes que anochezca* 11).

Developing the categorization of the three dimensions of marginality (economic, political, and social) in three different times and spaces (Oriente during Batista, Havana during Castro, and Miami and New York in exile) that Arenas suffers requires combining the understandings of Bejel and Olivares's ideas. According to Bejel, the constant oppression suffered by Arenas results

in him living in the margins of society, while Olivares's perspective is that Arenas's oppression is in fact determined and influenced by the historical happenings of the time. Therefore, categorizing Arenas's marginalization in childhood, adulthood, and later in exile in correlation to Batista, Castro, and the United States government, respectively (where adolescence crosses over between the Batista and Castro governments; serving as both a literal and figurative transition). Each of these periods had a set of characteristic changes that contributed to Arenas's suffering: economic dependence on the United States contributed to socioeconomic decline under Batista; Castro's political revolution limited his writing career; and social stigmas for having come in the Mariel boatlift isolated him during exile. This is not to say that Arenas's social marginalization is limited to historical timeframes, but that each stage had a prominent challenge he had to face. Instead, the components of triple marginalization morph as time passes, and interactions among Arenas and his environment contribute to its severity.

Part I: Poverty & Politics – Batista's Rule

For Arenas, his marginality began in early childhood. Among multiple contributing factors, the most prominent include poverty, his emerging homosexuality, and the political ideologies of the time because of Batista's return to power in 1952.

The moment Arenas was born, there already existed foundations for uprising. In his autobiography, he recalls "un dolor de barriga terrible" which made him so desperate to the point of eating soil (17).² In his opinion, this, in conjunction with political violence and Batista's dictatorship, caused many families like that of Arenas's to suffer extreme poverty. This is evident when he describes his living situation in which he, his single mother, aunts, his religious grandmother, and his politically opinionated grandfather lived under the same roof. Arenas describes that, "La situación económica se hizo tan difícil que mi abuelo decidí vender la finca – unas tres caballerías... ¡Cómo lloraban mi abuela, mi abuelo, mis tías, mi madre, yo mismo!" (55). Arenas had to work twelve hours for one peso a day, which was insufficient to support himself, much less his family.

Arenas's recognition of his homosexual tendencies early in life does not marginalize him initially, but it did cause him to feel disconnected from the people around him. As Bejel mentions, "la sexualidad del protagonista...es ambigua," (34). This is interesting, because his experience of seeing naked men at six years old made him aware of his sexual tendencies enough to declare "... indiscutiblemente, me gustaban los hombres" (25), but he only interpreted it as one of many components of who he was. Arenas establishes a distinction between internal and external marginality. Internally, he can recognize that he has multiple qualities that are not limited to his sexuality, just like everyone else. Externally, he realizes that he is different according to the norms of society, and that this difference would prove difficult in showing others what he already understands

about his inner concept of self.

Later in his autobiography, Arenas remembers his first homophobic confrontation (written after describing a few ambiguous relationships) in which a classmate "se sentó junto a mi pupitre y con un diabolismo absolutamente sincero me dijo: 'Mira, Reinaldo, tú eres pájaro. ¿Tú sabes lo que es un pájaro? Es un hombre al que le gustan los otros hombres. Pájaro; eso es lo que tú eres,'" (61). The importance of this occurrence cannot be underestimated. Although it does not necessarily marginalize Arenas intensely at first, it caused him to feel another disconnect from the people around him – almost like a foreshadowing of his future marginalization. At a formative age, Arenas understood that to be homosexual is equivalent to negative social standing. He would be an outcast in his own community, which is likely due to the ongoing negative attitudes under Castro's government. This was only one of many homophobic encounters that marginalize Arenas from the rest of society.

The final defining characteristic of Arenas's childhood and adolescence is politics. In fact, Arenas dedicates a whole chapter of his autobiography to Cuban politics during this stage of his life. In this chapter, which takes place in 1957, Arenas describes that "Casi toda la provincia de Oriente estaba contra Batista y había rebeldes en los montes" and sometimes rebels attacked Batista's army since most of the town was against dictatorships (62). Arenas also mentions his grandfather, who he describes as "... antirreligioso, liberal y anticomunista. [...] Para mi abuelo, todos los gobernantes anteriores a Batista también habían sido unos delincuentes," (51). His grandfather identified as a member of the Partido Ortodoxo because of his undying support for politician Eduardo Chibás, who founded the party in 1947 due to his strong opinions against corruption (Thomas 31). Arenas emphasizes not only his father's devotion but that of his entire family. This is shown when Arenas recounts when his great-grandmother and Chibás died on the same day and his mother explained to him "No lloro por la muerte de mi abuela, sino por la de Chibás" (52). It is probable that those against Batista lived in poor economic situations and blamed dictatorship for it, especially with lack of food and limited money to buy it. According to Geraldine Lievesley, this opposition may alternatively have to do with the increasing hope or Cuba to become economically independent rather than depending on the United States. She states, "Nationalist opposition to Batista was linked in the minds of many Cubans with a desire to repudiate the conspicuous display of financial and military might and to reduce dependency upon US consumerism and its cultural manifestations on the island" (14).

When the conditions in Holguín continued to decline in 1958, Arenas decided to join as one of Castro's rebels. Although he had much enthusiasm and excitement, the rebels rejected him because he was too young and had no weapons of his own. That was the first time he felt excluded from the revolution project.

Eventually, Arenas was able to participate and contribute to the cause by attending a specialized school, teaching students to be agricultural accountants. Although he could experiment with other homosexuals, the school did not support homosexuality and the true purpose of the school was to form groups of young communists to support Castro during the Revolution.

The influence of his friends told him he would be successful. Curiously, within Cuba, Arenas struggled to find people who could help him. They often tried to do what they could, but most of the time they feared Castro's government.

Part III: Trading Success for Freedom – Exile in the U.S.

The largest transition in Arenas's life was in 1980 with his exile from Cuba to the United States. When the opportunity arose to leave through the Mariel boatlift, he had to assume a new name and occupation to attain permission to pass. Castro's objective was to rid the country of people who did not support the Revolution (increasing the concentration of supporters on the island), while prohibiting intellectuals such as writers and artists from leaving, this way they would be unable to utilize their freedom of speech and expression in the United States to write negatively of him or Cuba in general. Arenas was one of those writers. His decision to attempt an escape despite the risks and consequences of capture demonstrates his genuine desire for a better life. Not only this, but it also shows his hope of writing freely in the United States.

A symbolic moment during Arenas's separation from his native land happened when he had to sign a form accepting that he would never be able to return. From Arenas's perspective, this solidified the severity of the persecution inside Cuba, as Castro forced homosexuals, criminals and the mentally ill to leave. In addition, this signifies the definite exclusion of Arenas. Not only did he have to leave his home to start over in another country, but he was also leaving knowing that Castro's unfulfilled promises of social equality and improved conditions for intellectuals were the reason for this migration. Although he assumed a different identity, the fact that he still witnessed the critical faces of the Castro police further reinforced his perspective that the government did not care about its citizens.

Conclusion:

Although Arenas was happy to leave his dangerous environment behind, he underestimated the difficulty brought by his new life. Arenas was not the only Cuban writer fleeing Castro's government, and there were other writers who came across that jeopardized his success. Now there were many Cuban writers generating stories and testimonies of their experiences in the Revolution, which in turn decreased demand for that type of literature – which is typically the case of supply and demand within the capitalist economy. On the other hand, the chances of publication for this type of literature may have already been slim. Now that the Cuban writers,

including Arenas, were no longer in Cuba, their writings were not of interest. When Arenas was in Cuba, his writing was desirable for authenticity and the idea that he struggled and fought to publish his work beyond the borders. However, now Cuban writers including Arenas faced a different kind of struggle; one against capitalism's supply and demand.

Now that his work could be easily written and published freely, the “unique” aspect of his work was lost and became like any other product on the market. In his autobiography, Arenas lists examples of other Cuban writers in a similar predicament as him, including Enrique Labrador Ruiz and Carlos Montenegro who he states “...ahora se encontraban con la imposibilidad de publicar sus obras aquí” (311).

The reality of the capitalist world crushed his dreams. In a segment of an interview with Arenas of a documentary called *Conducta impropia* directed by Néstor Almendros and Orlando Jiménez Leal, Arenas says that he is indignant that people who live in communist countries and want to publish their writing cannot because of failures in democracy and the hierarchy of wealth associated with capitalism. In saying this, Arenas suggests that capitalism has its own faults like communism. He believes that while communism in the case of Castro's government was corrupt, capitalism in the United States favors the rich who can spend, which in turn determines the supply and demand of the economy.

Arenas had exchanged his career for his safety and freedom, although he found himself questioning how much freedom he actually had. The reality was that, in both Cuba and the United States, exclusion caused these ostracized situations. Those on the Mariel boatlift experienced negative stereotypes and therefore had fewer opportunities to survive economically. Because of this, Arenas tried to establish himself economically by relying on the promises of his friends. However, although his manuscripts were popular in France and his friends promised him part of the profits, he states a writer, and a homosexual. Arenas's experience of primarily economic exclusion in childhood, social isolation during Castro's reign, and the stigma surrounding members of the Mariel boatlift and an anti-Communist writer exiled by Castro (a “gusano”) in addition to the limited economic opportunities in the United States contributed to his triple marginality.

Before committing suicide, Arenas wrote one last note explaining his decision in which he blames the sequential events causing his outsider social status on Castro:

Dear Friends: Due to the precarious state of my health and the terrible spiritual depression I feel because I cannot continue to write and to struggle for Cuban liberty, I am ending my life. ... There is only one person responsible: Fidel Castro. The suffering of exile, the pain of banishment, the loneliness and disease, surely would not have come about had I lived a free man in my own country. ... I urge the people of Cuba, in exile and in the island, to continue struggling for freedom. My message is not a message of defeat but of struggle and of hope. (Arenas, "Carta de Despedida")

In his final moments, Arenas wanted others to realize that his contributions towards Cuban liberty via his writing was what mattered most to him, more than the adversity he faced in his journey towards accomplishing this goal. As he urges for his suicide note to be a message of "struggle and hope," one must consider to what extent society versus self-perseverance impacts fulfillment, and exactly how hope factors into influencing these aspects of life. Regardless, it is appreciating that Arenas's life was littered with homophobic experiences, economic adversity, and social stigma that serves as a prime example of the impacts of triple marginality.

Notes

1)

From a literary perspective, another possible interpretation may be that this moment is a representation of the culmination of the constant struggles he had to endure, therefore extending the titles' meaning to reference a period of persecution in his life.

2)

While referencing this part of his life, Arenas is also paying homage to magical realism writer Gabriel García Márquez's novel *Cien años de soledad* by alluding to Rebeca Buendía, who "...solo le gustaba comer la tierra húmeda del patio," (58).

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