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Writing for Freedom: Exile, Marginalisation and Oppositional Militancy in Reinaldo Arenas's *Before Night Falls*

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Abstract: This paper tries to investigate the genre of the exilic autobiographical memoir as a form of liminal writing that inhabits in the interstices between the 'real' and the 'fictive'. It offers a reading of Reinaldo Arenas's autobiographical memoir *Before Night Falls*, written from exile in New York during the late 1980s and early 1990s, which offers a form of sustained literary resistance to the systematic discrimination against, and marginalisation of the homosexual in post-revolutionary Cuba of the Castro-regime. The paper argues that Arenas's autobiographical memoir becomes one of the principal texts through which he advances his oppositional militancy to Cuban machismo, a patriarchal and gendered code of behaviour co-opted by the Revolution. It concludes by positing Arenas's project as a counter-hegemonic and resistant one, which adapts certain features of the testimonio (testimonial narrative) to lay bare the statesanctioned ostracism and penal measures adopted against the homosexual individual.

Keywords: Exile, Autobiographical memoir, Cuban literature, LGBTQ, Homosexuality, Reinaldo Arenas, *Before Night Falls*, Marginalisation, Counter-Militancy.

Autobiographical writing in exile has the potential to lay bare subjective versions of historical dilemmas and crises faced by the author in a pre-exilic, and post-exilic timeframe in any given society, replete with its own codes of visibility, ascendancy and approval. While standards of historical verifiability and authenticity ought to inflect the writing of the exilic memoir, one can hardly deny the inherently subjective nature of the exercise, in which, exiled authors can only attest to their remember versions of history. Authenticity, in these particular contexts, may be ascertained by exiled authors through an antithetical relationship to the laws, strictures and the already naturalised hierarchies of power and social visibility, all of which can be understood as constitutive of the reasons for their marginalisation in such a society. As Simona Antofi writes, the autobiographical memoir, because of its subjective interpretation of historical realities, "...brings forth once again a dichotomy that was once eliminated as irrelevant to the study of literature – the one between true and false" (Antofi 30). The "fictionalisation of experienced facts", she goes on to add, initiates a division within the narrator, who has to conceive of themselves as part of such fictionalisation. (Antofi 30) Therefore, while it cannot be denied that the author is a historical figure, their literary representation in memoir writing initiates a division where they face

the challenge of envisioning themselves as simultaneously part of their fictionalised narrative, as well as outside its diegetic margins. As Antofi illustrates the problem further, a schism or separation must be introduced between the historical person who is confessing, and who also appears, paradoxically as the object of this confessional discourse. (Antofi 30). Thus, “a third person – spectral, phantasmal, perceived only by intuition, and yet certain” is often produced within the discursive ambit of the autobiographical memoir, where the author “starts talking about himself to himself and to others as if he were another.” (Antofi 30).

Exile writing initiates a literary mechanism of coping with the severance from the space an author is accustomed to call their “native realm”. The absence of “home” conditions most exilic narratives including autobiographical ones, since “[e]xile also involves an orientation to time, a plotting of one’s life story around a pivotal event of departure and a present condition of absence from one’s native land” (Barbour 706). Although traditional conceptions of exile saw the condition as a form of banishment and/or penal servitude, the twentieth century has turned it into a ubiquitous and widely prevalent phenomenon. Edward Said points towards George Steiner’s designation of a whole body of texts in Western literature as “extra-territorial”, but nevertheless thought of literary and religious representations of exile as obscuring “what is truly horrendous: that exile is irremediably secular and unbearably historical; that it is produced by human beings for other human beings” (Said 174). The first-person autobiographical memoir written in exile however, inhabits that intermediate and liminal space between the interstices of fiction and historiography. It is symptomatic of a “median state”, prioritising subjective enunciations of history as a form of personal witness (Said 114). This form of personal engagement with historical instances of persecution, marginalisation and, in certain cases, invisibilisation often foreground an ethical resolve to re-member the objectively unrepresentable past.

The object of this paper is to introduce and offer a reading of the Cuban dissident poet and novelist Reinaldo Arenas’s autobiographical memoir *Antes que anochezca* (*Before Night Falls*) as an instance of the exilic autobiographical memoir, where Arenas responds to realities of his systematic marginalisation in post-revolutionary Cuban society as a homosexual, and reveals his gradual disillusionment with the arbitrariness of the dictatorial Castro regime. My reading of Arenas’s memoir will specifically concentrate on its exilic import, and the consequences of the author inhabiting that indeterminate, yet strategically significant, space between the ‘fictive’ and the ‘real’. As I proceed, I shall also hope to throw some light on Arenas’s literary project of resistance against the official versions of Cuban history sanctioned by the Castro regime.

Born in Aguas Claras in Oriente Province Reinaldo Arenas came from a peasant family living in dire poverty, in a typical *bohio*¹ in the Cuban countryside. After being abandoned by his father, the young Arenas and his mother had no other option but to survive as unwelcome intruders at his grandfather’s household. Arenas’s reminiscences of

his early childhood include feelings of desolation and abandonment, particularly in an episode where he saw his father for the first time. His mother, now reduced to a “fallen woman” in the dominantly patriarchal society of rural Cuba was enraged, and, “...picking up stones from the riverbank”, she started to throw them at the man’s head. (Arenas 9). The nameless stranger, whom Arenas later discovered to be his father, “put his hand into his pocket, pulled out two pesos and gave them to me” (Arenas 9). This episode brings out the Arenas also recounts the extreme poverty and deprivation he faced as a child, going so far as to state that he had to eat dirt in order to escape the pangs of hunger (Arenas 3). He recounts his early forays into sexuality in school itself, “the typical pre-adolescent romps that mask desire, infatuation, and sometimes even love”. (Arenas 13). He recalls having copulated with farm animals such as hens, goats, sows and mares, sometimes even collectively with his friends at school (Arenas 13). The lush green countryside of Oriente Province offered him “an incredible opportunity to escape it all without anyone worrying about where I was or when I would return” (Arenas 11). He was a naturally imaginative child, intrigued by the mysteries of the countryside and thought it was laden with magical qualities. His childhood “was a world of pure creativity” (Arenas 11). Later on in his life, Arenas would go on to identify as a maricón², the “passive” partner in gay anal intercourse, one who “receives” the phallus.

Since it was nearly impossible to support the large family with the meagre earnings from agriculture, Arenas’ grandfather had sold the family farm and moved to the dreary little town of Holguin where they ran a grocery store. Arenas took up a menial job at a guava paste factory at the age of twelve, working a twelve-hour shift a day for a peso. It was at this point that Arenas left, walked to a town named Velasco on foot, and decided to join Fidel Castro’s guerrillas. He served as “an alzado”—as the rebels were called—and “performed menial tasks, such as cooking and washing for the troops” (Olivares 16). Because of his contributions to the success of the Revolution, Arenas was awarded a state-scholarship which allowed him to continue his education. He graduated from the Instituto Politecnico as an agricultural accountant, and briefly worked at a State Farm before moving to Havana in 1963. In Havana, he worked at the Biblioteca Nacional and submitted the manuscript of his first novel *Celestino antes des alba* (Singing from the Well) to the inaugural National Literary Competition (Premio Nacional de Novela Cirilo Villaverde), organised and sponsored by the Union of Writers and Artists in Cuba (UNEAC) in 1965. The novel received an honourable mention, as did his second novel *El mundo aluciante* (Hallucinations, or The Ill-Fated Peregrinations of Fray Servando) at the next edition of the literary competition in 1966. On both occasions Arenas’s departure from Socialist Realism was probably taken stock of by the UNEAC, which deprived him of the first prize. In *Before Night Falls*, Arenas also introduces the reader to two important figures in Cuban literature, Virgilio Pinera and Jose Lezama Lima who had served as literary mentors to his writing. (Arenas 52-54).

Recurrent instances of dissent against the newly instituted revolutionary government in Cuba surface throughout *Before Night Falls*. In an early section, Arenas highlights the discrepancy between Castro's explicit public distancing of the Cuban Revolution from Sovietline Communism and the ideological indoctrination of the Cuban youth, where he suggests that "while Castro was assuring the world that he was no communist...Cuban youth was already receiving communist indoctrination", including classes on military skills. (Arenas 37). Arenas thus illustrates how dictatorial regimes falsify truth by revealing only a part of it. After the initial success of the Cuban Revolution, Castro had been wary of associating the revolution to a decidedly Communist line, and had assured that the revolution "will solve Cuba's problems, because this revolution is not red, this revolution is olive green"—as green as the palm trees of the country (Pedraza 3). However, the CIA-backed Bay of Pigs' Invasion³ in 1961 changed this predetermined course, and Castro aligned the Revolution to a clearly defined MarxistLeninist line, veering towards the Soviet-bloc within Cold War diplomatic and geo-political relations. Following Castro's public admittance to Marxism-Leninism, the growth of massbased organisations was observed in Cuba, such as "Committees for the Defence of the Revolution (CDR), the Federation of Cuban Women (FMC), the Central Organization of Cuban Trade Unions, the Associations of Rebels Youths, and the National Association of Small Peasants" (LeoGrande 457-58). As he depicts the hypnotic frenzy that had swept over the nation after the successful defence of Cuba in the Bay of Pigs invasion, directed "against 'Yankee imperialism' and against untold thousands of enemies suddenly discovered" Arenas sees this form of indoctrination as comparable to being locked up in a monastery before being sent on an evangelical mission to find new converts. It was almost like indoctrination to a new religious faith r creed. He suggests that it seemed that Cuban youth were the "ideological guides of a new kind of repression" (Arenas 41), with its new ecclesiasts and its secret police.

The years 1961-65 also began an ideological debate in the realm of Cuban literature and the arts over the role of the artist-intellectual in fostering revolutionary consciousness. Whereas novels published during the first phase 1959-61 had heavily depended upon Socialist Realism and the testimonial narrative to represent the paradigm shift that had entered Cuban society with the Revolution, Francisco Soto writes that there was "[d]issatisfaction over the quality of literature produced" (Soto 16). In view of this debate, a literary style was widely sought, which foregrounded "formal experimentation that did not compromise the Revolution" (Soto 16). Ernesto "Che" Guevara was a crucial voice in this debate, whose much-celebrated essay "Socialism and Man in Cuba" (1965) also addressed the issues of formal experimentation and fostering of revolutionary consciousness. Guevara argued that while it was undeniable that Socialist Realism was an outdated mode of literary expression that will produce a monotonous and sterile literature in Cuba, the tendency towards mere formal experimentation compromised the

writer's commitment to the Revolution. He proposed not condemning "all post-midnineteenth century art forms from the pontifical throne of realism- at-all costs", because it entailed "committing the Proudhonian error of the return of to the past, and straitjacketing the artistic expression of the man who is born and being formed today" (Guevara). In his view the "original sin" of many of Cuba's writers and intellectuals lay in the fact that "they are not authentically revolutionary" (Guevara). He advised finding a balance between the needs of formal experimentation that would suit the literature of the present and finding an authentic revolutionary voice, without imitating foreign models which merely showed the decadence of the Capitalist order. While Guevara's thoughts on artistic expression were mostly in favour of espousing literature which actively promoted and fostered revolutionary consciousness, the essay also reveals the willingness to debate questions of artistic theme and form in postrevolutionary Cuba during this phase.

However, the advent of "Super-Stalinism", as Arenas has called it, introduced a repressive phase in 1968, wherein "[f]orced voluntary work was intensified", and the time for leisure was cut down for Cuban writers and intellectuals" (Arenas 72-73). These developments occurred just "at the time when the entire nation was gearing up for the ten-million-ton sugar harvest" (Arenas 72-73). From November 1965, Military Units to Aid Production (UMAPs) were set up to aid economic production through agricultural labour camps in the Camaguey province. These forced labour camps imprisoned and detained "thousands of selfacknowledged, closeted and presumed homosexuals for up to three years without charge" (Guerra 268). The UMAP camps detained all conscientious objectors to Obligatory Military Service (SMO) under the revolutionary government including, but not limited to, religious groups such as Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh Day Adventists, Catholics, Pentecostal Christians, priests, dissident artists, marihuaneros ("potheads")⁴, drug addicts, governmental officers under trial for corruption, pimps, farmers who refused collectivization and homosexuals (primarily "gay" men). Internees were forced to perform a variety of menial agricultural jobs such as planting and harvesting sugarcane, picking boniato (sweet potato), yucca, and fruit to tearing down marabú (mimosa bushes), applying fertilizer, and weeding (Tahbaz 2013). Although disbanded in 1968 owing to international pressure created through the agitation of Human Rights' agencies and groups, the legacy of forced labour has been difficult to eradicate. Arenas himself was also sent to the Manuel Sanguily Sugar Mill in 1970 "to cut sugarcane and to write a book praising that odyssey as well as the ten million-ton harvest" (Arenas 74). The experience of forced labour at the sugar mill seemed to him "like entering the last circle of hell", where the recruits were expected to get up before dawn and cut sugarcane all day long under the blazing, tropical mid-day sun (Arenas 74-75). Arenas' experience of the forced-labour camp inspired his long poem 'El Central', which explicitly denounced the arbitrary and repressive nature of the totalitarian state,

which, in the name of supposed “rehabilitation”, forcefully expropriated labour from a section of its own citizens.

At the sugar mill, the recruits were expected to “get up at four in the morning”, and, with a machete in hand and a water bottle, they were “taken by cart to the fields to work all day under a blistering sun, among the sharp leaves of the sugarcane” (Arenas 74). Arenas therefore points out that the experience of the camps seemed almost a retrogression to the ignominy of working under the plantation system of colonial times, suffered by “the Indian” and the “black slave”. He empathizes with these two enslaved and marginalised figures from Cuba’s history and reimagines their plight through the tribulations he saw around him. He writes that it seemed he was now reduced to “the Indian” and “the black slave”, fated to historical servitude. (Arenas 74). An entire generation of young Cubans, “...those young men, sixteen and seventeen years old, were treated like beasts, had no future to hope for, nor a past to remember. (Arenas 74).

The notion of bearing “poetic witness” is central to the literary oeuvre of Arenas, who attempts to lay bare the numerous forms of historical injustices in post-revolutionary Cuba: state-endorsed expropriation of labour, ostracism of the homosexual, torture and incarceration. John Beverley points out that Arenas’s fictional works such as the *Pentagonia* (a quintet of five novels comprised of *Singing from the Well*, *The Palace of the White Skunks*, *Farewell to the Sea*, *The Color of Summer* and *The Assault*) have characteristics of *testimonio* or testimonial narrative that seeks to create a feeling of lived experience and expresses a “problematic collective social situation through a representative individual” (Beverley 94-95). According to Francisco Soto, the *pentagonia* “underscores the agony suffered by the characters of this quintet, who find themselves pressured and persecuted by abusive authoritarian systems and discourses of power” (Soto 19). But while Arenas introduces a necessary form of authorial selfdistancing between his lived life and the characters of his *pentagonia*, in his autobiographical memoir, this fictive distance is reduced. As I have insinuated earlier in this paper, the reduction of this fictive distance enables Arenas to critique the systematic forms of oppression in a Communist dictatorship in his own person (reminding the reader repeatedly that his “narrative”, after all, is predicated upon the ‘real’), while at the same time taking the creative liberty to re-arrange episodes of his life in a pre-determined order (by resorting to the same literary strategies as “fiction”). This fundamental ambivalence is built into the narrative structuring of *Before Night Falls*, embedding strategies of resistance to prevent personal, or collective memories from “assimilation, repressions or misrepresentations” (Vickroy 1) committed by official histories that omit these instances of grave injustice.

Arenas writes that the failure of the projected ten million ton- sugar-quota had ensured that “[t]he country had been devastated”, being now depleted of those “thousands upon thousands of fruit trees and royal palms, and even forests” in the attempt (Arenas 75). The forced overproduction in the sugar mills irreparably damaged the machinery and left the nation as “the poorest province of the Soviet Union” (Arenas 75).

In order to deflect attention from this failure, Castro conveniently shifted the blame “to other areas, such as his hatred of the United States” (Arenas 75). In 1970, eleven Cuban fishermen disappeared, an event which was misleadingly dubbed as a kidnapping “by CIA agents on some Caribbean island” (Arenas 75). In fact, the Castro administration was looking for an opportunity to stir up a nationwide frenzy and hatred of “Yankee imperialism”, and “millions of people who had been cutting sugarcane for a year had to reassemble in Revolutionary Square, or in front of what used to be the U.S. embassy in Havana, to protest the alleged kidnapping of the fishermen” (Arenas 75). Arenas carefully highlights state-induced methods to inspire docility in its citizens. He sarcastically portrays the mind-numbing sloganeering at the mass rally and the conclusion to the tiresome ordeal through the eruption of the carnivalesque, mocking Castro’s “flair for theatrical strategies”. He recounts that the irruption of such dramatic happenings came to an end “in a sort of rumba” (Arenas 75). Overtly enthusiastic crowds, infused with typical “Communist” fervour, burnt effigies of President Nixon “to the beating of bongo drums” (Arenas 75). In keeping with the demands of the circumstances, the state required a number of distractions to divert the attention of Cuban citizens. Therefore, carnival celebrations were in order throughout Cuba, where “the masses gathered in order to be able to eat a Cuban burger” (Arenas 75). The failure of this economic policy adopted by the Cuban state in a deeply polarised world, through excessive over-reliance on meeting the projected sugar-production quota seemed to re-inforce, in Arenas’s view, that “that we had been the butt of a bad joke, that the efforts of all those years had been useless, that we were a completely underdeveloped country, more and more enslaved every day”. (Arenas 75), In order to conceal his homosexuality to the eyes of the Cuban state, Arenas had entered a marriage of convenience with Ingravida Felix, a divorced and talented actress famous for her role in the play *La noche de los asesinos* (The Night of the Murderers). Her independent demeanour and her relatively free sex life were among the reasons she had been “parametrized and fired from her job, in spite of her enormous acting talent” (Arenas 84).

The moral puritanism of the Castro regime is brought out through Arenas’s accounts in his autobiographical memoir, where he recounts “notorious arrests of women at try sting hotels” which had been created and maintained so that “heterosexuals could rent a room for a few hours to make love” (Arenas 84). But in spite of this fact, internal surveillance mechanisms within the ranks of the government also needed to find out “which women were committing adultery” under this pretext, “especially if any happened to be the wife of some Communist Party stalwart” (Arenas 84). As a marginalised gay man in Castro’s Cuba, Arenas does not hesitate to extend his solidarity towards heterosexual women who were thought of, by the Castro regime, as “inferior beings” (Arenas 84). Whereas sexual promiscuity among macho men was seen as a sign of virility, similar privileges could not be extended to women and homosexuals by the State. Therefore, attitudes of empathy

and mutual protection evolved between the two, since they “suffered persecution for the same weakness” (Arenas 84)— the preference of men as sexual partners. Their marriage was testimony to the fact that these two sections of the Cuban population were ostracised (albeit in varying degrees) by the continuation of machismo⁵ after the Revolution. Women and homosexuals were explicitly excluded from the utopian concept of the “New Man” (*hombre nuevo*)⁶ supposed to emerge in future with a supposedly “superior consciousness” (Guevara). The moral puritanism endorsed by the Castro regime aimed at preserving the traditional institution of the family which, through biological reproduction, ensures continual supply of labour in the workforce for future generations. The libidinal economy of homosexuality was viewed as “unproductive, inclined more to waste and dissipation than to socially relevant creation and generation” (Epps 241). Traditional Marxist-Leninist line of thought thus viewed homosexuals as narcissists who could be made “men” through “hard work” (Epps 241). This extolled cult of militant uber-machismo was aimed at fostering homosociality between overtly “masculine” men. It justified the UMAP camps and the state’s forceful expropriation of penal labour from its “sexual deviants”. While elaborating on Guevara’s concept of the “New Man” of superior Communist consciousness, Castro noted in a later interview to Italian journalist Gianni Mina: “We postulate something to which the Christian doctrine also subscribes: the brotherhood of all people, solidarity, selflessness and generosity, to which we add a high education, advanced technical training, national dignity, and an internationalist approach” (Mina 143). However, for all its purported extolling of brotherhood, the regime’s ostracism, practised against its non-macho “others”, becomes immediately visible in Castro’s exclusion of the homosexual from the ideal, projected vision of the true “revolutionary”:

Nothing prevents a homosexual from professing revolutionary ideology and, consequently, exhibiting a correct political position...And yet, we would never come to believe that a homosexual could embody the conditions and requirements of conduct that would enable us to consider him a true revolutionary, a true Communist militant. A deviation of that nature clashes with the concept we have of what a militant Communist should be...[b]ut I will be frank and say that homosexuals should not be allowed in positions where they are able to exert influence upon young people. (Leiner 26) Castro was therefore explicitly pointing out that a homosexual was (in and as of themselves), somehow “less” than, or socially “inferior” to the Communist ideal of the “New Man”. His comments also directs our attention to the graded rights available to homosexuals in post-revolutionary Cuba, turning them into second-class citizens. As more and more stringent and repressive measures were adopted, the homosexual was not only excluded from all positions of influence, but also from the mainstream of Cuban public life.

The circumstances of Arenas’s arrest and incarceration, as depicted in *Before Night Falls*, indicate the powerlessness of the homosexual in the face of a repressive, Janus-faced state. During the summer of 1974, Arenas writes that he and his friend Pepe Malas had “sex in the mangroves with some young guys” (Arenas 86). After love-making, they had left

their beach bags on the sand and had dived into the sea for a swim. On returning, they found that they had been robbed, and that “our recent lovers had taken our bags” (Arenas 86). Pepe Malas informed the police of the theft. The collective, entrenched bias against the homosexual is carefully highlighted as Arenas, as an afterthought, admits “this should never have been done in our case” (Arenas 86). Seeking police help was always dangerous for citizens engaged in “dubious” moral behaviour, such as homosexuals. Although the police did find the thieving adolescents and the bags were also found, the adolescents now levelled a counter-accusation at Arenas and Malas as homosexuals who had tried to make sexual advances towards them. Despite being implicated in a case where the clear proof of theft was on their side, Arenas realised that “I had overlooked a Castroist article of law stating that in case of a homosexual committing a sexual crime, anyone’s accusations were enough grounds for persecution” (Arenas 86). He discovered that “[a]ll of a sudden, everything positive had disappeared from my file, and I was nothing but a homosexual counter-revolutionary who had dared to publish books abroad” (Arenas 86). Even after being released on bail, when Arenas returned to his workplace at the UNEAC, he found that suddenly “it seemed I had become invisible” (Arenas 86).

The lengthy UNEAC report and the extended “dossier of evidence” available on him to the State accused him of “being a counter-revolutionary who had smuggled his books out of Cuba without the UNEAC’s authorization” (Arenas 86). It was signed by notable Cuban literati such as Nicolás Guillén, Otto Fernandez, Jose Martinez Matos and Bienvenido Suarez. His desire to embrace exile grew more and more desperate, and he hatched an outrageous plan “to leave the country in a boat via the U.S. naval base at Guantanamo” (Arenas 87). However, he was immediately arrested and taken to the Miramar police station, from whence he again attempted a heroic escape. Arenas’s escape from a solitary cell at the Miramar Police Station happened purely on the stroke of good luck, but it was an event which nevertheless summed up the socio-economic context of deprivation in which Cuba remained at the time. Thus, as soon as an officer had announced that he had brought “hot espresso, a privilege in Cuba, where coffee is rationed at three ounces a month per person”, all officers left their stations to gather towards him (Arenas 88). Seizing his opportunity, Arenas ran away through the open gate “which led to the shore”, took off his clothes and dived into the water (Arenas 88). He managed to reach Patricio Lumumba Beach, where, with the help of a former lover, he reached his aunt’s house to tell her the fabricated story that it had all been “a mistake and I only needed to pay a fine” (Arenas 88). Arenas’s perseverance in evading arrest reached its pinnacle as he accomplished the near-Herculean feat of swimming in an “inner tube” (buoy), with only a bottle of rum and a can of black beans given to him by a friend, and reached the nearby coast of Jaimanitas (Arenas 88-89). Although his plan to escape via the sea had failed, Arenas managed to reach Guantanamo by train. Being constantly pursued by Cuban soldiers and policemen, he had to hide in a tree for two whole days.

He finally managed to reach Holguin, his hometown and left again for Havana. He hid himself in Lenin Park, Havana and with the help of his friends Juan and Olga Abreu, started to make arrangements to leave Cuba (Arenas 88-89).

Surprisingly enough, Arenas managed to evade arrest for ten more days, hiding himself behind a few bushes in Lenin Park with only a copy of *The Iliad* which his friend had given him. He had almost finished reading it, being at the point where “Achilles, deeply moved, finally delivers Hector’s body to Priam” (Arenas 94), when he was arrested by the police. Misinformation and propaganda against him had already been on the loose, and “[w]ithin a few hours the whole town was gathered in front of the police station...word had spread that the CIA agent, the rapist, the murderer of the old day, had been captured by the Revolutionary Police” (Arenas 94). Under false charges of rape. Arenas was transferred to the notorious “El Morro” castle, now turned into a prison, in Havana. It was a dank place, blocked off from any passage or outlet to let in adequate air, especially under the blazing tropical sun. Arenas realised the documentary import of his autobiographical memoir, and thus, provides the reader detailed descriptions of his new acquaintances in prison and the conversations he could recall with them. He had entered El Morro prison with “an infamous reputation not as a political prisoner or a writer but as a rapist, a murderer, and a CIA agent; all this gave me an aura of respectability, even among the real murderers” (Arenas 95). The sub-human living conditions in El Morro prison are brought out in *Before Night Falls*, where “the bathroom was just a hole in which everybody defecated; it was impossible to get there without having your feet and your ankles full of shit, and there was no water to clean up”. (Arenas 95-96). Arenas thus mockingly says that under such sub-human living conditions, the soul could do very little to exonerate the body from its own constant self-deprecation.

However, the false charges proved to be a blessing in disguise for him as he could avoid incarceration in the “homosexual” wards of El Morro prison. He writes, “these wards were below ground at the lowest level, and water seeped into the cells at high tide...a sweltering place without a bathroom” (Arenas 96). Gay prisoners did not get human treatment at El Morro, “they were treated like beasts...were the last to come out for meals...and the most insignificant incident was an excuse to beat them up mercilessly” (Arenas 96). But he sought creative and nurturing occupations, even in the midst of the chaos and din he witnessed in prison. He started giving French lessons to a few inmates after meals. Rape was also a frequent happening at El Morro prison, where the “ward chiefs” behaved like “thugs, pouncing upon young adolescent boys who were called “fresh meat” (Arenas 97). To defend themselves against the oppressive machismo around them, the queers and “fairies” acted unpredictably, and were prone to violence; they had made themselves “a very effective weapon which consisted of a stick studded with razor blades” (Arenas 97). Vek Lewis points out that Arenas’s uncompromising stance in standing in favour of a *maricóneria* (active assertion of one’s

politics and identity as a maricón) acts as a point of oppositional militancy and emerges as “a counter-questioning of the macho’s claims to naturalness and authenticity” (Lewis 108). He does so, however, not just from within the prison, for prison itself is “an exaggeration of the kinds of condition in Cuba on the outside” (Lewis 111).

Arenas earned a great reputation as a letter-writer within the wards of the El Morro prison. The marginalisation endured in his earlier life, in which he must have felt excruciating loneliness and alienation was now replaced with the affirmative assertions of the condemned and incarcerated poet paradoxically representing his co-inmates, whose agonies he now bears active witness to. He managed to “set up a sort of desk in [his] ward, and they would all come to have [him] write their letters” (Arenas 98). Literary crafting through the use of imagination, in which the voice of the creative artist must perform a necessary self-dissolution in order to be able to be those he represented, became his sole diversion at this point. He had become, as he amusingly calls it in his autobiographical memoir, “the literary boyfriend or husband for all the prisoners at El Morro” (Arenas 98). Arenas was investigated, from time to time, by State Security at Villa Marista. After spending an excruciating three months there, he could not endure the torture any longer and agreed to sign a confession tantamount to recanting from his erstwhile resistant position of noncooperation. The confession statement ran that he “regretted the ideological weakness” apparent in his published works and “that the Revolution had been extraordinarily fair” with him (Arenas 104). He also had to accept what the State saw as “correctional rehabilitation” and renounce his homosexuality. But having already been able to foresee such an outcome, the clever Arenas knew that he had already written a communique before his arrest from Lenin Park, to a host of international organisations such as the International Red Cross, the UN, UNESCO—that his “accusations against the regime of Fidel Castro were absolutely true to fact, even if, at some point, I denied it” (Arenas 104). Although he had surmised that by signing the confession he had lost his “dignity” and “rebellious spirit” (Arenas 104), this act should not warrant the censure or judgement of most readers, who (in most cases) are cushioned by better opportunities and political security than the poet ever faced.

Released from prison in 1976, he would go on to live in Cuba for only four more years. In April 1980, “a driver on the number 32 bus route drove a bus full of passengers through the doors of the Peruvian embassy” seeking political asylum (Arenas 132). Thousands of Cubans flocked to the Peruvian embassy in the following days, inciting “the first mass rebellion by the Cuban people against the Castro dictatorship” (Arenas 132). The Mariel Boatlift was a direct consequence of the aforementioned events, a event where the Cuban port of Mariel was opened for a short period of time to allow what the Cuban government regarded as the “riffraff” —in short dissidents, conscientious objectors to the dictatorship, the mentally ill and the homosexuals—to immigrate to Miami on the southern coast of the United States.

However, realising that it was essentially detrimental to the image of the Castro regime to let him immigrate, Arenas had apprehensions about being able to leave Cuba. He presented himself at the nearest police station and took necessary care to declare that he was a “passive” homosexual, especially since the already established Cuban context of machismo ensured that “the Cuban government did not look upon those who took the active male role as real homosexuals” (Arenas 133). Upon a preliminary examination of his statement, his clothes and public appearance, as well as his gait, he was able to satisfy his inquisitors at the police station and his “exit permit had been negotiated at the neighbourhood level” (Arenas 133). His final exit from Cuba took place under dramatic circumstances, as after waiting through a sleepless week locked up in his “unbearably hot room”, he was directed one morning by the police “to get ready and show up at a place called Cuatro Ruedas to leave the country” (Arenas 134). He managed to reach the camp at El Mosquito reserved for the Mariel immigrants where, in order to escape the prying eyes of state security, Arenas altered the “closed e” in his name on his hand-written passport to an “i” to become “Reinaldo Arinas” (Arenas 134). Although both the Cuban State Security and the UNEAC had been alerted within a few hours (and later Arenas learnt that than “intensive search” had been organised at El Mosquito camp to prevent him from leaving) he barely managed to elude the authorities and left Cuba for good.

In exile, Reinaldo Arenas lived under greater personal freedom but constantly came under attack, especially from the left-leaning “progressive” U.S. based intellectual classes who “from their ivory towers supported socialism in Cuba” (Cruz-Martes 9). He showed resilience to denounce outright the repressive measures of the Castro regime in Cuba. Yet, at the same time, Camelly Cruz-Martes points out, he also “quarrelled with the anti-Castro rightist groups with their conservative values”, denouncing their anti-homosexual stance without equivocation. (Cruz-Martes 9) Along with his friends and compatriot-writers such as Juan Abreu, Rene Cienfuegos, Luis de la Paz, Roberto Valero, Carlos Victoria and a few others, Arenas published the journal *Mariel* to represent the voice of the Marielitos in the American world of letters.

But as soon as Arenas started denouncing the arbitrary tyranny of the Castro regime, “even my own publishers, who had made enough money from my books, covertly turned against me” (Arenas 137). He alleged accusations at Emmanuel Carballo (his Mexican publisher of *El mundo aluciante*) of having never paid him anything despite publishing five editions of the book. In reply, Carballo wrote him “an indignant letter saying I should have never left Cuba, while at the same time, refusing to make any payment” (Arenas 137). Arenas sarcastically phrases the entire episode as “a very profitable way of exercising his (Carballo’s) communist militancy” (Arenas 137). In another instance he provides of his verbal altercations with his publishers, Angel Rama, who had formerly published a collection of short stories authored by Arenas in Uruguay, wrote “a lengthy newspaper article for *El Universal* (published

from Caracas, Venezuela) which he entitled “Reinaldo Arenas on His Way to Ostracism” (Arenas 137). Rama argued that Arenas’s decision to leave Cuba “was a mistake”, and that all his problems had merely been “bureaucratic” (Arenas 137). This seemed especially cynical and sinister of Rama, who had met Arenas before Havana in 1969, and knew of the constant censorship the latter had faced within Cuba. Arenas witnessed, as part of the global war of propaganda and counter-propaganda (which was a result of Cold War diplomatic tensions), the well-rehearsed vacillations and circumlocutions which ultimately ended up trivialising the material difficulties he had endured both before and after his exile. Considering Arenas had been already subjected to so much invisibilisation and ostracism already, to assert that he would, yet again, be condemned to them seemed like a motivated response: “I realised that the war had started all over again, now in a much underhanded manner”, and although “it was less terrible than Fidel’s war against the intellectuals in Cuba”, it was “no less sinister” (Arenas 137). Severo Sarduy, Arenas’s French publisher, paid him “a mere thousand dollars” for all of his editions. (Arenas 137). Thus, as soon as he arrived in Miami, Arenas realised first-hand what he already had known before, that the “capitalist system was also sordid and moneyhungry” (Arenas 137). However, an important difference was posited by him between the so-called “free-market” economies of the liberal, democratic countries and a country under a quasi-military dictatorship such as Cuba: “the difference between the communist and capitalist systems is that, although both give you a kick in the ass, in the communist system you have to stand and applaud, while in the capitalist system you can scream” (Arenas 137). And thus he directly announces his agendum of “screaming” in a space where he could assert, unapologetically, his rights to free speech. Elsewhere, he writes,

...I have never considered myself as belonging to the “left” or to the “right”, nor do I want to be included under any opportunistic or political label. I tell my truth, as does the Jew who has suffered racism or the Russian who has been in the Gulag, or any human being who has eyes to see the way things really are. I scream, therefore I exist. (Arenas 143)

He touches upon themes of exilic loss and troubled memory revealing the accumulated longing for “home” which, paradoxically, has only “condemned” him. Arenas illustrates this essential ambivalence of his exile while living in New York—marked by the contrary pulls of longing for his patria and the desire for “freedom”—in an interview given to Ann Tashi Slater, where he stated that “[e]very person who lives outside his context is always a bit of a ghost, because I am here, but at the same time I remember a person who walked those streets, who is there, and that same person is me”. (Arenas). In context of the present analysis, this ambivalence has implications of exilic longing for home and the symbolic inscription of the patria on Arenas’s memory.

The final portions of *Before Night Falls* introduce an ominous “bursting of an empty glass” to signal the end of a protective relationship connecting Arenas to his “deity”—the Moon (Arenas 150). In a manner that may be considered counter-hegemonic, Arenas does not attempt to

refute the traditional connection (dating back to Roman geographers such as Pliny the Elder) asserted between the Moon (luna) and “lunacy” but instead reclaims it through his voluntary subjectification as the loca,⁷ who embraces chaos as a form of creative escape from the tyranny of order. The Moon is thus exalted as a patron-goddess of the loca, the deity which allows Arenas to superimpose his own pain and suffering on its muted face. (Arenas 150).

By choosing death through suicide over a slowly deteriorating terminal illness such as AIDS, Arenas encounters the uncertainty of death and makes it “certain”. His farewell note, which comprises the last chapter of *Before Night Falls*, expresses contentment that despite the tragedies of exile and dislocation, the poet had managed (in a “delicate state of health” and a “terrible emotional depression”) his “literary work, to which I have devoted almost thirty years” (Arenas 151). Arenas’s strategic rebellion consists in personally holding the dictator accountable for his displacement and misfortunes: “Persons near me are in no way responsible for my decision...[t]here is only one person I hold accountable: Fidel Castro” (Arenas 151). Brad Epps, in his essay on Arenas, directs our attention to this ascription of historical responsibility on Castro, and suggests that “Arenas’s writing is so suffused with the struggle against suppression, and for publication, that suppression becomes the condition of possibility of Arenas’s writing itself” (Epps 246). In a similar vein, Castro is also perpetually present within any analysis on the poet, as “the phantasmic co-author of Arenas’s writing, the authority who by striving to disauthorize Arenas ultimately only authorizes him all the more” (Epps 246). Since Arenas’s literary self-fashioning was inextricably linked to his aberrant or “improper” conduct under a totalitarian regime, the exile to the United States of America ultimately freed him. However, the directness with which Arenas’s accusations against the dictator are levelled also hint at a strategic abjuration of responsibility on his part. It is significant that Arenas cites his perceived sense of injustice (the marginalisations forced upon the dissident homosexual) to be the root cause of his exile and displacement: “[t]he sufferings of exile, the pain of being banished from my country, the loneliness, and the diseases contracted in exile would probably never have happened if I had been able to enjoy freedom in my country” (Arenas 151). After considering a significant part of Arenas’s literary oeuvre including his autobiographical memoir, I conclude that this tendency to ascribe complete historical responsibility to Castro emerges as part of his rebellious mariconería, a counter-discourse to the hegemony of ubermachismo which Castro embodied through his public appearance. The maricón (who strategically embraces the stigma of “passivity” traditionally thrust upon him, only in order to turn it into a counter-discourse through the use of the rhetorical devices of irony) thus becomes akin to a trickster-figure; he subverts his invisibilisation by mocking the entrenched discrimination to which he is subjected to. Del Risco thus comments that “[i]n Arenas, autonomy not only means constructing a different reality, an escape, it also means responding to and undermining the supposed coherency and weight

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Notes

- 1 bohio: A typically Cuban clay hut with a thatched roof.
- 2 maricón: When used in a general sense, it is a pejorative Spanish-language slang for the queer person, usually translated as the English word "faggot". In its particular sense i.e. the sense in which it is used here, it refers to the "bottom", the one who "receives" penal penetration within anal sexual intercourse between gay partners.
- 3 Bay of Pigs' Invasion: The Bay of Pigs' Invasion was a failed landing operation carried out by CIA-backed Cuban exiles opposed to the Castro regime, fought on the south-western coast of Cuba from April 17-20, 1961. The armed wing of the Democratic Revolutionary Front (DRF), with funding and military training from the CIA, led the operation which was thwarted by the Cuban Revolutionary Armed Forces. Faced with an international scandal, U.S. President John F. Kennedy decided to withhold air support and the invading army was forced to surrender. The failed invasion was crucial in moulding Castro's foreign policy in the years that followed, as he veered towards the Soviet camp and U.S.-Cuba diplomatic ties entered an alltime low.
- 4 marihuaneros: Cannabis, or marijuana addicts.
- 5 machismo: The social sense of being overtly "manly" and the gendered code of displaying exaggerated masculinity.
- 6 "New Man" (*hombre nuevo*) was the postulation and endorsement of a hypothetical future man by Ernesto "Che" Guevara, infused with a "superior" (and Communist) consciousness who facilitated the transition from capitalism to communism. The ideal "New Man" deliberately rejected the use of material incentives in the building of a (supposedly) communitarian society. Crucial to Guevara's conception of the "New Man" was his rejection of class hierarchies caused by money and market relations and his vision of a "classless society" at a future stage of Communism. The disjuncture between the "humanitarian" rhetoric used in the endorsement of this concept and the fierce indoctrination and social engineering promoted by this economic scheme was never properly bridged. Despite its claims to "liberty", this concept conveniently co-opted the already entrenched masculinist bias inherent in machismo, and reduced women and homosexuals to "inferior" and marginalised subjects.
- 7 La loca": Loca, derived from the classical Arabic word for stupid, usually connotes "crazy" as an adjective in Spanish. Used as a noun (*la loca*), it can mean a "crazy" woman, or an effeminate (and usually, homosexual) man who does not conform to the codes of machismo. The exact connotative force of the

noun can vary with context across Latin America, variedly referring to trans or cis-women sex workers (Uruguay and Argentina) or even “promiscuous cis-women” (Cuba). But regardless of its specific application, the term has been historically used to subjugate the gender non-conforming “woman” as an “inferior” marginal other. Melissa M. González writes that “the term loca reflects parallels in the biopolitical management of both craziness and homosexuality, two subjectivities that have been historically relegated to a position of otherness”. See Gonzalez, Melissa M. “La Loca”. *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1. 1-2 (2014): 123-25. Web. 24 May 2022. <https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-2399794>