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# The King's Toilet: Cruising Literary History in Reinaldo Arenas' *Before Night Falls*

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THE KING'S TOILET: CRUISING LITERARY HISTORY  
IN REINALDO ARENAS' *BEFORE NIGHT FALLS*

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[W]hen I entered a public rest room I became painfully aware that my presence failed to arouse the old expectant feeling of complicity. Nobody paid any attention to me, and the erotic games going on proceeded undisturbed. I no longer existed. I was not young anymore. Right then and there I thought that the best thing for me was to die.

—Reinaldo Arenas, *Before Night Falls*

*I. Before Night Falls Twenty Years After*

Reinaldo Arenas (1943-1990) opens his last major work in search of sex in a cruisy toilet.<sup>1</sup> In his posthumously published autobiography *Antes que anochezca* (1992; *Before Night Falls*, 1993),<sup>2</sup>

1. I thank Rita Geada and the late Roberto Valero for introducing me to Arenas and his work. The Department of Rare Books and Special Collections at Princeton University, Firestone Library, provided timely access to Arenas' papers, photographic archive, and correspondence for this article which forms part of a longer project on Arenas' "afterlives."

2. In what follows, all quotations from Reinaldo Arenas' *Antes que anochezca* (1992) refer to Dolores Koch's translation of his autobiography *Before Night Falls* (1993). It is worth noting that while Arenas was finishing his autobiography, he was also rewriting *El color del verano* (translated as *The Color of Summer: or the New Garden of Earthly Delights* in 2000), which was published posthumously by Ediciones Universal in Miami in 1991. The novel is one of his most autobiographi-

Arenas—known as “Rey” or “El Rey” to his friends (“the King” in Spanish)—writes that months before taking his life he had entered a public restroom in search of sex only to find that no one was interested in cruising him much less engaging in any sort of sex.<sup>3</sup> Arenas simply finds himself unwanted by the cruisy queens in the loo who carry on as if he did not even exist. El Rey, in the toilet and distraught, tells us that “[r]ight then and there I thought that the best thing for me was to die” (ix). He buys a ticket to Miami to do just that, but finds that even death is elusive when one wants it most. Lucky for Arenas and for us. The experience of rejection at the loo, that symbolizes his impending death, also functions as the catalyst that allows him to face his literary legacy: “My main regret...was to die without having been able to complete my *pentagonía*” (x).<sup>4</sup> In *Before Night Falls* Arenas’ desire and commitment to completing his “*pentagonía*” (quintet), a cycle of five novels of which he had already published three: *Singing from the Well* (*Celestino antes del alba*, 1967), *The Palace of the White Skunks* (*El palacio de las blanquísimas mofetas*, 1980), and *Farewell to the Sea* (*Otra vez el mar*, 1982), also announces how he wished his body of work to be understood. So it is that in *Before Night Falls*, more than in any other work, “the King’s” literal body becomes indexical to and inseparable from how he wished his body of work to be understood. I take Arenas’ tearoom anecdote to be highly instructive of a broader concern regarding the nature of writing for El Rey, his literary legacy, and the queer Cuban literary history his broader work wishes to memorialize. Let me explain why.

In the tearoom, Arenas draws a stark parallel between his

cal were his persona is triangulated in the characters “Skunk in a Funk,” his queer nom de guerre, Gabriel “the dutiful straight son,” and Reinaldo “the famous ‘persecuted’ author.” It is evident that toward the end of his life the autobiographical impulse took center stage in his last works. Still, the genre demands and constraints of autobiography make *Before Night Falls* a indispensable text and map for studies on Arenas’ work and legacies.

3. For a useful discussion of the politics of “tearoom,” or toilet sex, at the height of the AIDS crisis see José Esteban Muñoz, “Ghosts of Public Sex: Utopian Longings, Queer Memories,” in Ephen Glenn Colter, et al., *Policing Public Sex: Queer Politics And the Future of AIDS Activism* (1996).

4. For an analysis of the *pentagonía* see Francisco Soto’s *Reinaldo Arenas: The Pentagonia* (1994). Soto’s monograph emerged at a moment were the politics of testimonial literature in Latin America received considerable critical attention. Not surprisingly, Soto perhaps too singularly emphasizes Arenas own declaration that the quintet was “both a writer’s autobiography and a metaphor of Cuban history.”

physical decline, and concomitant lack of desirability in the face of uninterested tricks who refuse to acknowledge his existence, with his incomplete *pantagonía* and his legacy as a writer confronting imminent death in the face of literary history; put another way, Arenas body becomes a book and the loo's queens his unwilling literary critics. So it is that Arenas takes it upon himself to have *Before Night Falls* serve both as a map of how his work should be understood in relation to his very own queer Cuban literary legacy and, no less significantly, as an occasion to revisit his relation to Cuban literary history after the Revolution of 1959. Rey forestalls death in *Before Night Falls* so that his own literary afterlife may be given a corrective reprieve and opportunity for completion lest it be met with the indifference he found in the tearoom. In the process, *Before Night Falls* becomes Arenas' *ars poetica*.

In this article I will read *Before Night Falls* as Arenas' queer version of Cuban literary history and his relation to it. Against the commonplace assertions that demand that *Before Nights Falls* be primarily understood, if not exclusively, as an invective against Fidel Castro or, in the other extreme, as an *ars moriendi* and AIDS testimonial from a sexual dissident, I wish to revisit this text on the twentieth anniversary of its publication to underscore a missed reading that can help situate how Arenas, one of the most transgressive writers theorized in this collection as the Generation of '72, might also be its most conservative in his attachments to the very modernist aesthetic agencies eschewed by so many of his generational contemporaries.<sup>5</sup> This is not to ignore, of course, the most obvious and sometimes illuminating readings of *Before Night Falls*

5. For Arenas as little more than an opportunist critic of communist Cuba see Lourdes Argüelles and B. Ruby Rich's influential article in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, "Homosexuality, Homophobia, and Revolution: Notes Toward an Understanding of the Cuban Lesbian and Gay Male Experience, Part 2." Here Argüelles and Rich's go so far as to suggest that Arenas work represents "the beginning of an unprecedented manipulation of the gay issue by those engaged in the U.S.-financed war against the Cuban revolution" (132). For a more measured analysis of this tendency see Vek Lewis's thoughtful essay, "Grotesque Spectacles: The Janus Face of the State and Gender Variant Bodies in the Work of Reinaldo Arenas" (2009). For a reading of Arenas as AIDS memorist see Nerea Riley's "Reinaldo Arenas' Autobiography Antes que anochezca as Confrontational 'Ars Moriendi'" (1999). Riley considers Arenas's autobiography as ushering in an aesthetics of dying where "narrating one's death has become a genre in itself." Rafael Ocasio's *A Gay Cuban Activist in Exile: Reinaldo Arenas* (2007) provides a reading of Arenas' complex relationship to queer writing and queer studies.

that have fallen on either end of the political continuum, or somewhere in between, but rather as an opportunity to revisit Arenas' important autobiography on the anniversary of its publication this year. And so it is to *Before Night Falls*' afterlives that I now turn in order to reconsider and map *el caso* Arenas' literary histories.

## II. Before Night Falls' Afterlives

El Rey's *Before Night Falls*, beyond the genre constraints of autobiography and its attendant truth claims, is unlike any of Arenas' other works. At the end of his life and near death, much of the autobiography was dictated into a tape recorder, transcribed by his intimate friend Lázaro Gómez Carrilles (who became one of the beneficiaries of his estate along with the Cuban exile painter Jorge Camacho [1934-2011]), and finally revised for publication.<sup>6</sup> The spoken quality of the transcribed text figures prominently in the autobiography as the first person narrative voice follows the rhythmic patterns of Arenas' measured but speedy delivery of speech. This is evident to anyone who ever heard Arenas speak in person. His voice in *Before Night Falls* glides from sentence to sentence, anecdote to anecdote, with an urgency that is stoically resigned and mediated by a steady tonality that appears unbroken by pauses. Curiously, this very confusion between the actual writer's voice, with his narrative autobiographical voice, also manifested itself most stridently in *Before Night Falls*' most significant afterlife as a film. The substitution from word to flesh, that is, Arenas' book functioning as a metonym for Arenas himself, was facilitated when Arenas was discovered by a generation of admirers after the release of Julian Schnabel's award winning version of *Before Night Falls* in 2000.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, many of

6. The original draft of Arenas's *Antes que anochezca* remained closed to researchers until 2010. There is as yet no study that compares the first edition of *Antes que anochezca* published in Spain by Editorial Tusquets in 1992 with the original draft. See the "Dolores Koch Collection of Reinaldo Arenas, 1974-2005" (bulk 1982-1993). The collection is stored onsite at Firestone Library. Box 1, Folders 1-4 are stored in special vault facilities. For online resources see the Princeton University Library Manuscripts Division site (<http://findingaids.princeton.edu/getEad?eadid=C0984&kw=>).

7. The Generation of '72's literary outpouring has resulted in many film adaptations including Fernando Vallejo's *La virgen de los sicarios* (1994), Ricardo Piglia's *Plata quemada* (1997), Ariel Dorman's *Death and the Maiden*, and Antonio Skármeta's *Il Postino* (1996), just to name a few of the most popular.

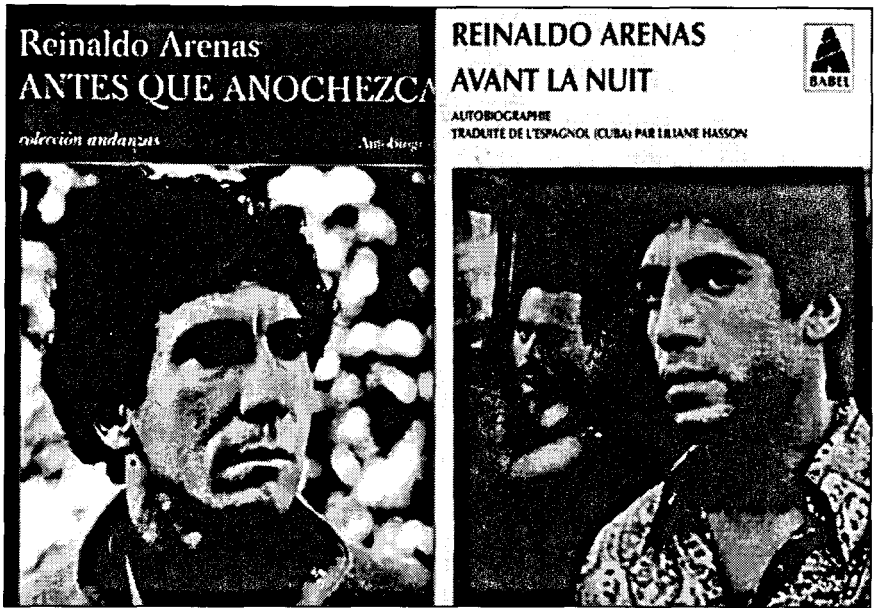


Figure 1: In the French translation of Reinaldo Arenas' *Antes que anochezca* by Liliane Hasson, *Avant la nuit*, Arenas' photograph on the cover is replaced by Javier Bardem playing Arenas in Schnabel's film along with Johnny Depp as Lieutenant Víctor.

these admirers had little or no knowledge of El Rey's broader intellectual project or its relationship to his autobiography and, much less, the extent of his prolific outpouring of work (let alone of his exile through the Mariel Boat Exodus, much less Cuba). And it wasn't just that some popular as well as professional readers confused the generic constraints of the original autobiography, the retrospective accounting of a life, with the genre constraints of the memoir delimited by a finite or thematic moment or preoccupation in a writer's life. The film not only seemed to erase these generic demarcations but it also, wittingly or not, substituted Arenas' own life story with the filmic simulacrum of a queer Cuban life. In the process, Arenas' afterlife became mediated through its filmic simulacrum as represented vis-à-vis the film to the embarrassment of journalists, bloggers and editors who even mistook Javier Bardem's photograph with El Rey's image. This was made blatantly patent, for example, in the French translation of Spanish publisher Editorial Tusquet's *Antes que anochezca* (*Before Night Falls*) when French publisher

Babel's *Avant la nuit* (2000) used Spanish actor Javier Bardem's image on the cover of Arenas' autobiography (see Figure 1). The double, the celluloid simulacrum of Arenas' life, stood inviolate for the original. Schnabel's version of Arenas' life story and those that followed proved problematic, wittingly or not, for various reasons that are worth exploring.

Beyond issues of poetic license, the film ultimately reduced Arenas' life story to a "gay" identity category where the protagonist fundamentally becomes a victim of communist Cuba's repression of artists, if not its most valiant and an admirable one at that, but Castro's victim nonetheless.<sup>8</sup> The film was well received by a U.S. gay and lesbian community who was, as late as 2000, both discovering and starved for queer "Latino" topics that would represent the range of LGBTQ experiences in "America."<sup>9</sup> In *The Advocate*, for example, the oldest continuing LGBT publication in the United States, a review of Schnabel's *Before Night Falls* assured readers that "anyone inclined to romanticize Cuba in these winter years of Fidel Castro's regime needs to take a look at Schnabel's *Before Night Falls*, which presents a harrowing portrait of what it meant for a writer to be gay and out [sic] in the heyday of the revolution. [...] Arenas must run a veritable *Midnight Express* obstacle course of imprisonment and psychological torture before landing on unsteady feet in America [sic]" (57).<sup>10</sup> (Curiously, it is with little irony that *The Advocate*, as the "serious" voice of LGBT issues in the United States, now endorses Cuba's Mariela Castro Espín, President Raúl Castro's Daughter, and her queer rights work in her capacity as the director of Cuba's National Center for Sex Education (CENESEX); an irony that would not have been lost on El Rey.)<sup>11</sup>

8. For a reading of Arenas' *Before Night Falls* and Schnabel's film in transnational context see my "Locas al Rescate: The Transnational Hauntings of Queer Latinidad," *Journal of Transnational American Studies* 3.2, Winter 2011 (Reprise). Digital (<http://escholarship.org/uc/item/9ch96543>).

9. Director Manuel Zayas' documentary *Seres Extravagantes* (2004), released in the United States as *Odd people Out* (2004), attempted to be a corrective of sorts to Schnabel's version of Arenas' life. The documentary, which was clandestinely shot in Cuba, provides interviews with Arenas' colleagues, friends, and relatives. Limited distribution and internet access has limited this important documentary's interlocutors.

10. Jan Stuart, "Havana Heartache," *The Advocate*, December 19, 2000, 57.

11. Michael Rowe, "The New Cuban Revolution," *The Advocate*, September 14, 2009. The online version of the article can be found at the [Advocate.com](http://Advocate.com)

Not surprisingly, the autobiography, which was rediscovered after the film, and the film's reception itself, also created unusual bedfellows and alliances between formerly irreconcilable camps. Many right-wing media outlets and critics praised both the film and the autobiography by exalting its politics at the expense of its strident emphasis on sexuality, while left-identified queers and their allies praised Arenas' dissident sexuality while mostly ignoring his disillusionment over the most obvious of their sacred cows, the Cuban Revolution of 1959, and what the Revolution has meant to scores of intellectuals and writers outside of Cuba. In the filmic version of Arenas' life story, it appears that the Cuban writer is imprisoned for being a strident *maricón* without taking into account that it was ultimately Arenas' writing, and the subsequent publishing of his work abroad, that led to his incarcerations. The omission is significant. Imprisoned in El Morro, Arenas relates in his autobiography how he finds out through one of his interrogators, Lieutenant Víctor, that his novel *The Palace of the White Skunks* "had been published in France and Germany; he showed me one copy but did not allow me to touch it... The publication of this book was proof of my existence, and that infuriated them" (215). For Arenas, *scripta manent, ergo sum*, that is, if his writing endures, therefore he is.

The most striking feature of these substitutions—between the book and its simulacrum, the celluloid image of the writer with the actual writer—was that it posthumously confirmed Arenas' reputation as a writer and secured his place in the Latin American and, not coincidentally, the emerging United States Latino literature canon. As a consequence of this, the film also sealed Arenas' reputation as a "gay" anti-Castro zealot on a crusade against "communism," at least as its understood in the United States, and of *Before Night Falls*, the autobiography—whether it was actually read or not—as the text that proved his singularity of purpose. Such reductionism is, of course, problematic but especially so to a writer like Arenas who understood *Before Night Falls* as a corrective literary supplement to his writerly neglect while he was alive.

The most significant iteration of the Manichean duality that emerged from the success of Schnabel's version of Arena's life story occurred ten years after Schnabel's film with the highly anticipated production of *Before Night Falls* by Cuban American composer



Jorge Martín. The opera itself emerged at a propitious moment in the United States where “emerging” cultural centers with large Latino populations such as Dallas and Houston were willing to take risks in “contemporary” productions and establish reputations for not only introducing local audiences to great performances but also to performances that were deemed more relevant than the traditional operatic fare of major venues such as New York, Paris, Munich or Milan.

*Before Night Falls*, the opera, had been in the works for many years. An initial concert reading from the first act of the opera was performed at the Clark Studio Theatre at Lincoln Center in Manhattan on May 2 in 2005 to considerable acclaim. Following the Lincoln Center performance of the opera’s first act, a panel discussion was moderated by Steven Osgood, the conductor and American Opera Projects Artistic Director, and included composer Jorge Martín, and co-librettist Dolores M. Koch. The truncated New York performance, and the panel discussion that attempted to frame it, was but a rehearsal for the world premiere of the complete opera at the Fort Worth Opera in Texas on May 29, 2010.<sup>12</sup> The opera’s opening run, however, along with the accompanying 2010 release of a CD performed by the Fort Worth Opera, was met with mixed reviews that are illustrative of the broader tensions that characterized previous iterations of *Before Night Falls*’ afterlives from autobiography to film.

Writing for *The Wall Street Journal*, opera reviewer Heidi Waleson repeated and perpetuated many of the standard banalities about the opera that mirrored earlier reviews of Schnabel’s film, even calling the opera an adaptation of a “memoir” [sic] by Reinaldo Arenas.<sup>13</sup> Beyond the standard banalities about either left or right political proclivities, or Arenas as a writer in search of freedoms, Waleson’s lack of interest in Arenas and, it would appear, the broader themes the production attempted to grapple with were stunning. For Waleson, *Before Night Falls*, the opera, is simply insufferable:

[I]t’s never clear what it was that he [Arenas] wrote that was so threatening to the regime. And as lament follows lament, Rey nev-

12. The dates for the performance at the Fort Worth Opera ran from May 29, 2010 until June 6 of that year.

13. See Heidi Waleson, “Imprisoned by Clichés, Laments and Exposition,” *The Wall Street Journal Online*. Accessed May 21, 2012.

er seems to change...it's a relief when an actual antagonist—Victor, the Castro hardliner—finally starts *torturing* Rey by burning his manuscript and *knocking him around* in prison. (my emphasis).

Waleson's ahistorical and factually inaccurate review of the opera, as well as the life it was based upon, highlighted the difficulty of apprehending *el caso* Arenas in the public sphere beyond the media sound bite and the unfortunate confluence of events that have made the likes of Arenas, whether one sees him as a Cuban writer, a Cuban American writer, an "American" writer, or a "global citizen," ultimately not worthy of serious or at least thoughtful engagement. Waleson's assertions and mistaken genre associations, in the pages of *The Wall Street Journal* no less, evinced a less than accurate assessment of Arenas' "story of underdevelopment," to borrow a commonplace from the post-revolutionary Cuban and Cuban American vernacular.

Edmundo Desnoes, expanding on his contribution to the classic Cuban film *Memorias del subdesarrollo* (1968)—an adaptation of his eponymously named novel—wrote that "El subdesarrollo es la incapacidad de acumular experiencias" (underdevelopment refers to the inability to accumulate experiences). The need to accumulate experiences, understood as a state of yearning from the periphery, versus Waleson's lack of desire or willingness to move beyond her unexamined prejudices, characterizes this misreading of *el caso* Arenas. Waleson's missed opportunity puts into relief the importance of cultivating alternative cultural and critical industries, especially when metropolitan cultural centers are incapable or unwilling to apprehend the objects they ostensibly wish to elucidate. Would a writer in the pages of *The Wall Street Journal* be as unselfconsciously dismissive of, say, an African American writer?

A curious exception to Waleson's depoliticized assessment of the opera appeared in the highly partisan *National Review* by Jay Nordlinger. Yet where Waleson's review was naively ahistorical to the point of actually wishing El Rey's "torture" for the sake of the opera's narrative clarity, or perhaps her own satisfaction, Nordlinger's review evinced a politicized reading mediated through a Cold War era optic that attempted to reconcile conservative homophobia with Castrophobia. Nordlinger called the opera, "a worthy work of art... [that] for telling a truth too seldom told, it makes you grateful." In his review, Nordlinger—who can fortunately distinguish the difference between a "memoir" and an "autobiography"—praises the

opera as “a worthy work of art” for the very reasons that Arenas’ autobiography was initially reduced to a monochromatic tirade about pro- or contra-Castro subject positions whose “value” was contingent upon how well it represented a particular political agenda for interested constituencies. He begins by establishing a context for his readers noting “that a movie of *Before Night Falls* was made in 2000” before dishing:

Can we talk about the opera world? We’re all adults here, right? We can speak frankly. The opera world is very gay and very left-wing. There are a fair number of conservatives in it. Many are closeted, and they sometimes come out to me (swearing me to eternal secrecy, on pain of death). But the opera world is by and large strongly left-wing, as well as gay. And *Before Night Falls* will pose a dilemma: On one hand, you have your 50-year love affair with the Castro dictatorship; on the other hand...what about gays? It’s one thing to persecute filthy capitalists who want to sell toothpaste in the shadows, or who read *National Review*-style literature by candlelight. But *gays*?

Nordlinger becomes an apologist for the “gay question” in the *National Review* as the queer theme becomes subservient to the broader appeal of the opera’s most important contribution as he sees it: to “speak frankly” and tell the “very gay and very left-wing” opera world about the evils of communism and, presumably, open the eyes of left-wing opera lovers and closeted conservatives alike.

From Nordlinger’s jocular but predictable reading of Arenas as a metonym for anti-communism—always through Schnabel’s film—to Waleson’s disinterest in the politics that Arenas represents to either the left or the right, indeed her disdain for any of Arenas’ afterlives, make understanding El Rey’s literary legacy all the more urgent twenty years after the publication of his autobiography and how he hoped it would be read and remembered. So it will be useful, however briefly, to distinguish Arenas’ afterlife and the use-value of his simulacrum to these partisan constituencies, from the broader concerns that emerged when, after being discarded in the toilet and facing imminent death, El Rey resolves to complete his literary project.

### *III. The Arts of Cruising*

Cruising in *Before Night Falls* is as important as Arenas’

disillusionment with the regime but has received relatively scant critical attention despite its conspicuous presence in the autobiography. From public restrooms, to beaches, changing-rooms, mangroves, trucks, trains, buses, private homes (especially his wretched aunt Agata's), and even at military camps such as the infamous UMAPs,<sup>14</sup> Arenas is constantly cruising. Though the toilet certainly seems like a strange place to begin an autobiography Arenas takes it upon himself to begin in a locus of "unproductive labor," in a scatological social space, engaging in a "nonproductive" activity without any seemingly redemptive or useful ends save his desire to do so. Arenas' laborious cruising is counter to socially "useful" or productive ends and could, with some irony, be said to constitute what Marx called "labor without speech"<sup>15</sup> in order to situate his work—both his literary and sexual labor—in terms of a fundamental modernist proposition: that a work of art is fundamentally an autotelic artifact outside the control of the state or the use-value accorded to it by any system that would delimit the work of art's autonomy. The insistence on the fundamental autonomy of the work of art is, of course, a modernist conceit that Arenas' extends and elaborates in *Before Night Falls* so that his aesthetic proposition here—the art of cruising—requires the recognition that sexual freedom and artistic freedom are inseparable and mutually constitutive of the other; any limitation imposed on one is an affront on the other.

In *Before Night Falls*, laboring unproductively, what I am here calling Arenas' art of cruising, is laboring against the state *aesthetically* and so Arenas' writerly critique of the state is further reinforced by his queer acts, the arts of the cruising, that destabilize bodies and pleasures and makes "art" out of queer sociality. Arenas' queer art is ultimately disruptive because it incites reproductive laborers, ostensible subjects of the state, to counter-pleasures they

14. Begun in 1965 the "Unidades Militares de Ayuda a la Producción," Military Units to Aid Production, were work camps set up for alternative form of military service for queers and, to a lesser extent, religious groups such as Jehovah Witnesses and Seventh Day Adventists.

15. In the principle English translation of Karl Marx's *Grundrisse* Martin Nicolaus translates Marx's "arebit sans phrase" as "labor pure and simple." The translation misses the ambiguity and force of Marx's assertion where he elaborates, "the harmonies of equality [and] freedom," the structuring force of *pecunia*, or money, in Capitalism resides in alienating labor from speech not just the more commonplace understanding of "alienation" where the subject is severed from her material labor, the material object of production (105).

take out of the toilet and into their state-sanctioned lives. These subjects, who through comportment and deportment are state actors, lose the very subject integrity that the state demands; in the process, they are “interpolated,” to borrow an Althusserian commonplace, by the queer imperative of counter(revolutionary) pleasure.<sup>16</sup>

Arenas considers cruising and writing to be a complimentary “great feast.” After detailing various sexual escapades at Guanabo Beach with fellow queer writer friends, Arenas relates how they “would all bring [their] notebooks and write poems or chapters of [their] books, and would have sex with armies of men. The erotic and the literary went hand in hand... I could never work in pure abstinence; the body needs to feel satisfied to give free reign to the spirit” (101). Writing for Arenas could not happen without cruising or vice versa:

I would lock myself in my little room in Miramar, and sometimes write until late into the night. But during the day I roamed all the beaches, barefoot, and enjoyed unusual adventures with wonderful guys in the bushes, with ten, eleven, twelve of the sometimes; at other times with only one, who would be so extraordinary he would satisfy me as much as twelve. (102)

Indeed, Arenas’ aesthetic move is strategic, insofar as it allows his recursive cruising in toilets, mangroves, and all manner of recondite places for homosexual erotic fulfillment in *Before Night Falls*, to be understood not only as an affront to a repressive a political regime (Castro’s Cuba) that attempts to destroy both unproductive and unproductive labor—or “the art of cruising”—but also as an indictment of the supposedly “enlightened” regimes of “advanced societies” where, as he notes, queers paradoxically segregate themselves and willingly delimit their own erotic imagination rather than undermine the normative strictures that “tolerate” queerness (107). That is, queerness for Arenas functions as an aesthetic drive, creation *sans* reproduction, an art unencumbered by the potential ends of its use value that can thereby avoid being coerced as much by totalitarian regimes as by purportedly free democratic states.

16. I cite Louis Althusser’s ideologeme: “...what thus seems to take place outside ideology (to be precise, in the street), in reality takes place in ideology [....] That is why those who are in ideology believe themselves by definition outside ideology: one of the effects of ideology is the practical *denegation* of the ideological character of ideology by ideology: ideology never says, ‘I am ideological’” (118).

Through cruising it might be said that Arenas is extending a broader tradition of Cuban modernist anti-authoritarian aesthetic practice developed by his generational precursor Jorge Mañach (1898-1961) in his classic *Indagación del choteo* (1928). Mañach's essay—initially delivered as a lecture at the Institución Hispano-Cubana de Cultura in Havana by the invitation of Fernando Ortiz (1881-1969)—considered “*choteo*” to be an anti-authoritarian *techne* and practice in the face of authority that he strategically understood to be part of the Cuban national character. Mañach's *choteo*, and his broader intellectual project, forms part of a wider cultural and political movement, grouped around the *Revista de Avance* (1927-1930) that attempted to counter through cultural agencies the political and economic crisis instantiated by Cuban dictator Gerardo Machado (1871-1939). For Mañach, Cuban *choteo* incarnates individual self-assertion and independence against authority. The practitioner of *choteo*, *un choteador*, is “*un opositor sistemático*,” a systematic contrarian who, despite himself, “*no toma en serio nada de lo que generalmente se tiene por serio*” (a *choteador* does not take seriously anything that should be taken seriously), not even the “*presencia sagrada de la muerte*,” (the sacred presence of death) (15; 22). It is in this sense that Arenas' cruising extends what Jorge Mañach called “*libertinaje mental*” (42), literally “*mental libertinism*,” or, more felicitously translated, “*unrestrained thinking*” in and through the literal body vis-à-vis intercourse with the body politic's forbidden fruits. Perhaps anticipating one of Leo Bersani most important contributions against the orthodoxy of queer theory, and its initial imperative in the 1980s to redeem queer subjectivity by resemanticizing “*shame*,” Arenas refuses to impose the discourse of “*dignity*” to queer subjects of the state whom the state considers shameful in their unproductive drive, their inability to labor for the Regime, their inability to fashion desire in the image of the state's “*Hombre Nuevo*” (the New Man).<sup>17</sup> Arenas resists the imperative to rehabilitate what we might call “*disabled queer subjects*.” In this sense, “[*g*]ay men's ‘*obsession with sex*,’ as Bersani writes, “*far from being denied, should be celebrated—not for its communal virtues, not because of its subversive potential for parodies of machismo [...], but rather because it never*

17. For an analysis of “*el Hombre Nuevo*” in Cuban literary studies and its relation to politics see Sonia Béhar, *La caída del Hombre Nuevo: Narrativa cubana del período Especial* (2008):1-34.

stops re-presenting the internalized phallic male as an infinitely loved object of sacrifice" (30). That "object of sacrifice," for Bersani, is the encounter of the self with the incommensurability of absolute otherness; itself understood, as we used to say in literary studies, as an encounter with "the ineffable."

As an aesthetic practice or *techne*, the arts of cruising for Arenas functions as a corporeally coded search for beauty's elusive embrace and an aesthetic response to literary and literal death. Cruising is elaborated in *Before Night Falls* as an aesthetic prerogative of sexual experiences with others from which to lime literary agencies; cruising scandalizes and titillates, to be sure, but it also decenters the spaces ostensibly occupied by what became El Che's compulsory *hombre nuevo*, the Cuban "New Man."<sup>18</sup> The idea of the Cuban New Man was, of course, antithetical to homosexuality as the history of the UMAPs makes clear. Fidel Castro himself had famously pronounced that the "homosexual" could never "embody the conditions and requirements of conduct that would enable us to consider him a true Revolutionary."<sup>19</sup> So it is against the carceral apparatus of forced labor camps and the state's insistence on "productive" labor for the Revolution that Arenas himself labors against as much as for an aesthetic practice of freedom. It is therefore not surprising that it is precisely in a forced labor sugar plantation that Arenas tells us he began to write what became his autobiography, what at the time he called "The Western Diary," his daily record of events, conversations, meetings, and seemingly boundless cruising (130).

Cruising in *Before Night Falls* is both a constant act and an aesthetically principled practice of freedom initiated under state-sanctioned confinement, that is, as much in the forced labor camp as in its metonymic incarnation, the Cuban state. I would go so far as to suggest that cruising for Arenas in *Before Night Falls* is an aesthetic practice that insists on new forms of sociality that are neither dependant on morality or state sanctioned forms of intimacy such as marriage or adherence to the regime's ideals. Arenas' voracious cruising, beyond any moralistic reductionism and collapse into mere promiscuity, constitutes a practical ethics that depends on cultivating a principled openness to otherness. Cruising, like

18. Samuel Feijóo, "Revolución y vicios." *El Mundo*, 15 April 1965 (5).

19. Cited in Carrie Hamilton and Elizabeth Dore, *Sexual Revolutions in Cuba: Passion, Politics, and Memory* (39).

modernism's art for art's sake, is a *techne*, an aesthetic prerogative of confrontation with incommensurable otherness. Cruising for Arenas is a literary practice as much as a corporeal search for the ineffable; aesthetic content inseparable from artistic form.<sup>20</sup>

#### IV. Before Night Falls' Queer Literary History

[M]y generation, would read the poems, banned under the Castro regime, of Jorge Luis Borges, and we recited from memory the poems of Octavio Paz. Our generation, the generation born in the forties, has been a lost generation, destroyed by the communist regime.

—Reinaldo Arenas, *Before Night Falls*

The recourse to the concept of a “literary generation” does not emerge *ex nihilo*, or much less disinterested or outside the structuring imperatives it serves, but rather it is created in order to reinforce two of the principal foundational pillars of literary studies as understood within the Western literary tradition: periodization and canonicity. Periodization, the belief in predictable literary themes or concerns borne of historical circumstances, and canonicity, the means through which literary artifacts are accorded their “value” based on the cultural and historical tastes of the former, are central to the understanding the generational concept in literary studies. The conceptual recourse to literary “generations” has, of course, more notable and linguistically specific genealogies within the languages and canons of the West’s list of so-called “great books.” But within the Peninsular and Latin American literary tradition, the so-called “Generación del ‘98” (the Spanish “Generation of 1898”), has provided the template from which to understand Julius Petersen’s (1878–1941) concept of “literary generations” which he elaborated in 1913.<sup>21</sup>

20. Pedro Juan Gutierrez’s (1950-) highly sexualized *Trilogía sucia de La Habana* (1998) is the literary inheritor and successor to Mañach’s “libertinaje mental” and Arenas’ “arts of the toilet.” In the face of a broken city, Havana, “un laberinto construido con tablas podridas y pedazos de ladrillos” (293), and a political system confronting its historical legacies, his *Trilogía* expands anti-authoritarian aesthetics in Cuba’s “Período especial,” or special period of economic hardship after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

21. See Julius Petersen, “Las generaciones literarias,” in Emil Ermantinger, *Filología de la ciencia literaria* (1946): 75-93. German philologist and literary his-



Petersen's influence was not uniform within the "Hispanic" tradition in the Spanish speaking Americas but it ultimately established the foundation from which critics like Cedomil Goic could term the "Generation of 1972" (1992) to refer to the point of contact and generational affinities between those Latin American writers born between 1935 and 1949.<sup>22</sup> For Goic, Reinaldo Arenas, along with writers as diverse as Mario Vargas Llosa (1936-), José Emilio Pacheco (1939-) and Severo Sarduy (1936-1993), represent a generational cohort of post-Boom writers who break with well-worn and established narrative innovations and who represent a range of "sectores sociales," ("social sectors"), that is, the diversity of experiences made manifest in literature from the vantage point of various social, ethnic, racial and sexually diverse groups that often, though certainly not always, fell outside the standard narratives of post-boom aesthetics. The thematic treatment of homosexuality, for example, in texts as diverse as Vargas Llosa's *La ciudad y los perros* (1963),<sup>23</sup> and the whole of Reinaldo Arenas' writings, make manifest the extent to which Goic attempted to "diversify" Latin American literatures and writers with divergent political and aesthetic concerns despite his structuralist insistence on generational affinities and thematic integrity (even when these affinities were not always driven by generational imperatives or defining zeitgeist).

As the Generation of 1972's queerest of aesthetes, Arenas attempts to explain why his generation of Cuban writers and artists, "has been a lost generation, destroyed by the communist regime" (88). Against Goic's much looser conception of a literary generation, for Arenas the term "generation" refers specifically to those Cuban writers who came of age after the Revolution or who were delimited by the Revolution's insistence on writing that espoused the ideals of the state. It is in this sense that *Before Night Falls*

torian Petersen remains central to Cedomil Goic's conception of "literary generations" though by way of José Ortega and Gasset and the Spanish peninsular legacy that Latin American critics of the mid XX inherited as they elaborated an emergent Latin American literature canon.

22. See, Cedomil Goic, *Mitos Degradados: Ensayos de Compresión de la Literatura Hispanoamericana* (1992).

23. In Vargas Llosa's novel the character Paulino, for example, fellates a group of fellow military school cadets with the ruse of awarding a "prize" to the cadet who can last the longest before climaxing. Paulino's labor, is based on favors, whereas Arenas' are based on the premise and expectation, at least as he tells it, of unadulterated pleasure for all parties involved.

becomes both a literary history of Arenas' own trajectory as a writer, his testament to the importance of "un(re)productive labor," as well as a corrective literary history of his generation of Cuban writers that he considers either "lost," "destroyed," or both, by a state that regulates the use-value of artistic creation in general and literature in particular. Arenas' relation to Cuban literary history, as described in *Before Night Falls*, requires an impassioned dialectic between writing and literary futurity; the future aesthetic dividends of his work vis-à-vis an imagined community of readers and critics after his demise.

*Before Night Falls* is principally divided into three sections or "movements" that correspond with Arenas' early childhood in Cuba in his hometown of Holguín; his late adolescence and adulthood in the early 1960s and 1970s in Havana; and the final decade of his life from approximately 1980 to 1990 that he spent between New York and Miami. These three principal movements are bracketed by an initial introduction that begins in the toilet and Arenas' suicide note, which concludes the autobiography. The first third of the autobiography chronicles Arenas' childhood in terms of "absolute poverty and isolation" that is so anchored to a literalized love of the land that we learn that Arenas, the child, eats dirt in a shed next to "the house where the animals slept" (1). The second movement narrates adolescence and his family life in Holguín before ceding way to his initial exuberance occasioned by the Cuban Revolution's triumph that eventually allowed him to study at university despite coming from abject poverty. This second movement charted in the autobiography is significant because it instantiates the most marked transition from personal biography proper into a story that documents the writerly and artistic censorship he sets out to document in order to liberate himself and his art from increasing state repression. It marks the transition from Arenas' initial uncritical exuberance after the Cuban Revolution to complete disillusionment after learning of the Regime's support of the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 where "[a]ny hope of a possible democratization of the [Cuban political] system," or "a possible break with the Soviet Union... "died then and there" for Arenas (125).

It is after this transition in *Before Night Falls*, through his second to third movement in the autobiography and the not inconsequential date of 1968, that Arenas' text begins to resemble a literary history. From this point onward, Arenas explains both

his *oeuvre*, and his unrelenting attempts at protecting or salvaging his writing, while subjecting the best-known Cuban writers to canonical reevaluation. The list of writers he subjects to reevaluation—sometimes in detail though often in passing—is extensive and includes figures from both the established canon of Cuban literary studies, both on the island and in exile, as well as lesser known Cuban and Cuban American writers. The list is extensive and includes the likes of René Ariza (1940-1994), Antón Arrufat (1935-), Miguel Barnet (1940-), Lydia Cabrera (1899-1991), Guillermo Cabrera Infante (1929-2005), Alejo Carpentier (1904-1980), Eliseo Diego (1920-1994), Roberto Fernández Retamar (1930-), Fina García Marruz (1923-), Nicolás Guillén (1902-1989), Enrique Labrador Ruiz (1902-1991), José Lezama Lima (1910-1976), Herberto Padilla (1932-2000), Virgilio Piñera (1912-1979), José Rodríguez Feo (1920-1993), Severo Sarduy (1937-1993), Roberto Valero (1955-1994), Cintio Vitier (1921-2009), and many others as well as revered Cuban cultural icons of note such as Alicia Alonso (1921-).

However, Arenas' intentions and his accounting of Cuban literary history, as well as his relation to that literary history, is established early in the autobiography. Arenas' principal break with the Latin American Boom's most famous aesthetic practice begins in the first movement of *Before Night Fall*. At the onset he makes it clear that his reference to "eating dirt," which he does with his cousin Dulce María with whom he also engages in sexual trysts as a child, should not be occasion for readers to take this as an example of an "aesthetic style." He states unequivocally, "I should make it clear right away that to eat dirt is not a metaphor, or sensational act" and, as if requiring further clarification, he continues noting that "[i]t has nothing to do with *magic realism*, or anything of the sort" (11, my emphasis). Banishing the "Macondo aesthetic," so-called "Magic or Magical Realism" from the onset allows Arenas to separate his work from what became the brash commercialization of Gabriel García Márquez's (1928-) fictional Macondo in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967) and the version of Latin America that it represented to a generation of readers, writers, and critics. With this caveat Arenas draws a line in the sand regarding Latin American literature, its commodification, and his absence from the circuits of power that exiled him yet again from the Cuban and Latin American literary canon.

This is significant when one considers that Arenas had won

and shared France's literary prize in 1969, the "Prix du meilleur livre étranger" (the best foreign book prize), for *El mundo alucinante* along with García Márquez and his *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. It is hard to imagine that this irony was lost on El Rey when he notes at the end of *Before Night Falls* how García Márquez stood by Castro after the storming of the Peruvian Embassy that led to the Mariel Boat Exodus of 1980, which was the catalyst for his leaving Cuba, and applauded when Castro called the defectors "antisocial and sexually depraved" (278). Indeed, Arenas' disdain for what emerged and passed for "authentic" Latin American literary production after the success of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, and much of what followed, made him acutely aware of the nature of what many years later after his death, the "McOndo generation" derided as an essentializing aesthetics by the likes of Alberto Fuguet (1964-), Giannina Braschi (1953-), Edmundo Paz-Soldán (1967-) and many other writers associated with the McOndo generation.<sup>24</sup>

It is from his disidentification with Magical Realism that he can, in the second movement in the Autobiography, then establish the conditions that lead to literary death. While elaborating his critique of the Cuban literary canon he writes, "Dictators and authoritarian regimes can destroy writers in two ways: by persecuting them or by showering them with official favors... People of unquestionable talent, once they embraced the new dictatorship. Never wrote anything worthwhile again" (90).

Arenas, having distanced his work from the popularized versions of "lo real maravilloso" that García Márquez and critics turned into a commodity and niche marketing strategy for publishing Latin American literature under the aegis of "Magical Realism, finds its analog, not surprisingly, in Alejo Carpentier whose importance and popularity after the revolution Arenas sees as devoid of merit. "What ever happened to Alejo Carpentier after *El siglo de las luces*?" Arenas rhetorically asks as he continues his surgical dissection of the national literary jugular when he "assesses" his cohorts' legacy beginning with Carpentier:

His writing [Carpentier's] became slipshod, dreadful, impossible to read to the end. What ever happened to the poetry of Nicolás

24. For a reading of the McOndo generation's simultaneous derision and debt to *El Boom* generation see Diana Palaversich's *De Macondo a McOndo: Senderos de la posmodernidad latinoamericana* (2010), especially useful is "Del postboom al neoliberalismo": 19-60.

Guillén? After the sixties his work became irrelevant or, worse, deplorable. What happened to the brilliant essays, though always somewhat reactionary, of the Cintio Vitier of the fifties? What happened to the great poetry written by Eliseo Diego in the Fifties? None of them are what they use to be; they are dead although, unfortunately for UNEAC and even for themselves, they are still living. (90-91)

Arenas does not establish any criterion for his assessment save his privileged position as a writer “fuera del juego,” outside the regime’s political game.<sup>25</sup> Facing death himself, he pronounces Carpentier, Guillén, Vitier and Diego as already dead as far as their literary afterlives are concerned; a fact, he notes, that is “unfortunate” for the National Union of Writers and Artists of Cuba the Union of Cuban Writers (UNEAC) and, by extension, the national literary canon. Arenas’ literary necrology calls attention to and is counterpoised by the vital life affirming “arts of cruising” and, one might be tempted to say, represents an extension of the Cuban national anthem’s refrain well-known refrain, “En cadenas vivir es vivir /en afrenta y oprobio sumido,” that is, “To live in chains is to die/in dishonour and ignominy,” to literalist abandon. Arenas, however, is not the only “survivor” to emerge from what he called “lost generation, destroyed by the communist regime” (88). For every account that he wanted to settle in *Before Night Falls* for real or perceived injustices El Rey is also interested in repaying literary debts.

In his literary accounting Arenas considers José Lezama Lima and Virgilio Piñera to be the foundational pillars of contemporary Cuban literary history. Unlike Alejo Carpentier, who “manipulated information, dates, styles, and numbers like a refined but dehumanized computer,” meeting Lezama Lima for Arenas was “an entirely different experience” insofar as Lezama’s erudition shared and radiated “creative vitality” (83). Arenas considers Lezama’s *Paradiso* (1966) one of the most “heroic” and important works of the Latin American literature canon. In Cuban letters, “I do not think Cuba had ever witnessed the publication of a novel so explicitly homosexual, so extraordinarily complex and rich and

25. Heberto Padilla’s collection of poems *Fuera del juego* (1968) represented one of the few significant literary attacks by Arenas’ generational cohort in Cuba; though Padilla was ultimately made to recant his “antirevolutionary” work in a public *mea culpa*, to Arenas it represented Padilla’s death, “he walked like a ghost among the tress” (217).

imagery, so idiosyncratically Cuban, so Latin American, and at the same time, so unique" (84). Arenas' assessment of *Paradiso* hinges on the exaltation of thematic and formal characteristics that make it at once "idiosyncratically Cuban" as well as Latin American. In this sense, *Paradiso* for Arenas is both a national Cuban novel and a transnational Spanish American novel. Crossing genres into the performative, Arenas also exalts the merits of Virgilio Piñera's *Dos viejos pánicos* (1968) for its ability through "the absurd" to reference what it is like to exist under totalitarian rule. Unlike Arenas, however, both Lezama and Piñera remained in Cuba which, according to Arenas, caused their work to suffer under censorship and "internal exile" as they wrote "until death claimed them, knowing that their writings would end up in the hands of State Security, and perhaps the only person to read them would be the policeman assigned to filing or destroying them" (84). What is most curious about Arenas' evaluative assessment of Lezama and Piñera's work is the anxious substitution that takes place when Arenas apparently displaces his fears of being forgotten by the literary establishment with the image of Lezama and Piñera's writings in the hands of an unappreciative representative of the state acting like a literary critic who discards or destroys their work. This anxiety is intensified in *Before Night Falls* when Arenas finds that fulfillment, leaving Cuba, creates another set of challenges he summarized thusly, "the difference between the communist and capitalist system is that, although they give you a kick in the ass, in the communist system you have to applaud, while in the capitalist system you can scream. And I came here to scream" (288).

It is in exile, and feeling ignored by both the left and the right literary establishment, that Arenas' turns his attention to the question of canonicity most directly as he himself becomes a critic of the academic institutions that establish what counts as good writing and in doing so consecrate literary canons. He writes with critical aplomb that in the United States leftist academics and critics have made it nearly impossible for his works, or the works of those Cuban and Cuban American writers he wishes to canonize, to find critical the interlocutors they require:

When I left Cuba my novels were being used as assigned texts at New York University, and when I adopted a radical position against the Castro dictatorship, Haydée Vitale, professor of literature, started to drop my books from the curriculum until not one

of the remained. She did the same with all other Cuban writers in exile. In the end, the program included only a few of Alejo Carpentier's novels. This happened to me at many universities in the United States and in many other parts of the world. Ironically, while I was in jail and could not leave Cuba, my chances of being published were better because I was not allowed to speak out, and foreign publishing companies with leftist leanings would support a writer living in Havana. (301)

In typically strident fashion Arenas names and seeks an accounting of the literary legacy he feels he has been denied. In Arenas' less than generous analysis of why his work, and that of fellow Cuban exile writers have fallen into disfavor, he signals institutional practices and academic canon formation as the primary reason for being ignored as a writer. For Arenas, it would seem that arm-chair leftist critics are the worst, unlike many other Generation of '72 writers whose experiences and ideology fed seamlessly into the academic and the New Left zeitgeist that romanticized revolutionary aesthetics and battles on distant shores.

Yet for aficionados of Arenas who are certain that he is an acerbic critic of his contemporaries, even of his once close circle of friends, it should be noted that perhaps El Rey's most powerful invective against those who would belittle his prolific *oeuvre* or, worse, ignore it altogether for political reasons, was reserved for the very oblivion he believed was heaped upon him. Arenas effaces as much as he wishes to redress in *Before Night Falls* as the prospect of his literary erasure clashed head on with canon formation and literary practice in the United States academy. The most infamous of the erasures concerning Arenas' literary history is also perhaps the least known and deserves some commentary.

The Cuban exile poet and academic Roberto Valero, in a question and answer forum at the Library of Congress for "Hispanic Heritage month"—and perhaps sensing his own relation to literary history a year before he passed away—related how Arenas was incensed to learn in 1986 that Stanford University professor and, not coincidentally, the Chilean critic of Latin American literary studies, Fernando Alegría had excluded any mention of him whatsoever in the critic's influential *Nueva historia de la novela Hispanoamericana* (1986 [1973]).<sup>26</sup> By the publication of Fernando Alegría's high-

26. Roberto Valero's lecture and selected reading from his posthumously published *Este Viento De Cuaresma* (2004) was read at the Library of Congress' "His-

ly influential and augmented *Nueva historia* in 1986, it appeared to El Rey that his work was not going to be valued in the standard canonical literary accounts of the period. Without mentioning Alegría directly in *Before Night Falls*, Arenas is clearly interested in diminishing the critical labor of those who have been dismissive of his literary labor.<sup>27</sup>

Alegría, Valero noted, was said to have dismissed Arenas' work because of his invectives against Uruguayan literary critic Ángel Rama (1926-1983) whom Arenas considered, despite a prior history of conviviality, an opportunist "communist sympathizer." Rama, who had been appointed to a professorship of Latin American Literatures at the University of Maryland, College Park, in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese, was denied a continuation of a work permit under the McCarthy era McCarren-Walter Act which sought to root out "subversive communists" by restricting immigration to the United States.<sup>28</sup> It has been suggested that Arenas was instrumental in the State Department's denial of a work permit extension for Rama and his partner, the well-known critic of Latin American art Marta Traba (1930-1983). Having left the United States and exiled in Paris, after Rama's petition was denied on behalf of the University of Maryland, they died in a plane crash outside of Madrid while en route to a conference on Latin American writers at the "Primer Encuentro de la Cultura Hispanoamericana" in Bogotá, Columbia, in 1983.<sup>29</sup> The tragic loss of Rama and Traba

panic Heritage Month" celebration at Pickford Theater, Madison Building, United States Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., September 13, 1993.

27. Valero's assertions are substantiated in Arenas' correspondence. See Firestone Library, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections at Princeton University, boxes labeled "Nonfiction" (numbers 23-26) for Arenas' exchanges with Rama, Rodríguez-Monegal, and others.

28. See Rosario Peyrou for a documented discussion of the Arenas-Rama controversy, "Reinaldo Arenas y Ángel Rama: El perseguido como perseguidor" (2012). As a graduate of the University of Maryland, College Park, it was common knowledge for those of us who entered the Department, and well into the mid-1990s, that the effects of both Rama and Arenas' personal histories were tied to the Department's own history. In my experience, the departmental administrative structure remained respectfully neutral about the issue despite the grave loss that the controversy itself represented to the University at the height of Ronald Reagan's establishment of neoliberal policies; policies whose collateral effects throughout the country and the nation's cultural industries we have yet to recover.

29. Peyrou, quoting from another source, ventures the conjecture that "...deprestigar a Rama y calificarlo como 'agente castrista', Arenas—con el perman-



has created long-standing animosities that almost thirty years have not been able to quell for interested constituencies.

It would seem from the extant record that neither Arenas nor Alegría were successful in creating the conditions under which canonicity and politics would become wholly integrated and function in unison to either create or destroy literary traditions based primarily on personal vendettas and an impolitic understanding of the politics of canon formation.

### V. Conclusion: “The King is Dead. Long Live the King!”

El Rey’s literary legacy—twenty years after the posthumous publication of *Before Night Falls*—is still most legible through various instantiations or what I have here called Arena’s “afterlives.” From book, to celluloid, to stage, and representational points in between, the King’s body has been reconstituted as a performative stand-in for a variety of political positions that reduce both his work and his relation to literary practice; most especially, the question of canonicity and periodicity and its relation to Arenas’ work. As I have suggested, such reductive performances of the King’s body risk ignoring how cruising, as an aesthetic *techne*, provides a significant contribution to a broader history of anti-authoritarian literature within the Cuban literary canon; that is, what Jorge Mañach called “*libertinaje mental*,” literally “mental libertinism,” more felicitously, “unrestrained thinking.”

Moving beyond such an impasse twenty years later, as *Before Night Falls* implores us to do at its best, might require retiring the figurations of the King that we have inherited so that the generation of ‘72’s queerest of aesthetes may continue to cruise after death, arousing readers and critics alike, to other forms of sociality and political *libertinaje*. The arts of cruising ultimately require us to be less beholden to our own subjection, whatever our political

*ente apoyo de Rodríguez Monegal—logró el padrinazgo de otro exiliado cubano que actuaba como asesor de seguridad en la Casa Blanca del gobierno Reagan: Roger Fountain, nacido en Cuba como Rogelio Fuentes’.* Sea o no cierta esa conjetura, el episodio en el que este perseguido se convierte en perseguidor es digno de ser conocido. Por cierto no rebajará un ápice el valor literario de su obra, pero al menos a mí, me hace dudar de la calidad de su persona. Y sin duda, asuntos como éste integrarán la peor historia del exilio latinoamericano de esos años” (emphasis in the original).

attachments may be, so that the fiction of an inviolable and unified subject (defender of either left or right agendas) is undressed and we, ideal readers, are reminded that stakes are never as clear cut when we attach ourselves to ideas that impose content over form.

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