Re-appropriating the Self: Reinaldo Arenas and the Homosexual

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According to Tzvi Medin, when Fidel Castro declared in 1961 the inception of Marxist-Leninist ideology as part of the goals originally promoted by the Revolution, he established the parameters for a dichotomy that fore grounded the extrication of any form of middle ground. Thus, Medin states, the new socialist government adopted and promoted a "Manichean division of the world" (42). Medin postulates that:

> Around the positive pole of Manichean axis are clustered Cuba, the Cuban Revolution, anti-imperialism, socialism, communism, the Soviet Union, the socialist bloc, the Third World, and humanity. At the negative pole are counterrevolutionaries, capitalism, imperialism and its local supporters, and the United States (40).

At the same time the binary homogeneity/heterogeneity became common practice on the island. By deconstructing the status of one the "Manichean axis" promoted an exclusive self-image of the Other. Cuban consciousness had to adopt the notion that everyone believe in the ideals their leaders were promoting. Hence, according to Medin, the stereotyping of everything that opposed the revolution promulgated the idea at home, "in its own camp," of the way things had to be (42). This concept echoes Brad Epps' analysis of the abandonment of the "I" for the "we" that had to be reflected in Cuban literature.

Within the new Cuban revolutionary social consciousness another dichotomy emerged which promoted the angelic perception of the Soviet Union and everything it represented versus the demonic image of the United States. To continue promoting and perpetuating this dichotomy, Marxist-Leninist ideology was introduced to the Cuban people: "by grafting it onto the images, symbols, values, and concepts of Cuban nationalism" (53). The association linking Cuban nationalism and the Marxist-Leninist regime was the image of Fidel Castro as the "ultimate" patriot and nationalist, the "integrative symbol" (54), and as Pérez-Stable states, there was no: "claim on power independent of Fidel Castro" (63). Therefore, the promulgation of Fidel Castro as the "integrative symbol" of nationalism and thus, the justification for accepting a Marxist-Leninist ideology can be described as "internal colonialism."

Consequently, Marxist-Leninist ideology in Cuba was promoted through what Medin describes as a Manichean view of the world where there are no "in-betweens," but instead the binary "good and evil" and any convergence from that norm creates the "gusano," the counterrevolutionary that must be expunged from the masses so as to not corrupt the process of developing a homogenous revolutionary social consciousness. The notion of "counterrevolutionaries" and

the connection to capitalist/imperialist nations epitomizes the revolutionary government's contempt: "for anyone who is not on the side of the communist revolution" (Medin 40). According to Reinaldo Arenas' interpretation of the Cuban Revolution and its ideals, the promotion of "unifying" Cuban society came at the expense of marginalizing part of the population that already existed in the periphery, in an "underground" world that promoted a way of life un-Cuban by the time the revolutionaries took over the island in January 1959.

The "colonization" of homosexuals in post-revolutionary Cuban society was reflected in the condition of women. According to Simone De Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1989), in a patriarchal/phallogocentric society woman, and her "rise" in "status" was defined by her relationship to man which stems from the "first sex's" decision to permit a union through matrimony of the two. It is important to note that in Spanish American colonies, patriarchy served to enhance *machista* qualities that continue to exist in contemporary Latin American society. De Beauvoir states that:

> …man does not make his appeal directly to woman herself; it is the men's group that allows each of its members to find self-fulfillment as husband and father; woman, as slave or vassal, is integrated within families dominated by fathers and brothers, and she has always been given in marriage by certain males to other males (426).

Therefore, women become the "other" in the patriarchal order because there is a hierarchy between the sexes supported by – among other things – religious ideologies.

This idea presented above is further discussed by Silvia Nagy-Zekmi's study of the parallelism between North African (Maghreb) and Latin American feminine narratives. She states that the ideal role of women in Latin America stems from the concept of *marianismo*, the notion that women must rise to a status beyond that of the earthly pleasures connected to the sins of the flesh. Hence, the image of the Virgin Mary stands as the epitome of purity, virginity, motherhood and self-sacrifice. Nagy-Zekmi writes that: "El modelo mariano asigna la 'pureza' para la mujer que servirá de base a la praxis de la opresión masculina. Esta 'pureza' 'resulta ser la aspiración máxima en un sistema axiológico que posee como base fundamental la oposición de la Carne y el Espíritu" (88). She further explains that control over women is based on her reproductive capabilities and thus perpetuates man's monitoring over female sexual behavior (89). According to Smith and Padula, women in post-revolutionary Cuban society continued to exist within the traditional behavioral norms established by patriarchal mentality during Spanish colonization. Her treatment by her male counterpart will stem from the notion of *machismo* which Rafael L. Ramírez describes as masculine behavior based on the belief that

men: "are…beings who are aggressive, oppressive, narcissistic, insecure, loudmouthed, womanizers, massive drinkers, persons who have an uncontrollable sexual prowess, and who are…*parranderos de parranda larga*" (7).

Nagy-Zekmi's approach coincides with that of Smith and Padula as to the treatment of Cuban women: "…la fuente de la subordinación femenina en el ordenamiento patriarcal basado en dogmas religiosos, en los cuales se acentúa la relación jerárquica entre Dios y el hombre, y esta jerarquía se extiende a la relación entre el hombre y la mujer" (87). The established dichotomy between men and women, which can be identified as a colonization of one gender that believes to be superior to the "other" explains the colonized existence of the homosexual. Based on the idea of patriarchy and a *machista* attitude in Cuban society, homosexuals diverge from the traditionalist expectations regarding masculine behavior. Reinaldo Arenas defies that structuralization by writing to oppose not only the status of homosexuals on the island but to write against the grain in order to deconstruct the established image of "dissidents" who do not accept the ideals nor promote the agenda of the revolution.

Arenas' and his "character's" marginalization is both sexual and literary, according to Nagy-Zekmi's analysis pertaining to feminine narratives in Latin America and North Africa. Consequently, sexual orientation, its relationship to the "loss" of Cubanness, and an understanding of the concept of "machismo" is important because of its connection to the treatment of women and by extension, homosexuals on the island. Lumsden writes: "Discrimination against homosexuals has also been bolstered by the *machista* devaluation of women" (51). To this statement Smith and Padula add that the question regarding the role of women in the Revolution comes under scrutiny if female qualities in homosexuals are seen as inferior. They asseverate that the traditional beliefs regarding female sexual behavior were adamant in Cuban society which was reflected in the treatment, and hence the imprisonment of homosexuals (173). This sentiment with regards to homosexuality stems from the machista roots that permeate the island. Accordingly, Reinaldo Arenas' writing criticizes the nation as a whole due to its absorption by the government of its individuality. Carmelo Esterrich writes in "Locas, pájaros y demás mariconadas: el ciudadano sexual en Reinaldo Arenas" that one of Arenas' goals was not to reconstruct the nation, but instead it focused: "…en la crítica de una nación absorbida por el Estado, una nación, en parte, estancada. Contra esto, Arenas propondrá una comunidad consciente de la imposibilidad comunitaria" (180). Francisco Soto, in "*Celestino antes del alba, El palacio de las blanquísimas mofetas,* and *Otra vez el mar*: The Struggle for Self-Expression" identifes Arenas' goals through Hector, the protagonist of *Otra vez el mar*. Soto states that: "Hector wishes to express 'his' truth, not 'a' or 'the' truth, that someone…will receive. Hence, the realization that the work only comes into existence when it becomes the intimacy shared by the

person who writes it and the person who reads it is revealed" (65). The idea is that Arenas sees his writing as an opportunity to surpass the obstacles presented by the revolutionary government. He will reject the expectations that those like him must neither be seen nor heard.

Cuban Machismo = No Homosexuals

Cuban society is dominated by the ideology of machismo, of being *machista*. This idea arises from the understanding that men must behave in a certain manner, and its roots can be traced to the Spanish, African and Catholic influence, asserted by Smith and Padula, that would provide the necessary aggregates in the formation of the Cuban and its society. According to Lumsden:

> At the outset of the Cuban Revolution, machismo was deeply ingrained in the fabric of Cuban society. Gender roles were clearly identified and sharply differentiated. Men were expected to be strong, dominant, and sexually compulsive. Women were expected to be vulnerable and chaste (55).

To this Mirta Mulhare de la Torre's argument adds that: "the dominant mode of behavior for *el macho*, the male, [was] the *sexual imperative*…A man's supercharged sexual physiology [placed] him on the brink of sexual desire at all times and at all places" (quoted in Lumsden 31). Evelyn P. Stevens categorizes societal attitudes toward women in terms of the traditionally accepted marianista role. According to Stevens, the characteristics imposed on women ranged from "semidivinity" to "spiritual strength" (91). The notion that women must accept their "lot" in life and perform self-sacrificing acts only reflects the machista belief and adoration of the "cult of virility" (4). It can be concluded then that a *macho* generally beliefs in the idea of being in control, acting rather than thinking first. Patriarchal societies must adhere and accept the role of men and their behavior, their domineering nature and "insatiable sexual appetite". In summary, a man is a real man based on his adaptation and performance of the established role: the man is always on "top", always in control of any and every situation. Therefore, because he possesses the "phallus," he names and labels. Thus, the phallus becomes the representation of the center, the representation of patriarchal law.

This phallus, which plays an important role in the enforcement of the machista mentality in Cuban society by establishing the "order of culture," according to Susan Bordo, is a "cultural icon which men are taught to aspire to" (94). The phallus, she states, must "rise to the occasion," thus sustaining Ilan Stavans' notion that in Hispanic cultures the phallus is associated with the crucifix and therefore with the gods and the heavens (91). Bordo argues that: "The master body must signify an alliance with the gods rather than the masses, the heavens rather than the earth. He gazes outward and upward, undistracted, penetrating some higher truth" (91). It can be concluded that the phallus, based

on Bordo and Stavans' interpretation, is juxtaposed to a higher culture, a civilized world and not with nature (89). Rafael L. Ramírez interprets the role of women in a patriarchal society in the following manner: "The woman is for pleasure, penetration, *para comérsela* (to be eaten). The macho seduces, conquers, and takes, and uses his sexual power in keeping with an old saying: *Yo suelto mi gallo, los demás que recojan sus gallinas*" (45). Bordo, Ramírez and Stavans argue, therefore, that the male is dominant, controlling and "just" for his acts are promoted and supported by the rest of society. Anything feminine is seen with negative connotations, or as Luce Irigaray states, "female sexuality has always been theorized within masculine parameters," perpetuating the concept of a phallogocentric society (99). According to Lacan's analysis of the phallus, the notion of the "phallic stage" echoes the believe that because women are not the signifier they are judged by their "lack," thus becoming the signified. He writes:

> For the phallus is a signifier, a signifier whose function, in the intrasubjective economy of the analysis, lifts the veil perhaps from the function it performed in the mysteries. For it is the signifier intended to designate as a whole the effects of the signified, in that the signifier conditions them by its presence as a signifier (285).

The idea presented up to this point is that man is at the center of the universe and everything and everyone else revolves around this belief. The penis (phallus) dominates, controls, "rips" and women, and the homosexuals, must accept it and succumb to its power. Women and homosexuals, therefore, are complementary in debates regarding their role in a *machista* society, particularly because the treatment of each, as it relates to Cuba, cannot be separated from the other. In order for the homosexual to overcome the obstacles presented, in order to claim his own existence, he must, as Arenas does, rewrite the self, re-discover that which has been taken away.

Homosexuality in the Revolution

By adopting a variety of specific characters in his novels, short stories, poems and plays, Reinaldo Arenas became a dissident in the eyes of the Cuban regime, and a counterrevolutionary attempting to interrupt the process of building and maintaining a socialist government on the island. Consequently, Arenas' literary personas became archetypal figures of the Cuba that Castro perceived as oppositional to the development of a revolutionary social consciousness. The use and representation of the homosexual, as well as the relationship between mother and child in his writing infused his desire to "re-write" his story, as well as that of others like himself who were perceived as a threat to the revolutionary ideals. Arenas' depiction of these characters reflected not only his own personal

experiences, but spoke to the condition under which the homosexual lived in Cuba.

According to Brad Epps, the revolution's objective included "a surrender of the individual to the collective, a sacrifice of the ego to the (ego) ideal…" (234), thus, the acceptance of society over the individual. The characters depicted in Arenas' writing represented imperialistic influences in Cuba that opposed the regime's demands upon expected literary support of their agenda: not only because the characters described could be interpreted as a form of mimesis of the treatment various individuals endured on the island, but also because the Cuban writer's message opposed the ideals of the Revolution. Epps, however, establishes that the Revolution's negative and oppositional attitude not only toward the United States, but directly attacking homosexuality and its "imperialistic" roots stands as a contradiction.

While Castro and the regime believed that: "Homosexuals, long designated as less than men, are instead seen as the victims of capitalism, as the destritus of bourgeois decadence" (Epps 238), the United States also saw their "problem" with homosexuality as circumvented by foreign influences. Epps writes that the effect and influence of foreigners, and as a result the increase in reported homosexual cases was due to the: "'widespread perception of gay sexuality as an alien infestation, an unnatural…practice, resulting from the entanglement with foreign countries – and foreign nationals – during the war'" (240). As a result, the marginalization of homosexuality, and homosexuals, became institutionalized. This perspective of the Cuban government, and their treatment of homosexuals relate to Michel Foucalut's statement regarding the concept of sexuality in 17th century Europe. Foucault states that:

> The seventeenth century, then, was the beginning of an age of repression emblematic of what we call the bourgeois societies, an age which perhaps we still have not completely left behind. Calling sex by its name thereafter became more difficult and more costly. As if in order to gain mastery over it in reality, it had first been necessary to subjugate it at the level of language, control its free circulation in speech, expunge it from the things that were said, and extinguish the words that rendered it to visibly present. And even these prohibitions, it seems, were afraid to name it. Without even having to pronounce the word, modern prudishness was able to ensure that one did not speak of sex, merely through the interplay of prohibitions that referred back to one another: instances of muteness which, by dint of saying nothing, imposed silence. Censorship (17).

This idea is also discussed by Ian Lumsden who states that before the Revolution ousted the Batista dictatorship, talk regarding any form of sexuality in

Cuba was repressed in a way that was both uncommon and exaggerated in comparison to other Latin American countries (31). Through his writing, however, Arenas transgresses the expected silence by graphically describing his life, and particularly his sexual adventures and voracity. At the same time, his writings reflect a search for his identity and his authorial voice. For instance, it has been argued by various critics and scholars that in his first novel, *Celestino antes del alba*, it is Arenas himself who narrates the story, and through his retelling discusses the persistence of censoring talk or expression regarding sexuality. Humberto López Cruz articulates that: "Su voz se convierte en una aleación narrador-personaje que no cambia a través de toda la obra; por consiguiente es su visión, sus sentimientos, sus experiencias, lo que aflora en el discurso" (158). The child-narrator pronounces Arenas/Celestino's struggle with censorship under the auspices of both the Batista government and the Castro regime as exposed by the Cuban writer in his first novel:

> Celestino no oye nada. Hace una semana que no descansa ni de día ni de noche, y ni siquiera ha probado un bocado…como un loco escribe y escribe, y yo me digo: no es posible que sean malas palabras lo que él está poniendo. No puede ser, debe de estar escribiendo algo muy lindo, que la muy yegua de la mujer de Tomásico no entiende, ni yo tampoco, y por eso dice ella que es algo asqueroso. ¡Salvajes! Cuando no entienden algo dicen enseguida que es una cosa fea y sucia. ¡Bestias! ¡Bestias! ¡Bestias! (*Celestino…* 187).

Arenas' struggle against censorship focuses precisely on reestablishing the individual the regime hopes to "reeducate." By describing Celestino's motivation to inculcate his writing at the "root" of the very society that denies him an existence, he and Arenas interpolate themselves in the revolutionary/colonial discourse, equated with post-colonial discourse. According to Bill Ashcroft: "Post-colonial literatures, in which the 'consumption' of the language, as cultural capital, becomes the production of writing, demonstrates a powerfully effective interpolation of the dominant culture" (54). Consequently, Celestino, Arenas/child-narrator's alter ego becomes symbolic of the Cuba that is being oppressed by the regime and those that conform to their ideals. The scene above also depicts Arenas' struggle and denouncement of governmental control of self-expression. At the same time it connects to the writer's acceptance and reclaiming of his sexuality and the government's rejection of both his writing and his "improper" sexual conduct.

Benigno Sánchez-Eppler explains that the government's marginalizing practice described Arenas' existence and relationship within the Cuban revolutionary society. Sánchez-Eppler writes: "Reinaldo Arenas' life can be summarized roughly as a succession of decades lived in different cultural or

social spaces, and with different levels of exclusion from social and/or political enfranchisement" (155). His life can also be described as a series of adventures inspired by the very repression that marginalizes him. In order to explain the presence of the homosexual and their treatment on the part of Castro's government Epps adds: "But an equally widespread perception of gay sexuality holds for Cuba: there too it is scripted as a result of entanglement with foreigners, as a matter of national security" (240). Consequently, Arenas' writing is directly connected to imperialistic values, thus supporting the Castro regime's goals of expunging all outside influence from the island.

Kessel Schwartz's interpretation of "homoeroticism" in Reinaldo Arenas' writing echoes the Cuban government's approach to homosexuality on the island. According to the critic the Cuban writer discussed various topics which reflected his "inner wishes" as opposed to his experiences, brought together in *Antes que anochezca*. Schwartz states that: "In his fiction we encounter a variety of sexual perversions, guilt complexes, phobias, inhibitions, infantile regressions, phallic glorifications, homoerotic fantasies, and incestuous fixations, accompanied by a concomitant denigration and fear of women" (12). These words can be interpreted as a reflection of Epps' statement regarding the Cuban government's perception of homosexuality. Because of its "unnatural" roots, those individuals subjected/plagued by homosexual inclinations "feared" the un-acceptance and treatment based on their "improper conduct." Schwartz's statement, however, may be explained by Michel Foucault where he states that: "For a long time, the story goes, we supported a Victorian regime, and we continue to be dominated by it even today. Thus the image of the imperial prude is emblazoned on our restrained, mute, and hypocritical sexuality" (3). Arenas, as does Foucault, rejects the expected silence on the part of the regime and those who seek to eliminate "immoral" behavior from their society.

The standpoint established by Cuban society can be traced to historical roots and its connection to the overall mind-set regarding sexuality and proper/moral behavior/conduct. Lois M. Smith and Alfred Padula declare that:

> The roots of Cuba's contemporary sexual landscape lie in the nation's cultural heritage, which blends Spanish and African influences to form sexual 'ideals' that continue to shape contemporary thought and behavior. The sexual mores of traditional Spanish society, deeply influenced by the Catholic church, emphasized the need to contain female sexuality while encouraging the expression of male sexuality (169).

Notwithstanding, Castro would see homosexuals as lazy, undisciplined and a danger to the country as well as to the revolutionary ideals. As a result, by 1965, the creation of the UMAP camps (Military Units to Assist Production/Unidades Militares de Ayuda a la Producción) signaled institutionalized marginalization,

oppression and persecution of the homosexual. These camps: "were justified on the grounds of social production (prisoners were put to work, e.g., in the production of sugarcane)" (Epps 241). According to Smith and Padula, what most offended the revolutionary government with regards to the homosexual subject was the "embracing" and acceptance of female sexual practices and the denial of the machista outlook expected of every Cuban male. Smith and Padula postulate that an:

> …important aspect of Cuba's traditional sexual culture was the perception that in sex there must be an active and a passive partner, and the active role of power and domination was reserved for males. Thus it is widely believed in Cuba that only the receptive partner in male-to-male sex is a homosexual. It was in choosing the female role that a man invited ridicule (170).

Therefore, the denial of the macho qualities promptly placed the homosexual in a hierarchy that categorizes him at a lower status than women in revolutionary Cuban society.

Homosexual Characterizations

The homosexual: "must write [himself], because this is the invention of a new insurgent writing which, when the moment of [his] liberation has come, will allow [him] to carry out the indispensable ruptures and transformation in [his] history" (Cixous 250). Arenas' autobiography *Antes que anochezca* attempts to accomplish the goals stated by Hélène Cixous. In the chapter titled "Las cuatro categorias de las locas" Arenas presents interpretations of what he relates to as "queer" behavior in Cuban society. These interpretations help the reader "understand" homosexual conduct in the midst of a Marxist-Leninist regime. By the same token, Arenas' representation of the "four categories of gays" also depicts the government's treatment and stance toward these individuals. He writes:

> Primero estaba la *loca de argolla*: éste era el tipo de homosexual escandaloso que, incesantemente era arrestado en algún baño o en alguna playa. El sistema lo había provisto, según yo veía, de una argolla que llevaba permanentemente al cuello [...] Después...venía la *loca común*. Es ese tipo de homosexual que en Cuba tiene su compromiso, que va a la Cinemateca, que escribe de vez en cuando algún poema, que nunca corre un gran riesgo y se dedica a tomar el té en casa de sus amigos...Las relaciones de estas locas comunes, generalmente, son con otras locas y nunca llegan a conocer a un *hombre verdadero* [...] le sigue la *loca tapada*...era aquélla que, siendo

> loca, casi nadie lo sabía. Se casaban, tenían hijos, y después iban a los baños, clandestinamente, llevando en el dedo índice el anillo matrimonial que le hubiese regalado su esposa...muchas veces condenaban ellas mismas a los homosexuales. Después estaba la *loca regia*; una especia única de los países comunistas. La loca regia es esa loca que por vínculos muy directos con el Máximo Líder o una labor extraordinaria dentro de la Seguridad del Estado o por cosas semejantes, goza del privilegio de poder ser loca públicamente; puede tener una vida escandalosa y, a la vez, ocupar enormes cargos...(*AQA* 103-104, italicized words my emphasis).

The idea is that depending on an individual's preference each homosexual subject, as is the practice in gay communities across the United States for example, fall into a category. According to Steven Seidman: "although many meanings circulate under this sign, queer suggests a positioning as oppositional to both the heterosexual and homosexual mainstream" (140). In *Arturo, la estrella más brillante* similar categories are employed to describe the hierarchy present in the particular UMAP camp where Arturo has been imprisoned. According to Arturo, there were three categories of people he was able to identify: them (ellos), the others (los otros) and the rest (los demás). Each of these groups were not only represented within the camp, but they were also representative of the population that composed the rest of the Cuban society as well. For Arturo the worst of these were "ellos" who, according to his experience and eyewitness accounts, took advantage of every available opportunity to celebrate, perform and entertain anyone and everyone around them. Arenas describes Arturo's perspective in the following manner:

> ellos, con sus infinitas conversaciones inútiles, ellos con sus gestos excesivamente afeminados, artificiales, grotescos, ellos rebajándolo todo, corrompiéndolo todo, hasta la auténtica furia del que padece el terror, hasta el abusado ritual de las patadas, los culatazos en las nalgas, las bofetadas; hasta la ceremonia de un fusilamiento se convertía, se transformaba para ellos en un ajetreo de palabras rebuscadas, de poses y chistes de ocasión (12).

Arenas' description of the homosexuals Arturo comes in contact with reflect john Hawley's notion that: "The central tenet of queer theory is a resistance to the normativity which demands the binary proportion, hetero/homo" (3), which also supports the Cuban writer's denouncement and rejections of established North American gay communities.

As Hector does in his interaction with his young companion in *Otra vez el mar*, Arturo criticizes the flamboyant and exaggerated behavior of the imprisoned homosexuals (in Hector's view homosexuals are prisoners in Cuba itself, whereas Arturo is a prisoner in a UMAP camp which reflects the inner workings of revolutionary Cuba) almost as if his view of them reflected what the regime itself condemned homosexuals for. His reaction also reflects his own mother's attitude and reaction at having found her youngest and "brightest" in the arms of another man. According to Francisco Soto, Arenas' novel *La vieja Rosa*, and in particular the encounter between the mother, the son and the lover was a call, a challenge for the Cuban revolutionary regime to: "…reexamine…traditional reactionary mentality when it came to same-sex relations" (83). Thus, the attitude exhibited by Hector, Arturo and Old Rosa regarding homosexuals is reflected in Arenas' 1970 poem "La tétrica mofeta es prisionera" where he discusses the treatment on the part of "real men" toward this homosexual individual. However, it is la Tétrica Mofeta's reaction to the abuse that beckons the question of whether most Cuban homosexuals believe that there are only two genders and thus need to succumb completely to one or the other as discussed by Ian Lumsden. This poem also cogitates Arturo's "dream world" and ideal lover since la Tétrica Mofeta also lives for the ideal lover to whom he gives complete control of his being. Arenas writes: "A veces la imagen que quisiera / simula haber hecho su llegada / y la tétrica mofeta, engalanada, / al 'príncipe azul' le da bandera" (*Voluntad de vivir…*58). What happens between "Prince Charming" and the homosexual also mirrors Arenas' own descriptions regarding same-sex encounters with "real men." The Cuban writer's poem gives further details of the encounter: "El príncipe la toma por el cuello, / le clava un alfiler, siete cuchillos, / le lleva el traje y no saca la espada" (58). In *Antes que anochezca*, in the chapter titled "El erotismo" Arenas narrates a series of sexual encounters and adventures that mirror his depiction of la Tétrica Mofeta. For instance, at the beginning of the chapter Arenas writes: "A veces nuestras aventuras no terminaban en el objeto deseado" (120). He continues by relating stories of encounters that include himself, Tomasito la Goyesca, Hiram Pratt, la Gluglú and Coco Salá in which some sort of violent response on the part of the lover is to be "expected," reflecting as a result the machista mentality and the sexual repression of women; as long as the man continues to perform the active role in sexual encounters, his masculinity can never come into question. Arenas describes: "A veces los amantes con los que nos tropezábamos tenían intenciones criminales o complejos que los llevaban a desatar una violencia injustificada" (124). Yet, in the poem, Arenas' attitude regarding these kinds of sexual meetings promote the idea that the behavior on the part of the "bugarrón" is in some way acceptable as long as the purposes for the encounter/adventure have been met: "Mas la tétrica mofeta sin resuello, / descubre en sus ojos 'cierto brillo' / que la dejan por siempre cautivada" (*Voluntad de vivir…*58).

However, as Arenas has described in his writing, the homosexual who was in danger of being oppressed, stigmatized and ostracized was the *loca*. The *loca*, or queer, sought out *real men*, masculine acting men who would subdue them, who would continue playing the expected role for a male in a *machista* society, while the *loca* simultaneously adapted and adopted the role of the woman, reflecting submissive characteristics. Ian Lumsden states that: "The belief that homosexuality involves gender inversion even led many to think of themselves as 'women' who could only be attracted to their opposites, 'real' men" (30). Homosexuals, therefore, were not real men if they "denied" their masculinity which was a "reflection" of the denial of their masculinity by the conservative/machista society as represented by Castro's government. Real men even though they participated in same-sex sexual activities, as long as they played the role society had designated for them, were labeled as *bugarrones* and were often accepted and tolerated by society in general. Thus, the effeminate homosexual could justify the attraction to the *bugarrón* who was then considered a masculine man according to societal standards. To this argument Stephen O. Murray adds that:

> …those who have dropped out of the machismo competition [the locas] generally have the sense not to rattle the fragile masculinity of the macho, who is all too likely to lash out at anyone who questions his (sacred) masculinity. Just as it takes a slave to be a master, the *pasivo* invents, persuades, polishes, and maintains his fantasy of the 'real man (*hombre-hombre*) (56).

This reaction on the part of the macho is reflected not only in various encounters described by Arenas in his autobiography, but through Hector as well in *Otra vez el mar*. Hector's reaction toward the young man after having come face to face with the moon, a reflection of his actions, replicates Murray's definition of the "macho." Esterrich writes in relation to this scene that: "Después de una serie de intentos, Héctor seduce al muchacho; pero una vez desnudos y erotizados, Héctor comienza a insultarlo, a humillarlo, y finalmente lo rechaza en un ataque brutalmente homofóbico" (179). Hector's attack on the young man reflects the need for the Cuban "individual" to exist in two planes: first, Hector must acknowledge a machista/patriarchal attitude for fear that the young man is a secret police agent. Arenas writes:

> Comencé a reírme a carcajadas. Camino a su alrededor riéndome. Me planto ante él y lo abofeteo. -- ¿Qué te habías creído?, le digo. Y vuelvo a golpearlo. -- ¿Crees que desde el principio no me di cuenta lo que eras? ¿Crees que todo esto lo he hecho porque sentía algo hacia ti como seguramente habrán

> sentido otros, como estarás acostumbrado a que ocurra? (*Otra vez el mar* 352-353).

Hector's reaction is the need to recognize, as well as inform the reader of the dangers that exist in being labeled a homosexual. However, while Hector accuses him of being a police agent, he realizes that the young man actually is a homosexual seeking to fulfill his own desires. As opposed to continuing his "machista" stance, Hector begins to preach to the young man about the dangers of being identified a homosexual. These words also reflect Arenas' frustration of having to live a double life under a regime that denounces "improper conduct:" "¿No sabes que nunca podrás ser tú mismo, sino una mascara, una vergüenza, una piedra de burla y escándalo y de venganza para los otros, y de incesante humillación para ti? Nada más que para sobrevivir tendrás que traicionar y negar precisamente lo que te justifica y eres" (*Otra vez el mar* 353). Thus Hector, manipulated by the author, condemns the society that controls and dictates behavior and self-expression.

The attitude expressed by Hector toward the young man, however, also reflects a belief present throughout Arenas' literary work: a *loca* needs a real man and not another *loca*. As Reinaldo Arenas writes : "Lo normal no era que una loca se acostara con otra loca, sino que la loca buscara a un hombre que la poseyera y que sintiera, al hacerlo, tanto placer como ella al ser poseída" (*AQA* 133). Hence, Arenas' interest in representing the homosexual through his writing was to reflect the idea and desire of being possessed. This representation by Arenas mirrors the internalization of the very machismo he suffered through in Cuba. Yet, this act, this "abandonment" of the traditional masculine behavior was related to the idea that homosexuals sought out "real men" and this conduct was a choice on their part. From this belief stems his criticism of the homosexual communities in the United States. In his autobiography he writes of the frustration he felt during his encounters with other homosexuals due to the fact that gays in the United States sought out their equal rather than their opposite, which contradicted homosexual encounters he experienced in Cuba:

> Después, al llegar al exilio, he visto que las relaciones sexuales pueden ser tediosas e insatisfechas. Existe como una especie de categoría o división en el mundo homosexual; la loca se reúne con la loca y todo el mundo hace de todo. Por un rato, una persona mama y luego la otra persona se la mama al amante. ¿Cómo puede haber satisfacción así? (*AQA* 132).

This passage reproduces Arenas' own "acceptance" of the dichotomy that exists in homosexual communities in reference to patriarchal society's interpretations, since he, even as a homosexual, portrayed a "machista" attitude. For him the ideal was to find an opposite, someone who would satisfy his immediate needs,

whether it meant being possessed or possessing someone else. His detailed descriptions of sexual encounters in his autobiography reflect the belief that homosexuals are men seeking other men, particularly those that are different from them. This idea also supports his conviction that homosexuals were not meant to have long lasting relationships, but instead their culture revolved around a variety of encounters, on the freedom of sharing themselves with as many people as possible, demonstrative of machista characteristics. This mode of thinking on the part of the Cuban writer can also be connected to the influence his mother's experience with his "father" had in his life. He further writes:

> Si, precisamente, lo que uno busca es su contrario. La belleza de las relaciones de entonces era que encontrábamos a nuestros contrarios; encontrábamos a aquel hombre, a aquel recluta poderoso que quería, desesperadamente, templarnos. Eramos templados bajo los puentes, en los matorrales y en todas partes por hombres; por hombres que querían satisfacerse mientras nos las metían. Aquí no es así o es difícil que sea así; todo se ha regularizado de tal modo que han creado grupos y sociedades donde es muy difícil para un homosexual encontrar un hombre; es decir, el verdadero objeto de su deseo (*AQA* 132).

Finally, this graphic description of sexual encounters with other men, with "real men" is a tactic utilized by Arenas in order to re-construct the "I" that had been denied to him. His attempt was to reconstruct his manhood in order to counter-attack the Cuban government's notion that a homosexual was not a "macho." According to Margarita Sánchez, the purpose for writing *Antes que anochezca* was to: "…revivir a través de la memoria al personaje sexualmente voraz, siempre al margen de la ley y vengarse de Fidel Castro y de todos aquellos que lo traicionaron o le dieron la espalda antes y después de la salida de Cuba" (168). It is his opportunity to rewrite himself from the AIDS afflicted writer and reinvent that youthful homosexual who through various sexual adventures lived even under the worse of circumstances: marginalization, repression and persecution. As he states in his autobiography: "Creo que si una cosa desarrolló la represión sexual en Cuba fue, precisamente, la liberación sexual" (*AQA* 132).

The discussion on machismo and the various roles that homosexuals play in same-sex sexual activities arises from the impression that homosexuals are inferior, subordinates, influenced and as a result a product of imperialist/capitalist culture and ideology. This "understanding" of homosexual behavior surfaces from the "underworld" activities taking place in La Havana prior to the Revolution. Arenas describes this subterranean life in the capital, which for the adventurous and daring homosexual existed parallel to the sexual exploits and experiences in the beaches during the 1960s:

> ...La Habana disfrutaba también de otra vida homosexual poderosísima; subterránea, pero muy evidente. Esa vida era el flete nocturno por toda la Rampa, por Coppelia, por todo el Prado, por todo el Malecón, en el Coney Island de Marianao. Todas esas zonas estaban repletas de reclutas y becados; hombres solos, encerrados en cuarteles y escuelas, que salían de noche deseosos de fornicar y le metían mano a lo primero que encontraran (130).

These scenes depicted and experienced by Arenas, however, were the last remnants of a world that seized to exist after the fall of Fulgencio Batista's dictatorship. As a consequence, the institutionalization of homophobia and as a result the creation of the "homosexual" concentration camps (UMAP), substituted the "I" for the "I" which did not include the "other," the homosexual. Although they targeted homosexuals, these camps would further create dichotomies, divisions not only in general, but that further marginalized this group both in and out of mainstream Cuban society. Consequently, according to Martin Leiner's study: "camps solely for gay men were then set up to separate the 'girls' from the boys" (29). Juan Escalona, the Cuban Minister of Justice in 1984 made the following statement to Leiner during an interview:

> These units were created after careful consideration. They were required by the Revolution and the new society; we had to get rid of the bums and among them were homosexuals who were vagrants. You must consider that homosexuality is not a crime in Cuba. So we decided that homosexuals should work on floraculture. Thus (laughs) these special units were really cute and neat because every day you could see these *people* sowing seeds and picking flowers, and from a far distance you could notice their camps because of the peculiar garments you saw hanging to dry: (laughs) girdles, bras, etc. (29 my emphasis).

Accordingly, the visual image of the homosexual portrayed by "these people" to the regime as well as to the rest of society implied an effeminate quality that justified their status as equal to that of women. The exception, obviously, was the importance placed on the reproductive role that the homosexuals did not partake in. This manner of thinking complied with the understanding that a homosexual was not the individual who participated in same-sex sexual activities, but rather the "man" who abandoned his "hombría," his "male identity" to adapt the role commonly and traditionally associated with women: "To have sex with another man is not what identifies one as homosexual. For many Cubans, a man is homosexual only if he takes the passive receiving role" (Leiner

22). Lumsden echoes Leiner's interpretation and states that Cubans believed strongly in the designation that society had for men and women. This attitude, Lumsden writes, stems from among other things, a strong Spanish value system yet to be contested by any Latin American culture. He states that: "The oppression of homosexuals in Cuba has its origins in a patriarchal culture that celebrates conventional masculinity at the expense of women and of men whose public behavior is perceived as unmasculine" (115). Therefore, it is this individual, Reinaldo Arenas, that has created a problem for the Revolution as stated by Brad Epps: "For although the acts and identities vary, it is the *maricón*, the *reina* ('queen'), or the *loca* (literally 'the crazy woman'), the man who does not act 'properly' phallic and who, in one way or another, knows it, that is the subject whose sexuality is, or has been, most 'problematic' for the revolution" (235).

The treatment that many Cuban "outcasts" endured, in part by the revolutionary regime, particularly homosexuals, stems from outside influences on the island. While Cuban homosexuality was blamed on imperialistic values permeating in Cuban society, Juan Abreu saw the treatment of the non-conformist impacted by the neo-colonization of Cuba on behalf of the Soviet Union. He provides a clearer picture to better understand Reinaldo Arenas' struggles to maintain a hold on who he was:

> La década del setenta al ochenta fue sin duda la más oscura de estos casi cuarenta años de dictadura [...] Todos han sido malos, pero en esos diez años se sumó a la infamia de la falta de libertades la humillación de sentirnos colonizados por una potencia extranjera. La idolatría y la sumisión a los soviéticos llegó a tales extremos que los soldados cubanos, durante las ceremonias militares, juraban fidelidad eterna no sólo a nuestro país sino también a la Madre Patria Soviética. Nunca Cuba fue tan dependiente (20).

Abreu's words reflect Reinaldo Arenas's condition on the island. Therefore, the colonization of Cuba was synonymous with the colonization of women as presented in Arenas' writing, thus perpetuating the de-construction of the individual's identity and her/his loss of the self.

It can be argued that one reason for Arenas' marginalization under Castro and the revolutionary government was due to the characters employed by the Cuban writer that conflicted with the expectations of all Cuban artists. Soto writes that: "Arenas' characters…meditate on their own existential problems and the issues shaping individual existence, a practice that runs counter to the accepted revolutionary consciousness, which places class struggle over individual experiences" (76). Soto's argument continues by addressing the issue of what is to be considered as "real" or "imaginary" as it pertains to the role of

literature in Cuban society and its promotion of the establishment of a revolutionary social consciousness: "Thus, in Cuba the question is not whether a given character in a documentary novel is 'real' or not but whether a given character adheres to and supports the accepted revolutionary consciousness" (76). This dichotomy presented by Soto, nonetheless is important for Arenas since it establishes the necessity that exists in his characters to find ways to survive. The binary, reality/imagination, in the eyes of the Cuban writer, is present to save the lives of his characters, and at the same time it serves to establish the author's own existence in a world that denies him that. At this juncture, the depictions in his writing of the homosexual, of himself, are a way to establish a "home" for someone who even within the island had been displaced, a displacement that followed him into exile. This exile/displacement is often represented by Arenas through the creation of alter-egos in his writing. The boundaries Arenas created in his literary productions blurred into one another when the author "allowed" his characters to begin creating other characters, alter egos: "doubles that complement them or show other aspects of their personality" (53). For instance, in the case of *Celestino antes del alba*, the creation/birth of Celestino, according to Félix Lugo Nazario: "es la invención del Narrador para acompañarse en su soledad, sencillamente, es su 'doble'" (82). Arenas himself admitted this when he wrote that:

> Celestino es el amigo inventado, hecho a imagen y semejanza del inventor para satisfacer sus vacíos espirituales. Por lo tanto, aquello de que era su primo parece ser una justificación imaginaria. A veces, es su otro yo, a veces una representación simbólica de sus angustias (quoted in Lugo Nazario 83).

It can be argued that the author wrote himself in his novels, therefore becoming the subject of his own objectives to reconstruct the "I" of the "other." The ideas expressed in the quote above also reflect in the novel how the child-narrator describes Celestino's relationship and closeness to him, describing how both of them are always together, always doing the same things and experiencing the same adventures, with the exception of Celestino's writing, to which the child-narrator admits not to being able to read because he is illiterate. The need to create a friend, the poetic "I" which in the countryside has been denied is a result of the child's loneliness expressed by Arenas at the beginning of the novel: "Corriendo llego y me asomo. Pero, como siempre: solamente estoy yo allá abajo. Yo desde abajo, reflejándome arriba. Yo, que desaparezco con sólo tirarle un escupitajo a las aguas verduscas" (17). His characters, thus, are a fusion, a syncretism of his own experiences, artistic expression and imagination (Soto 76).

Although Arenas recognized the dangers of promoting the creativeness that leads, in a sense, to "freedom," it was necessary for it reinforced and redefined for him what a human being was:

> Es que el escapar de la realidad más inmediata – imaginar o soñar – se paga muy caro. Para mí la imaginación es más "real" en el sentido humano del término, que la acción común que realiza todo hombre diariamente porque es la que lo define como hombre [...] El don de la creación, de la imaginación, es lo que hace que el ser humano sea tal y tenga esa trascendencia como ser humano. La imaginación es el punto de partida para toda obra trascendente en cualquier sentido. Por eso yo siempre he pensado que lo real en el hombre es esa capacidad para imaginar y hasta cierto punto para soñar (Prieto Taboada 686).

This idea is greatly reflected in *Arturo, la estrella más brillante*. This novel, which applies the stream of consciousness tells the story of Arturo, a young homosexual incarcerated in one of Cuba's concentration camps. What Arenas has done is present the fusion of both Arturo's reality as well as the world he fantasizes to reflect the character's need to escape into a place where oppression and persecution do not exist, but instead is dominated by art and beauty, correlating to romantic traits present in the novel. Arturo finds himself dreaming, while awake, constructing castles and trying to describe to himself his perfect mate. Unfortunately, while being repressed by both the guards (a representation of Castro's domination and control) as well as by the other homosexuals, (for Arturo is a non-conformist), he finds that his particular form of coping, of escapism, is also his undoing: he is shot while running away from the guards. For Arturo, it is the second time he is shot at, since his own mother, at the end of *La vieja Rosa* attempted to kill him after finding her son in the arms of a man. The connection between the two scenes, although Arturo is not aware of his impending death, is echoed by Arenas in the novel. Arenas writes: "siempre confundía por unos instantes la jeringonza de los cocineros del barracón con la voz insustituible de la madre" (*Arturo*…19). Perhaps a foreshadowing of what is to come, this reference to his mother is ironic because Arturo by now has become a "full-flegged" *loca*. What is both symbolic and ironic in Old Rosa's attempt at killing her son is that the riffle she uses was the same weapon used by her oldest son when he joined Castro's rebels. Thus, the juxtaposition of the weapon and the attempt by Old Rosa to kill her youngest and "brightest" validate the notion of Rosa as the incarnation of repression and persecution of the non-conformist, the "dissident homosexual writer."

David Foster believes that the importance portrayed by this particular character lies in the fact that he is a double "outcast," both in the

heterosexual/Cuban revolutionary society for being a homosexual, and in the homosexual world for not being gay enough. Foster writes that: "What makes Arturo of special interest is that he is represented as something other than the stereotypical example of the screaming queen, the most overt manifestation of a puritative gay identity, at least from the perspective of the straight world" (69). In this sense he differs from Reinaldo Arenas, who states in *Antes que anochezca* that he refused to partake in homosexual activities while incarcerated for fear of being raped and suffer further repression. This attitude can thus be juxtaposed to Arturo's situation for he is "controlled" by a guard whom he must satisfy whenever the "request" is made. Arturo's circumstances also differ from Arenas' experiences in prison because unlike the writer, Arturo (the character) played along with the role that was expected and imposed on him. In *Antes que anochezca* Reinaldo Arenas states the following with regards to his attitude about sexual encounters with other inmates:

> Me negaba a hacer el amor con los presidiarios […] Lo bello de la relación sexual está en la espontaneidad de la conquista y del secreto en que se realiza esa conquista. En la cárcel todo es evidente y mezquino; el propio sistema carcelario hace que el preso se sienta como un animal y cualquier forma del sexo es algo humillante (205).

In this passage Arenas declares his choice in not partaking in any sexual activities with other prisoners, thus confirming his non-conformity with expectations placed on him as a homosexual. Arturo, on the other hand, had weekly encounters with a soldier, part of his "transformation," of his conformity or expected conformity on his part by those around him. Bewildered not only by his looks, but also by his new behavior, Arturo, unlike Arenas, played the role expected and demanded of him, thus, hiding his true self and his desires, just as Hector had warned the young man he would have to do in order to survive in Cuban society. In *Arturo, la estrella más brillante* Arenas describes this façade on the part of the protagonist by allowing the "objectification" of himself as a sexual being and adapting characteristics expected of the homosexual by society. Arenas writes:

> Sí, era cierto que ahora, siempre que pasaba por las postas, algún soldado se sobaba, se rascaba los testículos, y hacía una señal obscena, pero eso era más bien una costumbre, una tradición, un modo de decir *aquí el macho soy yo*, y muchas veces ni siquiera le miraban el rostro mientras hacían el gesto; sí, era cierto que algún maricón a veces le elogiaba la brillantez de sus ojos y al regresar del campo, otros…le tocaban los muslos; era cierto también que el soldado guardiero en el

> encuentro semanal, en el preciso momento del resoplido le pasaba una mano por el cabello…(49).

In this scene, Arenas focuses on the denial of Arturo's individuality, on the emphasis placed on superficiality rather than on the person. Arturo, hence, becomes another nameless homosexual within the confines of the "labor camp." He plays the role in order to satisfy the demands and expectations of others. This sacrifice on the part of Arturo, however, stems from the need to hide what he truly desires: to be ignored, to create the ideal world for him and his lover whom he refers to as "él," the nameless figment of his imagination. The representation of Arturo as an individual who lives in a "third space," in a world paralleled to his own reality, enhances the notion of his status as an outcast, or as Hawley asserts: "both the colonizer and the post-colonized can reduce all differences to the lowest common denominator, belittling all real distinctions within a social group (such as sexual 'deviance') to the simple one of not-us" (9).

Conclusion

Reinaldo Arenas' writing process was oriented at the idea of breaking with the colonized status he had endured which was based on his status as a homosexual. This homosexual status was equated with the feminine based on patriarchal values. Within the revolutionary establishment homosexuality was seen as another imperialist/capitalist influence. Arenas as the homosexual subject opposed the ideals of the Cuban Revolution, establishing a non-conformist stance that did not support governmental/revolutionary/patriarchal norms. Arenas refused the role of the passive subject and as a result adopted characteristics promoted by the revolutionary government in order to counter-attack from within the system. To break from the passive subject position he employed the representation of characters that reflected the notion of colonization by the Cuban state. At the same time, his writing process attempted to reconstruct his life for two reasons: 1) for not subscribing to the ideals of the Revolution and for not promoting them; and 2) for being a homosexual.

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