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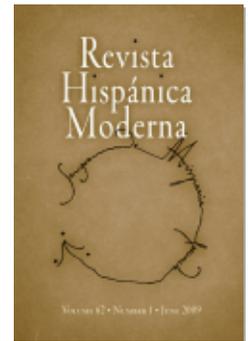
A Gay Cuban Activist in Exile: Reinaldo Arenas (review)

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(Review)

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analiza, que sirven como modelos para hacernos ver cómo funcionaba esta literatura y paraliteratura, en su día.

De la Península en 1813 salta Muñoz a Inglaterra durante la primera represión fernandina y el Trienio Liberal. Desde España llegaron escritos anti-Inquisitoriales que comenzaron a informar lo que es (y será) la novela gótica. *Vargas, a Tale of Spain* (1822) representa un “salto evolutivo” en el tema inquisitorial (142) que nos lleva directamente al análisis de las obras románticas que tienen, enterradas en su argumento, referencias al Santo Oficio (el público comprendió las referencias): *La conjuración de Venecia*, *Carlos II el Hechizado*, *Doña Mencía*, *Ni Rey ni Roque*, *El auto de fe*, etc. Muñoz revela cómo la Inquisición es un elemento fundamental en estos dramas y novelas, elemento desapercibido (o por lo menos, poco comentado) por los críticos. Por eso, podemos concluir con Muñoz que “La importancia del Santo Oficio en los medios escritos sorprende no sólo por su abundancia sino por su contraste con el estado contemporáneo del Tribunal” (210). Su elegante análisis de los textos, su balance crítico y su comprensión de la riqueza de la manifestación del tema en la literatura dieciochesca y decimonónica aseguran que este libro llegará a ser referencia obligada para todos los que intenten comprender la dura vida y complicada muerte del Santo Oficio de la Inquisición española.

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RAFAEL OCASIO, *A Gay Cuban Activist in Exile: Reinaldo Arenas*. Gainesville: U of Florida P, 2007.

This biographical study is a stimulating, well-researched account of Reinaldo Arenas’s literary career following his 1979 exile to the United States. It explores many previously uninvestigated documentary sources from the Arenas collection at the Princeton University Library—particularly Arenas’s personal and professional correspondence—to offer new details on the brief but highly condensed final decade of this writer’s life. As the introduction makes clear, the purpose of this biography is not only to analyze and recount the complexities of Arenas’s literary, political and professional trajectory during his exile years, but also to reexamine aspects of his literary work in light of that trajectory. Accordingly, several of the chapters offer useful, although somewhat selective, considerations of Arenas’s poetry, short narrative and novels in their relation to the political and professional dimensions of the final years of Arenas’s life. It is no easy task to impose narrative coherence on the biographical-archival complexities of a writer like Arenas, not only given that the circumstances of his imprisonment and exile often resulted in disappeared manuscripts, multiple versions of texts and vexing questions about chronologies of composition, but also due to Arenas’s frequent tendency to filter his own biographical accounts through testimonial fictions and other subterfuges, often (as Ocasio stresses, with some affirmation, toward the end of his study) even treating his own life and person as a work of fiction. Ocasio navigates these complexities with impressive dexterity, although some aspects of his particular narrative construction of Arenas also raise some questions.

The book's four chapters follow a biographical sequence as well as a story of Arenas's evolving political activism, although with somewhat greater emphasis on the latter, since this is not a biography that seeks to provide an intimate portrait of Arenas as a person but rather keeps the focus on the more public dynamics of Arenas's negotiations as a writer and political figure during his exile years. One possible exception to this emphasis on Arenas's relation to the "public sphere" is Ocasio's treatment of his sexual behavior, a topic this review will explore later in more detail, although even in this regard the subject matter is far from "private" in its implications. The first of the book's four main chapters focuses on the circumstances of Arenas's departure from Cuba and assesses his initial efforts in the U.S. to identify himself with, and promote causes in support of, his fellow Mariel exiles. Ocasio devotes considerable attention in this chapter to the enigmas surrounding Arenas's arrest on charges of sex with two teenage boys prior to his four-year imprisonment and his later decision to leave Cuba, discussing the implications of the arrest incident for Arenas's own, often conflicting, accounts of his departure from the island in the boatlift and his subsequent political identification with the Mariel exiles in the U.S. Ocasio's discussion in this chapter is not limited to the circumstances and implications of Arenas's departure from Cuba; in treating Arenas's Mariel-related political activism in the early years of his exile in the U.S., it also provides extensive and useful information on the broader context of the politics of Cuban exile writing and the history of the exile press during the 1990s. Chapter 2 explores the growing assertion of Arenas's activism—and its increasing aim against the Castro regime—, examining the complexities posed to that activism by Arenas's initial efforts to downplay his homosexuality and by the many disputes he had with other writers and public figures and which would continue over the decade. Ocasio returns here to the unresolved questions over Arenas's arrest in Cuba, suggesting that his failure to adequately address the incident often undermined his early political stances in the U.S. This chapter also weaves the stories of Arenas's political interventions during this period with some brief but useful considerations of his early publications of short fiction in the U.S. Chapter 3 engages in a somewhat more detailed analysis of the nexus between Arenas's politics and his literary work, in a discussion of the historical, erotic and political dimensions of Arenas's first two major book publications following his departure from Cuba: his poem-narrative *El central* and the novel *Otra vez el mar*. The discussion of these works also includes a consideration of Arenas's early assertions, in other contexts of writing and activism, about the treatment of gays in Cuba. Ocasio's comments on the historical dimension of *El central* address accusations, levied against Arenas upon the publication of this work, that he had failed to document and detail the charges about the Castro regime's repression of gays that the work set out to accomplish, while the treatment of *Otra vez el mar* critiques the incursion of Arenas's fiction into a more daring conjunction of political and explicitly erotic motifs. In his discussion of these works, Ocasio again returns to the specter of Arenas's arrest in Cuba, arguing that Arenas's continued refusal to clarify the nature of that arrest, even while drawing attention to it, ultimately detracted from the political effectiveness of these publications. Chapter 4 covers the final, most difficult years of Arenas's life, including his battle with AIDS; the circum-

stances of his writing and publication of *El color del verano*, the autobiography *Before Night Falls* and the final *Pentagonía* volume, *El Asalto*; as well as Arenas's growing assertions as a gay activist. Arenas's predilection for adolescent boys, as a topic linked to his arrest in Cuba, continues to feature prominently in this final chapter, as Ocasio returns once more to this subject in assessing Arenas's first relatively comprehensive, but still evasive, account of the arrest incident in *Before Night Falls*.

In the course of his study, Ocasio offers fresh and abundant detail on Arenas's many literary disputes with such writers and critics as Belkis Cuza Malé, Edmundo Desnoes, Severo Sarduy and Ángel Rama. He generally treats these disputes judiciously, faulting or defending Arenas and his opponents in accordance with a careful reading of archival and anecdotal evidence. Ocasio's treatment of the disputes over national and sexual politics in which Arenas was frequently entangled—particularly in relation to his defense of his fellow Mariel exiles, his denunciations of the repression of gays in Cuba, and his aggressive attacks on sympathizers of the Castro regime—likewise constitutes a generally careful and detailed assessment. One admires the way Ocasio repeatedly emphasizes the ethical character of Arenas's own political efforts even while acknowledging their excesses, in his stress on how Arenas's pursuit of certain causes and battles virtually guaranteed preventing him from achieving success as a “mainstream” writer. In general, Ocasio works hard to highlight Arenas's significance as one of the first outspoken Latin American, or Latino, gay writers.

One possible exception to this generally judicious critique of Arenas's literary and cultural politics is Ocasio's handling of his repeated references to Arenas's arrest in Cuba and the associated topic of Arenas's attraction for teenage boys. It is understandable that the arrest incident would feature with some prominence in any conventional biography of this writer, not only as part of an effort to accurately document the circumstances of Arenas's departure from Cuba and to explore the complexities of his subsequent identification with the Mariel exile generation, and not only given that Arenas himself kept the issue alive in his own evasive accounts, but also because the incident has undeniable implications and repercussions for any analysis of Arenas's own sexual politics. However, because of Ocasio's very insistence on continually revisiting the topic, one begins to note some troubling aspects in its presentation. The implications of Ocasio's treatment of this topic go beyond issues of biographical rigor, although those issues should be addressed here first. For one thing, Ocasio fails to acknowledge the testimonial paradoxes that complicate his access to, and interpretation of, the facts and documentation of the case. In discussing the arrest, he seems to imply the existence of some kind of objective account against which Arenas's versions could be gauged, although all details about the incident come only from three unstable sources: the bare historical fact of the arrest itself (as carried out by a police apparatus of dubious motivations); Arenas's own contradictory accounts of the incident; and rather vague third person testimonials (such as Ocasio's comment that “. . . off the record everyone admitted knowing about Arenas's strong attraction to ‘muchachos’ . . .” [124]). Ocasio therefore has access to essentially only one corpus of testimonial material—that of Arenas's conflicting and incomplete biographical accounts—in his efforts to determine

what are the objective facts about the case, on the one hand, and what elements of Arenas's accounts are to be considered suspect, on the other. Nonetheless, he not only insists on treating the case as a relatively straightforward criminal charge in its basic contours but also moves a bit too quickly to dismiss elements of Arenas's own testimonial defense and fails to consider the cultural, historical and political nuances surrounding the arrest. Arenas claimed that the handling of the case by the Cuban authorities had discriminatory dimensions and motivations, and it is not even clear what role the accusers had in it—that they might have acted as deliberate informants, as Arenas alleged, is something Ocasio acknowledges but underplays with regard to its significance for the possible political implications of the arrest.

Ocasio does refer to some supporting accounts, such as that of Arenas's friend and fellow Cuban writer Juan Abreu, which argue that the arrest was a police entrapment; and he does point to some rather pragmatic reasons why Arenas might have chosen to downplay the incident, most importantly his concerns that not only his criminal record but also his HIV status (another topic Arenas was long silent on) might jeopardize his efforts to gain U.S. citizenship. But these acknowledgements are subordinated to Ocasio's preference for other dimensions of, or lacuna in, the account which he uses to imply almost a moral indictment, not only of Arenas's actions leading to his arrest, and not only of his failure to tell the whole story of the case after moving to the U.S., but also of Arenas's undocumented, hypothetical, sexual behavior in subsequent years. For example, in Chapter 4, even after acknowledging Arenas's concerns about the repercussions of his arrest for his citizenship application, Ocasio immediately leaps to another conclusion in the following sentence: "Or perhaps Arenas was dealing with the thorny issue of his own sexual preference. He was not willing to discuss fully even in his autobiography his attraction to teenage boys, if indeed he pursued this in the United States" (152). A few pages later, Ocasio repeats this implied judgment-by-suspicion of Arenas's sexual behavior, using language that any journalist would recoil from: "Conspicuously absent from his autobiography are any references to his attraction to engaging in sexual relations with teenage boys while in New York" (157). In this second comment (and note the odd wording of the phrase, "his attraction to engaging in . . ."), it is as if Arenas were condemned by the very absence of signs of his sexual activities and desires. Ocasio seems to imply that Arenas is permanently marked, as a moral-sexual subject, by his arrest back in Cuba and from that point onward will be guilty even of actions (or of "attractions to engaging in" actions) associated with the criminal case which third party accounts do not specifically refer to and to which Arenas himself might only have alluded in his fictional works—although only a poor reader would interpret those fictional references as actual signs of his real life activity or desires, whatever those activities and desires were and whatever evolving forms they might have assumed over time. Although Ocasio's treatment of Arenas's sexual persona is generally narrated with an "objective" tone—that is, without an explicit intent to moralize and always taking into account Arenas's posture as a "sexual outlaw," as a libidinal stance specific to a certain era of gay activism and considered in relation to the behavior of other gay figures of the period, such as Scott O'Hara and Jack Nichols—, the very exercise of narrative-

biographical “objectivity,” in its persistent focus on documenting Arenas’s testimonial inaccuracies and evasions, becomes the vehicle of obscurely implied judgments about the writer’s actual or alleged sexual behavior. While Ocasio’s ostensible objective in discussing the arrest and Arenas’s accounts of it is to theorize how the incident and its handling by Arenas served to undermine his politics, the persistent tone of suspicion ultimately targets more than Arenas’s politics and verges on becoming an implied *ad hominem* judgment. It should be stressed that this judgment does not color the treatment of every aspect of Arenas’s life in this biographical study: Ocasio equally valorizes Arenas’s gay activism in other dimensions and at other moments, particularly in the book’s final chapter and conclusion, in his emphasis on this writer’s significance as one of the first openly gay Latin American, or Latino writers. Yet the portrait of Arenas that ultimately emerges in this study attributes excessive significance to the incident of criminal arrest in terms of the biographical associations and implications that might be drawn from it.

The reason Ocasio’s handling of this topic calls for critique has nothing to do with whether Arenas should be defended or accused in his sexual behavior, or whether Ocasio in assessing that behavior is “right” or “wrong” in terms of biographical accuracy. Rather, Ocasio’s treatment of this topic merits interrogation for the role it plays in the work’s construction of thematic progression in the biographical plot line and for what that particular narrative progression might function to exclude in the treatment of Arenas’s work and political life. Ultimately, Ocasio uses this topic as a way of giving dramatic and thematic development, on a psychological or behavioral level, to a life which otherwise does not easily offer itself to the framework of this particular kind of dramatic progression. By repeatedly revisiting the topic of Arenas’s arrest and his later testimony of it, Ocasio turns it into a kind of leitmotif of the biography which, by determining so much of the narrative, results in a foreclosure of other possibilities in the analysis of Arenas’s writing and political activity.

One might wonder if it is even possible to write a straightforward biography of a figure like Arenas, who injected so much fiction into his testimonial traces and whose fictions at times seem almost more vitally suggestive than his life. One wonders, that is, whether Ocasio’s biographical study of Arenas might have been better served by taking Arenas’s fiction even more seriously than it does; that is, by setting aside the “prosecution” approach of continually assessing Arenas’s testimonial veracity and instead engaging in a more comprehensive treatment of the testimonies—within but also beyond questions of veracity and direct reference—of Arenas’s literary constructions. At the very least, one wishes that the biographical narrative had taken more into account the complex ways that fiction potentially deflects, distorts and reinscribes questions of testimonial accuracy. In its many phantasmagorical levels, might Arenas’s fiction have something else to say about the role of the criminal arrest incident? Might it give access to other ways of interpreting that incident, particularly ways that might better illuminate, or account more effectively for, Arenas’s peculiar and difficult relation to nation, exile, political ideology and law? Although Ocasio’s introduction announces his intention to foreground the analysis of literary works in the study, the readings he ultimately provides tend to be of a narrowly “biographically-

symptomatic” type, examining the literary works in terms of their more or less direct capacity to elucidate political and sexual dynamics, or facts, of Arenas’s final years. Toward the end of his study, Ocasio alludes to the possibilities of a more expansive, or nuanced, fiction-centered approach when he briefly comments on the inextricability of fiction and biographical fact in Arenas’s life and work. One wonders what additional insights or critiques Ocasio might have offered if he had taken a little more seriously the comment made by Arenas to his friend Perla Rozencaig which appears toward the end of the final chapter: “that [literary] character I’ve left in my books is the meaning of my life” (149). The statement, made just a few days before his death, seems almost like an epitaph on Arenas’s tomb. Ocasio does not linger over the comment, and one wonders how he might have responded to the implicit challenge it offers to him or any of Arenas’s future biographers. What is that “literary character” and what does it do? What does it say that “Arenas himself” could not? How does it evolve through Arenas’s writings, and what biographically-ungoverned connections might it suggest within its own heterogeneities? How might an exploration of this “character” redirect judicial questions—those aimed at uncovering the truth of biographical referents—toward other dimensions of analysis? In short, one wonders whether Ocasio might not have engaged a bit more fully with this literary character, rather than treating Arenas’ fiction as yet another symptom pointing back to his life and person. One suspects that Arenas’s life, in the nakedness of its documentary evidence, has less to say when it is denied the vital, volatile, testimonial companionship of “that character” that has been “left in [his] books.”

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FERNANDO OPERÉ. *Indian Captivity in Spanish America: Frontier Narratives*. Trans. Gustavo Pellón. Charlottesville, VA: U of Virginia P, 2008.

In the first chapter of *Indian Captivity in Spanish America: Frontier Narratives*, Fernando Operé recounts a memorable episode from Garcilaso de la Vega’s *La Florida del Inca*. Diego de Guzmán, who accompanied Hernando de Soto through the present-day southern United States, settles with an Indian wife and refuses to rejoin de Soto’s expedition. Guzmán states his desire to remain by writing his name in charcoal on a letter sent to him by his countrymen. The signature, the letter, and Garcilaso’s retelling of the incident epitomize the focus of Operé’s study: the transmission of writing and bodies across the unstable, shifting frontiers between Amerindian and European cultures. These writings are a testimony to centuries of conflict and acculturation in the Americas, as well as allude to the practical and theoretical difficulties of a project that endeavors to “establish a foundation for constructing a history of captivity” (65).

Published originally as *Historias de la frontera. El cautiverio en la América hispánica* (FCE: 2001), *Indian Captivity* is an eminently readable translation by Gustavo Pellón. On its opening page, Operé positions himself as an advocate of captives, whom he calls “practically unknown supporting actors,” “silent victims,” and