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Reinaldo Arenas, Caliban, and Postcolonial Discourse

Enrique Morales-Díaz

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Reinaldo Arenas Fuentes (1943-1990) was a novelist, poet, playwright, essayist, and short story writer considered by many as one of the most eloquent and daring literary figures of his generation. Some of his most known works include the five novel series known as the Pentagony (Pentagonía): Celestino antes del alba, El palacio de las blanquísimas mofetas, Otra vez el mar, El color del verano o el jardín de las delicias, and El as alto. Other literary works by Arenas include El central, Voluntad de vivir manifestándose, La vieja Rosa, Arturo, la estrella más brillante, El mundo alucinante, Adios a mamá, Antes que anochezca: una autobiografía and his one act plays Persecución: cinco piezas de teatro experimental. The themes he explored in his writing ran counter to what Fidel Castro and the revolutionary regime expected from its intellectual citizens. While Castro wanted everyone that wished to be published on the island to succumb to the ideals of the revolution, to promote them in their works, Arenas refused because he believed in the artistic freedom of expression. While he began his adolescence in support of the rebels that were fighting against Fulgencio Batista's dictatorship, he began attacking the revolution when the institutionalized persecution of homosexuals began in Cuba. The research that has been done on Reinaldo Arenas has often focused on his sexuality and his opposition to the revolution. Hundreds of articles have dealt with either specific literary works or themes present in his writing, either using Queer Theory or more traditional literary analysis. However, none have focused on the idea that Arenas could be considered a postcolonial writer since there is a question as to whether that particular theoretical approach can be applied to that region. A study of the relationship between a writer such as Arenas, who refused to conform to the idea that the individual had to become part of a larger collective, and the iconic image of Caliban as he has been appropriated by many Latin American scholars and activists, is necessary to understand the conditions under which many marginalized groups lived whether we are referring to Cuba or any other Latin American country. This is the first critical study of Reinaldo Arenas from a postcolonial venue. It seeks to find the commonalities that exist between Arenas and the image of Caliban which first appeared in William Shakespeare's The Tempest. The focus is to show how the appropriation of this seventeenth-century image of the New World native can be used to understand the goals of Arenas' writing: to counter attack the regime's goals and false promises which fueled his desire to create a literary counter-discourse that promoted freedom of expression and assertion of an identity separate from that expected by Cuban revolutionary society. Arenas' characters represent imperialistic influences in Cuba that opposed the regime's demands upon expected literary support of their agenda: not only because his characters could be interpreted as a form of mimesis of the treatment various individuals endured on the island, but also because Arenas' messages opposed the ideals of the Revolution. As homosexuality became marginalized and discrimination of homosexuals became institutionalized, Arenas' writing transgressed 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 authorial voice. The arguments in this book focus on a discussion of Reinaldo Arenas' struggle against censorship focused precisely on reestablishing the individual the regime hopes to reeducate. The author's motivations for interpolating his writing at the root of the very society that denies him an existence can be equated to postcolonial discourse. This book is of interest to areas such as Latin American studies and postcolonial studies.

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