

---

Ileana C. Zéndegui. *The Postmodern Poetic Narrative of Cuban Writer Reinaldo Arenas*. Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 2004. 146p.

PATRICIA CATOIRA  
MONTANA STATE UNIVERSITY-BOZEMAN

Since his well-publicized suicide in New York in 1990, Cuban writer Reinaldo Arenas (1943-1990) has become one of the most prominent figures of the Cuban exile literary canon. Most studies about the author inevitably have discussed the influence on his works of his hardships in Cuba as a persecuted homosexual and censored author. Arenas left his country in 1980 during the Mariel Boatlift and settled in New York after a brief stay in Miami. The author's resentment towards Fidel Castro's policies made him a well-known political figure in the Cuban exile community in the United States, many times clouding his achievements as a writer. Ileana C. Zéndegui met Arenas while attending a course given by the author in 1986 at Florida International University on the topic of Cuban literature. Her *The Postmodern Poetic Narrative of Cuban Writer Reinaldo Arenas* points out the influence of the writer's life on his texts but successfully escapes the politics of the Miami Cuban exile community and offers a deeper analysis of Arenas' narrative discourse.

Zéndegui's major achievement in her study is her theory of "lo real espantoso" (the hideous unreal) to explain the guiding light in Arenas' narrative. She successfully counterpoints "lo irreal espantoso" to the well-known Latin American concept of "lo real maravilloso" (the marvelous real), mostly developed by Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier (1904-1980). Whereas "lo real maravilloso" refers to the existence of amazing happenings in ordinary life in Latin America such as the existence of ancient civilizations along with urban settings, Zéndegui's "lo irreal espantoso" considers those occurrences as horrific. The reality in Latin America, consequently, does not cause amazement but fright. Zéndegui argues that Arenas breaks with the utopian and mythical constructions of the Latin American Boom movement of the 1960s, which had among its main figures Alejo Carpentier and Colombian Gabriel García Márquez. Instead of adopting a foreign gaze and a discourse of exploration and discovery of the Americas, Arenas acknowledges the cruel reality of the continent and looks for the marvelous and the magical in writing and the imagination. Zéndegui contends that Arenas deconstructs his hideous reality through a poetics that allows him to create a second reality in which each individual is free of external authority. For Arenas, the critic concludes, the marvelous is the poetic reality of the individual, a subjective space created in the act of writing, while the "real" reality surrounding him is frightening.

Zéndegui's study is written in Spanish and divided in four chapters, each analyzing two works: Chapter 1, *The Palace of the White Skunks* (1999) and "The Parade

---

Begins" (1981); Chapter 2, *Arturo, the Brightest Star* (1984) and *El Central: A Sugar Mill* (1981); Chapter 3, *Farewell to the Sea* (1982) and *The Color of Summer* (1999); and Chapter 4, *Singing From the Well* (1991) and *The Assault* (1991). All of the works discussed are novels except for the short story "The Parade Begins" and the long poem *El Central: A Sugar Mill*. The titles of each chapter reflect the progression of Zéndegui's theory of "lo irreal espantoso" in Arenas' works: Chapter 1, Suspicion of Terror; Chapter 2, Between Terror and Unreality; Chapter 3, Literary Inclemency: Self vs. Power; and Chapter 4, Toward a Terrifying Unreal. The exposition of arguments and works is clear and coherent. She integrates other thinkers' analyses (i.e., Jean-Paul Sartre, Michel Foucault, Jean Braudillard, and Roland Barthes) in her discussion without allowing them to distract or take over her own arguments.

All the works of Arenas' so-called pentagon (*Singing From the Well*, *The Palace of White Skunks*, *Farewell to the Sea*, *The Color of Summer*, and *The Assault*) cover the coming of age of a character, whose identity changes a little in each of the novels but maintains a consistent role of author/witness, from the eve of the revolution to a dystopian future where men and women have been reduced to animals by a tyrannical regime. The main character dies in the first four novels but is reborn in the last one amid that animalized world. Despite the death of each main character in the five novels, the endings are triumphant. The hero leaves his writings behind, contesting the official story of an unnamed barbarian regime. The obvious parallel to Arenas' Cuba leads many like Zéndegui to view the author as writing the unofficial narrative of Cuba's revolutionary regime.

In her discussion of *El Central*, Zéndegui considers Arenas' poem a continuation of José Martí's (1853-1895) *El presidio político* (1871). Both texts were published from exile, with a tone of consternation about the terrible political happenings on the island, the last decades of the nineteenth century for Martí and the last half of the twentieth century for Arenas. By presenting Arenas' poetics in the same light as Martí, Cuba's most famous writer and national hero, Zéndegui subverts the appropriation of Martí by the Cuban revolutionary government. Arenas' life and works emerge as revolutionary as Martí's.

Zéndegui, like many other critics in the field, calls Arenas one of the most representative authors of Postmodernism in Latin America. He uses postmodern techniques such as parody, polyphonic language, hybridity of genres, and the erosion of boundaries between fiction and historiography and between the author and narrator/characters. The postmodern sensibility allows Arenas to contest authority at different levels. On the one hand, he can deconstruct his own reality in order to create a new one, which in turn can be easily reformulated. On the other hand, the

---

writer challenges the traditional cultural policy of Socialist realism imposed by Cuba's revolutionary regime. Socialist realism proposes an art that captures and propagates the goals of the revolution (i.e., social equality and anti-imperialism) and is easy to understand. The government marginalized writers who did not adhere to this normative aesthetic. Despite government persecution, Arenas kept writing against the grain of Socialist realism while in Cuba and became, in Zéndegui's words, a "postmodern chronicle writer." His works use the author's society as a reference but then create a world of the subjective. They present a grotesque and hostile reality on the island. His characters' search for freedom often mirrors the act of writing. Zéndegui sees in writing the space where Arenas was able to find the unconditional freedom he so much longed for. Zéndegui argues that for Arenas creating other realities through a subjective lens and the imagination was the only way in which an individual could learn about himself and about his (cruel) reality. Writing in this way constitutes a daring act that challenges authority and official discourses.

Zéndegui's *The Postmodern Poetic Narrative of Cuban Writer Reinaldo Arenas* offers an important contribution to the study of Cuban exile writer Reinaldo Arenas. Her theory of "lo irreal espantoso" provides a refreshing analytical framework for Arenas' works and, more significantly, offers a new approach to the study of Latin American literature. ✱