



The Book Truly Stops Here: A Lacanian Reinterpretation of Reinaldo Arenas' Freedom

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ABSTRACT: In his essay, "Reinaldo Arenas, Re-writer Revenant, and the Repatriation of Cuban Homoerotic Desire," Benigno Sánchez-Eppler puts forth what he terms a "signifying possibility," an informative yet nondefinitive explanation of what the exiled queer Cuban novelist Reinaldo Arenas meant in his suicide note. Arenas' suicide note, which served as the conclusion to his autobiography, *Before Night Falls: A Memoir*, written in 1990 and published posthumously in 1992, has an inconclusive meaning stemming from the novelist's brief declaration of his own freedom at the end. After encouraging the Cuban people to remain vigilant in their fight for freedom and against the rule of Fidel Castro, Arenas succinctly yet confidently declares that he himself is already free without suggesting the source of his freedom. Citing various works of the novelist, Sánchez-Eppler argues that this individual freedom originates from the exiled novelist's literary act of self-repatriation, using suicide as an inspired form of return to his homeland.

This essay argues against Sánchez-Eppler's signifying possibility. As expressed in his suicide note, Arenas' notion of freedom, far from being a literary monumentalization of the writer and his Cuban queerness, destined to be creatively repatriated back to his native Cuba through the vehicle of suicide, is more an example of a successful Lacanian "end-of-analysis," when the individual subject comes to terms with and accepts his or her own irredeemably divided self in the present. My own "signifying possibility" for interpreting Reinaldo Arenas' freedom relies on Lacanian psychoanalysis, as interpreted by critical race and Lacanian theorist Antonio Viego in his book, *Dead Subjects: Toward A Politics of Loss in Latino Studies*.

Keywords: queer of color critique, diaspora studies, Lacanian psychoanalysis, "Reinaldo Arenas, Re-writer Revenant, and the Repatriation of Cuban Homoerotic Desire," *Dead Subjects: Towards A Politics of Loss in Latino Studies*

Benigno Sánchez-Eppler chronicles the life and work of exiled Cuban queer novelist Reinaldo Arenas by situating them within the context of movement, the state of being transported from one location to another.¹ The ultimate test of this analytical framework is his interpretation of Reinaldo Arenas' suicide note, which served as the conclusion to the novelist's autobiography, *Before Night Falls: A Memoir*. In the note, Arenas first encourages his people to stay vigilant and continue the struggle for freedom against the oppressive rule of Fidel Castro. He ends the note with the following declaration: "Cuba will be free. I already am." From the outset, it is clear that Arenas is communicating his optimism by predicting the Cuban people's eventual freedom. Nothing in the note, however, explains the nature of Arenas' own individual freedom. Sánchez-Eppler attempts to give meaning using the context of movement and offers what he terms a "signifying possibility," an informative yet nondefinitive explanation of the note. He argues that Arenas' suicide note is a literary act of self-repatriation. The novelist uses suicide as an inspired means of overcoming his exile and returning to his native Cuba in death. Sánchez-Eppler's "signifying possibility" draws from Arenas' previous writings on suicide in which various actors in Cuban history have regarded the action as a positive form of return. Sánchez-Eppler's interpretation is untenable considering that Arenas achieves his freedom independently and in the present, unlike Cuba, which has

¹ Benigno Sánchez-Eppler, "Reinaldo Arenas, Re-writer Revenant, and the Repatriation of Cuban Homoerotic Desire," *Queer Diasporas* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2000).



yet to achieve its freedom. I argue that Arenas' individual freedom, experienced moments before his suicide, is more an example of a successful Lacanian "end-of-analysis," when the individual subject comes to terms with and accepts his or her own irredeemably divided self.

Sánchez-Eppler's analysis is part of *Queer Diasporas*, a collection of essays that regards movement as a theoretically relevant factor in the formation of queerness. In their introduction to the collection, Cindy Patton and Sánchez-Eppler state that "when a practitioner of 'homosexual acts,' or a body that carries any of many queering marks moves between officially designated spaces—nation, region, metropole, neighborhood, or even culture, gender, religion, disease—intricate realignments of identity, politics, and desire take place."²

Here, movement refers to being transported from one "officially designated space" to another. Patton and Sánchez-Eppler use official definitions of space (nation, region) as well as more abstract notions of space (gender, religion, disease). Thus, movement between officially designated spaces can take place physically or conceptually. The authors stress movement's non-uniform effect on the queer body by pointing out the various forms of alterations that can occur, including "bodily homecomings" and "monumentalized remembrances of the queer and the dead that continue after transmogrification."³ This process of change goes so far as to concurrently affect and reinvent place and location themselves.

Sánchez-Eppler's essay focuses on movement's role in queerness by analyzing Arenas' autobiography *Before Night Falls: A Memoir*, which was published posthumously in 1992. Reinaldo Arenas was born in 1943 in eastern Cuba. His childhood was characterized by rural poverty and the presence of his mother and grandparents. His adolescent years were spent in the provincial city of Holguín, with poverty still a lingering concern. The Revolution of 1959 provided the background to and impetus for Arenas' rise as a writer, with Cuba and its educational system developing anew following the successful coup. His first novel, *Celestino antes del alba (Singing from the Well)*, which was based on his rural childhood, earned him a national prize in 1965. Subsequently, in 1967, *Celestino antes del alba* was published by the UNEAC (National Union of Cuban Writers and Artists).⁴

Arenas' personal life benefited from the tumultuous changes during this period. His early homoerotic encounters in a provincial setting gave way to an immersion in a fervent national urban gay culture. The novelist's initial success passed, and he soon developed an appropriately fierce opposition to the Cuban revolutionary government. Sánchez-Eppler writes, "By the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s the increasingly explicit dissonance of his writing, particularly with respect to homoeroticism and its discontents in an increasingly Stalinized socialist order, force him to bypass Cuban publishing restrictions. He starts to publish outside of Cuba without the requisite official imprimatur."⁵ Arenas' publication strategy only attracted more negative attention from the revolutionary government, and the writer was soon punished through surveillance, prosecution, and imprisonment. He consequently became unemployed and homeless. As a result, his writing gained a more defined edge, seeing state

2 Cindy Patton and Benigno Sánchez-Eppler, *Queer Diasporas* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2000) 3.

3 Patton and Sánchez-Eppler 3.

4 Sánchez-Eppler 158–159.

5 Sánchez-Eppler 155.



homophobia as the primary reason to espouse a type of counterrevolutionary homoeroticism. Arenas at this point was aware that his literary work could not be safely published in Cuba, and he was constantly vigilant lest his work be confiscated by the government.

Matters came to a head in 1980, when a growing criminal record soon forced the novelist to flee Cuba through the port of Mariel on a boat headed to the United States. Convictions against him included “counterrevolutionary activities” or “attitudes” and, more specifically, “ideological diversionism” with reference to his literary work, and he was charged with “public scandal” and “corruption of minors,” a reference to his homosexuality. Arenas enjoyed relative freedom in the United States, both within the Miami community of exiles and in the burgeoning American gay culture. At his peak, Arenas became an anticommunist representative, possessing an apparent determination that fit well with Ronald Reagan’s politics.⁶

The force of movement certainly impacted the novelist’s life. Arenas was pushed out of Cuba and moved to the U.S. in 1980. Sánchez-Eppler’s essay focuses on how Arenas’ Cuban queerness and its representation were affected dynamically and unevenly by movement. For example, movement significantly influenced his literary descriptions of one scene that held special significance to the writer, a river full of young men. Arenas revisits this scene numerous times throughout his work including in his first novel, *Celestino antes del alba* (*Singing from the Well*) and later in *Otra vez el mar* (*Farewell to the Sea*). In *Celestino*, which was written before his expatriation from Cuba, Arenas described a scene at the river: A young boy, Héctor, also a budding writer, hides behind some trees and catches a glimpse of young men drenching themselves in a river nude. The scene arouses his earliest homosexual desires. This description is then juxtaposed with the boy’s arrival home to his aunts, grandparents, and mother, where he is isolated and his queer desire has no place. After meeting them at the table, Héctor “stayed alone in the parlor under the kerosene lantern.”⁷ Arenas retells this anecdote in his autobiography, *Before Night Falls: A Memoir*, written while exiled in New York. The tone changes dramatically and the river scene is transformed into a site of queer celebration, where the young Arenas not only catches a glimpse of the young men, but also discovers and engages in the “mystery” of masturbation.⁸ Here, movement affects the various tellings of the same scene. As a young writer in the newly communist Cuba, Arenas first began framing his life on paper, detailing in *Celestino* the negative and closeted aspects of his childhood. Years later, when writing his autobiography in the relatively freer United States, the energy of literary freedom seeps into his descriptions of the same scene. Here, the force of movement affects how Arenas represents the incident at the river. The scene is written differently as movement brings the writer from revolutionary Cuba to the capitalist United States.⁹

Sánchez-Eppler also uses this framework to analyze Arenas’ suicide note, which served as the conclusion to his autobiography, written in 1990 and published posthumously in 1992. Arenas, suffering from health complications related to AIDS, committed suicide soon after writing the note. Sánchez-Eppler highlights the significance of movement when he regards Arenas’ suicide note as a literary

6 Sánchez-Eppler 155–156.

7 Sánchez-Eppler 164.

8 Sánchez-Eppler 164–165.

9 Sánchez-Eppler 166.



monumentalization of his Cuban queerness, which allows for his repatriation back to the homeland. First, Sánchez-Eppler presents an English translation of Arenas' suicide note:

[Pongo fin a mi vida] voluntarily because I cannot continue working There is only one person I hold accountable: Fidel Castro.

I want to encourage the Cuban people out of the country as well as in the Island to continue fighting for freedom. I do not want to convey to you a message of defeat but of continued struggle and of hope.

Cuba will be free. I already am.¹⁰

According to Sánchez-Eppler, the first phrase of the note, "Pongo fin a mi vida," inserted from the Spanish translation, does not strictly mean "I am ending my life." It comes closer to the meaning, "I put an end to my life." Given more authority, the phrase says, "I set down 'the end' to my life." This specific closure comes in another form, "the book stops here," an artistic paraphrase offered to Sánchez-Eppler by Susan Ramond-Fic.¹¹

Sánchez-Eppler then uses two of Arenas' earlier works as evidence that the novelist's suicide note as a whole functions as his literary repatriation back to Cuba. Importantly, Sánchez-Eppler tempers his interpretation, calling it a "signifying possibility."¹² The first source, a 1986 essay on José Martí, establishes the concept of suicide as a form of return. Arenas describes how Martí died in 1895 fighting against the Spanish. The valiant manner in which Martí is murdered makes the fallen leader access Cuba in death, leading Arenas to remark that "return is a suicide."¹³ Sánchez-Eppler's second source is Arenas' 1987 work, *La loma del ángel (Graveyard of the Angels)*, which details how Cuban slaves on the plantation believed that suicide could physically take them back to Africa. Sánchez-Eppler posits that Arenas, too, saw his suicide as a gateway to his Cuban homeland. This gateway to Cuba, expressed creatively, is dependent on hope, with Arenas "imagining a future for Cuba when the nation would gladly repatriate him."¹⁴ According to Sánchez-Eppler, the suicide note, in its totality, "enacts total mastery or willfulness as it performs the end of the story as a function of authorial agency."¹⁵ The suicide note is a carefully orchestrated performance that relies on the force of movement, with the novelist exercising the bit of agency at his disposal before committing suicide.

10 Sánchez-Eppler 179.

11 Sánchez-Eppler 177. Sánchez-Eppler does not indicate who Susan Ramond-Fic is in his essay. The exchange between Sánchez-Eppler and Ramond-Fic at the time of his essay's publication was informal, with Ramond-Fic offering the paraphrase upon hearing Arenas' framing of his suicide note as a literary closure. Sánchez-Eppler describes the paraphrase "the book stops here" as a "Tru(man)ism," a creative joining of the two words, truism, and Trumanism. President Harry Truman, the thirty-third U.S. president had a sign reading "the buck stops here" on his desk in the Oval Office. Originating from the game of poker, the phrase, in a political context, means the responsibility of action belongs to the individual named in charge, not to someone else. See Mitford M. Mathews, ed., *A Dictionary of Americanisms on Historical Principles* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1951) 198–199.

12 Sánchez-Eppler 179.

13 Sánchez-Eppler 179.

14 Sánchez-Eppler 180.

15 Sánchez-Eppler 177.



This interpretation of the suicide note satisfies Sánchez-Eppler's underlying expectation that Arenas was destined to return to Cuba in some meaningful way. At the beginning of his essay, he argues that Arenas' status as an "exile" rather than an "immigrant" signifies that he was forcibly distanced from his land of origin. Movement in this context, thus, affects both how sexuality is represented and "the investment in some sort of return."¹⁶

In addition, Sánchez-Eppler's interpretation neatly positions itself alongside Arenas' general interest in suicide as a whole, which appears in his writings many times, attached with different motives ranging from the humorous to the serious. Arenas was adamant in stating, however, that suicide was not an inherent function of homosexuality. The homophobia underlying this viewpoint only concealed the reality that Cuban queers who commit suicide do so because of the government oppression they experienced.¹⁷

My counterargument against Sánchez-Eppler's "signifying possibility" critically focuses on the last two sentences of the suicide note: "Cuba will be free. I already am." Sánchez-Eppler interprets these words to mean that Arenas in 1990 viewed his suicide as a return to Cuba and were thus a rendering of his Cuban queerness as a literal monument destined for repatriation. This interpretation, however, becomes suspect when one considers the spatial and temporal differentials contained in these two short sentences. The first sentence says that Cuba, as a state, will be free in the future. In the next sentence, "I already am," Arenas is saying that, as an individual human being, he has achieved freedom in the *present*. The implications of these verb tense differences are vast. First, they debunk the notion that Arenas thought his suicide was a kind of return to Cuba, as he separated himself and Cuba in the note. The words do not give any credible indication that Arenas was practicing a creative form of repatriation, where his queer self is successfully returned to Cuban society through his writings. Moreover, this separation of country and individual is further demarcated by the entirely different status the two entities (Cuba and Arenas) have in regard to freedom. Cuba, as a state, has yet to achieve freedom. Arenas, in the body of his suicide note, encourages his people in the Island to not give up, to fight for their freedom, and to not read his note as "a message of defeat." The figure that casts a formidable shadow on the current state of Cuba and Reinaldo Arenas himself, of course, is Fidel Castro, the leader of the Cuban Revolution and the resulting revolutionary government. In regard to his own individual liberation, however, Arenas writes that he is already free.

What did Arenas ultimately mean in his suicide note? How can we begin to understand how Arenas thought he had achieved a state of freedom that an entire people of Cuba has yet to realize? In other words, how did he see himself accessing a transcendental shortcut to freedom? What is another, more viable "signifying possibility" (to use Sánchez-Eppler's words) that we can attach to Arenas' carefully written and performed suicide note—one that does not depend on his status as an "exile" and the expectation that, at one point or another, he will return to his country of origin and therefore enact his final creative act of movement? Sánchez-Eppler's use of movement as a means of analysis is inadequate for explaining Arenas' suicide note. I posit, instead, another signifying possibility of what

16 Sánchez-Eppler 154.

17 Sánchez-Eppler 178–179.



the Cuban novelist meant in his note. I begin by framing my argument using Sandra K. Soto's critique of "intersectionality" in her book *Reading Chican@ Like A Queer: The De-Mastery of Desire*.

"Intersectionality" is perhaps too spatially rigid and exacting a metaphor to employ when considering the ever dynamic and un-ending processes of subject formation. It seems to me that race, sexuality, and gender are much too complex, unsettled, porous (and I do mean to be wordy here), mutually constitutive, unpredictable, incommensurable, and dynamic, certainly too spatially and temporally contingent, *ever* (even if only for an instant) to travel independently of one another.¹⁸

Intersectionality is a mainstream concept in identity knowledge academics in the United States because of how it counters the "universalizing effects that attend the institutionalized monotheism of identity as a solo sojourn, now compartmentalized—if not departmentalized—under the singular rubrics of race, gender, sexuality or nation."¹⁹ Intersectionality gives more comprehensive attention to how race, gender, sexuality, and the like all inform and constitute identity as a whole. This concept has not only produced new insights about minorities in the U.S. but also has been a source of optimism among scholars aiming to the achieve the ultimate goal of intersectional analysis, "identity-oriented justice."²⁰ Soto takes issue with analyses that employ the concept of intersectionality by simply layering the concepts of race, gender, sexuality, and so forth. For Soto, intersectionality is "too spatially rigid and exacting a metaphor," and therefore inadequate in articulating the complex, uneven, and spatially and temporally dependent manner in which subject formation takes place. Hence, Soto's use and critique of the term "shorthand intersectionality approach." In other words, Soto is not against the use of intersectionality altogether but instead is arguing in favor of a more nuanced use of identity rubrics, one that accounts for the effects of unpredictability, space, and time.²¹

Although she focuses on Chicano/a subjectivity in her book, Soto's analysis of intersectionality and its limits is applicable to Arenas' writings, as well. The vast differentials in Arenas' suicide note reinforce Soto's point about the surprising manner in which subjectivity is formed. Arenas' conflation of his impending suicide to realized individual freedom, a freedom not yet achieved by the people of Cuba in the present, highlights how the conceptualization of his intersecting identities is "unpredictable, incommensurable, and dynamic, certainly too spatially and temporally contingent." At first glance, the existence of this form of individual freedom seems virtually impossible and even morbid. There is this glaring paradox, then, in Arenas' declaration of his freedom. The issue now is how to make sense of this paradox and adequately account for Arenas' concept of freedom without relying strictly on the effects of the singular dynamic of "movement," specifically repatriation.

18 Sandra K. Soto, *Reading Chican@ Like A Queer: The De-Mastery of Desire* (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 2010) 6.

19 Robyn Wiegman, *Object Lessons* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2012) 240.

20 Wiegman 240.

21 Soto's view on the endless and unpredictable manner in which race, sexuality, and gender constitute subject formation is akin to that of Kathy Davis. In her essay, "Intersectionality as Buzzword," Davis remarks that intersectionality's ambiguity and inherent open-endedness make possible "a process of discovery which not only is potentially interminable, but promises to yield new and more comprehensive and reflexively critical insights" (p. 77). See Kathy Davis, "Intersectionality as Buzzword: A Sociology of Science Perspective on What Makes a Feminist Theory Successful," *Feminist Theory*, 9.1 (2008): 67–85.



The idea that an act as negative as suicide could have anything to do with an ideal like freedom may, on its face, seem nonsensical or even perverted. I use Lacanian psychoanalysis, however, to explain and provide another signifying possibility for Arenas' conceptualization of freedom moments before his suicide. I interpret the suicide using insights espoused by critical race and Lacanian theorist Antonio Viegó, specifically how he interprets the subject in Lacanian psychoanalysis.

Viegó's understanding of the subject is informed by the work of renowned French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, who locates subject formation in language.

Lacan's understanding of the subject in language, I would like to suggest, also provides an intervention into racist discourse. Lacan reworks the early-twentieth-century Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure's notion of language as a system of signs into a system of signifiers and then argues that language, as paradigmatic structure, has certain privative and generative effects on the human speaking subject. The human organism must at some point choose language in order to express her or his needs, but language always has a somewhat distorting effect that never quite captures the need that is expressed in its medium. This is because the human subject is dependent upon a system of differentially constituted signifiers, a system in which signifiers signify only in virtue of their difference from other signifiers, and so any determination made about the human subject in language will be incomplete and insufficient to exhaustively defining who or what the subject is.²²

What does Viegó mean when he says that the human subject "is dependent upon a system of differentially constituted signifiers"? To answer this question, a useful starting place is British psychoanalyst Dylan Evan's book, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, which defines important terms used by Lacan. I use Evan's entries on "signifier" and "signified" to analyze Viegó's statement on the human subject. According to de Saussure, in linguistics a "signifier" denotes the mental image of a sound, as opposed to the heard sound itself. It is, in his words, the "acoustic image" that represents the "signified," the term used to identify the object that is mentally represented. For example, the separate letters "h," "a," and "t" are each signifiers when mentally conceived with their own corresponding sounds. When these letters are put together, the resulting product gains meaning. The mental image of "hat" becomes the signified, an article of clothing that one puts on the head. Saussure is careful to say that the signified is not the real object found in the world but is only the corresponding psychological representation of this object. Lacan takes this basic understanding of language and positions the signifier as primary in importance and structure. He argues against Saussure by stating that, far from being equal to the signified, the signifier gives rise to the signified. On the other hand, Lacan sees the immateriality of the signifier just like Saussure did: The signifier is in itself meaningless. The signifier does not correspond to a signified that ultimately exists in reality, even the composite word "hat." Lacan uses the term "pure" signifier to describe this aspect of the term and states that the more a signifier ultimately signifies nothing, the more "indestructible" it is. As such, Lacan adheres to Saussure's view of language by recognizing that there are no inherently positive terms in language, only differences. The signifiers in language only possess their value by their relative position among other signifiers.²³

22 Antonio Viegó, *Dead Subjects: Toward a Politics of Loss in Latino Studies* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2007) 5.

23 Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1996) 186.



When Viego says that the human subject “is dependent upon a system of differentially constituted signifiers,” he therefore is emphasizing that the human subject’s constitution is necessarily “incomplete and insufficient.” The human subject’s integral elements (its expression of needs and its self-conceptualization) depend on and are effectively tarnished by language, which as a whole contains no positive terms, but is only defined by the differences between its signifiers. This is the “distorting effect” of language that Viego describes in the above passage. The distorting effect of language and its pernicious role in subject formation is the focus of Lacanian psychoanalysis.

Viego next discusses the ultimate goal of psychoanalysis, termed “end-of-analysis.” Viego cites Lacanian psychoanalyst Paul Verhaeghe. Verhaeghe states, “The analytical experience makes clear that [the] Other does not exist, and hence that the subject does not exist either.”²⁴ Note that the subject does not come first in this statement. The “Other” occupies this space. The Other denotes a concept of reality that is constituted solely by language. The subject, being dependent on signifiers for its expression of needs and its self-conceptualization, does not exist and operate prior to the signifier and does not have an active role in producing reality. Rather, the signifier, and language as a whole, exists and operates prior to the subject.²⁵ Recall Lacan’s term, the “pure” signifier and how its function to signify nothing material does not make it insignificant, but on the contrary, makes it all the more indestructible. The superior quality of the pure signifier extends to its role in the constitution of reality. This is why Verhaeghe states that seeing the nonexistence of the Other results in seeing the nonexistence of the subject, not the other way around.

To illustrate the ultimate nonexistence of the subject, Viego offers psychoanalyst Maire Jaanus’ words:

The analytically defined “human” is not the traditional knot of living flesh and eternal spirit, but a subject constituted by the force and structure of speech and language. And language as such has nothing human about it. Signifiers are dead. “Humans” incorporate this deadness.²⁶

The end-of-analysis involves the recognition of and coming to terms with this “deadness” in the human subject’s makeup. For Viego, seeing the nonexistence of the subject by the patient or analysand in guided Lacanian psychoanalysis involves the emotions of grief and mourning, modes of expression that Lacan did not use in his own writing.

How might one characterize the acceptance of the lack of the Other in Lacanian theory? Is this acceptance a sign of something successfully mourned? ... Does the Lacanian end-of-analysis with the analysand’s acknowledgment that the Other doesn’t exist and that, likewise, the analysand-qua-subject doesn’t exist either, mark the consummate act of successful grieving, where one has been given the strangest and most deliciously morbid opportunity to mourn one’s death while still alive?²⁷

Successful mourning and successful psychoanalysis, therefore, have to do with learning the true nature of the subject and more importantly the wholehearted acceptance of the self’s irredeemably divided nature as caused by language. Viego gives a vivid image of this success when he writes that

24 Viego, *Dead Subjects*, 235.

25 Evans 133.

26 Viego, *Dead Subjects*, 14–15.

27 Viego, *Dead Subjects*, 235.



this acceptance is akin to “mourning one’s death while still alive.” Thus, when Arenas says that he has achieved “freedom” moments before taking his own life and ending his subjectivity, a freedom not yet realized by the entire nation of Cuba, he is intimately communicating the release he feels as a result of successfully mourning his nonexistent self. Arenas inadvertently achieves the goal of Lacanian psychoanalysis by accepting the ultimate nonexistence of his being, of which he is viscerally aware due to suffering from AIDS, and by exercising his “authorial agency” over his nonexistent mortal self through his literary suicide note. He was “mourning his death while still alive.” In other words, Arenas was truly committed to the meaning of the literary embellishment that Sánchez-Eppler offered to contextualize his writings, “the book stops here.” Both his work and his own self are put to a definite and liberating end, as opposed to functioning as elements of self-monumentalization and creative repatriation. The literary embellishment can therefore be rewritten as “The book truly stops here.” Arenas was thus in an exceptional psychological state in writing with self-assurance, “I already am [free],” as the process of revelation that leads to this statement is usually executed in a guided clinical setting in Lacanian psychoanalysis, between an analyst and a patient, or analysand.

What about the Other? Remember that the Other does not exist either in Lacanian psychoanalysis, but Arenas clearly saw that Cuba has a tangible existence, that it will eventually realize its own political freedom, a freedom that will mirror his own realized freedom. Here, we can use Viego’s second reinterpretation of the end-of-analysis, which has to do with the queer ethic, neatly summed up in the saying “Get over yourself.” Viego cites Michael Warner and his book *The Trouble with Normal* to highlight how acknowledging the ultimate nonexistence of the Other should be an occasion for everyone to have a meaningful social bond and be brought together. In being attuned to the collective abjection to which all people are subjected because of their dependence on language, one can express the queer saying as a small but nonetheless significant part of the Lacanian psychoanalytic process.²⁸ In regard to Arenas’ suicide note, the nonexistence of the Other, i.e., Cuba, gains another meaning, where the island’s value should be seen as inherently fractured and as such should not be possessed passionately. Cuba is, in other words, something to eventually “get over.”

Arenas’ notion of freedom and the end-of-analysis are not one and the same, however. Rather, this comparative analysis offers an analytical framework to understand as much as possible about what Arenas actually meant in his suicide note. In other words, my argument is just another, more viable signifying possibility. Lacan and Viego certainly did not see the end-of-analysis as absolute freedom. For Lacan, he did not regard psychoanalysis in its entirety as a form of therapy, where the subject is “cured” and becomes free in some sense. Psychoanalysis’ only function is to articulate the truth regarding the subject.²⁹ Viego extends the purpose of psychoanalysis by regarding it as a step toward a transformative politics of social justice, a politics that does not rely on the law’s limited and flawed conceptions of minorities as subjects unaffected by language.³⁰

28 Viego, *Dead Subjects*, 236–237.

29 Evans 153.

30 Viego, *Dead Subjects*, 104–105.



Likewise, Arenas did not conceptualize his own freedom in strictly Lacanian terms. The brevity of the suicide note's last sentence, "I already am [free]," precludes any lengthy and definitive explanation. In addition, Arenas was never exposed to the work of Lacan. These two observations lead me to conclude that Arenas was not using theory when he declared his freedom in his suicide note. This signifying possibility is only a framework for arriving at a close approximation of what Arenas meant and, emphasis added here, *felt* during the last moments of his life. An effective way to connect the meaning of Arenas' suicide note to Lacanian psychoanalysis is provided by Raymond Williams' concept of "structures of feeling," which are

concerned with meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt ... specifically affective elements of consciousness and relationships: not feeling against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought: practical consciousness of a present kind, in a living and interrelating continuity. We are then defining these elements as a "structure": as a set, with specific internal relations, at once interlocking and in tension. Yet we are also defining a social experience which is still *in process*, often indeed not yet recognized as social but taken to be private, idiosyncratic, and even isolating.³¹

The concept of structures of feeling enables me to assign a meaning to the suicide note that frames "thought as felt and feeling as thought." This is in contrast to Sánchez-Eppler's interpretation, which is framed only as "thought" or "theory," as he relies strictly on Arenas' writings about suicide as a form of return. Also, the concept of structures of feeling enables me to identify the content of Arenas' suicide note as an example of "a social experience which is still *in process*." That is to say, the brevity of his concluding sentence makes its meaning ambiguous and only fully accessible by its author. Even when my interpretation and its reference to the Lacanian end-of-analysis are considered, the meaning of Arenas' suicide note and specifically his freedom are ultimately "private, idiosyncratic, and even isolating." Indeed, it is this aspect of Arenas' note that implicitly gives functionality to Sánchez-Eppler's term, "signifying possibility": Arenas' suicide note requires an exterior interpretation, which can only be a possibility, something never completely in sync with the freedom actively and privately felt by Arenas.

On the other hand, my signifying possibility offers an opportunity for political translation. Arenas' individual freedom can serve as a model with which to conceptualize the eventual freedom of the Cuban nation as a whole. Diana Fuss offers insights in this matter using a Lacanian framework. She argues that the fictional unity of identity, as divided in language, does not necessarily preclude one from engaging in social activism. She questions the commonly held assumption that in order to engage in political work, one first needs to envision at least a stable set of *political* identities, free from "psychic conflict and internal disorder."³² For Fuss, this kind of politics is ultimately ineffective and fractured. This insight, Fuss notes, even goes over the heads of post-structuralist feminists, the specific subjects of her writing.³³ Certainly, Arenas' successful acceptance of his "psychic conflict and internal disorder" can be achieved in some meaningful way by the people of Cuba as a whole. This collective act would involve accepting the true nature of the subject and embracing individuality as inherently fractured

31 Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1977) 132.

32 Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1989).

33 Fuss 103–105.



and divided. Being closer to the truth, a more mature and effective type of activism can be envisioned and practiced, which can lead to a more nuanced and grounded form of freedom.

This kind of freedom is similar to Viego's aforementioned "transformative" form of social justice. Viego criticizes the dominant goal of current ethnic-racialized discourse in the United States, where activist efforts are centered strictly on material and political redress. Current ethnic-racialized discourse assumes that the ethnic-racialized subject can and should be made whole and complete. As we have just seen, the subject is inherently divided by language and as such cannot possibly be made whole and complete. Relying on the conceptualization of the subject as the ego, a false formation whereby the individual is immune from the divisive effects of language, actually empowers racist practice. It keeps intact the mechanism that allows discrimination to operate in the first place: having identifiable and calculable egos, i.e., dead subjects, to control and oppress.³⁴ In other words, if the analytical framework employed by *Queer Diasporas* and Sánchez-Eppler were to be re-used, Arenas' achieved freedom and its acceptance of the irredeemably fragmented subject become the metaphorical destination point to which the Cuban nation should travel. At this destination point, every Cuban citizen arrives at the true knowledge of the subject and as a result no longer becomes a dead subject, a knowable and entirely controllable entity. When this insight is applied to all aspects of the Cuban people, not just their nationality, they can be closer to being truly free from all forms of oppression.

My pairing of Reinaldo Arenas' Cuban queerness with Lacanian theory touches upon another manifestation of intersectionality present in *Dead Subjects*. Viego sees the complementary interactions of Latino studies and Lacanian theory being embodied in the crossing of the Latino subject and Lacan's "barred subject," a term the psychoanalyst used to describe the subject as irredeemably divided in language. The complex intersectional Latino-barred subject allows the reader to imagine a "psychoanalytic-historical-materialist reading practice" that accounts for all the losses to the minority subject, including material, political, and subjective losses due to language.³⁵ Certainly, the content of Arenas' suicide note was attuned to all of these types of losses, where freedom for the Cuban people, which involves achieving a collective informal type of end-of-analysis, must also address the political figure responsible for its current social state: Fidel Castro. As such, Arenas, as the author of the note, is a veritable example of the Latino-barred subject.

At this point, it is important to look more closely at Arenas' position on the state of the Cuban people, and queers specifically, under Fidel Castro, whom he blames in his suicide note. Lourdes Arguelles and B. Ruby Rich make an opposing and more nuanced argument, stating that not all Cuban queers shared Reinaldo Arenas' anticommunist and anti-Castro view. Many queers were indeed in the Mariel exodus, a mass migration of Cubans into the United States in the spring of 1980 through the port of Mariel. Nonetheless, Arguelles and Rich observe that some queers in the Mariel exodus left Cuba for reasons not tied to state repression, such as for better career mobility in the U.S. or for adventure. Moreover, many homosexuals, gay men and lesbians, deliberately chose to stay in revolutionary Cuba because they felt the political environment ultimately benefited them: "Their lives had been constantly

34 Viego, *Dead Subjects*, 100, 226–227.

35 Viego, *Dead Subjects*, 6, 137.



improving. The revolution might not yet speak to the homosexual in them, but it continued to address other vital aspects of their being. They, in response, put the revolution—and Cuba—first, and put off sexual politics until later.”^{36, 37}

The positive status of a substantial number of Cuban queers, unlike that of Reinaldo Arenas, attests to the country’s contradictory relationship to the issue of homosexuality during this time period. Arguelles and Rich observed that in the late 1960s Cuba began to follow other communist countries by enacting more progressive policies toward homosexuality. One of the more pertinent manifestations of this trend in Cuba occurred in 1971.

The First National Congress [on Education and Culture] delivered a mixed message to gays and the population at large. On the one hand, the customary denunciations of homosexuals as decadent were gone; homosexuality was no longer seen by the revolutionary leadership as a fundamental problem in Cuban society, but, rather, viewed as a form of sexual behavior requiring study. And for the first time in an official document, homosexuality was referred to in medical and psychological rather than criminal terms. On the other hand, declarations from the same congress called for the removal of homosexuals from the field of education, thus continuing the view of homosexuality as a contamination of the body politic. Mayra, a lesbian photographer still living in Cuba, described these years: “You were not totally accepted by the revolution and there were positions you could not get if you were open about [being gay] unless you were in the arts. Still ... there was no persecution unless you were involved in counterrevolutionary activities. Then you were in trouble, and usually it was blamed on the weakness of being a homosexual.”³⁸

It is most likely, then, that Reinaldo Arenas was persecuted in Cuba due to his writings’ counterrevolutionary tone. Recall that he had denounced Cuba’s “increasingly Stalinized socialist order” and its homophobia altogether in the 1960s, inflecting his writing with a form of counterrevolutionary homoeroticism before the country’s move toward more tolerance. Moreover, the novelist battled the state’s publication restrictions and maintained his uncompromising position well before his expatriation to the

36 Lourdes Arguelles and B. Ruby Rich, “Homosexuality, Homophobia, and Revolution: Notes Toward an Understanding of the Cuban Lesbian and Gay Male Experience,” *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past*, edited by Martin Bauml Duberman, Martha Vicinus, and George Chauncey, Jr. (New York, NY: New American Library, 1989) 451.

37 Conducted between 1979 and 1984, Arguelles and Rich’s study was charged with Cold War politics. It had a wider and more politicized aim of countering the anti-Castro and antisocialist sentiment dominant within North American gay academic and artistic circles and even some parts of the Left, which regarded the mass migrations of Cuban queers into the United States, including the Mariel exodus, as proof of Cuba’s institutionalized homophobia. They write, “Such reductive interpretation is consistent with the acritical nature of bourgeois thought and its well-known tendency to simplify motivations and homogenize differences among ‘lesser mortals’: Third World peoples, ethnic minorities, the working class, and particularly the gay and female segments within them” (p. 442). The study was also designed to expose the CIA’s role in counterrevolutionary efforts. For instance, the CIA attempted to stimulate migration among Cuban queers through propaganda campaigns, offers of academic grants and publishing deals for the intelligentsia, and blackmail, and it organized an assassination plot against Fidel Castro using a former revolutionary soldier and gay student leader, Rolando Cubela (pp. 447, 451).

38 Arguelles and Rich 449.



United States in 1980. The order of the charges against him seem to adhere to the state's logic regarding homosexuality. First, he was charged with being involved in "counterrevolutionary activities," specifically "ideological diversionism" with reference to his literary work. Then the other charges—"public scandal" and "corruption of minors," which referenced his homosexuality—followed, as if only secondary in importance, a simple manifestation of blame. Thus, it would be wrong to say that Reinaldo Arenas was forced out of Cuba simply because he was gay. Rather, the consistent counterrevolutionary tone of his writings made him a target of brutal government persecution. Truly, for Arenas, up until the very end, to "put off sexual politics until later" was simply not an option.³⁹

As a whole, my essay is a much-needed engagement of Lacanian theory with queer of color studies. Viego notes in *Dead Subjects* that Emma Pérez is one of the few theorists to infuse Latino studies with Lacanian theory.⁴⁰ Pérez, as a lesbian Chicana, is the only one who has successfully laced Lacanian theory with queer of color commentary. In the novella *Gulf Dreams*, an unnamed Chicana lesbian narrator falls in love with another unnamed Chicana during the Chicano movement of the 1960s and the Vietnam War. Viego argues that *Gulf Dreams* is laden with meanings that cannot be analyzed strictly through materialist and political frameworks: from the narrator's adamant opposition to the Chicano movement and its underlying heterosexism, to aspects of her romance with her unnamed Chicana lover, i.e., her conceptualization of their primal connection, to her failed attempt to end her affection for her partner. Meaningfully understanding queer Chicana subjectivity thus becomes dependent on seriously engaging with important terms related to Lacanian psychoanalysis.⁴¹

The Lacanian psychoanalysis present in Pérez's queer novella is not visible in Soto's book, even though she cites *Dead Subjects*. In the introduction, Soto describes her project of articulating the subjectivity of queer "chican@s": "In embracing de-mastery over certainty, I want to resist what the Lacanian theorist Antonio Viego describes as a 'reductive and ego amplifying narrative of Latino and Chicano subjectivity.'" Her form of subjectivity does not fit a simple narrative of "certainty, mastery, and wholeness," terms she also borrows from Viego.⁴² For Soto, de-mastery aims to do away with identifying and analyzing difference as if it were a naturally occurring and stable element. Through de-mastery, she resists the naturalization of queer Chican@ difference in the very attempt to undo the oppression experienced by bearers of that difference. Her approach is not just another version of "hybridity" or "intersectionality," frameworks that attempt to describe and analyze difference by

39 As counterrevolutionary as his writings were, Arenas in *Before Night Falls* keenly observed a paradoxical aspect of Cuba's use of concentration camps. Police officers, disguised and apparently willing, lured homosexuals and arrested them, which only served to increase homosexual activity at the sites. Sánchez-Eppler writes, "With this, Arenas destabilizes the certainties in all the projections of Cuban masculinity. In doing so, he opens up in the sinews of the national identity the possibility—the definitive suspicion even—that this obsessive masculinist society shows structural evidence of rampant homosexuality, which at some point the nation is going to have to acknowledge, repatriate, and naturalize as its own" (p. 174).

40 Viego, *Dead Subjects*, 165.

41 Viego, *Dead Subjects*, 179, 189, 191. The relevant terms here, the complex meanings of which are beyond the scope of this article, are, respectively, the Lacanian Real, symbolic castration, and, concerning the unnamed Chicana narrator's release of her affection, symptom and sinthome.

42 Soto 2.



having an “indelible dependence on what can only be a fantasy of a normative center inhabited by homogenous, static, racially pure, stagnant, uninteresting and simple sovereign subjects.”⁴³ However, Lacanian psychoanalysis, which Viego uses to critique “certainty, mastery, and wholeness,” is absent in the introduction, nor is it mentioned at all in Soto’s fourth chapter, “Américo Paredes and the De-Mastery of Desire,” which supposedly employs his insights.

In this chapter, Soto analyzes two of Américo Paredes’ works, the short story “Over the Waves Is Out,” and the novel *George Washington Gómez: A Mexicotexan Novel*. Widely considered by diverse admirers as the “Don” of Chicano literature, Paredes first cemented his foundational status through a 1958 work, *With His Pistol in His Hand*. The interdisciplinary and complex manner in which the work studies and analyzes the *corrido* art form, the Anglo/Tejano border conflict, and the heroism and life of the “Border Mexican” was groundbreaking.⁴⁴ For Soto then, her analysis of the two pieces aims to contribute to the academic knowledge surrounding the revered Mexican writer by producing queer readings of his works through the use of “de-mastery.”

Soto reinterprets Paredes’ short story by arguing that there is a hidden queer dynamic between an unnamed father town deputy and an unnamed son in a setting near the U.S.-Mexico border. This dynamic revolves around mysterious piano music heard and enjoyed by the son in the night in the father’s pianoless household. The father learns of his son’s unusual experiences and reprimands him. Despite his father’s discouragement, the son continues to hear and enjoy the piano music night after night, only to have it abruptly end with a gunshot near the house. Subsequently, the father and son learn the true source of the music, a radio located inside a nearby bakery destroyed by an exasperated *acordeonista*. The boy then loses interest in piano music in general. Even when his father offers a player piano, the boy’s interest is not piqued because the instrument would only produce a “copy” of the musical form. The boy’s artistic interest is seemingly defeated when he discerns that the music he heard was mechanically reproduced from a “box” rather than stemming from some transcendental and therefore purer source.⁴⁵

Soto carefully analyzes Paredes’ descriptions of the boy’s nighttime enjoyment of the piano music. Quoting the various and sometimes long descriptions verbatim,⁴⁶ she regards “the boy’s nighttime musical experiences as (thinly veiled) descriptions of masturbation.”⁴⁷ The ecstatically experienced piano music and the boy’s nighttime masturbation are one and the same, thus giving rise to the concept of the boy’s “piano/body.” The boy’s piano/body is eroticized by the sounds produced by the instrument, and as a result it is able to connect with, and not be in opposition to, the physical source of the music heard, the bakery radio, even as the radio is shot and destroyed. The nighttime experiences have an understated yet ephemeral existence of their own. Thus, Soto “de-masters” the boy’s pre-pubescent desire for piano music by recognizing it as valid and extraordinary, and not interpreting the subsequent waning of the boy’s interest as both the end of the intergenerational conflict between the boy and his

43 Soto 3.

44 Soto 89–90.

45 Soto 108–109.

46 Soto 106–108.

47 Soto 111.



father and, according to author Ramón Saldívar's view, the consolidation of "male solidarity." The de-mastery of the boy's desire, therefore, allows Soto to state that Paredes' short story is truly "one of the richest and queerest Chicano feminist stories ever published."⁴⁸

Even though Soto uses "de-mastery" to unveil a queer interpretation of Paredes' short story, she did not analyze the subjects of the work using Lacanian psychoanalysis at all, in the same manner that Viego did in *Dead Subjects*. De-mastery requires that the subject, in this case the boy, be analyzed as irredeemably divided by language, thereby debunking the myths of "wholeness, completeness, and transparency."⁴⁹ Therefore, Soto's use of the critical tool "de-mastery" and Viego's book *Dead Subjects* in general are out of context in her analysis of Chican@ queer subjectivity and literature.

When Soto moves on to analyze the second piece of Paredes' writing, *George Washington Gómez*, written in the 1930s and published in 1990, her misuse of "de-mastery" and misunderstanding of Viego are simply absent. That is to say, she loses focus in her analysis and relies on more conventional terminology in order to appreciate the queerness of the text as a whole. First, Soto situates her study of the novel as a "fresh approach" to Paredes, one that proves the pre-existence of antiheteronormative interpretations of Chican@ sexuality and gender prior to the 1990s.⁵⁰ Soto justifies this viewpoint by carefully analyzing the privileged status of the protagonist, George Washington Gómez, or Guálinto, in relation to his older sisters Maruca and Carmen. Soto does not follow the usual focus on the protagonist and his racial socialization in the Lower Rio Grande Valley during the Anglo-Texan/*tejano* conflict in the first half of the twentieth century. Throughout the novel, Gómez is in a "tug-of-war" between the racist institutions of his time, including the prevalent educational institutions, and the counteracting *tejano* social forces, which aim to "preserve *tejano/mexicano* cultural systems" and mold Gómez into an effective "leader of his people."⁵¹ Rather, Soto enriches this focus by bringing attention to Guálinto's socialization within the context of his sisters' marginalization.

The first example of this socialization is when family members meet to name the baby (Guálinto). So much investment and hope go into this process precisely because of his privileged gender. He is given the name George Washington after the "great North American," as a reference to his future as a great man and leader. The name Guálinto came from the mispronunciation of the official name given by his grandmother. The clear importance of this process and of Guálinto in general, contrasts sharply with his family's treatment of his older sisters Maruca and Carmen. The two sisters interrupt the family meeting by having a physical fight, and their father, Gumersindo, reprimands them: "Hush, both of you ... You should be asleep." Until this point in the novel, Maruca and Carmen are not present, and when they finally are, their position is clear: They are silenced and relegated to the periphery.⁵²

A more powerful example of Guálinto's privilege occurs years later, when Carmen is expected to unquestioningly drop out of high school to take care of their mother. Carmen is known to highly value

48 Soto 110–111.

49 Viego, *Dead Subjects*, 227.

50 Soto 89.

51 Soto 113–114.

52 Soto 118–119.



education, making the assumption that she is the one who should drop out even more significant. Soto appreciates Paredes' nuanced treatment of this development, as seen in how she analyzes Carmen's interaction with Guálinto following the family's agreement. As the novel describes, "Carmen looked as if she was going to cry. But she just swallowed hard and nodded. Suddenly she planted a kiss on Guálinto's forehead and turned towards the stove." Soto states that Guálinto, as a man, was exonerated from familial guilt by his sister's comforting kiss, and subsequently Carmen's inferior position as a woman in the household is wholeheartedly accepted by her turn "towards the stove," a physical fixture of the home traditionally assigned to women. Such examples of Maruca and Carmen's unequal socialization contribute to Guálinto's status as an "antihero" that develops by the end of the novel. This dynamic, according to Soto, comprises "an indelibly feminist move" by Paredes.⁵³

In Soto's analysis of this story, de-mastery is nowhere to be found. There is no desire that needs to be "de-mastered," unlike in Paredes' short story "Over the Waves Is Out," which she first analyzed. She uses conventional phrases like "antiheteronormative interpretations" and "feminist move" to describe her more nuanced interpretation of Paredes' novel. As such, this second part of her analysis does not belong in the chapter, which is titled, "Américo Paredes and the De-Mastery of Desire."

Even Viego himself has not used Lacanian theory to shed light on his own identity as a queer male Latino. *Dead Subjects* uses the academic work of white European queers such as Tim Dean and Lee Edelman but primarily focuses on issues of ethnic-racial subjectivity, and in the case of his analysis of Emma Pérez's novella, *Gulf Dreams*, only Chicana lesbian identity.⁵⁴ He has only engaged Latino male queerness in his 1999 essay "The Place of Gay Male Chicano Literature in Queer Chicana/o Cultural Work," in which he critically positions the artistic representation of gay male Latinos against the insights of Chicana queer theory. Viego maintains that these two bodies of work cannot and should not be conflated, as they present different problematics and therefore require separate analyses.⁵⁵ Viego's adamant distinction between queer male Chicano literature and Chicana queer theory begs the question of why he has not applied Lacanian theory toward his own identity.

Why have so few queers of color engaged with Lacanian theory? An earnest reluctance seems to be at play, one that Antonio Viego recognized specifically among critical race theorists in *Dead Subjects*. Lacanian theory's treatment of the subject can apparently be "ahistorical, apolitical, universalizing, and antihumanist," characteristics that are incompatible with the objectives of critical race theorists. The work of these academics necessitates a subject that is at least functional and intact.⁵⁶ Viego's commentary is interesting here considering that, once again, he does not pair Lacanian psychoanalysis with commentary concerning queer men of color such as himself elsewhere. There may be more than one reason, then, why the academic literature on queer of color Lacanian commentary is only developing now.

53 Soto 119–120.

54 Viego, *Dead Subjects*, 154, 189.

55 Antonio Viego, "The Place of Gay Male Chicano Literature in Queer Chicana/o Cultural Work," *Latina/o Discourses in Academe* 12.3 (1999): 120–122.

56 Viego, *Dead Subjects*, 49.



In this sense, this essay works against the “vanilla” (to borrow a phrase from José Esteban Muñoz) in which queer engagement with Lacanian theory is immersed. The entire field of Lacanian theory is enriched and challenged by the increased presence of queers of color in the academic conversation, rather than the value of analysis being restricted to the interests of queers of color.⁵⁷ My reinterpretation of Reinaldo Arenas’ suicide note combats the “vanilla-ness” of queer Lacanian theory, highlighting the importance of Arenas’ Cuban nationality. My pairing of Arenas’ suicide note and Lacanian psychoanalysis in terms of a “structure of feeling” serves as an example of Marxist cultural theory, which aims to more accurately identify the term “culture” and how it operates in reality. According to Raymond Williams, “human cultural activity” has always been projected into the past, always regarded as a finished process. The explicit cultural forms identified using this analytical framework fail to account for the nuances contained in the lived process, in the very formation of the explicit content that supposedly exists as independent and whole products.⁵⁸ The revisionist aspect of Marxist cultural theory makes it especially relevant to literature, of which Arenas’ autobiography *Before Night Falls: A Memoir* and its concluding note are definitely a part.⁵⁹

In addition, my signifying possibility provides a challenge to Eve Sedgwick’s universalizing declaration that the closet is “the defining structure for gay oppression in this century.”⁶⁰ First, Sedgwick does not explicitly define the closet, but her definition of “closetedness” is instructive. Closetedness is the deliberately performed silence about one’s own homosexuality, with the intent of producing ignorance among the consciousness of people.⁶¹ With this definition, one can regard the closet as the spatial embodiment of this deliberate silence. One is “in” the closet when attempting to hide one’s homosexuality. The closet is an oppressive space only until the queer person decides to no longer publicly deny the existence of his or her sexuality, and through this process of affirmation come “out” of the closet.

My challenge to Sedgwick’s universalizing declaration is inspired by Gayatri Gopinath’s argument in *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures*. Analyzing Urdu writer Ismat Chughtai’s 1941 short story “The Quilt,” Gopinath redefines the contours of homoerotic desire of Indian lesbian women “through tropes of concealment and visibility, secrecy and disclosure.” Entirely jettisoning the closet as a framework with which to analyze Chughtai’s short story, Gopinath exposes the misleading element of Sedgwick’s universalizing statement in both Western and non-Western contexts. In the process, she works toward “a potentially generative site of alternative narratives and significations of female homoerotic desire.”⁶²

57 José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1999) 10–11.

58 Williams 128–129.

59 Williams 133.

60 Eve K. Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1990) 71.

61 Sedgwick 3–4.

62 Gayatri Gopinath, *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2005) 145.



In Arenas' case, the closet does not exist, only governmental repression. Arenas did not perform the deliberate yet oppressive act of feigning ignorance about his homosexuality in relation to Cuban communist society. Recall that his first book, *Celestino antes del alba* (*Singing from the Well*), which featured experiences of homosexuality inspired by his childhood, was positively recognized by the revolutionary government, receiving a national prize. The subsequent repression that Arenas experienced at the hands of the "increasingly Stalinized" social order was exterior and brutal. The Cuban communist government as a whole enacted policies against him that aimed to literally conceal and eradicate both Arenas' writings on counterrevolutionary homoeroticism and the queer novelist himself. Here, the oppression of homosexual identity comes not in the form of deliberate silence from Arenas, the queer person, but imposed censorship and bodily repression at the hands of an institutional entity, the Cuban communist government.

In addition, a second layer of oppression revealed in my analysis of Arenas' note involves Lacanian psychoanalysis, specifically Antonio Viego's interpretation of it. Recall how Viego extends the purpose of Lacanian psychoanalysis by regarding it as one step toward a transformative form of social justice, whereby minorities combat their oppression by arriving at the true knowledge of the irredeemably fragmented subject and as a result no longer become a dead subject, a knowable, entirely calculable entity. The challenge of successfully addressing and defeating this form of oppression is correctly applying the concept of the end-of-analysis and coordinating this with the other materialist and political factors influencing minority oppression, as exemplified in Arenas as the "Latino-barred subject."

Lastly, my reinterpretation of Arenas' suicide note counters the "vanilla-ness" of queer Lacanian theory by offering a real-life example of how to begin to conceptualize Diana Fuss' ideal form of collective politics, which embraces "psychic conflict and internal disorder." How exactly can we translate Arenas' individual, Lacanian-inspired notion of freedom, as successfully experienced by the writer moments before his suicide, into state freedom, which Cuba as a whole has yet to achieve? How would "freedom" be defined in this context? What kinds of goals and initiatives would government be striving toward? What economic and political systems would be necessary to produce this state freedom? These questions are made relevant in this essay, serving as points of departure for future studies of queer of color, Lacanian, and political theories. |



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