A Twice-Told Tail: Reinaldo Arenas's "El Cometa Halley"

JORGE OLIVARES

¡Cómo gozarías de vernos a mí y a mis hijas camino del lupanar!

Wouldn't you be thrilled to see me and my daughters on our way to the whorehouse!

—Federico García Lorca, *La casa de Bernarda Alba*

I BEGIN AT THE BEGINNING—WITH THE OPENING PARAGRAPH of Reinaldo Arenas's short story "El Cometa Halley":

> Aquella madrugada de verano de 1891 (sí, de 1891) en que Pepe el Romano huye con la virginidad de Adela, mas no con su cuerpo, todo parece haber terminado de una manera sumamente trágica para las cinco hijas de Bernarda Alba: Adela, la amante de Pepe, colgando de la viga de su cuarto de soltera, Angustias con sus cuarenta años de castidad intactos, y el resto de las hermanas, Magdalena, Amelia y Martirio, también condenadas a la soltería y al claustro. (83)

> Very late one night in the summer of 1891 (that's right, 1891), when Pepe el Romano runs away with Adela's virginity, leaving her behind, everything seems to have come to a most tragic end for Bernarda Alba's five daughters: Adela, Pepe's lover, hangs from a noose fastened to the ceiling of her maiden room; Angustias keeps intact her forty years of chastity; and the rest of the sisters, Magdalena, Amelia, and Martirio, are also condemned to spinsterhood or the convent. ("Halley's Comet" 74)[1]

This recapitulation of the ending of Federico García Lorca's *La casa de Bernarda Alba* is followed by the startling disclosure that things did not really happen that way. As we shall see, the Cuban's provocative revelation sets in motion what Gérard Genette would term a "corrective continuation" of the Spanish play (175, 192–95). Giving a humorous twist

JORGE OLIVARES is the Allen Family Professor of Latin American Literature at Colby College. This essay is part of a book in progress entitled *Arenas of Desire: Family, Nation, and Sexuality in Reinaldo Arenas*. Olivares's work on Arenas has appeared in *Hispanic Review*, *MLN*, and *Nueva revista de filología hispánica*.

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to García Lorca's tragic ending, Arenas's revised and expanded version of the history of the Alba women begins by describing how the four older sisters disobey their mother, take Adela down, and slap her back to life. This defiant act culminates in the women's escape to Cuba.

After this opening account of the daughters' transatlantic emancipation from their tyrannical mother, the narrator fast-forwards almost two decades to tell us about their participation in the frenzy generated by the return of Halley's comet in 1910.[2] Although convinced, like most people, that the world is going to end when Earth passes through the comet's poisonous tail, the sisters do not join others in prayer for the salvation of their souls. Instead, incited by the sexually liberated Adela, who comes from Havana to die with her older sisters, the Alba women participate in a communal orgy on the streets of Cárdenas, the provincial city to which the four older siblings had moved. To everyone's surprise, the comet comes and goes, leaving the world, but not the sisters, intact. Commemorating their transformation and flaunting their liberation, Angustias, Magdalena, Amelia, and Martirio—in a joint effort with Adela—turn their house into a popular whorehouse, aptly naming it El Cometa Halley. And as the narrator not unexpectedly tells us in the last line of the story, parodying the ending of García Lorca's play, "ninguna de ellas murió virgen" 'none of them died a virgin' (107; 82).

This summation makes clear that the return of Halley's comet expands the Alba sisters' horizon of experiences: sex and its pleasures, which had been barred from the maternal house in Spain, are freely welcomed into the sororal house of sexual pleasure. Insofar as Arenas's tale is a tail of sorts, a textual extension appended to the Spanish play, the comet's tail can be regarded as an emblem of Arenas's prolongation of the history of García Lorca's women. In the first part of this essay, I dovetail Arenas's and García Lorca's tales in an attempt to unpack the Alba sisters' liberating voyage to Havana, a voyage that concludes, like Ismael's in Arenas's novel *Viaje a La Habana* 'Voyage to Havana,' with the joyful—and, in this case, humorous—release of the characters' repressed sexual desires.[3] In the second part, I enlarge on the reading of "El Cometa Halley" by situating the story in the mother-son dynamic that figures prominently in Arenas's life and oeuvre.

The Fiery Return of the Alba Sisters

In the last scene of *La casa de Bernarda Alba*, on discovering Adela's hanging body, the servant La Poncia puts her hands around her neck and laments, "¡Nunca tengamos ese fin!" 'May we never have that ending!' (199). Bernarda immediately commands everyone not to cry and, referring to Adela, declares: "Ella, la hija menor de Bernarda Alba, ha muerto virgen. ¿Me habéis oído? ¡Silencio, silencio he dicho! ¡Silencio!" 'She, the youngest daughter of Bernarda Alba, died a virgin. Did you hear me? Quiet, quiet, I said. Quiet!' (199; *House* 172). With these famous last words, the controlled and controlling Bernarda, in the female sphere of the home, attempts to assert maternal control over her daughters by proclaiming multiple expressive orifices closed. Gaping bodies, as represented by the women's clamoring mouths and Adela's penetrated vagina, have no place in Bernarda's hermetic house. Silence, finality, closure: that is what Bernarda wants but not what she gets—or so claims Arenas. According to the Cuban's narrative, García Lorca did not complete his story, leaving it "trunca y confusa" 'unfinished and unclear' ("Cometa" 83; "Halley's Comet" 74), because he was killed by Adela's lover, after whom García Lorca had gone in hot pursuit while the events in the Alba household were still unfolding. Although García Lorca is unsuccessful in his quest to be possessed by Pepe, he is successful in having his textual body possessed by Arenas, who gladly fills its gaps, thus fulfilling La Poncia's wish for a different ending.

That the servant enables Arenas's appropriation of García Lorca's text is revealed in the story's epigraph, which is taken from *La casa de*

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Bernarda Alba: "Nadie puede conocer su fin" 'No one knows how one's life will end' ("Cometa" 83). Repeating La Poncia's warning to Bernarda about the uncertain future of the Alba women, Arenas has García Lorca obliquely authorize the continuation of the play. Beginning with a paratextual commentary about the unpredictability of endings, "El Cometa Halley" proceeds to narrate the death of the original author (García Lorca) and set the stage for the birth of his reader, our author (Arenas). By collapsing the distinction between life and fiction, the Cuban's textual performance dramatizes negotiations among author, text, and reader. Placing García Lorca in the same fictive space as his literary creations, Arenas not only has the author die at the hands of one of his characters but also calls attention to the need for an active reader to resume the writing of García Lorca's text by filling in the gaps left by the dead author. An allegory of reading, Arenas's writing of "El Cometa Halley" offers a potential ending to García Lorca's indeterminate text.

But there is more to Arenas's playful story. Deposing a canonical dramatic work, Arenas foregrounds the Alba daughters' ascent to power as they dislodge their domestically empowered mother. In other words, performing a dethronement at the level of discourse and at the level of the story, "El Cometa Halley" imaginatively displaces a tightly rule-governed play to tell, in a less restrictive literary genre, the story of the displacement of Bernarda's maternal authority. Through its emphasis on hyperbolic liberation and reversal, "El Cometa Halley" embraces a festive spirit that can be assimilated to the excessive, hybrid, topsy-turvy world of carnival. Adela's hanging body marks the end of García Lorca's play and the beginning of Arenas's story. In *La casa de Bernarda Alba*, Adela's suspended state is seen as a tragic death, as a finality; in "El Cometa Halley," it is humorously seen for what it literally is: a suspension—not a termination of life but a transitory condition that leads to the animation of the lifeless Adela and the transformation of her resuscitating sisters into unlikely subversives. Besides initiating the Alba women's rebellion against Bernarda, this playfully bizarre opening scene, in which the slapping, screaming, and reproaching older sisters lower Adela's body, also sets in motion—and is emblematic of—the story's carnival logic and spirit: the systematic lowering of all that is held high.[4]

Refusing to live any longer under "la égida de aquella vieja terrible" 'the fearsome old woman's iron hand' and coming together in their desire to bring about "la caída de Bernarda Alba" 'Bernarda Alba's fall from power' ("Cometa" 84; "Halley's Comet" 74–75), the five sisters disregard their mother's threats, jump out the window, escape through the stables, cross the Sierra Morena, and end up in the port city of Cádiz, where they book passage on a ship to Havana.[5] The Alba women's liberation traces a topographical trajectory, literal and metaphoric, that conforms to the story's carnivalesque thrust. If geographically the sisters' escape from their mother country follows a downward movement in Andalusia (from Córdoba through Seville to Cádiz), a corresponding vertical and horizontal displacement is suggested in their escape from their mother's house. Once Adela has been brought down, the sisters move away from the door, which is guarded by their mother, and let themselves out through a rear window that leads to the stables, through which they have to pass to evacuate Bernarda's property. Taking into account the traditional association between the house and the human body and considering that the daughters' exit from their mother's house entails a descending backward movement, one can argue that the women's escape represents a voiding of the body. This symbolic economy, which allows us to see the Alba sisters' evacuation in physiological terms, can be read in the context of Mary Douglas's discussion of filth as "matter out of place" (40). Extricating their bodies from Bernarda's control by discharging themselves outside her house, the Alba sisters deliberately

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take themselves out of the ordered place in which family and culture had situated them. As a result, they become the embodiment not only of what Natalie Zemon Davis calls "female disorderliness—the female out of her place" (129) but also of symbolic impurity. More precisely, no longer in their mother's house, no longer in their place, the sisters are transformed into figurative excremental matter. Their self-expelled bodies and their movement toward and through the scatological spaces of Bernarda's stables mark the women's transgressiveness, their disrespectful departure from—and the degradation of—Bernarda's immaculate house. This initial scene in Spain introduces, then, a process of carnivalesque inversion, debasement, and defilement that will culminate two decades later in the sisters' own "stable," the house of prostitution that they will make famous in Cárdenas.

If by going to Cuba in 1891 the five Alba women distance themselves from their mother, achieving a geographic separation that allows them to seek sexual pleasure, the four older ones, who repeatedly fail to attract men in their first few months in Cuba, soon succumb once again to the emotional and ideological hold that Bernarda has over them. Their transitory liberation comes to an end when they have to confront Adela's parturition, since Pepe has left their youngest sister with child. Adela's uninhibited sexuality, which is visually marked first by pregnancy and subsequently by a child whose paternity is claimed by twenty-five men of different races, offers a public spectacle of desires that her sisters now disavow. The older sisters' reaction to Adela, which grows out of fascination and aversion, follows the logic of abjection.[6] They expel the unruly sister out of their lives in an attempt to reestablish boundaries; in other words, they aim to restore order in the Alba household by closing themselves to the threat of the abject other. To this differentiating end, they kidnap their nephew (who is christened José de Alba), move away from Havana, and settle in Cárdenas in an impenetrable and conventlike house, where Adela's name is never mentioned and where her son is spoken of as the nephew whom they brought home after his mother's death in childbirth. Angustias, Magdalena, Amelia, and Martirio, by abjecting their youngest sister, come to embody their mother's authority, reincorporating into the text the temporarily suspended oppressive maternal order. Known in Cárdenas as "las monjas españolas" 'the Spanish nuns' (88; 76), the four older Alba women devote their lives to the church and to the care of their nephew. Living in a house with "cortinas oscuras" 'dark curtains' (87; 76) and always dressed in black, the four sisters "se prometieron dejar de ser mujer" 'promised themselves to stop being women' (87), thus containing their sexuality. At the same time, they control the sexuality of their nephew, who is also always dressed in black and who is allowed to leave the house only to peddle the artificial flowers and knitted goods made by his aunts.

The Alba house in Cárdenas becomes an asexual space policed by ever-vigilant maternal eyes. The sisters not only re-create the house of Bernarda Alba but also subject their nephew to the same life of repression that their mother forced on them. They live in abnegation for two decades until the day when Halley's comet and Adela return. On that day, the youngest of the five Alba sisters suddenly returns from the dead, resurrected, as it were, just as she had been when her sisters slapped her back to life. Adela's return, paralleling the comet's, constitutes an imminent danger to the older sisters' lives; specifically, she threatens their sexually repressed existence. But unlike the comet, which does not cause the anticipated "conflagración universal" 'universal conflagration' (93; 78), Adela brings her sisters' world to an end with a metaphoric conflagration of sexual desire.

If at first Angustias, Magdalena, Amelia, and Martirio refuse to respond to Adela's loud and persistent knocking when she appears at their house, they eventually open the door. What they see is as menacing to them as the comet: Adela has arrived dressed in a magnificent evening gown,

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accessorized with a mantilla, white gloves, suede boots, and a fan of peacock feathers. The sisters' reaction is not difficult to guess: they step back in horror as Adela theatrically enters the house, "contoneándose a la vez que le hacía una señal al cochero para que bajase el equipaje, un monumental baúl con excelentes vinos, copas de Baccarat, un gramófono y un óleo que era una reproducción ampliada del retrato de Pepe el Romano" 'swaying her hips and gesturing to the coachman to bring down her luggage, a monumental trunk full of excellent wines, Baccarat glasses, a gramophone, and an oil painting that was an enlarged portrait of Pepe el Romano' (96; 79).

Dressed in colorful attire that her mother forbade, attire that makes her stand out—like the comet—in the darkness of the evening, the transgressive Adela frightens her sisters and not only because of her appearance (in the sense of both her unexpected visit and her extravagant dress). In her "monumental baúl" 'monumental trunk' she carries emblems of forbidden desires that for years have been kept locked in the older women's psyches. Adela's narrative portrait, which is strategically placed in the middle of the story and which is rendered visually by Adela's appearing in the frame of her sisters' front door, significantly ends with the mention of another portrait—Pepe el Romano's. A portrait within a portrait, Pepe's "enorme" 'enormous' likeness is not only sexually allusive (104; 81), because of its magnitude and its insertion in (the portrait of) Adela and her trunk, but textually emblematic as well. The *reproducción ampliada* of Pepe's portrait remands the reader to the narrative in which it is inscribed. For Arenas's story, having been written in intertextual dialogue with—and as an augmentation of—*La casa de Bernarda Alba*, is, like its pictorial metonym, a provocative *reproducción ampliada* of an existing text. Throughout Arenas's story, Pepe and the cosmic tail (and tale) are linked, as the body in the portrait is figuratively constructed as a mirroring image of the distinctive attribute of the story's heavenly body. Like Halley's comet, Pepe has returned after a long absence and commands a "tail" that the Alba women find terrifying and irresistible. Thus, in an amplified tale, with Pepe's amplified portrait as the sisters'—and the text's—guiding light, Bernarda's daughters amplify their minds and bodies.

García Lorca critics have pointed out that, although Pepe sets the action of *La casa de Bernarda Alba* in motion, he never appears onstage (Gabriele 388; Urrea 51). He is present only allusively through the women's discourse and through a picture of him that the jealous Martirio steals from Angustias in the second act, claiming later to have done so as a "broma" 'joke' (166, 169, 182; 150, 152, 160). It is in the context of the search for Pepe's missing picture that La Poncia warns Bernarda that "aquí pasa una cosa muy grande" 'something big is going on here' (*Casa* 169). Perhaps inspired by this scene in García Lorca's play and particularly by La Poncia's reaction, Arenas literally writes into his parody—his *broma*—"una cosa muy grande," Pepe's enormous portrait, in the presence of which other big things happen. Once inside the house, Adela executes her first act of possession in her sisters' inviolate space by hanging Pepe's portrait on one of the walls of their living room. In full view, the "espléndido lienzo" 'splendid canvas' immediately and simultaneously captivates Angustias, Magdalena, Amelia, and Martirio: "Ante la vista de aquella imagen las hermanas Alba quedaron súbitamente transformadas" 'At the sight of his image the Alba sisters were suddenly transformed' ("Cometa" 98; "Halley's Comet" 79). The women's once-impenetrable house and bodies succumb to a relentless and promiscuous sexuality. For Adela, convinced that the world is about to end, turns the Alba house into a carnival stage with its full range of liberating potential: the doors are flung open and a constellation of transgressive desires let in.

The devout Alba women initially heed the admonition of the local priest, who warns them that God, angered by humanity's impiety and excess, is behind the comet's imminent destruc-

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tion of the world. But in a carnivalesque shift from the spiritual to the material, Adela preaches to her sisters a religion of the flesh. Although agreeing with the priest that the comet is a "castigo" 'punishment' (102; 81), an inebriated Adela offers an alternative and subversive explanation:

> Pero no por lo que hemos hecho, sino por lo que hemos dejado de hacer. [. . .] Aún hay tiempo, no de salvar nuestras vidas, pero sí de ganarnos el cielo. ¿Y cómo se gana el cielo? [. . .] ¿Con odio o con amor? ¿Con abstinencia o con placer? ¿Con sinceridad o con hipocresía? [. . .] ¡Nos quedan dos horas! [. . .] Entremos en la casa y que nuestros últimos minutos sean de verdadera comunión amorosa.
>
> Not for what we did, but for what we did not do. [. . .] We still have time, not to save our lives but to gain admission to heaven. And how does one get to heaven? [. . .] With hate or with love? Through abstinence or through pleasure? With sincerity or with hypocrisy? [. . .] We only have two hours left! [. . .] Let's go inside the house and pass our last minutes in loving communion.

During her blasphemous speech, a carnivalesque inversion of the priest's sermon, Adela is helped from falling by José, who "ya se había transfigurado en la viva estampa de Pepe el Romano" 'had been transformed into the sheer image of Pepe el Romano' (102; 81). The painting, already an object of the transgressive female gaze, now comes to life in the person of the son, whom Adela passionately kisses on the mouth, a prelude to their orgiastic sexual encounter. She then puts on a record of "Fumando espero," further stimulating the women's sexual appetite with the seductive lyrics of the phallically suggestive *cuplé*. Literally intoxicated with Adela's wine and figuratively with her words, music, and example, the Alba women make love under Pepe's enlarged portrait. Crossing various normative boundaries, the women's revelry with the young José and Adela's black coachman ignites same-sex, cross-sex, cross-class, cross-race, cross-generational, orgiastic, and incestuous desires. Like Angel Facio in his 1972 staging of *La casa de Bernarda Alba* (Facio 15), Arenas makes explicit, for instance, the implicit lesbianism of García Lorca's Adela and Martirio; and he alludes at the end of the story to a threesome formed by these two sisters and José. By allowing his characters to express their repressed heterosexual and homosexual desires, Arenas not only outs García Lorca's play but also opens up the story in multiple ways. In moving the action from Spain to Cuba, Arenas simultaneously shifts the center of gravity from mother-daughter and sister-sister relationships to sister-sister and mother-son relationships. While I would not want to minimize the importance of the homoerotic sisterly dynamic in the text, it is worth reflecting in more detail, as I do later in this essay, on the new element that Arenas adds to the story of the Alba women. With the resurrection of Adela and the addition of her son to the original cast of *La casa de Bernarda Alba*, Arenas privileges these two characters and directs the reader's attention to their incestuous desires. It should not surprise us that in an earlier draft of "El Cometa Halley" the mother-son incest motif is even more highlighted—as, for example, in a passage in which Adela urges her sisters to take their orgy outside and the narrator reveals that, while talking, she is being "poseída apasionadamente por su hijo" 'passionately possessed by her son.'[7]

Outside the Alba house, the sisters, José, and the coachman expand their promiscuous intermingling by merging with an unruly crowd of farm laborers—while Pepe's portrait still presides over their indiscriminate lovemaking. Just minutes before the comet positions itself at the center of the celestial vault, Adela and Martirio retrieve Pepe's image from the house, take it outdoors, and place it looking up toward the sky as if mirroring the heavenly bodies above. If Pepe and the comet are spatially associated in this scene, they are literally and discursively connected in the next. At the level of plot they share the same fate: both ultimately fade with hardly any public notice. And the paragraph in which this narrative

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detail is revealed is tellingly symmetrical, as it begins with the comet's disappearance and ends with the disappearance of the portrait:

> Y lo ocupó [el centro del cielo]. Y siguió su trayectoria. Y desapareció por el horizonte. Y amaneció. Y al mediodía, cuando las hermanas Alba despertaron, se sorprendieron, no por estar en el infierno o en el paraíso, sino en medio de la calle mayor de Cárdenas completamente desnudas y abrazadas a varios campesinos, a un cochero y a José de Alba, cuya juventud, inmune a tantos combates, emergía una vez más por entre los cuerpos sudorosos. Lo único que había desaparecido era el retrato de Pepe el Romano, pero nadie le echó de menos. (105–06)
>
> And so it did [occupy the central position in the skies]. And then it continued on its trajectory. And it disappeared over the horizon. And the sun rose. And by noon, when the Alba sisters woke up, they were amazed to see themselves, not in hell or in paradise but in the middle of the main street in Cárdenas. Totally in the buff, the sisters were still embracing several farm laborers, a coachman, and José de Alba, whose youthfulness, despite his many sexual encounters, emerged once more from the sweaty bodies. The only thing that had disappeared in the confusion was the portrait of Pepe el Romano, though nobody had noticed. (82)[8]

Like the comet, Pepe's portrait disappears by morning. Moreover, also like the comet, which leaves behind a trace in the name of the sisters' brothel, the portrait leaves a trace—or tail: young José's erection looming large over the naked and sweaty bodies of the liberated Alba women.

The Alba sisters' transformation is brought home in a revealing act of naming in the last scene of the story. As the women, exhausted from a night of promiscuous sex, enter their house, a triumphant Adela removes from the front door the old sign, "VILLALBA FLORES Y TEJIDOS" 'VILLALBA FLOWERS AND HANDMADE KNITS,' and that afternoon she replaces it with another, "EL COMETA HALLEY" 'HALLEY'S COMET' (106; 82). In a playfully perverse intertextual inspiration, Arenas has his characters turn their house into a whorehouse, making Bernarda's worst fears—as expressed to La Poncia and encapsulated in my epigraph—come to pass: "¡Cómo gozarías de vernos a mí y a mis hijas camino del lupanar!" 'Wouldn't you be thrilled to see me and my daughters on our way to the whorehouse!' (García Lorca, *Casa* 170). Having put a new face on their house and on themselves, the daughters yield to, while subverting, the spirit of their mother's command to achieve "buena fachada y armonía familiar" 'proper appearances and family harmony' (*Casa* 182; *House* 160).[9] Ironically, they fulfill their mother's wish, for Bernarda insists that one must always live by these words.

As in carnival, whose participants violate what are normally accepted as "impenetrable hierarchical barriers" (Bakhtin, *Problems* 123), Arenas's characters engage in incestuous, interracial, cross-generational, and class-crossing heteroerotic and homoerotic sex. True to the transgressive logic of carnival, "El Cometa Halley" places the enjoyment of diverse forms of sexualities above normative repressions and prohibitions, a celebration of the flesh made possible by the return of the sexually indocile Adela. The youngest sister's visit to Cárdenas connects the comet's elongated tail to Pepe's amplified portrait; in their textual dissemination and in line with Arenas's male-centered worldview, the comet's tail and Pepe's enormous portrait come to represent the male element that ultimately penetrates—and carnivalistically liberates—the Alba sisters and their repressed universe.

Arenas's work reveals little awareness of many issues raised by feminist scholars, among them the complexities of prostitution. Whether prostitution is an uncomplicated source of sexual pleasure and an empowering profession, as Arenas has it, or a quintessential symbol of patriarchal exploitation, or a dangerous occupation that nonetheless gives women agency, in "El Cometa Halley," as in Arenas's imaginary more generally, patriarchal structures are reaffirmed

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rather than dismantled.[10] In important respects, the power achieved by the Alba sisters in their sexual liberation is illusory, for they are portrayed as becoming "mujeres" 'women' (87) only in the presence of phallic symbols (the comet, the portait) and only when they surrender to penetrative sex with men. By opening the brothel, the naming of which participates in the story's network of phallic resonances, the sisters defy maternal control and assert female sexual desires, but they do so by perpetuating male power. This should not be surprising, since the characters' sentimental journey echoes their author's. In Arenas's fantasy of sexual freedom, the ultimate desire is to submit, as the Alba women do, to a man. To further explore the complicated sexual politics of "El Cometa Halley," I now turn to an analysis of the text in the context of familial patterns in Arenas's life and writings.

A Son's Fantasy

Having viewed the comet's tail in Arenas's tale, I would now like to contemplate the tale behind the writing of "El Cometa Halley." What may account for Arenas's continuation of *La casa de Bernarda Alba*, particularly his linking of the lives of the Alba women with the 1910 return of the comet? Written in January 1986, Arenas's story had as its most immediate inspiration the upcoming visit of Halley's comet, which was to make its closest outbound approach to Earth on 11 April of that year (Calder 146). In addition, Arenas may have been prompted to revisit García Lorca's play because 1986 marked the fiftieth anniversary of its writing and of the tragic death of its author, who was murdered in 1936 by the Fascists two months after completing the work (Gibson 438, 446–70). Arenas's decision to dislocate Bernarda's daughters to a sexualized Cuba may have originated in a tropical episode in García Lorca's biography, the three-month visit to the island in 1930 that introduced the Spaniard to a larger world of sexual alternatives (Walsh 273). More specifically, on this Caribbean island, a locale that García Lorca called "paradise" (Gibson 285), conveniently far away from his mother, the author of *La casa de Bernarda Alba* came to openly embrace his homosexuality. Like their original creator, who was unable to resist Cuban male bodies and who insisted that he spent the happiest days of his life in Cuba (Gibson 301), the Alba sisters, also at a safe distance from their mother, find sexual fulfillment and unqualified happiness on the irresistibly phallic island of Cuba.

Arenas's readers would not consider "El Cometa Halley" particularly remarkable, given the author's penchant for intertextuality, which is evident, for instance, in his novels *El mundo alucinante* and *La Loma del Angel*. But one can ask why, other than to pay homage to a writer he admires, Arenas decides to write a parodic continuation of the story of Bernarda Alba and her daughters. Repressive motherhood and repressed sexuality, central themes of *La casa de Bernarda Alba*, undoubtedly attracted the Cuban author to the Spanish play. Arenas appropriates these themes, which are central in his oeuvre, and rewrites them from the nostalgic and painful perspective of exile.

After years of ostracism and a period of imprisonment in his native Cuba because of his political views and sexual practices, Arenas leaves the island for the United States in 1980 in the confusion of the Mariel boatlift. Like many an exile, Arenas does not find home—or ever feel at home—once away. In an essay on José Martí, in whose life as an exile Arenas sees his own life mirrored, he observes, "Estando aquí fuera del sitio amado y odiado, fuera de la prisión, de donde tuvimos que salir huyendo para poder seguir siendo seres humanos, seres libres, no somos completamente libres, porque estando aquí, en el destierro, estamos aún allá en alma e imagen" 'Being here, away from the place we love and hate, away from prison, from which we had to flee to be able to continue existing as human beings, as free people, we are not completely free. Because, although we are here, in exile,

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we are nonetheless there in soul and image' ("Martí" 57). In *Antes que anochezca* (*Before Night Falls*), his autobiography, Arenas explains that soon after leaving Cuba he becomes disillusioned with the United States, a country ruled by money. Alienated from the Cuban American community because of its materialism, anti-intellectualism, and machismo, he is also dissatisfied with the ghettoization of North American gay culture. As a result, Arenas finds refuge from the adversities of exile by imaginatively journeying back, through what Benigno Sánchez-Eppler calls "narrative self-repatriation" (158), to an otherwise unattainable Cuba.

In "El Cometa Halley," Arenas vicariously writes himself back to Cuba when he returns García Lorca, in the guise of the Alba women, to the tropical island that the Spanish writer visited—and fell in love with—in 1930. Returning to Cuba with—and as—Bernarda's daughters suits Arenas's literary erotics in part because this allows him to imagine being *templado* 'fucked' by "hombres de verdad" 'real men' (*Antes que anochezca* 133), a possibility that Arenas associates with Cuba rather than the United States:

> [A]l llegar al exilio, he visto que las relaciones sexuales pueden ser tediosas e insatisfechas. Existe como una especie de categoría o división en el mundo homosexual; la loca se reúne con la loca y todo el mundo hace de todo. [. . .] ¿Cómo puede haber satisfacción así? Si, precisamente, lo que uno busca es su contrario. La belleza de las relaciones de entonces era que [. . .] encontrábamos a aquel hombre [. . .] que quería, desesperadamente, templarnos. [. . .] Aquí no es así o es difícil que sea así; todo se ha regularizado de tal modo que han creado grupos y sociedades donde es muy difícil para un homosexual encontrar un hombre; es decir, el verdadero objeto de su deseo. (*Antes que anochezca* 132)

> Later, in exile, I found that sexual relations can be tedious and unrewarding. There are categories or divisions in the homosexual world. The queer gets together with the queer and everybody does everything. [. . .] How can that bring any satisfaction? What we are really looking for is our opposite. The beauty of our relationships then was that we [. . .] would find that man [. . .] who wanted desperately to fuck us. [. . .] Either conditions here are different, or it is just difficult to duplicate what we had there. Everything here is so regulated that groups and societies have been created in which it is very difficult for a homosexual to find a man, that is, the real object of his desire. (*Before Night* 106–07)

Longing for the gender-differentiated sex of his Cuban years, Arenas metaphorically transports himself back to his homeland, to a place where, like García Lorca, he spent his happiest and most sexually fulfilling days. Like García Lorca in *La casa de Bernarda Alba*, then, Arenas invites us to read his work through the lens of a "transvestite poetics," by which the reader views the heterosexual female characters as homosexual men to lay bare the text's metaphoric displacement of male homosexual desire.[11]

Having repeatedly insisted on the autobiographical dimension of his writing, Arenas would not disagree, I think, with this reading of "El Cometa Halley."[12] Indeed, Arenas is in his text but in ways more subtle than I have suggested so far. Although it is possible to read all the Alba women and their quest for men as an allegorical representation of the woman-identified Arenas, I find the figure of Adela most intriguing. Why does Arenas bring Adela back to life, transforming her from a rebellious daughter in *La casa de Bernarda Alba* to a sexually empowering and licentious sister and mother in "El Cometa Halley"? Why does Arenas have Adela save the day by sexually emancipating not only her older sisters but also her son? Why, more to the point, does Arenas juxtapose Bernarda and Adela in their roles as mothers, one despotic and sexually repressive and the other liberating and sexually permissive? To answer these questions, I take a short detour through other texts by Arenas.

In 1981, five years before writing "El Cometa Halley," Arenas told Antonio Prieto Taboada that "en todo lo que yo he escrito hay una serie de constantes. Una de las más importantes

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es la madre. La madre es de gran importancia para mí" 'in everything I have written there is a series of constants. One of the most important is the mother. The mother is of great importance to me' (Arenas, "Esa capacidad" 685). Among Arenas's maternally themed works, one finds the meaningfully titled *Adiós a mamá* 'Good-bye, Mother,' a posthumous short-story collection that includes, among others, "El Cometa Halley" and the eponymous story. Having lost the original 1973 version, Arenas rewrites "Adiós a mamá" in exile in 1980, six months after he leaves Cuba. The story centers on a Bernarda-like mother who totally controls her five children—four women and one man (the youngest of the five).[13] Beginning with the announcement of the mother's death, the narrative goes on to focus on her grotesque wake. Incapable of parting with their mother, the four daughters refuse to bury her and compulsively tend to her decomposing, stinking, vermin-infested body. Continuing to be ruled by their rotten mother, Ofelia, Otilia, Odilia, and Onelia completely submit to her by committing suicide; they stab themselves with their mother's kitchen knife and then throw themselves into "el inmenso charco pululante que es [. . .] mamá" 'the sprawling, teeming morass that is [. . .] mother' (65; "Goodbye" 58). But what about the fifth sibling, the nameless male narrator? Having been the only child who argued for the mother's burial, a position that led his sisters to call him a traitor, the narrator, after two unsuccessful attempts at killing himself, decides not to join his mother and sisters. Instead, he flees the house and rushes to the ocean, where he plunges into the waves, proudly saying to himself, "Soy un traidor. Decididamente soy un traidor. Feliz" 'I'm a traitor. A confirmed traitor. And happy' (79; 66).

Given its mother-focused plot, in which the youngest of five siblings rebels against a powerful matriarch, "Adiós a mamá" invites the reader to speculate about the filiation between this story and *La casa de Bernarda Alba*. Although Arenas may also have been inspired by the matriarchal household in which he lived, where his grandmother ruled over her daughters, it may not be a coincidence that "Adiós a mamá" is placed immediately before "El Cometa Halley" in the short-story collection. The textual contiguity of the two stories suggests a common Lorquian intertext.[14] One can speculate further that "El Cometa Halley" continues not only *La casa de Bernarda Alba* but also "Adiós a mamá" and not just because one follows the other in the collection. As Arenas explains in a self-conscious letter by the "Tétrica Mofeta" 'Skunk in a Funk' (his alter ego) in *El color del verano* (*The Color of Summer*), "Mis libros conforman una sola y vasta unidad, donde los personajes mueren, resucitan, aparecen, desaparecen, viajan en el tiempo, burlándose de todo y padeciéndolo todo" 'My books constitute a single enormous whole in which the characters die, are reborn, appear, disappear, and travel through time—always mocking, always suffering' (358; 315). In a manner typical of Arenas, "El Cometa Halley" takes up where "Adiós a mamá" leaves off. The carnivalesque story of the rebellious child in "Adiós a mamá," which ends as the son throws himself into the sea to escape from an unbearable matriarchy, continues with the carnivalesque story of Arenas's Alba sisters, which features the women's experiences after a transatlantic voyage. Thus, García Lorca's Adela in *La casa de Bernarda Alba* metamorphoses into the figure of a son, the narrator in "Adiós a mamá," who in turn metamorphoses back into Adela in "El Cometa Halley." At the same time, although "Adiós a mamá" opens with the matriarch's death, the figure of the mother neither dies nor disappears in "El Cometa Halley." Instead, while Bernarda is left behind in Spain, the four older Alba sisters assume in Cuba, vis-à-vis their nephew, the role of the controlling mother. Eventually, however, Adela undermines their authority, bringing their stifling matriarchy to an end, and as a result a new mother—radically different—emerges, one who is an advocate for liberated pleasures and desires.

Arenas's Adela deviates, then, from the customary authoritarian mother that populates the

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Cuban's works—a menacing figure that finds its most extreme representation in *El asalto* (*The Assault*), a novel Arenas wrote in 1974, a year after writing the first draft of "Adiós a mamá."[15] Both narratives, not coincidentally, thematize the son's fears of—and reactions to—the impending threat of merging with the mother, physically and psychically. In the story, when facing "el gran momento [de] unir[se] a mamá" 'the big moment [to] join mother' ("Adiós" 76; "Goodbye" 64), the son resists and escapes; in the novel, fearing that he will become like his mother, the son commits matricide. But, conceived, written, and published in exile a dozen years later, "El Cometa Halley" ends uncharacteristically: the son does not suffer from "matrophobia" (Rich 235) and feel compelled to flee from the smothering figure. Instead, son and mother happily "come together" in a tale that celebrates mother-son incest.

The emergence of the new mother (Adela) seems odd in the context of the familial constellation prevalent in Arenas's works, one marked by the commanding presence of the authoritarian mother and the "absence" of the father. In an attempt to understand Adela's role, I want to address, first, the issue of the father. I place *absence* in quotation marks because that absence is only apparent. Although it is true that Arenas saw his father only once, at age five, the author does not evict the paternal figure from his literary universe, as some critics have maintained he does. On the contrary, the figure of the father plays a prominent, albeit oblique, role in Arenas's life and oeuvre. The cornerstone of *Antes que anochezca*, Arenas's autobiography, is its first chapter, which briefly but movingly narrates Arenas's only encounter with his father. Suggestively titled "Las piedras," a reference to the stones that Arenas's mother throws at a handsome young man when he attempts to bond with her simultaneously confused and excited child, this memorable first chapter sets in motion the oedipal dynamics of the text.[16] This oedipal telemachy, although more veiled, figures importantly in *El asalto*, to which I will turn presently.

In his interview with Prieto Taboada, Arenas addresses the role of the mother in Cuban culture:

> En el mundo en que yo me desenvolví la madre tenía un sentido patriarcal. El padre era el aventurero que podía sencillamente engendrarte y desaparecer (como sucedió en el caso mío), pero la mujer era siempre la constante: la que te vigilaba, la que te mecía, te criaba, te condenaba, te criticaba, te exaltaba… En fin, la que te iba a conceder el perdón o la condena. Y eso es evidente en lo que yo he escrito. Yo creo que incluso hay un *sentido edípico* en la relación entre la madre y yo, y aun entre el pueblo cubano en general y la madre. La madre se convierte en última instancia en el poder absoluto. Entre las formas que han tenido las dictaduras en Cuba, el dictador asume hasta cierto punto la categoría de madre del pueblo. Hay entonces una especie de chantaje sentimental: una autoridad casi materna. Eso lo podemos ver también actualmente: cómo la dictadura se convierte en un poder materno que nos administra, nos dirige, nos organiza, nos dice cómo tenemos que peinarnos, cómo tenemos que vestirnos, cómo tenemos que hablar, lo que debemos hacer, lo que no debemos hacer.
>
> (Arenas, "Esa capacidad" 685; my emphasis)

> In the world in which I lived, the mother had a patriarchal role. The father was an adventurer who would simply conceive you and disappear (as happened in my case), but the mother was always a constant: the one who kept watch over you, rocked you, nursed you, punished you, criticized you, praised you . . . In sum, the one who would forgive you or condemn you. And that is evident in what I have written. I also believe that there is an *oedipal character* to the relationship between my mother and me, and even between Cubans in general and their mothers. The mother embodies, in the end, absolute power. In the various forms that dictatorships have had in Cuba, the dictator partly takes on the role of mother of the people. There is, as a result, a kind of sentimental blackmail: an authority almost maternal. That is what we see at present: how the dictatorship becomes a maternal power that manages us, guides us, organizes us, tells us how we must comb our

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> hair, how we must dress, how we must speak, what we must do, what we must not do.

Although one must not consider as universal the psychoanalytic postulates regarding sexual identity formation, Diana Fuss reminds us that psychoanalysis "constitutes a powerful cultural narrative that continues to shape, in both regulative and disruptive ways, representations of sexual identity" (13). Arenas is a case in point. He not only interprets his family romance in a Freudian context but also uses a psychoanalytic model to offer an oedipal interpretation of the political situation of the Cuban people. Despite Arenas's claim about his mother's centrality in his life and works, it is important not to lose sight of the fact that the (absent) paternal figure enjoys an equally remarkable presence, albeit allusive and elusive, in his oeuvre. Moreover, one could also argue that for Arenas the losses—or absences—of father and fatherland are equally poignant, since *padre* and *patria* share an emotional space in his life and writings. His exile from his fatherland and his father's absence leave a void that Arenas fills through writing. Having been denied the love of a father, Arenas redirects his filial love toward his fatherland. And in the same way that his mother—in the eyes of the innocent child—comes between him and his father, an equally repressive figure, Fidel Castro, comes between Arenas and his fatherland. Thus, for Arenas, it proves difficult if not impossible to distinguish between Castro and the castrating mother.[17]

This conflation of the mother and Castro literally takes place in *El asalto*, where the two figures who represent absolute power share the same body. In this novel, the last volume of Arenas's *pentagonía* 'pentagony' (an "agony" in five novels, in which the Cuban author narrates a secret history of Cuba), the nameless protagonist embarks on a homicidal search for his mother.[18] In the last scene, coming face to face with the president, Reprimerísimo, in a public square, the protagonist realizes that his mother and Reprimerísimo (an obvious double of Castro) are one and the same. As the son confronts his mother, his member swells to enormous proportions, and in a fury he sexually assaults her. After an arduous struggle, the aroused son penetrates his mother with the gigantic penis, killing her instantly: "Ella al ser traspasada emite un alarido prolongado y se derrumba al mismo tiempo que yo siento el triunfo, el goce furioso de desparramarme en su interior. Ella, soltando un aullido, estalla lanzando tornillos, arandelas, latas, gasolina, semen, mierda y chorros de aceite" 'As she is pierced, she gives a long, horrible shriek, and then she collapses. I sense my triumph—I come, and I feel the furious pleasure of discharging myself inside her. Howling, she explodes in a blast of screws, washers, tin cans, gasoline, semen, shit, and spurts of motor oil' (140; 145).[19] Next, as the elated citizens advance toward Reprimerísimo's agents, eventually taking over the square and destroying everything in sight, the protagonist, unseen by anyone, walks away from the crowd in the direction of the seashore. *El asalto* comes to a close with two brief sentences: "Camino hasta la arena. Y me tiendo" 'I walk down to the sand. And I lie down' (*Asalto* 141). Giving his body to the *arena* of his fatherland, the protagonist-son (a double of the author) symbolically becomes one with Arenas, the father. The narrator has reached a safe place, a place where he regains the essence of his being, that of a son—of his absent father and his beloved Cuba. And this is told, suggestively, in the final words, "me tiendo" 'I lie down,' which coupled together produce the present participle *metiendo* 'inserting,' a phonic verbal play that participates in the passage's sexual subtext.[20]

If one keeps in mind Arenas's admiration for the *Iliad*, a text prominent in his memoirs, one can also read the final scene of *El asalto* as an evocation of a scene in book 23 of the Homeric poem in which the mournful Achilleus, having lain down on the beach away from his men, reunites with the deceased Patroklus, whose ghost appears to him in a dream. That Patroklus, whose death leads Achilleus to grieve inconsolably, has been considered a paternal

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figure vis-à-vis the Homeric hero (for being older, for having been named Achilleus's mentor, and for having *pateres* in his name) permits the association between the beach scenes in Homer and Arenas. And if one subscribes to the view that Achilleus and Patroklus have a sexual relationship, as some scholars have claimed, the Homeric connection is even more germane to my reading, since the two men's intimate lives help to advance the father-son incest motif in the final scene of Arenas's novel.[21]

Finally, this intertextual reading of the closing scene of *El asalto* is authorized by *Arturo, la estrella más brillante* 'Arturo, the Brightest Star,' a novel that Arenas wrote in 1971, three years before writing *El asalto*. The happy ending of the last novel of Arenas's *pentagonía* culminates not only the five-novel cycle but also, in keeping with Arenas's fondness for textual echoes and continuities, the creative process that Arturo initiated in the novel that bears his name. Referring to the fantastic castle that, while serving time in one of Castro's labor camps, he is constructing in his imagination for himself and the male lover for whom he is searching, Arturo explains, somewhat enigmatically, that "aún faltaban maravillas: arenas, orquídeas, oquedades y Patroclos" 'there were still so many marvels to be made: sands, orchids, hollows, and Patrocluses' (81; *Brightest Star* 97). But Arturo, we are told, is murdered by a troop of soldiers led by his mother before completing his sand castle. Despite Arturo's death, his dream does not go unrealized, for like the nameless male protagonist of "Adiós a mamá," who reappears in "El Cometa Halley" in the guise of Adela, Arturo reappears in *El asalto* in the guise of this novel's nameless male protagonist, who in the end fulfills his desire to be with the man he loves. In the final scene, on the beach, the protagonist of *El asalto* finds himself in a happy place, a place where *arenas* (Arenas) and Patroklus appear and come together, joining the protagonist, not in a castle as Arturo had planned, but in an echo chamber of evocative intertextualities.

The last scene of *El asalto* also resonates with the incestuous plot of Arenas's *Viaje a La Habana*. In this novel, an exiled father, persuaded by his son's mother in Cuba, returns to the island after a fifteen-year absence to reunite (sexually, as it turns out) with the son he left behind. Although metaphoric in *El asalto* and literal in *Viaje a La Habana*, the sexual reunion of father and son brings both narratives to a felicitious conclusion. But if in *El asalto* this connection is made possible only by the absence—the elimination—of the mother, in *Viaje a La Habana* it depends on her presence, since without the mother's active role father and son would not come together after years of separation. A year before completing *Viaje a La Habana*, Arenas wrote "El Cometa Halley," in which a mother also reunites father and son. As the reader will recall, in Arenas's continuation of *La casa de Bernarda Alba*, a pregnant woman who was abandoned by her lover has a son, from whom she is separated at birth. When she meets her son eighteen years later, the mother shows him a picture of his father and introduces the young man to a life of promiscuous sex. Because of his mother's entrance into his life, the son simultaneously becomes aware of his mother's, his father's, and his own identities and desires. Although one can see in this story a subtle reworking of the father-son theme present in various texts by Arenas, two things remain enigmatic. Why, as in *Viaje a La Habana*, is the mother in "El Cometa Halley" the broker of the meeting between father and son, deviating from reality, as represented in *Antes que anochezca*, in which the mother makes every attempt to thwart their union? And why, unlike her counterpart in *Viaje a La Habana*, does the mother play a central role in "El Cometa Halley," emerging as its protagonist?

That "El Cometa Halley" and *Viaje a La Habana* were written entirely in exile may explain the portrayal in these texts of a maternal figure different from the one that Arenas had depicted earlier in his career. Completed within one year of each other and at a time when Are-

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nas begins to suspect and then confirms that he has contracted HIV, these two fictional narratives are his way of honoring his mother, whom he suspects he will never see again.[22] Instead of a forbidding and authoritative figure, from whom the son constantly has felt the need to flee, she is now cast in the role of an understanding mother in *Viaje a La Habana* and a sexually liberated and liberating mother in "El Cometa Halley." Unlike the repressed and repressive mother protagonists in fictional texts originally conceived in Cuba, Adela is a hedonist who literally bonds with her son through music, alcohol, and sex. In fact, she seduces him and leads him into a life of eroticism. Because of this and because José, despite his age, is characterized as sexually inexperienced, as an innocent child who undergoes his sexual awakening when his sexually aggressive mother enters his life, "El Cometa Halley" can be interpreted, more specifically, as a preoedipal fantasy. As in the preoedipal stage, the maternal figure introduces the child to sexual pleasure. No longer chaste, repressive, and frustrated, this new mother in Arenas's fantasy aggressively seeks and finds erotic fulfillment not just in others but also in her son. As in the dyad of infantile life, the son enters a world of blissful plenitude, in which he and his mother come together in a totalizing erotic communion.[23]

Although in *Antes que anochezca* Arenas describes his mother as an asexual woman who "siempre fue fiel a la infidelidad de mi padre" 'was always faithful to my father's infidelity' and who, much to her son's dismay, "eligió la castidad" 'chose chastity' (19; *Before Night* 3), he recalls an episode from his childhood when he experienced his mother's sexual desires on his body:

> Una de mis tías tenía el privilegio de poder escuchar alguna novela radial; a la vez que la iba escuchando se la iba contando a sus hermanas. Yo recuerdo que, sentado en las rodillas de mi madre, mi tía contaba las escenas eróticas que escuchaba; las piernas de mi madre se estremecían y yo, sobre ella, recibía aquellos reflejos eróticos, que mi madre, joven y seguramente ansiosa de tener una relación sexual, me transmitía. (52–53)

> One of my aunts had the privilege of being allowed to listen to a soap opera; while she listened, she would pass the story on to her sisters. Sitting on my mother's lap, I remember my aunt describing the erotic scenes she heard. My mother's legs quivered and I felt the sexual tension that my mother, young and anxious to make love, transmitted to me. (30–31)[24]

Childhood recollections such as this support reading "El Cometa Halley" as a text that fictionalizes its author's preoedipal remembrances of things past. In the last narrative that Arenas writes in which the maternal figure occupies center stage, he pays homage to his preoedipal mother. And he does this, not surprisingly, as he also pays homage to his (absent) father. Physically absent but symbolically present through his enlarged and commanding portrait, Pepe brings to mind the other dominating image in Arenas's life and works: that of the handsome and young *guajiro* in the Cuban countryside who is forever remembered by his jilted lover and abandoned son. I would insist, however, that "El Cometa Halley" is primarily a tribute to preoedipal mother love, an allegorical reenactment of the crucial bonding phase between mother and child that the father's oedipal interference has not yet begun to disrupt.

Good-bye, Mother?

In a letter of 29 August 1989 to Jorge and Margarita Camacho, Arenas writes about his mother, Oneida Fuentes, who was in the United States on a twenty-day permit from Cuba. Although the dutiful son traveled from New York to Miami to be with her, there was not, as Arenas laments to the Camachos, "mucha comunicación de NINGÚN TIPO" 'much communication of ANY SORT.' For instance, he did not say a word to her about his precarious health. And perhaps more disheartening for Arenas was his

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mother's lack of appreciation for his writing. One day, as he was diligently working on *El color del verano*, she asked him whether he would get a real job some day, since—as her hurt and bitter son explains—"para ella trabajar es picar piedra en una cantera" 'for her to work is to smash rocks in a chain gang.' Partly attributing their complicated relationship to his illegitimate birth and accepting once and for all that his mother "está a mil leguas de [su] vida" 'is far away from [his] life,' Arenas comes to a sad but irrevocable determination when he writes to his friends, "En fin, *adiós a mamá*" 'In sum, *good-bye, mother*' (Letter). This is one more good-bye in a series of farewells that began years ago in Cuba when, at a young age, Arenas realized that he could not live with his mother. As he states in *Antes que anochezca*:

> Toda mi vida fue una constante huida de mi madre; del campo a Holguín, de Holguín a La Habana; luego, queriendo huir de La Habana al extranjero. [. . .Y]o sólo podía abandonar a mi madre o convertirme en ella misma; es decir, un pobre ser resignado con la frustración y sin instinto de rebeldía y, sobre todo, tendría que ahogar mis deseos fundamentales. (221)

> My whole life had been a constant running away from my mother: from the country to Holguín, from Holguín to Havana; then, trying to run away from Havana to another country. [. . .] I had to leave my mother or become like her—that is, a poor, resigned creature full of frustrations with no urge for rebellion. Above all, I would have to smother my own being's innermost desires. (*Before Night* 197)

When Arenas writes and underlines *adiós a mamá* in his letter to the Camachos, he not only graphically underscores the emotional import of a phrase that for him reverberates with past and present painful experiences of separation but also deliberately calls attention to the autobiographical dimension of his writing. Like the eponymous story of *Adiós a mamá*, "El Cometa Halley" is also an *adiós a mamá*: the five Alba sisters say good-bye to their tyrannical mother, whom they leave behind in Spain.

But there is more to this good-bye in the Cuban's version of the story of Bernarda Alba and her daughters, and it has to do with the chronological deviation of Arenas's text from its intertext. "El Cometa Halley" begins, as we are insistently told, in 1891, and reaches its climax in 1910. An allegory of Spain on the eve of the civil war (Smith 20), *La casa de Bernarda Alba* seemingly unfolds in 1936. Why, then, does Arenas depart from García Lorca's chronology? To answer this question, I briefly turn to critical elements in Cuba's history and Arenas's biography.

Having been shaped by his harrowing experiences in revolutionary Cuba, the exiled Arenas, although inspired by the 1986 appearance of the comet, rejects setting the Alba sisters' story of sexual emancipation, a story with which he identifies, in Castro's repressive post–1959 era. Instead, Arenas antedates the events and has his narrative culminate in 1910, which not only is when Halley's comet made its previous visit but also happens to be during the promising formative period of the young Cuban republic (founded in 1902). Though not blind to the social and economic inequalities and political corruption that plagued the early years of the republic, Arenas chooses to have his liberating story occur at this propitious moment in his country's history. The place that the 1910 comet holds in the Cuban cultural imaginary may also have contributed to Arenas's preference for 1910 instead of 1986. The curious coincidence that the comet was closest to Earth on 20 May (Giralt and Gutiérrez Lanza), eight years to the day after the founding of the republic, seized the Cuban imagination. Some Cubans claimed, for instance, that the comet's tail resembled the shape of their island. The "deslumbrante fenómeno" 'dazzling phenomenon' of the comet's tail indelibly marked the collective memory of a generation of Cubans, as Graciela Pogolotti has explained (123), and symbolized a country that was poised to embrace a dazzling future. Writ-

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ing "El Cometa Halley," Arenas affirms—in the tradition of intellectuals like Renée Méndez Capote, Marcelo Pogolotti, and Loló de la Torriente before him—the comet's penetration in the Cuban imaginary.

If Cuba's history and cultural imaginary guide Arenas's manipulation of the chronology, so does the author's family history. The Cuban's corrective continuation of the Spanish play can be read as a fanciful corrective of his primal and traumatic scene of maternal separation, about which his mother wrote to him in a letter of 3 March 1986: "Ahora recordé que hizo en febrero 24 años que te fuiste para La Habana separados desde entonces cada día más. Qué daño habremos hecho para sufrir así sólo Dios lo sabe" 'I just remembered that you left for Havana 24 years ago in February. We have been separated since then more each day. What we have done to suffer so much only God knows' (Fuentes). Oneida Fuentes's letter alludes to the fact that Arenas was eighteen when he left her—and the city of Holguín—in 1962 to begin a new life in the capital.[25] This bit of family history is pivotal for an understanding of "El Cometa Halley."

The story's first sentence states and immediately repeats in parentheses that the tragedy Pepe brings on the Alba household takes place in 1891. By designating 1891 the year that Pepe deflowers Adela, leaving her pregnant, Arenas makes their bastard son eighteen when Halley's comet and his mother return in 1910—a narrative detail that allows us to see Reinaldo in José. For in addition to a striking parallel between the real and fictional parental couples (in both cases, a handsome man abandons a young woman after impregnating her), there is an equally striking parallel between the two sons, who are the same age when their relationships with their mothers take crucial but inverted turns. Oneida's son is eighteen when he leaves his mother; Adela's son is eighteen when he reunites with his mother. It may not be possible to do more than speculate, but the autobiographical reading that I am suggesting may be an additional tale lurking behind Arenas's comet. In a humorous but powerful short story, Arenas recasts Adela as a sexually aggressive preoedipal mother and adds a son to the original cast of characters of *La casa de Bernarda Alba*, all in an attempt to imagine an alternative family constellation. Unlike Arenas's mother in real life and Bernarda in García Lorca's play, who are suffering and controlling, the mother in "El Cometa Halley" is wild and liberating. Arenas fantasizes a mother who, understanding one's needs to satisfy one's *deseos fundamentales*, opens new worlds for her son. As Arenas alters García Lorca's story, he simultaneously alters and allegorically rewrites his own personal story to imagine what it would have been like if, on that day long ago when he was eighteen, he had not been forced to say *adiós a mamá*.

Notes

My heartfelt thanks go to Marc Stein and Gustavo Pérez Firmat for their insightful comments and constant encouragement throughout the writing of this essay.

[1] Written in Miami Beach in 1986, "El Cometa Halley" was first published in a Venezuelan magazine, *Exceso*, in 1989 and was subsequently included in *Final de un cuento*, a posthumous miscellany of essays and stories, and in *Adiós a mamá*, a posthumous collection of stories. I quote from the latter. For the English translation, I rely primarily on Koch's version ("Halley's Comet"), making slight emendations where noted. Where no source is indicated, translations of this work and others are mine.

[2] First identified in 1682 by Edmond Halley, the comet returns to Earth every seventy-six years. Capturing the human imagination, it has been associated with the overthrow of despotic rulers and the end of terrestrial life. The 1910 comet in particular produced mass hysteria. Curiously, despite the belief that it would bring the end of the world, many people welcomed it with outrageous "comet parties," of which the Alba sisters' orgy in Arenas's "El Cometa Halley" is an imaginative re-creation. The phallic connotations of the comet's tail were common in the popular imagination of 1910. For example, a Cuban *guaracha* of that year, about a jealous wife who cuts off her unfaithful husband's penis, includes the following lyrics: "No te apures, Enriqueta / que el mundo ya no termina / porque ayer la Mallorquina / le cortó el rabo al cometa" 'Enriqueta, don't you fret / the world is not going to end / because yesterday the Mallor-

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quina / cut the tail off the comet' (qtd. in Fernández Soneira). On Halley's comet, see Calder; Etter and Schneider; Genuth 156–77; and Gropman.

[3] On *Viaje a La Habana*, see Olivares.

[4] On carnivalesque "casting-down," see Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 19, 21, 370; Morson and Emerson 443; and Stallybrass and White 9, 23, 183. In my use of the carnivalesque as an analytic category, I mainly follow Stallybrass and White. Distancing themselves from those who see carnival in the strict Bakhtinian sense as a licensed—hence, ineffectual—revolt, Stallybrass and White place it in broader categories of symbolic inversion and transgression, which allow us to see carnival as a site of struggle that may lead to change.

[5] If in *La casa de Bernarda Alba* there are only two ways of escaping—namely, insanity or suicide (Ozimek-Maier 84)—"El Cometa Halley" explores a third way: escape by way of the sea. Arenas, whose passion for the ocean is well known, may have been inspired by La Poncia, who says, "A mí me gustaría cruzar el mar y dejar esta casa de guerra" 'I wish I could go across the sea away from this battleground of a house' (García Lorca 189; 164).

[6] According to Kristeva, "It is [. . .] not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules" (4).

[7] The typescript of this draft is part of the Reinaldo Arenas Papers (box 14, folder 5, Literary Papers and Mss. Div., Dept. of Rare Books and Spec. Collections, Princeton Univ. Lib., Princeton).

[8] I have made slight revisions to Koch's translation.

[9] The translation into English does not fully render the etymology of *fachada*; the Spanish noun, like *façade*, can refer to the visible face of a building and to the deceptive or illusory appearance of something or someone.

[10] See Rosen for a balanced historical view of prostitution.

[11] On transvestite poetics, see Savran 115–20. Although one may find "transvestite criticism" problematic, as Sedgwick does (233–34), I submit that Arenas may have been aware of this common approach to García Lorca. On women as homosexual men in García Lorca, see Binding 212–16 and Urrea. Not surprisingly, in *El color del verano* (212), Arenas connects a gay character in his novel with García Lorca's Adela.

[12] To cite one example: "I'm basically interested in two things in the narrative world. One is the exploration of my personal life, my experiences, my sufferings, my own tragedies. The other is the historical world" (Arenas, "Conversation" 145).

[13] "Adiós a mamá" was first published in *Novísimos narradores hispanoamericanos en marcha, 1964–1980*, a 1981 anthology edited by Angel Rama. I quote from Arenas's collection.

[14] The striking parallel between the author's household, which is fictionalized in his novels, and the Alba household has not escaped critics. See, e.g., Wood 21. In *Adiós a mamá*, Arenas seems to arrange the stories thematically, not chronologically.

[15] Written in Havana in 1974 and revised in New York in 1988, *El asalto* was published posthumously in 1991.

[16] On the role of the father in *Antes que anochezca*, see Olivares.

[17] On Castro's evocative surname, see Epps 262–63.

[18] On the *pentagonía*, see Soto. On *El asalto* in particular, see Biron 120–42, Epps 275–82, and Molinero. Arenas has spoken of "an entire gallery of mothers" in *Otra vez el mar* (the third novel of the *pentagonía*); among them one finds, in canto 2, "the dictator mother" ("Conversation" 144). In *Arturo, la estrella más brillante*, the figure of the mother is also associated with Castro's repressive government. As this novel concludes, the mother, dressed in military gear, leads the troop of soldiers who kill the protagonist, one of thousands of homosexuals sent to labor camps because of their sexual preferences.

[19] I have made slight revisions to Hurley's translation.

[20] I am grateful to my student Nicole LaBrecque for this observation.

[21] On Achilleus and Patroklus, see Halperin 75–87 and Sergent 250–58. On Arenas and the *Iliad*, see Arenas ("Elogio") and Olivares.

[22] Arenas worked on both texts simultaneously. He began writing *Viaje a La Habana* in 1983 and finished it in 1987. He wrote "El Cometa Halley" entirely in 1986. I am not suggesting that Arenas altogether stops depicting the mother as an oppressive figure. She appears in *Antes que anochezca* and *El color del verano*, the last works he wrote before his death.

[23] On the preoedipal mother, see Sprengnether. Insightfully challenging the mother's "spectral" presence in Freud's treatment of the child's sexual development, Sprengnether underscores the profound importance of maternal power during the two-person phase in infantile life. Unlike Freud, who generally limits the mother's position to object of her son's libidinal urges, Sprengnether argues for the mother's central position as a sexually desiring and aggressive subject. I should note here that portraying José as a child is congruent with Arenas's view of himself as a child. See, e.g., his poem "Viejo niño" 'Old Child' and his interview in the documentary *Havana* (Arenas, Interview).

[24] I have made slight revisions to Koch's translation.

[25] Arenas was born on 16 July 1943 and left for Havana in February 1962, when he was five months shy of his nineteenth birthday.

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