

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, MERCED

The Act of Reading John Rechy:
Transnational and Transcultural Intertexts and Readers

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by

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DEDICATION

To John Rechy and his readers

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- 2015 “Interview with John Rechy.” *The Textual Outlaw: Reading John Rechy in the 21st Century* (provisional title). Eds. Manuel M. Martín-Rodríguez and Beth Hernandez-Jason. Alcalá de Henares (Spain): Instituto Franklin-Universidad de Alcalá de Henares, *Submitted*.
- 2014 “The Cultivation of Readers in John Rechy’s Novels.” *Crossing the Borders of Imagination*. Alcalá: Instituto Franklin. *Accepted and forthcoming*.
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- 2013 "John Rechy's Fan Mail: Reader Responses from 1983-2011." *50 Years of City of Night: New Perspectives on the Work of John Rechy*. University of California, Merced. April 5, 2013.
- 2012 "The Creation and Cultivation of Readers for John Rechy's *City of Night*." *Eighth International Conference on Chicano Literature*. Toledo, Spain. May 23-26, 2012.
- 2012 "A New Literary Affiliation? Gloria Anzaldúa and John Rechy." *El Mundo Zurdo International Conference on the Life and Work of Gloria Anzaldúa*. University of Texas at San Antonio, May 17-19, 2012.
- 2012 "Reading John Rechy Across Borders: The Transnational Reception of *City of Night, Rushes and Numbers*." *"Ethnic Literatures and Transnationalism": Second Annual Joint Conference of USACLALS and MELUS*. Santa Clara University. April 19-22, 2012.
- 2012 "Gaze, Space and the Performance of Identity: Cameras, Movie Theaters and Movie Stars in the Work of John Rechy." *Sex and Sexuality in Hispanic Literature and Film Symposium*. CSU Long Beach. March 9, 2012.
- 2010 "As I (Read) It From Here: Jesús Colón and His Readers." *Recovering the U.S. Hispanic Literary Heritage Conference*. Houston, TX. November 11-13, 2010.
- 2010 "The Act of Reading Across Genres: Josefina Niggli, Maria Cristina Mena and Fabiola Cabeza de Baca." *Fifth Annual Graduate Student Colloquium*. UC Berkeley. April 9-11, 2010.
- 2009 "Performing Identities and Social Transformation: Caló and Aesthetic Innovation in Chicana/o Poetry." *Modern Language Association*. Philadelphia, PA. December 2009.
- 2008 "Who Would Have Thought It?: Uncle Tom's Cabin and María Amparo Ruiz de Burton." *Recovering the U.S. Hispanic Literary Heritage Conference*. Houston, TX. November 2008.
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- 2008 "We Happy Few: Rolando Hinojosa's Recent Expansion of Chicano Literature." *Northern California Foco, NACCS*. UC Merced. February 2, 2008.
- 2007 "Private Matters in the Public Sphere: Chicana Sexuality in History." *Southwest Texas Popular Culture and American Culture Association Conference*. Albuquerque, NM. February 14-17, 2007.

Abstract

The Act of Reading John Rechy: Transnational Intertexts and Readers

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PhD World Cultures

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Reader response criticism and reception theory approach texts through their readers by examining the historical (and theoretical) interpretations of real and implied readers. In *Life in Search of Readers: Reading (in) Chicano/a Literature* (2003), Manuel Martín-Rodríguez analyzes the implied readers of Chicano/a literature, the historical reception of key texts, and how readers are portrayed in Chicano/a literature through metaliterary discourse. My project uses this framework as a starting point to reexamine the little-recognized significance of U.S. novelist John Rechy, documenting how his work spans literary traditions and readerships that are seldom considered in relation to each other: U.S. and international LGBTQ literature, Chicana/o literature, and Anglo-American literature. Organized in three chapters, this study situates Rechy's work within diverse literary traditions and examines how the act of reading (in) Rechy's work is mediated by ethnicity, class, nationality, gender and sexual orientation. By analyzing one author as a case study, my study delves deeply into his work while also studying his connections to transnational texts and readerships, by examining the intertextual references within his texts as well as references to his work by other authors.

My study contributes to reader response and reception studies by demonstrating the benefits of using a reader response theory approach in an analysis of texts with multiple audiences, because it opens texts to multiple interpretations. Finally, the results of my analysis of the responses of everyday readers to Rechy's work suggest that for widely read texts, this is an effective way to qualitatively measure the social impact of a text, while my documentation of intertextual references to Rechy's work combined with archival research illustrates the literary impact of an author's work. These methods are particularly well suited for texts that have mixed critical reviews, or that have been understudied, and they provide a historically situated and more egalitarian framework for measuring the social and literary value and impact of a text.

INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Do I contradict myself?
Very well then I contradict myself,
(I am large, I contain multitudes.)

Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself," *Leaves of Grass*

The road to studying John Rechy's work is a combination of chance and fate. James Giles first wrote about Rechy's early novels after Rechy wrote a letter in response to his wife Wanda Giles's review of *This Day's Death* (1969) for an alternative newspaper in a North Texas town.¹ The three agreed to meet for an interview after several letters back and forth between Wanda Giles and Rechy, and since then, James and Wanda Giles have published several articles and book chapters on Rechy's work.² Honora (Lynch) Finkelstein overheard a professor suggesting that a Chicana graduate student do her dissertation on John Rechy's work, and the student refused. Finkelstein spoke with her advisor and decided to write about Rechy's work for her own dissertation. I first read *Bodies and Souls* (1983) as part of my work for the Chicano/a Literature Intertextual Database, a project created by Manuel Martín-Rodríguez at the University of California, Merced. Soon, I found myself driving to archives in San Diego and Austin, Texas, flying to Rechy's archives in Boston, and driving up the winding Hollywood Hills to interview him at his home.

John Rechy has many personas—he is the author, John Rechy, the implied author of his 15 books, the journalist, the book reviewer, and the letter writer, defender and interpreter of his work. To add to this, much of his early work is semi-autobiographical, pictures of the author adorn the front or back cover of his books, and the protagonists in his early novels display traits that readers associate with Rechy, such as performing a very masculine, sexual, narcissistic, identity alongside an introspective, expressive, literary, educated, writerly side. Through his fiction and nonfiction writing, Rechy explores the world and the facets of his own past as Johnny Rio, Jim Girard, Jerry, Blue, Endore, Marilyn Monroe, Normalyn, Amalia, Manny, Amber, Lady, and Lyle. Like Walt Whitman above and later lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) Chicano/a writers such as Gloria Anzaldúa, Rechy is uncomfortable with labels that contain or constrain him, and while he will now accept inclusion in different identity categories (e.g. gay, Chicano), he is very aware of the ways in which those labels can limit his image and his readership. Nevertheless, for many readers, John Rechy is synonymous with one thing: his best-selling novel *City of Night* (1963).

¹ Wanda Giles, "Love, Death, and John Rechy," *The Voice* [Denton, TX] 2.1 (1970): 9. Print.

² Conversation with Wanda Giles.

Published with the New York-based Grove Press, *City of Night* follows the unnamed protagonist, a wanderer-turned-hustler, through the major cities of the U.S., including New York City, New Orleans, Los Angeles, and even his relatively small hometown of El Paso, Texas. The protagonist is sometimes an active participant in the underground worlds he explores, sometimes a silent observer, narrating scenes of confrontations between Mardi Gras drag queens and heterosexual “tourists,” a heartbroken mother searching for her disowned gay son in her gay bar, and other eccentric characters. Rechy expressed concern that he had unfairly exposed the lives of this subaltern world to a mainstream readership (that also probably included vice officers),³ and in fact some readers interpreted his book as illustrating the moral depravity of those who were involved in a “deviant lifestyle.”

In fact, prior to the publication of *City of Night*, Rechy did publish a short piece that is in line with this view of male hustling and homosexuality. In an interview Rechy stated that under the pseudonym “Jack Schantz” he published a piece on male prostitution in the tabloid *Whisper*⁴ and in a 1957 issue, the article “Male Prostitution: The Growing Sin of the Nation” appears. Listed as an “exposé” in the table of contents, the piece describes the world of male hustling in New York City, New Orleans, Los Angeles, and El Paso, Texas. Much like *City of Night*, “Male Prostitution” describes male hustling in great detail, from clothing and what motivates the men to the prices they charge and the places they can be found: “These young men are seldom ‘gay’ themselves. They’re usually tough-looking, masculine types. They are out looking for some lonely men – usually middle-aged—for \$2, \$5, \$10, \$15, seldom more [...]” (18). The “exposé” informs readers how to pick up a hustler or how to become one themselves, if there were so interested: “On arriving in any big city, a hustler easily finds his place of business merely by asking where the all-night movie houses are. Here he’ll either find customers or find persons who can tell him where they are” (58). However, the article ends with a moralistic veneer: “It’s time decent citizens put an end to this sordid ‘business’—before irreparable harm is done to the morale, and morals, of the nation” (59).

After *City of Night*, Rechy’s second novel *Numbers* (1967) appeared. It followed the protagonist’s existential search for meaning or perhaps even a momentary respite from death through sexual encounters in Los Angeles’ Griffith Park. Johnny Rio also spends time with literary acquaintances, eventually (futilely) attempting to experience mutual desire and affection with one man’s boyfriend. This novel is more blatantly psychoanalytical and even philosophical than *City of Night*, and the sexual scenes are fairly explicit. As I describe in Chapter One, while *Numbers* contains clear references to *City of Night* and could be considered its sequel⁵ (despite the fact the name of the protagonist is not the same,⁶) Rechy’s third novel, *This Day’s Death* (1969), does not

³ John Rechy, “Real People as Fictional Characters: Some Comic, Sad, and Dangerous Encounters.”

⁴ Interview of John Rechy by Beth Hernandez-Jason, April 1, 2011.

⁵ Patrick O’Connor argues the same, writing that *Numbers* “could easily be seen as the novel’s sequel” (n.p.).

⁶ In fact, a phrase in *The Sexual Outlaw* (1977) could be read to imply that the different characters in Rechy’s books are interchangeable alter egos for the author: “Jim—he calls himself that sometimes, sometimes Jerry, sometimes John—removes the bikini, lies boldly naked on the sand. Because of a mixture of Anglo and Latin bloods, his skin quickly converts the sun’s rays into tan;” (*The Sexual Outlaw*, 23). “John” is the name of the author, “Johnny” is the protagonist of *Numbers*, “Jim” is the name of the

contain metaliterary references to the protagonist as an author. Nevertheless, Rechy suggested in an early interview with James and Wanda Giles (1973) that his first three novels “are somewhat of a trilogy” (28).

This Day's Death signals a distinct shift in the political tone of Rechy's writing, and while the novel contains strong intertextual connections to *City of Night*, it also departs in important ways from it and from *Numbers*. While these first two novels focus on the protagonist, his past, and the different characters he comes across in big cities, *This Day's Death* is more concerned with greater social issues, such as the monetary and emotional repercussions for homosexuals who come out or who are caught up in the justice system, as well as the plight of low-income Chicanos and Mexican immigrants. Surprisingly, despite the fact that this novel is a powerful coming out narrative that also draws extensively on Mexican and Chicano culture, scholars rarely mention this novel. Rechy himself dislikes the novel, and asked Grove Press to stop printing new editions: “I disliked the book right away. The review in *The New York Times* just walloped me. Especially the headline. I had tried for the mother to be sympathetic, not monstrous.”⁷ In “Mother, the Monster Who Started It All,” Webster Schott writes that while “neither Rechy nor her son [Jim] connect the history of Mrs. Girard's behavior with his flight into homosexuality [...] [o]bviously Mother has been pointing Jim toward the park grotto [homosexuality] all their lives” (314). Schott then states that “[i]n this culture, the male doesn't suddenly go homosexual as an act of defiance. The author's failure to link mother, son and homosexual choice is a cop-out” (314). In the novel, the mother is very ill, and her son grapples with her impending death while also fighting a false (sexual) charge, both of which are based on real life events in Rechy's life. As a result of the critiques of the depiction of the mother, combined with the death of Rechy's mother Guadalupe (Flores) Rechy the following year, John Rechy did not promote or defend his third novel to the same degree that he has with his other novels.

The two books that followed feature experimental narrative techniques and emphasize group dynamics, and were not received well by critics. *The Vampires* (1971) is about a strange assortment of people who are invited to a wealthy man's island for a game to see if any of the guests are morally pure. In this and *The Fourth Angel* (1972), Rechy introduces a strong female character who has her own parental demons, who in turn terrorizes those around her. According to Rechy, Barney Rosset, the publisher of Grove Press, did not like *The Fourth Angel* (nor had he particularly liked *This Day's Death*),⁸ so Rechy published the novel with Richard Seaver's imprint at Viking Press. Prior to its 1973 U.S. release, an expurgated version of *The Fourth Angel* was published in England in 1972. This novel follows four young people who are trying to deal with the pain they experience because of the abuse or neglect they have suffered at the hands of their parent(s), although the protagonist, Jerry, is unable to accept his beloved mother's death, which Rechy himself had struggled with a few years earlier.

In 1977 Rechy returned to Grove Press, publishing in short succession *The Sexual Outlaw* (1977) and *Rushes* (1979). Both books placed Rechy squarely in the developing

protagonist in *This Day's Death* and *The Sexual Outlaw*, and “Jerry” is the protagonist of *The Fourth Angel* (1972).

⁷ Interview with John Rechy by Beth Hernandez-Jason, February 6, 2014.

⁸ Interview with John Rechy by Beth Hernandez-Jason, February 6, 2014.

(explicit) gay literary category. The first book combines short narrations of sexual encounters with newspaper clippings about homosexuals in the media and their unfair treatment at the hands of the police and the media, in a technique that is similar to that of John Dos Passos' "Newsreels" and "Camera Eyes" in the *U.S.A. Trilogy*.⁹ It advocates for gay men to embrace their sexuality and avoid trying to "assimilate" to heterosexual mores, as he argues that there is nothing wrong with promiscuity. There are also references to Rechy's experiences as a hustler, and includes excerpts from interviews with journalists as well as fictional speeches. In an interview with *Drummer: America's Mag For the Macho Male*, Rechy explained why he wrote *The Sexual Outlaw*: "These are my explorations, so that I will no longer have to hate anyone for being gay, including myself. It's a public exploration on my part" (Interview with Robert Payne, 10). *Rushes* is a more in-depth exploration of the world of sadomasochism within the U.S. gay bar scene. This novel also details the ageist and anti-drag queen attitudes of some of the hardcore S&M bars.

Rechy changes course in terms of subject matter, audience, and publisher with *Bodies and Souls* (1983). Published with Carroll & Graf, this novel depicts the repression and exploitation of sexuality on a larger scale, examining the impact of unscrupulous pornographic film directors, hypocritical televangelists, classic Hollywood films, parents, and the media. There are numerous references to literary texts and popular culture, and while there are a few gay characters, the narrative centers on the sexual tension between one young woman (Lisa) and two young men (Orin and Jesse). In many ways, his next novel, *Marilyn's Daughter* (1988) is similar in that it could be seen as an attempt to appeal to a more mainstream, heterosexual, and female readership. This tour de force features a female protagonist, Normalyn, who discovers she might be the daughter of Marilyn Monroe and a Kennedy. As she travels around Texas and Los Angeles trying to determine her true identity, we meet Ted Gonzalez, a young Chicano, a group of young Hollywood star impersonators, and Troja, a drag queen who lives with her drug-addicted boyfriend, and who becomes Normalyn's confidante. This novel received no scholarly attention, and the cover and premise of the novel alone suggest why—it was seen as a trashy novel, even though it contains complex depictions of the construction and performance of identity.

In 1991, Rechy published *The Miraculous Day of Amalia Gómez*, which features a Mexican American protagonist named Amalia Gómez who fantasizes that her life will turn out like the scenes in movies and telenovelas as a way to avoid her painful past and current reality. The ubiquitous references to telenovelas and Mexican and U.S. Golden-Age movies and actresses reflect the cultural repertoire of Amalia and of the implied readers of this text, although the references are always explained for those who are not familiar with Mexican American or Chicano/a culture. This novel secured Rechy's place in the Chicano/a literature syllabus with its barrio setting, Chicana protagonist, and detailed account of the multiple oppressions Amalia faces both from dominant American society and from within Chicano/a culture. Rechy struggled to find a publisher, but eventually Arcade Publishing accepted the novel. Arcade was an independent press

⁹ According to E. C. Applegate, "[t]o make the story more believable, Dos Passos incorporates 'Newsreels,' which include headlines, news stories, and songs; 'Camera Eyes,' which include sketches based on the author's experiences [...]" (106). Many of the headlines appear to be composites of actual headlines.

started by Richard and Jeannette Seaver (Richard had worked at Grove Press in the past). Rechy also published *Our Lady of Babylon* (1996) with Arcade, and like *The Miraculous Day*, it details the sexual and societal oppression faced by women. However, while there is one “protagonist,” (Lady), she ultimately represents (or has been reincarnated as) a dizzying number of historical women, including Medea, La Malinche, Mary Magdalene and Helen of Troy. There is a strong metafictional element running throughout the novel, with Lady writing her own memoir, *Pensées*, as she narrates her life to Madame Bernice and a peacock named Ermenegildo.

In some ways a reworking of *City of Night* but with the added emphases on gender and race that are seen in books like *Bodies and Souls* and *Marilyn’s Daughter*, *The Coming of the Night* (1999, Grove Press) follows multiple characters as they all wind their way towards a “showdown” at a park where a young gay man named Jesse wants to celebrate his birthday by having a sexual encounter. He fatefully meets a man who is intent upon initiating Jesse into hardcore sex (namely, fisting). Meanwhile, we also come across Orville, a “black cowboy” who has a complex relationship to sexuality and race, an aging gay man who is alone, and characters from earlier Rechy novels, such as Mandy Lange-Jones, a newscaster. In 2003 Rechy publishes *The Life and Adventures of Lyle Clemens* (Grove Press), which is also similar to *Marilyn’s Daughter* and *Bodies and Souls* in that it features a complex cast of characters yet follows one main protagonist (Lyle II) in his search for identity. Like *Our Lady of Babylon*, it also contains more fantastical or obviously fictional elements in a move away from Rechy’s more realistic fiction. The overt references to Fielding’s *Tom Jones* (1749) and the stylistic similarities could be seen as an attempt by Rechy to further cement his identity as a writer (as opposed to a gay writer or a Chicano writer).

Finally, in 2004 Rechy’s previously published articles, book reviews and online essays were collected in *Beneath the Skin* (Carroll & Graf), and this was followed by his memoir, *About My Life and the Kept Woman* (2008, Grove Press). In many ways one of his strongest books to date, *About My Life* foregrounds the fact that memory is fickle and that any narration involves a certain amount of fiction. The book is structured around the young John Rechy’s (fictional?) memories of a beautiful “loose” woman who creates controversy and intrigue by daring to attend her brother’s wedding despite her reputation as the “kept woman” of a married man in Mexico. Nevertheless, like Rechy (and also echoing *The Miraculous Day*’s ending), Marisa Guzman declares that she is not ashamed of herself (356) despite what her critics say.

Methodology

This dissertation examines the response of implied or textually-constructed readers of different genders, ethnicities and sexual orientations to Rechy’s work and the reception of Rechy’s work by actual readers at three different levels: first, I focus on how scholars and book reviewers dealt with (or ignored) the theme of reading and intertextuality in his texts, and then I examine the responses of everyday readers of Rechy’s books who wrote letters to newspapers or even to Rechy himself in response to his writing, as well as the responses of readers who respond to Rechy’s work online, via

social review sites like *Goodreads* and on user-created blogs. Finally, I document and analyze Chicano/a and transnational LGBTQ authors who quote him in their own published work, or who make significant references to Rechy in interviews or nonfiction pieces. Given Rechy's multiple readerships that I know of (French, U.S., British, Chicano, LGBTQ), and his own wide literary and popular culture tastes, I read his work across those literary traditions. I also consider the reception of his work in these different categories of readers, with an emphasis on U.S., LGBTQ and Chicano readerships, while acknowledging that many of these categories and subsets overlap (e.g., LGBTQ Chicano/a readers).

My work also relies on close readings of primary documents such as letters between Rechy and his editors, drafts of his books and unpublished writings, and his published short stories, novels and articles. I identify key passages where the act of reading itself is portrayed or analyzed, as well as references to other literary texts and authors. I also identify metaliterary references, which are present in all of the texts I will be analyzing. The secondary texts provide evidence of popular and scholarly readings of these texts, which I then analyze to see how this may have changed over time. For example, when *City of Night* was first published, there was no mention of this work in the Chicano/a literary community (as far as I can tell thus far), yet Alfred Chester with the *New York Review of Books* wrote a (negative) review of the novel. As John Rechy himself has noted in interviews, his novel was received very poorly by critics, but it had very high sales—he apparently expected the opposite to happen.

In order to examine the impact of publishers, editors and other factors on Rechy's published work, and to further explore his connections with different authors and texts, I conducted archival research at Boston University's Howard Gotlieb Center, home of the John Rechy Collection, and also visited the Mandeville Special Collections Archive at the University of California, San Diego where I found correspondence predating the publication of *City of Night* between Rechy and Donald Allen, his first editor at Grove Press. I also visited the University of Texas at Austin's Nettie Lee Benson Latin American Collection in order to trace the impact that John Rechy might have had on her work, because in *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Gloria Anzaldúa mentions that *City of Night* was the first Chicano novel she ever read.

Theoretical Framework: Reader Response and Reception Theories

Authors employ various textual strategies not only for stylistic and thematic reasons, but also in order to engage their readers. For example, readers might derive a sense of satisfaction from references to literary texts, popular media and cultural elements that only certain readers will understand, as they might have a deeper understanding of the text as a result of those references. These kinds of readers are made to feel like “insiders.” On the other hand, explanations that decode and translate foreign or unfamiliar ideas or cultures show that the author is probably also writing for readers who are “outsiders.” Sometimes the authors themselves are insiders or self-proclaimed “outsiders” who have managed to get access to or gain an understanding of a certain culture, whether that is an ethnic group, religious group, or a subculture, which in the case of John Rechy's early

novels is the world of male hustling and cruising in big cities across the U.S. What makes a reader response and reception theory approach to John Rechy's work particularly helpful is how it provides a more democratic way of determining the significance and aesthetic quality of Rechy's work, by illuminating how readers of different nationalities, genders, sexual orientations and ethnic backgrounds might respond (and have actually responded in the past and present) to Rechy's work. I principally rely upon reader reception and response theories, which means that I consider the literary repertoire, ideal reader, and the ongoing critical and popular reception of Rechy's body of work. I also analyze paratextual elements such as the title, epigraphs, cover art, book jacket and marketing materials.

Some scholars use elements of reader response theory or reception theory in their work without explicitly labeling it as such, but in general, it is still not a common approach in critical literary studies in the U.S. In "The Reception of Reader-Response Theory" (2005), Patricia Harkin explores why reader response theory appears to have fallen out of favor with literature, composition and rhetoric professors and scholars. She explains: "if the [high] theory boom was to remain elitist, it had to deauthorize reader-response [theory]. If reader-response was to remain populist, it had to consent to and participate in that deauthorization" (415). She argues that reader-response theory became "naturalized," and its clear pedagogical implications (making reading teachable) "disqualif[ied] Iser from further serious consideration" (416). Similarly, in 1989, Robert C. Holub published an article about the U.S. reception of reception theory, writing that it "continues to be an optional and marginal theoretical tendency in the United States" (213). He posits that this is because

it [reception theory] has never been perceived as a radical departure from more familiar approaches; it has appeared more traditional, more conservative, and more commonplace than the most popular forms of reader-response criticism and almost all varieties of post-structuralism, especially deconstruction (Holub 214).

Holub's argument would explain why reception theory is not often favored by scholars who study marginalized literatures, although there are a few scholars within Chicano/a and LGBTQ literary studies who do use this methodology and reader response, as I will discuss below. Their work demonstrates the ability of these approaches to read literary texts as fiction while also taking into account the cultural and historical context in which the texts were written and read over time, as does this study.

In *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (1978), Wolfgang Iser proposes that the role of the interpreter (critic) should be

not to explain a work, but to reveal the conditions that bring about its various possible effects. If he clarifies the *potential* of a text, he will no longer fall into the fatal trap of trying to impose one meaning on his reader, as if that were the right, or at least the best, interpretation (18, emphasis in original).

In the case of Rechy's work, it has been particularly tempting for critics to read his work with a journalistic, sociological and biographical emphasis, because of the realism of his

early work, and the fact that Rechy has shared in interviews and sometimes within the text of his books some of the confluences between his life and his writing. Unfortunately, this emphasis closes off the possibilities and openness of the text. Furthermore, the scholarship up to this point has not considered how a female (and/or) lesbian reader might respond to Rechy's work, perhaps because it was clear that female readers were not the intended audience of his early novels, although as I demonstrate in Chapters Two and Three, female readers, including lesbians, have read and continue to read his early novels. Thus, using the concept of the "implied reader" when considering the response of an imagined lesbian reader helps re-open Rechy's texts to different interpretations.

In Chicano/a literary scholarship, while some scholars draw on reader response and reception methods, few explicitly label it as such, with the notable exception of Manuel M. Martín-Rodríguez. He pairs the reader response theory of Wolfgang Iser with Ángel Rama's concept of "transculturación" (writing about one culture for a readership of a different culture). In "The Act of Reading Chicano/a Texts: Strategies for Creating a Multicultural Readership" (1999), Martín-Rodríguez uses Rama's concept to modify Wolfgang Iser's concept of the literary "repertoire," or "references to earlier works, or to social and historical norms, or to the whole culture from which the text has emerged" (Iser 69). Martín-Rodríguez writes that "'transculturation' [...] account[s] for the act of mediation or translation that occurs when an author familiar with one culture writes for a readership that is unfamiliar with that culture" (19). This modification encourages scholars to take into consideration the cultural background of the author and the implied and actual readers. Rama's transculturación applies to some of Rechy's writing on the Chicano community, though I also apply this concept to readers of different sexual orientation and gender. Rechy's works engage heterosexual and LGBTQ readers in different ways, with some texts acting as an intragroup critique (for the gay community that was engaging in S/M, for example), as a guide for gay readers who might be unfamiliar with the gay cruising and hustling scene in big cities, and as a "tour" for heterosexual readers.

I also rely on reception theory (and reader response theory) to examine the responses of professional (book reviewer), scholarly and "everyday" readers. I rely on Hans Robert Jauss' concept of the "horizon of expectations" in *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception* (1982) in order to examine how reader's prior reading experiences and the sociocultural context in which Rechy's work first appeared affected initial responses to his work. In my discussion of the international intertextual references within Rechy's work (Chapter One) and the transcultural and transnational references to Rechy's work in other texts, I draw on Martín-Rodríguez's suggestion that "[...] Chicano literary history should [...] explore the links that connect Chicano writers and readers with literary traditions outside the Southwest" ("A Net Made of Holes," 17-18). It is through intertextual references that I explore these links within and (principally) outside of the Chicano/a literary community.

When examining the theoretical implied readers and actual reader responses, I also keep in mind Gloria Anzaldúa's discussion of gender and sexual orientation and how that can affect a reader's understanding of a text:¹⁰

[...] I venture to say that to read with a queer *facultad* would mean “to ‘see into’ and ‘see through’ unconscious falsifying disguises by penetrating the surface and reading underneath the words and between the lines.... For me then it is a question of whether the individual reader is in possession of a mode of reading that can read the subtext, and can introject her experiences into the gaps. Some conventionally trained readers do not have the flexibility (in identity) nor the patience in deciphering a ‘strange,’ that is, different, text” (“To(o) Queer the Writer,” 238).

Anzaldúa importantly also notes that sometimes “straight, white, academic women” can also read in this way:

However, there are straight, white, academic women who sometimes ‘see into’ and ‘see through’ to unconscious falsifying disguises by penetrating the surface and reading underneath the words and between the lines. As outsiders, they may see through what I’m trying to say better than an insider (272).

Lillian Manzor-Coates draws on this concept in her introduction to *Latin American Writers on Gay and Lesbian Themes: A Bio-critical Sourcebook* (1994), where she suggests that rather than focusing on authorial “sensibilities,” scholars examine those of the reader: “...instead of focusing solely on gay or lesbian aesthetics in a text we should recast our concerns and focus on a gay or lesbian reading sensibility—in other words, in reading with a “queer *facultad*” (faculty), as Gloria Anzaldúa has suggested” (xxx). She writes that Anzaldúa’s concept addresses the “oversights” of “the now classical approaches to reader response criticism” that “overlooked issues of race, gender, class and sexuality” and “the nature of the reading material” (xxxii).

My dissertation illustrates the importance of keeping in mind that a “gay or lesbian reading sensibility” or “queer *facultad*” should be understood to be a social construction that not all LGBTQ readers will have, and therefore not all LGBTQ readers will have the same interpretation or understanding of a text. I agree with Anzaldúa that one’s gender and/or sexual orientation can sometimes allow that reader to better “read the subtext,” although that means that the reader can relate to the experiences being narrated, or is familiar with the literary and/or cultural intertexts (such as references to LGBTQ authors, texts, places, etc.). Again, not all LGBTQ readers will share those experiences or intertexts, perhaps because of differences in class, nationality, ethnicity, literacy, or other differences. Furthermore, my dissertation does not focus solely on a LGBTQ “reading sensibility” but rather on the intertextual references and narratives that might resonate with different kinds of readers. The framework I use when examining the responses of

¹⁰ In *Reading Chican@ Like a Queer: The De-Mastery of Desire* (2010) Sandra K. Soto uses this approach to do a “queer reading” of Chicano/a texts that are not always written by LGBTQ authors, which I further explore in Chapter Three.

actual readers, particularly in blogs that are directed towards LGBTQ or Chicano/a readers, is Stanley Fish's concept of "interpretive communities":

Interpretive communities are made up of those who share interpretive strategies not for reading (in the conventional sense) but for writing texts, for constituting their properties and assigning their intentions. In other words, these strategies exist prior to the act of reading and therefore determine the shape of what is read [...] (*Is There a Text in This Class?* 171).

Fish also notes that some individual readers belong to different interpretive communities, and writes that the interpretive strategies "are not natural or universal, but learned" (172). I find that this is a useful way of talking about the sometimes-similar responses of LGBTQ and/or Chicano/a readers to Rechy's work without falling into the trap of essentializing readers. However, Anzaldúa's observations remind us to consider gender and sexual orientation when thinking about interpretive communities and their strategies.

Literature Review

Before *City Of Night* was published in 1963, the U.S. author Terry Southern wrote about one of Rechy's published excerpts from his novel-in-progress in *The Nation*. Southern's article "Miller: Only the Beginning" (1961) is largely about Henry Miller's narrative style, and he mentions Rechy's distinctive narrative voice "[t]his form—the narrative using a wholly created, but entirely convincing *I*—is one of the great forms of the future, even as it is today, in the work, for example, of William Burroughs and John Rechy" (401). That same year, sociologist Albert J. Reiss Jr. draws on Rechy's "The Fabulous Wedding of Miss Destiny" and "A Quarter Ahead" as source texts for information on how male hustlers conceive of themselves in terms of sexual identity (103-4). Terry Southern later writes again about Rechy in "Rechy and Gover" within *Contemporary American Novelists* (1964), this time discussing romantic agony and narrative style in *City of Night*, alongside analyses of Henry Miller, Robert Gover's novel *One Hundred Dollar Misunderstanding* (1962) and *The Maniac Responsible* (1963). Southern also notes Rechy's stylistic similarities to Thomas Wolfe. This same year, another scholarly discussion of Rechy's work situates *City of Night* in a homosexual U.S. context. In "The Cities of Night: John Rechy's 'City of Night' and the American Literature of Homosexuality" (1964), Stanton Hoffman compares Rechy's work to Gore Vidal's *The City and the Pillar* (1946) and James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* (1956). Hoffman suggests that Rechy's novel turns the "gay world" (a construct that Hoffman creates to describe the performance of stereotypical gay identity in a sort of ghetto) into a metaphor that critiques America, rather than focusing on "the interior life of homosexuality" (205). Hoffman instead appears to favor "non American novels" that explore more variations within homosexuality and are less polemical and pornographic (206).

Rechy's work receives international attention from Dennis Altman in *Homosexual Oppression and Liberation* (1971), who writes that "The very furtiveness and outlaw status of the gayworld has led to its greater integration across color lines" (201), although

he mistakenly refers to Rechy as “a white from Texas” (201) in his comparison of *City of Night* with Charles Wright’s book *The Messenger* (1963). He also notes that while Rechy’s first two novels “enjoyed a vogue among the America avant-garde,” it “is fashionable to denigrate Rechy as a writer” (34). He then states that “straight reviewers” miss the fact that Rechy’s work at the very least “convey[s] some part of the pain of being homosexual in our society” (35).

James R. Giles, currently a distinguished professor emeritus of Northern Illinois University and a specialist in 19th- and 20th-century American literature, was the first scholar to write extensively about Rechy’s work, and he continues to include Rechy in recent publications, such as “The City Novel” in the 2010 *Companion to Twentieth-Century United States Fiction* (34). In his first article to discuss Rechy’s work, “Larry McMurtry’s *Leaving Cheyenne* and the Novels of John Rechy: Four Trips Along the Mythical Pecos” (1972), Giles argues for considering Rechy a Texas writer in spite of his unconventional subject matter and the seeming emphasis on Los Angeles in his early novels. He and his wife Wanda H. Giles also published an interview with John Rechy in the *Chicago Review* in 1973, and the following year James Giles compares the themes of alienation and homosexuality in the article “Religious Alienation and ‘Homosexual Consciousness’ in *City of Night* and *Go Tell It On the Mountain*” (1974). He observes that Baldwin and Rechy “belong[ed] to two ‘minority groups’” and that

neither writer often unites ethnic and homosexual protest in his fiction. Except in the first section of *City of Night*, Chicano identity is not stressed in Rechy’s fiction. He does publish non-fiction essays frequently in such journals as *The Texas Observer*, essays centered around unmistakable Chicano pride (376).

Emmanuel S. Nelson’s “John Rechy, James Baldwin and the American Double Minority Literature” advances similar claims in 1983, along with the observation that Rechy’s “unwillingness to combine racial protest with homosexual revolt probably explains much of the critical silence on his ethnicity and its impact on his field (Nelson 70). Giles’ article appears in a special *College English* issue titled “The Homosexual in Literature,” and an article about teaching “Homosexuals and Literature” by Arnie Kantowitz includes *City of Night* in the syllabus. The following year, another pedagogical piece on homosexuality, “A Propos the Teaching of a Gaelic Course” by Bernhard Frank, appears in *College English* (1975).

Honora (Lynch) Finkelstein’s dissertation on Rechy’s work appears in 1976, and she examines all of Rechy’s published work up to that point (*The Sexual Outlaw* had not yet appeared), as well as drafts and unpublished pieces in his archives, and she interviews John Rechy as well. Her emphasis is on existentialism in Rechy’s work, and she also discusses a few key intertextual references in Rechy’s books, such as Dante’s *Inferno* from *The Divine Comedy*. This is the only book-length study of Rechy’s work.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s gay literature in the U.S. begins to become more accepted and a plethora of books appear, as well as the gay journal *Gai Saber*. In the second issue James William Clay writes about “Self and Roles in Relation to the Process of Writing in Jean Genet’s *Journal du voleur* and John Rechy’s *City of Night*” (1977). Early books, none of which are published by academic presses, include Roger Austen’s

Playing the Game: The Homosexual Novel in America (1977), Stephen Adam's *The Homosexual as Hero in Cotemporary Fiction* (1980), and James Levin's *The Gay Novel: The Male Homosexual Image in America* (1983).¹¹ Beginning with *Playing the Game*, written by Austen, who was a contributing editor of the gay West Coast newspaper *The Sentinel*, only two out of Rechy's five books published up to that point were discussed: *City of Night* and *Numbers*, although Austen stated that his book would only examine "male-oriented novels written by Americans before 1965" (xiii). He describes *City of Night* as "perhaps the most ambitious and sweeping work of gay fiction to come out during the decade" (205), and he discusses some of the literary influences (Thomas Wolfe, Jack Kerouac and Tennessee Williams). Levin's *The Gay Novel* (1983) discussed *City of Night* in some depth, noting how Rechy's depiction of male hustling "allowed readers to satisfy prurient interest in a special part of the homosexual subculture while still feeling morally superior" (197). He also writes that *Rushes* (1979) "masters the dialogue, the poses, and the subtle styles of rejection" (301). He does not discuss *Numbers*, *This Day's Death*, or *The Sexual Outlaw*, and only lists *The Vampires* with other novels from 1971. Finally, in *The Homosexual as Hero*, Stephen Adams does not mention *This Day's Death*, *The Vampires*, *The Fourth Angel* or *Rushes*. Like Austen, Adams compares *City of Night* with Kerouac's *On The Road* (1957), and he also offers an extensive analysis of the novel and of *Numbers*, and only briefly describes *The Sexual Outlaw*. He argues that Rechy's protagonists are "outlaws... invest[ed]... with heroic values—in his later works, more and more shrilly" (84).

Rechy's work also faces one of its first critics within the emerging U.S. LGBTQ scholarly community in "Contemporary Homosexual Fiction and the Gay Rights Movement" by Trudy Steuernagel (1986). She compares Patricia Nell Warren's *The Front-Runner* (1974) with Rechy's *City of Night*, *Numbers* and *Rushes*. Steuernagel argues that while the protagonist of *City of Night* understandably "rejects the goals and values of a society that would make him miserable," and remarks that "[a]ny movement for human liberation needs this kind of image," she does not approve of his later novels because they "present an image of homosexuality that is potentially destructive and harmful to the goals of the gay liberation movement" (132).¹² Outside of the U.S., a small handful of French theorists and scholars also wrote about Rechy's work during this time period. Guy Hocquenghem writes about "Le theater 'cuir' [queer] de John Rechy" for *Les Nouvelles littéraires* in 1980 (which I further discuss in Chapter Three), and Jeanine Parot examines *City of Night* in "Soi l'un... soi l'autre: Frontières réelles et mythiques de l'homosexualité dans 'City of Night' de John Rechy" (1986), which is followed by Jean Cazemajou's "La longue Quête d'un Chicano dans la nuit 'électrique' de l'Amérique souterraine" (1988).

¹¹ In 1982, Ben Satterfield publishes "John Rechy's Tormented World" in the journal *Southwest Review*, which is published by Southern Methodist University Press. Like some of the early book reviewers, Satterfield describes Rechy's characters as "aberrant" and "deviant," and argues that his work "demonstrate[s] the disastrous result of the failure to love" and thus is a "negative demonstration[n] of a very positive and moral appeal" (84).

¹² According to the Gay Liberation Front's *Manifesto* (London, 1971, revised 1978), their goals centered on ending "discrimination against gay people, male and female, by the law, by employers, and by society at large" (Gay Liberation Front).

I would now like to turn to the first mentions of John Rechy's work by Chicano/a scholars, itself an emerging field in the 1970s. Writing in "The Chicano Renaissance" in 1971, Phillip D. Ortego acknowledges Rechy's Mexican-American identity, but problematically claims that his work is not Mexican:

Until the 1960s, fiction, such as Floyd Salas's *Tattoo the Wicked Cross* and John Rechy's *City of Night*, was rare. Both authors are Mexican-American writers who have penetrated the literary iron curtain not as ethnic writers but just as writers. This success simply attests to the fact that, as black writers who have written nonblack works, Mexican-American writers are capable of writing *non-Mexican works* (Phillip D. Ortego, "The Chicano Renaissance," 344, emphasis mine).

It is now *de rigeur* within the Chicano/a scholarly community to open any article about John Rechy's work with a brief history of his rocky reception by scholars of Chicano/a literature early on due to the homosexual themes in his work, as evidenced in the quote from 1971 above.¹³ Rechy's work was not widely recognized as Chicano literature until the late 1970s, but this does not mean that individual Chicano/a readers were not familiar with his work.¹⁴ In fact, one of the first people to label John Rechy and his novels as "Chicano" in writing was John Womack, Jr., a historian who specializes in Mexico and Latin America. Writing in 1972 for the *New York Review of Books* on the topic of Chicanos, he argued that, up to that point, Mexican American's own accounts of their experiences were superior to that of the accounts of non-Mexican Americans. He also wrote that Rechy's novels were the "most competent" of the Mexican American novelists in narrating those experiences: "[m]issed by sociologists and historians, the quality of 'Mexican American' experiences is clearest in 'Mexican American' narrations of them. The judgment required in this art has so far eluded the novelists; the most competent is John Rechy" (n.p.).

Simultaneously, one of Rechy's short pieces that first appeared in Grove Press's literary magazine *Evergreen Review* in 1958 was included in the following Chicano/a anthologies: *Literatura chicana: texto y context* (1972) and later in *Chicano Voices* (1975). Both anthologies edit out a paragraph mentioning "fairies" in "El Paso del Norte," allowing them to include Rechy without including his problematic sexuality, and they also do not mention his novels. The first published instance of a Chicano/a scholar accepting Rechy's early novels as Chicano literature appears in *Chicano Perspectives in Literature: A Critical and Annotated Bibliography* (1976), edited by Francisco Lomeli and Donaldo W. Urioste. However, for reasons that are unclear, they do not include summaries of *Numbers* or *The Vampires*. Rechy is also included in an entry by Julio A. Martinez in *Chicano Scholars and Writers: A Bio-Bibliographical Directory* (1979).

¹³ In 2010 Phillip D. Ortego (under the name Felipe de Ortego y Gasca) revised his position on Rechy, writing in "Chicano Writers and the Art of the Novel" that "[i]t turned out, John Rechy was among the first of the Chicano novelists in that first decade (1960-1969) of the Chicano era, publishing *Numbers* in 1967 and *This Day's Death* in 1969" (n.p.). It is not clear why he does not include *City of Night*.

¹⁴ Rechy's occasional journalistic writings in Texas newspapers might have exposed Mexican-American (and Texan) readers to his non-fiction work.

The first analytical piece on Rechy's work by a scholar of Chicano literature might have occurred during a conference. Juan Bruce-Novoa writes that "[i]n 1974, just before I presented my concept of Chicano literary space in a forum outside of the classroom, I was told by the then foremost Chicano critic that I could not include John Rechy among Chicano writers" ("Surviving Our Decade," *Retrospace* 129). Bruce-Novoa would go on to publish on Rechy's work and the reception of Rechy by the Chicano scholarly community in at least five pieces, from 1978 to 2001. Three articles by Juan Bruce-Novoa, Charles Tatum and Carlos Zamora appeared in a special issue on Rechy's work published in *Minority Voices* in 1979. In the article "In Search of the Honest Outlaw" (1979), Juan Bruce-Novoa focuses on the tension between what he terms Apollonian and Dionysian impulses in Rechy's writing. He writes about the evolution of the Rechian protagonist's position between the poles of order (including his identification with the implied author and the creative act of writing) and chaos (in this case, the identification with the hustler identity), paying particular attention to *City of Night*, *Numbers*, and *The Sexual Outlaw*. However, he also briefly mentions *The Vampires*, *The Fourth Angel* and *This Day's Death*. He argues that the "schizophrenic" split image of Rechy as hustler/writer in his early novels "threatened to impose a false image of a man unable or unwilling to deal with life, his own in all its dimensions," and suggests that he resolved this "in the form—literally speaking—and content of *The Sexual Outlaw*" (42). He notes that in this book, Rechy writes in multiple narrative voices (third and first person), and reveals much more about his sexuality and identity as a writer:

What we have, then, is Rechy, the author, and Rechy, the hustler, joined in the form of Rechy the sexual rebel, prophet of gay liberation, an intellectual capable of articulating the demands and direction of the gay movement from a basis of real and continual life experience (44).

Bruce-Novoa was instrumental in highlighting Rechy's absence in Chicano/a literary criticism, and arguing for his inclusion throughout his career. Karen Christian detailed this struggle over inclusion and the idea of an authentic Chicano/a in "Will the 'Real Chicano' Please Stand Up? The Challenge of John Rechy and Sheila Ortiz Taylor to Chicano Essentialism" (1989). Karl J. Reinhardt more broadly explored the depiction of homosexuals in Chicano/a literature, and also pointed out the selective inclusion of Rechy's work in early Chicano/a anthologies in his article "The Image of Gays in Chicano Prose Fiction" (1981). He also observes that in Rechy's novels, there are no other Chicano homosexual characters aside from the narrator (47). Also, much like James Giles, John Chávez considers Rechy's contribution to Chicano/a literature of the Southwest in *The Lost Land: The Chicano Image of the Southwest* (1984). To summarize, prior to the 1990s, nine scholars in the fields of Chicano/a Studies and Chicano/a Literature published 10 articles on Rechy (Bruce-Novoa published five out of the 10 articles, and I do not include bibliographic entries or anthologies).

In the 1990s, the analysis of Rechy's work is dominated by Chicano/a literature scholars, but there are a few articles by scholars who examine his work within the context of (non-Chicano/a) LGBTQ literature or U.S. literature, and the changing social mores are apparent in their analyses. Some scholars focused on Rechy's early work as a

“guidebook” for homosexual readers, while others viewed it as a book written to titillate a non-homosexual readership. In *Homosexual Themes in Literary Studies* (1992), Wayne Dynes and Stephen Donaldson categorize *City of Night* under the sub-heading “gay-directed novel”:

In the United States, the first widely successful gay-directed novel was James Barr’s *Quatrefoil* [1950]. . . . A long hiatus followed before John Rechy’s *City of Night* (1963) had a major impact with its gritty semi-autobiographical depiction of the ephebophilic world of male prostitution (“Introduction,” xv).

In Gregory Woods’ book *A History of Gay Literature: The Male Tradition* (1998), he also notes the fact that gay U.S. literature was directed towards gay readers even during the 1960s. He discusses the production, reception and intended audience of gay literature between the 1960s and 1980s, and I draw on this in Chapter One. However, Woods does not mention *This Day’s Death*, *The Vampires*, *The Fourth Angel*, *Rushes*, or *Bodies and Souls* in his discussion of Rechy’s work.

Terry Woods compares *City of Night* with other gay U.S. writers such as Andrew Holleran, Joe Orton and Hart Crane in “Starless and Black: Alienation in Gay Literature” (1990). While he appears to conflate Rechy with the narrator of *City of Night*, Woods provides a useful comparison between Rechy and the gay U.S. novelist Andrew Holleran, and like Honora Lynch, he focuses on the theme of alienation, though solely within a gay context. Carole-Anne Tyler focuses on the role of transvestites in literature in “Boys Will Be Girls: Drag and Transvestite Fetishism” (1991). She argues that the protagonist of *City of Night* experiences a moment of self-knowledge that is triggered by his identification with a drag queen (Kathy): “He understands that like Kathy he is only a man and not what he must seem to be in the comedy of sexual relations” (388). In *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault* (1991), Jonathan Dollimore examines the theme of dissidence in *The Sexual Outlaw* and *Rushes*, noting that Rechy romanticizes his “outlaws” while simultaneously “interrogat[ing] that romanticism from within” gay culture (213). He argues that *The Sexual Outlaw* is particularly significant because it depicts and “attempt[s] to integrate, two strands of liberation: anarchic desire and political engagement” (213). During the 1990s, the other significant scholarly work on Rechy outside of Chicano/a literature includes a chapter and an article by James Giles, “‘Hey, World,’: John Rechy’s *City of Night*” in his book *The Naturalistic Inner-City Novel in America: Encounters with the Fat Man* (1995) and “Hubert Selby, John Rechy, and Latter-Day Naturalism” (1997), which draws on his work in the book. Giles argues that the works of Rechy, alongside that of authors such as Hubert Selby, Joyce Carol Oates and Richard Wright, differ from earlier depictions of the U.S. inner-city because, in the case of Selby and Rechy, the narrative humanizes those living in the inner-city, often because the narrator identifies with the denizens.

In Chicano/a literary scholarship on Rechy in the 1990s, there are a series of articles and book chapters that connect Rechy to the burgeoning subcategory of LGBTQ Chicano/a literature. I will save my discussion of an ongoing debate between LGBTQ Chicano/a scholars for the end of the literature review, even though it begins in the 1990s, and instead focus now on other Chicano/a scholarship on Rechy from this time period.

Juan Bruce-Novoa continued to publish on Rechy's work in various outlets, and he reprinted several of these essays and conference proceedings in *Retrospace: Collected Essays on Chicano Literature* (1990). In the third volume of *The Handbook of Hispanic Cultures in the United States: Literature and Art* (1993), two essays include John Rechy in their discussions of Chicano/a literature. Francisco Lomelí writes in "Contemporary Chicano Literature, 1959-1990: From Oblivion to Affirmation to the Forefront" that the protagonist of *City of Night*'s "main concern is not ethnicity or cultural antecedents but rather his true self in sexual and psychological terms" (89), in contrast with later Chicano/a texts during the Chicano Movement. Within the same volume, in "Aesthetic Concepts of Latino Literature," Martín-Rodríguez states that Rechy's literary output "constitute[s] an important contribution to Chicano literature because of their almost documental verism" (17). He is probably referring to Rechy's first three novels, because some of Rechy's experimental novels of the 1970s and *Marilyn's Daughter* (1988) do not necessarily fit this description of "documental verism," and in 1993 Rechy had not yet published his more imaginative texts such as *Our Lady of Babylon* (1996) and *The Life and Adventures of Lyle Clemens* (2003). This same year (1993), Ramón Gutiérrez writes about the impact of patriarchy in the Chicano/a movement on Rechy's status within Chicano/a literature: "It was his name, his homosexuality, and the themes he explored in print that excluded him from the community young men defined as Chicano" (371). He also notes that

Rechy's novels were intellectual forerunners to postmodernism among Mexican Americans. The themes of marginality, of fractured identities, of suspension betwixt and between worlds, were themes he first articulated, but which would not emerge again until 1987. In that year Gloria Anzaldúa's book, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* appeared (371-2).

Ricardo Ortiz published four articles about Rechy in the 1990s. The first, "Sexuality Degree Zero: Pleasure and Power in the Novels of John Rechy, Arturo Islas, and Michael Nava" (1993) situates Rechy amongst other gay Chicano authors. His second article situates him alongside a gay British-American author, in "Rechy, Isherwood and the Numbers Game" (1994), drawing on the intertextual reference to Christopher Isherwood in *Numbers*. Ortiz writes that in *Numbers*, Johnny Rio recounts his sexual "game" for "the prurient fascination" of the "culturally elite," literally an "audience of Isherwoods" (510). He then compares *Numbers* with Isherwood's *A Single Man*, noting how Isherwood is "more firmly inscribed in the dominant narrative of literary success..." and is "in a position to patronize Rechy, to be his patron or substitute father" (510). While I agree about Ortiz's first assertion, his second point about Isherwood acting as a substitute father is unconvincing. Because Rio refuses to sleep with Sebastian, and because Sebastian does not financially support Rio, it seems unlikely that he is meant to have a fatherly role, unlike the man that Rio tries to reconnect with in the beginning of *Numbers*. Instead, it seems like a loose interpretation meant to bridge the gap to his next, more interesting claim—that the inability to have a reciprocal gay relationship is akin to his separation from his mother and ethnic identity. He argues that this is part of an oedipal impulse in Rechy, with "his male protagonists always leav[ing]

the maternal space of their origins in search of the love and protection of an infinite number of fathers, patrons, or better put, ‘daddies’, of whom Isherwood is a prime example” (512). Again, I generally agree with Ortiz’s analysis of Rechy’s protagonists, yet I disagree with the assertion that Isherwood is a “prime example” of a father or patron (or sugar daddy). Instead, I see the scenes with Sebastian Michaels/Isherwood as a metaphor for Rechy’s desire to have his work taken seriously. He engages in a direct dialogue with an elite gay readership, with a critique of their inability (or unwillingness) to take Rechy’s work seriously, their discomfort with promiscuous sexuality, and a further discomfort with openly engaging in meaningful self-reflection.

The following year Ortiz publishes “John Rechy and the Grammar of Ostentation” (1995), a more personal discussion of Ortiz’s reading of Rechy’s aestheticized performance of his sexual and cultural identity, including his choice to avoid labeling himself as a Chicano author (68). Finally, in 1998 Ortiz publishes “L.A. Women: Jim Morrison with John Rechy,” in which Ortiz attempts to “read” Morrison’s ambiguous lyrics alongside Rechy’s *City of Night* and U.S. Beat writers such as Jack Kerouac and William Burroughs. He argues that Morrison’s “lyrical citations” of the prior authors are an “appeal to a queer genealogy” (399), and he performs a queer reading of several songs on the album *Break on Through* in part by examining more closely their intertextual references to Rechy’s novel.

Rafael Pérez-Torres analyzes Rechy’s *The Sexual Outlaw*, drawing on the theoretical work of Mikhail Bakhtin, and Deleuze and Guattari’s concepts of deterritorialization and reterritorialization in “The Ambiguous Outlaw: John Rechy and Complicitous Homotextuality” (1994). In this important piece, Pérez-Torres notes that *The Sexual Outlaw* still relies on a “heterosocial” binary way of examining the world, yet it also “replicates, doubles, refutes, and challenges those signs of repression and discord that map the delimiting and silencing geography through and against which the male sexual outlaw acts” (223). On a different note, Carl Gutiérrez-Jones’s emphasis is on the “cultural constitution of illegality” in *The Miraculous Day of Amalia Gómez*, in his article “Desiring B/orders” (1995). He discusses the role of Rosario, Amalia’s coworker who tries to encourage the other workers to unionize and look at what is happening around them, and the foregrounding of discourses and their effect on agency or choice in Rechy’s novel.

Alma Rosa Alvarez also analyzes *The Miraculous Day of Amalia Gómez*, but in “National Traitors in Chicano Culture and Literature: Malinche and Chicano Homosexuals” (1997), she focuses on the roles of Catholicism, Mexican/Chicano culture and nationalism in exiling homosexual Chicano/as from their families and their culture. She also briefly draws on the work of sociologist Tomás Almaguer, who I discuss in the final section of the literature review. Two years later, Luis León discusses the depiction of religion in *The Miraculous Day of Amalia Gómez*. He writes that

The Miraculous Day of Amalia Gómez is a religious myth inasmuch as Amalia reimagines the Catholicism she inherits in order to make it a source of hope and power in her struggle to survive, remaking her master religious narrative into a poetics of *redemption* [...] (207).

He also compares Rechy's novel with Rudolfo Anaya's novel *Bless Me, Ultima* (1972), arguing that the gender norms (such as the virginal holy woman) are flipped in Rechy's novel, where a woman who has had an abortion and has sex out of wedlock is nonetheless embraced by the Virgin de Guadalupe (207). He chooses to focus on *The Miraculous Day of Amalia Gómez* due to the plausibility of the characters and the "accurate portray[al] [of] the environment under which religious production occurs" in "Latino Los Angeles" (206). However, he also notes that "Chicano literature does not offer absolute or positive knowledge about religion, but it proposes instead rich representations of religious behavior and thought" (207).

David William Foster is the next scholar of Chicano literature to deeply engage with Rechy's work, and while he has published several articles and chapters about Rechy, I would like to focus here on *Sexual Textualities: Essays on Queer/ing Latin American Writing* (1997). He argues that Latin American concepts of sexuality play an important role in Chicano/a and Latino/a gay writing:

Works by Hispanic-identified authors in English are now, but not without some blurring of cultural boundaries between the American and the Hispanic, customarily used as disjunctive terms, generally considered American writing (e.g., work by John Rechy). Yet, to the extent that Chicano literature constitutes frontier writing, tied as it is to the specific space of the southwestern border between the United States and Latin America, one must take into account how it manifests both issues of general U.S. queer culture and issues of a particularly Latin American consciousness of sexuality (Foster *Sexual Textualities*, 15).

The only caveat I would raise with regards to what Foster says above is that Chicano/a literature is now not just about the border between the southwest of the U.S. and Latin America—Chicano/a literature is also in the Northwest of the U.S., the Northeast, and even the Midwest. Rechy's novels are set in Los Angeles, New York, Illinois, and New Orleans. Foster also takes issue with the fact that Rechy's work "provided an equally deleterious view of homoerotic preferences by failing to break away from the tragic mode that marked virtually every depiction of homosexual existence" (*Sexual Textualities* 76-77). Finally, Foster is one of the first Chicano literature scholars to discuss some of Rechy's lesser-known books, such as *Bodies and Souls* and *Marilyn's Daughter*. Foster argues that in Rechy's three books after *Rushes*, *Bodies and Souls*, *Marilyn's Daughter* and *The Miraculous Day* are not "specifically homoerotic depictions": "The proposition that I wish to make about Rechy's fiction in this period concerns not his turning away from gay or Chicano themes but his effort to depict a 'queer take' on the world" (*Sexual Textualities* 81).

After beginning with a brief discussion of "El Paso del Norte" being emblematic of Rechy's "border consciousness," in *Border Matters* (1997) José David Saldívar delves into *The Miraculous Day of Amalia Gómez*, which he describes as "Rechy's postnational Chicano fable" (109). As Frederick Luis Aldama later develops more fully in *Brown on Brown*, Saldívar compares the novel to Joyce's *Ulysses*, while also referring to Amalia as a flâneur (119). However, unlike Kenneth Roon Jr.'s discussion of the flâneur in *City of Night* (2009), Saldívar does not qualify his analogy with an acknowledgement of the

inherent class identity or status of the flâneur, who has time to leisurely walk around observing people. Finally, he argues that *The Miraculous Day* is both a realist novel and “an analogy for the oppressed and misunderstood artist Rechy himself,” (119). He also claims that Rechy is alluding to Adorno when he writes about the sensation of “having a loaded gun held to your head” (77, cited in Saldívar 119). It seems a stretch to assume that this is a reference to Adorno’s quote about the “office of art” resisting “the course of the world, which permanently puts a pistol to men’s heads” (305, cited in Saldívar 120). Marko Juvan writes in *History and Poetics of Intertextuality* (2008) that

A reader has to decide how to interpret correspondences between texts, textual elements or structures against “what has already been read” in order to determine whether those parallels are merely accidental or must be assigned some function and be considered in light of certain creative plan (145-146).

While readers can make connections to different texts they are familiar with, it is important to differentiate between an allusion that an individual reader might see versus an allusion that the author deliberately makes, which often requires archival work or an interview with the author.

In 2001, María DeGuzmán writes about the way in which *City of Night*’s protagonist cherishes familial ties to his mother even as the narrative displaces “blood ties [...] through an expanding network of remembered cities, strangers, and confessions” (181). “Turning Tricks: Trafficking in the Figure of the Latino” DeGuzman considers how the protagonist, and even Rechy himself, plays with idea of authenticity, illusion, and masks. Later, in 2003, a wide variety of articles and chapters appear on Rechy’s work. In “Grito, luego existo: La homosexualidad y la disidencia política en la narrativa de Reinaldo Arenas y John Rechy,” Diana Palaversich compares Rechy’s depiction of U.S. attitudes and laws surrounding homosexuality in *City of Night* and *The Sexual Outlaw* with the Cuban author Arenas’ depiction of the experience of homosexuals in Cuba in *Antes que anochezca*. She argues that despite their differences, in the 1960s and 1970s, the treatment of homosexuals living in Cuba and the U.S. was fairly similar (113).

Keith Harvey, whose work I discuss at greater length in Chapter Three, examines the French readership of Rechy’s works in *Intercultural Movements: ‘American Gay’ in French Translation*, and Robert McKee Irwin focuses on Mexican culture in *Mexican Masculinities*. In a chapter titled “Homosexual Panic,” Irwin compares Rechy’s *City of Night*, Américo Paredes’ *George Washington Gómez*, and Jose Antonio Villarreal’s *Pocho*, arguing that “[p]aternity is a key issue in all of these texts, particularly as it pertains to the personal development of the young sons who are their protagonists” (216). In his discussion of *City of Night*, Irwin focuses on the parallels between this novel and the work of Mexican authors Samuel Ramos and Xavier Villarrutia, although Rechy has stated that he has never read Villarrutia’s work.¹⁵ While the similarities in symbols (such as angels and flashing signs in Los Angeles) are fascinating, his analysis is strongest when he discusses how “[t]he queer masculinity of early Mexican American writers such as Villarreal and Rechy continue to play out the conflicts of Mexican masculinities, but

¹⁵ Interview, Beth Hernandez-Jason, October 21, 2012.

now in the geographical context of the United States” (223). Turning back to the United States, Michael Bronski’s *Pulp Friction: Uncovering the Golden Age of Gay Male Pulps* examines the function of pulp novels for gay readers. In the appendix, he briefly mentions Rechy’s *City of Night* and *Numbers*, and the way in which they differed from prior gay novels (363).

Three different texts that mention Rechy’s work to varying degrees appeared in 2004. Tim Libretti’s article “Sexual Outlaws and Class Struggle: Rethinking History and Class Consciousness from a Queer Perspective” provides a fascinating discussion of the tensions within the U.S. Socialist/left movement around homosexuality in particular and “identity politics” in general. He points to *The Sexual Outlaw* as illustrating “shared elements of the marginalized experience that create the conditions for a potential solidarity between homosexuals, working classes, and racially oppressed peoples” (156). He then focuses on how John Rechy and James Baldwin “represent their queer identities not in isolation but in dialectical relation to and interaction with their racial and class identities” (158-9). Unfortunately, his discussion of Rechy’s reception within Chicano literature is outdated, as he only relies on an early essay by Juan Bruce-Novoa (160). Alan Sinfield’s book *On Sexuality and Power* explores the “reconciliation of masculine and feminine qualities” in *City of Night* and Rechy’s anti-sadomasochism stance in *The Sexual Outlaw* (100). Sinfield is interested in the different power dynamics at play surrounding sexuality, whether it is around gender, race, age, or re-enacted in “the formalized role-play which we call ‘S/M’” (76).

In an essay that combines U.S. and Chicano/a literary traditions and cultures within *Latino and Latina Writers: Introductory Essays, Chicano and Chicana Authors* (2004), Patrick O’Connor’s encyclopedic essay on John Rechy’s work divides Rechy’s books into the following categories: “the gothic and documentary” early books from *City of Night* to *Rushes*, the realist Los Angeles-based melodrama of *Bodies and Souls* and *The Coming of the Night*, and finally the “feminine fictions” of *Marilyn’s Daughter*, *The Miraculous Day of Amalia Gómez*, and *Our Lady of Babylon*. O’Connor is an attentive and thorough reader of Rechy’s work, noting, for example, that in *The Miraculous Day*,

Amalia’s first son, Manny, is a rewriting, with very few details changed, of the first character vignette, ‘Manny,’ in *Bodies and Souls*, and the personality of that Manny is an expansion of the character of the same name in *The Fourth Angel*. In all these Manny characters, the rejection by the mother, although sometimes only temporary, fuels the son’s bad behavior and self-destructive impulses (n.p.).

O’Connor does not hesitate to pass judgment on the aesthetic qualities of Rechy’s work, for example writing that “[o]ne repeated aesthetic misjudgment in [*Marilyn’s Daughter*] is Rechy’s recourse to an exclamation-heavy, mass-market, pulp-novel style in order to portray Normalyn’s naiveté...” (n.p.). Furthermore, it is clear that he also takes issue with Rechy’s decision to not write about the AIDS crisis during the 1980s, and in his opinion, *The Coming of the Night* is disappointing because Rechy does not describe “any activism, grieving, or new personality types that may have arisen in the intervening two decades” between the publication of *City of Night* and this later book (n.p.). O’Connor concludes by arguing that “Rechy is central to the canon of mid-century American literature

because, as a loner, he is central to the canon of mid-century gay literature,” and he also can help “connect the canon of Latino literature to mid-century American literature” (n.p.).

In a chapter titled “John Rechy’s Bending of Brown and White Canons” within the book *Brown on Brown: Chicano/a Representations of Gender Sexuality and Ethnicity* (2005), Frederick Luis Aldama describes the reception of Rechy’s work by Chicano critics beginning with the 1979 issue of *Minority Voices* that featured three articles on Rechy’s work, through 2006. After this Chicano “critical genealogy,” Aldama aims to describe how *Numbers*, *This Day’s Death*, *The Sexual Outlaw*, and *The Miraculous Day of Amalia Gómez* “work as fiction to engage, and possibly transform, the imagination of his readers” (53). However, he ultimately details the combination of ethnic and queer elements in these books, while pointing out intertextual references to canonical world literature, without fully exploring how the intended, implied or actual readers are transformed by reading Rechy’s work. For example, in his discussion of *Numbers*, Aldama notes that the protagonist and narrator slowly merge, so the reader is “viewing” the world from Rio’s queer *pícaro* vantage point (55), yet he does not explore what it might mean for different readerships to feel like a participant in a gay cruising scene, or the possibility that the reader may not only identify with Rio but perhaps with the men who cruise Rio, sometimes with success, sometimes not. In his discussion of *This Day’s Death*, Aldama writes that “Jim’s relationship to his mother and his sexuality are powerfully linked,” with his mother representing his “racial subjectivity” (58). However, in some of the examples Aldama draws on, it is not clear if his mother represents motherhood, ethnic identity, sexual repression, or perhaps simply mortality, and the protagonist’s fear of her impending death. If it is the latter, the connection to the prior novel *Numbers* is much more clear.

Aldama insightfully points out the intertextual references Rechy makes to the work of James Joyce, Virginia Woolf and William Butler Yeats in *The Miraculous Day of Amalia Gómez* (1991), focusing particularly on how Amalia’s journey is modeled on *Ulysses*. However, Aldama does not explore what impact, if any, this has on Rechy’s readers, and he does not reflect on what this says about Rechy’s influences compared with other Chicano/a authors. Instead of drawing on Latin American, Mexican, or Chicano/a literary texts, Rechy connects his work with canonical world literature, and one other author who Aldama does not mention: Rechy himself. *The Miraculous Day of Amalia Gómez* features characters that appear in prior Rechy novels, such as Manny Gómez (*The Fourth Angel*, *Bodies and Souls*) and Mandy Lang Jones (*Bodies and Souls*).

Aside from David William Foster’s chapter on Rechy in *El Ambiente Nuestro*, which I have already discussed elsewhere, in 2006 all of the discussions of Rechy’s work did so within an American gay or working class (and not Chicano) context. Published the same year as her dissertation on the same topic, Jennifer Moon wrote about the act of cruising and its implications for identity and community in *City of Night* in “Cruising John Rechy’s *City of Night*: Queer Subjectivity, Intimacy, and Counterpublicity.” Noting the stigma attached to sexual cruising, Moon argues that “cruising develops into a personal aesthetic and program of self-fashioning for Rechy’s protagonists” while “creatively reimagin[ing] intimacy in terms of social marginalization” (n.p.). Lillian Faderman and Stuart Timmons briefly discuss *City of Night* and share a few of Rechy’s

recollections in *Gay L.A.: A History of Sexual Outlaws*, and Wendell Rickett's review of *Beneath the Skin* and a handful of books by other authors situates Rechy (via his authorial persona and style throughout *Beneath the Skin* and biographical details) squarely as a working-class author in "'We Almost Killed Ourselves with Rage': Working-Class Lives in Recent American Writing."

Between 2007 and 2008, two articles and one book chapter analyze Rechy's work in the context of the composition classroom, religion in Latino/a American writing, and the changing locations and landscapes of "gay outlaws." The discussion of geography and place is then revisited in 2011. In "From Subterranean to Suburban: The Landscapes of Gay Outlaw Writing" (2007), Martin Dines compares the different settings of gay "outlaw" texts, including the work of Bruce Benderson, John Rechy and Dennis Cooper. He notes that while Rechy might be considered an urban writer, his descriptions of the sites of his sexhunters suggests "a vast and hostile natural landscape" of "primordial settings" or habitats, while the street is indicative of the activism of gay liberation (n.p.). Bridget Kevane's *Profane and Sacred: Latino/a American Writers Reveal the Interplay of the Secular and the Religious* (2008) analyzes Rechy's use of religious imagery and concepts such as "miracles" in *The Miraculous Day of Amalia Gómez*. She argues that Rechy transforms the miracle "into a powerful individual tool divorced from its divine and hallowed source [...] and transported to the power within the individual" (2). Her reading, like that of Mark D. Jordan in 2011 and Luis León in 1999, illustrates the fruitfulness of examining religious themes throughout Rechy's work. Finally, in one of the only pieces to discuss Rechy's work in a pedagogical context, John Goshert writes about themes of literacy and illiteracy in *City of Night* and how that, combined with his disruptive "nonnormative sexuality," challenged early critics and continues to pose challenges to students, for whom "Rechy's nightworld recedes into the background of consciousness, occupying--if any place at all--that of a historical footnote or aberration in the odyssey of gay people's progress toward recognition and normalcy" (17). Thus, Goshert calls on teachers to develop students' "critical literacy" by exposing them and their "normative perceptions" to "longstanding, contentious conversations about gender and sexuality" (18).

In 2009, historian Josh Sides briefly cites excerpts from Rechy's work in his book *Erotic City: Sexual Revolutions and the Making of Modern San Francisco*, and two chapters on Rechy's work also appear in England and the U.S. In "John Rechy's Borderless *City of Night*" (2009), Kenneth Roon explores the narrator's "dual manifestation as flâneur and Stranger" in the cities he visits (182). Roon details the ways in which the narrator differs from other literary flâneurs, and the ambivalent relationship between the narrator and the City. Daniel Enrique Pérez writes about the role that Rechy's novels played in "shap[ing] the gay male aesthetic that in turn shaped the current male aesthetic" (16) in his book *Rethinking Chicana/o and Latina/o Popular Culture*. He also notes the "working-class markings" of Rechy's male bodies (18).

Discussions of Rechy's work in 2011 center on the city, the environment, sexual and ethnic identity, and literary aesthetics. In his 2011 book *Urban Underworlds: A Geography of Twentieth-Century American Literature and Culture*, Thomas Heise briefly describes some of the U.S. reception of Rechy's first novel in the early 1960s, including reviews in the *LA Times* and *New York Times* (178), and mentions the reaction of one gay

reader, Felice Picano (179). He notes that “for some reviewers, *City of Night* spotlighted activities that needed to be policed or were better left in the dark altogether, [while] for some gay readers it not only mapped a queer world but it also taught them how they might be in that world” (Heise 179). While not labeling it as such, Heise explores what the implied (gay) reader’s response to *City of Night* might have been based on the response of Picano and the textual clues. He also discusses the geographies detailed in Rechy’s work, and how that relates to sexuality on both a practical and abstract level:

[...] the utopian promise of contact in the public spaces of the city is still available to the reader who perhaps can see what Rechy’s own narrator cannot. What is formed in these socially and economically devalued terrains are knowledges and intimacies that are public, political, potentially collective, and not tethered to the domestic space of monogamy and reproductive ideals (192).

One recent analysis of *Numbers* at first glance seems to follow Heise and Antonio Viego’s lead (who I discuss later), arguing for a more nuanced reading of sexual identity and masculinity. Kevin Arnold’s “Male and Male and Male: John Rechy and the Scene of Representation” (2011) illustrates the benefits of a reader response approach to Rechy’s work, but also the consequences of limiting our reading to one perspective, or one implied readership. Arnold’s analysis of a character named “Danny” in *Numbers* tries to correct the reading, or the response of the implied reader to the character’s homoerotic interest in Johnny Rio. He argues that the desire Danny appears to feel is ambiguous and cannot reliably be read as homosexual (120), and states that “Danny is figured neither as a homophobic (‘masculine’) character nor as a self-hating closeted (‘gay’) one that could achieve happiness should he only be capable of coming out” (Arnold 120). Yet in my reading, Danny is depicted as being both homophobic (or at least trying to act homophobic) and unhappy, and I do not agree with Arnold that “Rechy is pointing to... the *impossibility* of coming out for a character like Danny” (121). Instead, in *Numbers* I think Danny acts as a foil to Johnny Rio, and helps Rio become more comfortable with his sexuality, while also further developing Rio’s character for the reader. Through this scene, we realize that Rio is a bit of a loner, but he is not as needy or insecure as Danny. Therefore, even though Rio does not fully embrace his gay identity in the way that some of his wealthy friends seem to, he is also comfortable enough with his sexuality to treat drag queens with compassion, and does not feel the need to label other gay men in derogative ways.

Arnold then suggests that the reader’s response would probably be to laugh at Danny, and proceeds to explain the problem with that imagined response: “Laughter here not only staves off our anxieties about its ambiguous meaning, but stabilizes that meaning into an easily recognizable form that establishes ‘our’ epistemological superiority (i.e. “we know Danny ‘really’ is gay after all”)” (119-20, emphasis in original). Arnold then argues that “this scene... is about a representational problematic, the fact that we can’t really read sexuality and gender in it reliably (120).” In *Numbers*, the scene between Johnny Rio and Danny is not necessarily mocking Danny as an individual person. Instead, this scene combined with others in the novel also work to remind readers that masculinity is just as much of a performance or construct as the drag queen’s femininity. While

Danny has a tough exterior, he shows himself to be insecure and small-minded, practically begging Johnny to work out with him, but later denigrating a transvestite. Like other scholars, Arnold also appears to disregard the coming out narrative in *This Day's Death*, writing: "Rechy's early novels might be read as kinds of 'anti-coming out' narratives, articulations of the impossibility of identification, of reconciling masculinity with homosexuality into a stable identification" (121). I do agree with Arnold's assertion later that in Rechy's early work, the body is not a site of physical pleasure in the sense of satisfaction for the protagonist, but instead, the protagonist derives pleasure (though rarely satisfaction) through the act of being desired, approached, and paid for. However, Arnold's astute analysis unfortunately does not examine Rechy's novels as a whole body of work, and appears to bypass elements in the texts that do not support his thesis.

In 2011 six additional books¹⁶ include analyses of Rechy's work, including *Recruiting Young Love: How Christians Talk About Homosexuality*, a book by Mark D. Jordan, who specializes in sexual ethics and theology. In this text, Jordan argues that *City of Night* is written "against Augustine and Dante, against their canonical Christianity" (80), and notes that "The story writes its Christianity directly onto sex . . . his first experience of sexual intercourse takes place under a hilltop crucifix bearing *Cristo Rey*, Christ the King" (81). In "Mapping persistence in John Rechy's *The Miraculous Day of Amalia Gómez* and Helena María Viramontes's 'The Cariboo Café,'" a chapter within *Of Space and Mind: Cognitive Mappings of Contemporary Chicano/a Fiction*, Patrick L. Hamilton compares the aforementioned texts, and focuses on the theme of persistence in *The Miraculous Day*: "The question, then, of whether or not Amalia can persist within the world, and thus this novel's textualization of 'persistence,' depends upon altering, for herself as well as for the reader, the role these forces and their world enforce on her and her reaction to them" (57). He emphasizes Amalia's agency, although I think his discussion of her persistence and her "new understanding of herself and her world" (61) would benefit from a discussion of two major challenges she faces: letting herself remember that she aborted her baby, and accepting her gay son, Juan.

While Ignacio López-Calvo also discusses *The Miraculous Day of Amalia Gómez* in his book *Latino Los Angeles in Film and Fiction: The Cultural Production of Social Anxiety*, he notably also provides an "ecocritical" reading of *Numbers* and *Bodies and Souls*, a book that few scholars have analyzed, particularly in the field of Chicano/a or Latino/a literature. He argues that Rechy's 1983 novel "proposes a transformation of our environmental consciousness," because "land is . . . not equated with the female human body," and "no violence against the natural environment is committed" (72). He also notes Rechy's preoccupation with "faulty urban planning" and its impact on the working poor whose homes are often displaced by freeways that never materialize (73). López-Calvo also analyzes this urban planning in *Numbers*, and how Rechy highlights the city government's suppression of street people (including hustlers).

David Vázquez's *Triangulations: Narrative Strategies for Navigating Latino/a Identity* examines the "narrative strategies" used by Latina/o authors in first-person personal narratives to "locate their own subject positions through an analogous

¹⁶ Surprisingly, in *Ambientes: New Queer Latino Writing* (2011), edited by Felice Picano and Lázaro Lima, Rechy is briefly mentioned once in the introduction, in spite of his important role in LGBTQ and Chicano/a literary traditions, and even though he continues to publish books.

triangulation of identity—often in terms of serial and progressive negation (not ‘this,’ not ‘that,’ but something other)” (3). He considers Rechy’s *The Sexual Outlaw* to be a first-person personal narrative because of the biographical parallels to the author (109), and writes that Rechy’s book “triangulates . . . gender oppression, homophobia, and racism to posit a radical, queer, Chicano subjectivity vis-à-vis Jim’s outlaw persona” (108). One of the strongest sections of the chapter discusses the “tension between existential and communal identities” (113), a theme that Kevin Arnold also touched on his 2011 article. Vázquez concludes that “the sexual outlaw . . . exceed[s] the insufficiencies of multiple identity categories [e.g. Chicano and gay]” (116).

In *Buenas Noches, American Culture: Latina/o Aesthetics of Night* (2012), María DeGuzmán briefly analyzes the symbolism in Rechy’s depiction of night in *City of Night* and *The Coming of the Night*. She also notes that “John Rechy’s oeuvre is a prime example of Chicana/o revisionist uses of Catholic Reformationist Baroque sensibility” (37), yet she surprisingly also writes that “Rechy’s formulation of night” is missing “a feminist consciousness” (37). While this is certainly true for the two novels mentioned before, her claim implies that his entire body of work lacks “feminist consciousness,” which seems to ignore *Marilyn’s Daughter* and *Our Lady of Babylon* entirely.

I would like to close with a discussion of an ongoing debate that both the Chicano/a and Latino/a LGBTQ and U.S. LGBTQ scholarly communities appear to be engaged with, between feminist/lesbian and gay (male) scholars and they way that both talk about their literary history and current status in their respective fields. In a review of four gay literary anthologies, all published in 1998 (and some include excerpts from Rechy’s early work), George Haggerty takes issue with the exclusion of female authors. He points out that “[t]he male homosexual tradition in Western literature is nearly indistinguishable from the Western tradition as it has always been known. How easy it is to write this history [of gay literature] and leave out women entirely. They have always been left out, after all” (296). He cites Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s *Epistemology of the Closet*, writing “not only have there been a gay Socrates, Shakespeare, and Proust but . . . their names are Socrates, Shakespeare, and Proust; and, beyond that, legion—dozens or hundreds of the most centrally canonic figures . . .” (Sedgwick 51-2, cited in Haggerty 285). He calls for a “companion volume addressing women’s issues . . . until the history of same-sex desire is rewritten to accommodate more sexes than just one” (296). A somewhat similar tension exists within the Chicano/a LGBTQ scholarly community, although the gender roles are reversed.

In Tomás Almaguer’s “Chicano Men: A Cartography of Homosexual Identity and Behavior” (1993), Almaguer, a sociologist, writes that

[u]nlike the writings on Chicana lesbianism, however, these works [by Chicano gay authors Rechy, Arturo Islas and Richard Rodriguez] fail to discuss directly the cultural dissonance that Chicano homosexual men confront in reconciling their primary socialization into Chicano family life with the sexual norms of the dominant culture (256).

Aside from the fact that Almaguer is attempting to read literature in a sociological manner, it also appears that Almaguer either did not read Rechy’s third novel, *This Day’s*

Death, or he determined that it was not “direct” enough in detailing the “cultural dissonance” of being a Chicano homosexual. Similarly, in Cherrie Moraga’s “Queer Aztlán: The Reformation of Chicano Tribe,” published the same year, she writes that “[s]ince the early 1980s, Chicana lesbian feminists have explored these traditionally ‘dangerous’ topics [sex, gender roles] in both critical and creative writings,” and [i]n the last few years, Chicano gay men have also begun to openly examine Chicano sexuality” (160). This either implies that Rechy’s work prior to the 1980s did not “openly examine Chicano sexuality,” which suggests that Moraga’s definition of “openly examine” or “Chicano” might be narrowly defined, or it suggests she is not familiar with his work.¹⁷ Moraga then criticizes Chicano gay authors for not being open enough about their sexuality: “Unlike the ‘queens’ who have always been open about their sexuality, ‘passing’ gay men have learned in a visceral way that being in ‘the closet’ and preserving their ‘manly’ image will not protect them, it will only make their dying more secret” (163). Ironically, in *City of Night* and *Numbers* (and later in *Marilyn’s Daughter*) Rechy makes a similar point about the ways in which masculine gay men and hustlers can “pass” while drag queens are the brave “foot soldiers” who must endure constant oppression, including from within the gay community. In “The Place of Gay Male Chicano Literature in Queer Chicana/o Cultural Work” (1999), Antonio Viego responds to these two pieces, arguing that gay Chicanos and lesbian Chicanas do not necessarily face the same issues, and therefore they will not necessarily write in similar ways (in terms of ‘openness’), nor do they have enough things in common to automatically form an “alliance.” Drawing on Lee Edelman, Viego writes that while in this specific context, this call for “an explicit, visual mapping of the gay Chicano, Latino body” is part of a desire to identify “a potential gay male Chicano, Latino literary canon,” it ultimately “echoes too clearly the homophobic insistence that homosexual bodies be tracked and located wherever they threaten to go unnoticed” (129). He continues:

failure is marked by the writers' narrative reticence, ... each text is seen as the mandatory site for the writer's inscription of his homosexual self. It is shocking that it has occurred to so few of us with regards to this particular argument a quite simple fact, that the refusal to be exhaustively forthcoming with regards to these matters is often times the very enabling condition for survival and defiance (Viego 130).

Viego’s point is well-taken, although the narrative reticence that he notes might also be attributed to the fact that some gay authors, such as Rechy, might have wanted to avoid having their books labeled “gay literature,” which can limit who the book is marketed to and how the book is approached. Furthermore, the reaction of Moraga and Almaguer probably helps explain why Rechy’s early work faced a lukewarm reception from the

¹⁷ While unrelated to my discussion here, I think it is also important to note that Moraga also takes Chicano gay men to task for being

silent over the Chicano Movement’s male heterosexual hegemony. As much as I see a potential alliance with gay men in our shared experience of homophobia, the majority of gay men still cling to what privileges they can. I have often been severely disappointed and hurt by the misogyny of gay Chicanos (161).

1980s to the present—his most well-known books lack a clear “coming out” narrative, both in terms of sexual identity and even ethnic identity. While Rechy’s name is mentioned in the Chicano LGBTQ debate, a closer examination of some of his texts, including *This Day’s Death*, *The Sexual Outlaw* and his later feminist novels would contribute to these conversations

Though perhaps not in response to Moraga and Almaguer, also in 1999, in an essay within *Chicano/Latino Homoerotic Identities* the Chicano poet Francisco X. Alarcón also addressed the “disparity” between Chicano/a gay and lesbian output:

I want to bring up the question of why until very recently there was an almost complete lack of verbal articulation of the Chicano/Latino gay male experience when at the same time there has been a prolific booming of the verbal, critical, and literary articulation of the Chicana/Latina lesbian experience. I don’t have any definite answer to this question. Without doubt this phenomenon is affected by the fact that Chicana lesbians and lesbians of color have found a resounding echo and solidarity in the Lesbian and Women of Color communities in particular and in the feminist movement over all. On the other hand, there is no comparable men of color consciousness or movement at this moment. Solidarity among men of color across ethnic boundaries or between White middle-class gay men and gay men of color is still not very common (Alarcón, “The Poet as Other,” 163).

Alarcón’s point about the importance of connections with other communities of color and/or Anglo-American counterparts (with regards to gender or sexual orientation) is echoed by Manuel de Jesús Hernández-Gutiérrez, who in the same volume notes that

U.S. Latina lesbians guarantee the survival of their literary expression through their own presses and journals. On the other hand, U.S. Latino gays have relied on short-lived presses, on small Chicano/Latino presses, publication abroad, or acceptance of a space within small Anglo presses (293).

This of course does not take into consideration John Rechy or Michael Nava’s publication records, which are both with fairly large presses (Grove Press, Viking Press, the LGBT press Alyson Books, and Harper & Row). Daniel Enrique Pérez also writes in his contribution to the aforementioned volume that

John Rechy, a self-identified gay author, has been virtually the only Chicano author to produce homoerotic texts, and the majority of these texts have been realized in subaltern spaces outside of a Chicano cultural context. Most of what has been revealed about homosexuality within a Chicano cultural context has been from the writings of self-identified Chicana lesbian writers like Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa and Chicano gay writer Francisco Alarcón (Daniel Enrique Pérez, “The Quest for Freedom,” 99).

While I would generally agree with this statement when considering *City of Night*, *Numbers* and *Rushes*, I am not sure why *This Day’s Death* is not considered to be set in

large part within a “Chicano cultural context”—the home he shares with his mother and Miss Lucia in El Paso, Texas.

Furthermore, the fact that Rechy’s protagonists tend to have sexual encounters with people who are not Chicano, that it tends to happen away from his home or the “barrio,” and that the protagonists never “come out” to their Mexican parents could also be seen as a commentary on the dissonance between Chicano/a culture and homosexuality. It is also worth noting the fact that traditionally, Chicano male sexuality is not policed as heavily as Chicana female sexuality by the family or by the Chicano/a community. In “National Traitors in Chicano Culture and Literature: Malinche and Chicano Homosexuals,” Alma Rosa Alvarez writes that while

Mexican families not only prohibit sons' and daughters' sexual conduct within the household but also prohibit the discussion of sexuality within the home.... within Mexican culture women are bound to a double standard concerning sexuality; men are permitted to be sexually active outside of the home, while women are not (n.p.).

This might also help explain why gay Chicano authors prior to the 1990s did not write extensively about the conflict between their ethnic and sexual identities in the same way that Chicana lesbians did in the 1980s and beyond.

The debate detailed above is revisited again in 2011 when the editors of *Gay Latino Studies*, Michael Hames-García and Ernesto Javier Martínez, reprint Viego’s article followed by a response from Luz Calvo and Catriona Rueda Esquibel: “Comment: Our Queer Kin.” They write that Viego has oversimplified Chicana lesbian writers:

On the one side is ‘the’ Chicana lesbian who, he argues, has for many critics come to represent plenitude and has been viewed as intelligible, readable, straightforward, visible, and (a bit too self-righteously) political. On the flip side is the gay Chicano subject, whom Viego associates with paucity; he is illegible, unreadable, complex, invisible, and (somewhat intriguingly) apolitical (105).

They ultimately suggest that Viego and others might be “resentful or critical of any attention paid to Chicana lesbian work” (106), and stress the fact that

much of Chicana lesbian literature in the 1980s and 1990s was published by small feminist or alternative presses, many of which have since gone out of business. Many of these books are now out of print (even such classics as *This Bridge Called My Back*) (107).

Finally, they ask for recognition that Chicana lesbian writing does not always represent Chicana lesbians as ‘culturally intelligible’ subjects, and moreover these writings should not be read as transparent nor as representing experience” (108). While Luz and Esquibel make important points about the presses, and Viego’s article at times strikes a plaintive tone about the relative canonical status of Chicana lesbian writing within (Chicano/Latino) academia, they never acknowledge the problematic statements made by

Moraga and Almaguer that Viego principally wrote about. In addition, their final call for a less literal reading of Chicana lesbian writing is, I would argue, precisely what Viego suggests, although the emphasis in his article is on defending gay Chicano writing.

Summary of Chapters

As scholars, it is helpful to zoom out from our specialized niche to read authors in multiple contexts, and to map out their reception by readers across geographic, linguistic, and cultural borders. We cannot only think of Rechy as a Chicano writer, focusing only on Chicana/o authors who were and are his temporal peers, his ongoing reception by Chicano/a scholars, and his influence on later Chicana/o authors. Yet this line of inquiry also is important, because it enriches our understanding of Chicano/a literary history and Rechy's significance to Chicano/a literature. On the same note, to only examine his LGBTQ readership and reception assumes that heterosexual readers did not read him, and that approach often privileges gay male Anglo-American readers.¹⁸ In Chapter One "The Cultivation of Readers in the Novels of John Rechy," I discuss the fact that excerpts of some of his novels were published in adult magazines that targeted heterosexual men. Furthermore, when *Bodies and Souls* (1983) was published, Rechy was adamant that his publisher take out advertisements in mainstream publications that portrayed his newest novel as being distinctly different from his earlier novels. Rechy realized that being labeled a gay writer meant that some heterosexual readers would avoid his work, or never hear about it, because it was only being promoted in LGBTQ newspapers, magazines and bookstores.

Chapter Two "Fan Mail, Blogs, and *Goodreads* Reviews: The Everyday Reader's Response to John Rechy's Novels" examines the responses of everyday readers to John Rechy's writing. Rechy allowed me to read the fan mail (including email) that he has received since the 1980s, and he says that he destroyed prior letters that he had received. These letters provide insight into ways that different readers engaged with Rechy's work, and the impact it had on their lives. I then document and analyze blog posts and book ratings and reviews of Rechy's books on *Goodreads*, a social website that encourages readers to rate and review books, and share their reviews with their friends. I then compare the types of readers represented by these three different sources, and which books by Rechy they tend to discuss or review.

Finally, in Chapter Three "Writers Reading Rechy: Intertextual References to John Rechy and His Novels" I examine intertextual references to Rechy's work in fiction and non-fiction texts. These references help us better understand who has read (and currently reads) his work, and the kind of literary impact Rechy may have had. I begin by documenting references to his work in Chicano/a literature. In the case of the Chicano/a literary community, it is important to keep in mind that while Rechy is Chicano and therefore his books are part of Chicano/a literature, he was not writing in dialogue with or response to other Chicano/a authors, nor was he publishing with Chicano presses or literary journals, and thus, his work was not directed towards Chicano/a readers. As a

¹⁸ One notable exception is Keith Harvey's *Intercultural Movements: American Gay in French Translation*.

result, and as I document, only a handful of Chicano/a authors prior to the 1990s make references to Rechy's work in their own writing.

This has important implications for Chicano/a literary history and pedagogy. If we are to reincorporate more of Rechy's texts into the Chicano/a canon, we cannot simply insert his texts in the syllabus chronologically¹⁹ without the caveat that, for multiple reasons, Rechy's work was not written from within the Chicano/a literary community, nor was it explicitly directed towards a Chicano/a readership, yet it is still Chicano/a literature. Therefore, when reading *The Sexual Outlaw*, for example, Rechy's critique of the straight Chicano oppression of homosexuals was neither directed at a Chicano/a readership nor seemingly aware of Chicana feminist writings on the topic.²⁰ Instead, Rechy's work and that of Chicana feminists in the 1970s were concurrent strands that—barring any future discoveries of heretofore-unknown connections—were not in dialogue. However, this is not to say that Rechy's work did not indirectly impact individual Chicana/o writers, which I demonstrate in Chapter Three. While Rechy was not writing for a Chicano/a readership, he was writing for a dual readership nonetheless—both a mainstream U.S. readership and a more specialized gay readership. In addition, he also had an international readership, and this final chapter also examines references to his work by gay Anglo-American and non-U.S. authors. This chapter is not exhaustive, as there may be more references to Rechy's work that I have not been able to identify due to linguistic and logistical constraints.

¹⁹ Martín-Rodríguez argues in *Life in Search of Readers* that “the task of reconstructing the history of Chicano/a letters cannot be understood as the simple process of filling in the gaps in the sequence of known works and then tracing alleged lines of evolution from the past to the present” (141).

²⁰ Prior to 1977, some Chicano publications featured special issues dedicated to Chicanas (such as *El Grito* in 1973), and Chicana feminists created their own journals, such as *Regeneración* (1970) and *Encuentro Femenil* (1973) (Alma M. García, *Chicana Feminist Thought*, 8).

CHAPTER ONE: THE CULTIVATION OF READERS IN THE NOVELS OF JOHN RECHY

“Somebody tells me he loved my book.
‘Which one?’ I ask.
‘*City of Night*, of course.’”
—*The Sexual Outlaw*

John Rechy resents the attention his first best-selling novel receives at the expense of his later novels. In fact, he does not consider it his best work: “I don’t want to call it... a favorite child or something. But I think, maybe *Bodies and Souls* [1983] is my best work. Maybe. But that’s one that I see as an epic sort of thing.”²¹ Yet *City of Night* (1963) is what John Rechy is best known for, read by people across the borders of sexual identity, gender, nationality and ethnicity. In spite of Rechy’s apparent frustration, many of his later novels explicitly allude to *City of Night*, as seen in the opening quote from his “documentary novel” *The Sexual Outlaw* (1977). For the most part, these references function as a meta-commentary on the response of certain literary critics and members of the gay community to the explicit depiction of male-male sexuality.²² Then, beginning primarily with the publication of *Bodies and Souls*, his work shifts as he tries to recapture the diverse readership he once had with *City of Night* (heterosexual and homosexual men and women), and he more fully explores the politics of depicting sex/sexuality in literature. This chapter draws on archival findings and close readings to describe the pre-publication history and marketing of *City of Night*, while also examining some of the behind-the-scenes editing, including Rechy’s concerns about his audience and critical reception. I then examine how the textual strategies of his novels from 1963 to 1988 continually refer to *City of Night* and become increasingly metaliterary while also inviting multiple kinds of readers, thus making Rechy a “transcultural author.”

Theoretical Framework

In his 1999 article “The Act of Reading Chicano/a Texts: Strategies for Creating a Multicultural Readership,” Manuel Martín-Rodríguez proposes an adaptation of Wolfgang Iser’s concept of the “repertoire,” which Iser defines as “consist[ing] of all the familiar territory within the text” such as “references to other works, or to social and

²¹ John Rechy, interview by Beth Hernandez-Jason, April 1, 2011.

²² For example, Alfred Chester’s scathing 1963 review of *City of Night* for the *New York Review of Books* is now inextricably linked to the description of the novel by scholars, book reviewers and by Rechy himself. Rechy has taken upon himself the job of the literary historian: depicting the critical reception of his work in letters and essays and within his books, and informing the reader of the politics behind the publication and marketing of his books. He unapologetically contacts book reviewers and editors when a book is not reviewed, or if he feels it has been reviewed incorrectly or unjustly, and he then talks and writes about this with interviewers and on his website.

historical norms, or to the whole culture from which the text has emerged” (Iser 69). Martín-Rodríguez then introduces the work of Ángel Rama in order to modify Iser’s repertoire. Martín-Rodríguez writes that “Rama adopts Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz’s term ‘transculturation’” to account for the act of mediation or translation that occurs when an author familiar with one culture writes for a readership that is unfamiliar with that culture (19). This allows scholars to take into consideration the cultural background(s) and knowledge of the text and its readers:

[Ángel] Rama’s approach to writing and reading, then, already presupposes a negotiation of cultures that is not part of Iser’s understanding of the ‘repertoire’ [...] [W]here Iser speaks of the repertoire as (among other things) the sum of references ‘to the whole culture from which the text has emerged (69, emphasis in original), Rama’s transcultural approach casts the shadow of doubt over the independence of any one culture from other contact cultures (Martín-Rodríguez, 19).

In other words, national and ethnic literature does not exist in a vacuum, and some texts are written for multiple audiences, including a readership that may not be familiar with the cultural repertoire of the text. Martín-Rodríguez then notes that “[i]n such a mediating role, it is not uncommon for the transcultural author to appropriate and reclaim popular culture in the vernacular and to transpose it into an artistic category of its own...” (19). One of Rechy’s earliest published pieces, “El Paso del Norte,” which originally appeared in a 1958 issue of *Evergreen Review*, fits this description of the transcultural author or mediator, describing Mexican-American life on the Texas-Mexico border for an audience unfamiliar with the place or people. As a transcultural author, he “capture[s] the culture’s vitality and... codif[ies] it for the appreciation of a reader who may not belong to that culture and who inhabits a different historical circumstance (Martín-Rodríguez 20).

While Rechy performs a mediating role between Mexican-American and Anglo-American cultures (and readers) in later novels such as *This Day’s Death* and *The Miraculous Day of Amalia Gómez*, in this chapter I am most interested in determining whether a similar mediation could apply to sexuality. Rather than categorizing his early novels as primarily journalistic or sociological pieces, I think Rechy should be considered a “transcultural author,” though in an expanded sense that includes sexual orientation. His texts depict different gay subcultures (such as the gay hustling and cruising scenes and the gay literati) for an audience of multiple sexual orientations and genders. In fact, even when his work shifts to a broader discussion of sexual mores and the arts, his books still retain an explanatory, translating tone, particularly when there is a gay character.

I primarily draw on one other other theoretical concept from reader response theory: the “implied reader.” Irwin Wolff’s concept of the “intended reader” is a fictional reconstruction of “the public which the author wished to address,” and while it is useful to a certain extent, it is also limited to one perspective, and one historical time period (Iser 33). In order to address this limitation, Iser created the concept of the implied reader, which is

... a textual structure anticipating the presence of a recipient *without necessarily defining him*: this concept prestructures the role to be assumed by each recipient, and this holds true even when texts deliberately appear to ignore their possible recipient or actively exclude him (Iser 34, emphasis mine).

By examining the implied reader(s) of any given text, particularly in conjunction with Martín-Rodríguez's adaptation of this concept with that of Rama's transculturation, a variety of potential readerships and reader-responses can be imagined and analyzed. This opens our critical reading of these novels to multiple interpretations or readings. Furthermore, in the case of Rechy's early work it shows which audiences or readerships he and his publishers were (and were not) aware of and actively courting. Finally, we can examine whether the strategies were successful in attracting certain kinds of readers.

There are additional reasons why it is particularly useful to study the implied readers of the novels written by John Rechy. First, while there are numerous ways to study the responses of actual readers, in the case of Rechy's early novels, this is complicated by the fact that his novels openly discussed homosexual acts at a time when homosexuality was still pathologized by the American Psychiatric Association, and it was considered a crime to engage in consensual non-heterosexual sex.²³ Thus, it is clear not all readers would have been comfortable sharing their responses to his work publicly (in the form of letters to the editor, book reviews or scholarly work), so relying solely on that would not provide an accurate picture of the amount or type of readers Rechy had. It is also less likely that readers from the working class and ethnic minorities would write letters to the editor, book reviews or scholarly articles in the types of publications in which Rechy's work appeared. One way to work around these limitations is to examine the fan mail received by Rechy, and the Internet also provides a novel way to examine otherwise undocumented public reader responses on blogs and review sites. Several years ago John Rechy destroyed hundreds of letters out of fear that the privacy of the letter writers might be compromised, although he subsequently saved letters from the 1990s onward, which I examine in Chapter Two.

This chapter will also draw upon the reception theory of Hans Robert Jauss, which analyzes how any given sociocultural and literary context affects the response of readers to a given text. One way of describing this would be the phrase he coined, the "horizon of expectations," which, according to Jauss, is the set of expectations a reader has based on his or her own prior reading experiences, as well as the paratextual clues given, such as book reviews and cover art, and that affects their reading of a text (23). I

²³ The American Psychiatric Association and the American Psychological Association changed their official stances on homosexuality as a mental disorder in 1973 and 1975, respectively (Morin and Rothblum). In *Lawrence v. Texas* (2003) the U.S. Supreme Court invalidated the remaining anti-sodomy laws in 13 U.S. states. According to Laurence Tribe, it was "fairly common prior to *Lawrence*'s invalidation of all statutes prohibiting consensual sodomy... [to charge] defendants prosecuted for forcible rape or sexual assault with consensual sodomy, to which they might plead guilty in exchange for a prosecutor's agreement to drop the more serious charge rather than to make the uphill attempt to prove absence of consent" (Tribe, cf. 11, 1896).

will primarily focus on the initial response of a wide swath of reviewers (and Rechy's editors) to Rechy's novels.

With this theoretical framework in mind, I consider the following questions: first, what kinds of readers were implied or textually structured in Rechy's work, and can they be clearly demarcated along the lines of class, gender, ethnicity, nationality and sexual orientation? Secondly, what do intertextual²⁴ and metaliterary references in his books tell us about the implied reader(s), and what do they illuminate about the role of literacy, reading and writing in Rechy's work? Finally, I examine how these strategies evolved in some of his subsequent books.

The Formation of *City of Night* and Its Readers

While several scholars have analyzed *City of Night*, no one has discussed the fact that a readership for John Rechy's work already existed before *City of Night* was published. On the back cover of the first edition, its pre-publication history and audience formation is recounted:

City of Night has been four years in the writing, and during that period various sections have appeared in *Evergreen Review*, *Big Table*, *Nugget* and *The London Magazine*. These prepublication excerpts have already established John Rechy as one of the most exciting and truly original talents of the past decade (*City of Night*, back cover).

Prior to 1963, many of the chapters were published separately as stand-alone stories, which were later slightly revised and incorporated into the novel, and which had the dual benefit of providing Rechy with much-needed income and advertising. The result of this pre-publication strategy was two-fold: first, it potentially affected the shape that *City of Night* took due to the response from readers and editors, and secondly, it created a readership before the novel came out. According to a letter found in Donald Allen's archives, in 1957 Rechy submitted poetry to the *Evergreen Review*, a quarterly literary magazine published by Barney Rosset, who was also the publisher of Grove Press. In a letter to Barney Rosset, Rechy expressed concern after not hearing back from them: "Some time last month I submitted, from a San Francisco address... a group of poems. Since then my address has changed" (5 Sep 1957). It appears that no one ever responded to him. One year later, when Rechy submitted the story "Mardi Gras" to *Evergreen Review* in 1958, Donald Allen wrote to publisher Barney Rosset:

²⁴ In my work with the Chicano/a Literature Intertextual Database (CLID), created by Manuel M. Martín-Rodríguez, the intertextual references and any references to reading or sites of reading are catalogued to facilitate further research. Thus my focus on intertextual references in Rechy's work has been inspired in large part by this approach, although the data I have collected on Rechy is my own work.

This story MARDI GRAS by John Rechy strikes me as being excellent. I've read it twice and I think it's the only American story on this kind of theme I've read that really succeeds and that owes nothing to Genet. It surpasses T. Williams I believe; Rechy really handles the psychology well and he handles the language beautifully (*the one or two references seem too literary to me*). Tell me what you think (emphasis mine, 11 Mar 1958).

The references Allen refers to are explicitly mentioned in Allen's letter to Rechy, and he suggests that Rechy remove some of them:

We would like to publish "Mardi Gras" in Evergreen Review.... There are a couple of literary references I tend to question. For instance, on page 12, would it not be better to omit reference to "an existentialist novel" and possibly to "Miss Carson McCullers" though the last is more defensible than the existential one, seems to me (7 Apr 1958).

As a result of these and other edits, there are no explicit references to existential novels or to Rechy's U.S. contemporaries in *City of Night*, which affects how the reader views the narrator and author's "literariness," and also might make his connections to his peers less readily apparent. When Rechy later submitted "The Fabulous Wedding of Miss Destiny" to *Evergreen Review*, Rosset had several critiques of it, so Allen suggested that Rechy send it out to other publications ranging from *Playboy* to *Paris Review*:

I ... continue to believe your FABULOUS WEDDING is marketable. I'm returning it to you separately airmail because I think you should submit it yourself to 1) Esquire, then maybe 2) Playboy. Or Jack Kerouac for an anthology he's editing for Avon. I'll write him today asking if he's interested and then he can write you if he is.... If you don't make out with Esquire or Playboy or Kerouac, I'd suggest thinking about sending it to Paul Carrell [sic] for Big Table, that is if they are paying anything and if it continues. Also Paris Review (21 Jun 1959).

After a few changes, the piece was submitted to *Big Table* and published in the third volume in 1959, eventually winning the Longview Foundation fiction prize. Rechy continued writing *City of Night* and publishing excerpts in different publications in the U.S., France and Great Britain, as well as a translation of a Spanish language interview and short story for the *Texas Quarterly*'s special supplement, "The Muse in Mexico." In a letter to Donald Allen in 1962, Rechy describes further edits he had made that would shift the perspective of the novel and remove metatextual elements:

Mostly, I've²⁵ tried to make adjustments so that the book, instead of already being the book the narrator is writing, becomes, instead, the actual journey. For that reason, many of the observations are premature, since they could only have been made in retrospect. *So I've deleted references to the narrator's writing of a book (that is, at the end of the first chapter)*" (Letter 1 Oct 1962, my emphasis).

This shift allowed readers to feel like the book was being written as things were happening, as opposed to having a narrator share experiences in retrospect, while also creating a bit more distance between the narrator and implied author. However, Rechy left other intertextual references, as well as metaliterary references to the act of recording and observing. I would like to first begin by describing how Rechy courted distinct readerships by publishing excerpts of his novel in progress in different venues.

From the very beginning, Rechy courted multiple readerships by publishing excerpts of his developing novel in both literary magazines and in "men's magazines" like *Nugget: The Man's World*, a publication that featured photographs of partially nude women. At the time, there were no Chicano periodicals such as *El Grito* (1967), or the anthology *El Espejo* (1969), making it more difficult for him to specifically address a Chicano audience, assuming he had wanted to. Therefore, *City of Night* already had begun to develop a readership of multiple literary tastes and sexual persuasions through these publications, although *Evergreen Review* provided a more serious, literary readership, which Rechy himself acknowledged, writing: "...*Evergreen Review* had created the interest in my writing that others were responding to" (Rechy, Introduction to *City*, xiii). For example, in a 1962 issue of *Evergreen Review* one reader from Florida wrote: "I was so glad to see John Rechy is finally having his novel published, and by the only firm fit to bring it out, Grove. I expect I've read about a third of the book already in excerpt form but I'll still buy it" (Aletti 127). Prior to the publication of *City of Night*, Grove Press and *Evergreen Review* had already established a community of readers with a set of common interests that leaned heavily towards existentialism (Beckett), explicit explorations of sexuality, and translated works from France and Latin America such as Genet and Octavio Paz. These readers could be said to share a common "horizon of expectations," a phrase coined by the reception theorist Hans Robert Jauss (23). It describes the set of expectations a reader might have about a book and its plot development based on his or her prior reading experiences, as well as ongoing textual clues within the text, and paratextual clues, such as book reviews and cover art. One would assume that a good number of people who read books published by Grove Press also subscribed to *Evergreen Review*, and thus had a certain set of shared reading experiences (although we cannot know if their interpretive strategies are shared).²⁶ As a

²⁵ In Rechy's early letters and in *City of Night*, he does not use punctuation marks such as apostrophes, and he often capitalizes words.

²⁶ One could also, arguably, refer to those who subscribed to *Evergreen Review* as an "interpretive community," Stanley Fish's term for "those who share interpretive strategies" that "determine the shape of what is read" (14). While they might not construct meaning in identical ways, one assumes that their response to existentialist themes and explicit sexuality (including homosexuality) was more uniformly accepting.

result of the publication of these excerpts, Rechy's work came to the attention of a wide audience that included literary scholars and sociologists before 1963, both in the U.S. and abroad. In 1960 the French literary review *Les lettres nouvelles* asked Rechy to submit a short fiction piece; American writer Terry Southern praised Rechy's work in a 1961 *Nation* article, and sociologist Albert Reiss, Jr. used excerpts from his short stories in a 1961 article about young male hustlers. Citing passages from "The Fabulous Wedding of Miss Destiny" (published in *Big Table*) and "A Quarter Ahead," he writes:

There apparently exist the other possible types of males who engage in homosexual sex acts based on the elements of self-definition as homosexual and hustler. John Rechy in several vignettes describes a third type who conceive of themselves as hustlers but do not define themselves as homosexual (103)²⁷.

This illustrates some of the different kinds of readers Rechy had before *City of Night* officially came out and demonstrates one reading of his work that was fairly common at the time: as a sort of ethnography of the subaltern arena of male hustling. It is important to keep in mind that there were other kinds of readers who did not provide public glimpses of their responses at the time of *City of Night*'s publication, which is one reason why it is particularly helpful in Rechy's case to examine the implied reader.

Describing the publication of gay literature of this period in Britain, Gregory Woods observes "[i]f gay publishers had not existed as such before the late 1960s, the fact remains that a number of publishers recognised in homosexuality a saleable theme" (10). In the U.S. during the late 1950s and early 1960s, Grove Press fit this description—it was not an explicitly "gay publisher" but it did publish books that pushed the limits of that time, both for ideological and profitable reasons, including the unexpurgated *Lady Chatterley's Lover* in 1959, Miller's *Tropic of Cancer* in 1961 and Burroughs' *Naked Lunch* in 1962, as well as a translation of a novel detailing sadomasochism from a woman's perspective, *The Story of O*, in 1965. Grove Press initially tried to market *City of Night* to people interested in reading about homosexuality, but Rechy resisted this, preferring a broader thematic label and readership. He achieved this by publishing excerpts in various types of publications and demanding changes to *City of Night*'s book cover and jacket. Rechy also ensured that his novel was accessible to readers unfamiliar with the gay hustling and cruising scenes by explaining terms and behavior in an almost ethnographic way. These marketing and textual strategies reflect Rechy's desire to reach a general readership, with a participant-observer narrator who would explain jargon and

²⁷ Incidentally, a 2003 sociological article shows the danger of misreading literature as sociology/history: the scholar misreads a quotation included in Albert Reiss Jr.'s 1961 article "The Social Integration of Queers and Peers" from Rechy's short story "A Quarter Ahead" as being a quote from an actual hustler interviewed by Reiss, Jr.: "Based on interviews of delinquent boys and social observation of sexual meeting places, 'Queers and Peers' made several significant contributions to the emergent sociology of sex.... The boys' motives and collective definitions of the physical activities of fellatio were economic, not sexual. Reiss quoted one of them as saying: 'No matter how many queers a guy goes with, if he goes for money, that don't make him queer. You're still straight. It's when you start going for free, with other young guys, that you start growing wings'" (1961, p. 103-104)" (emphasis mine, Janice Irvine, "'The Sociologist as Voyeur': Social Theory and Sexuality Research, 1910-1978," 442).

the unspoken rules while maintaining credibility for gay readers by constructing a realistic portrait that did not sensationalize or argue for a moral reformation.

Rechy was conscious of the immediate impact that the cover photo and book jacket would have on (potential) readers and book critics. One of the first cover photos presented to Rechy featured a drag queen on the cover, which he opposed immediately: “But I dont think it fits the book as a whole--which is, after all, not even in large part about dragqueens. (And, too, as Ive told you, I dont consider my novel by any means a ‘homosexual novel’ as such.)” (Letter to Allen 23 Jan 1963). Donald Allen agreed, writing back to him:

[...] please do say that you object strongly to the idea of using this photo in any way as part of the jacket design for CITY OF NIGHT. It is based, if at all, on a slight reading of only a small part of the book; it would definitely interfere with sales of the book; it is a gimmick and interferes with the establishing of yourself as a serious young writer....Stress the fact that you wish to be presented as a serious writer and not as a sensational exposé one night stand type of thing (Letter to Rechy 24 Jan 1963).

The cover was changed to a photograph of a silhouette of a man standing on a city street at night (see figure 1).

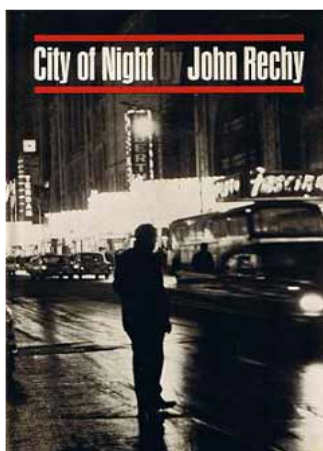


Figure 1: Cover of first U.S. edition of *City of Night*

In this image, for many readers there was possibly no hint of the sexual orientation of the character, or of sexual activity—the stance of the man does not appear to be particularly inviting, and he looks like he might be waiting to cross the street. However, for other readers who were already familiar with Rechy’s published excerpts, or familiar with the hustler scene, this image might have hinted at a very specific kind of sexuality. Nonetheless, for all readers, upon opening the cover and reading the book jacket text, the subject matter was unambiguously alluded to. When Rechy saw the first version of the text for the book jacket, he objected to the description of the novel’s subject matter:

In the copy [of the book jacket], relatively early, there was a reference to the “homosexual world”. Now, believe me, Don, I have no psychological block against the word “homosexual”; there’s no trauma involved. But I feel very much that it is much too clinical [...] I suggested to Mr Seaver that, if possible, I’d prefer that that word be avoided on the jacket. Not—God knows—for any purpose of misleading but merely--again--because it sounds so patently clinical and, further, because *I dont consider my book a “homosexual” novel in the sense of other American homosexual novels* (Letter to Allen 9 Mar 1963, my emphasis).

Rechy’s objection to the “clinical” nuance of the word homosexual²⁸ is also discussed explicitly in *City of Night* by a character who is married and has paid the narrator to spend the weekend with him: “ ‘Gay people—they—’ the man started, interrupting himself: ‘I hate that word—‘gay’—there should be another word: not ‘homosexual’—that sounds too clinical—not ‘queer’, not ‘fairy,’ either—...’ ” (229). Just as Rechy’s characters are uncomfortable with labels on their identity, Rechy also shuns having his book labeled a homosexual novel “in the sense of other American homosexual novels.”²⁹ I think his main concern is not with being associated with homosexual U.S. novels per se, but rather with the effect the label might have on limiting his book to certain readers. Rechy wanted readers of all sexual orientations, and of all reading tastes, to read his book, explicitly stating (in a humorous but still serious way) the importance of clarifying that there are heterosexual characters as well: “I also suggested that, For Purposes Of Heterosexuality, either Barbara or Sylvia should be mentioned on the jacket, too” (Letter to Allen 9 March 1963). In the end, the book jacket uses the phrase “world of hidden sex,” and “clandestine world of furtive love” (*City of Night*).

This attention to labels and how they might affect readers also seemed to play a role in Rechy’s lack of interest in identifying his novels as Chicano literature prior to the 1990s. In 1986, Juan Bruce-Novoa noted that Rechy “himself denies ever having written a Chicano novel because his main concern and responsibility is with the writing of gay literature” (“Homosexuality,” 71), even though he was beginning to be included in Chicano/a literary scholarship and some anthologies at that time.³⁰ The power of naming and categorizing one’s self and one’s work, versus having it labeled by others merits a closer examination. When appearing in specialized arenas, Rechy’s identity is often simplified in a sentence-long “bio” to appeal to the readership of the publication, with his

²⁸ Coincidentally, Foucault’s *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception* was published in France in 1963, which examines the concept of the “Medical Gaze.” While Rechy was likely unfamiliar with the work of Foucault at this time, and vice versa, it is fascinating to see some of the convergences (and later divergences) in their approaches to sexuality and gender. Both were familiar to varying degrees with French existentialist literature and philosophy, Freudian psychology and the work of authors such as Jean Genet.

²⁹ His designation is ambiguous, because it refers to a genre and not the sexual orientation of the author. Therefore, he could be referring to novels that include homosexual activities written by heterosexual authors, pulp homosexual novels, or books such as *The Salt and The Pillar* or *Other Voices, Other Rooms*.

³⁰ I assume that Bruce-Novoa was suggesting that Rechy’s “main concern and responsibility” was in “writing... gay literature” (71), and that this was not explicitly stated by Rechy, who tends to reject the labels of gay and Chicano literature for his work.

homosexual/hustler identity highlighted in gay publications to attract readers (alongside large photos of Rechy) and edited out for heterosexual men's magazines (*Nugget*, *Oui*). For example, in a 1974 interview with the literary magazine *Gay Sunshine*, a large photograph of Rechy in a provocative pose is featured prominently (see figure 2). While Rechy probably consciously and strategically did this or accepted it for marketing purposes, the same cannot be said for his depiction in an early Chicano/a anthology, *Literatura Chicana, texto y contexto* (1972). Edited by Antonia Castañeda, Tomás Ybarra-Frausto and Joseph Sommers, the anthology includes an excerpt of Rechy's "El Paso del Norte," a short piece that had previously appeared in *Evergreen Review* in 1958. Placed alongside other texts that talked about "los barrios de aztlán" ("El Hoyo" by Mario Suárez, "Nuestro barrio" by Alurista, "El Louie" by José Montoya and "A Trip Through the Mind Jail" by Raúl Salinas), Rechy is introduced as "a Chicano novelist and journalist from... El Paso," and, as Karl Reinhardt observes in "The Image of Gays in Chicano Prose Fiction," the "fourteen-line introduction ... does not mention that Rechy is a nationally known, best selling gay activist writer" (41). Furthermore, an entire paragraph is missing from the version printed in *Literatura Chicana*, beginning with "And something quite something else... Once upon a time in El Paso there was a band of fairies—yes, really, in El Paso, Texas" ("El Paso del Norte," *Evergreen Review*, 131). The entire paragraph is simply deleted, and skips ahead to a paragraph about Christmas in El Paso.



Figure 2: *Gay Sunshine* 23, 1974. Photo by R. Michael Kelley, 1970.

On the other hand, Juan Bruce-Novoa was the first Chicano critic to openly and unapologetically acknowledge the homosexual themes in Rechy's work while arguing for his inclusion in the Chicano literary canon. In his 1991 article "Sheila Ortiz Taylor's Faultline: A Third-Woman Utopia" Bruce-Novoa explains his vision for the Chicano canon, which also reflects his stance towards Rechy:

...although Ortiz Taylor has expressed no desire to enter the Chicano canon, one of the aims of Chicano criticism must be to identify authors and incorporate their works into a corpus, thus expanding our literature to more accurately represent all elements of our culture, even those which some, for whatever reason, might wish to ignore or exclude (226).

Bruce-Novoa acknowledges the tension inherent in this canonical project—while for him labeling Rechy a Chicano author is an inclusive gesture that seeks to diversify the literary landscape so it will more accurately reflect our cultural reality, he notes that sometimes these authors reject this inclusive move. For some, the act of labeling an author can be perceived in a negative light: “[t]he adjective before writer marks, for us, the ‘inferior’ writer, that is, the writer who doesn’t write like them. Marking is always ‘marking down’” (Anzaldúa, “To(o) Queer the Writer” 264). For Gloria Anzaldúa, to call herself a “Chicana, *tejana*, working-class, dyke-feminist poet, writer-theorist” is a tactic that allows her multiple identities to survive, but “when writers label me thus [a Chicana writer], they’re looking not at the person but at the writing, as though the writing is Chicana writing instead of the writer being Chicana” (264-5). Rechy has similarly argued that he should not be labeled a gay author, because it limits his audience:

When John Updike is routinely identified in book-review journals as a “self-avowed heterosexual,” I won’t mind being identified as a “self-avowed homosexual, although I don’t remember having taken a vow about sexuality, whereas I suspect Updike may have done just that. Labeled by sexual persuasion, ethnicity, or the gender of a writer, such literature is guaranteed a restricted audience of like identification. Very few (one or two, *if any!*)—the least threatening—may find their way into English Departments that too often disdain minority voices (Interview with Debra Castillo, 113).

Rechy, like Anzaldúa, recognized the invisible power/authority of the heterosexual male Anglo-American author who is described as an “author,” or perhaps an “American author”—the implied universality of the author and their texts when there is no need for a hyphenated identifier. Rather than rejecting his identity as a gay and Chicano author, Rechy expected his work to be relevant to all readers, and feared that these markers would limit those potential readers. It is also worth noting that Rechy’s view of these labels was formed at a time when there were no established LGBTQ or Chicano/a presses or established markets.

Rechy was aware of the potential reaction of his future readers as he wrote *City of Night*. In letters to Donald Allen and in his later introduction, he says that he wrote *City of Night* with a concrete reader in mind (the addressee of the “Mardi Gras” letter), and later found it difficult to continue writing when he was no longer addressing this reader:

...i havent been doing any writing at all. (letters are so much easier-- because there is communication already: i mean youre writing to someone, who is going to read what youve written--and i need this feeling--but when youre writing Creatively, well, really, you dont have that sense of communication completely (sometimes like talking into a dead telephone: you can yell, shout, cry, and it's all on your side only, no one is hearing you) (Letter to Allen 13 Dec 1959).

In “Schizie Notes on a Novel,” an unpublished essay that was submitted to *Big Table* just as it folded (its last issue was published in 1960), Rechy then explains how he solved this problem:

...the fact that ‘Mardi Gras’ had been conceived not as a story but as a letter--with an ‘audience’ ready (that is, my friend in Evanston) convinced me that what had made writing so difficult before (difficult in the sense of communicating) was that I had been addressing no one, at best a nebulous someone who might or might not listen, or care, someone Way Out There--.... Thus, this novel, Storm Heaven and Protest [later *City of Night*], is written directly to Someone: several people now (n.p.).

The “several people,” or intended readers can be extrapolated by examining certain textual strategies used in *City of Night*, including intertextual references and explanatory passages that define and “translate” for readers who are unfamiliar with the world of hustlers and drag queens. For example, in a scene with Miss Destiny, the narrator describes and explains the dynamics that exist between drag queens and masculine hustlers:

...the queens being technically men but no one thinks of them that way-- always ‘she’--their ‘husbands’ being the masculine vagrants--fleetingly and often out of convenience sharing the queens’ pads--never considering theyre involved with another man (the queen)... he remains, *in the vocabulary of that world*, ‘trade’ (97, my emphasis).

In this and other sections, the narrator is acting as an ethnographer or transcultural mediator (Rama’s term) for uninformed readers. In this and later novels like *Numbers* and *Rushes*, at times the narrator addresses a specific kind of implied reader who is separated by class, geography, sexual orientation or life experience, allowing them to read about an unfamiliar world without experiencing the discomfort of not understanding. In fact, it is worth noting that gay readers are not homogenous, and therefore not all gay readers would necessarily be familiar with the terms, subcultures or symbolism used in the novel. For example, a gay reader living in a small town that does not have a hustling or cruising scene would probably need explanations of terms and behaviors. In *Urban Underworlds: A Geography of Twentieth-Century American Literature and Culture* (2011) Thomas Heise writes that “...for some gay readers it [*City of Night*] not only mapped a queer world but it also taught them how they might be in that world” (179).

Furthermore, Rechy's narrator also takes pains to explain that this is now also his world, even as he occasionally refers to it as "that world": "...Chuck the masculine cowboy and Miss Destiny the femme queen: making it from day to park to bar to day like all the others in *that ratty world* of downtown L.A. *which I will make my own*:" (105, my emphasis). There is a tension between two perspectives in *City of Night*, the insider and outsider, the participant-observer versus the recorder/implied author. Even in the midst of the novel, the narrator/protagonist does not fully participate, and occasionally addresses the narratee as he explains and interprets:

"And this is Tiguh—" Miss Destiny went on. And Tiger (names, you will notice, as obviously emphatically masculine as the queens' are emphatically obviously feminine and for the same reason: to emphasize the roles they will play)..." (*City of Night*, 111).

In an aside to the reader, the narrator emphasizes the fact that both drag queens and hustlers are performing their identities (playing roles). This had the dual purpose of explaining things to uninformed readers and of making a point to readers who assumed that drag queens are less authentic than hyper-masculine gay men such as the hustlers. Heise discusses the "pedagogical" nature of *City of Night*, writing that the novel "functions as a guidebook to the queer urban subcultures of the nation" and "also works to produce queer readers by teaching them... how to 'become a homosexual'" (181). He refers to a quote attributed to Felice Picano in Charles Casillo's biography of John Rechy: "I was 19 years old and trying to become a homosexual ... I didn't even know what there was of the gay world. And *City of Night* was my entry into it" (Picano, qtd in Heise, 180). I would argue that Heise's latter assertion is somewhat problematic or at least imprecise, as it calls into question whether someone can "be" homosexual if they have not (yet) engaged in homosexual sex acts, and it is important to specify that *City of Night* details only a few ways of "being homosexual"—it is not an exhaustive introduction to "the" homosexual world. However, I agree with Heise in his assertion that "[w]hat Rechy's novel distilled from this provisional world was a thickly detailed textual space where gay men could find themselves and discover others like them, a space inside the pages of a book that was perhaps more durable than the spaces it described" (196). This is illustrated in many of the excerpts from fan mail, blog posts and *Goodreads* reviews I discuss in Chapter Two.

Another tension somewhat related to that of the participant-observer is the contrast between the narrator's performed fantasy identity as a hustler—heterosexual, illiterate and wholly absorbed by his own body—and the observant narrator and implied author who sees through the "myth of the streets," and perhaps the protagonist's own lack of self-knowledge. Other scholars such as John Goshert (2008) have focused on this tension by examining the scene in which the drag queen Miss Destiny and the narrator "rewrite" Shakespeare's *Othello* in drag and revel in their shared (literary) knowledge, and an incident between the narrator and a "john" who is upset to hear that the young hustler reads books (14). There is an unresolved, ongoing tension in Rechy's work between the body and mind and between popular lowbrow writing and highbrow literature, which was of particular import at the time of publication given the cases of

ensorship against any work considered to be pornographic. As Rechy himself has noted, many critics zeroed in on the sexual content of the novels,³¹ which probably helped improve his sales while diminishing his literary reputation. An additional factor in the critical reception of *City of Night* that should be considered is the amount and kind of intertextual references. Luckily there is archival evidence of how intertextual references in *City of Night* were deleted or revised prior to its publication in novel form, both at the behest of Rechy's editor at Grove Press and as a result of Rechy's own editing.

Intertextual References and the Reception of *City of Night*

In early drafts of *City of Night*, the narrator is clearly the “implied author,” or the reader's construction of the author of a literary text, which is distinguished from the “real” author.³² The narrator's writing process is occasionally alluded to, and there are a larger number of explicit intertextual references. As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, Rechy's editor at Grove Press, Donald Allen, suggested that Rechy remove some intertextual references, such as a reference to Carson McCullers' work. There was also one other section that Rechy removed from a draft of *City of Night* that included references to French authors, quoting from their work in French and English. At the beginning of the penultimate chapter “Jeremy: White Sheets,” the narrator is leaving a bar in New Orleans with two “scores” when he suddenly “blurted to those two”:

“Im not at all the way you think I am. Im not dumb—as you want me to be and as I try to look and act—nor tough either! Not at all! Thats just so I can make this scene.” I go on, feeling completely out of my own control, as if the words are coming from someone else. “What the hell—dig—I can quote Rimbaud!” And in that bar, from years-ago remembrance of another world, I quoted: “ ‘Jadis si je me souviens bien, ma vie etait un festin’....And Verlaine: ‘It rains in the street, as it rains in my heart....’ ” I felt as if something were exploding inside me, and I went on: “And Nietzsche and Christ and Shakespeare and Desdemona and Drusilla Drake,” and I began to roar with laughter. “And I dig Modigliani because of the eyes he paints, man, the cool crazy hipsters' eyes!” (Rechy, Draft of Part Four).

The Rimbaud quotation refers to a poem about memory (*Une saison en enfer*), and it also has the function of creating a sense of identification with the narrator for the ideal reader, as Rimbaud would have been quite familiar to a number of Grove Press readers.³³ However, in the final version these literary references disappear:

³¹ In an interview with Debra Castillo, Rechy said that “[s]till, today, I find myself viewed as a writer whose primary contribution is one of uncovering once-taboo subjects—in my first book. I hope eventually my whole work will be viewed beyond subject matter” (123).

³² See Wayne Booth's *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, 75.

³³ In 1953, Wallace Fowlie published *Rimbaud's Illuminations: A Study in Angelism*, a translation and study of Rimbaud's poetry, with Grove Press.

Im not at all the way you think I am. Im not like you want me to be, the way I tried to look and act for you: not unconcerned, nor easygoing—not tough: no, not at all... No, Im not the way I pretended to be for you—and for others. Like you, like everyone else, Im Scared, cold, cold terrified (*City of Night* 369).

As a result of these changes, the literary knowledge of the narrator, implied author *and* implied reader is de-emphasized, which may have impacted how *City of Night* was received. On the other hand, one French reference in *City of Night* remained after all the editing: lyrics from ‘Chanson des gardes Suisses,’ quoted and translated by a character referred to as the Professor, that incidentally also served as the epigraph for Céline’s 1932 novel *Voyage au bout de la nuit* (translated and published in the U.S. by New Directions in 1949 and 1960). In contrast to the deleted French phrases and authors above, because it is spoken by the elderly Professor and not by the protagonist, it does not create a sense of identification with the protagonist or implied author—in fact, given that the Professor is depicted as somewhat pathetic, readers would probably prefer to not identify with him. Nevertheless, French readers (who might have been familiar with Rechy from the short excerpt of *City of Night* published in *Les Lettres Nouvelles* in 1960, and subsequently read his translated novel in 1965) and U.S. readers who were familiar with French literature would certainly have had a deeper understanding of this reference, and would have further identified with the implied author.

There were also several playful literary references to “highbrow” and “lowbrow”³⁴ literature that seemed to escape the attention of early critics, although later scholars have analyzed some of them as evidence of the performed identity of the hustler protagonist (see Goshert). For example, when the narrator and the drag queen Miss Destiny discover that they have both read Shakespeare’s *Othello*, the protagonist re-writes and riffs off of the original text, performing a sort of queer reading of the canonical text. The same thing occurs with texts such as Superman comic books, gossip magazines, *Gone With the Wind*, and even Mark Twain’s *Tom Sawyer* and Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland*. One character describes how comic books were used to force a heterosexual, masculine identity on him as a child: “And oh, once, when I was a kid, I asked my father for *paperdolls*, and he brought me some Superman *comicbooks* instead—” (*City of Night* 106). Later, towards the end of *City of Night*, the protagonist is in New Orleans during Mardi Gras, and he is surrounded by drunken debauchery as he drinks “proffered liquor” with pills, and describes what he sees: “*Alice in Wonderland!—billowing skirt raised obscenely. Tom Sawyer!—pants open at the rear...*” (338). These

³⁴ A discussion of Rechy’s combination of what Lawrence Levine calls “lowbrow” and “highbrow” cultural and literary references deserves further analysis, but for now I’d like to note that different readers responded to Rechy’s work in strikingly different ways. For example, while reviewers at the time implied that this was sensationalistic melodrama, contemporary authors such as Dennis Cooper refer to Rechy as lending a loftiness to homosexuality: “...along with Jean Genet, John Rechy, and Ginsberg, [Burroughs] helped make homosexuality seem cool and highbrow, providing gay liberation with a delicious edge” (144-45).

books about children are reread in a grotesque, carnivalesque image filled with (homosexual) sexual innuendo.

These references to literature would have been read in different ways depending on the reader's familiarity with them, as well as his or her own personal biases or opinions about sexuality and art. Readers who were familiar with these literary references might have identified with the narrator and implied author, as the references indicated that the implied author and narrator were not just literate, but also familiar with the Western canon and popular culture. However, those readers who were (and are) less interested in literary games, or less familiar with literature, were not subjected to a large number of intertextual references, making it easier for readers to focus on the sexual content and street-smart jargon and as a result, potentially take the book less seriously. Furthermore, a third category of potential readers likely viewed homosexuality and explicit sexuality in general as deviant and unworthy of literature, and did not appreciate this reading of *Othello*, *Alice in Wonderland* and *Tom Sawyer*.

Finally, *City of Night* seems to send a mixed message about reading. While the protagonist spends time at a library and is familiar with literature, we never see him reading a poem or novel. When a narrator or protagonist is depicted in the act of reading, or alludes to their prior reading, it mirrors what we as readers are doing, and creates a shared identity—that of the reader. Yet describing a character reading (or writing) a book can be boring if not done well, and takes away from the image of the protagonist as a masculine hustler, an identity that Rechy publically cultivated. Regardless of the intention or reason for deleting so many of these intertextual and metafictional references, the result was that at least initially, *City of Night* was often not described as “literary” but as sociological—even by French reviewers. For example, in a 1965 review with the heading “Sociologie” for *Le nouvel observateur*, Jean-Louis Bory wrote that “Ce roman, très documenté, apparaît d’abord comme un supplément au rapport Kinsey. En plus détaillé” (22)³⁵. While Bory does acknowledge *City of Night*'s literary qualities, he seems more fascinated by the psychoanalytic theme underlying the novel. Meanwhile, Peter Buitenhuis' review for the *New York Times* suggests that “[p]erhaps, then, the book should be regarded more as sociology than as a novel. Mr. Rechy is the Kinsey of the homosexuals...” (168). In the 1960s, openly gay book reviewers similarly viewed *City of Night* in sociological (and political) terms.

After *City of Night* was published, some gay critics appeared to be bothered by the public attention to the gay hustling scene, the language used in *City of Night* to depict street hustlers and drag queens (including the lack of apostrophes), and above all, the narrator's attitude toward homosexual men who paid for sex—or who were too old or ugly to ‘make it’ mutually with a young man.³⁶ At the root of their discomfort was the audience—heterosexual readers with limited knowledge of the homosexual community, which was an understandable concern given the sociocultural attitudes towards

³⁵ “This novel, very documented, appears first like a supplement to the Kinsey Report. In greater detail” (Bory, 22, my translation).

³⁶ In his biography of Rechy, Casillo writes: “...as is often the case with new and unusual works, the first critical reaction was severe. Such unapologetic homoeroticism made the literary intelligentsia—particularly homosexuals—distinctly uncomfortable” (151), referring here primarily to Alfred Chester's review, which is further described shortly.

homosexuality at the time. In a review of *City of Night* for the magazine *one: the homosexual viewpoint*, Marcel Martin warns his homosexual readership: “[t]o the heterosexual community this book will appear to be (and this is no doubt unfortunate) a revelation of the homosexual world In a very real sense it is not the homosexual world at all” (25). Yet Martin is not arguing that the book is painting an unrealistic or sensationalistic experience: “It is doubtful that this is a novel at all; it is rather (and I hope, at least, that this is so) almost pure reporting, but it is selective and creative reporting as one might not only expect but demand of an artist” (24). This appears to be a criticism, although it illustrates the problem with reading literature as a piece of journalism or sociology. For the readers of *one: the homosexual viewpoint*, Martin has an entirely different concern, observing that the narrator’s “activities” are “regrettably, never detailed nor explored,” leaving him, “unsatisfied and unconvinced of the reality of the narrator” (24). As I will explore below, *Numbers* is a double-edged response, in many ways, to both of these arguments.

In the novels following *City of Night*, one main shift occurs: the amount of intertextual references increases, and *City of Night* (and its reception and author) becomes part of these references. These latter references function as an inside joke for informed readers who are familiar with *City of Night* at least in name and reputation, and as a sort of coy introduction for readers who might have only encountered his later books. More importantly, they are a metaliterary commentary on what we read, how we read, and the politics of writing and publishing texts.

Numbers (1967)

While many readers immediately noticed that *Numbers* was more sexually explicit, reviewers and scholars rarely mentioned the references to literature (including *City of Night*) and the depiction of upper-middle-class gay literati. Furthermore, in using standard punctuation and depicting a protagonist who has literary status, the money to buy a Mustang and a circle of upper-middle-class friends, the protagonist and implied author are portrayed in a more educated, literary light. These textual elements are interrelated, as the informed reader will assume that the protagonist’s new sense of financial security is a result of the publication of the implied text, *City of Night*. Thus, *Numbers* is directly addressed to those who have read *City of Night*, and in particular, gay readers, while still allowing in new readers.

The cover of *Numbers* features a photograph of Rechy in a pose, looking straight at the reader (see figure 3). While it would likely appeal to gay men and heterosexual women, it also could be read as taunting reviewers such as Alfred Chester, who in a now-infamous review titled “Fruit Salad” in the *New York Review of Books*³⁷ not only questioned Rechy’s existence (much like Marcel Martin above), but also mocked the

³⁷ Chester’s review appeared in 1963, was reprinted in a collection of Chester’s book reviews (*Looking for Genet*), and several authors, reviewers and critics referred to it at the time, and continue to do so. It has now become part of the lore surrounding *City of Night*, due in part to Rechy’s mention of the review in several interviews. As a result, it is often cited in book reviews and scholarly articles. As recently as 2009, reviewer John Ridpath quoted from Chester’s review in his article on the re-issue of *City of Night* by Souvenir Press (52).

photograph of Rechy on the back cover of *City of Night*: “So fabricated is it [*City*] that, despite the adorable photograph on the rear of the dust jacket, I can hardly believe there is a real John Rechy...” (Chester 6). Then, at the opening of the second chapter a particularly interesting scene occurs: when Johnny Rios arrives in Los Angeles, a man immediately calls out to Johnny and indirectly offers to pay him, assuming that Johnny is poor. As they walk towards Johnny’s car, the man describes a newly published book in vivid detail:

Well! You probably remember him—this young number that used to hang around the bars and Pershing Square? Well! He wrote a book about Main Street and hustling and Pershing Square and queens, and tourists came down looking for Miss So-and-So that he'd written about! (*Numbers* 25).

The man then continues telling Johnny, who, it is implied, is the author of the unnamed text in question: “‘I knew him—the author. Knew him quite well, I might add,’ he adds suggestively. ‘Who would have thought he was going to write a book? Why, he looked like any other young vagrant!’” (26). In these quotations, there are two different reader responses indicated—that of a homosexual “john” who knew about *City of Night* and views male hustlers as illiterate vagrants (“Who would have thought...?”), and that of people who are unfamiliar with this world—the “tourists” who “came down looking for” Miss Destiny. In fact, the magazine *one: the homosexual viewpoint* published an interview with the real “The Fabulous Miss Destiny” in their September 1964 issue, with her photo on the cover (see figure 4). For the informed reader who has read *City of Night* (or is at least familiar with the book, and perhaps has read some of the book reviews), this is an overt reference to the novel and to reviews such as “Fruit Salad” by Alfred Chester.

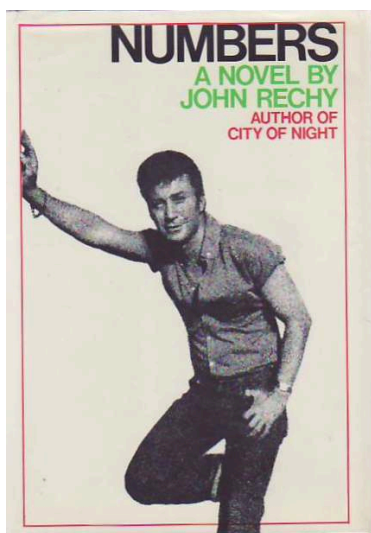


Figure 3: Cover of first U.S. edition of *Numbers*

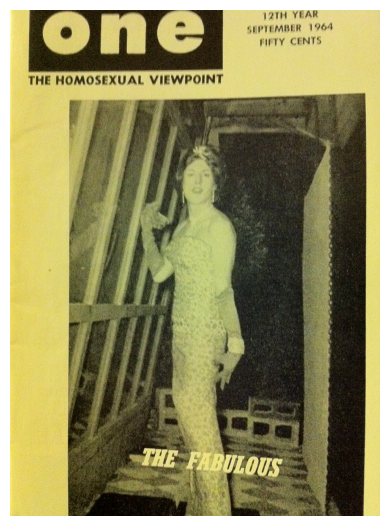


Figure 4: Miss Destiny on the cover of *one: the homosexual viewpoint* (1964)

This is similar to the explanations provided in *City of Night*, and acts as a transcultural mediation for uninformed readers. However, elsewhere in the novel are other coded references that another type of implied reader of *Numbers* would have appreciated more so than others at the time: the highly literate middle- and upper-middle-class homosexual man familiar with the Los Angeles gay literary scene. *Numbers* is primarily about Johnny Rios' attempt to stave off his awareness of death and decay by having sexual contact with multiple men, only it is now done in the realm of cruising, not hustling. However, when he isn't cruising, Johnny spends time with a group of gay men who all appear to be writers, except for one—Guy, the boyfriend of one of the men. Rechy's depiction of this group is interesting for several reasons: for the reader who is familiar with gay literature and politics at that time, it is a humorous parody of well-known authors and intellectuals while also acting as an intragroup critique.³⁸

On the other hand, for the reader who was not familiar with the coded references, it is akin to reading the dialogue between Rechy's drag queens in *City of Night*—some would enjoy the camp, while others might be bored. We learn that one of the authors, Sebastian, had once tried to seduce Johnny, but: "Johnny declined; he knew that if Sebastian came on with him he'd be convinced the famous writer had listened to him only because of a sexual interest and not—as Johnny wished—because he wanted to be an understanding friend" (*Numbers*, 162). As Ricardo Ortiz has noted, from the description of Sebastian, it is fairly obvious to informed readers that he is Christopher Isherwood, and "beyond looking and writing like Isherwood, [Sebastian] Michaels lives in Santa Monica with his younger lover, Tony Lewis, who, like Isherwood's own partner Don Bachardy, is a noted portraitist" (509). They meet with other men, and Johnny talks a bit about his quest for sexual numbers, but he primarily observes the men discussing their current projects and sharing "aphorisms and theorems concerning homosexual life" (234): "Emory on camp: 'I wish that giddy woman who started the populace fussing had shut up. My butcher the other day offered me a 'campy leg of veal'" (169). While for most readers, this may be mildly funny, some gay readers and culturally informed readers will see an obvious reference to Susan Sontag's essay "Notes on Camp" (1964) which makes the reference even funnier, and they would probably enjoy the fact that this is an in-group joke. However, the narrator also views this group critically, distinguishing himself and Guy from the others.

Guy is a young, attractive man who is dating Paul, one of the writers. During the gatherings, Guy rarely speaks, only drinking and watching, until he later asks Johnny about his life of anonymous, promiscuous sex, which mortifies the others. Over time, Johnny develops a sense of identification with and sympathy for him: "Then: Johnny felt sorry for Guy. Even sympathetic. ... On fire ... rushing ... driven ... Johnny Rio might have overheard that about himself, though his life is so different from Guy's" (173). In many ways, Guy and Johnny are depicted as outsiders within the cultured, gay elite—

³⁸ Predating the 1968 premiere of Mart Crowley's play *The Boys in the Band* by one year and Justa Publications' release of Alfonso C. Hernandez "Every family has one" by a decade, *Numbers* features a similar depiction of a group of gay men. Both feature a marked contrast between the intelligent, effeminate characters with "trade" who act hyper masculine and do not appear to be as intelligent, and delve into themes of loneliness and despair.

misunderstood by them, and not taken seriously. John Goshert explores this dynamic in Rechy's work, writing that

... Rechy's examination of gay roles and rituals exposes the ways in which gay men often adopt some of the straight world's most injurious traits of class, wealth, and privilege and reproduce them among already-marginalized people. In the hustling scene especially, Rechy shows older, wealthier, and homosexual-identified men denying the young men the depth and sophistication they reserve for themselves (13).

Like the "john" at the beginning of *Numbers* who assumes that Johnny is poor and ignorant, the gay elite—many of whom criticized *City of Night*—is now the world that is being depicted, including their reaction to Johnny and his quest. They do not understand what drives him, and are uncomfortable when Guy, who acts as a sort of model or "ideal" reader, does: "Guy is saying to Johnny: 'I *know* too—but in a different way—... When you said 'scared'—... Like there are times when I can't sleep at all, I'm so fuckin afraid'" (174). He, like Johnny, is afraid of death, and their loneliness is partially assuaged by sharing their common fear, which is never brought up by their companions. According to Jauss, the concept of the "ideal reader" can refer to a reader or readership that does not yet exist: "there are works that... break through the familiar horizon of literary expectations so completely that an audience can only gradually develop for them" (26). This reader, who I would argue gradually developed, and was cultivated by Rechy, will best understand the literary and cultural references, and thus in the case of Rechy's early work, can be described as being gay, not necessarily upper-middle-class, and willing to acknowledge or explore their fears.

As he later writes in *The Sexual Outlaw* (1977), Rechy is critical of complacency: "Allowing no interior criticism of the gay world, we invite a deceptive lulling that disastrously drains us by assuring us that all is fine, fine. We prefer not to face that when we weaken ourselves through *lack of introspection*, we strengthen the real enemy" (246-47, emphasis mine). Rechy continues to explore the psyche in several of his later novels (*This Day's Death*, *The Vampires*, and *The Fourth Angel*).

However, I would like to note that this attention to psychology as well as existentialism would appeal to readers of various sexual orientations who are interested in these concepts. In addition, it is worth noting that readers of different sexual orientations could acquire some of the "cultural capital" needed to more fully appreciate Rechy's work simply by reading his books and being aware of their reception by critics. Two books published in the 1980s, *Bodies and Souls* and *Marilyn's Daughter*, similarly call attention to Rechy's early work and its reception, while more blatantly targeting a general U.S. audience. In fact, in the first book I discuss, *Marilyn's Daughter*, the reception of *City of Night* is described in great detail, which acts as an inside joke for informed readers while educating new readers. These two books also further engage readers in considering what texts we are allowed to read, how we approach literature, and how that should differ from the approach of (some) book reviewers and critics.

Marilyn's Daughter (1988)

In *Marilyn's Daughter*, a novel about the fictional daughter of Marilyn Monroe and Robert Kennedy, Rechy expertly combines the genres of detective and romance novels, and there is a large amount of metaliterary discourse about this literary endeavor. What is particularly fascinating is the fact that the novel, from the marketing and cover to the title and subject matter, create a set of expectations for readers who are not familiar with Rechy's work, and then the text itself both meets and confounds those expectations. In an interview with Rechy in the University of Southern California's newsletter *Transcript*, John Farrell writes that *Marilyn's Daughter* was "widely misinterpreted" (8). For example, in a review for the *New York Times Book Review*, Joan Mooney wrote that "[a]nother problem is John Rechy's breathless tone," but then seems to derisively write "one wonders if it's meant as a parody of the Hollywood scandal sheets" (22). Rechy responds in the USC interview: "I wanted a prose that has been referred to as 'breathless.' Which is, of course, precisely Marilyn's persona" (6). This "breathless tone" can be read as romantic and fantastic and, by a perhaps more discerning reader, as a parody of romance novels or exposés—some will enjoy it as summer pleasure reading while others will enjoy the metafictional references and symbolism, while others might enjoy both elements at the same time. It is a suspenseful book that plays off of the romance and exaggeration of Hollywood while also being a literary novel that discusses themes such as censorship, racism, psychological trauma, sexism, and the idea of constructing and performing one's identity, often through references to reading and writing.

There are three characters in particular I would like to focus on who have a metaliterary function: Mark Poe, Normalyn and Troja. Mark Poe is a young gay author, Normalyn is the protagonist, a voracious reader who talks about writing a novel, and Troja is an African American drag queen who parodies Marilyn Monroe at night clubs and becomes close friends with Normalyn. Mark and Normalyn act as metaliterary tropes, and both Mark Poe and Troja connect back to *City of Night*. While Mark Poe plays a fairly minor role in the novel, he is of particular interest because of his first novel. Nearly halfway through the novel, the narrator describes the critical and popular reception of Mark Poe's novel (whose last name evokes Edgar Allen Poe) and the reader learns that

His first novel, *After Twilight*, was about the creative young drifting in Hollywood. Daring for its time because of one scene of homosexual desire, it sold well but infuriated reviewers who saw it—in the words of one irate critic—as "a disgusting guide to perversion." Its wit and lyrical literacy were ignored. The jacket photograph of the handsome actor-turned-writer did not help the book's critical reception (*Marilyn's Daughter* 218-219).

The description of the content and reception of *After Twilight* is quite similar to that of *City of Night*, and acts as a way for Rechy to 'answer' his critics by arguing that the "wit and lyrical literacy" of *City of Night* "were ignored" because of "one scene of homosexual desire," and the informed reader who is familiar with *City of Night* and its reception will understand the reference immediately. The reference to Rechy's novel is continued with the description of the jacket photograph's negative impact on "the book's

critical reception.” New readers of Rechy’s work, on the other hand, may not immediately understand the reference fully, but the following metaliterary references would likely be familiar to readers who had not read Rechy’s earlier novels.

From the beginning of the novel, Normalyn is described as a voracious reader who is introduced to canonical literature by a librarian named “Miss Stowe”: “Soon the afternoon librarian—a sexy woman with astonishing auburn hair and knit dresses—Miss Stowe—began to suggest books to Normalyn: ‘Have you read this one?’” (30). Miss Stowe (eliciting thoughts of author Harriet Beecher Stowe from anyone who read *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in a U.S. high school or college literature class) encourages Normalyn to read everything from Thomas Hardy’s *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* to Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*, both books which are about female sexuality. When Miss Stowe is unexpectedly fired, she leaves Normalyn a letter with a trail of books to follow, some with asterisks. Upon asking the new librarian what the new “stark, locked glass bookcase” contains, he replies: “Books you shouldn’t read and some you shouldn’t have read” (32). Eventually, getting permission from her mother to read one of the books that had an asterisk next to it (and that is now locked in the bookcase), Normalyn reads *The Grapes of Wrath*:

The book moved her, saddened her—and depressed her so much that she decided she would return it to the library without finishing it. But she resumed reading it the next day and wanted to protest for Ma Joad and Tom and Casy and—... Was there still that much cruel injustice? (33).

This description of censorship and novels that talk about social protest might elicit different responses from readers depending on their familiarity with U.S. literature in general and with Rechy’s novels in particular. This social protest also connects to the Chicano character Ted Gonzales’ burgeoning social awareness in Texas, and it also signals the importance of continuing to read, even when a book depresses the reader. That is to say, Rechy’s intertextual reference provides a somewhat subtle hint that readers should persist when reading books that highlight social and economic realities, even if it is uncomfortable or upsetting. Given that many parts of this novel in particular might attract a readership more often used to romance novels or biopics on Monroe, this message might have been doubly important to send.

Additionally, for a reader familiar with Rechy’s earlier novels, the description of a text being literally locked up and inaccessible might also conjure up memories of the experiences that homosexual readers may have had in trying to access books, or even the efforts of the U.S. Postmaster General to censor certain books. Furthermore, Rechy’s earlier novels such as *City of Night*, *Numbers*, *Rushes* and *The Sexual Outlaw* were similarly accused of being depressing or negative. Later on, even more explicit references are made to Rechy’s writing.

There are two other instances where there appears to be an indirect reference to the novel we are reading. While talking to a group of young people she has just met, Normalyn is asked what she is going to be, and, put on the spot, she answers:

“I’m going to write a novel,” she decided at that moment.
 “What kind of novel?” asked the attractive youngwoman.
 Normalyn answered firmly, “A novel that will be partly like James Joyce’s, partly like Emily Brontë’s.”
 “That would really be something!” Michael approved. “A romance with a modern, new structure. Mark would love that—tradition *and* experimentation, Goddamn! I mean, to *create*--...”
 Normalyn was caught in his excitement, yearned to express her own. But [...] she just didn’t *know* how to act with a group of people her age! (435, emphasis in original, first ellipsis in original).

This description of Normalyn’s on-the-spot decision to write a novel resonates with the stories Rechy recounts of his decision to tell Grove Press editor Donald Allen that the story “Mardi Gras” was part of a novel he was writing,³⁹ which some readers would be familiar with from reading Rechy’s 1984 introduction to a later edition of *City of Night*:

a letter arrived from Don Allen, one of the editors of *Evergreen Review*, in response to my story-letter, “Mardi Gras”; he admired it and indicated it was being strongly considered for publication. Was it, perhaps, a part of a novel, he asked thinking this might assure publication of the story, I answered, oh yes, indeed, it was part of a novel and “close to half finished” (n.p.).

On the other hand, the direct mention of Emily Brontë and James Joyce and the attributes of their novels (romance, tradition and modern experimentation) acts as “self-description” of Rechy’s writing style in *Marilyn’s Daughter*: the melodramatic tone of *Wuthering Heights*, and the experimental nature of Joyce’s work (*Ulysses* in particular) with its use of different types of discourse and its structure.

Later, in a scene where a young lady is auditioning to be Marilyn Monroe for “The Dead Movie Stars” (a group of young people who research the lives of stars in order to earn the right to impersonate them), the narrator suggests that made-up details may not be considered an outright lie: “Even the ex-contender’s admission that she had ‘made up’ certain parts might signal only the *natural embellishments* required in a complex narrative—the insertion of *intimate points of view* to clarify motivation” (*Marilyn’s Daughter* 370, emphasis mine). In a sense, this is what *Marilyn’s Daughter* is doing: as historical fiction, it is taking some information that is true (some of the details of Monroe’s life, including her involvement with the Kennedy brothers) and creating “natural embellishment” (fictional elements). Of course, the creation of a fictional daughter is more than a “natural embellishment,” but it also allows us an “intimate point of view” into the lives of people that we may never fully understand. Furthermore, Rechy creates a dialogic novel that contains the different perspectives and ‘myths’ surrounding Monroe by alluding to and sometimes including excerpts from the various biographies

³⁹ In a 1958 letter to Donald Allen, Rechy writes: “Mardi Gras, which you have, is from a novel I’m [sic] writing now which will probably be called *The City of Dreadful Night*, from James Thomson’s poem” (Letter, 18 Mar).

and exposés published before and after Monroe's death. These texts are counterbalanced by the perspectives of the columnist Mildred Meadows, Miss Bertha, Enid, and Monroe's fans (from drag queens to young teenage impersonators), so readers can, like Normalyn, construct their own understanding of what happened. There are several other connections between *Marilyn's Daughter* and Rechy's other work that deserve further analysis, but I would like to focus on two characters at this time: Normalyn and Troja.

Normalyn, like some of Rechy's early male protagonists, is literally on a search for her identity (who her true mother and father are), and it is very much enmeshed with sexuality, although she does not explore her sexual orientation. After leaving a club called "The Silent Scream" and emerging onto a street filled with prostitutes, Normalyn enters an "all-night coffee shop" and is seemingly rescued by a well-dressed man. However, as she begins to open up to him he shushes her: "It's just that unwanted words banish fantasy. They have to be exact words. Let me create you only in my imagination. Please, just answer what I ask—" (289). Much like the two men who reject the narrator in *City of Night* for admitting his true feelings and not performing the hustler identity that is expected (*City of Night* 369), the man prefers to create a fantasy identity that he expects her to play along with: "What she heard clearly, beyond implied questions, was the suggestion that she needed no identity of her own, no life, that she remain a reflection determined by others" (*Marilyn's Daughter* 289). However, unlike the narrator in *City of Night*, Normalyn is not rejected—she actively rejects this man and his attempt to erase her: "*This* is what she would not be! Easily, she turned over the cup of coffee, letting the ugly dark liquid spill on him" (289). In a sense, this acts as a revision of the actions of the protagonist in *City of Night*, with Normalyn refusing to act out the fantasy of another person.

A similar revision or vindication occurs with Troja, although in this case a sense of victorious closure is created both for the reader who has only read *Marilyn's Daughter* and for the reader who is also familiar with *City of Night*. Troja in many ways evokes thoughts of Miss Destiny, a key figure in *City of Night*, who is attracted to 'macho' men, and longs for a wedding and husband. However, in the end of *City of Night*, the protagonist hears multiple accounts of how Miss Destiny has ended up, and the last version presented in the novel suggests that she has become a soon-to-be-married "he":

"Well, man, some queen was saying how she got this letter from Destinee. An remember this ah this ah head doctor she was going to, man?--the one she said she would have on the couch next time? Well, he finally cured Miss Destinee, man-- Miss Destinee wrote she ain a queen no more, she has honest-to-jesus-gone-Christ turned *stud* man!--an that ain all, man!" he goes on gleefully "--Miss Destinee wrote she is getting married, man!--to a real woman!..." (129).

The narrator then "thinks": "*Oh Destiny, Miss Destiny! I dont know whats become of you, nor where you are--but that story Chuck just told me, as you yourself should be the first one to admit, is oh Too Much to believe!*" (129, emphasis in original). Thus, the story of Miss Destiny ends in an ambiguous defeat. On the other hand, in *Marilyn's Daughter*, Troja's life is tragic, yet ends on a more positive and less ambiguous note. When

Normalyn first comes across Troja, she is performing as Marilyn Monroe at a nightclub, and it is clear to Normalyn that Troja wants to present an “authentic” and loving performance of Monroe, yet the nightclub owners and audience members prefer to laugh at the performer’s transgendered performance. Troja’s lover, a drug-addicted muscular man named Kirk, appears to be emasculated by his inability to stand up to Troja’s pimp (who also provides Kirk with drugs). After Kirk is killed, Troja sinks into a depression, but with Normalyn’s support, she eventually learns to love herself, and agrees to perform as herself (and not as a parody of Monroe). While she does not end up with a romantic happy ending, she has dignity, symbolized by her “subdued” beauty, as well as the friendship of Normalyn: “Troja wore a subdued gray dress, subdued makeup. Once again she was the imposing woman Normalyn had first met, even grander now...” (529). The word “subdued” implies that Troja no longer needs to “overdo” or parody her femininity, and some readers might see this as a critique of an overt performativity embraced by some drag queens. This closed ending provides resolution for both Troja and, for those readers who will connect the two, Miss Destiny, sealing her as a “grand” and imposing woman who retains and embraces her preferred gender identity. Differing from the characters in *City of Night*, Troja’s existence and performance as a woman is portrayed as being possible and positive. This female empowerment also occurs in the ending of *Bodies and Souls*, an earlier novel by John Rechy, and also occurs in later books such as *The Miraculous Day of Amalia Gómez* and *Our Lady of Babylon*. For now, I would like to focus on the implied readers of *Bodies and Souls* and the metaliterary analysis of those readers contained within the book.

***Bodies and Souls* (1983)**

Published after *Rushes* and *The Sexual Outlaw*, Rechy’s 1983 novel *Bodies and Souls* was overtly marketed to a wide readership, although, like Rechy’s earlier novels, it invites in readers of multiple genders, cultural backgrounds and sexual orientations, while continuing to allude to Rechy’s earlier novels. It also further engages readers in considering how we approach literature. In *Bodies and Souls*, Rechy creates characters who are thinly-veiled depictions of real-life people such as the magazine magnate of body building publications, Joe Wieder, and the televangelists Paul and Jan Crouch, while also loosely following the activities of three teenagers (Orin, Jesse and Lisa) who have come to Los Angeles for different reasons. The novel opens with a violent yet ambiguous scene that foreshadows the ending, in which Orin, much like Meursault in *L’Étranger*, shoots a gun, but it is not entirely clear whether it is intentional or not. Song lyrics from imaginary and real bands are interwoven throughout the novel along with references to classic movies, radio newscasts and verses from the Bible. While these visual and aural intertexts play an important role, I would like to focus first on the lecturer’s parodic reader response analysis and how it affects our reading of the end of the novel, and then on the way in which *Bodies and Souls* was marketed to an expanded readership.

In the middle of the novel, an author named James Hurston (who is clearly semi-autobiographical) gives a lecture at a university: “Angular, moody dark good-looks and a slender survivor’s body made James Hurston appear younger than his fifty years.... Many

were here simply because he was famous, some said notorious, the author of several books that described his turbulent life...” (202-203). There are several different types of audience members—a young (presumably gay) man, a university professor, a Latina, two lesbian girls, and a few others—and as Hurston lectures, the reader is privy to his running analysis of the reactions of his listeners and his inner dialogue as we also read the lecture: “He would not speak in a large auditorium—he needed to watch his listeners” (*Bodies and Souls* 202). The depiction of Hurston “watching listeners” can be read as both a description of his implied readers and as a phenomenological reversal of roles that creates the sensation that the implied author is reading *our* reading of the lecture, *Bodies and Souls*, and Rechy’s literary output up to this point.

As Hurston speaks, he observes the audience’s reactions to what he says, what they write down, what makes them frown, smile, or pay attention, and he also makes conjectures about their lives, and their outlook on sexuality and literature, much like readers do when analyzing Rechy’s work. They, like other characters in Rechy’s books, are observed and analyzed, yet for multiple kinds of readers, the lecturer’s internal monologue that we are privy to may be discomfiting, as the text’s “gaze” is turned towards us. Hurston first describes the motivations he imagines the listeners, a “typical audience,” might have for being there: “There were the students, at least a few assigned to attend by professors who would themselves not be present, their statement on the lecturer’s controversial life and views” (203). Hurston chooses 12 audience members as the addressees/implied readers, illustrating the broad readership that *Bodies and Souls* might have. One character who is almost a parallel to the Professor in *City of Night* is Dr. Admas: “Scanning the filled hall, James Huston chose others: a male professor—Dr. Admas—already mentally writing his scathing, remorselessly obscure 'post post-structuralist' critique of this lecture” (203). In a particularly amusing passage, Hurston illustrates more of his knowledge of literary theory, while mocking it: “Dr. Admas sighed audibly, thinking, Inverse romantic anachronism!—and he will write in his pad: ‘But then, his works have always shown a complete lack of consciousness about the implied reader and the narratee—’ ” (208). Thus the reader who is familiar with Rechy’s work realizes that he/she is reading the literary critique that one might imagine could be written about *Bodies and Souls*.

The lecture is also synechdochal, representing the entire book’s philosophical and thematic elements, while also providing one way of analyzing the novel’s ending (and affecting the expectations of the reader as the ending occurs). As Hurston lectures, he inwardly pleads with the students to “*Please...wait!*” as he talks about literary theory, noting the connections that he makes with different listeners—when he mentions “mad parents,” sex, social justice, and suicide. For the reader who is familiar with Rechy’s earlier novels up to this point, this lecture encapsulates the existential despair within Rechy’s novels, where the protagonist is hyper-aware of his inevitable death. However, towards the end of the lecture Hurston notes Mark’s anguished reaction “demanding more” (218). Hurston then decides to end his lecture with a note of hope for this young listener/reader, that he himself doubts:

“In the defiant movements of that dance which acknowledges the triumphant void— ...” He stopped. *Do I believe this? Do I still believe this? Am I speaking to this youngman—whoever he really is, whatever he really wants—or only to myself?* “...—in those defiant movements there should be—...might be—...will be...a kind of meaning...which may—...” *perhaps!* “...—allow hope” (218).

This might create in some readers the expectation that the ending of this novel will not be entirely pessimistic, in spite of the opening scene of the shooting. However, the unspoken thoughts of the lecturer hint at another way to read the novel and the ending:

James [Hurston] looked out—drawn steadily by the wavy whiteness of the day and its dark shadows, and he remembered Meursault, in Camus’s *The Stranger*, the apathetic man rushing at fate, facing the Arab he would soon kill only because the sun was attacking his eyes—the Arab he will soon be ‘killed’ by, *his* death thrown back at him by the hypnotizing sun (211).

The description and analysis of Meursault’s actions mirror that of Orin at the end of the novel, which will color the interpretation of the ending for readers who are familiar with Camus’ novel. Throughout the novel, the three main characters, Orin, Jesse and Lisa, wander throughout Los Angeles as Orin waits to find out if a televangelist can prove that an “old woman” (possibly his mother) has been forgiven of her sins (incest is implied). In their journeys, they repeatedly run into a woman and her husband who are going to the “gathering of souls” event hosted by the televangelist, who Orin associates with religion. When he discovers that the televangelist cannot prove the old woman is in heaven, he goes up to a hill with the other two characters to throw away a rifle they found. However, as they stand over the intersection of freeways, Jesse sees the car belonging to the couple: “They’re probably on their way to that Gathering of Souls—...” He stopped. Darkness captured Orin’s face. “*No!*” he screamed. His thumb retreated from the release lever and his index finger touched the rifle’s trigger. Bullets sprayed the freeway below...” (416). Orin’s finger “touches” the rifle, and afterwards, he “looked down at the rifle as if only now discovering its horror” (416). Readers could interpret it as an accident, with Orin not realizing how sensitive the gun was, as an intentional action, or, as the lecturer interprets *L’Étranger*, Orin’s action is a result of the coincidence of seeing the car, later resulting in his own death. Like the blinding sun for Meursault, one could read this as Orin not consciously acting, but instead reacting. Above all, this is a clear evocation of Camus’ novel, artfully combined with the movies *White Heat* and *Gone With the Wind*, all of which are referred to repeatedly throughout the novel.

In an epilogue we are told which characters died as a result of the shooting, and which survived. There are two ways to read this: the death of some characters and not others has some sort of symbolic meaning, or it is completely at random, symbolizing the haphazard, unplanned nature of the universe. Each reader will create the meaning they see there. Incidentally, on his website, Rechy states that the ending was completely random, because he “couldn’t bear to decide”: “...I wrote their names on pieces of paper, and blindly assigned a few to each fate, not checking until I had reached the end of the

book” (“Real People as Fictional Characters”). Thus, the lecture within the book and the thematic content of *Bodies and Souls* and its ending clearly parallel one another, inviting the reader to interpret the end as either devoid of meaning or as a final argument in an existential novel. It should also be noted that some readers might be annoyed by the heavy handed way in which Camus’ novel is alluded to, which in some senses closes off this book to a more open-ended interpretation.

While Rechy was obviously quite aware of his academic audience and those who were already familiar with the existential nature of his early work (which was the topic of Honora Lynch’s 1976 dissertation), his text also continued to invite in new readers, explaining things in a way that is similar to *City of Night* and his other novels. In *Bodies and Souls* the narrator spends nearly two pages describing the “world they called ‘the street,’” and which could have easily appeared in *City of Night*:

With variations in between, there are two main types of male hustlers: the overtly masculine and the pretty-boyish. Like Stud, there were those who claimed to be ‘straight’ and ‘did nothing’—just got blown, masturbated for or were masturbated by someone; posed, flexed (*Bodies and Souls* 309).

Rechy explains things so a new or uninformed reader could read his books in any order and still understand the terminology he uses to describe different types of gay men. In his review of *Bodies and Souls* for *The Weekly News* "Book Nook," a gay weekly, Jesse Monteagudo writes: "*Bodies and Souls* is pure Rechy. All his stock characters—excepting the lovable drag queens from *City of Night*—are here, including Rechy's favorites, the hustler and bodybuilder" (22). He then mentions that it's not a "gay" book, but "an important book, for gays and straights alike" (22). This acknowledgment that the book is “for gays and straights alike” is, I argue, true for all of Rechy’s books, in the sense that readers of all sexual orientations are able to read and understand his novels. However, for several reasons *Bodies and Souls* was seen as being quite different from Rechy’s other work, which, in terms of marketing, he encouraged in order to attract new readers.

In a 1990 article titled “On Being a Grove Press Author,” Rechy wrote that “[w]ith... *Bodies and Souls*, I thought I would finally break the increasingly restrictive label of ‘gay writer’... I was sure that this sprawling novel about many people, men and women, rich and poor, in contemporary Los Angeles, would” (140). In letters between Rechy and Kent Carroll of the publishing house Carroll & Graf (the publisher of *Bodies and Souls*), the issue of marketing to an expanded readership is brought up multiple times, particularly with regards to book reviews and advertising. For example, in response to a letter of concern from Rechy regarding a lack of book reviews, Kent Carroll wrote: “The only explanation I’ve heard... is that *Rushes* was so ‘specialized’ a book that we are combating a preconceived notion that interest in your writing does not extend beyond the homosexual community” (Letter to Rechy). This illustrates the difficulty of breaking through the “horizon of expectations.” Clearly, it is applicable to not just everyday readers, but also book reviewers, and in Rechy’s case, risqué depictions of homosexual sexual activity were now expected. Newspaper and magazine book editors resisted assigning *Bodies and Souls*, expecting something along the lines of *Rushes*, a novel that

explored the sadomasochistic gay bar scene of the 1970s. Rechy realized this, and was concerned that Carroll & Graf was not doing enough to publicize the differences:

nothing in the ads indicated the departure I had made in subject; indeed, if you look at them that way, they actually affirmed the opposite: ‘the dark underbelly of life’ ... ‘the seamier side of the streets.’ Anyone familiar with my work would infer that the subject had remained as before (Letter to Carroll).

Furthermore, the cover of the first edition is quite similar in color to his earlier books, and the photograph of a freeway at night would probably evoke thoughts of *City of Night*—in a sense, the cover of *City of Night* was a “close up” of a man on a street at night, and this photo is taken above a freeway with the city on the horizon (see figure 5).⁴⁰

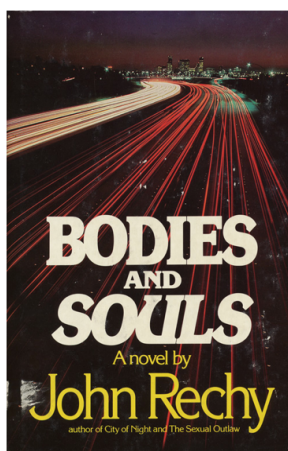


Figure 5: The cover of the first edition of *Bodies and Souls*

Rechy was still very much aware of reader’s expectations—up to this point he had published two books in a row that were quite sexually explicit and centered on the homosexual experience and sadomasochism (*The Sexual Outlaw* and *Rushes*). While his writing is always open to the uninitiated or uninformed reader, this is not to say that this type of reader is the ideal reader of his novels. He is writing to be understood by anyone who reads him, and does not force readers to “work” to understand his books, but those who will understand the majority of his references are well-read people familiar with the U.S. homosexual community and politics of the late 1950s-1970s. Through the repetitive descriptions and explanations of hustling in his novels, Rechy allows the uninformed, casual reader to read and understand his texts. Conversely, the informed reader who is familiar with Rechy’s work or the world he depicts may either be frustrated by the

⁴⁰ According to Charles Casillo’s biography, Michael Snyder, Rechy’s husband, acquired the rights to *Bodies and Souls* as well as *The Miraculous Day of Amalia Gómez*, and Grove reprinted both books starting in 2001 (294).

repetitiveness,⁴¹ or they may enjoy knowing that, unlike new readers of Rechy's work, there are clear connections to his earlier work.

While the primary intended reader of Rechy's work is a well-read gay man who is familiar with Rechy's body of work, there are multiple points of entry for other implied readers. As Martín-Rodríguez argues, "[t]ransnational/transcultural texts... seem to be much more aware of their being different things to different people, as well as of their need to transcend barriers and borders that could impede the reader's interactions" ("The Act of Reading," 26). The readers of Rechy's novels were and are not restricted to the audiences that were explicitly marketed to, nor to the literary communities that fully accepted him. Rechy successfully reached a broad audience with *City of Night*, although after the publication of *Numbers*, *Rushes*, *This Day's Death* and *The Sexual Outlaw*, a firm horizon of expectations was established that negatively affected the non-homosexual reception of his later works. Furthermore, the later establishment of presses and imprints that catered to gay readers meant that fewer books were explicitly marketed to a non-homosexual market. Yet in studying Rechy's earliest work, we must keep in mind that books like *City of Night* were read by U.S. and international heterosexual, bisexual and transsexual readers, and even when Chicano cultural elements were not explicitly highlighted, Chicano/a readers were reading his work, which I further document in Chapter Three. Furthermore, the metaliterary elements in his work engage readers in a dialogue about what we read, how we read it, and the politics of writing and publishing texts. These intertextual and metaliterary references demonstrate Rechy's engagement with a broad literary community, differentiating, from the very beginning, his work from the journalistic writing of newspapers and the empirical approach of sociological studies.

⁴¹ Iser writes that readers enjoy a text that "allows him [the reader] to bring his own faculties into play. There are, of course, limits to the reader's willingness to participate, and these will be exceeded if the text makes things too clear, or, on the other hand, too obscure" (108).

CHAPTER TWO: FAN MAIL, BLOGS, AND *GOODREADS* REVIEWS: THE EVERYDAY READER'S RESPONSE TO JOHN RECHY'S WORK

Although John Rechy cultivated a polarizing authorial persona that resulted in derision from some mainstream reviewers, many of his readers felt an intimate connection with Rechy and his characters. This connection is evidenced in the fan letters written to Rechy, and the associated blog posts and online reviews about his work. Thus far, I have documented and analyzed the “implied readers” who are textually constructed within John Rechy’s work, and the reception of some of his early work by different scholarly communities. In this chapter, I examine the private and public responses of everyday readers, beginning with Rechy’s fan mail and emails he has received via his website. The term “everyday readers” refers to readers who are not scholars or professional book critics, yet I do include people who are students who might have been assigned one of Rechy’s books in a class. With the increasing use of the Internet, there are now several rich and otherwise undocumented sources of their responses to Rechy, including personal blogs, forums, the comments on online articles, review sites such as *Goodreads* and *Library Thing*, and customer reviews on retail websites, (such as *Amazon* and Barnes and Noble). However, the reviews on *Amazon* and other retailer sites are sometimes forged or cut and pasted from other places.⁴² Therefore, after discussing the letters, I focus on the role that blog posts and the review site *Goodreads* play in sharing Rechy’s work with a transnational readership and analyzing new reader responses relative to academic and professional readers.

This approach democratizes the analysis of the significance of Rechy’s work by considering the responses of readers who do not have the academic or literary cachet to share their opinions in the venues that are normally examined. Furthermore, this methodology can potentially allow scholars to better understand an author’s work in diverse cultural contexts. Unlike books reviews and scholarly articles, which provide a smaller sample numerically and, particularly in the past, are limited in terms of ethnic and gender diversity, the responses of everyday readers provides a broader lens with which we can document the social and literary significance of a text.

However, it is important to keep in mind that while anyone can sign up for an email address, create a blog, or register a profile on *Goodreads* for free, access to the internet and web literacy are barriers for some readers. Based on a 2013 survey by the Pew Internet & American Life Project, race/ethnicity, age, educational attainment and household income are some of the biggest factors that affect whether U.S. residents have

⁴² In 2004, according to a *New York Times* article, “the company’s Canadian site... revealed the identities of thousands of people who had anonymously posted book reviews on the United States site under signatures like ‘a reader from New York’” (Harmon, “Amazon Glitch Unmasks War of Reviewers,” A1). Amy Harmon interviewed Rechy, who was one of the anonymous reviewers: “‘That anybody is allowed to come in and anonymously trash a book to me is absurd,’ said Mr. Rechy, who, having been caught, freely admitted to praising his new book” (A1). Harmon also noted that “[n]ot unlike authors who have manipulated newspaper best-seller lists by buying copies of their own books, one ordered books through Amazon to raise his ranking there” (A1).

online access, as well as the quality of that access (Zickuhr, n.p.). For example, while 14 percent of non-Hispanic White Americans who are 18 years old or older do not go online, 15 percent of Black non-Hispanics and 24 percent of Hispanics are not online, and out of people over 65 years of age, just under half (44%) are not online (Zickuhr). Similarly, those who do not have a high school diploma are less likely to go online than college graduates (41% versus 4%), as are those who make less than \$30,000 a year compared with those who make \$30,000-\$49,000 a year (24% versus 12%, Zickuhr). Unfortunately, the economic and educational background of the readers who wrote letters, blogs, and reviews is not readily apparent in most cases, and is even more difficult to capture from online writing, so my analysis does not include that information. In addition, while at times it is clear that a reader is an older adult if they mention having read one of Rechy's books in the 1960s or 1970s, most readers do not disclose their age in their letters, blog posts or online reviews.

While it is well known that *City of Night* was a best seller, that label does not let us know very many details about the demographics of Rechy's readers between then and now. Also, we lack other details, such as how and where readers came across Rechy's work, and whether his popularity was limited to certain regions. For example, there are a few scattered references to the popularity of Rechy's work in Texas, although some of the sources are not reliable or scientific. The following letter to the editor seems to suggest that Rechy's first novel was not popular in his hometown or was censored, but upon deeper inspection, it is clear that this was not the case. In an El Paso newspaper,⁴³ Priscilla Marion asks why "the nationally acclaimed best selling, well-written novel, 'City of Night' by El Pasoan John Rechy is not available in most of El Paso's bookstores, not even the one on the Texas Western College campus?" (n.p.). Rechy graduated from Texas Western College, which might be why she singles out the campus. She continues:

Not only in Rhode Island, but everywhere where intelligent people are reading books; people are reading Rechy's novel, Henry Miller's novels, and the plays and prose of Genet. Need I mention what the absence of such books in El Paso's bookstores indicates about the mentality and provinciality of the El Paso population? Sir, I would never want to move here. I would never, in fact, want my children to move here. I am very surprised at El Paso. I thought, being in Texas, it was, as a city, more manly. —Mrs. Priscilla Marion, Providence, R.I. (n.d., n.p.).

In bold type below the letter, a brief response follows: "Shucks, ma'am, maybe we're just so manly here that books on homosexuality don't appeal to us. —Editor." While the editor of the Texas paper sarcastically appears to confirm that *City of Night* is not appealing to El Paso readers, in fact, El Pasoans were buying the novel. In a letter sent to his editor Donald Allen, Rechy explained the situation, as Allen had seen the letter to the editor and was concerned:

⁴³ I found this letter to the editor in John Rechy's archives, but was unable to identify the date or the newspaper, although its content suggests it is from the *El Paso Times*.

In answer to your question about whether ‘City of Night’ is sold in El Paso: The letter, printed by the newspaper—the one I sent you—was misleading. It’s true that the stores here didn’t have it—but because they had all sold out for their fourth or fifth order. They were waiting for a new shipment (John Rechy to Donald Allen 24 November 1963).

In the absence of other records, taking Rechy’s word suggests that in El Paso, the book sold very well. One year later, it was still popular in Texas, particularly amongst college students. In a 1964 column for the *New York Times* titled “Unrequired Reading: A Report From Ten Colleges,” Dave Hickey talked to “many undergraduates and to the local booksellers” at the University of Texas about “what they buy and what they talk about,” in order to “distinguish the reading habits of our student body from those of other colleges” (37). He begins with the “older authors who have not yet been canonized into the modern literature courses,” such as John Steinbeck and John O’Hara, and then says that “the novels [...] most often mentioned” are by Larry McMurtry, Ken Kesey, and Lawrence Durrell, and then says *City of Night* and Larry McMurtry’s *Leaving Cheyenne* are “also mentioned” (37). He then ends by noting that the “obvious and best sellers,” which, one assumes, are commonly read at other universities, include texts by “J.D. Salinger, William Golding and James Baldwin,” but also *Modern Sex Techniques* (37). The column is rather unscientific, but fascinating for the brief snapshot of what some Texas college students read at the time. As we shall see below in the fan mail, some of those who read Rechy’s books in the 1960s were nervous about buying his books, or being seen reading them.

Letters from readers

Fan mail scholarship is still relatively uncommon, particularly when studying texts from the middle of the 20th century, because it can be difficult to access private letters written to an author, and perhaps also because the responses of everyday readers do not help legitimize or canonize lesser-known authors. For example, while the correspondence of published authors is examined in biographies and studies, there are fewer examples of scholarly writing that examine the responses of everyday readers.⁴⁴ However examining the fan mail from everyday readers provides an intimate look at their responses to the text, and an intriguing amount of demographic information that is difficult to find elsewhere. This is particularly true when considering a literary text that

⁴⁴ Over the last two decades, several articles and chapters have appeared on fan mail sent to authors. One chapter in Clarence Karr’s *Authors and Audiences: Popular Canadian Fiction in the Early Twentieth Century* (2000) discusses fan mail sent to five authors, and in “At Odds: Reviewers and Readers of the *Jalna* Novels” (2000) Ruth Panofsky compares the responses of reviewers and everyday readers to the work of Mazo de la Roche, as well as the impact these responses had on de la Roche as a writer. In 2006 Beth Rigel Daugherty discussed the significance of the letters written to Virginia Woolf by the everyday readers that Woolf hoped to reach (“‘You see you kind of belong to us, and what you do matters enormously’: letters from readers to Virginia Woolf”). Recently, in the dissertation “Flirting with Fame: Byron and His Female Readers” (2010), Corin Throsby studies the “celebrity fan mail” received by Byron, and R. Kent Rasmussen has edited a collection of letters from Mark Twain’s readers, sometimes including his responses (*Dear Mark Twain: Letters from His Readers*, 2013).

has controversial content, or that is both popular and part of the literary canon (or both, as is the case with some of Rechy's work).

Fan mail tends to have a positive bias, as those who feel compelled to write a letter to Rechy tend to do so because of the positive and important impact of his books. In "One Reader, Two Votes: Retooling Fan Mail Scholarship," Barbara Ryan acknowledges the concerns of William St. Clair who argues that fan mail "offer[s] 'at best' only 'a tiny randomly surviving, and perhaps highly unrepresentative, sample of the far larger total of acts of reception which were never turned into words in the mind of the reader let alone recorded in writing'" (cited in Ryan, 76). Nevertheless, Ryan argues that while "[i]t is right to caution that fan mail is dominated by glowing feedback [...] scholars know that especially avid fans can also be severe critics" (71). Ryan also sees fan mail (and letters to the editor) as demonstrating a "desire to be heard. The same cannot be unequivocally said of marginalia, library records, book-sellers' ledgers, references in private journals, and other sources of information long consulted by historians of reading" (73). Ryan draws on the work of Michael Shudson, who argues in *The Good Citizen: A History of American Civic Life* (1998) that the shift in political campaign and voting methods provided fewer venues for (primarily male) Americans to express themselves, and thus sought out "replacement activities, on which dammed enthusiasm could be extended," including "film, dance-halls and car rides" (74). Ryan argues that readers of newspapers and literature had an increased desire to be heard both on a civic and emotional level (74). Ryan's attention to the political and social context in which letters were written informs my analysis of how the socio-cultural atmosphere and laws regarding homosexuals in the United States are reflected in the letters from readers throughout Rechy's career.

However, I depart from Ryan's emphasis on the "electoral model" approach to fan mail as it comes at the expense of personal and emotional readerly responses. She states that "it makes sense to develop models for fan mail research which move past sentiment and intimacy" (73), and while I agree that other elements can and should be analyzed, moving "past sentiment and intimacy" might imply that they are not important or worthy of research and analysis, thus limiting our understanding of the impact of reading. Therefore, in this chapter I also analyze how some of Rechy's readers become more than active readers—they become writers, expressing not only their opinions of his work, but also sharing details of their own lives, such as their coming out process, their own attitudes towards homosexuality, and the path that lead them to reading Rechy's work. This illustrates the emotional intimacy that the letter writers felt towards Rechy, while also documenting the unique (and often challenging) routes that readers sometimes took to read his work, a trait that is unmistakably linked to the subject matter, sociocultural mores, and common methods of attaining books before the advent of online booksellers.

In the biography *Outlaw: The Lives and Careers of John Rechy* by Charles Casillo, Rechy explains why he burned the hundreds of letters he received after writing *City of Night*:

Rechy received hundreds of letters from fans writing about how *City of Night* had affected them. “Young men. Old men. So many,” he recalls. “I answered them all. These letters would make an interesting book in themselves. They were profoundly moving but very personal. The University of California at Berkeley had offered to buy them. But I felt that would be a violation of trust. I worried that if something happened to me, these letters would end up in the wrong hands. So I burned them” (Casillo 175).⁴⁵

Rechy was understandably concerned about the privacy of his readers, particularly because their frank disclosure about their sexuality was during a time when homosexuality was illegal. Shortly after the publication of *City of Night*, in several letters Rechy shares the response he was getting from readers with his editor, Donald Allen:

I got a letter from a Catholic priest in Boston telling me how greatly he admired my book; how restrained and un-lurid he found it—and calling it a “prodigious accomplishment” I’ve gotten lots of mail—from an ex-English-professor at Columbia to a law professor at Yale—all the letters have been laudatory. I’ve also been getting several long-distance calls (Rechy to Allen 17 June 1963).

Boy, am I getting mail!—all good, too. And even long-distance phone calls: Among them—a girl from New York; and a woman from New Jersey (the latter was very very drunk, and wanted to tell me that I looked like “a very cute little boy” and how could I have done such awful things?—then her husband took the telephone from her and wanted to know who I was” (Rechy to Donald Allen 30 June 1963).

This is the only extant record of these responses, because in order to protect readers Rechy destroyed hundreds of letters for an indeterminate period of time. However, he does have a collection of letters (and emails) from around 1983 to the present that he has made available to me. What follows is an analysis of these letters, focusing on the gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and nationality of the readers while maintaining their anonymity. A brief discussion follows on the elements in Rechy’s books that appeared to most appeal to these readers, and the role they feel his books have played in their lives. The letters are dated between 1983 and 2011, and in my analysis, I focus on 81 letters written by 75 different people that specifically state that the letter writer read Rechy’s books, as opposed to some of the more generic letters requesting that Rechy attend an event or congratulating him on a positive review in the newspaper.

While the earliest letters were mailed to Rechy care of his publisher, more recent letters often appeared in the form of emails, most of which were sent via John Rechy’s website, www.johnrechy.com. The website was created in the mid-to-late 1990s by Lucas

⁴⁵ According to Rechy, one letter writer even wrote that he had “decided he was going to live like the drifter in *City of Night*” and “began calling and writing” to John Rechy (Casillo 174).

Crown, who attended Rechy’s writing workshops. According to Crown, when a visitor clicks “feedback” the website sends it as an email, and Crown “delete[s] the obvious spam and forward[s] along the real correspondence [to Rechy]. I don’t read the email beyond what it takes to know it isn’t spam.”⁴⁶ The 75 letter writers are primarily from the United States, and a few also hail from Canada, Germany, Thailand, Holland, England and Australia. The location of the writers is divided by state and country (see Table 1). Some of the letters did not have their original envelope, or the email did not indicate the country of origin, which is indicated in the table below as “(No state), USA” or “Unknown Country.” It is fairly easy to identify the gender of the writers based on their name, although it is possible that some writers are transgendered or transsexual, or who have a name that is typically associated with someone of a certain gender but identify as a different gender.

Table 1: State and Country of Letters

| Location | Percentage | Number |
|--------------------------|-------------------|---------------|
| California, USA | 25.3% | 19 |
| New York, USA | 12% | 9 |
| Illinois, USA | 5.3% | 4 |
| Texas, USA | 4% | 3 |
| New Jersey, USA* | 4% | 3 |
| Indiana, USA | 2.7% | 2 |
| Arizona, USA | 2.7% | 2 |
| Washington, USA | 2.7% | 2 |
| Arkansas, USA | 1.3% | 1 |
| Connecticut, USA | 1.3% | 1 |
| Florida, USA | 1.3% | 1 |
| Kentucky, USA | 1.3% | 1 |
| Massachusetts, USA | 1.3% | 1 |
| Oklahoma, USA | 1.3% | 1 |
| Pennsylvania, USA | 1.3% | 1 |
| (No state), USA | 8% | 6 |
| TOTAL USA | 76% | 57 |
| England | 6.7% | 5 |
| Australia | 1.3% | 1 |
| Canada | 1.3% | 1 |
| Germany | 1.3% | 1 |
| Holland | 1.3% | 1 |
| TOTAL not-USA | 12% | 9 |
| **Unknown country | 12% | 9 |

* One of the writers originally from New Jersey is currently living in Thailand with his partner.

** All of the letter writers from unknown countries wrote in English, and only one appeared to be a non-native English writer

⁴⁶ Lucas Crown, Interview by Beth Hernandez-Jason, November 22, 2011 (email).

On the other hand, identifying the sexual orientation of the writers is much more difficult, because it is reliant on self-reporting, and one might ask why it should even be attempted. My project here is to document who was/is reading Rechy's work, in part to compare this finding with the textually implied reader and with the overt marketing of the book. I also intend to correct the scholarly discussions and book reviews that often assume that the early books, including *Numbers*, *Rushes* and *The Sexual Outlaw*, were only read by gay men, and that only later books like *The Miraculous Day of Amalia Gómez* were read by Chicano/a readers of all sexual orientations, who had finally come around to acknowledging Rechy as a Chicano author. Therefore, I identify the sexual orientation of the letter writers when possible, trying to not fall into stereotypical traps. For example, when a writer states that he or she strongly identifies with Rechy and his experiences, or mentions belonging to a LGBTQ book club, I do not assume that the writer is gay or not heterosexual. On the other hand, when a writer mentions a same-sex partner, I put them in the non-heterosexual category (see Table 2).

While the majority of the letters that I examine are from men, five out of 75 letter writers (6.7%) self-identify as female, and only one of the writers specifically states her sexual orientation (as heterosexual). The others do not explicitly state their orientation, and do not share any identifying details. The majority of the letter writers (93%) are male, and of those, just over half (57%) do not explicitly state their sexual orientation, or are quite vague, although some of the letters could be read as implying a homosexual or bisexual orientation. Forty percent state that they are gay, or openly discuss their male partners or their attraction to Rechy, and one writer [1.4%] explicitly refers to himself as a heterosexual. Two letter writers identify as bisexual, or at least identify themselves as being bisexual years ago, when they report first reading Rechy's books. Clearly, the majority of the letters are from homosexual men, although it is possible that in the cases where readers do not self-identify their orientation, heterosexual men did not feel the need to state their sexual orientation, as this is often assumed to be the default sexual orientation. On the other hand, some letters could be read as signaling the reader's sexual orientation through references to other gay authors.

Table 2: Gender and Sexual Orientation of Letter Writers

| Letter Writers (75 total): 1983-2011 | | |
|---|-------------------------|-------------------------|
| Gender | Female: 5 (6.7%) | Male: 70 (93.3%) |
| Sexual Orientation | 80% unknown | 55.7% unknown |
| | 20% heterosexual | 1.4% heterosexual |
| | 0% LGBTQ | 42.9% LGBTQ |

In Table 3 I tabulate novels by what readers in their letters (including *Beneath the Skin*, a collection of essays). If readers wrote that they had read several of his books without mentioning specific titles, I included them as well in a separate category, "no specific book mentioned." Just over 18 percent of the male readers did not mention a specific book in their letter, but said that they had read his work. *City of Night* is by far the most commonly mentioned book by both male and female letter writers—all of the female writers mentioned it, and just over half of male writers also did so. In fact, one

letter writer wrote that a “gay and lesbian reading club” in El Paso, TX “decided to call ourselves the City of Night Reading Club” (Letter 9). It is worth noting that aside from *City of Night*, the most popular titles mentioned by male letter writers are *Numbers*, *The Sexual Outlaw*, *Beneath the Skin*, and *The Coming of the Night*, which feature homosexual characters and/or themes prominently. The four least-mentioned novels have strong female characters and feature heterosexual relationships, although most of them have secondary characters that are male and homosexual. Given the small sample of letters from women, the data on the books they mention is less revealing.

Table 3: Books By Rechy in Letters

| Books by Rechy Mentioned by Letter Writers (75 writers) | |
|--|--|
| Female Letter Writers (5) | Male Letter Writers (70) |
| 100% <i>City of Night</i> (5) | 52.8% <i>City of Night</i> (37) |
| 20% <i>Marilyn’s Daughter</i> (1) | 18.6% No specific book mentioned (13) |
| 20% <i>Miraculous Day of Amalia Gómez</i> : (1) | 15.7% <i>Numbers</i> (11) |
| 20% <i>The Coming of the Night</i> : (1) | 15.7% <i>Sexual Outlaw</i> (11) |
| | 8.6% <i>Beneath the Skin</i> (6) |
| | 5.7% <i>The Coming of the Night</i> (4) |
| | 4.3% <i>Miraculous Day of Amalia Gómez</i> (3) |
| | 4.3% <i>About My Life</i> (3) |
| | 2.9% <i>This Day’s Death</i> (2) |
| | 2.9% <i>Rushes</i> (2) |
| | 2.9% <i>Our Lady of Babylon</i> (2) |
| | 1.4% <i>The Fourth Angel</i> (1) |
| | 1.4% <i>Bodies and Souls</i> (1) |
| | 1.4% <i>Lyle</i> (1) |
| | 1.4% <i>Marilyn’s Daughter</i> (1) |

Rechy also received letters and emails in response to the book reviews, articles and essays he published in newspapers and on his website, but in this chapter I focus only on the letters and emails from readers who talked about his books. A few letter writers sent more than one letter, so there are a total of 81 letters, and some are written directly “to” Rechy, while others are written to the publisher, or they are addressed to someone other than Rechy, as many were not sure if the message they sent through John Rechy’s website would reach him directly, or go to a webmaster. The bulk of the letters and emails are from 2005 (26%), 2006 (16%), and 2010 (11%), and 7.5% are from 2011 and 2004.

A small percentage of writers state their ethnic and class identity. Perhaps if Rechy was not able to “pass” as Anglo American (a fact that Rechy brings up in his memoir, *About My Life and the Kept Woman*), his readers would have brought up race

and ethnicity more often. Two readers make a point of noting that they do not share Rechy's ethnic background, while commenting on his ethnicity: "Not having the beauty of being half-Mexican (Welsh and Irish), I've had to view the seductive world about which you wrote from a great distance" (Letter 7). On the other hand, only one reader specifically mentions being Latino, writing: "I'm Latino-American, and I am taking a Latino American fiction class here. Our teacher just assigned us a segment of your work from *City of Night* and I was floored. I also happen to be gay, and when I read through the assigned passages, I was moved to tears" (Letter 39). Another called himself a "skinny, and dumb Mexican kid who wants to make something of himself" (Letter 60). It is not clear if this reader is actually living in Mexico, or if he identifies as Mexican but lives in the United States, or some other country. Finally, one reader identifies his ethnic and social identity from years ago: "Growing up in an upper-middle class Jewish household in New Jersey, I probably had not been told directly that these feelings were 'wrong.' I was allowed to read what I wanted" (letter 66).

A few letter writers describe reading Rechy's work in rural and/or conservative places, such as the "Bible Belt," the U.S. Midwest, and small rural towns in Alaska and Ontario, Canada: "I am just amazed that a small public school in [...] Ontario could easily censure *Catcher in the Rye* - but still find a place for *City [of Night]*. You've got allies in small, far away places John - and thank God for that..." (Letter 29). On the other hand, two different writers note the impact that *City of Night* had on them when they first visited New York: "As I mentioned to you [at a book signing], 'City of Night' had a profound effect on me as a seventeen year old kid just arrived in NYC" (Letter 24). The letters hold a rich trove of information about who read(s) the work of John Rechy, and the impact it has on their lives. In the following pages, I focus on 1) the routes readers took in finding and reading Rechy's work, 2) the self-described impact of the books on reader's understanding or acceptance of their own sexuality or the sexuality of others, and 3) the responses of readers who have continued to re-read Rechy's novels over the years.

Encounters with Rechy's Work

Readers came across Rechy's books in many different ways; some borrowed books from friends, or picked them up after a friend recommended them, while others saw the book at a library or bookstore. A recent reader wrote that at a "GLBT festival," he "was directed to check out your writing, particularly 'City of Night'" (Letter 72), while another stated that he read *City of Night* "at age 13," and that he "subscribed to *The Evergreen Review*" (Letter 66), which suggests that this is how he learned about *City of Night*. One reader read Rechy's first novel while in the U.S. Navy, "when I was a cadet and my ship was in Singapore in 1967" (Letter 52). A few letter writers mention reading Rechy's novels for the first time in college, and some letters are from professors, describing the reaction of their students to his writing: "I'd read from your work to my students and they would be enthralled" (Letter 50). A male writer remembers finding *City of Night* in the library while in the 10th grade:

I came across a cover of a paperback – that seemed obscure enough – a city corridor dimly lit with streetlights – and a shadowed figure. Total chance – or as luck would have it, I picked it up and started reading and never looked back [...] The librarian was an elderly man who seemed [...] peevish, booky [sic] and with a general dislike of sound, motion, movement, expression, etc. [...] I would steal into the library every chance I had to read *City* – hard on raging under the desk – under the ever-scrutinous watch of the book keeper – who seemed to hold a special, silent satisfaction with my choice of book (Letter 29).

Another writer describes his “flash back to sitting in my parents backyard, secretly reading it [*City of Night*], and thinking this is not some story a guy made up. This is real” (Letter 16). Similarly, another reader describes the need to hide the act of reading Rechy’s work. At the age of 19, he

discover[ed] City of Night on the paperback rack at the ‘el’ terminal. I read the jacket and blurbs and begin to understand what it is about, or so I think. I could not believe that such a book could exist, much less be displayed publicly and be for sale. [...] I don’t know how I finally worked up the courage to buy it, but I did. From that point [...] until I had finished reading it several days later, I carried it with me and read it surreptitiously whenever I could (Letter 10).

It seems safe to assume that the reader was surprised that the overtly homosexual and sexual content was not censored, although his surprise that “such a book could exist” suggests he was not familiar with other texts such as *The Story of O* or the work of Jean Genet. One reader mentioned reading a piece in the *Los Angeles Times Book Review* “naming Southern California writers who made up the area’s literary center. Almost every contributor to the piece rated you as outstanding and had high regard for Cities of Night [sic]” (Letter 12). The letter writer was so fascinated by the positive mentions of *City of Night* and the negative responses to *The Coming of the Night* that she decided to read both and find out why there was such a large discrepancy in the reviews for the two books. Another female reader wrote that she borrowed *City of Night* from her boyfriend years ago, and in the process of reading it, realized he was gay (Letter 32). At least two different letter writers spoke in detail about the difficult time they had finding or buying Rechy’s novels. In 1983, one writer who already owned four autographed books by Rechy described his quest to purchase *Bodies and Souls*. After ordering a copy of the book directly from the publisher (Carroll and Graf), he never received the book, so he “purchased a soft cover in Waldenbooks,” although it later “fell apart, while I was half way through” (Letter 75). Rechy ended up photocopying this letter and mailing it to his publisher because of a dispute he had with them about the quality of the paperback copy of *Bodies and Souls*. Another letter writer complained about his frustration with a mainstream bookstore when trying to buy books: “Well I was just in a Barnes and Nobles [sic] book store when I realized how much I hate that place. You know I can’t even get

the books I want in there. I had to order *City of Night*. No, I haven't ever read it but I have heard a lot about it and wanted to give it a try" (Letter 45).

Given that Rechy's work was so provocative for its time (and was likely banned from high school bookshelves, with the exception of the letter writer from Canada), there are very few letters from people who were assigned Rechy's work in a class. Younger readers may have seen books like *City of Night* and *The Miraculous Day of Amalia Gómez* on class syllabi (only one letter writer mentions reading one of his books for a course in 2005, and it was for a writing class), but Rechy's novels have not achieved the canonical status of books that are most often featured in a survey course on post-1945 U.S. literature, nor a Chicano/a literature survey course. In contrast, texts by authors such as Gloria Anzaldúa are assigned and anthologized in Women's Studies, Ethnic Studies and Gender Studies courses nation-wide.

The Impact of Reading Rechy

According to the letter writers, reading Rechy's work expanded their awareness of alternative perspectives and experiences and deepened their understanding of themselves (including acceptance of the reader's sexuality). Oftentimes, this was linked to the experience of empathizing or identifying with characters in Rechy's novels, even if the reader did not share the gender identity or sexual tastes of the character(s). The letter writers do not say if Rechy's writing arouses them, although some authors who have read Rechy's work do write about this, which I explore further in Chapter Three.

One reader who does not state his sexual orientation writes "I have read a number of your books through the years and [...] I particularly appreciate your outspoken views on gays, gay rights and gay politics. It adds a good deal of perspective to my life" (Letter 3). The letter could be read as implying that the writer is not gay and that his worldview has been expanded by the work of John Rechy. Similarly, one reader states that *Numbers* "was seminal in my education and acceptance of all creation" (Letter 42). Another letter writer describes her experience reading *City of Night* in a way that could be read as exoticizing and distancing herself from what she perceives as different from her:

That Other World in *Cities of Night* [sic] was such a treat. The characters and situations were so striking, so mind boggling that it seemed to me I was actually present in those bars. I was there staring, absorbing the conversation, gasping, Wow, and thinking eventually someone is going to throw me out of here (Letter 12).

This experience also seems to coincide with what Victor Nell describes as the "reading trance" that sometimes occurs during ludic reading, or pleasure reading: "[...] the term *reading trance* [...] describe[s] the extent to which the reader or listener has become, through the narrative, a temporary citizen of another world" (77). Another female reader wrote "...I read *City of Night* probably 30 years ago when I lived in NYC.... I am a 53 year old straight woman but was and still am profoundly moved by this book. In many ways I identified with your protagonist; the loneliness, detachment and determined

curiosity” (Letter 65). Seemingly aware of the fact that she may not be the ideal reader of the text, she nevertheless found the book compelling enough to write Rechy an email.

Some readers found that Rechy’s work was a useful way to explain homosexuality to others: “When I came out to my employer, I gave him ‘City of Night’ and ‘The Sexual Outlaw’ to read. And when I came out to a friend who was studying for the priesthood, I gave him the same two books” (Letter 40). A 2013 Pew Research Center poll found that “14% of all Americans... say they have changed their minds on this issue in favor of gay marriage,” and “[r]oughly a third (32%) said [their views changed] because they know someone – a friend, family member or other acquaintance – who is homosexual” (“Growing Support for Gay Marriage,” n.p.).⁴⁷ Rechy’s books, as well as a multitude of other factors, played a role in helping some people come out, or perhaps even convincing them to come out in the first place.

One letter is from the opposite perspective—a person who learns they have a gay family member. The female reader thanks Rechy for “opening my eyes to a way of life I knew nothing about,” and then continues: “My son is gay and I am his biggest fan. *City of Night* helped me understand some of what his life is about” (Letter 32). This letter writer did not explain what character or element of *City of Night* helped her understand what her gay son’s life is like, and *City of Night* in many respects depicts a highly specialized kind of lifestyle: that of the hustling and cruising world of the late 1950s and early 1960s in the U.S. However, earlier in the letter, she does note that she found *City of Night* “beautifully erotic,” so perhaps it helped her come to terms with the idea of his same-sex attraction.

As early as the 1980s, Rechy stated in an interview that he was aware of the fact that heterosexual couples found his books erotic. In an interview with John Rechy, Leland Hickman describes the reactions of heterosexuals he knew who had read *Rushes* and *The Sexual Outlaw*:

The last scene of *Rushes*, set in The Rack, has horrified some heterosexual readers whom I know. *The Sexual Outlaw* seems to be addressed to heterosexuals just as much as it is to homosexuals [...]. And some of the scenes in *The Sexual Outlaw* are extremely sexual, extremely erotic, and I would assume that your strategy there may partly have been to impress upon the heterosexual reader, as well as on the others, just exactly what it is you are demanding the freedom to do (10).

Hickman notes the erotic nature of the scenes in *The Sexual Outlaw* and while he acknowledges that Rechy has heterosexual readers, it is not clear whether he considers the possibility that a heterosexual reader of either gender might have an erotic response to Rechy’s writing. Rechy, however, directly addresses this potential (and actual) reader reaction: “...you will be amazed, I mean at the number—and I don’t mean one or two—of letters and comments from heterosexual men and women who read passages to each other to enhance their own sexuality” (Rechy, “The Relentless Pursuit,” 10). In the

⁴⁷ Also, see Neil Steinberg’s column “Coming out of the closet worked” *Chicago Sun-Times* 26 Mar. 2013 Web. 1 Apr. 2013.

statement above, it's not entirely clear whether Rechy is referring only to people who read *The Sexual Outlaw*, or to his earlier novels as well, but from the sample I examine, it is clear that some female heterosexual readers found *City of Night* erotic even though it was one of Rechy's less sexually explicit books. One female reader seemed to appreciate how Rechy depicted sexuality in an erotic way: "I have very much enjoyed your work, and find your wicked sense of humour and ability to appreciate sexiness even when it is far afield from your own taste delightful" (Letter 35). Later in the letter, the only book referred to is *City of Night*.

For many gay readers who wrote Rechy letters, Rechy's books did more than simply entrance (or arouse) the readers—their sense of self was affected, as they found themselves reflected in the text. In *Pulp Friction*, Michael Bronski argues that gay pulp novels had a similar effect:

While pulp novels functioned as validation for gay male sexual desires, they performed other functions as well [...] The importance of these novels as educational, self-help, and how-to manuals cannot be underestimated. No one is brought up to be gay, hardly anyone (even now) comes from a "gay family" (8-9).

Bronski highlights the educational role of texts featuring homosexual relationships, particularly given that fact that one's parents may not be willing or able to provide sexual guidance, let alone a model of what a gay relationship looks like. Similarly, in a review of Christopher Bram's *Eminent Outlaws*, Stan Persky describes his lonely experience as a gay teenager:

When I was a teenager I believed, as many have, that I had personally invented homosexuality. This was prior to the gay movement, when there was scant public evidence that being gay existed and, if it did, it was *sick* [...] Much more than the concurrent civil rights, women's, students' or anti-war movements of the 1950s to mid-1970s – though all generated significant writing – the gay movement was unusually dependent on books, journalism, theater, and screenwriting to spread its message, both to others and itself. That was so for a very simple reason. Unlike women, African Americans, and other activists, homosexuals, except for the stereotyped subculture of flamboyant "queens," were mostly invisible to one another, and even to themselves (n.p.).

Persky and Bram do not draw on any evidence to prove that the gay rights movement of the 1950s-1970s produced or was more dependent on the literary arts than other movements (for example, during the Chicano Movement a significant number of plays, poetry, short stories, novels and journalism was produced).⁴⁸ Nevertheless, Persky's experience of feeling alone because of the lack of information about homosexuality and

⁴⁸ It is possible that the literary arts produced during the gay rights movement had wider visibility than those produced by the Chicano Movement or other ethnic civil rights movements.

the lack of identifiable markers like gender or ethnicity is echoed in the letters Rechy received. A longtime reader writes: “For many years, more than 30, I have read your books, and lost and found myself in them” (Letter 10). Finding oneself in a book could mean the reader understands himself better after reading, or recognizes something about himself in the text. For example, one writer explicitly states that *City of Night* was “the first book I ever read (gay or straight) that I could relate to” (Letter 16). Gay readers from other countries could also relate to Rechy’s books, including the depiction of “the corresponding loneliness after casual sex” in the gay bar scene (Letter 19), and gay life in general: “[...] the truth in the writing is still growing on me, as I learns [sic] more about gay life over here [in Holland] and in myself” (Letter 23). This “truth in the writing” that the reader mentions is echoed later by gay authors in Chapter Three. Other readers wrote to Rechy asking for advice, or a sign of hope for their own lives, because they identified with him: “You are the role model for my future, given you’ve walked in my shoes before me (so to speak). I’m looking for some direction, action, understanding. *Did you find love and companionship or not?*” (Letter 72, emphasis original).

Other readers were even more explicit about the impact Rechy’s work had on their sexual identity: “My partner ... and I are fans of yours. Your books had a huge impact on our understanding of our sexuality” (Letter 11). Another wrote that reading *The Sexual Outlaw* in particular “was in many ways a very important part of finding my new identity as a gay man” in the late 1970s (Letter 14), which is echoed again and again: “He [Rechy] was important to my early coming out process (when, in Texas where we both grew up, just being gay made me a sexual outlaw)” (Letter 17); “When I first came out in 1974, at age 21, I found your books, *City of Night* and *Numbers*. Those books [sic] brave honesty helped give me courage to step out into an unknown and feared—but desired—new world” (Letter 57). A reader mentions re-reading *Numbers* recently and thanks Rechy in his letter for “being out when it was not easy, and explaining the facts of gay life to an innocent but very horny young man” (Letter 70). For many gay readers, *Numbers*, *City of Night* and *The Sexual Outlaw* acted as sexual “primers,” introducing readers to the places, behaviors, dangers and pleasures of gay sexuality in large cities. One reader had a very visceral response to *City of Night*: “[...] it knocked the breath out of me & I was suddenly crouched on the floor of the Stacks in a Public Library weeping, inconsolably—because we were alike [...]” (34). This cathartic experience is difficult to measure, or analyze in a detached way. While we cannot assume too much from the letters, it seems clear that the act of reading and the act of self-recognition was therapeutic, at the very least. For one self-described “past youngman,” reading *City of Night* allowed him to “deal with my past” (Letter 28).

Re-Reading Rechy

Finally, ten different letters mention that the letter writer is in the act of re-reading Rechy’s novels, plans to do so, or has re-read his work over time. This might indicate a deeper appreciation for and understanding of Rechy’s writing, which can occur when reading a literary text more than once. One writer explained that

After reading [Charles] Casillo's *Outlaw*, I decided on a project of reading all of your books in the order of publication. I have now reread *City of Night* and *Numbers* and am now reading *This Day's Death*. . . . It was wonderful to reread *City of Night* after many years, and, always obsessed with numbers, I believe I now completely understand Johnny Rio (Letter 15A).

This writer is referring to the protagonist of *Numbers*, and indicates a better understanding of him after rereading the novel. Another writer observed that he was having a completely different response to *City of Night* while rereading it:

To be frank, reading your book devastated me. As a boy loving men, was this the life to which I would be relegated? Would I be so forever lonely, ostracized, hated, hunted and desperate? I'm more than half way through re-reading *City of Night*. It goes without saying that my experience of reading the book after so many years and experiences have passed, is a completely different one. Rather than being filled with fear and self-loathing, I find myself tenderly empathizing with you, your characters and their situations (Letter 66).

The reader acknowledges that with time and experience, he approaches the book differently, and feels a tender empathy for Rechy and his characters, although it is not clear if he is conflating Rechy with the protagonist of the book, or if this is based on his knowledge of Rechy's biography. For some, rereading reaffirms the merit of his writing, because it stands the test of time, so to speak. For example, one reader states "[...] I am reading *City of Night* for about the 10th time and it is still one of the most profound books I have ever had the pleasure to read," (Letter 38). The letter writers range from devoted fans to those who never got around to reading Rechy's work even after owning it for years. For example, one letter states: "Just read '*Sexual Outlaw*' for the first time after having it around since it first appeared in paperback. I was even more stunned at its continued relevance. Thank you for your candor and your truth. You are a true hero for every gay man in this country" (Letter 36). While this last letter is not technically a "re-reading," it is a reader recognizing that while a great deal of time has passed since *The Sexual Outlaw* first appeared, the book is still relevant.

When readers comment on the "relevance" of Rechy's work, it tends to be in reference to his early work, including *City of Night*, *Numbers*, and *The Sexual Outlaw*. For example, in 1996 a letter writer wrote "Everything about *Numbers* is so TRUE and applies 100% even today, even in Phoenix, AZ" (Letter 4). The writer points out that in spite of geographical differences, Rechy's work applies to his city. "Relevance" could plausibly refer to two things, and they are not mutually exclusive: first, that his observations and depictions of characters and/or the sociocultural milieu are still applicable because of how little things have change, and secondly, that his observations about human nature and society are timeless. One reader in Germany can relate to the loneliness described in *City of Night*: "You describe some of the subtleties and banalities of gay life quite brilliantly. I live in Munich. . . and though I did never live on the streets, I

recognized many gay bars here, and the corresponding loneliness, after casual sex for example” (Letter 19). At least five letters mention loneliness, and it is often what causes them to identify with Rechy and his writing.

These intimate accounts attest to the transformative work of Rechy’s writing in the lives of readers. A few do mention their appreciation of his “literary genius,” and some even point out the broad reach of his work: “[...] I have read everything Mr. Rechy has written, and remain astonished at the depth of his writing vision, that he did not limit himself to the big box of the gay underworld” (Letter 48). However, the overwhelming majority writes about how important his books were and continue to be, which is true for readers of different genders, sexual orientations and nationalities. Furthermore, for these readers, the act of reading Rechy’s novels is a catalyst for the act of writing. While several readers mention that they are writers, all of these readers are letter writers, documenting their interpretations and responses to Rechy’s work. Similarly, the following bloggers also make the transition from reading to writing, in a much more public forum.

Online Reader Responses: Blogs

Blog posts differ from private letters in that they have a potentially international audience beyond the single recipient. However, unlike archived letters, blogs can become ephemeral without the intervention of scholars. If a blogger does not maintain active use or ownership of the website, it can be shut down, or a blogger can choose to delete posts and/or comments. While some sites can be recovered using the “Wayback Machine” (an online archive of “extinct” web pages) or can be captured using screen shots, there is no guarantee that later generations of scholars and readers can access these blog posts. Thus, scholarship has the role of documenting and recording these sites of reading responses and communal memory. This is particularly important for everyday GLBTQ and Chicano/a readers, as their responses to literary texts do not regularly appear in mainstream outlets. Instead of gathering a group of research subjects and asking them to read Rechy’s work and share their responses with me, as Victor Nell does in *Lost in a Book: The Psychology of Reading for Pleasure*, or talking with book club members or the patrons of a specialized bookstore like Janice Radway in *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*, examining blogs and online reviews allows me to examine pre-existing unprompted public reader responses. In addition, reading public blogs and review sites allows scholars to track the number of readers talking about an author’s work online, as well as reader responses to other readers and the discussions that are inspired or provoked by Rechy’s work. This is particularly true for blogs, as some bloggers have established participatory readerships, and the medium allows for extensive conversations between bloggers and their (sometimes anonymous) commenters. Given the informal and conversational nature of blogs, the style of writing is often unpolished, with grammatical errors, slang, and few citations in the blog posts and comments (though there are exceptions). According to David Warlick, the first “blogs” began in the mid-1990s, and were “web pages that were created and maintained by individuals who made it their practice to monitor the Web, identifying new sites of value to their readers” (25). In 1998, Warlick writes that “Jorn Barger coined the term ‘weblog,’” and later Peter

Merholz “announced that it should be pronounced ‘wee-blog,’ later shortening it to *blog*” (25). One year later, two companies, Blogger and Pyra Labs “launched free web sites that enabled anyone to establish a weblog account and start their own weblog pages, simply by filling in web forms” (25). However, blogs became much more widely used and read between 2005 and 2006 (Warlick 37).

I have identified 23 individual blog sites and blog posts on online magazines or journals that feature reader responses to the work of John Rechy.⁴⁹ Sometimes a blogger will write two different posts about Rechy’s work, or a blog will have multiple writers, so there are 13 distinct blogs (sites), and 16 different blog post authors. Also, I include posts that do not mention Rechy or his work if there is a comment that mentions Rechy’s work. This potential for dialogue is one of the most important elements about a blog or website that allows comments. The blog posts I examine were published between 2005 and 2013.⁵⁰

Through my reading of these online texts, I have found that blog posts have some of the following functions when it comes to John Rechy’s work: First, they allow readers to become informal literary critics (with a potentially global audience), and secondly, they act as public, dialogic reading journals where readers can record their responses to a text. The second function is similar to that of the letters Rechy received from readers, except that blogs make these reading experiences public, and open to commentary and dialogue across time and space. In addition, some of the blogs create or foster a virtual community of readers with a function similar to that of a specialized book club or “interpretive community.” In *Is There a Text In This Class?* (1980), Stanley Fish defines the interpretive community as a collection of readers who have similar (learned) strategies in their interpretation of a text (171-2). Finally, many of the blogs act as an online space for documenting and archiving communal LGBTQ memories and experiences around reading and sexuality. One key difference between the online reading responses and private letters that I discussed earlier is that the blogs and reviews provide a broader yet smaller sampling of reader responses to Rechy’s work compared with the fan mail Rechy received (in terms of gender), showing the heterogeneous opinions of LGBTQ, Chicano/a and other readers. On the other hand, because it is easier to remain anonymous online, the demographics of the readers-turned-digital writers are harder to accurately measure.

The blogs I have identified that discuss Rechy’s work tend to focus on a particular genre or special interest (e.g. 1970s horror, LGBTQ, or Chicano/a literature), although there are a few that have a broader focus, such as reading and reviewing best-selling books or books that match a specific theme that changes each day. Out of the 13 blogs, two focus on specific genres (1970s horror, graphic novels), nearly half (five) are focused on LGBTQ themes, one is about Chicano/a literature, and four feature reviews of a broad swath of literature. Finally, one website is an academic blog, complete with citations and literary/cultural theory, which I will not include in my analysis. Given that the sample is

⁴⁹ According to EDUCAUSE, a nonprofit group that focuses on IT in higher education, a blog is “an online, chronological collection of personal commentary and links,” and blogs “are a form of Internet publishing that has become an established communications tool” (1).

⁵⁰ I do not include posts that are common on sites such as *Tumblr*, which tends to feature images of book covers, photos of authors, and/or quotes from their texts, unless there is original commentary on the text.

very small, particularly for Chicano/a blogs and readers, I do not aim to make generalizations about the responses of the communities represented. In terms of demographics, the blogosphere is not an entirely accurate representation of the U.S. population with regards to age, income level, or ethnicity, and U.S. citizens write most of the blogs.⁵¹ Starting and maintaining a blog requires regular access to the internet and to a device that connects to the internet (computer, smartphone or tablet), a fair amount of leisure time (unless the blogger is able to make a living from their blogging, which is very uncommon) and web literacy, although sites like *Wordpress* and *Blogger* have pre-created templates so users do not need to be familiar with computer coding).

Genre-Specific Blogs

There are two blogs that focus on literary genres. The first is called *The Groovy Age of Horror* and was maintained by Curt Purcell, who used the site in 2005 to discuss various books, comic books and movies that fell under the genre of horror from the 1970s. He was in the midst of writing his own horror novel, although it appears that it was never published. Currently, it appears that other users create content for the website. In 2005 Purcell wrote a review of *The Vampires* (1971) by John Rechy, opening with the disclaimer “First things first: no real vampires here.” He then provides a list of characters and a brief summary, followed by his judgment and recommendation for his own readers:

fascinating patterns of interaction do eventually become clear [...] The one point on which I would recommend this for Groovy Agers is the fine period ambience. Everything, from the tone to the character types to the styles and lingo, paints a richer than usual picture of the world in which are set many of the other paperbacks I review here. I doubt that Rechy meant to write such a timebound novel, but therein lies its charm (Purcell, “THE VAMPIRES”).

Apparently at least two of Purcell’s readers had read *The Vampire*, and one of them even read it twice, although without finishing the novel. “Joe Kenney” commented:

I myself never managed to finish it. I intend to give it another try one of these days. But I found it so completely pretentious that it turned me off. The setup and characters are straight out of the trash fiction which was so popular at the time (gorgeous people in exotic places having lots of sex), but I felt that Richy [sic] just hamfisted [sic] the whole scenario. Who knows, maybe it was some occultic [sic] parody of the genre. However, you are 100% correct in that it captures the ambience of the groovy age. I’m surprised it was never picked up as some low-budget Eurocult movie.

⁵¹ Although bloggers are fairly evenly split between men and women, according to a 2010 study conducted by *Social Media Today*, the majority falls between the ages of 21 and 35 (Levine, n.p.). The study did not examine the race or ethnicity of bloggers. The Pew Research Center concludes that within the U.S., compared to 78% of Non-Hispanics, 64% of Hispanics use the internet, and those who speak Spanish or who immigrated to the U.S. are even less likely to use the internet (Livingston, n.p.).

It is noteworthy that neither Rechy's ethnic or sexual identity plays into these reader's opinions of the text. Interestingly, Kenney suggests that *The Vampire* might be a parody, although it does not seem to occur to him that regardless of the author's intention, the reader might choose to read the text as a parody, or as camp or kitsch, which is often how certain texts and movies become cult classics.

On the blog "lisa loves 2 read: All things Graphic Novels!," the blogger Lisa acts as an informal book critic, and her blog also serves as a public reading journal and informal book club for people interested in graphic novels. However, she departs from her blog's focus on graphic novels when she discusses John Rechy's work, which does not fall within the genre of graphic novels. Perhaps because of this, there are no comments on her posts about his work. Lisa not only shares her opinions of John Rechy's *City of Night*, but also documents how she learns of the book and author, as well as her process of purchasing the book. In a 2011 blog post titled "Here I am, rock me like an Amazonian," Lisa shares a list of items that are on her *Amazon* wish list, and number two on her list is *City of Night*. First she explains why books are so important to her:

The truth is, I'm a book whore. [...] Books to me have always been about comfort. My parents worked a lot when I was a kid, and my books were my babysitters (along with my Grandma – there was actually a person there looking after me amongst all those books!) – if I was bored, which for some reason, I always had a fear of when I was a kid, I would just pull out my book and start reading. Actually, that is how I survived as a child many many boring moments in Thailand. I think I actually took my book on an elephant ride, and read it as well!

Lisa then describes how she learned about *City of Night*, a book that is markedly different from those belonging to her favorite genre, but it is a convoluted story. She explains "I generally hate [the magazine] *Vice*, as most feminists I believe would. Not only is it not funny, but it is quite grotesque" (n.p.). However, her husband Dave subscribes to it, and she found an old issue of his that had graphic artists and cartoonists she admired, so "now when Dave brings how [sic] the newest edition of *Vice*, I no longer banish it to his man room, I put it amongst our reading material in the magazine rack that lives in our toilet" (n.p.). Therefore, Lisa learned of John Rechy (and *City of Night*) via her husband's copy of a magazine: "It was on the toilet (yes, I admit to it) that I read an article on John Rechy, and his very interesting novel (and life for that matter) and thought, 'Hells yes! I have to check this out!' (n.p.)" This method of coming across Rechy and his work illustrates the importance of ongoing interviews with a broad range of popular media outlets for authors and their texts. For example, while Rechy has been interviewed by several publications that are written for a gay male audience, *Vice* is geared towards heterosexual male readers. This example also shows that the subject matter of *City of Night*, and Rechy's own past life experiences add to the intrigue of the book for present-day heterosexual female readers.

Lisa wrote a second blog post after receiving *City of Night* in the mail, titled "City of Night—first impressions." She prefaces her post with a disclaimer: "This blog entry is

a first impression on a book which deals with very adult themes. If you are under 18, or don't like reading things about sex/sexual encounters/prostitution or homosexuality, then this post is not for you" (n.p.). Below the disclaimer, Lisa provides an image of the cover of the book, and writes below it "*I actually prefer [sic] this cover to the one I got off Amazon – and yes, I DO care about the covers of my books!!*" (n.p.). Further down there is a photo of John Rechy, likely found online, standing in his home with a tight white t-shirt and a broad smile. In this post, Lisa not only shares what she likes about the content and style of the writing, but also states that she recommended the book to the book club she belongs to. We learn that Lisa is particularly drawn to two elements: 1) the "vivid and shocking" depiction of New York City and the U.S. in general ("an America in which is rarely discussed in books that I have read before. Seedy, haunting, sexual"), and 2) the fact that the sexual acts are not graphically depicted:

Rechy refers to sex acts as 'making it', which is a polite way to say 'screwing for money.' That's another thing I love about Rechy's writing – he never goes into detail – it's NOT explaining the acts that he performs that makes it that much more sordid, that much more dark and forbidden (n.p.).

Lisa finds that the lack of detail actually contributes to the sordidness and forbidden nature of the text. She also ventures a guess at why Rechy "chose not to be too graphic with the sexual encounters":

Another reason why I believed he chose not to be too graphic with the sexual encounters (also because he was smart enough to work out that the book would be banned in an instant in the 60s) was to not focus too much on the acts themselves – his book is obviously about the people that he meets, not what he does or does not do with them (n.p.).

This observation is particularly interesting, because it helps explain the universal appeal of the book. When seen as a study of human nature, *City of Night's* popularity with a broad audience makes more sense. Perhaps this is why Lisa decides to recommend *City of Night* to her book club, whose members, she reports, "were happy to go along with it" (n.p.). For these two posts, there are no reader comments, which might be due to the fact that she is talking about a book that does not fit with the genre that she normally writes about. Thus, there is no way to verify whether any of her regular readers decided to read Rechy's work as a result of Lisa's posts, or to analyze their responses to her post.

GLBTQ Blogs

The blogs that specifically cater to a gay male audience differ in terms of style, content, and readership, and the responses of the bloggers and their readers to Rechy's work show a wide spectrum of opinion. They range from very impersonal, and almost magazine-like, to the more typical personal blog. *Queerty* started out as a blog, and is now an "online magazine and newspaper" and in 2011 it was acquired by *GayCities*, a

website that promotes gay-friendly tourism. The content appears to be written by staff members and is somewhat similar to Huffington Post, but is solely about LGBT issues. Also, their posts tend to attract a fairly large number of comments compared with the other blogs. In 2012, Mike Santos wrote a short piece titled “Fifty Shades Of Gay: Hot Queer Erotica For The Steamy Days Of August,” and one of the books he suggests is *City of Night*. First he introduces the topic: “With the breeders [heterosexuals] still gaga for *Fifty Shades of Grey*, we thought it was time for someone to highlight good erotica for queer folks” (n.p.). Santos then provides a three-sentence summary and one-line excerpt of six books, including *City of Night*.

What is of particular interest to me is the number of comments that follow, which creates a dialogic commentary on the book, as well as the overall piece, in which several books are recommended. Out of 26 comments, five specifically address *City of Night*, and some also take issue with the writer’s use of the term “breeders.” One commenter wrote “Glad to see they recommended City Of Night...great book...also check out Rushes by John Rechy ...” (crash_sublime), while another shared a personal memory of reading *City of Night* as a teenager:

I, guiltily, read *City of Night* when I was 16. I was so terrified to be caught with the book I never checked it out from the library and would spend two hours a day, over the course of a week or two, reading in a darkish corner. It completely changed me. I would highly recommend the book to anyone who has any interest in queer literature. There are harrowing vignettes, liberating characters, and life running throughout every thread. Not to be missed! (Jonny).

However, three other commenters shared different responses:

City of Night is VERY dated, boring, and not that erotic at all unless you find a male prostitute being on the receptive end of lots of blowjobs and sometimes giving anal sex and vaginal sex to be hot. Like others have posted I’ve read hotter erotica on nifty and other sites. (Luke).

I found Rechy’s *City of Night* to be tedious, very boring, and not erotic at all but I thought that his book “Numbers” had some hot parts in it; but I don’t like how Rechy is highly against consensual BDSM. (Rick).

City of Night was so boring it turned off any curiosity I ever had about hustlers, which I guess was a good thing. (the other Greg).

It seems that none of the readers who liked the book say that it is erotic, and several find it boring, while also taking issue with Rechy’s views on sadomasochism within the gay community. The comment section acts as an informal book club, while also documenting the memories of gay men.

Original Plumbing is a quarterly print magazine that targets a “trans male” readership, and they also feature blogs by different writers online. In a 2011 blog post

titled “The Gay Pride Teenagers of Tomorrow,” Tom Léger writes about the significance of different kinds of GLBTQ literature for “young queer people today” (n.p.). He differentiates between coming-out literature that “helped me find myself” versus “lesbian humor [that] helped me find my people” (n.p.). He then invites his readers to share their favorite books in the comment section, and “Bryn Kelly”⁵² writes:

You have really got me thinking about this, Tom! Almost all of my gay teenage lit experiences came from my sister bringing home random “new arrival” titles from the library. I vividly remember the first three gay books I read, and they were: *Pagan Babies*, Greg Johnson[;] *Our Lady of Babylon*, John Rechy[;] *Interview with the Vampire*, Anne Rice[;] ... all of which, obviously, relied really heavily on a tangy blend of Catholicism and homosex. [sic] Which um I think says a lot about the kind of gay I am today, for better or for worse (n.p.).

Given the year in which Bryn Kelly is writing and the way in which she came across the books (new arrivals from the library), it is understandable that she mentions Rechy’s 1996 novel, rather than *City of Night*. It is also possible that the feminist perspective and female-centered novel is more appealing to a female-identified reader than Rechy’s earlier, more androcentric novels. It is also interesting to see the similarities she observes between seemingly disconnected novels: religion (Catholicism) and homosexuality. This blog post and comment function in some ways as a book club, with the blogger and readers acting as an interpretive community. It also illustrates the importance of fiction and nonfiction texts for helping readers find themselves and their “people.”

The blog *The Closet Professor* is “about GLBT History, Art, Literature, Politics, and Culture. The Closet Professor is a fun (sometimes tongue-in-cheek, sometimes very serious) approach to GLBT Culture,” according to the header of the blog. The website is hosted on *Blogspot.com*, and is run by Joseph E. Cates, an Anglo American gay man who describes himself as “a graduate student... and a teacher (high school and college adjunct) who lives in the South” (“About Me”), and who goes by the screen name “JoeBlow.”⁵³ In a 2011 blog post, he writes about Rechy after “a new reader of this blog wrote to me and asked if I had ever written a post about John Rechy” (Cates, “Storm Heaven and Protest”). The author then proceeds to discuss his first impressions of *City of Night*, and then quotes different interviews with Rechy from other websites, sometimes without citing them. He writes that the grammar in *City of Night* bothered him, but “One of the main reasons I originally continued reading the book was to get to the section about New Orleans, a city which I love dearly. I couldn’t bring myself to just skip to that part of the book, so I ventured on” (“Storm Heaven and Protest”). He also notes that he “read the introduction after completing the book, and it made all the difference. I would suggest that for anyone. Read the book, then read the introduction. It made for a much

⁵² Incidentally, on *Goodreads*, the only review of *Our Lady of Babylon* is by a reviewer named “Bryn,” which may be the same person as “Bryn Kelly.”

⁵³ The author of the blog has a *blogspot.com* profile name and avatar that appears in the “About Me” section, and the only name that appears is “JoeBlow.” In an email, he gave me permission to use his real name, Joseph E. Cates.

more fascinating read this way” (“Storm Heaven and Protest”). What follows in the comments is worth noting because it is about how readers are buying books now compared to the first half of the 20th century, as well as regional variations, perceived or actual, when it comes to the availability of books. Below the bibliography, a commenter identified as “Writer” responds: “Here at my library we have a couple of books on Rechy but nothing by him (this being Kentucky that isn’t all that odd), so I’ve always been interested. Even moreso now. Thank you.” “JoeBlow” (Cates) replies:

Writer, *City of Night* is well worth reading. His other books have come highly recommended as well. Living further south than you, I live where even the big bookstores have a terrible selection of gay books, so I order most of mind [sic] through Amazon, which is where I got *City of Night*. I do like to browse bookstores though and see what jumps out at me, sadly you lose that experience with internet bookstores (n.p.).

Like other bloggers, Cates purchases his book from an online retailer (Amazon), and he notes the difficulty in finding gay books at local bookstores in the U.S. South. Without the internet, the blogger may have never heard of Rechy (a reader asked him about Rechy, which is what inspired him to read Rechy’s work), let alone had access to his work. In this case, the blog acts like a reading journal and as a virtual book club, and in this case the readers of the blog make suggestions, so it is not just the blogger directing the conversation or the content.

On a more personal and in-depth blog titled *ZeitGAYst: A Look at History Thru Pink-Colored Glasses*, Rob Frydlewicz shares his experience of looking for *City of Night* in his university library in the 1970s, documenting the barriers to reading Rechy’s work at that time:

It was Fall 1977, I was starting my junior year at Penn State and in the early stages of coming out. I went to Pattee Library ... to see if they carried Rechy’s book. They did, but, curiously, it was kept in the section of the library called “Special Collections”. That’s right, because of its subject matter Rechy’s book wasn’t considered suitable for the “open stacks”, but instead was stored with ... antique maps, a 15th Century Hebrew bible and 200-year old manuscripts by the likes of William Penn! However, unlike these treasures, which couldn’t be taken out of the library, I was able to do so with *City of Night* - but for just 3 days (and I was required to fill out some sort of release) (n.p.).

This post exemplifies the fourth function of blog posts: to act as an online space for documenting and archiving communal GLBTQ memory. Furthermore, this post goes beyond mere personal memory, because it documents the institutional practices that created barriers for readers. Due to the location of the book, students at Penn State in the 1970s could not have come across *City of Night* by chance in the main stacks, thus limiting the exposure of the book to potential readers.

Chicano/a Bloggers

The following blog falls somewhere between a personal blog written by one person and the examples of *Queerty*. *La Bloga* is written by several Chicanos/as, and their “ideal reader” is a Chicano/a audience that is familiar with informal Spanish phrases and Chicano/a literature. The blog features essay-like opinion pieces, news from the academic world such as calls for papers, and reviews and interviews of Chicano/a texts and authors. It began in 2004 and still continues, now with 10 writers. One of the main founding bloggers is Michael Sedano. This blog fulfills the third function: creating or fostering a community of readers with a function similar to that of a specialized book club, or “interpretive community.” *La Bloga*’s community of bloggers and readers may not always agree on the interpretations of different texts, but they do agree that Chicano/a literature is worthy of being studied, and have their own shared “canon” of Chicano/a texts. In fact, it is John Rechy who provokes disagreement within the community, although it appears that the main dissident might be an outsider, or he or she might be a member of the community who has chosen anonymity for this occasion.

In a 2007 post titled “Chicano/Latino Literary LA In Words and Photos,” Sedano makes a list of novels “written for or about chicanos [sic] and latinos [sic]” that feature “evocative passages about the Los Angeles region” for a possible future photo book project (n.p.). In the list, none of Rechy’s books appear, which is surprising, given the central role of Los Angeles in several of his novels. There are 14 comments, and a heated discussion develops about the omission of Rechy. First, an anonymous commenter suggests several books, including *City of Night*, adding that “Rechy’s status in the Chicano canon may be debated, but it’s a classic of LA literature...” (Anonymous, Jan. 30, 2007). Sedano responds to the first comment, writing

Anonymous: Rechy's a suitable candidate except my current most memorable scene described a fellow's growing excitement in **The Coming of the Night**. Gilb describes the same scene in a story in *Woodcuts for Women*. Unlike him [Gilb’s protagonist], I put the book down at that point. Gilb's character wants to, but he's writing a paid review (msedano, Jan. 30, 2007, emphasis in original).

In a move that intertwines reality and fiction, Sedano does not address the specific recommendation of Rechy’s 1963 novel (as opposed to his 1999 novel *The Coming of the Night*), and instead indirectly argues that much like the narrator in the story “Bottoms” by Dagoberto Gilb, he did not enjoy reading *The Coming of the Night* (see Chapter Three for a longer analysis of this intertextual reference). He also notes that the protagonist in Gilb’s story is forced to finish the book, because he is writing a book review. After this, a second commenter also named “Anonymous [II]” writes:

Well, Rechy has been around a lot longer than most. And to say its [sic] debatable whether he fits in the Chicano/Latino literary world is pure nonsense. His Amalia Gomez book [*The Miraculous Day of Amalia Gómez*] is puro latino. *I sense a bit of homophobia in some of the responses.*

MSedeno [sic] even put the book down because it had a sexual description he didn't like. And you call yourselves writers with open minds? Gilb by the way in real life did read the entire book, it was his character who had mixed emotions. Gilb includes Rechy in his anthology *Hecho en Tejas*. He calls him one of his literary heroes. Me too. *A Gay Chicano Writer* (Anonymous II, emphasis mine).

“Anonymous II” responds to the original comment and argues that Rechy does belong in the “Chicano/Latino literary world.” Although he does not use the word “canon,” which is what the original commenter said, the argument for inclusion is clear. He then apparently misreads part of Sedano’s comment, in which Sedano somewhat ambiguously states that it is Gilb’s character who “wants to” stop reading *The Coming of the Night*, but “he’s writing a paid review.” The first commenter (Anonymous I) returns, explaining his statement on Rechy’s status within the Chicano canon:

Speaking as the original “anonymous” (a status I have only because I don't have a blogger account), I myself would not debate the status of Rechy. In addition to Gilb's great new anthology [*Hecho en Tejas*], he's also going to be in Daniel Olivas' *Latinos in Lotus Land*, I think. I've heard others debate the issue, though; me, I think the debate is nonsense: Rechy belongs in all manner [of] canons -- LA Lit, Chicano Lit, Queer Lit, and, above all, American Lit. But what do I know-- I'm just a gabacho. And if you're sensing homophobia in my post, I think your detector may need calibration. *Significant Other of Another Gay Chicano Writer* (Anonymous).

This self-described “gabacho” clarifies that he does think Rechy belongs in the Chicano canon as well as other canons, and argues that he is not homophobic, signing off as the romantic partner of “Another Gay Chicano Writer.” Sedano then replies to all of the above with “I don't care what anonymousII says about me, just spell my name right, it's Sedano. Big ‘S’ one ‘e’ one ‘a’. As AnonymousI points out, your phobia detector needs calibration” (msedano, Jan. 31, 2007).

Seven days later, Sedano writes a blog post that references the above exchange, titled “Pre-Valentine’s Day: One man’s eros is another’s...” and describes what happened in the comment section:

[L]ast week a kind of erotic resentment came up in a La Bloga discussion. Anonymous2 took exception to a description arising from a remark about the confluence of John Rechy's **The Coming of the Night** and a story in Dagoberto Gilb's **Woodcuts of Women**. Regretting Anonymous2's unintended affront, I decided to take another look at the issue, thinking one man's eros is another man's ...what? Disinterest? Distance? Dismay? Something with a name, but not homophobia, as Anonymous2 accused. Something to discuss, yes (emphasis in original).

Sedano tries to name his own stance and response to *The Coming of the Night*, arguing that his reaction was one of “Disinterest? Distance? Dismay? Something with a name, but not homophobia...” (n.p.). He then proceeds to provide a more detailed personal response to *The Coming of the Night*, as well as his interpretation of Gilb’s story. Rather than addressing the arguments over canon or explaining why he did not include *City of Night* or even *The Miraculous Day of Amalia Gómez* in his original list of books that feature memorable passages about Los Angeles, he compares his reaction to *The Coming of the Night* with the reaction of the narrator of Gilb’s short story, a roundabout way of arguing that for both, it is simply a matter of taste, not homophobia. Sedano writes that Gilb’s protagonist assumes his “poolside male companion” is gay, and

as an antidote, the character flees into the arms of the woman on his other side. In all likelihood, Gilb’s character would have made a different pass at the woman and their affair turn out no differently than it develops. The friendly man simply filled geography and provided the hook-up strategy of the moment. Is Gilb’s character homophobic? He confesses otherwise: “I want to be a stereotype: Man sees woman. Thinks woman. Thinks tops. Has woman. Satisfies self.” The preference for one is not defined as the absence of the other, it simply is a preference.

However, the “antidote” that Sedano describes is open to interpretation. Is Gilb’s protagonist simply trying to fend off interest from a gay man, is he insecure or anxious about his own masculinity and/or sexuality, or is he using the “threat” of the man as a mental excuse to himself (and to the implied reader) for his behavior towards the woman? Ultimately, it appears that Sedano tries to draw a parallel between Gilb’s sexual preferences and his own textual preferences, although the argument that the “friendly man” had no textual significance aside from “simply fill[ing] geography” ignores the narrator’s ongoing anxiety around homosexuality and masculinity throughout the story. After this post, there are four comments (including one reply by Sedano). The first commenter writes

That Gilb’s charcter [sic] wants to be a stereotype says it all. I think that it’s subversive for anyone, queer or straight, to look at the place where boundaries blur, where desire flows in more than one direction [...] personally, Rechy will always have a place in in [sic] literature for writing what ‘couldn’t’ be written about (Lisa Alvarado).

Sedano responds:

what goes unsaid is the tribute to rechy’s [sic] power, that he can present such intensity that it draws the reader beyond the page into some of his characters’ lives. Gilb’s character wants easy answers, he doesn’t want to sweat, nor deal with those boundaries, especially if he doesn’t feel fenced in (msedano, Feb 7, 2007).

Sedano writes that Gilb has written a tribute to Rechy's writing, although one could argue that Gilb's protagonist is literally losing himself in the book because of chance circumstances and/or because he is in a near hallucinatory state, depending on how reliable the reader finds the narrator. However, Sedano does not respond to Lisa Alvarado's comment about Rechy's "place in literature," although he does clarify that this comes down to his own personal tastes. However, by suggesting that he would not include Rechy's work in a hypothetical future photo book that would include passages from texts "written for or about chicanos [sic] and latinos [sic]" that feature "evocative passages about the Los Angeles region" (Sedano, "Chicano/Latino Literary LA In Words and Photos") ignited a lively debate on *La Bloga*, and the photo book has not been published.

Finally, after this, two reviews of Rechy's books appeared on *La Bloga* by different bloggers. The first was a reprinted review of his 2008 memoir *About My Life and the Kept Woman*, and the second was a guest column titled "Rediscovering John Rechy's *City of Night*" (Peters). In this piece, Peters writes "Rechy's novels about gay life include few references to people of color while his stories about Hispanic life are populated almost entirely by non-gay men and women..." (n.p.). It's not clear if he includes *This Day's Death* in this assertion, which is groundbreaking in its treatment of both homosexuality and Chicano identity. In response to this post, two commenters state that they have been inspired to read *City of Night*.

Review Blogs

At first glance, the following blogs do not appear to overtly target a specialized readership, but they do have distinct ideal readerships in terms of literary tastes and backgrounds. They also have differing levels of interaction with their blog readers. Out of the four blogs total that fall under this category, I will focus on the responses of two of the bloggers to Rechy's work: *Great Performances* (a play on "pen" and "performances") and *A Guy's Moleskine Notebook*. The first site takes the act of "reviewing" very seriously, and the blogger even gives grades to the books she reviews, while *A Guy's Moleskine Notebook* also has a system for letting readers know whether they should read the book or not. The other two blogs are written by men who are published authors and who are gay, although their sexuality does not seem to be consistently highlighted on their blogs.

Great Performances: Contemporary reviews of vintage novels is written by Linda Aragoni, and according to her profile description and photo, she is an Anglo American woman who is a self-described baby boomer, and she maintains another website called *You Can Teach Writing*, which provides resources for those who teach nonfiction writing, as well as writing instruction for adults. *Great Performances* features reviews of "best-selling fiction of the last century," focusing on "its importance and entertainment value for today's readers," with the purpose of "attract[ing] a new generation of readers for yesterday's great books by encouraging libraries and bookstores to promote older fiction" (*Great Performances*, "About"). Aragoni explains why she focuses on older fiction:

To find good reading, I usually comb the shelves of my public library. Even there, formula fiction, trashy romances, implausible plots, and plastic characters seem to dominate. Invariably, I find myself going down to the basement stacks to find great reading from years gone by” (“Your Reviewer”).

She then lists her basic requirements for a novel, as well as what makes a novel good, in her opinion: “If a novel can provide entertainment, plausible characters, and plausible plot, I’m satisfied.... *A really good novel* not only goes beyond the basics but also transcends its origins. It has a universal theme that is true in any time and place” (“Your Reviewer”). Finally, under the subheading “What I could do without,” she writes:

When the hero and heroine close their bedroom door, I don’t need to look through the keyhole, let alone be in the bedroom with them. I don’t need to read pages of obscenities to grasp the idea that Victor Valet is a scum bag. I can also do without gratuitous moral platitudes. Concluding a lurid story by tut-tutting “people who do such wicked things are punished in the end” strikes me as immoral (“Your Reviewer”).

“*City of Night* is too dark for comfort” was published in 2013, and after writing a brief summary in which she draws a parallel to *Lolita*: “In this novel as dark as its title, John Rechy brought the world of gay, purchased sex into mainstream literature much as Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita* did with pedophilia” (“City”). She concludes that the book is too pessimistic:

Finally offered a long-term gay relationship, the narrator turns it down. He would rather be miserably lonely than have a relationship in which he had to consider anyone other than himself. Rechy is too good a writer for this story. He does such a good job showing the futility and waste of the pay-for-sex scene that readers are likely to lay down this novel for one that offers even a firefly-sized glimmer of hope (“City”).

Interestingly, she does not seem to object to the subject matter, perhaps because *City of Night* does not feature detailed sexual scenes (although Rechy’s later novels do). However, she gives the book a “C+” grade, which she defines elsewhere on the site as

your basic formula fiction, pot-boiler novel. The characters and plot are strictly off-the-shelf. These novels pass the time. Within their genre, one C book is pretty much like another. You may find yourself reading them a second time without remembering that you read them before (“How I Grade”).

The description of a “C” novel does not seem to fit *City of Night*, and her review does not suggest that the novel is formulaic or forgettable. The review is tagged with the phrases “homosexual,” “John Rechy,” “prostitution,” and “sex,” which strips the novel of all other attributes. Based on her review, it seems that more accurate tags should include the words “lonely” and “pessimistic.”

In terms of interaction with other readers, there are no comments on the review. According to the website, as of October 2013, the blog has 1,039 followers who have reviews sent directly to their email address. After examining other blog posts, Aragoni does not appear to have a very interactive or participatory readership in general, particularly compared with some of the blogs examined earlier. On the other hand, *A Guy's Moleskine Notebook* has more comments from readers, and the blogger, named Matthew, responds to those comments.

Matthew does not share very much information about himself beyond his interests on his "About Matt" page, but his blog posts and profile photograph provide more demographic information, although the nature of the Internet allows for anonymity and the reinvention of one's identity. Under the tab "About Matt" he describes himself a "voracious reader" and "Citizen of the world" who has "just completed the graduate degree in comparative literature" ("About Matt"). Under the subheading "Why This Blog," he explains that "Moleskine [Matthew] used to freela[n]ce for SparkNotes, TestMagic, and Amazon, and decides to launch book blog on his own. This is a reading history of a book worm who wants to say a few things about the books he reads" ("About Matt"). On the sidebar of his home page is a list of his "All-Time Favorites," which include *Giovanni's Room* by James Baldwin, *Maurice* by E.M. Forster, *To The Lighthouse* by Virginia Woolf. In other blog posts, while "Matthew" does not openly state he is gay, it is implied. For example, in 2008 he posted a list of GLBT books and bolded the ones he had read, with an asterisk next to his favorites ("The Big Gay Reads"). In other posts, it is clear that the blogger has lived in Hong Kong in the past, and he mentions spending time in Hawaii, Thailand, and San Francisco. His profile photograph is of a man of Asian descent in his 20s or 30s. He sometimes posts bilingual posts quotes in Chinese and English. Finally, in a list of blog links, he has three categories: blogs about books ("Bookish Places"), blogs from China or Hong Kong ("Over the Pond"), and GLBT blogs ("Over the Rainbow").

In 2011 Matthew wrote a sort of trailer and reflection piece about his upcoming review of *City of Night* on his blog *A Guy's Moleskine Notebook*:

In which I reflect upon the reason for my approaching this book very slowly. Day 6: A Book That Makes You Sad.... The book is sad in the way it awakens an unbearable loneliness.... A full review is to follow. Loneliness is when you have to remain in the shadow in a neon-light world. This loneliness is very sad ("6/30 Day Book Meme: A Book That Makes Me Sad").

Four different people left comments on this post, with one writing "I can't wait to read your review of this one!" and two others responding to the theme of loneliness. Another commenter shared the most depressing book they had ever read, and included a link to their own blog post about that book. The next day, Matthew posted his review of *City of Night*. After a brief summary of the book interspersed with two quotes, he writes: "This book is both humbling and liberating in documenting a slice of America that even today is treated upon with hushed silence. The nightmare existence is explored with a clarity and vividness with no self-pity" ("City of Night –John Rechy"). Below the review he

recommends that the book be read (the other options are “skim” or “toss”) and borrowed (as opposed to bought). Two different female readers leave comments on this post, and Matthew responds to them both. Marie responds with: “Wow, this sounds pretty intense and unusual. I enjoy books that explore under-written-about slices of American life; this sounds like a good example. Thanks for sharing it with us.” Marie’s name includes a hyperlink to her own blog, *The Boston Bibliophile*, where she describes herself as “a bookseller and a published NBCC [National Book Critics Circle] reviewer” (“About Me and Review Policy”). It appears that she has not written anything about Rechy on her own blog. Matthew replies to Marie: “It’s a disservice to categorize this as GLBT fiction alone because it does speak about the underworlds of American culture. Whether people like it or not, or they [are] hush-hush about their existence, they do exist. It’s very well-written.” Another commenter named Kathleen writes “I guess the fact that the main character is unnamed further enforces the loneliness theme that underlies everything in this book. It sounds like a book that would make me sad too.” Kathleen also has her own blog, which is called *Boarding In My Forties* and also is made up of book reviews. According to her profile, Kathleen lives in California and works in marketing, is middle-aged, and appears to be Anglo-American. She sometimes receives books directly from publishers such as Penguin, and also hosts giveaways of the books she reviews, which are provided by the publishers as well. She also does not have any posts about Rechy’s work. While they end up discussing the themes, it is not quite akin to a book club where members have (at least theoretically) read the same book, and neither commenter commits to reading the book. Nonetheless, it is possible that other readers who do not comment do decide to buy Rechy’s book based on the review.

According to an automatic counter, *A Guy’s Moleskine Notebook* has had over 800,000 hits as of October 2013, and it has 467 followers who receive posts via email. According to a statistical widget on the blog, during a two-day period in October 2013, over half of the site visitors were from the U.S. (276 “hits”), just over eight percent were from the United Kingdom, and just over three percent were from Hong Kong (“Country,” *StatCounter*). This blog reaches a heterogeneous readership of different genders, sexual orientations, nationalities and ethnicities, which is likely due to the variety of books reviewed and the background of the blogger. Perhaps due to the volume and diversity of this blog’s visitors, authors and agents directly contact the blogger to ask him to review their work, which some of them do by leaving requests with their information in the comments section. This shows one of the newer ways publishers are trying to reach potential readers, and the importance that everyday reader “reviews” have in persuading people to read a book. *Goodreads* is another platform for everyday reader responses that publishers and authors also use for marketing.

Online Reader Responses: *Goodreads* Reviews

Goodreads combines the functions of *Facebook*, a book club, and, to a certain extent, blogs. Users are encouraged to use *Facebook* to sign in or create an account which might help reduce the number of forged reviews, and they can easily share information between the two sites. All of the information on *Goodreads* is user-generated, much like *Wikipedia*, and people can apply to become “librarians” with the power to edit entries on

books. As a result, *Goodreads* is not a perfect system—unless a “librarian” goes to the trouble to edit things, there may be incorrect information, or other irregularities. In the January 2013 issue of *PMLA*, Lisa Nakamura suggests that *Goodreads* is a valuable source of information on reading culture and reader responses to literature, but in the case of Rechy and other writers, the amount of information that *Goodreads* supplies can be quite limited. Nevertheless, by examining the reviews of *City of Night*, which is Rechy’s most highly rated and most reviewed book on the site, it is clear that recent readers mirror the range of responses of Rechy’s early critics. *Goodreads* reviewers of *City of Night* tend to categorize *City of Night* as a historical, sociological and/or literary text. However, due to changing sociocultural mores, there are no overtly homophobic responses.

Nakamura writes that “[s]cholars looking to study reading culture ‘in the wild’ will be rewarded by a close study of *Goodreads*” (241). She points out the availability of “[d]ata about how popular each book is...and reader tastes reflect the traditional literary canon more closely than one might expect” (240). Furthermore, “*Goodreads* hosts its own conversations for newly released or popular books, often featuring the author in a live chat; comment threads have the tone of a book club, and users often mention how their physically copresent clubs discussed a book” (241). However, if scholars are studying older texts, or if living authors are not actively involved on *Goodreads*, there is less activity on the site in terms of “conversations,” discussion forums, and comment threads. In other words, for scholars studying non-canonical or texts that were not recently published, *Goodreads* provides less data on the “reading culture” surrounding those texts. While there is less interaction amongst the *Goodreads* reviewers and other users than the blogs, there are more responses to Rechy’s work to examine, and the readers and their reviews are more diverse in terms of gender. Thus, the reviews provide an interesting perspective on the demographic makeup of today’s readers, as well as an in-depth look at what readers like and dislike in his books.

If users do not categorize books or suggest connections, which is the case with many of Rechy’s books, scholars cannot study how readers categorize his work. Casual users of the site may not enter this kind of information, instead writing reviews rather than entering these details. This is particularly evident in the case of John Rechy’s books on *Goodreads*. In May 2013, a general search for *City of Night* under “title” did not include Rechy’s novel. Instead, there were three pages of other books, such as the 2009 fantasy novel *City of Night* from the series “The House War” by Michelle West, James Thomson’s *The City of Dreadful Night*, a 1920 science fiction novel *City of Endless Night* by Milo Hastings, and obscure collections on operas. Even searching for “*City of Night* John Rechy” or “John Rechy” did not come up with any results for *City of Night*. Instead, some of his other books appeared, as well as Charles Casillo’s biography about Rechy. The only way to find the page and reviews for Rechy’s best-selling novel is by searching by his name on *Goodeads*, and then clicking on his name to go to his *Goodreads* home page, where *City of Night* is listed.⁵⁴ Thus, given all of these factors, it appears that other users will be less likely to see his books recommended, so it is unlikely that readers who are unfamiliar with Rechy’s work will hear of it by using *Goodreads*

⁵⁴ As of October 2013, this is no longer the case. Now a search for “John Rechy” or “*City of Night*” results in Rechy’s novel *City of Night*—in fact, under the latter search term, his novel is the second result.

unless they follow another user who rates or reviews his books.

On the “author page,” there is a photograph of Rechy, incorrect biographical data (it states his birth date year as 1934, when it is actually 1931), and a link to his website. Below this, it states the genres to which his work belongs as “Literature & Fiction” and “Gay and Lesbian.” Also, much like *Facebook*, people can click a button that says, “become a fan,” and it shows that 44 *Goodreads* members are fans of John Rechy’s work. Under the tab “Similar Authors” are the following authors, based on who other *Goodreads* members liked: Andrew Holleran, Larry Kramer, Felice Picano, Dale Peck, Edmund White, Gore Vidal, Vito Russo, Mary Renault, and many other (mostly male) LGBTQ authors. There is a brief bio, followed by a list of his books with their ratings. His average rating overall is 3.5 out of 5, with 1,988 ratings⁵⁵, and 130 reviews as of October 2013.⁵⁶ In Table 4 I break down the ratings, number of ratings and number of reviews for each book. The highest rated books by Rechy are, in order, *City of Night*, Rechy’s memoir *About My Life and the Kept Woman*, *Numbers*, *The Sexual Outlaw*, and *The Miraculous Day of Amalia Gómez*. All of them include homosexual encounters to differing degrees. The lowest rated books are *Marilyn’s Daughter* and *The Vampires*, which also have some of the lowest number of ratings and reviews. However, *This Day’s Death* has the fewest number of ratings and no reviews, yet it has a higher rating than three other books by Rechy, confirming the fact that it is one of his least read books. There are 110 individual readers who wrote reviews of Rechy’s work on *Goodreads*, and of these, 12 wrote anywhere from 2 to 4 reviews. Given the small number of reviews of the books other than *City of Night*, I will focus on the content of the reviews for *City of Night*.

⁵⁵ On the author page it says his average rating is 3.80 and there are 2,013 ratings, but when I average the rating for each of his books and add the number of ratings for each book, the numbers are slightly different. It’s possible that *Goodreads* uses a different algorithm to come up with the average rating.

⁵⁶ While it says that there are 135 reviews on the author page, some of the reviews are by a user/reader who does not actually write a review, but instead rates a book and writes categories for the books in the review section, while others write what editions they own in the review section, and mark Rechy’s books as “To Read.” Thus, for the purposes of this study, I am removing these reviews from the statistical analysis. Also, as a point of comparison, Andrew Holleran’s author page states that his average rating is 3.91, with 3,664 ratings and 270 reviews, and on *Goodreads* it says he is the author of 22 distinct works (Holleran is an Anglo American gay author who published *Dancer from the Dance* in 1978). On the other hand, Rolando Hinojosa has 23 distinct works on *Goodreads* and has only 110 ratings and 5 reviews, and Rodolfo Anaya, whose novel *Bless Me, Ultima* is taught in high schools and colleges throughout the U.S., has over 13,000 ratings and over 1,000 reviews of his work.

Table 4: *Goodreads* statistics for each book (as of October 2013)

| Title | Rating | Number of Ratings | Reviews |
|--|-------------|-------------------|------------|
| <i>City of Night</i> | 3.88 | 1,302 | 73 |
| <i>Numbers</i> | 3.79 | 163 | 10 |
| <i>This Day's Death</i> | 3.33 | 6 | - |
| <i>The Vampires</i> | 2.87 | 15 | 4 |
| <i>The Fourth Angel</i> | 3.51 | 37 | 2 |
| <i>The Sexual Outlaw</i> | 3.75 | 110 | 9 |
| <i>Rushes</i> | 3.63 | 68 | 3 |
| <i>Bodies and Souls</i> | 3.61 | 46 | 4 |
| <i>Marilyn's Daughter</i> | 2.86 | 7 | 1 |
| <i>The Miraculous Day of Amalia Gómez</i> | 3.73 | 89 | 7 |
| <i>Our Lady of Babylon</i> | 3.25 | 12 | 1 |
| <i>The Coming of the Night</i> | 3.47 | 70 | 5 |
| <i>Life and Adventures of Lyle Clemens</i> | 3.35 | 20 | 3 |
| <i>Beneath the Skin</i> | 3.64 | 11 | 2 |
| <i>About My Life and the Kept Woman</i> | 3.84 | 32 | 6 |
| TOTAL/AVERAGE | 3.50 | 1,988 | 130 |

The demographic breakdown of the *Goodreads* users who reviewed Rechy's work and who reviewed *City of Night* appears below in Table 5. *Goodreads* requires users to sign up as members (for free), and they can share information on their home page such as their location, age, interests, photographs, and gender. Thus, I have categorized the people who reviewed Rechy's work based on the information they share on their profile. Some share their city, state, and/or country of residence, their age, ethnicity and gender, and their sexual orientation. Other times, I rely on the user-submitted photograph and their name to make an educated guess, much as I did with the blogs and letters. Clearly the demographic makeup of the reviewers of *City of Night* mirrors the overall distribution of reviewers because the majority of the reviews (66%) are for *City of Night*. Nearly two-thirds are male, and at least one third identify as LGBTQ, while 67 percent do not indicate their sexual orientation. Just under half are Anglo American or European descent (45.2%), and over half live in the United States (78.08%). Twenty out of the 73 reviewers rate *City of Night* between one and three out of five stars, and 52 rate it between four and five stars, but the ratings are not very informative on their own, because each individual reviewer has their own "rubric" for choosing their rating. For example, just over half (11) of the low-rated reviews (1-3 stars) have a relatively positive review. "Dan" writes that *City of Night* is "[a] significant novel about male street hustlers. It might have been a better novel if it were shorter, but the length, in addition to reflecting the author's ambitions, probably contributes to the realism." While the reviewer sees some flaws in the book, he also considers it to be significant, which is a viewpoint shared by many *Goodreads* reviewers. The responses of the *Goodreads* reviews illustrate the elements

that readers like and dislike about *City of Night*, and a handful of reviewers mention other books, which is less common in the blogs and letters.

Table 5: Demographics of *Goodreads* reviewers of Rechy's books

| <i>Goodreads</i> Reviewers of Rechy's Work (110 Total) | |
|--|---|
| Gender | Male: 62.7% (69) Female: 30% (33) Unknown: 7.27% (8) |
| Race/Ethnicity | Unknown: 47.27% (52) White: 47.27% (52) Latino/a: 2.72% (3) Other: 1.81% (3) |
| Sexual Orientation | Unknown: 62.7% (69) LGBTQ: 36.36% (40) Heterosexual: 0.90% (1) |
| Country of Residence | U.S.: 71.81% (79) Unknown: 13.63% (15) Other: 7.27% (8) Canada: 3.63% (4) U.K.: 1.81% (2) Australia: 1.81% (2) |
| <i>Goodreads</i> Reviewers of <i>City of Night</i> (73 Total) | |
| Gender | Male: 63.01% (46) Female: 27.39% (20) Unknown: 9.58% (7) |
| Race/Ethnicity | Unknown: 50.68% (37) White: 45.2% (33) Other: 4.1% (3)* |
| Sexual Orientation | Unknown: 67.12% (49) LGBTQ: 32.87% (24) |
| Country of Residence | U.S.: 78.08% (57) Other: 10.95%** Unknown: 10.95% |

*The "other" ethnicities represented include Latino/a, Filipino/a, and Arabic

** The "other" countries of residence include Canada (2) and Greece, Thailand, Philippines, Belgium, Finland, and Dubai (one each).

Much like the letter writers, those who gave *City of Night* four or five stars tended to comment on the impact the book had on them personally. The user "Msmurphybylaw" wrote that her brother gave her *City of Night* "after he had been diagnosed with HIV. I had to choke it down, but it has stuck with me for many years and has proven itself." She does not specify whether it was the subject matter or writing style that made it difficult for her to read, and it isn't clear whether the book has "proven itself" in terms of literary quality, realism or significance, but given the context in which she received the book, it seems safe to assume she is referring to its significance in her life. Another reviewer

wrote that he also experienced many of the things that Rechy did (conflating the author with the narrator), and as a result, he identifies with the text and feels that he has a better understanding of himself from reading it:

I am grateful to this man for his courage to say what I could never have said without the catalyst of his sensitivity and the power of his honesty. I understand in ways I never have why I cannot help but show a kindness to those on the streets whenever I can and why I feel such antipathy towards those who use them (Steve Woods).

More than one-third of the reviews, regardless of rating, mentioned the historical significance of *City of Night*'s depiction of male-male sexuality and the hustling subculture in the early 1960s. This is singlehandedly the most common comment made about *City of Night* on *Goodreads*. In fact, one reviewer who describes herself as an "activist/escort" writes "some insights about sex work... are universal, not just limited to the gay market... though not as great in this area as *The Sexual Outlaw*" (Cathy Simon). Some readers even suggest that *City of Night* "should be read with a historian's eye" (Joey Daytona). Daytona is at work on his first poetry manuscript, and in his review he writes that *City of Night* "galvanized an entire generation of gay writers and allowed us to explore our world through its stories." Another author, Katherine Scott Nelson, also sees the historical merit of Rechy's first novel, and clearly does not like certain elements of Rechy's writing, including some of the intertextual references:

It's a solid book, and a hell of a read, but mostly, I had a hard time getting past the unbelievably overblown prose. The Moloch of Times Square... Miss Destiny's Evil Angel... the Miltonian references have aged like an open box of cereal. For this reason I don't see *City of Night* resurging as a cult classic anytime soon, and will probably be lumped in with the likes of *The Well of Loneliness* as time goes on, as a look at "what life was like for us back then" (Nelson).

Nelson simultaneously calls it "a hell of a read" and describes the prose as "overblown," and suggests that it will be read for its depiction of pre-Stonewall gay life, much like Radclyffe Hall's 1928 novel with lesbian characters, *The Well of Loneliness*.

Twenty-seven percent of the reviewers of *City of Night* said they liked Rechy's writing (or at least some elements of the writing style), while 12 percent specifically said they disliked the writing style in *City of Night*. For some it was the atypical grammar, and others disliked what they saw as a lack of clear development or plot. At least two readers described parts of the book as "dragging," and one reader acknowledged that those with certain literary tastes may not like the writing style, although he found it to be powerful and vivid: "This book isn't a good choice for people who like good grammar and lean, efficient prose. But, ultimately, its circuitous narrative adds up to a very powerful story..." (Kyle Aisteach). Aisteach points out the relativity of aesthetic tastes, rather than declaring the book to have good or bad writing. One reader who describes himself as a Ph.D. student in literary and cultural studies and self-published author states that he wishes the

text were more “open”:

A large part of me wishes that this novel ended prior to the penultimate chapter (although the final chapter was nice) because much of the delectable invitation to analyze and diagnose the unnamed protagonist throughout the novel is all too eagerly taken up by Rechy in the end, drawing out and making hideously bare all of the subtlety that powers the rich narrative (Vinny Haddad).

According to Umberto Eco, an open work is “characterized by the invitation to *make the work* together with the author” (*The Role of the Reader*, 21, emphasis in the original). Eco notes that a work of art is in a “complete and *closed* form,” and is simultaneously

an *open* product on account of its susceptibility to countless different interpretations which do not impinge on its unadulterable specificity. Hence, every reception of a work of art is both an *interpretation* and a *performance* of it, because in every reception the work takes on a fresh perspective for itself (49, emphasis in original).

The open work requires that the reader actively construct meaning in the text. This might be one reason why some readers and literary critics do not think of Rechy’s work as being “literary” as opposed to popular, sociological or even journalistic. In an early interview with James and Wanda Giles, Rechy noted that “[...] *City of Night*, *Numbers*, and *This Day’s Death* are pretty autobiographical—and that doesn’t deny their artistic creation. I’m not just a reporter. I mean, so what if you use ‘reality’, you still have to put it down and give it order” (27-8). In *The Role of the Reader*, Eco draws on Superman comics and James Bond serials to describe closed texts that are “a recital of overcoded literary commonplaces” (39), that, leaving very little to the reader’s imagination, appeal to readers because of their repetitive structure (117). Eco contrasts these types of texts with works of art that require the reader’s skillful and active interpretation in order to fully appreciate or even complete the text (9). Rechy’s work, according to Eco’s definition, could be considered a moderately open text. While his books are not formulaic like a mystery novel, many of them explain or “spell out” the symbols and allusions for readers, and contain a fairly limited number of possible interpretations. Furthermore, the realistic style and setting of many of Rechy’s early novels encouraged readers to read or interpret them in more narrow ways. With that being said, each act of reading is “an *interpretation* and a *performance*” (Eco, 49), and thus his books are still open. Despite the efforts of Rechy’s publishers, Rechy himself, and the narrator to guide readers into a particular reception of each of his books through marketing, the book jacket and textual strategies, this cannot force the active (and critical) reader to passively accept one interpretation. For example, readers could question the reliability of the narrator of *City of Night*, which opens the text to different readings.

Some readers dislike *City of Night*, or think that young present-day readers would dislike it, in spite of its relatively accurate portrayal of the past. One reviewer wrote that he imagined “young gay folks would most likely dislike the gay life it portrays (though it

is very accurate for the period it covers),” and he describes buying it during his freshman year of college: “I was very nervous as I took it to the register. But no alarms went off to alert the staff to the presence of a queer” (Richard). A few other readers agree with Richard’s hypothesis. Mike rates the book three stars, and writes that *City of Night* is “One of the first gay books I read—this is set in the 60s, so I couldn’t relate much to the sentiments of the characters.” Another calls it “well-crafted and undeniably significant, but SO relentlessly depressing” (Fred Atherton). Interestingly, one reviewer states: “I know that my words here are not a review, proper. I don’t have the background to comment on pure literary merit” (Raymond). While this *Goodreads* user sounds self-conscious about opining on the literary merit of texts, most do not.

At least eight reviewers mention other books in their reviews—sometimes it is references within *City of Night*, and other times it is to compare the novel to other books. A few mention Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* or the Beats in general, with some stating that Rechy’s writing is more refined (Joe Greenlee). Others mention other books that led them to *City of Night*: “I’m not sure where this book has been all my life. Of course, I had heard of it. However, it came up several times recently in the [Christopher] Isherwood *Diaries* and *Wonderland Avenue* [memoir (1989) by Danny Sugerman, publicist for The Doors]. Hence, I finally bought it” (Marti Reppetto). This same reviewer also compares the writing with other texts: “The narrative reads like a trip through Hell (ie. Dante’s *Inferno*), but according to the introduction it was structured along the lines of Milton’s *Paradise Lost*” (Reppetto). Another reviewer mentions that *City of Night* was “the second gay novel I bought” while his “first gay book purchase” was the gay pulp novel *Maybe Tomorrow*, by Jay Little (Richard). I believe that these references are more common on *Goodreads* because it is a book review site, and often people compare books in order to help explain what a book is like to potential readers. Also, the audience of the reviewers is not only literate, but also ostensibly identifies as readers, and thus is more likely to be familiar with other texts.

Two *Goodreads* reviewers and one commenter on a review state they are rereading Rechy’s *City of Night*, and all three still like the book. One wrote “I read it when I was 17 and was blown away – hoping for an even more powerful experience now. Update – even better now that I am old and bitter” (William Benton). In a comment on another user’s review of *City of Night*, a user wrote that he “reread[s] this book about every decade and it always fascinates me. A classic” (Joseph Longo). For the reviews of *City of Night*, there are only two comments by other users on the reviews, so there is much less interaction around Rechy’s work than what is seen on some of the blogs.

To sum up, the responses of Rechy’s everyday readers documented above show the wide range of readers drawn to his work as well as the spectrum of responses his work elicits. The key differences lie in the different audiences and format, the level of interaction with other readers, and the amount of effort and access to the Internet required by each medium. Unlike the letters, the blogs and reviews have the potential effect of causing other people to buy Rechy’s books. In other words, they are advertising books (and at times, advertising the work of the author of the blog or review indirectly). This is evidenced by comments on blog posts and reviews that explicitly state that the reader of the blog or review plans on reading the book. Furthermore, it is possible for bloggers to post “affiliate links” to books, so if a reader clicks the link and buys the book online from

that link, the blogger will receive a “commission,” although it does not appear that any of the bloggers examined here do this. There is some overlap between the blogs and *Goodreads* reviews, because a few of the bloggers have online profiles on *Goodreads* and review Rechy’s work in both venues. Nonetheless, the majority of the responses to Rechy’s work on *Goodreads* are not as in-depth as those in the blogs and letters, and there is less visible interaction between Rechy’s readers on *Goodreads*, although *Goodreads* reviews and ratings might have a bigger overall impact on potential reader’s decisions to buy or read Rechy’s work because it reaches more viewers.

Table 6: Demographics of Reader Responses (Letters and Online)

| | Letter writers: 75 | Bloggers: 16 | <i>Goodreads</i> Reviewers: 110 |
|--------------------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------|--|
| | 1983-2011 | 2005-2013 | 2007-2013 |
| Male | 93.3% | 81.25% | 62.7% |
| Female | 6.7% | 12.5% | 30% |
| Unknown | - | 6.25% | 7.27% |
| Sexual Orientation of Writers | | | |
| LGBTQ | 40% | 62.5% | 36.36% |
| Heterosexual | 2.6% | 18.75% | 0.90% |
| Unknown | 57.3% | 18.75% | 62.7% |
| Nationality of Writers | | | |
| U.S. | 76% | 68.75% | 71.81% |
| Non-U.S. | 12% | 12.5% | 14.54% |
| Unknown | 12% | 18.75% | 13.63% |
| Ethnicity of Writers | | | |
| Anglo | - | 37.5% | 47.27% |
| Latino | 2.6% | 12.5% | 2.72% |
| Other | - | 6.25% | 1.81% |
| Unknown | 97.3% | 43.75% | 48.18% |

While the three forms of responses I have examined here are from different spans of time and mediums, and have different audiences and purposes, there are also some commonalities amongst Rechy’s readers who felt compelled to write a letter, blog post, or *Goodreads* review about his work. In all three cases, the majority of the respondents are male, although there are a fair amount of female readers writing reviews of Rechy’s work on *Goodreads* (see Table 6). Also, while the majority of the readers do not disclose their sexual orientation in their response, just over half of the bloggers self identify as LGBTQ, and at least 40 percent of letter writers are LGBTQ. Also, the majority of readers are U.S. residents from various states, with between six and fourteen percent coming from outside the U.S. Very few letter writers discuss their ethnic background, but online readers often have profile photos, or mention studying or reading Rechy’s work within a Chicano/a Studies or literature framework. Given that the online responses start during the 21st century, it is not surprising that more readers appear to be aware of

Rechy's ethnicity, and foreground that element.

More than half of the readers talk about Rechy's bestselling *City of Night*, and the next most popular books overall for the three types of responses are *Numbers*, *The Sexual Outlaw*, *The Coming of the Night*, and Rechy's memoir (see Table 7).

Table 7: Frequency of Books Mentioned in Reader Responses

| | Letters: 81 | Blog posts: 23 | Goodreads Reviews: 130 |
|--|--------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------------|
| <i>City of Night</i> | 51.8% | 78.2% | 56.15% |
| <i>Numbers</i> | 13.5% | - | 7.69% |
| <i>This Day's Death</i> | 2.4% | - | - |
| <i>The Vampires</i> | - | 4.3% | 3.07% |
| <i>The Fourth Angel</i> | 1.2% | - | 1.53% |
| <i>The Sexual Outlaw</i> | 13.5% | - | 6.92% |
| <i>Rushes</i> | 2.4% | - | 2.30% |
| <i>Bodies and Souls</i> | 1.2% | - | 3.07% |
| <i>Marilyn's Daughter</i> | 2.4% | - | 0.76% |
| <i>The Miraculous Day of Amalia Gómez</i> | 1.2% | - | 5.38% |
| <i>Our Lady of Babylon</i> | 2.4% | 4.3% | 0.76% |
| <i>The Coming of the Night</i> | 6.1% | 8.6% | 3.84% |
| <i>Life and Adventures of Lyle Clemens</i> | 1.2% | - | 2.30% |
| <i>Beneath the Skin</i> | 7.4% | - | 1.53% |
| <i>About My Life and the Kept Woman</i> | 3.7% | 4.3% | 4.61% |
| No specific novels mentions | 16.04% | 4.3% | - |

These books all center on themes related to homosexuality and sexuality as a (sometimes revolutionary) act of rebellion. *The Miraculous Day of Amalia Gómez* has a relatively good number of reviews on *Goodreads*, which might be due to the fact that it has become relatively well known within the field of Chicano/a literature. It's also important to note that when some letter writers were writing to Rechy, some of his later books had not yet appeared. Thus, the relative frequency of reader mentions of later books like *The Coming of the Night* (1999) and his collection of essays, *Beneath the Skin* (2004), shows that those who wrote letters, blog posts and reviews did not tend to write about books that prominently featured female sexuality, such as *Marilyn's Daughter*, *Bodies and Souls*, *Our Lady of Babylon* and *The Life and Adventures of Lyle Clemens*. One exception is *The Miraculous Day of Amalia Gómez* in the *Goodreads* reviews, and I suspect the frequency of reviews has to do with its popularity within U.S. Latino/a literature, and thus is a slightly different readership.

In addition to the more standard methods of analyzing the reception of Rechy's work, which includes the examination of book reviews and scholarly publications, it is valuable for scholars to document the response of everyday readers to his novels. This creates a more detailed picture of the kinds of readers Rechy's work reaches and the routes they take to access his work, as well as their responses to his work. Moreover, the

response of everyday readers provides insight into the literary and social value of Rechy's writing. Hans Robert Jauss suggests that scholars can more objectively measure a text's artistic character and aesthetic value by examining "the spectrum of the audience's reactions and criticism's judgment (spontaneous success, rejection or shock, scattered approval, gradual or belated understanding)" (25). This "spectrum" reminds scholars that there is rarely a homogenous response to a text, and that the sociocultural milieu, literary norms and the social location of the reader all inform the aesthetic evaluation of a text. Thus, I suggest that we should take popular reader's opinions of Rechy's work into consideration. Notably, Rechy's writing provokes strong reactions from readers of different genders, ethnicities, sexual orientations, and oftentimes *City of Night* is praised for its historical significance even when the reader does not find it aesthetically pleasing. This demonstrates the value in examining reader responses, particularly when reading texts that may be culturally and politically unpopular at the original time of publication, as these factors may also influence the aesthetic judgment of critics.

Future scholarship should take into account *Amazon's* recent acquisition of *Goodreads*, which may change the algorithms *Goodreads* uses to recommend books. In a 2011 blog, Sarah Kessler explains that the algorithm used by *Goodreads* "is largely based on what's on a reader's bookshelf and what other readers with similar bookshelves have enjoyed reading. It also takes into account why you liked a book" (n.p.). On the other hand, she notes that with the case of *Amazon*, the

criteria is largely based on sales data. It's likely to return books by the same authors of those that you've purchased or in the same genre. And it returns books that people who purchased the same books as you also purchased. It's likely to trend toward popular books (Kessler, n.p.).

In a March 2013 article in the *New York Times*, Leslie Kaufman writes that *Amazon's* newest acquisition

further consolidates Amazon's power to determine which authors get exposure for their work. Until the purchase, Goodreads was a rival to Amazon as a place for discovering books. Goodreads, which is based on networks of friends sharing reviews, was building a reputation as a reliably independent source of recommendations. It was also of great interest to publishers because members routinely shared their lists of books to be read (n.p.).

Until late 2013, Rechy's work was at a disadvantage on *Goodreads* in terms of searchability (and there is no easy way to determine whether or how often it is

recommended to users), so *Amazon's* acquisition may not have a noticeable negative impact.⁵⁷

⁵⁷ Furthermore, some publishers and authors provide review copies to *Goodreads* users via giveaways, and it is possible that some might directly contact some users as well. However, for books that are already published, such as Rechy's, this would not be feasible.

CHAPTER THREE: WRITERS READING RECHY: INTERTEXTUAL REFERENCES TO JOHN RECHY AND HIS NOVELS

There are multiple ways to determine the significance of an author and their work to particular literary traditions and communities, and the more traditional methods include arguments for the literary quality of a text, its continued relevance over time (the ability to “stand the test of time”), and the amount of scholarly attention that a text or author has received. Thus, the tastes of literary critics and their choice of texts to study play an important role in canon formation. However, reception theory provides us with multiple ways to measure the significance of an author’s work, by considering the scholarly, popular, and literary/artistic response of readers. In Chapter Two I discussed the popular reception of Rechy’s work by everyday readers, examining fan mail and online blog posts and reviews. Now I turn to the “responses” of authors, both published and unpublished, to the work of John Rechy. A complete catalogue or study of the actual and potential “influence” of Rechy on different writers would be a huge undertaking, which I will not try to do here. It would also require taking into account his impact on writers who have taken classes and workshops with him at the University of Southern California and elsewhere. Instead, this chapter documents and analyzes the overt references to Rechy and his books in transnational literary texts, as well as a handful of nonfiction accounts of authors who describe reading Rechy’s work. At least nine different authors of different nationalities, ethnicities, genders and sexual orientations have included clear references to Rechy or one of his novels in their literary works, while other authors discuss him in interviews, articles and book reviews. Thus, my findings are significant for Chicano/a Studies and LGBTQ Studies because they illustrate the important role that John Rechy’s work played in the development of transnational LGBTQ and/or Chicano/a writers.

While several Chicano/a and gay U.S. authors make references to Rechy within their writing, Rechy’s own fiction contains little to no references to Chicano/a or gay U.S. authors. For example, while there are references to the British-American novelist Christopher Isherwood in the novel *Numbers*, there are no explicit references to other gay U.S. authors in Rechy’s work, and there are no references whatsoever to Chicano/a authors or texts in John Rechy’s novels—including *The Miraculous Day of Amalia Gómez*, a book that explicitly foregrounds Chicano/a culture. Instead, as I noted in Chapter One, his literary references include canonical texts by U.S. and international authors from Dante to Mark Twain, as well as references to comic books and magazines. In his earlier work, this lack of intertextual references to Chicano/a and gay U.S. literature comes as no surprise, as there were far fewer books by those authors, and those that existed were not widely available or visible. As Manuel Martín-Rodríguez explains, writers of the Chicano Movement era in the mid-1960s often felt as if they wrote in a “literary void [...] because of the absence of channels and institutions to disseminate and

preserve those [Mexican-American/Chicano/a] texts and to create a broader readership that would keep their memory alive” (*Life in Search of Readers*, 12-13). This is not very surprising that Rechy’s first novel, which predates the Chicano Movement, does not make reference to any Mexican-American literature.

In addition, as far as I can tell, there are no clear references to his work in a published text by Chicano/a fiction writers prior to 1979. This mutual lack of acknowledgment prior to 1979 does not mean that Rechy had not read any Chicano/a literary texts prior to *City of Night*, nor does it mean that Chicano/a writers were not reading Rechy’s work. As I explore below, through a combination of archival research and an analysis of intertextual references, it is clear that some Chicano/a authors had read his work in the 1960s, and a handful of post-Chicano Movement authors acknowledge Rechy’s work by mentioning him in poems, hybrid texts, and short stories.

City of Night and Borderlands/La frontera: An Alternative Literary Genealogy

For many reasons, John Rechy’s work continues to be viewed as peripheral to Chicano/a literature, and compared with the scholarly attention to authors such as Rolando Hinojosa, Tomás Rivera and even José Antonio Villarreal, it was understudied or ignored by many Chicano/a scholars prior to the 1990s.⁵⁸ Nevertheless, Chicano/a readers and future authors read his novels as early as the 1960s, and as a result, from a reader-oriented perspective, his work is an integral part of early Chicano/a literary history. Furthermore, *City of Night* (1963) in particular provides an alternative literary genealogy for Chicano/a literature. Manuel de Jesús Hernández-Gutiérrez has referred to Rechy and the work of other writers such as Anzaldúa as contributing to “U.S. Latina/o lesbian cultural production,” which broadens the impact to include multiple disciplines outside of literature, but this seems to diminish the actual connections between these writers, almost implying that they each wrote in a vacuum, unaware of the work of earlier writers (297). Thus, I prefer to refer to this as an alternative literary genealogy, based on the evidence of intertextual connections. Also, it is worth mentioning that in her 2011 dissertation “Schooling La Raza: A Chicana/o Cultural History of Education, 1968-2008,” Melissa Martha Hidalgo writes about a “genealogy of queer Chicano educational formation,” drawing on *Pocho*, two novels by Arturo Islas, and the play *Sissies* by Ricardo Bracho (86-7). Again, in Hidalgo’s approach, there is no documentation that any of the later authors actually read the earlier texts, and she does not examine Rechy’s work.

This alternative genealogy is non-heteronormative, and depicts sexuality as a central component in life, even if it is not rooted in the reproductive cycle, or is not openly embraced by one’s relatives or community. When I first began studying the connection between Rechy and Gloria Anzaldúa, I didn’t know how to define it—was it simply an intertextual reference, a literary affiliation, or evidence of a literary genealogy?

⁵⁸ As I note in the introduction, prior to the 1990s, six scholars in the fields of Chicano/a Studies and Chicano/a Literature published 10 articles on Rechy’s work and there was one dissertation written in the field of U.S. literature in 1976. On the other hand, during that same time period Chicano scholars discussed José Antonio Villarreal’s novel *Pocho* in at least two dissertations, and there are at least eight articles by different Chicano/a scholars, while Chicano/a scholars analyzed Rolando Hinojosa’s work in at least 37 articles and interviews. In contrast, at least 17 articles or chapters were published about Rechy’s work in the 1990s.

At first I avoided the terms genealogy, forebear and filiation, because they can evoke paternalistic, hierarchical approaches. Yet genealogy can also mean family, and the lines can be horizontal, vertical or diagonal. In “La Prieta,” Anzaldúa writes that in “El Mundo Zurdo” (the left-handed world), “I with my own affinities and my people with theirs can live together and transform the planet” (209). She defines “my people” as “a network of kindred spirits, a kind of family. We are the queer groups, the people who don’t belong anywhere, not in the dominant world nor completely within our own respective cultures” (209). Thus, to argue that Rechy’s *City of Night* is one of Anzaldúa’s literary forebears and that they are part of the same literary genealogy is not to say that her work is derived from or even primarily influenced by Rechy’s work. This does not create an instant alliance between gay and lesbian Chicanos/as, but it indicates an important shared root, that also includes other queer and heterosexual Chicano/a authors as well.

Gloria Anzaldúa, co-editor of *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1981) and author of *Borderlands/La frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987), is considered a pioneer of Chicana feminist and lesbian literature and theory in the 1980s. In one of her earliest published pieces, she writes about the impact of reading:

One day when I was about seven or eight, my father dropped on my lap a 25¢ pocket western, the only type of book he could pick up at a drugstore. The act of reading forever changed me. In the westerns I read, the house servants, the villains, and the cantineras (prostitutes) were all Mexicans [...] The racism I would later recognize in my school teachers and never be able to ignore again I found in that first western I read (Anzaldúa, “La Prieta,” 222).

Borderlands/La frontera is now a seminal text in Chicano/a and feminist courses, and in this collection of essays, theory, and poetry, Anzaldúa traces her literary roots:

In the 1960s, I read my first Chicano novel. It was *City of Night* by John Rechy, a gay Texan, son of a Scottish father and a Mexican mother. For days I walked around in stunned amazement that a Chicano could write and get published (81).

Anzaldúa mentions Rechy again in a 1995 interview with María Henríques Betancor:

When I decided to become a writer [...] I looked around to see what other Chicanas were writing and I found very little [...] at that time the only writers I knew were John Rechy, a gay writer from El Paso who wrote *City of Night*, Verónica Cunningham, a Chicana lesbian poet, Corky González, and Estella Portillo (Anzaldúa, “Writing,” 236).

Up to this point, few if any Chicano/a scholars have mentioned the quotation from *Borderlands* when discussing the work of Anzaldúa, and when they do, they focus on the next sentence that talks about the impact of reading the bilingual epic poem *I am*

Joaquín.⁵⁹ Others have hinted at the thematic connections between these two works (and other later Chicano/a texts), without making the case that these later authors read *City of Night* or any of Rechy's other work, or were potentially influenced by his work. For example, Ramón Gutiérrez writes that

Rechy's novels were intellectual forerunners to postmodernism among Mexican Americans. The themes of marginality, of fractured identities, of suspension betwixt and between worlds, were themes he first articulated, but which would not emerge again until 1987 [with the appearance of *Borderlands/La frontera*] (371).

Yet the quotes Gutiérrez briefly analyzes from *Borderlands/La frontera* do not include Anzaldúa mentioning *City of Night*, nor does he discuss Anzaldúa's assertion that it was the first Chicano novel she had read.⁶⁰

It is striking that instead of beginning with Américo Paredes or other well-known Chicano/a authors, Anzaldúa's first Chicano book is by John Rechy. The 1958 folklore study *With His Pistol in His Hand* by Américo Paredes is often credited with inspiring many Chicano/a authors, such as Rolando Hinojosa and Tomás Rivera (Saldívar 26, Limón 86). In Sandra K. Soto's 2010 book *Reading Chican@ Like a Queer: The De-Mastery of Desire*, she describes Américo Paredes as "the most commanding figure in Chican@ Studies," and suggests that as early as 1953, he was "challenging, if not himself queering, tejano patriarchal and heteronormative systems" (89). Her work focuses on "what is not said and what is under-described" in Paredes' early work, and reaffirms his important role within Chicano/a literature. Soto laudably refutes Chicano/a literature's "traditional periodization, which marks the appearance of explicitly sexual work in the early 1980s as a distinctly new chapter in Chican@ literary history" (14). However, she never mentions Rechy, a surprising oversight that, inadvertently or not, replicates a common approach to Rechy that sees his early work as gay but not Chicano, with the 1991 novel *The Miraculous Day of Amalia Gómez* seen as his "breakthrough" into the realm of Chicano literature. *City of Night*, *Numbers*, *This Day's Death*, *The Vampires*, *The Fourth Angel*, *The Sexual Outlaw* and *Rushes* all pre-date the 1980s.

⁵⁹ See for example: Cristina Beltrán's "Patrolling Borders: Hybrids, Hierarchies and the Challenge of Mestizaje" (2004), which focuses on the way in which Anzaldúa appropriates "I am Joaquín," José Vasconcelos, Alurista, and *El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán* (597-598); María Teresa Nandín Vila's "Chicano and African-American Autobiographies: Identities on the Border" (1997); Jane Hedley's "Nepantlist Poetics: Narrative and Cultural Identity in the Mixed-Language Writings of Irena Klepfisz and Gloria Anzaldúa" (1996). Also, in the edited collection *EntreMundos/AmongWorlds: New Perspectives on Gloria Anzaldúa* (2005), none of the pieces mention Rechy, and obviously, neither does the book *Women Reading Women Writing: Self-invention in Paula Gunn Allen, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Audre Lorde* (1996), though it demonstrates one reason why this intertextual connection has likely been ignored for so long: the emphasis on feminism and female/lesbian identity in the scholarship on Anzaldúa.

⁶⁰ Shelley Fisher Fishkin also notes that Anzaldúa cites *City of Night* in *Borderlands/La frontera*, but she only analyzes or points out the influence of poets, nonfiction writers, and female authors that Anzaldúa does not cite in the book ("The Borderlands of Culture: Writing by W.E.B. Du Bois, James Agee, Tillie Olsen, and Gloria Anzaldúa," in *Literary Journalism in the Twentieth Century*, 161).

After reading what Anzaldúa wrote about *City of Night* in *Borderlands/La frontera*, I hoped to find a more detailed description of her reaction to *City of Night* somewhere in her archives at the University of Texas at Austin.⁶¹ I began looking at the draft of what later became *Borderlands/La frontera*, labeled “Autobiography,” from 1985. There I found a short piece in Spanish titled “Y no se nos olvide los hombres” (And let’s not forget the men): “Asombra pensar que hemos, / como feministas y lesbianas, / cerrado nuestros corazones a los/ hombres, / a nuestros hermanos jotos, / desheredados y marginales como / nosotras” (“Autobiography”).⁶² This was later included in the published version in a prose-like format. Given that the poem is written in Spanish, it seems to directly address U.S. Spanish-speaking lesbians and feminists. With an emphasis on their shared outcast status (within the mainstream U.S. and Chicano/a contexts, we might assume) this can be read in the context of personal relationships and strategic partnerships for activism.

Then, in an undated folder in the Gloria Anzaldúa Papers, I found a collection of small spiral-bound notebooks, which contained lists of books that she wanted to read, and lists of library call numbers. The authors included Arthur Rimbaud, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Jack Kerouac, John Steinbeck, and nonfiction self-help books, and books on writing and getting published. (see figures 6 and 7).

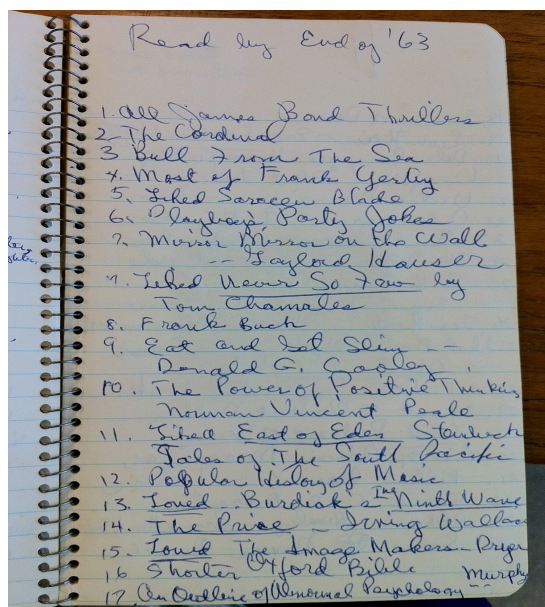


Figure 6: "Read by End of '63"

⁶¹ Anzaldúa’s journals are closed for the next 20 years, but when they become available, scholars might be able to find more information about her response to John Rechy’s work.

⁶² “It’s amazing to think that we have, as feminists and lesbians, closed our hearts to men, / to our joto brothers, / disinherited and marginal like / us” (my translation).

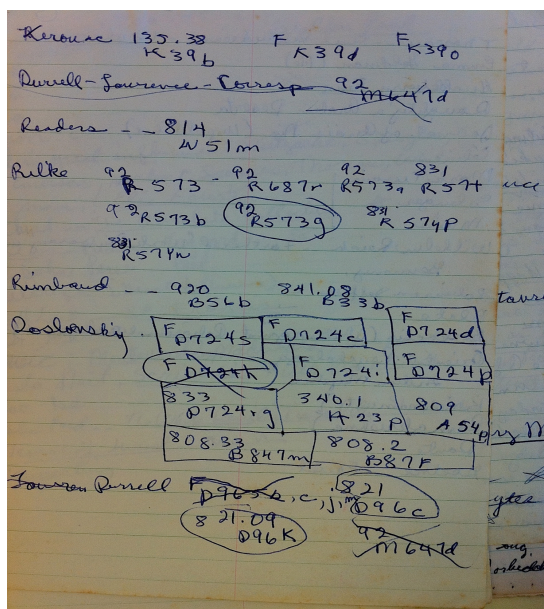


Figure 7: "Call Numbers"

Finally, under the title "Dirty Book???" *City of Night* appeared, circled with a check mark, alongside Terry Southern's *Candy*, Jean Genet's *Our Lady of the Flowers*, *Fanny Hill*, and William Burrough's *Naked Lunch* (see figure 8).

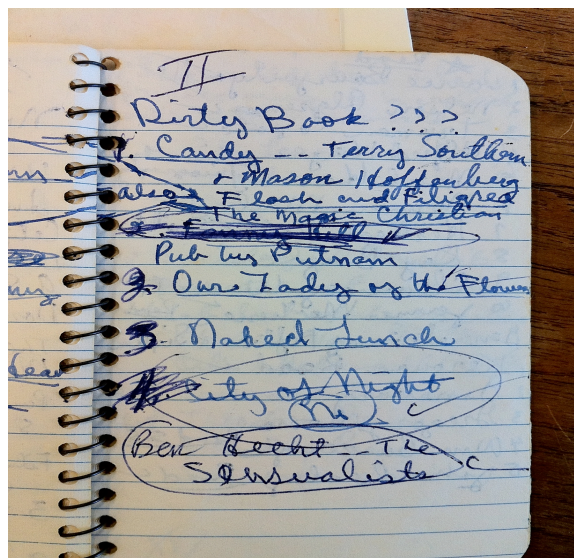


Figure 8: "Dirty Book???"

It is not clear how Anzaldúa came up with this list, or if she had read an article in a newspaper talking about these books, but many of them were published by Grove Press. Then, in a sheaf of loose papers within this collection, I found a piece of paper with the title "Three Memories." In this diary-like undated piece, Anzaldúa describes in further detail her experience reading *City of Night*, and the memories it triggered:

I finished one [of] John Rechy's chapters from his first novel. I am interested in the way he turned inward because his father led a hopeless life. Somehow the story reminds me of my own dead father. He died in '55 in January, or February? Funny how I don't remember and it wasn't too long ago (n.p.).

Interestingly, the connection she writes about having with the book is based on the protagonist's father in the book, and not sexuality or Chicano identity. In terms of dating this document, given that her father died in 1955, the 1963 publication date of *City of Night*, and the fact that she calls it "his first novel," it's possible that this might have been written between 1967 and 1969, and she stated in *Borderlands/La frontera* that she read the book in the 1960s.

This means that at least one Chicana was reading Rechy's work in the 1960s, before he was explicitly labeled as a Chicano author or discussed in Chicano/a literary scholarship. This documented response also demonstrates that Anzaldúa was able to identify with this novel, and felt compelled to write about her experience reading the novel. It is not surprising that she read the novel, because at the time it was a best seller, written by a fellow Texan, and clearly Anzaldúa was interested in becoming a writer at this time.

While this is a significant finding in and of itself, it is interesting to note that Anzaldúa does not talk more about Rechy's work in her published writings, and I wonder what she thought of his depiction of non-heteronormative sexuality, and in particular, lesbians. I assume that as a woman and as a lesbian (though I am not sure when she first openly identified as a lesbian), she might have felt excluded by *City of Night* (and other early novels such as *Numbers*), or might have read it with a resistant stance.⁶³ Rechy's early novels, and the work of many Grove Press authors, were not explicitly marketed to female readers in terms of publication venues, cover design or advertising materials, and the portrayal of women in Rechy's early novels—particularly lesbians—was at times one-dimensional and demeaning. Using Anzaldúa as a sort of case study, I would like to consider how a non-heterosexual female reader might have responded to *City of Night* in the 1960s, using the following statements Anzaldúa has made about identity and reading. This is similar to the concept of the implied reader, although a lesbian reader is not textually implied or "welcomed" in *City of Night*, as we shall see below.

Anzaldúa writes about the politics of writing and reading as a lesbian woman in "To(o) Queer the Writer—Loca, escritora y chicana." She notes the dynamics of identification, particularly around sexual orientation and gender:

⁶³ See Judith Fetterly, who in *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction* exhorts female readers to "become a resisting rather than an assenting reader," rejecting the often-simplistic or negative portrayals of women in fiction (xxii).

Identity formation is a component in reading and writing whether through empathy and identification or through disidentification. If it's a lesbian who's reading, she will have more incentive to keep reading when she reaches a dyke-concerns-laden passage in my writing. There will be more doors and windows through which she can access the text than if she's a non-lesbian (272).

At the same time, she describes her own ability to read in multiple ways, seeming to fit the role of the “resisting reader” that Judith Fetterly writes about:

[...] as a reader, I usually have more in common with the Chicana dyke than I do with the white, middle-class feminist. I am in possession of both ways of reading—Chicana working-class, dyke ways of reading, and white middle-class heterosexual and male ways of reading. I have had more training in reading as a white, middle-class academic than I do reading as a Chicana. Just like we have more training reading as men (Anzaldúa 273).

In *City of Night* there are only a handful of biologically female characters. In the chapter where the protagonist meets Barbara, the male protagonist identifies with Barbara's “toughmasked lonesomeness” and finds her attractive (*City of Night* 144). Barbara knows he's a hustler and gives him a hard time about it, eventually unmasking the truth for him: “All of you keep telling yourselves you're straight—and you make it with chicks to prove it—and when you make it with other guys, you say it's only for the bread Why dont you split the scene, man—if you really want to!” (146). It is implied that they have sex, but a few days later their budding relationship ends when he shows up at her apartment and discovers she's with a “tall, slender girl ... dressed in black slacks” who looks at him “with almost-hatred” and “roughly” tells him to “split—Barbara dont need you guys any more Shes got me” (147). The protagonist acknowledges “a feeling of loss which had to do with Barbara—but also with something unrecognized which extended beyond her—” and moves on to San Francisco (147). What is this loss that is implied, and how might a lesbian reader read this scene? It appears that the butch lesbian here is in direct opposition to the protagonist, challenging him and keeping him from Barbara— and from a heterosexual relationship. Yet he also keeps himself from it, choosing to remain a hustler. This is one of two references to lesbians in the entire novel. The other two are one-line descriptions of people he sees in bars, one of whom is actually a drag queen. I cannot help but wonder if these portrayals might have cooled Anzaldúa's interest in Rechy's other work, which, incidentally, later courted female readers and portrayed women in more central and empowering ways.⁶⁴

In thinking about these tensions, and this imagined response, I am reminded of Rechy's reaction to *Pocho*, the 1959 novel by José Antonio Villarreal. In 1960, when Rechy had already published several short excerpts of his developing novel, Donald

⁶⁴ While Rechy's work never features a positive portrayal of a lesbian, Rechy's later novels often reference glamorous movie stars like Marilyn Monroe and Maria Félix (see *Marilyn's Daughter* and *The Miraculous Day of Amalia Gómez*).

Allen sent Rechy a copy of *Pocho* in the hope that Rechy would review it. Allen sent Rechy copies of several books, including works by Jean Genet, as well as the novel *Pedro Páramo* (1955), so this was not out of the ordinary. Allen initially wrote to Rechy:

There's a new novel coming out: Pocho by José Antonio Villarreal. He's a young Mexican-American from California, and this his first novel is about the El Paso scene mostly. It's not too exciting, probably, but would you be interested in reading it and if you want write a short review of it for ER? They'd like to have it (Letter from Allen to Rechy, January 20, 1960).

Rechy's response was short: "im returning 'pocho' and i hope very much youll give it to someone else to review. i wish i could have done a review of pedro paramo [sic]—could i, still?" (Letter from Rechy to Allen, n.d.). When I asked him in an interview what he thought of Chicano literature, he didn't have much to say— he only commented that the quality didn't seem very good.⁶⁵ At the time I was surprised, but considering his response in its context, the time in which he really came into his own as a writer, it is not that remarkable. For a gay Chicano writer in 1960, reading *Pocho* might be painful, given the hyper-masculine and homophobic attitudes in the first half of the novel.

I am not sure if Anzaldúa (or other actual lesbian readers) took issue with parts of *City of Night*, or if she read any of his other books, nor do we know how much Rechy's sexual identity and subject matter in *City of Night* might have inspired Anzaldúa to write about the body or about non-heteronormative sexuality. Perhaps when her journals are open to researchers this will become clearer. However, we do know that she read *City of Night* early on, as she herself acknowledged in her published and unpublished writings. Therefore, the connections between the work of Rechy and Anzaldúa (and the work of other queer-identified U.S. Latino/a authors) deserve further study and acknowledgement. Thus, I will now turn to other Chicano authors who can be considered part of this alternative genealogy, and whose work connects in different ways to Rechy's early novels.

Other Chicano/a Readers

Gloria Anzaldúa is not the only Chicana/o to have read John Rechy's work during this early time period. As I will demonstrate below, there is intertextual evidence that at the very least, Raúl Salinas, Ricardo Sánchez, and Gregg Barrios were familiar with Rechy's early work prior to the publication of Rechy's books that were more popular with a Chicano/a scholarly audience, and Rigoberto González first read Rechy's work in the late 1980s. In my work with Manuel Martín-Rodríguez on the Chicano/a Literature Intertextual Database (CLID),⁶⁶ whose approach to Chicano/a literature is based both on reader response and reception theories and intertextuality, I have identified the following Chicano authors who make references to John Rechy and/or his novels in their fiction writing: Raúl R. Salinas, Gregg Barrios and Dagoberto Gilb. Notably, all three are from

⁶⁵ John Rechy, interview by Beth Hernandez-Jason, April 1, 2011.

⁶⁶ Thus far, the CLID, which I have also contributed to, covers the years 1939-1978 as completely as possible.

Texas and are male, although not all of them self-identify as homosexual. Nevertheless, each makes references to novels by Rechy that concentrate heavily on homosexual actions, such as *City of Night*, *Numbers* and the more recently published *The Coming of the Night* (1999). In the following section I document and analyze these intertextual references, considering their literary function and their larger significance for Chicano/a literature, and then turn to a nonfiction essay published by the Chicano author Rigoberto González.

Raúl R. Salinas (1934-2008) was born and raised in Texas, and spent time in prisons in California and Texas. He later moved back to Austin, Texas where he opened Resistencia Bookstore and founded Red Salmon Arts Group. He and others such as Ricardo Sánchez are known as “pinto-poets” which is defined by Miguel R. López as “a Chicano poet who writes about his or her experience as a prison inmate” (*Chicano Timespace: The Poetry and Politics of Ricardo Sánchez*, 7).⁶⁷ In a 1971 letter to Joseph Sommers, a professor of Chicano/a Literature, Salinas wrote about his reading habits while still imprisoned in Leavenworth:

Por cierto muy poco me ha interesado la novela, a través de los años. Mas bien prefiero la historia, biografías, la poesía, y los ensayos. Oh, I’ve read a novel or two [...] It wasn’t until the Beat movement of the late ‘50s produced its *literature*, that i [sic] got back into the novel. Parecen tener mas significancia para mí las escrituras del Camus y el Kafka. De los latinos, he leído a Azuela, Rulfo, Fuentes, etc. (Salinas, *raúlsalinas and the Jail Machine*, 107-8).

While Salinas does not make any reference to Rechy in this letter, he does mention novels by Beat movement writers from the 1950s, which might be how he came across Rechy’s first novel, which is referenced in Salinas’ first published book of poems, *Un trip through the mind Jail y otras excursions: Poems* (1980). In a poem that is rarely discussed by literary critics, he explicitly refers to John Rechy and a well-known Texan literary figure in the title of the poem itself. In the Table of Contents, the poem is referred to as “[Untitled] Lightning Steed Immaculate,” but the actual poem begins with what looks like a long sub-title: “(...on reading of J. Frank Dobie’s blasting the Texas Institute of Arts & Letters on behalf of John Rechy and his novel CITY OF NIGHT...)” (44). The poem is made up of four stanzas, and below I excerpt the first two and the final fourth:

⁶⁷ For more information on Raúl Salinas and other pinto poets, see *Movements in Chicano Poetry: Against Myths, Against Margins*. NY: Cambridge UP, 1995 by Rafael Pérez-Torres, *La Pinta: Chicana/o Prison Literature, Culture, and Politics* by Ben Olguín (Austin: U of Texas P, 2010) and *raúlsalinas and the Jail Machine: my weapon is my pen: Selected Writings by Raúl Salinas*, edited by Louis Mendoza (Austin: U of Texas P, 2006).

Lightning Steed Immaculate:

the color of fresh-fallen snows
upon the range;

my glimpse of you was from a distance far,
yet you stood out,
controlling your terrain.

.....
Racing beyond the steep montañas, to the sun,
a gallant figure slowly dims & fades away,
but for a tiny speck on the horizon;
Proud Mustang, you are Free (44).

At first glance, the poem appears to have nothing to do with the didactic, prose-like title—Dobie and his action are not mentioned, and Rechy and his book are never referred to by name. We can only assume that Rechy is the white (“color of fresh-fallen snows”) Steed, Stallion and Mustang—the epitome of masculinity, strength and freedom. However, this is not the only meaning of this metaphor. Dobie published *Tales of the Mustang* in 1936 and *The Mustangs* in 1952, and is known for playing a pivotal role in protecting the fate of the Texas Longhorn.⁶⁸ In *The Mustangs*, Dobie spent a great deal of time describing “the legend of the pacing white mustang,” who he notes “went under varying names — the White Steed of the Prairies, the Pacing White Stallion, the White Mustang, the Ghost Horse of the Plains. His fire, grace, beauty, speed, endurance, and intelligence were exceeded only by his passion for liberty” (144). It appears that Salinas is parodying the writing of Dobie, using his mythical language to describe Rechy, metaphorically.

The poem, like all of those written by Salinas, ends with a sign-off that indicates where and when it was written: “Las Paredes de / La Tejana en / Huntsville / 11/2/64” (43). Apparently written while serving time at Huntsville State Prison between 1961 and 1965 (Mendoza, 7), the imprisoned location of the implied author of the poem is juxtaposed with the position of the subject of the poem, a free wild stallion. The poem appears in “Part 1 — The Captive Years” of *Un Trip*, and illustrates that Salinas was at least familiar with *City of Night* and its reception, which was published one year earlier. While Salinas has not publicly mentioned Rechy in his other books or in subsequent interviews, it is noteworthy that Salinas openly wrote about a novel that dealt with homosexual themes while he was imprisoned in the 1960s. It also suggests that in addition to jazz, hip hop and Anglo-American Beat writers, Rechy’s *City of Night* might have been an early literary influence, particularly in his literary portrayal of the subaltern.

In a 1988 article for the *San Antonio Express-News*, Salinas’ fellow pinto-poet Ricardo Sánchez also mentions Rechy’s *City of Night*:

⁶⁸ According to the Texas Parks and Wildlife website, Dobie helped “find and select the longhorns” to establish a protected herd (www.tpwd.state.tx.us).

Some of us Chicano poets chortled when academicians like Philip Derragh Ortego, Dr. Juan Bruce Novoa, John Rodriguez, Thomás Rivera [sic], Roland H. Smith and others within ivory-towered enclaves proceeded to laud Muro as the salvation of Chicano prose. No one was willing to acknowledge John Rechy for that dubious distinction. Rechy, a brilliant powerful writer—read *City of Night* for openers—just happened to be gay, and the pretended machismo of academe was not (and is not yet) ready to admit that Rechy is still the most creative fiction writer in the Chicano world” (“Writing Under False Pretenses,” n.p.).

Ricardo Sánchez’s poems are hypersexual and hyper masculine, at times similar in content to the work of Henry Miller, and even, arguably, that of John Rechy. Yet because Sánchez’s poetic descriptions of sexuality are heterosexual while Rechy’s early work centered on homosexuality, their work is not seen as connected in any way. The work of authors such as Floyd Salas, Ricardo Sánchez, Rechy, and later Dagoberto Gilb (as I discuss later) all share a central motif of sexuality and masculinity that unites them.

Based in San Antonio, Gregory (Gregg) Barrios (1945-) has worked as a journalist and newspaper editor, and continues to publish pieces on books and music. He has also published at least four books of poetry, beginning in 1979, and several of his plays have been staged.⁶⁹ In an interview, he explained that he was inspired to write by Françoise Sagan’s 1954 novel *Bonjour Tristesse* because “it was written by an 18-year old in French and it was translated into English and became a huge best seller in Europe and [the] U.S.”⁷⁰ Barrios also stated that although the first Chicano book he read was *Pocho*, reading Rechy’s early depiction of the gay subculture appealed to him, and helped him come to terms with his own sexuality. Barrios and Rechy both had to negotiate mainstream culture, and in Barrios’ words, “Rechy did it sexually, while I did it intellectually.”⁷¹ According to a self-interview posted on the website “Latinopia: Latino arts, history and culture,” while Barrios first encountered Rechy’s work while stationed at Bergstrom Air Force base in the 1960s:

About this time, I read a book in which I saw myself as a Mexican American. It was *City of Night* by John Rechy. And in the first two chapters its [sic] about a little Mexican boy living on the border who lose [sic] his dog and cries. And he describes his loneliness and how he cannot find a place under heaven where he can find solace. Later he becomes a street person, he says, at one point, instead of going to Columbia University I went to Times Square. And I said, Wow! He didn’t believe that he had barriers or boundaries, neither do I! (“Gregg Barrios - In His Own Words,” n.p.).

⁶⁹ In 2009 he published *Rancho Pancho*, a play about the relationship between Tennessee Williams and his lover, Pancho Rodríguez. Conducting his own research, he discovered that Williams’ relationship with Rodríguez, not Frank Merlo, was the inspiration behind *A Streetcar Named Desire* (“Afterword,” *Rancho Pancho*, 51-4).

⁷⁰ Gregg Barrios, interview by Beth Hernandez-Jason, May 19, 2012 in San Antonio, Texas.

⁷¹ Gregg Barrios, interview by Beth Hernandez-Jason, May 19, 2012 in San Antonio, Texas.

Barrios' poetry is infused with references to Rechy's early novels, with dedications to Rechy and references to his work appearing in *The Air-Conditioned Apollo* (1979), *Puro Rollo* (1982) and *La Causa* (2010).

The Air-Conditioned Apollo, one of the first books of poetry by Barrios, has a striking image on the metallic cover of a man bending over, with wheels at his hips and shoulders (see Figure 10). The image looks like a combination of a dancer's pose, an erotic image, and the symbolism of movement and of an axis combined with the body. The metallic colors also seem to coincide with the space-age title. However, for readers who were familiar with Rechy's work, seeing his name on the cover as the author of the introduction would probably highlight the eroticism of the naked male form, with the "Apollo" taking on a phallic meaning. According to Barrios, the title refers to the Apollo Theatre on 42nd Street in New York that "was known for cruising and hustling back in the day," and a "sign above the box office read 'The Air-Conditioned Apollo' [...]." ⁷² He notes that it also refers to the U.S. space program, and is a "playful reference to the Spanish word for 'chicken' Pollo and for 'penis' Polla. These terms are used for young gay hustlers and Latino johns."

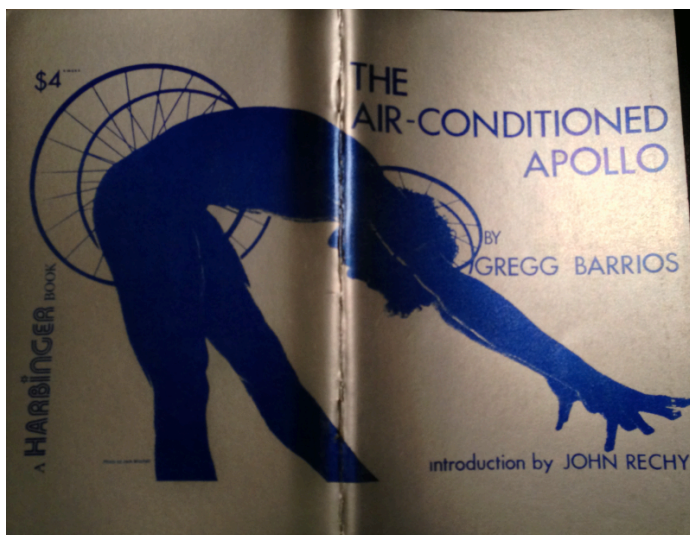


Figure 9: The cover of *The Air-Conditioned Apollo* ⁷³

In Rechy's introduction to the book, rather than praising the poems, he unequivocally states why he dislikes them at the very beginning: "I don't like this book of poems by Gregg Barrios—for a very personal reason. It's about malehustling ... and it supplied unwanted judgments" (6). Yet the introduction turns ambiguous, like a backhanded compliment:

⁷² Email correspondence, 8 May 2014.

⁷³ Image of cover used with permission of Gregg Barrios

Romance? Hell, no! ... Well, fleetingly. Sometimes. But don't look into that, forget it, flee from it. But Barrios doesn't. He dredges up from the loveless cum-spattered encounters in crushed rooms and cars—he dredges up romance. And that fantasy-romance recalls, in judgment-ridden memories, all the lovelessness in my own life (6).

Rechy's introduction ends with a plaintive question: "if what Barrios says is true—if there is romance (and therefore the mangled, avoided word ... 'love')—and is there? is there?—then, goddamnit, why the war?" The war that he refers to is between the hustler and the "score": "The score adores/desires the hustler—and hates him for that (every hustler knows that), just as the hustler hates the score—but needs him, oh, how much" (6). This connects to themes that are prevalent in *City of Night*, *Numbers*, *The Sexual Outlaw* and *Rushes*—the concept of desire and hatred being commingled, particularly for those who are perceived as being unattainable because of their attractiveness.

While many of the poems in *The Air-Conditioned Apollo* are about non-heterosexual sexuality, one poem in particular seems to point to scenes from *City of Night*. Titled "Get a Job," the poem describes the hustling scene:

Loitering is a passion
 credit card honored anywhere
 as all leads to darkness
 and F*A*S*C*I*N*A*T*I*O*N
 begins the beguine⁷⁴ (13).

In *City of Night*, the same sign is described: "And a great hungry sign groping luridly at the darkness screams: F * A * S * C * I * N * A * T * I * O * N" (30). The sexual scenes in this book of poems are very explicit, and while some are about hustlers who call the paying men "faggots," others are about mutual desire and affection. In "Shake Up," the narrator picks up a hustler named Larry and his friend, and in a motel room, it is not clear if the narrator asks Larry (or vice versa) " 'do you / like me?' strange / words coming at you: / 'yeah!' 'i want you / to be my date tonite / at the pearl street / ware house'" (50). However, it appears that it won't work out: "and home / less nomads driving on / back to the station / dropping names and them / off making excuses / not wanting to look / back as you see / your reflection / on the window pane / in the rear/view / mirror" (50). Again, it's not clear who is "making excuses" and who doesn't want to "look back"—the hustler and his friend, or the narrator. It seems that it is this exploration of the desire for a mutual relationship that Rechy is referring to in his introduction. However, unlike Rechy's early novels, Barrios' narrator is the paying "john" rather than the hustler, and his narrators observe the hyper-masculine pose but do not necessarily embrace it themselves.

Another book of poems by Gregg Barrios published in 1979, *Healthy Self*, does not directly make reference to Rechy, but one of the poems evokes the movie balcony section of Rechy's *Numbers* (1967). Titled "Ben," the narrator is "inside the mirky [sic]

⁷⁴ I appreciate the help of Ellen McCracken, who pointed out to me that "Fascination" and "Begin the Beguine" are also songs—the first is a waltz from the early 1900s and was popularized again when it appeared in the 1957 movie *Love in the Afternoon*, and Cole Porter wrote the latter.

theatre,” and an unnamed man “ushers you up / the stairway to heaven” (31). They end up in the bottom row, “tenderly kissing / tongue travelling,” ending with a “c/l/i/m/a/x / over the credits” (32). Missing from this account is any sense of power dynamics, aside from what appears to be on the movie screen: “the nameless faces / watching the tiny boy / suffering from a broken heart / attacked by his peers / calling him a sissy” (31).⁷⁵ A later poem dedicated to Rechy also features a movie theater. In the 1982 book of poems *Puro Rollo*, which opens with an epigraph from Luis Valdez’s *Pensamiento Serpentino* and an introduction by Tomás Rivera, important figures in Chicano/a theater and literature, the poem “JOHNNY CRUZA EL RIO BRAVO” [“Johnny Crosses the Rio Bravo”] appears. It code-switches with paragraphs in Spanish alternating with paragraphs in English, and makes clear references to the character Johnny Rio from *Numbers* as well as a reference to *City of Night*.

The poem’s title makes reference to not only Johnny, the protagonist of *Numbers*, but also to the river between the U.S. and Mexico. “JOHNNY CRUZA” opens addressing “you,” which could be read as being directed towards “Johnny Rio” or towards the narrator himself, and/or the implied reader:

In the dark movie theater in Texas / you glare at the flickering image / of Dolores Del Rio which translates / to ‘the sorrows of the river’ much / like your life long suffering teenage / years on the borderline between americano / y tejano... (68, emphasis in the original).

Immediately the identity of the addressee “between americano y tejano” is implying the term “Chicano”—particularly in the context of this book’s title and paratexts, yet Barrios does not use that label. The next paragraph is in Spanish, describing a man telling his mother the telephone call “Es para mí,” and two unknown people talk “por medio de miles / de alambres vivos una distancia larga” (68).⁷⁶ The poem then returns to English, again addressing “you”: “they called you Johnny Rio the same name / Marlon Brando had in *One Eyed Jacks* [...] as your battered mustang / races away toward a city of dark, lost angels” (68). This line evokes both *Numbers* and *City of Night* (“city of dark”), and after mentioning the “glittery streets of f*a*s*c*i*n*a*t*i*o*n,” the next paragraph in Spanish suggests that: “sé que se hablará ahí / afuera de las montañas y el desierto / alrededores de una frontera donde hasta / la vida sexual se sale sin salida / en el paso del norte” (68).⁷⁷ He then more clearly explains that “you met your final encounter although / reports of your untimely death were sketchy / or greatly exaggerated” (68). After asking rhetorical questions in Spanish about the circumstances leading to the addressee’s death, a reference to Rechy’s lack of acceptance is implied:

⁷⁵ Combined with the constant refrain “the rats are coming!” this may be a reference to a scene from the horror film *The Rats Are Coming! The Werewolves are Here!*, directed by Andy Milligan in 1972.

⁷⁶ “It’s for me [...] by means of miles / of live wires a long distance” (“Johnny Cruza,” 68, translation mine).

⁷⁷ “I know that they will talk out there / of the mountains and desert / outskirts of a border where even / sexual life exits without an exit / in El Paso del Norte” (“Johnny Cruza,” 68, my translation).

*you still remain leaving a good-looking corpse
a smiling memory of latin looks and irish luck
but to me you will always be the real Chicano
they never could accept (69).*

Johnny Rio is of Irish and Mexican descent (Rechy's family is Mexican and Scottish), and Barrios discusses the death of Rio (which is Barrios' interpretation of the ending of *Numbers*),⁷⁸ yet by writing "para John Rechy" at the end of the poem, Barrios plays with the line between author and character, seeming to address both. Yet who is "they" of "they never could accept"? In this hyper-Chicano book, Barrios writes about Johnny Rio, the protagonist of a book that details the experience of a man who is trying to accumulate "numbers" of sexual contacts with other men. "They" could refer to the Chicano/a community, Chicano/a authors and/or scholars, or the El Paso Chicano community. However, there is no clear "they" from within *Numbers*—the character does not spend time with other Chicanos/as. In the last stanza, the narrator writes "*for without you I could have never found the path / that leads me now to the end of the sentence*" (69). I interpret this as saying that Johnny Rio (and the implied Rechy) inspired the narrator (and implied Barrios) to write in general, and/or to write about sexuality and ethnic identity.

Finally, in his latest collection of poems, *La Causa* (2010), the poem "Boulevard of Broken Noses" is dedicated to Rechy as well, and seems to be a mash-up of references to Rechy and different characters from his books. The protagonist of the poem is named "Romeo" and is described as being on a "mission improbable / to be a Latino James Dean," a description that fits images of the young John Rechy, who often wore white t-shirts with black leather jackets (60). Romeo is described as having a United Farmworker eagle tattoo on his chest, and sells fruit "on the exit ramp" (perhaps a coy reference to Rechy's hustling), and we are presented with a snapshot of his life after a day, week, month, and six months later (61). In one scene, he sits on a patio with a "needle-damaged arm," and "kisses his glow-in-the-dark / rosary to hex this day's death" (62), a likely reference to the title of Rechy's 1969 novel *This Day's Death*. In the "Notes" of the book, Barrios writes that "Boulevard of Broken Noses" is "for John Rechy aka Johnny Rio" (82). Barrios' poems intertwine Rechy's books and sexuality with classic Chicano Movement imagery (such as the UFW tattoo), suggesting that it is an ongoing literary project for Barrios to reconcile Rechy and the Chicano (literary) culture that still only half-heartedly embraces Rechy and what he represents. While there have been book-length critical studies of Ricardo Sánchez, Cherríe Moraga, Gloria Anzaldúa, and other Chicano/a authors of different sexual orientations, within Chicano/a Studies and literature, Rechy's work has only been examined in article-length pieces, and is often compared with other Chicano/a authors. As a result, his body of work is partially analyzed, and his place within Chicano/a letters continues to be marginal. Also, as I've mentioned earlier in the case of Sandra K. Soto's recent book *Reading Chican@ Like a Queer*, his work still occasionally goes unmentioned in major analyses of queer Chicano/a writing.

⁷⁸ Conversation with the author.

In fact, recent plays by Barrios also illustrate his broader effort to reconcile homosexuality and Chicano identity. Ben Olguín summarizes the storyline of the 2005 production of *I-DJ Mofomixmaster*:

A young gay Chicano wants to proclaim his existence by joining the Chicano Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and 70s—el Movimiento—but his fellow Chicano activists respond by paraphrasing Eldridge Cleaver’s outrageous party line, that the only position for a woman or a fag in our movement is the lateral position (“Queering the Movimiento”).

To a certain extent, the reception of the poetry and plays of Gregg Barrios mirrors that of Rechy’s later work, which Barrios explains in an interview titled “Queering the Movimiento,” published in the *San Antonio Current*:

Because it [my message] doesn’t fit neatly into any pre-established categories, few people want to stage my work. It’s too Chicano for the white venues, not Chicano enough for the Chicano venues, too queer for straight ones, not queer enough for the queer spaces, and just too much of this and not enough of that for everyone else (Barrios, “Queering the Movimiento”).

There are no major scholarly articles on the work of Barrios, and they are rarely anthologized in Chicano/a or queer collections. While Rechy is more well known, there is even a dearth of in-depth analysis of his work (which this study hopes to help address), suggesting that in the important push to “recover” the texts of U.S. Latinos/as, we must not overlook this generation of authors who wrote shortly before, during, and just after the Chicano Movement, when homosexuality and Chicano identity were often seen as incompatible.⁷⁹ Rechy was a pioneer for Chicano/a readers, writing openly about non-normative sexuality and featuring protagonists of mixed descent at a time when it was even uncommon for Anglo-American authors. As a result, Rechy also paved the way for other Chicano/a authors who are not queer-identified, including Dagoberto Gilb, and potentially other Chicano/a authors who have not published or publicly stated the significance of Rechy’s writing to their work.

In a column about the influences of writers, Gregg Barrios interviewed Dagoberto Gilb, author of *Winners on the Pass Line* (1985), *The Magic of Blood* (1993), and several other short story collections and essays. Asked about his literary inspirations, Gilb replied that two of his literary influences are Ricardo Sánchez and Rechy:

⁷⁹ The *Recovering the U.S. Hispanic Literary Heritage* project, begun by Arte Público Press in 1992, has done important work recovering and publishing “lost Latino writings that date from the American colonial period through 1960” (“About Arte Público Press,” artepublicopress.uh.edu).

Dagoberto Gilb acknowledges the influence of El Paso writer Ricardo Sanchez, the late Chicano prison poet who had been an Express-News columnist. Just as important, he cites John Rechy's seminal novel "City of Night." "I'm so full of admiration when I teach 'City of Night.'" Gilb said. "I still think it's one of the greatest novels, let alone by a Chicano, ever. I'm so proud when I introduce it to graduate students and they flip out." (Barrios, "Writers Gain," n.p.).

Gilb points out the literary quality of *City of Night*, and suggests that it compares favorably with novelists of all ethnicities or nationalities, although he doesn't state what he thinks makes it "one of the greatest novels." In this interview, Gilb also acknowledges an intertextual reference to one of Rechy's books in a collection of short stories Gilb published in 2002 with Grove Press (which I also discuss in Chapter Two about *La bloga*):

Gilb added that his story "Bottoms" in his recent collection, "Woodcuts of Women," was inspired while reading Rechy's latest novel [*The Coming of the Night*]. "The authors published by the old Grove Press saved my life: Genet, Rechy, Burroughs. All these people were like my total heroes" ("Writers Gain").

All of the authors mentioned by Gilb, both Chicano/a and non-Chicano/a, write explicitly about sexuality, as does Gilb. Also, all of the authors depict the taboo and/or the subaltern, from prison life (Sánchez and Genet) to non-normative (homo)sexuality (Genet, Rechy, Burroughs).

In Gilb's strange life-imitating-art scene in "Bottoms" (a title that suggests physical anatomy), the protagonist is stressed out about writing a book review: "My last review appeared in last month's issue and I am not disappointed in it ... but with this new novel I am struggling because I don't know where to begin. I'm suspecting it's some kind of test Ixchel, who is my cherished, wise editor, wants to run by me" (129). For unsuspecting readers, the suspense builds as to why this might be a "test." He explains some of the pressure: "A favored author of the magazine, and hers, and I am assigned his latest, due ASAP, tomorrow" (129). Rechy's 2000 novel *Coming of the Night* was published by Grove Press (as are the majority of his books, with few exceptions), but at this point the reference could remain an inside joke. However, his description of the book makes it clear: "The book is as explicit as I have ever known, one page after another. I have never read so much about cocks and pecks, the hard and soft, big and small.⁸⁰ And it had never occurred to me to consider people as bottoms or tops—that is, ones who want it put and the ones who want to put it. I can't say I'm shocked by the novel's details ...

⁸⁰ Like *Numbers*, *The Coming of the Night* features sexually explicit descriptions of male bodies, and while the implied and ideal reader is a gay male, other potential readers might also be aroused by the text, including some heterosexual and bisexual female readers (though obviously a reader of any gender or sexual orientation might be aroused by sexually explicit writing, depending on their individual tastes). However, it is interesting to think of the affiliation of desire that heterosexual and bisexual women share with homosexual and bisexual men.

but I am on alert” (129). As he is reading, the narrator suddenly notices a man close by with “a stylish bald head,” and he allows his imagination to run wild, all the while aware that he is being “a little touchy” (129). As we read his discomfort, we are invited to laugh at him as he tries to hide the title of the book that he’s reading from the man and find comfort in the presence of a woman nearby (130). He then tries to return to the novel, summarizing it as “eight plus or minus characters, gay, male, going through a couple of very hot days in Los Angeles ...” (130). The narrator admits that “it’s turned me on,” but then proceeds to describe in explicit detail how it makes him fantasize about sex with a woman named Cata (130).

After several more twists and turns involving a woman who takes on monstrous proportions as the narrator tries to write his review after losing the book, an unnamed woman opens his window and is in his bed: “She has mounted me—I’m a bottoms. As her rhythm intensifies, the book, trapped between the box spring and the wall, clunks onto the floor I am smothered by pounds of soft *chiche*” (147). The story ends, and the following page is a linocut illustration of a woman straddling a man in bed (148, by Artemio Rodríguez). In this story, there are no references to Rechy’s earlier work, nor to his Chicano identity— instead, the story is a multi-layered metaliterary reference that only informed readers will fully appreciate, requiring some familiarity with Rechy’s work, and Gilb’s writing. Gilb mocks the anxiety of heterosexuality, the anxiety of the narrator who appears to be the implied author, Gilb,⁸¹ who ultimately fears not only gay men, but also being swallowed by a woman, even as she is fervently desired. As the narrator explains, he is “afraid of raw desire when I encounter it. Though I want to be a stereotype: Man sees woman. Thinks woman. Thinks tops. Has woman” (130). The story, like many others by Gilb, illustrates the anxiety of (gender) performance. This reference to *Coming of the Night* allows an examination of how homosexuality in literature can sometimes cause discomfort for readers, even as it arouses. It also illustrates that contemporary Chicano/a authors are reading and engaging with Rechy’s work.

One other Chicano author who has written about Rechy’s impact on his writing is Rigoberto González. González is an editor and author who has published award-winning books of poetry, novels, children’s books and memoirs, and he regularly writes reviews for the *El Paso Times*. Much of his work centers on queer sexuality, including his two young adult novels, which are about gay high school students (*The Mariposa Club* and *Mariposa Gown*). In a 2013 collection of personal essays, González writes about the role of his “literary forefathers” who not only share his ethnic heritage, but also his sexual identity:

I will refer to my literary forefathers then, as *jotoranos*—my veteran queer godparents. These are the people who came before and who fought first, who braved the public stages and weathered the stormy audiences so that my own journey would be a little less terrifying and much more rewarding (“Beloved Jotoranos,” 81).

⁸¹ There is no record of his review of Rechy’s book, although in the story it is never written.

He discusses the impact of seven writers: Arturo Islas, Michael Nava, Richard Rodriguez, Salvador Novo, Francisco X. Alarcón, Gloria Anzaldúa, and John Rechy. Unlike the other Chicano/a authors I discuss earlier in this chapter, González learned of Rechy within a university setting, and he read Rechy's later work before reading *City of Night*:

Professor Bredbeck gave me a copy of *Bodies & Souls* (1983), and it became my naughty companion throughout many of my lonely nights in college.⁸² Eventually I read Rechy's classic *City of Night* (1963) and *Numbers* (1967)—amused by how many Chicano professors dismissed his work as pornography, and how I was employing the sex scenes as such, even as I objected to this unfair characterization (83).

Even though *Bodies and Souls* disappointed some of Rechy's early fans because of the emphasis on heterosexual characters, it is clear that at least for González, this did not get in the way of his erotic enjoyment of the novel. González also hints at the fact that a book can be "used" by a reader in a pornographic/self-gratifying way, but that doesn't necessarily make a book pornographic, an important distinction that was lost on many of Rechy's early reviewers. González also points out that he has "reviewed (favorably) *The Life and Adventures of Lyle Clemens* (2003) and *Beneath the Skin* (2004)" for the *El Paso Times*, and he explains how *Beneath the Skin* in particular "gave me new insights into Rechy's politics and pride" (84). González is also an associate professor, and perhaps because of his position in the academy, he is aware of some of the different factors at play in the relative estrangement of Rechy from the Chicano/a canon: "his vanity, his literary bravado, and even his name (his father was of Irish ancestry), are why he's been excluded from most Chicano or Latino literary canons" (83). At a recent symposium on Rechy's work, González described the way he felt before coming across the work of gay Chicano/a authors like Rechy:

My double life continued, split apart the same way I had divided my personal bookshelf, with Chicano literature on one side, gay literature on the other. I kept them separated like feuding siblings. I could not quite bring them together because just as the Chicano texts excluded the gay character, those books by white gay men didn't place the man of color at the center of the narratives either-- he was, disappointingly, marginal, and sometimes worse-- a fetish, an exotic body, a flavor ("In Praise of My Gay Chicano Literary Ancestor," 3-4).

González vividly uses the metaphor of the split bookshelf to describe his own sense of exclusion or marginalization within the literary narratives of early Chicano/a and gay writers, and then explains why it is important to recognize Rechy as a literary ancestor:

⁸² According to the paper he shared at the symposium *50 Years of City of Night: New Perspectives on the Work of John Rechy*, this was in 1989 at the University of California, Riverside.

It's critical to recognize literary ancestry, to assume the position of continuing a lineage and to avoid the arrogance of feeling like a trailblazer when the true groundbreaking happens without ceremony or announcement. As writers we reach toward our immediate pasts for inspiration, but we must reach toward previous generations for direction and perspective. As a role model and literary hero, John Rechy meets that need if for no other reason than for the illustrious example of having the audacity of stripping the body of fear and shame ("In Praise," 9).

Rechy's work not only helped unite the seemingly disparate sides of a bookshelf, but also helped pioneer what is often considered a feminist endeavor: writing the (queer, brown) body, and doing so without shame.

There is still more work to be done in examining Rechy's significance to Chicano/a literary history. For example, while Gil Cuadros' published poems, short stories and his papers housed at the University of California, Los Angeles do not show any explicit references to Rechy or provide evidence that Cuadros read his work, it is hard to imagine that he was not aware of Rechy's early novels. Rechy pioneered an open depiction of working-class, non-normative Chicano sexuality, and Cuadros was one of the first openly gay and HIV positive writers, and he also openly wrote about sexuality. With further research, scholars may find concrete connections to Rechy's work. Similarly, in his critical biography of Arturo Islas, Frederick Luis Aldama writes that the "political and racial awareness" of Islas

was deepened, too, by the discovery of writers John Rechy and James Baldwin. Islas was struck by John Rechy's chronicling of a queer Mexican-Scottish American character from El Paso in his best-selling *City of Night*, and he became an avid reader of all of James Baldwin's novels and journalistic essays (Aldama 135-6).

This brief mention of a connection between Islas and Rechy deserves to be further explored, and as more information becomes available from research projects such as the CLID, I will be able to continue my work of documenting the intertextual references that connect John Rechy and other marginalized queer Chicano/a and U.S. Latino/a authors to Chicano/a literature. This work can never fully be complete, as there is always the possibility of learning more through personal interviews or archival work as well.

Furthermore, it is important to remember that there will not be a homogenously positive Chicano/a (or gay Chicano) response to Rechy's work. Not every gay Chicano/a person who read Rechy's work enjoyed it or agreed with Rechy's depictions of gay life and stances on things like promiscuity and sadomasochism. Michael Nava is the author of seven mystery novels featuring a gay Chicano detective named Henry Rios (and the recently published *The City of Palaces* (2014)). He explains that he does not consider Rechy to be a stylistic influence because when Nava "sat in on his [Rechy's writing]

workshop... [he (Nava)] was already developing [his] own voice.”⁸³ More importantly, he notes that when he read *City of Night* and *Numbers* as a teenager, he “found the books compelling and compulsive, not as literary works but morally. I haven’t read them since but if I did I imagine I would not be so judgmental.” He later expanded on this, writing that “those two early books... had a negative influence in that they confirmed a concept of homosexuality characterized by rootlessness, promiscuity and the inability to love that I rejected because they did not fit my self-image... nor did it fit what I wanted for myself as a homosexual.”⁸⁴ Nava also acknowledges that “he [Rechy] gets to write his books and not the ones I may have wanted him to write and those early books were undeniably powerfully written and influential.” This nuanced response reminds us that there are a multitude of possible reader responses, and that identifiers such as gender, ethnicity and sexual orientation do not necessarily mean that readers will have a similar kind of response. This suggests that Chicano gay readers, for example, do not automatically form an “interpretive community” according to Stanley Fish’s definition, and it reminds us that when considering the responses of implied or imagined readers, we cannot assume that a reader of a certain identity (working class, Chicano/a, homosexual, or male) will have a specific kind of response to a text. It also shows that a “negative” influence is still an influence, and what has been documented thus far illustrates the important role that Rechy’s work, including his earliest book, has played and continues to play in Chicano/a literature written by writers of all genders and sexual orientations.

Other U.S. Authors

“And if Rechy’s later, more confrontationally sexual gay-themed novels of the late 1960s and 1970s were less widely read, their influence upon gay culture’s sexual self-perception up until the mid-1980s was potent enough in 1982 for Dennis Altman to cite ‘above all the novels of John Rechy’ in his list of a gay male-related ‘literature of cruising.’”

Ben Gove, *Cruising Cultures*, 41.

The impact of John Rechy’s early novels, including *City of Night*, *Numbers*, *Rushes* and *The Sexual Outlaw* on gay authors in the U.S. is difficult to measure, because few of them (aside from Gregg Barrios) make direct references to him or his novels in their published work. Roger Austen describes one popular 1964 pulp novel, *Naked to the Night*, as “giv[ing] every indication of being derived from the greatly superior *City of Night*” (212),⁸⁵ but no mention is made of any other potential influences Rechy’s work

⁸³ Email correspondence with Michael Nava, March 19, 2014.

⁸⁴ Email correspondence with Michael Nava, March 21, 2014.

⁸⁵ *Naked to the Night* is bookended by explicit anti-gay discourse, first with an introduction by “Dr. Shailer Upton Lawton: Associate chief of the Diagnostic Clinic, N.Y. Post-Graduate Hospital,” who explains that the book is meant to aid in the prevention of homosexuality (although he also recommends that adult males not be prosecuted for consensual sex), and then in the final scene, when a jealous lover cries “I’m just another kid who once was normal and now, thanks to you, is as queer and hungry for abnormal love as any faggot anywhere in America” (174).

might have had on later gay books. For some gay men, reading Rechy's work encouraged them to write, but perhaps because of his reception by early literary critics and "serious" writers, an epigraph or clear acknowledgment would have either been too literary for erotica and pulp writing, and not literary enough for novelists who wanted to be taken seriously. In a letter to the editor of the gay publication *Bay Area Reporter* in response to a somewhat irreverent 1991 article on Rechy,⁸⁶ book reviewer Mike Varady states unequivocally the important role Rechy has played for not only gay authors, but also gay bookstores, periodicals and even philosophical positions:

As playwright James Carroll Pickett has said, without Rechy there would be no Different Light bookstores, or gay journals such as yours, or those writers who followed his lead and dared to write about homosexuality. Many of the philosophies guiding our lives and the liberation movement we are involved in were written about by him years before they were adopted by activists; they were considered radical positions when he suggested them, and yet are now taken as a matter of course without giving him attribution (Varady 6).

Within the LGBTQ community, Rechy continues to have an uneven reputation in terms of his significance, which I discuss to an extent in Chapter One. However, in interviews and articles, a number of well-known and marginal gay authors have openly stated how influential Rechy's novels are for gay literature in general, and for their own development as a writer. These include Bruce Benderson, Edmund White, Daniel Curzon and Samuel Steward.⁸⁷ I will briefly examine their descriptions of Rechy's impact on their writing and/or on the gay literary scene in general.⁸⁸

Many of the established gay authors of the time, such as Christopher Isherwood, Gore Vidal, Truman Capote, and Tennessee Williams tended to write about homosexuality in an indirect way, and portrayed upper-middle or upper class characters. Rechy's style of writing and subject matter—male hustling and cruising—was completely different, which helps explain the response of many book reviewers in the

⁸⁶ "Sexual Outlaw is Still One Pistol-Packing Papa," 28 February 1991 (n.p.). The article mentions that Rechy does not submit recent photographs of himself to publications, poking fun at his self-admitted narcissism. I do not know if the letter to the editor was ever published, as I have only seen the typescript of the letter in Rechy's archives.

⁸⁷ In a speech given at a memorial conference for the author John Preston in 1994, book editor Michael Denny suggested that the writer John Preston drew inspiration from the work of John Rechy and Samuel Steward: "[John Preston] found himself drawn to another literary strategy, the underground tradition exemplified by the mass market pornographic novels of Sam Steward, aka Phil Andros, and the works of John Rechy..." (Denny, ctd in Lowenthal, 13).

⁸⁸ Rechy's own biographer, Charles Casillo, dedicated a short story to Rechy titled "Terrible Darkness" in his collection of short stories called *Boys, Lost and Found* (2006), and the piece follows the narrator through pornographic movie theaters, bars, and sexual encounters. He also writes about the impact of Rechy's work on his life as a writer and gay man in "John Rechy at Home," also included in the aforementioned collection: "...when I came across it [*City of Night*] in a bookstore as a teenager it almost jumped off[f] the shelf into my hands, screaming for me to read it It has since gone on to influence every generation of writers that followed" (79, 84).

1960s.⁸⁹ Yet many readers who would later write their own books were inspired by Rechy's subject matter and the way in which he depicted activities that were seen as immoral, transgressive and embarrassing for some gay readers, especially given the fact that heterosexuals read *City of Night*. In a 1991 issue of *Lambda Book Report*, U.S. author Eric Latzky describes a common thread he sees between a transnational trio of gay writers who were stigmatized:

To suggest that there could be a single gay/lesbian point of view is like suggesting that there could be a single hetero[sexual] point of view. For uncommon people like Genet, Rechy, and Burroughs, like with their contemporary counterparts (select any combination of names contained herewith), these lives and therefore this new (and not new) writing is automatically outcast, pushed aside, squelched like it's dangerous, or disgusting or whatever. Like most writers, this new garde wrote/writes about their lives, about their own nature, what's native to any one of them. It's the other side, the mainstream (homo or hetero) that awards them the perspective to call their work subversive or transgressive (14).

Latzky argues that their work was not abnormal, perverse or inherently subversive, but rather is labeled as such by the homosexual and heterosexual "mainstream." His view is echoed by other authors, such as U.S. novelist Bruce Benderson,⁹⁰ who wrote in a 1991 article for *Outweek* that "gay rights are ruining gay literature" ("Is There a Gay Male Fiction?" 50). Benderson disparages the political correctness and middle-class values (including the desire to blend in and be accepted) that he sees seeping into gay literature, embracing instead the labels of "subversive and transgressive" both for his own writing and that of authors such as Genet, Rechy and Burroughs. In the aforementioned article, Benderson argues that "no gay-themed literature of today has come close to their [Genet, Rechy or Burroughs] passionate identification with the Other" and the way their work "revels in the idea of the homosexual as degenerate and outsider" (50). Benderson ultimately calls for a return to "[o]ur greatest resource, even in this age of AIDS [...] our desire. That desire may be our only line through class barriers, to a new solidarity with the degenerates with whom we once shared the denomination" (51). Benderson's responses foreground the societal distinctions in the characters portrayed by Rechy, Genet and Burroughs, and, importantly, also illustrates one side of the debate on the nature of queer sexuality and identity.

As Jonathan Dollimore explains in "Too hot for Yale?," a "fundamental antagonis[m] within the politics of sexual dissidence" is found between revolutionary and

⁸⁹ In a diary entry dated November 2, 1960 and published in *The Sixties: Diaries: 1960-1969*, Isherwood writes about a conversation he had with Rechy prior to the publication of *City of Night*, which reveals Isherwood's views on literary realism: "One of the characteristic things about John is his fear of inventing; he wants to record everything exactly as it happened. So I spent a lot of time trying to convince him that this would be undesirable and anyhow impossible" (23).

⁹⁰ Benderson has published several novels, and many appeared in French before they were published in English, such as *Autobiographie érotique* (2004; translated and published as *The Romanian: Story of an Obsession*, 2006), *Toward the New Degeneracy* (1997), and *User* (1994).

reformist approaches: the first argues that homosexuality is “a revolutionary force in western culture, with the power to entirely subvert its heterosexual underpinning,” while the latter that homosexuality can “exist comfortably alongside heterosexuality” with the help of education and the shift of cultural norms (214). This tension between the mainstream acceptance of homosexuality (and the implication that homosexuals will be “tamed,” losing their revolutionary stance towards capitalism, heteronormativity and sexuality, or stigmatize members of their own community who do not conform) versus the rejection of mainstream acceptance (and potential charge that only antagonistic or revolutionary attitudes can be associated with an authentic homosexual identity, or that any sort of acceptance means the loss of authenticity) has shaped the reception of Rechy’s work, particularly amongst those who are on either extreme of this debate. This is seen perhaps most clearly in the responses of reviewers within publications such as *one: the homosexual viewpoint* (see Chapter One) and *Drummer: America’s Mag for the Macho Male*. While many of the responses below from gay authors do not always directly engage this debate, focusing instead on the experience of reading Rechy’s work when they were first coming to terms with their sexuality, some do acknowledge the gray area in which Rechy can sometimes reside in terms of this debate.

In an issue of *Drummer*, a magazine about gay sadomasochism, the novelist Edmund White was interviewed about his nonfiction book, *States of Desire* (1980), and he described how important it was to him personally to be honest and open about his own sexuality, including his interest in sadomasochism (49-51). White also talked about how exciting it was for “all of us” (the gay community) to read about male hustling and sexuality:

Every time a little more truth comes into literature, the writing shows it and that’s *exciting*. John Rechy’s *City of Night*, for instance, was a tremendous thrill for all of us. Everyone ran out and read it. It was a galvanizing book because this stuff had never been written before (White 51, emphasis in the original).

While the above quotation is somewhat vague (“Everyone ran out and read it”), it is still telling that White says it in the context of an interview with a magazine that celebrates sadomasochism, which Rechy was known for writing about in a negative light in *Rushes* (1979). Also, his assertion that “this stuff had never been written before” is similarly vague, but we can extrapolate that he might have been referring to the things that distinguished Rechy’s work from that of earlier writers such as Vidal, Capote, Williams, and even James Baldwin—the portrayal of the U.S. hustling scene from the point of view of a hustler who examines the poses and fictions of the street and the underlying fears and loneliness behind them, all in the speech patterns of hustlers, drag queens, middle class tourists and upper class johns. It is this social realism with a participant-observer protagonist applied to the subaltern that resonates for many readers as honest and brave. White also appreciated Rechy’s “ear for gay speech and sympathy for the gay underdog,” which, paired with the work of Burroughs and Genet, helped to “transfor[m] our received notions of reality” (“Out of the Closet, Onto the Bookshelf,” 22).

Another gay U.S. novelist who also extols the honesty in *City of Night* is Daniel Curzon (the pen name of Daniel Brown), the author of *Something You Do In the Dark* (1971) and several other novels, plays and non-fiction books. In his memoir *Dropping Names* (2004), he wrote that the first gay book he read was *City of Night*, “probably around 1964 or so” (33). Curzon even states that “I owe my first sexual experiences thus to John Rechy” because it was in reading *City of Night* that he “learned that men sometimes had sex in parks or in YMCA’s” (33). In a 1988 piece for the *Los Angeles Times* he writes “[i]t is the honesty about his narcissism, his depression and his sexual promiscuity that lifts Rechy’s writing to art. Like so many books, ‘City’ got attention because of the sex, but it’s really about the soul [...]” (15). Sixteen years later in the memoir *Dropping Names*, Curzon reiterated his admiration for Rechy’s honesty:

What I admired in Rechy’s writing was that he was honest. He did not glamorize the dark cruising world that he inhabited and wrote about so frequently. He knew that he was trapped in an underworld of compulsive sexual behavior and told it just like it was, with all its orgasmic glories and all the emotional hollowness as well (*Dropping Names* 35).

Some of the very things that other readers such as Michael Nava did not like about Rechy’s early work appealed to Curzon, who appreciated an honest portrayal of the gay cruising scene. However, in Curzon’s first novel, he departs from Rechy’s style in several ways, while addressing similar themes. There are several notable similarities and differences between John Rechy’s early work Curzon’s *What You Do in the Dark* (1971). First, unlike the protagonists in Rechy’s work, Curzon’s protagonist is willing to have sexual encounters with men who are older, unattractive (or with obvious flaws such as acne), and who have physical disabilities. Secondly, Curzon’s protagonist must deal with the open rejection of his family, and he also confronts his heterosexual friends and acquaintances, while most of Rechy’s early protagonists keep their sex life a secret from their parent(s), although the protagonist in Rechy’s third novel, *This Day’s Death* does “come out” to some of his heterosexual acquaintances at the end.

There are at least two elements that the novels of Rechy and Curzon share, aside from homosexual themes: first, their novels contain homosexual protagonists who are depressed and/or violent, and both feature working class characters. For example, Curzon’s 1971 novel *What You Do In The Dark* is quite similar to Rechy’s *This Day’s Death* and *Numbers*, detailing the legal oppression of gay men in an existentialist and psychological way, and including cruising scenes in a city park.

Samuel Steward (1909-1993) was a professor, tattoo artist and writer who published several erotic short stories and books under numerous pen names, including Phil Andros and Ward Stames. Steward “established himself under the pseudonym of Phil Andros” and created a hustler character “by the same name” (Spring 306). Andros as a character first appears in the 1963 story “The Poison Tree,” and Justin Spring observes that this character is quite similar to the protagonists of *City of Night* and of Kerouac’s *On the Road*, and cites Steward’s response to *City of Night*:

I [had] had a lot of experience with hustlers, both as customers down at the tattoo shop, and as tension relievers in the shop's back room. And I had read John Rechy's *City of Night*, but...Rechy's waffling attitude about his nameless hustler was annoying. I had the feeling he was holding back, afraid to reveal himself, carefully cultivating the icy center of his being and saving it for—what or whom? I didn't know (Steward, cited in Spring 307).

As a result of Steward's frustration with the protagonist's attitude towards some of the men who paid him for sex in *City of Night*, in his own story, Steward "portrayed the men on both sides of the hustling equation as basically friendly, attractive, and human characters simply seeking sexual release" (Spring 306-7). Nevertheless, the review Steward wrote of *City of Night* for the trilingual Swiss homophile magazine *Der Kreis/Le Cercle/The Circle* is effusive in its praise:

Well, I have just finished reading John Rechy's *City of Night*, the longest saddest coldest 'gay' book ever written. I am quite sure that it is definitive, by which I mean that no one need ever write another word about hustlers in America, for he has said it all (35).

Of course, unbeknownst to the readers at the time, the review (with the subtitle "From a Subscriber's Letter") was written by Steward, who was about to publish stories with a hustler protagonist, giving the review a potentially sarcastic tone, at least in retrospect. His review continues: "it is a very discouraging book to read for those of us who have tried to write a little on the topic" and suggests that the only recourse now is to "write a sequel from the point of view of the 'score' himself" (35). After comparing the final scene of Mardi Gras to Plato's *Symposium*, he writes that "[a]fter this, there can only be imitators of Rechy, if they write in this field," which can be read as genuine praise or sarcastic hyperbole (36). Yet one line seems particularly true: "No one has a right to see so clearly and to write it down so well" (36). It is this ability to "see so clearly" that sounds like the coldness that Steward refers to earlier, and thus his own stories try to be more empathetic. In *Understanding the Male Hustler* (1991), a sort of self-interview in character, "Phil Andros" recounts the history of male hustling, and then transitions into its literary portrayal, beginning with Jack Saul's *The Sins of the Cities of the Plains* (1881) and then moving onto *City of Night*:

“And then there’s John Rechy’s *City of Night*.”

“About 1963, wasn’t it?”

“Right on the head. It was the first serious account of a homosexual hustler’s experiences in this country’s night cities—New York, Chicago, Los Angeles.”

“But wasn’t it a sort of waffling thing? I’m not sure he ever admitted being a hustler.”

“It was as unvarnished as the times permitted,” Phil said. “No, of course there wasn’t any *absolute* honesty of expression; the times wouldn’t allow it. But it’s a landmark achievement” (11).

This Socratic dialogue between “author” and “character” contains an incredible tour-de-force of gay literary history that ends with a list of “*all* the dirty porno books that have appeared since the Supreme Court in 1966 opened the floodgates for the cheapie publishers,” including books published by Steward under pseudonym (19). Steward does not mention Genet or Hubert Selby, Jr.—and it is notable that he labels his own books “dirty porno books.” Yet Steward’s books come a long way from Raul’s *Naked to the Night*, free of the anti-homosexual “warnings” that helped protect early presses from court battles.

Like many of the letters from readers, the gay authors who talk about Rechy’s impact focus on the power of reading about something that heretofore had remained unwritten. For some, reading his work helped initiate them into the world of sex, while others had their own experiences confirmed, and appreciated Rechy’s honest, accurate portrayal of activities that were not openly acknowledged by “respectable” heterosexuals or homosexuals. There was a similar reaction from readers outside of the U.S.

International Outlaws: Guy Hocquenghem and Christos Tsiolkas

This chapter ends with a brief analysis of two authors from outside of the U.S. who have mentioned John Rechy and his work in interviews and in published prologues and forewords: Guy Hocquenghem (France) and Christos Tsiolkas (Australia). While there are other non-U.S. authors who have made references to Rechy, such as Alberto Sánchez (Mexico), in the interest of space and the realization that this will be an ongoing project, here I will focus on only Hocquenghem and Tsiolkas because their readings of Rechy are well-documented, and illustrate the impact that Rechy has had on gay writers of different cultures, in the early 1970s and as recently as the 1990s. While the impact of Rechy’s work on Tsiolkas reaffirms what many of the letter writers have described earlier, the case of Hocquenghem’s connection to Rechy is a bit more complex.

Christos Tsiolkas (b. 1965) is an Australian novelist of Greek descent, and the author of several novels and plays. In a 2009 interview, he explains that in his 1995 debut novel *Loaded*, the “sex he [the protagonist] had and his refusal to name or limit his sexuality was an existential defiance grounded on fucking” (“Delivering a Punch,” n.p.). He goes on to explain how Rechy and French authors influenced him and his portrayal of sexuality:

There is nothing terribly original in that. I was very influenced by the works of John Rechy, the US gay writer who also worked as a prostitute, and for whom sex was the battleground for liberation. I was also greatly influenced by Camus, Genet, that generation of French writers: that's why I now, in hindsight, identify Ari's stance as 'existential' (Tsiolkas, "Delivering a Punch").

What is particularly interesting about this quote is that Tsiolkas also answers one criticism of *City of Night* that I address in Chapter One, which is that the protagonist does not embrace a homosexual identity, and instead refuses to accept a label. However, it seems that Tsiolkas is referring more to *The Sexual Outlaw* than *City of Night* in this example, particular in mentioning sex as "the battleground for liberation," which Rechy spelled out in the later montage of fiction and non-fiction. In fact, in the foreword to *Gay*, a collection of essays by Australian journalist Steve Dow, Tsiolkas explains that the first book he ever read by Rechy was in fact *The Sexual Outlaw*, and his experience mirrors that of many of the letter writers I examine in Chapter Two:

I had first come across Rechy when I was 16 and I'd nervously made my way up the steep stairs of the International Bookshop in Elizabeth Street, Melbourne I picked up in the rich second-hand section of the bookshop a copy of John Rechy's *The Sexual Outlaw* and, making sure that the book was safely hidden in between two other tomes, probably something Marxist, probably something from the English literary canon And so began my study of sexual politics (Tsiolkas, "Foreword" i).

He continues, explaining how Rechy's writing was able to appeal to his sexual and intellectual needs:

I was lucky. *The Sexual Outlaw* was a damn fine book, with enough description of sex to keep me up at night, as well as essays on politics, on sex, and on power as understood by an author who was born into a working-class Mexican family in the United States, and who had made his way to the big cities of Los Angeles and New York to be a hustler and a writer (ii).

What is most striking to me, and what I think is an important connection between Rechy and Tsiolkas both as writers and in terms of their male protagonists, is that both men come from an immigrant family with traditional (read, heteronormative) attitudes towards sexuality. The next writer, Guy Hocquenghem, was born in France, and seemed less intrigued with Rechy's existentialism, and more interested in the political and psychological possibilities of non-monogamous sex as a way to cross class and cultural divides.

Guy Hocquenghem (1946-1988), a contemporary of Foucault and arguably the first queer theorist,⁹¹ published several novels and non-fiction pieces that revolved around the themes of homosexuality, the commodification of desire, and the implications of identity politics. Much like writers such as Bruce Benderson and Eric Latzky, Hocquenghem was excited by the potential for “radical questioning” from “totally marginal territory,” particularly for non-heterosexual communities (Hocquenghem, *Homosexual Desire*, 136). Furthermore, in *Le Désir homosexuel* [*Homosexual Desire*] (1972) he writes about the negative impact of societal pressure (including psychology), as well as the meaning of the label “homosexuality,” echoing Rechy’s own exploration the term, which he wrote about in letters to Donald Allen (see Chapter One), as well as in a scene in *City of Night* between the protagonist and a married man. The married man talks to the protagonist about his frustration with the lack of sufficient terminology for his identity: “I hate that word—‘gay’—there should be another word: not ‘homosexual’—that sounds too clinical—not ‘queer’, not ‘fairy,’ either—” (*City of Night* 229). Similarly, Hocquenghem writes that

“Homosexual desire” — the expression is meaningless. There is no subdivision of desire into homosexuality and heterosexuality Just like heterosexual desire, homosexual desire is an arbitrarily frozen frame in an unbroken and polyvocal flux The category ... is a fairly recent invention” (Hocquenghem, *Homosexual Desire* 49-51).

While Hocquenghem does not mention Rechy in *Le désir homosexuel*, instead focusing on Freud, Proust, and the theories of Deleuze and Guattari, in later books and interviews he does refer to Rechy, and he is even quoted on the back cover of the French edition of Rechy’s seventh book, *Rushes*.

In his 1980 book *Le Gay Voyage*,⁹² which features interviews, observations, and a list of addresses at the end of most of the sections devoted to a specific city, Hocquenghem writes in the prologue:

Je ne connais pas de villes, je ne connais que de ghettos. Des ghettos qui se succèdent, à peine interrompus de gares ou d’aéroports. *Cité de la nuit*, disait le grand écrivain américain John Rechy: le Lungotevere s’achève à West Street, le Tibre se jette dans Hudson River, la porte du fond de ce sauna d’Amsterdam s’ouvre sur la salle obscure d’un cinéma de Pigalle (Prologue, 9).⁹³

⁹¹ See Michael Moon’s introduction to the English translation of *Le Désir homosexuel* (1993).

⁹² Keith Harvey describes *Le Gay Voyage* as a “travel book, intellectual enquiry and account of a personal encounter with the American cultural other on its own terrain” (55).

⁹³ “I do not know of cities, I only know of ghettos. Of successions of ghettos barely interrupted by train stations or airports. *City of Night*, said the great American writer John Rechy: the Lungotevere ends at West Street, the Tiber flows into the Hudson River, the back door of the sauna in Amsterdam opens on the dark room of a movie house in Pigalle” (Hocquenghem, Prologue, 9, my translation).

Keith Harvey writes that the prologue “scatters traces of the Anglo-Saxon world across its textual surface” and as a result, the prologue contains “a (fantasised) universalising gesture of queer experience alongside an underlining of the otherness of the American experience for the French gaze” (56). In addition to the geographical “flattening” of the gay world from the banks of the Tiber River in Rome to New York’s Hudson River and then to Amsterdam and Paris, the inclusion of the reference to *City of Night* serves as a further (literary) globalization, connecting these major cities to the realm of the literary. Hocquenghem also embraces the concept of the “ghetto,” which in this case could be interpreted in the physical/geographic sense as well as the literary: with the title *Le Gay Voyage*, the book is unabashedly geared towards a gay (French) readership, packaged as a literal guidebook. Aside from the prologue, *Le Gay Voyage* does not explicitly mention Rechy or his other books, although the narrator visits the Mine Shaft in New York, which is the unnamed setting for Rechy’s 1979 novel *Rushes*. In fact, Hocquenghem wrote a “blurb” for the 1980 French edition of *Rushes* (*Rush*), so while the text is not mentioned, we do know that he was aware of the novel.

According to Harvey, Hocquenghem’s endorsement “is used as guarantor of the book’s importance for contemporary gay culture; he hails it as ‘le roman le plus important [...] de l’année gay américaine’” (Harvey 190).⁹⁴ This endorsement is “designed to activate in the French reader existing knowledge of the controversies and debates about where French ‘gay’ is destined and the question of what, if anything, it should borrow from elsewhere” (191). It also clearly signals Hocquenghem’s awareness of Rechy’s writing, though we cannot know with certainty whether he was familiar with Rechy’s earlier work prior to writing *Le désir homosexuel* (1972). His review of *Rushes* appeared in 1980 in the French literary magazine *Les nouvelles littéraires*, in a special section on homosexual literature, and in his review he also mentions *City of Night* (which he mistakenly calls *Cities of the Night*, also giving the incorrect publication date of 1960), *Numbers* and *The Sexual Outlaw* (“Le théâtre ‘cuir’ de John Rechy,” 31). Nevertheless, his review of *Rushes* is very in-depth, discussing the attributes of the six primary characters. In a 1980 interview for *Christopher Street*, Hocquenghem discusses his views on sadomasochism, and cites *Rushes*: “John Rechy, in his book *Rushes*, stressed this very simple point: S-M is the theater of the real violence that imposes itself on gays, and we should note that the growth of the ‘new’ homophobia and of S-M sex are occurring at the same time” (45). He argues that while the increasing popularity of sadomasochism at that time might be due to the internalization of societal hatred or even the “commercialization of gay sex in the form of a complete S-M package,” to him it is “more simple than that” (45). He goes on to suggest that sexual organs and sexual energy are removed, with signifiers in their place:

⁹⁴ The endorsement by Hocquenghem, taken from his review published in *Les nouvelles littéraires* is translated as “the most important novel [...] of the American ‘gay’ year” (“Le théâtre ‘cuir’ de John Rechy,” my translation).

Curiously enough, the ‘hard cock’ becomes, in the leather scene, a pure and simple figure of rhetoric most of the time. Rare, very rare, are the hard cocks at the Mineshaft: drugs and alcohol have destroyed simply ‘sexual’ energy. But nobody cares: fist replaces cock, piss replaces sperm, showing and looking replace doing” (45).

Unlike Rechy, Hocquenghem does not focus so much on the psychology behind sadomasochism within the gay community, which Rechy explored in *The Sexual Outlaw* and *Rushes*. In fact, it was Rechy’s views on sadomasochism both within his writing and in published interviews that dampened enthusiasm towards him by some members of the gay community. For example, Rechy was interviewed by the editor of *Drummer: America’s Mag for the Macho Male*⁹⁵ in order to

probe further the statements against gay S&M in his most recent book *The Sexual Outlaw*. Mr. Rechy’s statements have caused as much furor in gay circles as in straight, and *DRUMMER* was anxious to illuminate in particular what the novelist and self-styled Revolutionary actually feels regarding S&M (“John Rechy Interview,” 8).

Given that the interview was for a magazine that focused on educating readers about sadomasochism within the gay community (alongside erotica), Rechy’s criticism of certain kinds of sadomasochism in *The Sexual Outlaw* (and later, in his novel *Rushes*) did not go over well. In these texts by Rechy and in interviews such as the one above, he explains that for him, humiliation and certain kinds of physical acts are linked to the psychological trauma of being bullied or abused by one’s parents, peers, or the police, as are the costumes of “oppressors”: police and nazi uniforms, specifically.

Rechy continued to speak out against some sadomasochistic practices, stating in a 1999 interview by Bruce Benderson that “[t]he [S/M] rituals that were occurring, at the Mine Shaft, for example, were no longer sexual; they were punishment for sex” (“A Night in the Park” n.p.). His novel *Rushes* portrayed bars such as the Mine Shaft, and in this 1999 interview Benderson focused on *The Coming of the Night* (2000). Benderson observes that *The Coming of the Night* “describe[es] people who are living in a very marginal way in this book,” and when Rechy replies that “[g]ay men put more emphasis on sexuality than any other contingent We don’t have any other thing; this is what we have,” Benderson then follows up with “But doesn’t that make gays subversive people in terms of the social order?” (n.p.). Returning to the debate described by Dollimore before, Benderson falls very much into the revolutionary camp,” equating “gays” with subversiveness by default of their emphasis on sexuality. Thus, he appears to see Rechy’s work as part of a tradition of writers who embrace their marginality, the subversiveness of promiscuity and explicit sex, from Genet to Burroughs to Rechy, and continued by writers such as Dennis Cooper and Benderson.

⁹⁵ I would like to thank Jack Fritscher for his generosity in providing me with photocopies of articles and interviews that appeared in *Drummer*. Archives of the magazine are located at the Leather Archives and Museum in Chicago, and the German National Library in Frankfurt.

For example, in an interview with Benderson, Alexander Laurence asked how he felt “about what others have written about Times Square and New York City? I’m talking about writers like Hubert Selby, John Rechy, Jack Kerouac and others” (“Bruce Benderson Interview”). Benderson replies that

[t]he people you mentioned wrote about NYC in the way I want to write about it. They wrote about what might be called ‘degenerate’ NYC You had to go to illegal places to have homosexual sex. So those writers had an intimate relationship with other criminal outsiders. I feel that the most interesting thing about drug, gay and other marginal cultures is that they are ‘rejected’ cultures. This means that these people can have amazing insights into American culture at large. I write a lot about male hustlers, prostitution and homosexuality. Despite the gain of acceptance that we won through gay lib, *I would like to re-marginalize the homosexual vision, and link it once again with the vision of the outsider. In a way, these writers from the past are my heroes and my models and I want to return to them* (“Bruce Benderson,” emphasis mine).

While I am not arguing that Rechy himself subscribes to this desire to “re-marginalize the homosexual vision,” his early work can be read in this vein, and as is clear above, has been read that way by many gay readers who either appreciated the emphasis on the working-class and middle-class gay community in big cities, or who shunned the focus on explicit non-monogamous sexuality. Though this is not the only way of situating Rechy’s work (or the work of these other writers), as I have shown throughout this study, it is one strand, and Guy Hocquenghem belongs in this strand as a novelist and theorist, not simply due to shared themes, but also to the intertextual connections that link his work to that of Rechy. Furthermore, this strand illustrates the international reach of Rechy’s work, and the role his books played in depicting in fictional form the ongoing debates within the international gay community about the role of gay fiction (i.e. a positive role model/activist versus the transgressive writer), the ethics of sadomasochism, and whether desire and/or sex can be the energizing force behind a political or social movement. *City of Night* played a vital role in building bridges to not only gay readers in the U.S., but readers of all sexual orientations and nationalities:

each of these books [*City of Night, Giovanni’s Room, Another Country*] was an enormous breakthrough in bringing the topic of homosexuality to a broader public discourse, as well as presenting—through their empathy and artistry—complex images of homosexuality and same-sex desire to a reading public. To judge them as ‘not good for the gays’ is not simply to misunderstand their place in history, but to misread them as literature as well (Bronski 11).

While a handful of Rechy’s books after *City of Night* were less widely read by heterosexuals, they had, and continue to have, relevance for an international readership

that continues to face many of the oppressive forces described in books like *This Day's Death* and *The Sexual Outlaw*.

As I have asserted throughout this chapter, people of different ethnicities, nationalities, genders and sexual orientations read John Rechy's novels. Fortunately, in addition to the literary references I have begun to document here, we have the evidence of the responses of everyday readers to Rechy's work in the form of archived personal papers, letters to newspapers, and letters to Rechy himself, in addition to the more typical book reviews, scholarly articles and books that document the responses of readers.

Thus, there is still a great deal of further research to be done on the role that Rechy's work has played in the work of international writers and theorists. Given that his books were so widely translated, scholars familiar with Japanese, Brazilian, and other world literatures will hopefully be able to document how Rechy's books were received. As is the case with some books by Guy Hocquenghem, many early books about homosexuality were published by small presses, and have still not been widely translated, limiting the ability of scholars to attempt a transnational reception approach, which would by necessity lack in-depth knowledge of the cultural, historical and literary contexts of the many countries in which Rechy's work was read.

CONCLUSION

In the U.S., those who self-identify as fans of Beat literature, romance novels, environmental literature or Manga will go to a certain section of the bookstore, or, as a result of an online search, will find texts that have been “tagged” with these identifiers. Students taking a U.S. Literature course will identify whatever texts are placed in their syllabus as falling under this umbrella, and examine the works in relation to one another, trying to find connecting threads. Thus, how a text is classified influences the reception of an author’s work, because it is compared to other works in that category, or Jauss’ “horizon of expectations,” in the minds of book reviewers, scholars and everyday readers. Rechy’s literary output provides an excellent case study for how the classification of authors and their work affects who reads them and the context in which they are read. His novels have been categorized in different ways, and over time some of his novels have moved to or been included in different categories. I use the word categories instead of canons, because Rechy’s work has not entirely entered any canon, and canons are constantly shifting.

Instead, Rechy’s texts have been too sexually graphic to be seen as literary, too promiscuous and working-class to be accepted by some upper-middle class gay readers, too anti-sadomasochism to be fully embraced by other gay readers, too homosexual and not cultural enough to fully enter the Chicano literary tradition (aside from *The Miraculous Day of Amalia Gómez*), too popular and obvious for scholars (*Marilyn’s Daughter*) and not theoretical enough for Queer studies. In Terry Eagleton’s *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (1983), he writes that “[c]ertain pieces of writing are selected as being more amenable to [literary] discourse than others, and these are what is known as literature or the ‘literary canon,’ ” (175-6). Rechy’s texts unapologetically dialogue with classic Hollywood films and movie stars, romance novels and popular music, and canonical classics by Dante Alighieri, John Milton, Albert Camus, Mark Twain and the Old and New Testament. Rechy demands that he be acknowledged and categorized as a writer, with his work taken seriously but also enjoyed. Lawrence Levine points out how seemingly disparate artistic forms were not always seen in the either/or terms of “popular” and “cultured” in *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (1988):

For most of the nineteenth century a number of forms of artistic expression—Shakespearean dramas, *bel canto* operas, novels by authors like Dickens and Twain, poems by Longfellow and Lowell, certain forms of painting and sculpture—were able to enjoy simultaneously high cultural status and mass popularity. By the twentieth century this was less and less true (233).

Rechy’s work continues within this long tradition, and he was also aware that in countries such as France, authors who were gay and wrote about homosexuality (such as Jean

Genet, Louis-Ferdinand Céline, and Marcel Proust, for example) were not put into literary “ghettos.” Nevertheless, Rechy’s work has appealed to a wide range of readers due to his transcultural textual strategies that constantly invited in new readers by explaining the jargon of different subcultures while also appealing to his ever-expanding intended audience of gay (male), female (heterosexual) and Chicano/a readers.

Furthermore, Rechy’s varied literary output and his membership in multiple literary traditions and literary periods provides an excellent example of the incoherence of literary traditions, and the constructed and limiting nature of the boundaries we often use for practical reasons in our research and teaching on literature, such as national, racial, ethnic, gender and period categories. Gerald Graff writes in *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (1987): “[t]he division of [literary] fields according to the least controversial principles [time period and genre] made the department easy to administer but masked its most interesting conflicts and connections” (8). Unfortunately, this is still fairly common in our scholarship as well. Graff ultimately suggests that we embrace in our teaching and scholarship the conflicts and contradictions that an author like Rechy brings to the surface:

In the final analysis, what academic literary studies have had to work with is not a coherent cultural tradition, but a series of conflicts that have remained unresolved, unacknowledged, and assumed to be outside the proper sphere of literary education. To bring these conflicts inside that sphere will mean thinking of literary education as part of a larger cultural history [...] (15).

Rechy’s work highlights these unresolved conflicts on multiple levels. First, the book reviews and scholarly reception of Rechy’s work illuminates shifts in aesthetic values and attitudes towards (homo)sexuality in multiple literary traditions over time, and the impact that has on the inclusion and canonization of literary texts. Secondly, and as other scholars have already suggested, Rechy’s presence in different literary traditions, by virtue of his national, sexual and ethnic identities, allows scholars to use his work to build bridges between these often-disparate traditions both for pedagogical and theoretical purposes. However, rather than examining his work in order to determine its intrinsic literary value, or treating the texts as emblematic of those categories, this dissertation suggests that one of the most productive ways of approaching Rechy’s work is through his readers and his own readings (in the form of intertextual references). This approach highlights the range of ways of reading and interpreting Rechy’s work, and, ultimately, gives everyday readers and the literature itself (in the form of references in the work of other authors) a voice in determining Rechy’s social and literary significance. It also allows us to examine Rechy within the context of multiple traditions simultaneously rather than separately, because his work and his readers cannot be partitioned into the categories of “LGBTQ,” “Chicano/a,” “American Southwest” or “Post-World War II” without acknowledging those other themes and identities. Rechy, his texts, and many of his readers, are gay *and* Chicano *and* American *and* working-class.

Finally, the intertextual references throughout Rechy’s work provide a multitude of literary traditions, genres and popular culture references through which we can approach his work. This organically connects his work to LGBTQ literature, U.S.

literature, transnational literature, and U.S. and Chicano/a popular culture in the forms of film, comic books, television shows, and public art. While scholars have examined some of these intertexts, there are still many more to analyze. I hope that more in-depth examinations of Rechy's work will appear across the different literary traditions mentioned above, which will give us an evolving understanding of his work, its significance, and his readers. An important caveat to an examination of intertextual references in Rechy's work and references to Rechy's work in other literary texts is that scholars must be careful to note when a literary allusion is a vague possibility that one might "read into" the text versus a clear or deliberate allusion. Through archival research and interviews, one can often add depth and accuracy to these educated guesses.

This study contributes to reader response and reception studies by demonstrating the benefits of using these approaches in an analysis of texts with multiple audiences that span nations, cultures, genders and sexual orientations, in part because it opens texts to multiple interpretations. My dissertation also shows that an analysis of the text's implied readers, and the "horizon of expectations" they might have when approaching a particular work, are useful for examining authors whose literary output varies in theme and style. The results of my analysis of the responses of everyday readers to Rechy's work in fan mail, blogs and *Goodreads* reviews suggest that for widely read texts, this is an effective way to qualitatively measure the social impact of a text, although it is also important to keep in mind that readers who belong to the working class and/or ethnic or racial minorities appear less likely to respond to texts using these formats. The documentation of intertextual references to Rechy's work combined with archival research illustrates the usefulness of this approach for measuring the literary impact of an author's work. The aforementioned methods are particularly well suited for texts that have mixed critical reviews and that have been understudied, and they provide a historically situated and more egalitarian framework for measuring the social and literary value and impact of a text.

I introduced this study with an epigraph with Walt Whitman, and the following fragment from Whitman's "Song of the Open Road" again calls to mind the refusal of Rechy, his texts, and his readers to stay inside the boundaries used to classify them.

From this hour I ordain myself loos'd of limits and imaginary lines,
 Going where I list, my own master total and absolute,
 Listening to others, considering well what they say,
 Pausing, searching, receiving, contemplating,
 Gently, but with undeniable will, divesting myself of the holds that would hold me. (Walt Whitman, "Song of the Open Road," *Leaves of Grass*).

One might also read into this poem the way in which Rechy's work "listens" to other texts—both literary and cultural—and how we as everyday readers and scholars should take a more open approach when reading literature, divesting ourselves and texts of the arbitrary boundaries that hold books from their readers.

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