

John Rechy: Bodies and Souls and the Homoeroticization of the Urban Quest

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It would probably be critical hype to assert that John Rechy's *Bodies and Souls* (1983) is the best Los Angeles novel to date, but it certainly must count as one of the very best. This novel was written at a time when Rechy was moving beyond the exclusively gay characters of his first novels, *City of Night* (1963), *Numbers* (1967), and the quasidocumentary *The Sexual Outlaw* (1977), novels that contained Chicano (usually main) characters. These novels were followed by fictional worlds in which neither the Chicano nor the gay is the specific controlling perspective of the novel (for example, *Marilyn's Daughter* [1988], *The Miraculous Day of Amalia Gómez* [1991], *Our Lady of Babylon* [1996]—the latter being Rechy's weakest novel to date (see Bredbeck, Ortiz, and Jaén for general overviews of Rechy's writing; also Castillo's superb interview). *Bodies and Souls* is a sort of urban *Pilgrim's Progress*. It is the story of three lost children of America (in reality, young adults) who make a car trip from the heartland across the country to the Promised Land of Los Angeles.

Wandering the vast megalopolis, Orin (obsessed with messianic religion), Lisa (lost in a world of romantic Hollywood-style love), and Jesse (seething with images of American outlaws) interact with what Rechy's Gothic dirty realism portrays as the paradigmatic denizens of the California myth: the homeless, violent racist police, oppressed people of color, agents of transcendence through religion and popular culture (especially, of course, the movies), and other tourists, each seeking the fulfillment of a personal vision of the city. Crisscrossing the city in an imposing Lin-

coln convertible that Orin has inherited in ways that are not immediately clear, this trio, whose journey could be followed with a city map in hand, traces a *via crucis* that ends apocalyptically in a shoot out at a freeway overpass in which Orin goes on a sniper's rampage, and Jesse and Lisa are killed by police bullets that also fell Orin. Also left dead by Orin's rampage are many of the characters whose stories, in chapters alternating with the main narrative about Orin, Jesse, and Lisa, form the Los Angeles mosaic that is what *Bodies and Souls* is all about.

One of the particularly important aspects of Rechy's novel is the definitive anchoring of Chicano fiction in a major urban space. Although Rechy's earlier novels were also urban in nature—*City of Night* describes the life of a Chicano who ends up hustling in the streets of New York; *Numbers* involves a gay Chicano who cruises for sex in Los Angeles's immense Griffith Park—none of them are concerned in any interesting way with characterizing the city. It is no longer possible to say that Rechy's fiction is not really Chicano-marked, which was always a reason to exclude him from the canon of Chicano literature of the 1960s and 1970s.¹ This exclusion of Rechy from the Chicano canon echoed a still prevalent homophobic view among Hispanic minorities that homoeroticism represented an Anglo vice and gay Chicanos had been corrupted by, were *vendidos* to, Anglo society.² Yet the fact that Chicano experience is a secure part of the mosaic of Los Angeles that *Bodies and Souls* traces makes it possible to say that here Rechy does effectively make Chicano life a central concern of the novel.

In *Bodies and Souls*, Chicano society is viewed as an integral part of the urban landscape, and Rechy's pilgrims come into contact with it as they intersect with all of the myriad subcultures of the city. It is not that Orin, Lisa, and Jesse necessarily have any sustained interaction with all of these subcultures: interaction and intersection are two different predicates. Rather, as would be the case of any individual moving in the complex world of the late capitalist megalopolis, they can only briefly brush the lives of a few others in their world. Where the great Jamesian psychological novels might weave a rich tapestry of the profound effect of one life on another, moving back and forth between dif-

ferent characters, but always bringing them together in profoundly meaningful relations, Rechy elaborates a narrative in which dissociation, fragmentary relations, and tangential or circumstantial contact are the norm. The chapters of the novel that alternate with the story of the three newcomers are, in one sense, a preparation for the apocalyptic conclusion, but the characters of the former become only Orin's anonymous victims, never integrative participants in his life.

In this way, the alternating chapters provide the backdrop for the trio's movements throughout the city, the substance of the social settings through which they glide, almost unconscious of its complexity. Driven by a series of limiting personal illusions, these three young people only see what matches their inner compulsions: Orin the religious programs transmitted on television; Lisa and Jesse their respective romantic and macho myths as relayed by the movies and as embodied in certain cultural icons of Hollywood and the larger Los Angeles. Each sees only what needs to be seen to feed their obsessions, and basically what they see are displaced fetishes (the icons) and mediated interpretations (television, the movies, advertisements). Only when they connect with the real, lived violence of Los Angeles do they participate in the city, with Orin's sniper rampage and Jesse's and Lisa's decision not to flee from him, thus dying with him in the barrage of police bullets.

It is also in this way that Rechy incorporates homoerotic dimensions in his novel. There is no homoerotic center to *Bodies and Souls*, unless one were to subscribe to the tenuous and ultimately undemonstrable proposition of a "gay sensibility" deriving from or giving representation to Rechy's public gay identity. Equally tenuous, it seems to me, would be to anchor this gayness in the particularly purple prose with which Rechy writes in this novel, particularly in his descriptions of the Los Angeles landscape, as well as the depredations the swelling urban concentrations have brought to that landscape—something like a highly rhetorical rewriting of Mike Davis's *City of Quartz*. The homoerotic center of *The Sexual Outlaw*, built exclusively around the motif of the male-male sex hunt or the crisis of sexual desire that drives the main character of *Numbers* (one of Rechy's sev-

eral forays into alienating sexual compulsions; see also *Rushes* [1979]) is lacking in *Bodies and Souls*, where if there is any center, it is a postmodern decentering for the individual and the cultural meaning that is the city of Los Angeles, where only destructive violence provides a unifying common ground.

Homoerotic desire is, of course, abundantly present in *Bodies and Souls*. It is there in the bodybuilding culture of Mick Vale, the adventures in the gay underworld of Dave Clinton, in the outcast effeminacy of Manuel Gomez, and in Billy the street hustler. And it is there in the commercialization of homosexuality of the anything-goes atmosphere of Los Angeles: the hustling strips, the gay bars, the porn films, and institutions of the gay world such as the slave auction. It is there in the rampant homophobia that accompanies the public visibility of the homoerotic: the messages of hate of the religious right, the discourse of police brutality in the name of law and order, the revulsion encoded in traditional cultures such as Amalia Gomez's Catholicism (which re-emerges as a theme in *The Miraculous Day of Amalia Gomez*), and the tragic repression that, as a coefficient of their fragmented lower-class background, drives the triangulated relationship between Orin, Jesse, and Lisa throughout the novel. Rechy sees this background as no less destructive than the upper-class background of the psychotic daughter of the reactionary Judge Stephens, who is virtually the only representative of the power structure in the novel.

Repressed sexuality and its tragic consequences are central to Orin's character: the pop Freudianism of demonstrating that Orin can ultimately only achieve orgasmic fulfillment in discharging the rifle that is his displaced penis in his murderous rampage that holds Jesse and Lisa in something like the three-way sex they almost have at several points in the novel. Sexual desire and its lack of fulfillment (at least in the conventional belief in a necessary orgasmic discharge) permeates *Bodies and Souls*, and nowhere more than in the relationship between Orin, Jesse, and Lisa, where Lisa is, after the fashion of woman as a shifter in the homosocial, and therefore potentially homosexual, relationship between men Sedgwick describes, a conduit of the sexuality that flows between the two men.

Each of the chapters devoted to the trio, in a trope on the designation of Los Angeles as the City of Angels, is named "Lost Angels"; there are fourteen of them. At the end of the third chapter of their story, Orin stages a sexual encounter between the three of them, one that is sexual in the sense that it is built on desire, but one that involves a frustration of desire because of Orin's despair:

Orin turned off the light, but bright night flowed in through drawn drapes, filling the room with dark whiteness. Orin took off all his clothes. His body was thin, chiseled, translucent in that bright darkness as he stood before them. Lisa and Jesse watched him. His thick cock was aroused, firm.

Lisa moved closer to the middle [of the bed], to make room for him beside her. She felt Jesse, hard. Orin lay in bed next to her. Then in one violent thrashing, he turned away from them, his face buried into his pillow. In a moment, the pillow was wet with smothered tears. (98-99)

One would expect the description of Orin's violent thrashing to signal the onset of sexual contact, a foreshadowing of an orgasmic finale. But, rather, it is his body's rejection of sex, and it is significant that he not only turns away from Lisa (who is more bewildered than sexually aroused: earlier, Orin has scolded her for her infantile relationship with the doll, Pearl, she carries everywhere and seems to communicate with as though speaking to her alter ego). Orin also turns away from Jesse, who is sexually aroused. Whether Orin intended to have sex with Lisa in front of Jesse, have sex with him (since he has left him sexually aroused as well), to share Lisa with Jesse, to have sex with Jesse in turn (position unspecified), or for the three to have sex together (that is, all at the same time beyond the fact that they are having sex by being in bed all together with at least the two men visibly sexually aroused) is left unresolved with Orin's tearful collapse into his pillow.

Although there are suggestions of sexual arousal elsewhere (the novel is quite hypererotically charged) in *Bodies and Souls* both between the two men and directed at and through Lisa, sex is never enacted between the three youths in what would be considered a full narrative, in the sense of leading to orgasm for at

least one of the participants, which is what would suggest the interpretation of Orin's shooting spree at the end of the novel as an act of displaced sex, a sign of Rechy's interpretation of America where sexual expression is constantly oppressed with violence and, thus, begets the violence of American life (see the transformation of homoerotic desire into a sublimation of a homophobic discourse of humiliation, the only scene of desire possible for the gay character Chip in the chapter "Dave Clinton, Slave Auction"). What is of interest here is not the execution or not of a sexual encounter, not ultimately its displacement into the homicidal rampage that closes the novel, but the way in which patterns of sexual desire charge the way in which the three view the panorama of Los Angeles. If romance and its version of sexual desire colors Lisa's every perspective on the city, and if the homosocial circle of rebellious men circumscribes Jesse's take on the icons of the city, Jesse's response to the television evangelist Sister Woman homologizes mystic transport and sexual ecstasy: in each case, the individual's reaction is the only form of transcendency that is available to them in the overheated, overscented, and overly sensualized Los Angeles that Rechy's overly rhetorical prose attempts to mimitize.

What I want to dwell on here is how the heightened sexuality of the novel (through the way it displaces unfulfilled erotic desire into the narrative trigger of the various actions and events that take place during the pilgrim's progress of these Lost Angels) charts an essentially homoerotic, queer, and trenchantly anti-straight interpretation of sexual desire. Even a partial inventory of the forms of sexual coupling in the novel, beyond the frustrated noncoupling of the three tourists, suggests an appalling image of sexual abnormality, not in any moral sense, but in the sense of a destructive dysfunctionism. Indeed, many of the chapters of the novel are devoted to descriptions of sexual relations that are exploitative (the command performance the muscle builder Mick Vale gives for the contest entrepreneur's wife, the TV reporter Mandy Lang-Jones's approach to sex with men, the use of female stars like Amber Haze in porn films) or where encounters are based on deceit or a radical disjunction of personal erotic narratives so that any meaningful sense of the word inti-

macy is absent (the attempts by Dave Clinton and Chip to find a common ground of erotic fantasy, the frigidity of the relationship between Judge Stephens and his wife Alana). While it is true that one might want to believe that sex is sex, that all sex involves forms of exploitation, and that an emotionally grounded sexual intimacy is so much romantic illusion, the point is that Rechy's novel does, in fact, subscribe to romantic notions of beneficent sexual relations, and the way in which all of those who pass through Los Angeles are lost angels is a consequence of the violence of dysfunctional sexual coupling, which in turn begets murderous social violence.

When two individuals begin to discover a relationship of love between them, it must end, since a mutually satisfactory and emotionally grounded sexual relationship is what is truly perverse in the Los Angeles Rechy's novel figures. The most interesting relationship as such is between Stud and Billy, two Santa Monica Boulevard street hustlers. Significantly, their lack of education and the primitive level of communication between them contrasts with Rechy's highly articulate prose, as though, if the latter is in the service of the description of a nightmarish sexual landscape, a glimmer of constructive sexual communication can only express itself in elementary English. Likewise, the sexual ideology of Los Angeles, as expressed in its complex array of cultural production—centered on the disingenuousness of Hollywood movies—has no room for the sort of relationship that comes to exist between Billy and Stud. The degree to which the latter can find no support, no legitimation, in the sexual narratives surrounding it, including surely the hustling scene the lovers are part of, such that it is a glaring anomaly, is what dooms it to extinction. Stud disappears, leaving Billy the following message:

Deeres Billy:

Life is strang in't it?!!! You think you no everythin ther is to no an you fine out you dont no anythin atall—life is shor strang!!! I cain love a guy an stil be my self Stud—you heer bout goin away to cleer yor hed—well—thats wat I am doin—to much hapent to soon an Gary dyin like that to—Billy I got-a cleer my hed then maybe life wont be so damn strang—I hop you unerstan???? You ar a boy

like me an thats the dam problum!!!! Who nos what tomoro wil
bring???? Heers wishing you the besta helth—
You truly—
STUD (325)

The “dam problem” to which Stud refers is not the male-male love that they have had: both are street hustlers, and they survive precariously by having sex with other men. Rather, the problem is that they have had sex with each other under circumstances that do not involve prostitution and exploitation. When sex occurs outside the context of exploitation, it is something “strang” and must be shunned for its abnormality.

The situation of Manuel (Manny) Gomez is considerably different, although equally disastrous. Already constructed within the enhanced and explicit violence of the Chicano ghetto (as opposed to the hidden and denied violence of Judge Stephens’s household), Manny is obsessed with getting a Christ figure tattooed on his chest, but one with “cock and balls.” This heightened anthropomorphization of the Christ image, the making of him more in the individual’s own image, making of him more of an overdetermined masculine symbol (an overdetermination that extends to his ethnic identity, since he will be as “brown” as Manny’s own chest), underscores the obverse, the degree to which Manny feels himself to be (or is shown by the narrative to be) a sacrificial figure of, in a first instance, Chicano society, and in a larger projection, as one type of the lost angels of the city; he will also become one of Orin’s victims in the final slaughter. Indeed, Rechy names this chapter “Manny Gomez: ‘The Frontal Christ,’ ” a denomination that is meant to underscore the overdetermination of Christ’s masculinity by the full frontal view Manny wishes to achieve.

Manny becomes involved with a group of hippies, dominated by Scarlett Fever and Revolver, who are also rock stars. He has sex with Scarlett Fever, but he also identifies emotionally with Revolver, who, according to Scarlett Fever, makes it with men: “Just once a week. Tuesdays or Thursdays. I forget which” (76). Although Manny has sex with Scarlett Fever and hangs out with both her and Revolver, his involvement is not primarily sexual in a directly genital fashion. Rather, it is the scene of sexual humili-

ation which, much like the one Chip pleads for from Dave Clinton, constitutes a form of erotic apotheosis. As though humiliation were the only form of sexual release, Manny, accompanying Scarlett Fever and Revolver as they perform their song "Filthy Bodies" (a song that tropes antisex messages), exposes himself as a Christ figure, and exposes the Christ figure he now has tattooed on his chest, the Christ figure he has invested with the signs of his own masculinity, as though their sacrifice were one and the same:

Manny took off his shirt. The naked Christ was on his chest. It had pubic hair over full genitals. The thorned head was tilted between Manny's pectorals. The feet were nailed at his navel. The pinioned hands touched each of Manny's nipples. The figure was drawn with black ink, the careful lines coated with colodion—to keep it intact. The varnished sheen gleamed like nail polish. The body radiated in the one funnel of light enclosed by darkness. . . .

Manny froze before the surging mob. Even the girls rushed into the squashed throng. Pushing, the guards unleashed more chaos.

Many felt the spittle. They were spitting on his chest, on his chest and on the naked, really naked Christ. He felt the spittle running down his flesh, and at last he felt relief from the years'-long [*sic*] burning on his hand. It had to be here in a sea of indifferent anger. The more they spat, the more the spittle ran down his shining flesh, the more relief he felt. He raised his arms out, and he leaned his head, sideways. (81-82)

Just as Manny maneuvers himself to receive the humiliation of the crowd, which he feels as a manifestation of his generalized humiliation as a Chicano man, he also enacts a paradigmatic gay sex fantasy, that of his body as a receptacle for the sexual discharge of the Other; such a fantasy may, especially if it is one versus a group, involve connotations of humiliation, although not necessarily and uncomplicatedly. Of course, spitting on someone is rather universally construed as a gesture of humiliation and reprobation, and Christ being spat upon by the multitudes is a standard Biblical motif that signifies His assumption of the humiliation of man, as well as His assumption of the degrading sins of man, precisely those evoked, even if sarcastically, by the lyrics of "Filthy Bodies." Pathetically, it would seem that Manny does not allow his body to be covered by the filth of other's spittle

as a form of redemption, either personal or as an image of the redemption through Christ's suffering. There is the terrible sense that he has nowhere to go beyond his humiliation by the surging crowd and that the sense of his relations with Scarlett Fever and Revolver has been to find a way of plunging himself irretrievably into a final abyss of degradation. As such, there is a continuity in the trajectory from his subject formation in the ghetto, his problems with his family and with the police, his entrance into the underworld of the hippies, who inhabit an abandoned house, and his acquisition of the tattoo, finally to be killed by Orin's bullets. Whatever grimy interpersonal sexuality he experiences along the way is submerged in, first, the displaced orgasmic gesture of his Christ-like exposure to the vituperation of the crowd and, second, his murder as part of Orin's own displaced orgasmic rage in his killing spree.

Bodies and Souls, therefore, provides a grim image of the possibilities of salvation, in the sense of human lives invested with some measure of dignity—this despite the overpoweringly lush exuberance of Rechy's prose, which in its evocation of the sights, smells, and sounds of Los Angeles that sit precariously somewhere between a very fleshly Garden of Eden and a compost heap of decaying Nature. Rechy's purple prose is not just an exercise in overwriting. Rather, it is an objective correlative of the intense sensuality that the city offers as the promise of a new life to the millions that have flooded in over the course of this century, which is Rechy's view of Los Angeles as a nightmare of American corruption and injustice—a veritable master narrative of the literature and cultural production, notably the movies, about the city—in which perfumed fragrances are really putrid stench. This is yet one more interplay, one might say, on the inversion of the trope of the normal or natural: just as sexual love can never be ennobling for lost angels and must always be violently dysfunctional, Nature in Los Angeles can never be innocent and will always only thinly veil the putrid.

Although *Bodies and Souls* ranges over a vast canvas of Los Angeles and posits a host of human types, there is an unquestionable emphasis on the role of sexuality in the human projects that take place within its borders. To a great extent, Southern

California has always offered a promise of liberated sexuality, whether in the general propaganda of the city or in specific themes of Hollywood films, while at the same time, long before the tele-evangelists with whom Orin is obsessed, providing morality tales of sex gone awry. But Rechy can have nothing to do with the disingenuous formulas of Hollywood movies, in which sexual license is shown lovingly in vivid, electrifying detail before the machinations of morality take place in the last reel. By focusing on dysfunctional sexuality as a unifying motif of his novel, Rechy characterizes the tragic dimensions of the narratives of heterosexist sexuality on which American society is grounded and which enjoy an especially privileged visibility in the Los Angeles his characters inhabit. Sexual desire and sexual relations are inevitably grounded, in Rechy's view of the world as heteronormativity has constructed and construed it, on abuse, exploitation, degradation, humiliation, and the corruption of any shred of ennobling sentiment. When homoerotic sex appears, it is in forms that only highlight how sex in Los Angeles can only be a codicil to the main heteronormative and therefore homophobic document of exploitation, which carries everything along with it. Therefore, when homoerotic desire occurs in a context outside the cynical domains of exploitation—and the novel provides a very thorough inventory of these domains—it has no context of legitimation, and therefore must be viewed as strange and abnormal, something to be fled from in consternation.

Any reader looking for the soothing balm of a fully legitimated homoerotic desire, as described in the poetry of Francisco Alarcón, will find no comfort in Rechy's *Bodies and Souls*. If it is a gay novel, it is almost exclusively so in its negative depiction of the forms of compulsory heterosexuality that destroy its ship-of-fools cast of characters. While there is at a central point in the story the glorious act of erotic coupling between Billy and Stud (ironically, bathed in the flickering light of a TV set), it must be given up because it is so frighteningly different from what goes on around it, either in the sense of the two boys' personal stories or in the sense of how it is embedded in Rechy's novel. Moreover, such a view is, after all, very much of a whole with Rechy's fiction. With the exception of the eloquent defense of erotic ex-

cess in the docunarrative *The Sexual Outlaw*, Rechy's fiction pretty much makes Manny an icon for the Chicano gay man (as in *The City of Night*, *This Day's Death* [1969], or *Numbers*), as much as it makes his humiliation an icon for the minuscule space allotted to the expression of homoerotic desire in American culture (the same novels, especially *Numbers*, and *Rushes*).

One could make the mistake of attributing internalized homophobia to Rechy's depiction of male-male sex. But to wonder in this fashion about how it is that his gay characters, whether Chicano or Anglo, end up experiencing intense humiliation in their quest for erotic fulfillment, rarely if ever being able to find any sense of self-worth, would be to blame the messenger for the message. Rechy provides a painstakingly accurate depiction of the sexual landscape of America, a counterimage to the jejune optimistic, pre-AIDS report of Edmund White's 1983 *States of Desire: Travels in Gay America*. Rechy's American cityscapes have nothing of the gay liberationist ideology of White's writing and all of the grim apocalypse of the finale of *Bodies and Souls*. It is for this reason that this novel must seek a larger canvas than Rechy's earlier fiction: it is not so much a question of submerging the identities of his Chicano characters such as Manny Gomez or even himself as a Chicano, but rather of providing an adequately detailed representation of the contexts in which sexuality in America takes place. If this means concluding with the image that, for once and all, humiliation and violent death are the order of the day in heteronormative America, that souls will never transcend their bodies because the violent mechanisms of destruction have too great a hold on the latter and, through them, on the former, then that is precisely where the power of *Bodies and Souls* as an interpretation of American life lies.

Notes

1. Bruce-Novoa's "Homosexuality in the Chicano Novel" and "In Search of the Honest Outlaw" and Tatum's "The Sexual Underworlds" were the first attempts to provide a serious appraisal of Rechy as a gay Chicano novelist; the abiding precariousness of Rechy as a gay Mexican-Ameri-

can novelist is reflected in the barely cursory treatment he receives in the volume of *Handbook of Hispanic Cultures in the United States* devoted to literature and art; Christian, by contrast, argues against the sort of cultural essentialism that denies Rechy proper recognition, because he is gay, as a Chicano novelist.

2. See in this regard my comments on Mexican/Chicano homophobia in the novels of Michael Nava, "Sleuthing Homophobia"; also Almaguer.

3. Indeed, Manuel Gomez's mother, Yolanda, renamed Amalia and recast in her identity—Yolanda is young and sexually active with ever-changing male companions, while Amalia is an older woman, lost in a religious otherworldliness—becomes the protagonist of Rechy's truly exclusively Chicano novel, the 1991 *The Miraculous Day of Amalia Gomez*, the first urban Chicano novel to focus on an older female.

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