Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona

DEPARTAMENT DE FILOLOGIA ANGLESA I DE GERMANÍSTICA

Finding Utopia in Queer Failure:

Representations of Identity and Gay Relationships

in John Rechy's *City of Night*

Treball de Fi de Grau / BA dissertation

Author: Cristian Benítez Morcuende

Supervisor: Nicholas Livingston Spengler

Departament de Filologia Anglesa i de Germanística

Grau d'Estudis d'Anglès i Espanyol

June 2023

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to express my gratitude to my TFG supervisor, Nick Spengler, for guiding and helping me throughout this entire process. This project would not have been the same without his advice and unfailing support. I would also like to thank my friends and family, who have always encouraged and trusted me. Finally, special thanks to Sergi and Ari for believing in me even in those moments when I was not able to believe in myself. Thank you for inspiring me and helping me grow.

Abstract

John Rechy's *City of Night* is deemed one of the most transgressive pre-Stonewall literary works due to its portrayal of the queer underworld, which is inhabited by hustlers and drag queens, among others. Critics have primarily analyzed the novel in relation to the challenges of being queer in a heteronormative and capitalist society, which has led to quite negative perceptions of the novel and its ending. However, hardly any studies have addressed the hopeful dimension that could lie behind an apparently pessimistic novel.

In this dissertation, I aim to offer a new reading of the novel in which failure, which has been historically deemed as a negative trait in our heteronormative society, can be understood as the place where queer utopian futurity can be born. In order to do so, I will draw upon the theories of queer critics like Halberstam, Butler and Muñoz. In my analysis, I will mainly focus on the way in which the novel portrays queer identity in relation to elements such as guilt, success and performance. In addition, I will examine the central characteristics of queer relationships to discuss whether love is as impossible in the queer world as it may seem in a first reading of the novel.

Keywords: *City of Night*, John Rechy, queerness, failure, performativity, utopia

0. Introduction

As queerness became more visible and less taboo in the United States during the second half of the 20th century, the gay world started to appear as a central topic in some works of literary fiction. The Stonewall Riots of 1969 were a major turning point in the queer liberation movement, though literature explicitly representing gay characters was being written and published even before this landmark event. Despite the emergence of such narratives in the pre-Stonewall period, their depiction of both gay experience and identity has struck many readers as negative. Queer characters in this period were often portrayed as doomed individuals whose life was bound to tragedy, thus having no possibility of a happy ending. Since queerness became synonymous with failure, gay people were seen as outcasts whose only purpose in life was to suffer from their inability to adapt to heteronormativity. However, this sense of "failure" can also be regarded as a positive trait in queer individuals, as it allows them not only to free themselves from an oppressive reality but also to imagine and create alternative and utopian ways of being in the world.

John Rechy's *City of Night* (1963) is deemed one of the most groundbreaking pre-Stonewall novels in 20th-century American literature. By portraying the lives of gay hustlers and queens, Rechy gives voice to some of the most neglected individuals inside the queer community. In this dissertation, I will focus on how queer identities and relationships are shaped in the novel to determine whether failure is presented solely in negative terms, or if it could also be seen as positive. Building on Halberstam's concept of "the queer art of failure," I will question the extent to which Rechy's characters conform to heteronormative standards of success, as well as the extent to which they embrace failure as a rejection of such standards. The present dissertation suggests that failure in the novel could be read as a way to rebel against heteronormativity and as the grounds for queer utopian futurity, as understood by Muñoz. Nonetheless, the desire for success is so rooted

in some of the characters that it makes them unable to enjoy the liberation that nightlife promises. Therefore, freedom and happiness may become unattainable for them.

In the first section of this dissertation, I will analyze the effects that failure has on the shaping of queer identity. I will mainly focus on aspects such as guilt and alienation, which have historically defined queer characters. I will also examine the ways in which the queer world in *City of Night* tries to emulate or parody heteronormativity. In this sense, Butler's concept of "gender performativity" will prove very useful. The second section is dedicated to the analysis of queer relationships. By concentrating on issues such as power, sex and love, I will try to determine whether the novel offers a hopeful vision of intimate connections in the gay world. I will attach great importance to the narrator's ambiguous perspective on love and relationships to find out whether he is suggesting that alternative ways of understanding love can exist in the queer community or is just scared of rejection.

City of Night and its exploration of queerness were quite revolutionary for its time. Heise and Pérez point out it was one of the first literary texts to explicitly deal with queer sexual encounters and to depict the lives of sexual outlaws, including hustlers and drag queens. Since they often engage in taboo practices, Pérez considers that the introduction of such characters enables Rechy to oppose gay male stereotypes and heterosexual norms. By contrast, critics such as DeGuzmán and Heise read the protagonist as a figure whose denial of his sexuality, inability to integrate in the queer scene and aversion toward love and intimacy represent his conformity with heteronormative pressures. Besides, DeGuzmán states that desire may be considered a reflection of dominant cultural values. Just as heterosexual individuals, queer characters in the novel want to be powerful, succeed and find "the one." *City of Night* could thus exemplify Kirsch's idea that queer people tend to accept heteronormative conventions to fit in and get a higher status. Such acceptance may reflect, in fact, their attempt to escape a sense of failure they seem to be doomed to.

In this regard, Halberstam contends that the negative connotation that has been historically attributed to the concept of "failure" goes hand in hand with capitalism and heteronormativity. Following the rules of market economy, losers leave no record, whereas winners are praised for their success, which society equates to wealth accumulation, family and sexual reproduction. Our value in a capitalist society, as Kirsch also maintains, is hence defined by our achievements, which are the result of what we produce. According to Muñoz, utopia is the only solution to this heteronormative present, in which queerness lacks any functionality because it does not involve sexual reproduction. By pushing minorities forward and offering a sense of hope, utopian idealities and daydreams make it possible for gay subjects to imagine other ways of living that go against the *here* and *now* of straight time. Despite the negativity that defines it, Halberstam and Muñoz agree that failure could be a utopian practice because it allows queer subjects to escape from capitalist alienation. This appreciation of failure is also present in style aesthetics like Camp, which Sontag claims is defined by its love of the exaggerated, unnatural and artificial.

Another powerful mode of self-expression and resistance against heteronormativity is performance, which Muñoz deems inherent to queerness. This idea is closely related to Butler's interpretation of "gender performativity." By considering gender a cultural construction based on the masculine/feminine binary, Butler claims individuals perform a series of socially constructed meanings associated with the notions of masculinity and femininity in order to approximate an unrealistic and unattainable concept of gender. The performative structure of gender is revealed through practices like drag, which mock the notion of a true gender identity. In this sense, gestures and mannerisms, which carry traces and remains of queer history, prove crucial. By denaturalizing the way in which they act and move, queer individuals could denaturalize the world they live in. Failing to conform would hence allow them to reimagine and transform their reality.

To my knowledge, no previous study has approached Rechy's *City of Night* in relation to Halberstam's concept of "queer failure," Butler's understanding of "gender performativity" and Muñoz's notion of "queer utopia." Nonetheless, I will show how the application of these theories can offer a deeper analysis of the novel. Therefore, this dissertation aims to present an alternative reading of Rechy's *City of Night* that draws on the aforementioned ideas and sheds light on some of its most significant issues. By doing so, we can gain a better understanding of how queerness has been explored and represented in pre-Stonewall American literature.

1. Queerness as a Failed Identity

1.1. Shaping Queer Identity: Otherness, Alienation and Loneliness

Western society has historically defined queer identity in opposition to heterosexuality. Being unable to integrate into heteronormativity, gay subjects have been relegated to a position of otherness. As a result, the queer community is presented in novels such as *City of Night* as "the Other Side—*their* side" (Rechy 228). By contrast, heterosexuality represents one of those "certain ways of seeing the world" that, according to Halberstam, "are established as normal or natural" despite being "socially engineered" (9). Given that there seems to be no meeting point between these two worlds, queerness is seen as a deviation from heteronormative society and is thus "equated with decadence, cultural decline, and degeneration" (Heise 34). Queer individuals seem to serve no purpose in economic and social progress because they are unable "to embody the connections between production and reproduction" (Halberstam 95). Consequently, their identity is shaped by this feeling of failure. We should hence consider the influence that this lack of success has on Rechy's characters in terms of both the negative effects of failure and its radical potential.

Rejection is one of the aspects that shape queer identity in the novel. Miss Destiny,

for instance, mentions that her parents "were always so ashamed of me when I wanted to dress up—and my father threw me out" (Rechy 131). This repudiation of the queer world seems even inherent in straight characters like Sylvia. Despite owning a hustling bar and having a good relationship with the homosexuals that frequent it, she is "torn between a compulsion to understand, to accept—and an innate tendency to reject" (Rechy 368). Isolating queer sexuality to specific places could reflect such natural inclination, as it causes difference to be geographically distanced from heterosexuality (Heise 30). These spaces, which are usually described as small and dark areas, become a "cavern of trapped exiles" and a shelter for "young lean faces already proclaiming Doom" (Rechy 125–126). Nonetheless, this negative description contrasts with the colorful and often lighthearted characters that inhabit such places. Some of them, especially queens like Miss Destiny, refuse to conform and fight to be acknowledged by "the despising, arrogant, apathetic world that produced them and exiled them" (Rechy 344).

Social rejection, however, can also cause a sense of alienation and loneliness in gay individuals. The narrator of *City of Night* embodies such characteristics, as he fits neither into heteronormative society nor into the queer world. Feeling an outcast, he would often flee "to the Mirror" and he "would stand before it, thinking: I have only Me!" (Rechy 26). His individualistic tendencies could be a reaction to the repressive straight world because, by alienating himself from it, the narrator could have the opportunity to find alternative ways of living. However, he is unable to share his experiences and emotions with other people due to his alienation. Consequently, he feels "an overwhelming sadness as intense as if I were the only person in the world who had ever felt it" (Rechy 149). Nevertheless, his conversation with Jeremy proves the narrator is not the only one feeling that way. In addition, loneliness could be easily attributed to the lack of love and intimate connections in the queer world. However, by the end of the novel, the narrator realizes his alienation

may have something to do with "the inherited unfairness—that nobody's responsible but we're all guilty" (Rechy 433). He may be hinting not only at his queerness but also at his human condition. In the latter case, the narrator's reflections could establish a relationship between gay individuals and humanity, thus denying the idea that queer identity is unnatural. As Halberstam suggests, these "legacies of failure and loneliness" could also be "the consequences of homophobia and racism and xenophobia" (98–99). Nonetheless, most queer characters in *City of Night* blame themselves for their state of loneliness.

Guilt is, therefore, another of the aspects that shape queer identity in the novel. This sensation is often associated with the mere fact of being gay, which characters believe is a negative trait. The guilt that the unnamed man from California felt after his first homosexual affair impelled him "to take a shower right away, to get clean again" and to "return to my wife" (Rechy 276). Similarly, Jeremy "prayed to be changed" and "felt guilty, as if I had committed a crime," after realizing he was queer. However, he immediately passes the blame on to the heteronormative society he was raised in by concluding that "the only crime had been in making me feel guilty" (Rechy 437). As for the narrator, it can be stated that, despite attempting to deny his queerness, he is anchored to the queer world and feels guilty for trying to adapt to heteronormative, capitalist society. Nevertheless, it is not until the Mardi Gras celebrations that he realizes he carries not only a "huge guilty knowledge of things done—*because we had to do them"* but also "of things undone—*because we couldnt do them"* (Rechy 448). His reflections on guilt show that it is not queerness that makes gay individuals feel miserable but rather the repression they bear for being queer.

The negative aspects associated with failure cause some characters in the novel to despise both homosexuality and those queer individuals who refuse to emulate heteronormative behaviors. On the one hand, queens like Miss Destiny fear their lovers "might turn queer" in prison (Rechy 121), which may indicate they are transgender women who desire

to be in a straight relationship. Nonetheless, it could also be a consequence of their heteronormative upbringing. On the other hand, scores such as Neil openly express their disgust for feminine homosexuals. The unnamed man from California also claims that "the effeminate ones […] frighten me" since "they seem sometimes to know so much" (Rechy 278). His words not only show how rooted he is in heteronormative ideals but also prove effeminate homosexuals may embody something he is trying to avoid in himself, be it his femininity or simply his queerness.

The rejection of queerness that failure seems to cause makes most characters have an unstable relationship with themselves. Miss Destiny, for instance, voices her desire "to fly out of my skin! jump out! be someone else! so I can leave Miss Destiny far, far behind" (Rechy 143). The rejection of her drag persona, which may also represent her transgender identity, could be an attempt for Miss Destiny to integrate into the heteronormative world. Leaving it behind, she could find the success that queer subjects are deprived of and avoid facing the negative effects of failure. Similarly, the narrator fears "the Mirror, which will stare at me lividly—and I'll look for Someone; but I wont see whom I want to see" (Rechy 384). This passage reveals how much he wants to get rid of his true identity, which could be related to the queerness the narrator constantly denies. The fragment could also be read as an attempt for him to understand his innermost feelings, as well as the reasons why he feels alienated from his own self. In both cases, queer characters prove their need to transform themselves in order to stop being a failure.

1.2. From Youth to Success: Queers Living on Today

Being successful seems to be essential for individuals to survive in a society in which "we are taught to believe that we are what we achieve" (Kirsch 26). Since it is impossible for characters in *City of Night* to achieve success through "reproductive maturity and wealth

accumulation" (Halberstam 2), they are doomed to failure, which is associated with "non-conformity, anti-capitalist practices, nonreproductive life styles, negativity, and critique" (Halberstam 89). Queerness thus becomes, as stated previously, unproductive and unable to help society progress. However, we must bear in mind that the capitalist society "insists that success depends only upon working hard and failure is always of your own doing" when, in fact, it "produces some people's success through other people's failures" (Halberstam 3). Therefore, it is possible for heterosexual individuals to succeed only because there is someone else—someone queer—who fails.

Despite their inability to achieve success, Rechy's queer characters will seek social and economic recognition in cities like New York. The narrator will at first imagine it as "a symbol of my liberated self" (Rechy 30), but the American city soon becomes "a wailing concrete island" which "the shrouded sky makes […] a Cage" (Rechy 32). The contrast between both descriptions seems to suggest that, despite the expectations the narrator may have, there is no possibility of success for him. Miss Destiny also believed that someone would "Discover me!—make me a Big Star! and I would go to the dazzling premieres and […] stand in the spotlights" (Rechy 143). Nonetheless, her dreams were shattered the moment her queerness was discovered. Similarly, Skipper felt he "was really Someone!" when a movie director "took me around—showed me off," as if "*he, too, were meant for all this luxury"* (Rechy 197–198). The reality was, though, that the director was just taking advantage of Skipper, who was, in fact, never meant for success.

Being aware of their failure, some characters pretend to be successful to be envied and admired. The narrator embodies this behavior when describing how Pete "would exaggerate his scores, I would exaggerate mine" (Rechy 67). Queens like Pauline also attach great importance to appearing to be successful. Consequently, she boasts about moving "into this *grand* apartment, out in *Hollywood,*" as well as having "the *wealthiest* women

in Beverly Hills" as customers. Nevertheless, she soon reveals she is disguising the truth because, "as matter of *fact*, I havent *really* occupied it, *yet"* (Rechy 208). In some cases, queer individuals speak proudly of their achievements to appear morally or intellectually superior. The Professor states that he is "one of that fading breed that belongs to the school of thinking" (Rechy 79) and claims he is "Respected, Admited, listened to, read!" before accusing the narrator of not being able to see what lies behind "the ridiculous man who made you stand by the bed with your pants down" (Rechy 99). Miss Destiny will act in a similar way when she finds herself surrounded by "all this: tuh-rash!" and points out that she "Went!! To College!!! And Read Shakespeare!!!!" (Rechy 141). This false sense of success seems to make such characters feel better not only with the world that represses them but also with themselves, if only for a brief period of time.

Their quest for success is so intense that the queer world becomes "a battlefield, in which theres always a winner and a loser" (Rechy 435). The story of Lance O'Hara seems to be the perfect example of this battle for success. Everyone in the queer world of Hollywood knows Lance "had been a part of the world of glittering moviedreams" and, despite not having "Made It Big," he "had been a Star" (Rechy 224). Nevertheless, his fame, which was the result of his sexual affairs with "all those big Movie Stars" (Rechy 240), soon came to an end. It only remained "the echoes of a legend," thus making those "who had envied and Desired" be "obviously pleased" (Rechy 234). Such characters' happiness is a consequence of the failure and defeat of someone who had been more successful than them. After Lance's fame crumbles, they can feel less of a failure. A similar feeling seems to seize Miss Destiny and her friends when they refer to Pauline as a "cheap whore" or a "common streetwalker" (Rechy 129). Their mean words have the main purpose of putting Pauline down so that they feel superior to her.

The aspect that seems to truly indicate success in the queer world is youth. It may

be due to its connection with physical beauty and the possibility of being sexually desired. Trying to make the most of the fleeting gratifications that it offers, gay characters in the novel experience youth as a "frantic running" (Rechy 158) whose end is "a kind of death" (Rechy 287) for them. By reducing their sexual appeal, growing old deprives queer individuals of the only way in which, according to heteronormativity, they can feel successful. Therefore, aging becomes synonymous with failing. Skipper, to whom life gave "nothing but physical beauty, an ephemeral beauty relying on Youth," will dwell on his apparently successful past to avoid feeling such way by keeping in "his wallet a set of photographs […] showing him—almost nude, much younger—a glowing youngman of about 20" (Rechy 191). However, rather than compensating for his loss of youth, such pictures turn Skipper into a caricature of his younger self. This queer obsession with youth could thus suggest that there is some kind of disconnection between gay individuals and their future.

The relationship that heteronormativity has established between futurity and reproduction seems to make queer characters fear the idea of *tomorrow*. Due to the uncertainty surrounding the possibility of existing as an un(re)productive—and thus flawed—subject in a world that aims for progress, "Tomorrow, like Death," becomes "inevitable but not thought of" (Rechy 182). The narrator's interactions with Chuck, who is the only hustler that could be undoubtedly labeled as heterosexual, make the contrast between queer and straight future clear. The narrator does not seem to understand Chuck's acceptance of his future, while he struggles to explain his fear of growing old "to Chuck—always smiling, always drifting happily, effortlessly" (Rechy 158). This scene indicates how straight characters do not have to worry about tomorrow because, unlike gay subjects, "the heteronormative political imagination propels itself forward in time and space through the indisputably positive image of the child" (Halberstam 106). Chuck's situation could thus prove that heterosexual people do not need to have children to believe in and contribute to this

"heteronormative political imagination." By contrast, trying to avoid an uncertain future, queer characters like the narrator stress the urge to live in "the realness of Today, of This Moment—Now!" (Rechy 181). However, they seem unable to happily live in the present of straight time without sacrificing their "liveness […] for what Lauren Berlant has called the 'dead citizenship' of heterosexuality" (Muñoz 49). In other words, gay subjects cannot embrace the vitality of queerness in a society to which they feel they cannot contribute.

1.3. The Art of Performance: Masquerade, Parody and Realness

Queer identity could also be defined in terms of performance. Gay characters in *City of Night* seem to emulate heterosexual conventions based on the masculine/feminine binary. Such classification is typical of Western cultures, which "dichotomize categories of gender and sexuality into either/or patterns" (Kirsch 49). Consequently, Rechy presents individuals like "Chuck the masculine cowboy and Miss Destiny the femme queen" (120). Nonetheless, Butler rejects the idea that these "so-called heterosexual conventions" can "be explained as chimerical representations of originally heterosexual identities." On the contrary, she believes they are the "inevitable site of the denaturalization and mobilization of gender categories" (41). Queerness as a performative act could hence attest that gender is a construction and prove heteronormativity is not natural. Muñoz also sees performativity as positive. Given "its ability to generate a modality of knowing and recognition among audiences and groups that facilitates modes of belonging" (99), performance could create utopian queer futurities. Therefore, it becomes necessary to determine whether the novel supports Butler's and Muñoz's interpretations.

The mere fact of hustling seems to be performative. After reaching New York, the narrator discovers not only that "there are a variety of roles to play if you're hustling" but also that hustlers learn and repeat "the stance, the jivetalk—a mixture of jazz, joint, junk

sounds—the almost-disdainful, disinterested, but, at the same time, inviting look" (Rechy 44) that characterizes them. Their act of performance aims at satisfying the scores' needs and fantasies. For example, they must "play it almost illiterate" (Rechy 44) to seem "unconcerned, toughened" (Rechy 423). However, despite being "not supposed to care," hustlers prove to be "as terrified by the isolation" (Rechy 436–437) as the scores are. Another of their aspirations is to keep intact their masculinity and heterosexuality, which "are inseparable and mutually constitutive" (Heise 28) in the novel. As prostitution makes them the object of desire, hustlers can reassure their masculinity and deny their homosexuality, whose negative connotations may undermine their manliness (Bergman; Hoffman). Pete, for instance, claims how much "it bugged" him other men "thinking I was queer or something" (Rechy 53). In this regard, the novel also portrays "the necessity of the hustler to assert his masculinity with a girl" (Rechy 361) to avoid being labeled as homosexual.

Masculinity is also essential in shaping the score's identity. As seen in *City of Night*, most of them try to hide those gestures and behaviors that could be considered feminine and, as stated before, reject queer individuals who express and celebrate their effeminacy. According to Butler, the exaggeration of masculinity in the gay man could be used "as a 'defense,' unknowingly, because he cannot acknowledge his own homosexuality" (66). In Neil's case, looking feminine is such a concern that he constantly mentions how, contrary to him, "Carl's not quite as butch as hes pretending to be" (Rechy 309). Despite trying to look naturally masculine, alcohol "releases the feminine self" and scores usually "become effeminate in groups, their gestures progressively more airy" (Rechy 185), hence proving their masculinity is posed. Although Rechy seems to be suggesting that femininity is the "essential" identity of queer men, we must bear in mind that the way they speak and act is extremely artificial, so this "feminine self" may also be performed.

Additionally, *City of Night* proves how hustlers and scores fail to adapt to an ideal

concept of masculinity that "by its very nature is just out of reach" (Halberstam 100). As a result, they become parodies of the hypermasculine image they seek to embody. Straight hustlers like Chuck, by contrast, do not speak with "the bragging of the male exhibiting his masculinity" (Rechy 168) because they do not feel the pressure to fit into heteronormative standards. Since performed masculinity makes the narrator feel disconnected from his identity, the need to free himself from his mask will seize him by the end of the novel, as he admits that "like everyone else, Im Scared, cold, cold terrified." The narrator will thus step out of character and discover scores "had sought momentary refuge" from their panic "in the flaunted, posed lack of it in me" (Rechy 414). Consequently, performativity reveals itself as a way for hustlers and scores to briefly escape from reality and find solutions to their problems. Besides that, their posed masculinity may evidence that "heterosexuality offers normative sexual positions that are intrinsically impossible to embody" and thus becomes "an inevitable comedy" (Butler 155).

Contrary to scores and hustlers, queens seek to embody femininity. They dress "as much like women as The Law allows" (Rechy 116) and often rely on drag to stress their feminine traits. Pauline, for instance, mimics the physical appearance of celebrities "like Sophia Loren, her lips round and pouting" (Rechy 207). In addition, she acts dramatically when "she rushed into the ladies' room, dabbing at nonexistent tears." By playing "the hurt, wronged woman" (Rechy 210), Pauline may be not only dressing as a female movie star but also imitating her actions. Therefore, performance allows queens to temporarily become someone they may never be due to heteronormative restrictions. Realness could hence be deemed a sign of success for them. The moment when Miss Destiny felt proud after she bought herself "a flaming-red dress and higheeled sequined shoes and everyone thought I was Real" (Rechy 132) may prove it. The possibility that queens, who the narrator states are "technically men but no one thinks of them that way" (Rechy 120–121),

may embody femininity makes heteronormative perceptions of gender identity crumble. Therefore, Rechy's characters try to reveal the queens' masculine side to avoid facing the fact that their identity could go beyond the man/woman binary. It may also explain why "the vice patrol had made them cut their hair" during Mardi Gras, given that "they looked so much like women and thats against the law If Youre Not" (Rechy 387).

Despite allowing them to reject heteronormative understandings of gender, the pressure to look feminine also makes most queens look like failures because of their inability to fully personify "an ideal" of femininity "that no one *can* embody" (Butler 176). Queens like Trudi, who "has most accurately been able to duplicate the female stance," are praised and seen as successful. By contrast, her friend Lola fails to look Real because she "has a husky meanman's voice and looks like nothing but an ugly man in semidrag" (Rechy 126–127). Similarly, Chi-Chi's masculine body, "which should belong to that idealization of a man," turns her into "a man patently unsuccessfully mimicking a flirt woman." Besides, she feels guilty for every "sudden flash of masculinity" (Rechy 394). Queens thus become caricatures of femininity, just like hustlers and scores became parodies of masculinity. However, there may be positive aspects in their failure to embody a concept of femininity that is absolutely heteronormative. Butler considers they become "the site of parodic contest and display that robs compulsory heterosexuality of its claims to naturalness and originality" (158). Additionally, they may prove identities that go beyond the masculine/feminine binary could exist.

1.4. Fantasy and Imagination: The Grounds for Queer Futurity

Performance in Rechy's novel is not limited to the exaggeration of masculinity and femininity. Queer characters also perform certain emotions to look successful. For instance, Lance is said to be "not as happy as hes pretending" (Rechy 251). In a similar way, queens

"giggle constantly in pretended happiness" (Rechy 116), thus showing their cheerful personalities may be staged. When this mask slides off and their true emotions surface, they appear to be frauds. Nevertheless, their posed happiness could also be an act of rebellion against the sadness to which heteronormativity has relegated them. Dressing up is another instance of queer performativity. Neil often transforms his physical appearance, as well as his lovers', to "create a fantasy" (Rechy 304–305). Similarly, Robbie "dressed in an elegant uniform" that "was definitely military: sword, gloves, boots to his hips," to attend a "costume ball" (Rechy 82). Dressing up hence allows characters to transform the world at their pleasure and create alternative realities. Consequently, performing becomes utopian and queer. Similar to the drag and costume ball performances depicted in the novel, the Ballroom Scene of the late 20th century could reflect the positive aspects of performing and pretending. Since their participants walk categories dressed as college students or corporate executives, queer individuals could embody—and even mock—social classes and ways of living they would not have access to in the real world.

Another essential aspect related to queer utopia is imagination. While interviewing the narrator, the Professor pictures how pleasing it would have been to be "hit by a gigantic truck—driven by a young handsome truckdriver." Nonetheless, his daydream shatters when he mentions he was, in fact, hit by a "simpering oldmaid from Oklahoma" (Rechy 76). According to DeGuzmán, his behavior could be deemed as delusional, just as Miss Destiny is when she exaggerates her past experiences and creates a fairytale-like atmosphere in which "*shes dancing like Cinderella at the magic ball"* (Rechy 119). However, this delusion could be helpful for them because "to live inside straight time and ask for, desire, and imagine another time and place is to represent and perform a desire that is both utopian and queer" (Muñoz 26). Therefore, illusion may allow queer individuals to escape the awful reality they live in and create possible futures that challenge heteronormativity.

This latter idea is illustrated by the moment when Miss Destiny fantasizes about her future wedding, which

> "[…] will be the most simpuhlee Fabulous wedding the Westcoast has evuh seen! with oh the most beautiful queens as bridesmaids! and the handsome studs as ushers! […] and *Me!*…Me…in virgin-white…coming down a winding staircase…carrying a white bouquet!…and my family will be crying for joy…And there will be champagne! cake! a real priest to puhfawm the Ceremony!—" (Rechy 122)

If we consider how unlikely it would be for a queer person like Miss Destiny to perform it, her description of the wedding may not seem realistic. Nonetheless, she is imagining and manifesting a utopian future. Despite not turning out the way Miss Destiny expected, she is able to celebrate her wedding, thus showing it was not as impossible as it seemed. Besides, the utopian possibility of her wedding pushes the queen forward and gives her a sense of hope that counteracts the negative consequences of her queer identity.

2. The Failure in Queer Connections

2.1. Doomed Relationships: Fear, Guilt and Repression

Failure can also be associated with the apparent impossibility to build lasting relationships in the novel. As Lance O'Hara mentions, queer life "is meant to be a series of love affairs —nothing more" (Rechy 255). However, this may not be an inherent trait in gay connections but rather the result of external factors. For instance, queer relationships are deemed unnatural because they fail to approximate the heterosexual ideal, which would consist in finding true love, getting married and having children. Their existence thus seems to make no sense in heteronormative society. Another essential aspect is the fear of rejection that queer individuals develop. As being rejected would imply failing once more, "theyll look for someone else rather than possibly hearing the answer 'No'" (Rechy 424). Despite the negative effects that fleeting connections could have, they are considered a better option than being alone. Consequently, queer subjects will hunt "different people every night—

even someone they dont really want" and "pretend it's someone else" (Rechy 427). Their craving for these frivolous contacts could indicate that the heteronormative desire to find their other half is still deeply rooted in gay characters despite appearing to be impossible.

Although engaging in such relationships seems crucial for them to satisfy their sexual and emotional needs, homosexual encounters often result in "some kind of shame, or guilt, for something not exchanged" (Rechy 418). Those feelings may be the outcome of their inability to share their love and warmth with each other given that queerness is considered immoral. Since having gay sex appears to go against the rules, scores will usually perform it under the influence of alcohol. Nevertheless, "if not really that drunk" it seems necessary for the score "that he pretend to be" (Rechy 211) to avoid being blamed for his actions. Trying to forget is another mechanism that queer characters use to relieve themselves from their guilt. As a result, gay lovers become "complete strangers again after the cold intimacy" (Rechy 42). Forgetting, however, proves to be ineffective because "whats just happened between them […] will happen again and again" (Rechy 418). Therefore, by unsuccessfully repressing their true desires, queer characters seem to contribute to the stigmatization—and impossibility—of homosexual relationships.

Despite participating in gay encounters, some characters will deny their queerness to avoid feeling ashamed. Pete embodies this behavior when stating that "whatever a guy does with other guys, if he does it for money, that dont make him queer." It is when "you start doing it for free, with other young guys, that you start growing wings" (Rechy 53). The one-way desire of prostitution allows Pete to hide a thirst for male intimacy that his relationship with the narrator could suggest. Similarly, Jeremy's first lover considers his queer desire a phase by mentioning "that ultimately he'd want women only" (Rechy 435). Contrary to the success related to heterosexuality, queerness seems to equate to humiliation. This could explain why the narrator "expected perversely to see an indignant Pete"

(Rechy 60) after he made him consensually participate in queer sexual intercourse with a drag queen called Flip. Given that not all hustlers are able—or willing—to prove their heterosexuality with women, most of them form brief romantic relationships with queens, whose exaggerated femininity makes the connection appear heterosexual. Therefore, "as long as the hustler goes only with queens," he "is not considered 'queer'—he remains, in the vocabulary of that world, 'trade'" (Rechy 121). This idea could indicate that relationships in the queer world may follow a set of rules and standards.

Besides the possibility of romantic involvement between hustlers and queens, fleeting contacts between two masculine men are deemed feasible in Rechy's gay underworld. This may be, on the one hand, an attempt from most scores to approach the ideal—and thus unrealistic—concept of manliness that hypermasculine hustlers try to embody. Consequently, Neil could be implying his own desire to look butch and hence successful by expressing his predilection toward one of his manikins because "he looks more—oh, Rough!" (Rechy 303). On the other hand, it could reflect the internalized hatred toward femininity that most homosexual men share, either because desiring effeminate characters would make them look queer or would make them feel they are replicating the masculine/feminine binary of heteronormative relationships. In this regard, a gay man in New York admits he does not "like em queer: If I did, Id go with a woman—why fuck around with substitutes?" (Rechy 32). Nonetheless, romantic or sexual connections between two feminine individuals seem impossible and incoherent. For instance, a man from New Orleans claims that "the lay-ast thing in the world a queen wants is to make it with what turns out to be huh sistuh" because "it is lew-rid and un-nay-tural" (Rechy 349). Similarly, for Pete it "seems strange" seeing two lesbians "just digging each other like that" (Rechy 62). His reaction could show that, being used to the frivolous and sly encounters of the gay world, Pete is unable to find coherence in a relationship that is based on pure desire and whose

members do not feel the need to deny their sexuality.

2.2. Queer Sex and Hustling: From Power to Dehumanization

Another relevant feature of queer relationships in the novel is their tendency to gravitate toward convenience rather than mutual attraction. Consequently, sexual affairs allow gay individuals to achieve a certain status. For instance, "queens will go on looking for their own legendary permanent 'Daddies'" to benefit economically, while hustlers will attempt to appear successful by "bragging about the $50 score with the fruit from Bel Air who has two swimming pools" (Rechy 124). However, their attempts to achieve success through sex can also fail. Despite starting a relationship with a well-known director with the aim of being in the movies, Skipper ends up being used by his lover, who takes advantage of his naivety to sleep with him. This example reflects Jeremy's idea that "in all those fleeting contacts in which you consider yourself the winner […] youre being used too" (Rechy 435). Nonetheless, both hustlers and scores ignore such reality and focus on the fleeting feeling of success that characterizes such encounters.

Rather than finding love or satisfying their sexual needs, these individuals may be trying to show off their limited power and prove they are in control. For instance, paying for sex transforms scores into the desiring—and thus active—member of the relationship. They hence feel that "although theyve paid you, theyre 'better'—smarter" (Rechy 423). By contrast, hustlers seem to think that they "have a definite advantage of whatever kind over the people youve been with, because theyve wanted *you"* (Rechy 431). The money involved in prostitution allows hustlers to feel successful, as they can be desired without having to reciprocate the feelings of the score. That could explain why the narrator feels the need to have sex with as many people as he can or, as he describes it, to be "*needfully adding numbers"* (Rechy 220). Consequently, the novel could suggest that lovers are not

people anymore but rather an evidence of the individual's power or worth.

Hustling thus results in the dehumanization and fetishization of those who resort to it. Since sexual partners become mere numbers, hustlers lose their individuality and prove to be interchangeable and replaceable (DeGuzmán; Heise; McKee Irwin). This idea may be noted when Mr. King tells the narrator that "theres dozens just like you" and suggests they "even get to look alike" (Rechy 38–39). A hustler's value seems to lie in his sexual function and, therefore, he is meant to be used and then disposed of. It could thus be stated that hustlers are deemed as commodities rather than human beings. Their objectification seems to become more apparent when the director "*looks at Skipper the in same way"* as he looks "*at his house, his garden, his pool, owning every inch of it, possessing it"* (Rechy 197). Similarly, the Professor mentions that he met a hustler named Smitty "when a friend gave him to me" (Rechy 90), hence proving he was something—rather than someone—the Professor could possess. Additionally, money transforms scores into "buyers in a market place" (Rechy 184) who "stand appraising the young malehustlers as if they were up for auction" (Rechy 136). Given that hustling turns sexual intercourse into an economic exchange, those who engage in it will aim at being bought—and subsequently used—to prove their worth.

Being stripped of their individuality and human qualities, hustlers seem to fear not being wanted anymore. As the narrator mentions, the time will come when "everyone has had you, […] those who havent have lost Interest" and "youve been replaced by the fresher faces that come daily into the city" (Rechy 182). In this sense, age is one of the elements that could lead to a hustler being substituted and cast aside. Nonetheless, it is not only the connection between youth and physical beauty that motivates it but also its relation to a certain idea of purity and deterioration. Randy, for instance, who was in his 30s, "in the

expression of the whisperers, Had Been Had" (Rechy 235) and thus was no longer sexually arousing for scores. This example illustrates that being in many sexual relationships makes hustlers become overused and dated, which appears to be extremely negative in a society in which newness and unfamiliarity are highly appreciated—and even fetishized. The narrator also experiences this first-hand when a score named Hughie accuses him of being "too old for me anyway" because "in their 20s, theyve already been had too often—and in too many ways" (Rechy 260). Therefore, "old" hustlers can no longer serve their purpose and become unable to hustle. By losing the little power that prostitution offered, they may have to face a reality they have decided to avoid, in which hustlers have turned into toys that nobody is willing to play with anymore.

Queer sex in *City of Night* hence proves to be influenced by external factors that go beyond pleasure and affection. Consequently, characters may perceive and experience it in different ways. On the one hand, hustlers could "actually come to loathe it." As Jeremy points out, their "compulsion to reach orgasm" and "get it over with" (Rechy 436) shows sexual intercourse is no longer synonymous with enjoyment for them. On the other hand, sex could also be considered a means of liberation and escape from reality. During some of his sexual encounters, the narrator feels "an electric happiness, as if the relentless flow of life had stopped" (Rechy 148). A glimpse of hope seems to be visible in this example, which demonstrates that queer sex can also be a source of pleasure. Furthermore, before moving to Los Angeles, the narrator wonders if his fleeting lovers will remember him "as someone of a long line who had expelled, with them, momentarily, the loneliness" (Rechy 103). Sex could thus help queer individuals relieve themselves from their feeling of solitude and isolation. However, by refusing to acknowledge their lovers "as other than someone—a nameless anyone" and repudiating lasting relationships, gay individuals witness

how their loneliness increases. To give an example, the narrator "had masturbated…feeling completely alone" (Rechy 428) right after having sex with several men. Therefore, it should be examined whether something beyond fleeting gay connections can exist or, on the contrary, queer subjects in the novel are destined for the accumulation and concatenation of empty sexual experiences.

2.3. Myths, Angels and Endings: Is Queer Love Possible?

The frivolous nature of queer relationships in *City of Night* could make the reader doubt their compatibility with love. As a result of its apparent impossibility in the gay world, characters in the novel often show they have lost hope in finding lasting romantic connections. The narrator, for example, states that if love "exists more than as merely four letters—like 'fuck,' […] I dont really believe it" (Rechy 427). By questioning its true existence, characters perceive queer love as an unattainable fantasy or, as the narrator describes it, as "a myth which could lull you again falsely in order to seduce you—like that belief in God—into a trap" (Rechy 444). Nevertheless, we must bear in mind that their judgment may be influenced by their unfortunate experiences, in which what they believed was love proved to be false. This could be due to the misuse of phases that express affection by scores. As the narrator mentions, he had never heard of "those words, except during the sex-scenes: words spoken over and over by hundreds of people, meaning the same thing each time—nothing" (Rechy 426). Therefore, a powerful word such as *love* seems to completely lose its original meaning. Additionally, the commodification of gay relationships, which DeGuzmán examines, could have turned love and affection into consumer goods. By asserting that "money is also an inadequate expression of my Love" (Rechy 95), the Professor seems to prove that his bond with Robbie was bought and, consequently, that there never was a real romantic connection between them.

Being deemed unattainable, queer love could be initially associated with suffering. The Professor seems to illustrate this idea when mentioning he "knew an ice-skater, who glided across my heart as if it were ice […], burying the blades of his ice-skates into my already-wounded heart" (Rechy 83). However, some characters in the novel tolerate and even glorify this pain because it is considered inherent to love. As a result, characters like the Professor accept that their lovers, who are often referred to as angels, "have one thing in common: they all have wings. It is their nature to fly away, leaving an emptiness—but a glowing emptiness!—in my heart" (Rechy 89). Love is thus incessantly sought despite its apparent impossibility in the queer world. This may well happen because individuals are taught that love is indispensable to feel complete, so finding their other half becomes their main purpose in order to fulfill a monogamous and heteronormative dream that still seems to dominate Western society. As Dave claims, "a person, whether hes queer or not, hes got to find someone…Nothing like a lonely fairy" (Rechy 262). This latter statement could prove that queer failure to achieve love is reflected in loneliness, which appears to become synonymous with unhappiness. Homosexual characters in the novel will thus do whatever it takes to escape loneliness and try to approach love. Carl, for instance, swears he would "wear a woman's silk nightie if it got me a Lover […]. If he wants me to be a woman, I'll be the greatest lady since Du Barry. I'll be all things to One man!" (Rechy 319). Therefore, the queer world proves to be highly influenced by an idealistic perception of love that only straight individuals could be able to approximate due to their privilege. As a result, it may be inaccurate to consider love is not possible for queer subjects. On the contrary, it seems to be this ideal and heteronormative view of love, which could still be present in the reader's mind, that they cannot experience. Redefining or broadening our understanding of love may hence offer new and alternative readings of the novel.

Evidence of emotional intimacy and affection between men throughout *City of*

Night seems to prove queer love may not be as unattainable as it seems. The relationship between the narrator and Pete provides the main example. Despite the "urgency, on both our parts, to split abruptly—to get away from each other" (Rechy 61) caused by their need to appear straight, a close and quite intimate connection blooms between both characters, who often seek each other's company while hustling the streets. However, their relationship seems to reach another level after spending a night together at the narrator's place:

> The lights are out now. The darkness seems very real, like a third person waiting. I lay on the very edge of one side of the bed, and he lay on the very edge of the other. A long time passed. […]
>
> And then I felt his hand, lightly, on mine.
>
> Neither of us moved. Moments passed like that. And now his hand closes over mine, tightly.
>
> And that was all that happened. (Rechy 66)

This fragment could suggest that Pete and the narrator's feelings went well beyond a mere friendship. The fact that their relationship ends right after this moment may also support the idea, given that both hustlers could have felt their posed heterosexuality was in danger if their true feelings for each other surfaced. Another instance of intimate gay connections is witnessed by the narrator in those bars "where males danced with males, holding each other intimately," and tried "to meet others like themselves for a mutual, nighlong, unpaid, sexsharing" (Rechy 72). Contrary to scores and hustlers, such gay characters appear to experience a kind of romantic affection that, despite not always lasting, is reciprocated and hence possible.

Additionally, useful reflections on queer love arise from the conversation between Jeremy and the narrator. After getting honest with each other, the score tries to redefine the concept of love that the narrator, just like most queer individuals, has inherited from heteronormativity. In Jeremy's opinion, it should involve "no rockets. Just the absence of loneliness […] can be the strongest kind of love" (Rechy 427). In fact, Jeremy seems to perceive a certain utopian futurity in failed queer relationships. Unlike the narrator, who

is worried about the moment "*when* it ends," Jeremy claims "theres something else: which makes life livable: at the very least, the attempt itself—no matter how often repeated…or, even, merely the remembrance of that attempt to share—*in* sex and *beyond* sex" (Rechy 444). Such an attempt to love may help queer individuals learn about themselves while discovering new ways in which they could connect with others. Consequently, by offering the narrator the chance to be in a romantic relationship, Jeremy seems to prove that queer love is possible.

Although the narrator's decision to reject him may seem to contradict this idea, the reader should also consider it may be motivated by other factors. The most relevant one could be the narrator's tendency toward one-way desire, which satisfies his need "to feel Wanted" without having to "need any one person" (Rechy 420). Since this behavior could suggest he fears admitting his queerness and showing vulnerability, readers may think the narrator denies the possibility of gay love. Nevertheless, he is talking about his sexual experiences with a girl the first time he mentions his "craving for attention which I could not reciprocate: one-sided" (Rechy 26). As a consequence, his rejection would not be of queer love specifically but rather of the whole concept of romantic love.

Bearing this in mind, there could be alternative interpretations of the novel's ending. A pessimistic reading appears to be the most common one given that readers would expect—and desire—the narrator to have a happy ending. Since we tend to associate happiness with the triumph of true love, his decision to reject Jeremy may be initially deemed as a natural consequence of his impossibility to love. However, readers should also take into account that the narrator may want something that goes beyond our understanding of love. By stating that "maybe I could love you. But I wont" (Rechy 446), he shows that, despite being able to, he would rather not stick to the traditional concept of love. Besides, he even suggests "that wanting to be wanted…or 'loved'…could be as much an aspect of

what you call 'love' as actually loving back" because, "if there is such a thing as what you call 'Love,' its shape must be as unpredictable as the patterns" (Rechy 439–440). This reflection could make readers realize we may have negatively judged the main character because he does not adapt to our perception of love. Consequently, the "crushing defeat" (Rechy 446) that the narrator experiences by the end of the novel could also evidence his inability to achieve this ideal and strictly heteronormative love. His decision to leave Jeremy, which prevents the narrator from achieving success in heteronormative terms, could thus be an attempt to distance himself from this glorified concept of love to explore alternative ways of connecting with people that, by challenging the norm, may be deemed as queer. In essence, an ending that could easily be read from a pessimistic point of view seems to hide a certain feeling of utopian futurity.

3. Conclusions and Further Research

John Rechy's *City of Night* has offered interesting insights into queer identity and relationships regarding concepts such as failure, gender performativity and utopia. Its queer characters still present a tendency to adapt to heteronormative standards of success since initially it seems to be the only way in which they can approach happiness. Nonetheless, their inability to embody such standards turns them into parodic figures that evidence the idealistic and hence artificial nature of the masculine/feminine binary. Additionally, performance may allow queer individuals—especially queens—in the novel to rebel against the norm and imagine alternative realities in which they could live freely. Consequently, queerness seems to hide the possibility of utopian futures, just as the narrator's rejection of traditional love could do.

Relationships in the queer underworld of the novel have proven to be more complex

than they seemed, as they are influenced by aspects like money, fear and suffering. However, their connections may not always be fleeting and frivolous, as characters like Jeremy show. It is rather the belief that queer relationships should be ruled by a heteronormative concept of love that seems to make them that way. Therefore, finding alternative ways of loving and building relationships could be deemed as something utopian and thus queer.

The topics addressed in the present dissertation should well be discussed in relation to other literary works that deal with the queer world. This could offer a broader view of the representation of queerness both in pre-Stonewall and post-Stonewall literature. Additionally, it may help detect utopian ways of living, loving and being in the world which we could be unaware of because of our still quite heteronormative judgments and perceptions. Understanding failure as the cradle of possibility, probability and utopian futurity could offer not only queer individuals, but humankind as a whole, a glimpse of hope.

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