



4-15-2006

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.13023/disclosure.15.10>

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Recommended Citation

Moon, Jennifer (2006) "Cruising John Rechy's *City of Night*: Queer Subjectivity, Intimacy, and Counterpublicity," *disClosure: A Journal of Social Theory*. Vol. 15 , Article 10.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.13023/disclosure.15.10>

Available at: <https://uknowledge.uky.edu/disclosure/vol15/iss1/10>

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Jennifer Moon

Cruising John Rechy's *City of Night*: Queer Subjectivity, Intimacy, and Counterpublicity

Later I would think of America as one vast City of Night stretching gaudily from Times Square to Hollywood Boulevard—jukebox-winking, rock-n-roll moaning: America at night fusing its darkcities into the unmistakable shape of loneliness. . . . One-night sex and cigarette smoke and rooms squashed in by loneliness.

—John Rechy, *City of Night*

The opening lines of John Rechy's *City of Night* introduce the reader to an underworld of criminalized homosexuality and male prostitution. Originally published in 1963, the semi-autobiographical *City of Night*, Rechy's first novel, is written from a place of stigma and social marginalization. Much like Radclyffe Hall's 1928 lesbian classic *The Well of Loneliness*, it paints a dismal yet sympathetic portrait of the sexual deviant exiled by society and deprived of love.¹ Divided into four parts, *City of Night* chronicles different stages in the anonymous narrator's life as a hustler. The first section connects his hustling and apparent narcissism to his childhood experiences of abuse, loneliness, and deprivation, and it describes his initiation into the world of Times Square and all-night movie houses. The second and third sections, set primarily in Los Angeles and San Francisco, document the narrator's driven exploration of the worlds of drag queens, police harassment, S/M, and Hollywood celebrity, as well as his efforts to harden himself emotionally for his chosen life. Finally, the fourth section takes him to Mardi Gras in New Orleans, where the mask of toughness and detachment that he has so carefully cultivated falters, leaving him, at the conclusion of the novel, desperate, scared, and alone.

Within these four sections, extended portraits of colorful individuals alternate with briefer, transitional chapters, which hold the plot together through the narrator's

introspective, musing commentary. While the transitional chapters generally take a despairing or apocalyptic tone, focusing on the depressing aspects of prostitution, the literary profiles succeed in capturing some of the narrator's initial fascination with and excitement at participating in this sexual underworld. They center on particularly memorable characters, like Chuck, the lazy, mellow "cowboy" hustler the narrator meets in Pershing Square; Sylvia, the New Orleans bar owner who caters to homosexuals to atone for having thrown out her gay son; and Miss Destiny, the energetic drag queen who constantly imagines her own elaborate wedding, complete with her grand entrance on a spiral staircase. Regardless of the psychic torment he exhibits elsewhere, the narrator often finds comfort, companionship, and sustenance with these fellow outcasts, who share his position of marginalization.

Rechy exhibits striking ambivalence toward his subject matter: he alternately delights in the freedom of his outlaw existence and finds it unfulfilling and compulsive, justifies his life choices yet is disdainful of both the mainstream and its outcasts, and seeks to increase public tolerance of homosexuality yet speaks of himself in pathological terms. This conflicted attitude is reflected in the specific details of his sexual encounters with men, in his interpretations of character, and in the narrative structure of the novel. Yet this ambivalence—the tensions that frame Rechy's portrayal of cruising and that shape his narrator's participation in the sexual underworld he describes—is partly what makes the narrative so compelling. The narrator's evolving struggle to understand himself through sexual contact captures many of the complex dynamics that underlie *any* experience of social marginalization, as well as the difficulties inherent in asserting a deviant sexual identity. Rechy's narrative is not merely specific to being a gay Chicano hustler in the mid-twentieth-century United States but, rather, describes challenges that continue to structure the lives of many lesbians and gay men today. What does it mean for sexuality to be a marker of difference? How does this recognition of difference affect one's perception of self and others? What alternative modes of existence or types of relationships might it enable?

With the current push for gay marriage and the continuing risk of HIV transmission, nonstandard forms of intimacy, like cruising for sex, are increasingly viewed, both by mainstream society and by the gay and lesbian community, as immature, illegitimate, and politically suspect.² Yet I argue that cruising—the aggressive solicitation of sexual contacts in public spaces—is a form of sexual and social interaction that contributes to the development of queer counterpublics. As depicted in novels like John Rechy's *City of Night*, cruising offers a compelling, radical vision of intimacy, sexual identity, and belonging that deviates from the normative

model of the privatized conjugal couple and nuclear family and that structures alternative, publicly queer modes of existence. Through close reading, I argue that cruising develops into a personal aesthetic and program of self-fashioning for Rechy's protagonists and that it creatively reimagines intimacy in terms of social marginalization. My exploration of cruising as a form of intimacy seeks to document different configurations of queer sexual community and, in doing so, to reclaim aspects of queer public culture currently portrayed as antithetical to the aims of the mainstream gay and lesbian movement.³

By drawing on queer social theory, feminist critiques of the public/private division, and contemporary cultural studies, I attempt to develop an interdisciplinary understanding of queer identities in the United States—one grounded in social-theoretical models rather than in psychoanalytic or poststructuralist literary ones.⁴ While a number of theorists have proven greatly influential in this regard, it is the concept of queer counterpublicity, as elaborated by Michael Warner and Lauren Berlant, that is central to my project.⁵ To begin, some basic definitions are in order. Jürgen Habermas imagines the bourgeois public sphere as a collective space of political engagement characterized by free and rational discourse; however, feminist philosopher and political theorist Nancy Fraser argues that this interpretation fails to take into account the resistant political movements of various nondominant populations. She provides an oft-cited definition of "subaltern counterpublics": "They are parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs" (Fraser 1992, 123). Criticizing Fraser's use of the term "oppositional" as too vague, Michael Warner expands on this definition:

A counterpublic maintains at some level, conscious or not, an awareness of its subordinate status. . . . The discourse that constitutes it is not merely a different or alternative idiom but one that in other contexts would be regarded with hostility or a sense of indecorousness. . . . [Members] are socially marked by their participation in this kind of discourse; ordinary people are presumed not to want to be mistaken for the kind of person who would want to participate in this kind of talk or be present in this kind of scene. (2002, 119–20)

Warner highlights the social marginalization of counterpublics and their participants; his definition emphasizes the stigma and possible shame associated with membership.

Thus, a specifically queer counterpublic not only accepts but embraces

the exclusion that derives from sexual deviance. Ideologically, it represents a rejection of assimilationist strategies of inclusion and the increased normalization of the gay and lesbian movement.⁶ Practically, it entails the development of print and visual cultures, private institutions and occupied public spaces, and personal styles, affects, and politics that collectively seek to modify or subvert heteronorms. In their essay "Sex in Public," Warner and Berlant further assert that "making a queer world has required the development of kinds of intimacy that bear no necessary relation to domestic space, to kinship, to the couple form, to property, or to the nation. These intimacies do bear a necessary relation to a counterpublic" (Berlant and Warner 2002, 199). Queer intimacies like cruising help extend the horizon of imagined sexual possibilities beyond the traditional couple form, thereby contributing to the parallel development of queer public cultures, relationships, and identities.

For example, Leo Bersani argues that gay cruising operates according to its own distinct logic:

When a man and a woman pick each other up, there is nothing they have to recognize except the signs of a mutual desire; their heterosexuality is, in a predominantly heterosexual society, assumed; it doesn't make them part of a particular community. When a man recognizes another man's desire, he is also learning something about the other's identity, not exactly what kind of person he is, but what kind of group he belongs to. In short, he both knows him and doesn't know him. (1995, 147)

The social deviance of recognizing, in public, another's same-sex desire here becomes a form of identification, but also a sign of the other's sexual marginality. Because of the stigma attached to homosexual behavior, cruising between men or between women becomes a performance of difference, of not belonging to or participating in heteronormative society. Bersani describes homosexuals as existing "in both time and space, in a vast network of *near-sameness*, a network characterized by relations of inaccurate replication," by which he refers to the conditions of marginality that make homosexuals similar to one another because of their shared difference from the norm (146). A type of deviant sexual and social interaction, gay cruising builds up a queer world structured along alternative lines of affiliation.

Rechy provides an indication of what such a queer world might look like in 1978's *The Sexual Outlaw*, a self-labeled documentary of the homosexual experience. Bolstered by the advances of the gay liberation movement, Rechy takes a bold, defiant tone:

Now I look at the audience, and to the homosexuals here I want to

say: "You have an untested insurrectionary power that can bring down the straight world. Use it—take the war openly into the streets. As long as they continue to kill us, fuck and suck on every corner! Question their hypocritical, murderous, uptight world." But I don't say that. Why? Because promiscuity, like the priesthood, requires total commitment and sacrifice. (1977, 32)

Rechy here presents cruising as a moral obligation, but one that does not simplistically equate sex with rebellion. Public sex is not merely a form of protest but, rather, a principled way of life and a personal ethic demanding discipline. For Rechy, a lapsed Catholic, the analogy with the priesthood not only is intentionally blasphemous but implies a commitment to self-cultivation not unlike that advocated by Michel Foucault in his reading of the ancient Greeks.

In the second volume of *The History of Sexuality*, entitled *The Use of Pleasure*, Foucault argues that in classical antiquity, sexual activity became linked to the "arts of existence," by which he meant "those intentional and voluntary actions by which men not only set themselves rules of conduct, but also seek to transform themselves, to change themselves in their singular being, and to make their life into an *oeuvre* that carries certain aesthetic values and meets certain stylistic criteria" (1985, 10). Through asceticism, or studious self-transformation, one developed a principled relation to one's body and its capacity for pleasure, thereby producing a life of ontological order and beauty (89). Foucault viewed homosexuality as a modern form of asceticism—a way to develop new modes of life through aesthetic self-stylization (1994, 137). Rechy's warning that promiscuity "requires total commitment and sacrifice" suggests that he, too, views gay sex, of the promiscuous and public variety, as an aesthetic practice, an existential choice, and a form of asceticism. Like the priesthood, cruising for sex becomes a form of service to a higher power and a way of life that transcends, and brings beauty to, one's mundane existence. Rechy elsewhere describes it as involving "a sense of choreography, ritual, and mystery," and hence it is not about the simple pursuit of pleasure but instead becomes a means of stylized self-expression (1977, 28). For Rechy, as the above passage suggests, cruising can form the basis of a personally derived program of self-fashioning and social deviance.

Whereas the protagonist of *City of Night* has sex with men only in exchange for money, Rechy openly identifies as homosexual in *The Sexual Outlaw*. Yet even at this later stage of his career, he remains ambivalent in his portrayal of public promiscuity. For example, the fictional protagonist Jim muses in the shower after a long night:

This night's hunt. And what was found? He concentrates on the sound of the jetting water. How many hands? How many mouths? How many cocks? How many assholes? How many lovers, strangers, men? He feels the specialness of his outlawry, and an exquisite joy. He turns off the water. And what was found? What was searched for? Depression knots tightly at the center of his being. He stands naked before the mirror. The joy returns. (Rechy 1977, 107)

This wonderfully frank passage captures the complex dynamics and recurring themes that are central to Rechy's portrayal of cruising in general. Initially, Jim's pleasure derives from the *number* of sexual contacts he has accumulated during the day. On occasion, Rechy's protagonists compulsively count their sexual contacts according to strictly defined rules; this mental exercise lends symbolic significance to their sexual encounters and serves as a measure of their masculine desirability. The tallying of scores becomes a way for them to assert control over the passage of time and the transience of their youthful beauty, by proving that they can "make it" with anyone they want.⁷ In addition, Jim's solicitation of numerous sexual contacts, reflected in the questions "How many hands? How many mouths?" poses an implicit threat to mainstream ideals of monogamy and long-term relationships simply by being articulated. Jim's brazen defiance of such norms—his sense of being somehow different—thus fuels his "exquisite joy," and he remembers the innumerable bodily orifices encountered during that day with the pleasurable knowledge that such experiences are not only taboo but also generally unattainable within mainstream society.

This desire for numerous sexual contacts coexists with intense feelings of alienation and loneliness—themes that recur in *City of Night*. Although the accumulation of a certain number of sexual contacts may reassure Jim of his masculine good looks, the repeated question "And what was found?" highlights the impermanence of this form of self-understanding. While Jim may experience "exquisite joy" through sexual interaction with others, such brief moments of intimacy inevitably fade, leaving him once more alone and desirous of further contacts. This realization results in a moment of depression, a feeling of aloneness that is mitigated by Jim's admiring himself in the mirror. The image of the self reflected in a mirror suggests not merely narcissistic vanity but also a desire for autonomy and emotional self-sufficiency. In both *City of Night* and *The Sexual Outlaw*, the protagonists link the sight of their bodies—whole, vital, and inviolable—to feelings of solitary agency and self-reliance, and they envision their internal, psychic lives as similarly impervious. By looking at his reflection, Jim sees himself as independent and self-contained, as not needing another person to com-

plement or sustain him within the model of a more traditional relationship. At this realization, "the joy returns," and Jim is once again content in his memory of the evening and, more broadly, in his chosen life of promiscuity.

This passage evokes many of the tensions that underlie Rechy's ambivalence toward cruising. The delight in promiscuity finds its counterpart in feelings of intense loneliness and self-chosen isolation; his sexual desirability confirms his self-worth yet is linked to his tenuous youthful appearance; and his joy in outlawry and self-sufficiency masks a complex attitude toward community and his need to belong. These tensions are clearly and simply expressed in *The Sexual Outlaw*, Rechy's most pro-cruising, morally exhortative, and activist text, but in it, these personal struggles are secondary to his political goal of challenging mainstream hypocrisy. In contrast, *City of Night*, a bildungsroman written at a much earlier point in his life, takes the narrator's inner turmoil and ambivalence about hustling, and about homosexuality in general, as its structuring feature and central point of inquiry. Although still sexually explicit, *City of Night* is more self-consciously literary and less overtly pornographic than other of his works, and the confrontational attitude toward heterosexual society that Rechy later exhibits is muted by this narrator's existential preoccupations and tortured sexual insecurity. Despite the narrator's ambivalence, however, this first effort to portray public sexual cultures offers a compelling, non-normalizing account of outcast psychology and documents a project of pre-Stonewall queer world-making—a project that, even today, is at times fraught with internal conflict, defiance, and shame.

Shame, Narcissism, and Queer Subjectivity

Queer theorist and literary critic Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick suggests that the affect shame might be central to the construction of queer subjectivities, an assertion that runs counter to the mainstream gay and lesbian movement's emphasis on the importance of pride and "out" identities.⁸ According to Sedgwick, in the interpersonal circuit, the other individual ideally reflects a favorable, affirming picture of the self—the self as it narcissistically wants to be perceived. When one's desires go unrecognized by the other, communication breaks down, and the body is subsequently flooded with uncomfortable sensations and feelings of isolation. Repeated experiences of shame promote introversion and decrease sociability by leading one to withdraw protectively into the self and to view others with distrust. Furthermore, "one of the things that anyone's character or personality is, is a record of the highly individual histories by which the fleeting emotion of shame has instituted far more durable, structural changes in one's relational and inter-

pretative strategies toward both self and others" (Sedgwick 1993, 13). According to Sedgwick, shame might especially be a defining, permanent characteristic of those labeled "queer," yet she is not interested in why this might be the case or how one might rid oneself of shame. Rather than being inherently negative, she argues, shame is a basic human affect that sometimes arises through negative interactions with disapproving individuals. If it constitutes queer identity, it does so through affective performance and accumulated experiences of social exclusion, and it thus reveals nothing *essential* about the shamed individual's inner subjectivity. Her non-normalizing perspective separates shame from questions of pathology and morality and places it firmly within the realm of interpersonal relations; it suggests a performative, rather than essentialist, understanding of queer identity.

In the context of early-twenty-first-century American gay and lesbian politics, many of the *City of Night* narrator's adult behaviors—his hustling, his avoidance of intimacy, and his narcissism—might be seen as reasons for shame, shrouded as they are in secrecy and denial. Although highly promiscuous, the narrator adamantly resists identification as gay or queer, often speaks of his behavior in pathological or tortured terms, and is rather neurotic about sex. Characterized by unwavering nonreciprocation, sex for him proceeds according to strictly defined rules:

I would never talk to anyone first. . . . My inability to talk first was an aspect of that same hunger for attention whose effects I had felt even in El Paso. . . . And so, in the world of males, on the streets, it was I who would be the desired in those furtive relationships, without desiring back. Sex for me became the mechanical reaction of This on one side, That on the other. And the boundary must not be crossed. Of course there were times when a score would indicate he expected more of me. Those times, inordinately depressed, I would walk out on him instantly. Immediately, I must find others who would accept me on my own terms. . . . To reciprocate in any way for the money would have violated the craving for the manifestation of desire toward me. It would have compromised my needs. . . . The money which I got was a token indication of one-way desire: that I was wanted enough to be paid for, on my own terms. (Rechy 1984, 53–54)

By refusing to speak first or to reciprocate sexually, the narrator maintains the illusion of heterosexual masculinity that is essential to his identity as a hustler, while presenting himself as a sexual object to be pursued. The narrative endorses an interpretation of this behavior as narcissistic, as it implic-

itly links the narrator's adult hustling to childhood experiences of sexual abuse and parental deprivation. Wishing to have all attention focused on him, the narrator seems reluctant to do anything that might detract, even minimally, from his own pleasure or sense of self-importance. Money provides additional confirmation of his desirability—proof that people will pay to pleasure *him*—as well as justification for engaging in homosexual acts in the first place. However, the narrator's craving for unilateral expressions of desire could also be seen as evidence of shame. Perhaps his "inability to talk first" reflects his unwillingness to be seen as queer and his attempt to avoid the shame of that particular identification. Rather than being an expression of arrogance, his reluctance "to reciprocate in any way" "without desiring back" seems a possible evasion of recognition, an attempt *not* to be seen as a subject with active, and specifically homosexual, desires.

Narcissism and shame represent two extremes in the self's engagement with others. While narcissism entails an overestimation of the self and an insistent demand for recognition from those considered inferior, shame suggests a devalued perception of the self and an avoidance of presumed superiors. What kind of masculinity, and/or what kind of sexuality, is founded on self-objectification, promiscuous nonreciprocation, and renunciation of active desire? What kind of sexual object-choice can exist if one consciously refuses to choose an object? The narrator's sexual behavior allows for highly contradictory readings of how one might express one's sexuality in relation to others and points to the complexity of attempting to define exactly what constitutes queer subjectivity, particularly in the context of changing social and sexual mores. Although the narrator has sex with innumerable men, he neither embraces a homosexual identity nor expresses active desire for a person of the same sex—both key features of contemporary gay or lesbian identity. His sexual subjectivity also does not imply a fixed, stable pattern of identification and desire/sexual object-choice—the two main categories by which sexuality is traditionally understood within psychoanalysis. Instead, following Sedgwick, I suggest that one read this form of subjectivity as structured by affective performances of shame and narcissism, which are enacted in the context of interpersonal relations. If shame and narcissism characterize the narrator's sexual interactions, the presence of such affects shifts the focus away from individualized, sexual interiority and toward intersubjective experiences of social recognition or misrecognition; this theoretical move allows us to conceptualize the narrator's sexuality in terms of queer performativity, rather than essential subjectivity.

One might term the narrator "queer," as his behavior undeniably exceeds the bounds of heteronormativity. However, I use the word *queer* not

in the colloquial sense, which encompasses the narrower categories of gay, straight, bisexual, transgender, and other, but rather in the sense of enacting a particular type of sexual relationality. David Halperin argues that *queer* "does not name some natural kind or refer to some determinate object; it acquires its meaning from its oppositional relation to the norm" (1995, 62). Rather than being a fixed category of identity, the word *queer* emphasizes the relation between the sexually marginal and the putatively normal, and it seeks to productively exploit this imposed position of marginalization. Rechy's narrator embodies a notion of queer performativity as sexual deviance, not because of who he is, but rather because of the public, sexual relations he participates in. Cruising narratives like *City of Night* suggest that queerness might be productively and radically reimaged in terms of participation within a sexual counterpublic, rather than in terms of normative definitions of identity.

Bersani takes this point even further with his theorization of the "gay outlaw." In his reading of Gide's *The Immoralist*, Bersani articulates a view of homosexuality devoid of psychic content, in which "we move irresponsibly among other bodies, somewhat indifferent to them, demanding nothing more than that they be as available to contact as we are, and that, no longer owned by others, they also renounce self-ownership and agree to that loss of boundaries which will allow them to be, with us, shifting points of rest in a universal and mobile communication of being" (1995, 128). He identifies this conceptualization as radical because it rejects personhood and the notion of intersubjectivity entirely, locating homosexuality not in individual bodies but in a "universal homo-ness." In Bersani's words, this "sexual preference is without psychic content; there are no complexes, no repressed conflicts, no developmental explanations, only the chaste promiscuity of a body repeatedly reaching out to find itself beyond itself" (125). He argues that homosexuality is a state of being in the world defined by the use of one's body rather than the substance of one's consciousness and is thus a sexual preference without need of psychological explanation.

Through multiple points of contact, Rechy's narrator is situated within an interconnected network of men who, collectively, constitute a sexual counterpublic governed by male erotic exchange. Homosexuality and queerness become properties of the counterpublic as a whole, enacted and performed in a group context. In *City of Night*, sex between men does not automatically translate into gay or homosexual identities, yet their collective, sexually deviant behavior challenges the traditional separation of public and private by removing sex from the protected confines of the marital home and by redefining public spaces as sites of queer sexuality. Cruising

thus forges transitory relationships between men who defy conventional morality and bourgeois norms through the pleasurable use of their bodies and who simultaneously participate in a project of queer world-making.

Intimacy, Sexual Contact, and the Pleasure of Partial Recognition

While cruising has the potential to build up alternative worlds, it can also be impersonal, antisocial, and individually isolating. Throughout the novel, the narrator struggles to define his place within the cruising subculture, wondering whether he chose the outcast world of criminality and deviance out of a perverse desire for nonconformity, or whether he was claimed by it because he was marked within society as sexually perverse: "Recurrently, around the others hustling those places, I felt a peculiar overpowering guilt because I was convinced I was not trapped by that world, as I was certain they were. Yet there were those other times when I felt even more hopelessly a part of it for having searched it out" (Rechy 1984, 169). Unable to resolve these questions, the narrator occupies a liminal position, caught between acceptance and disavowal of his marginalized status and group identification. Yet Rechy's narrative suggests that the experience of alienation might enable a compelling and imaginative form of intimacy.

For example, having arrived in Los Angeles, the narrator finds his new surroundings disorienting and strangely sinister. Initially apprehensive of this "world of Lonely-Outcast America squeezed into Pershing Square," the narrator demonstrates his relative innocence by refusing to steal from a trick who wants to be robbed; afterward, he immediately senses, "I had failed the world I had sought" (91, 93). Although attempting to immerse himself in a world of sexual and social deviance, he nevertheless feels somehow apart from it, and he interprets his reluctance to steal as a sign that he does not truly belong. Already thus an outsider, even among Los Angeles' outcasts and street people, he meets Miss Destiny, a flamboyant, talkative young drag queen who introduces him to the subculture of hustlers and queens. With their differently gendered self-presentations, both characters strive for personal authenticity yet are only too aware of the gap between external appearance and their own inner reality.

At a party one night, Miss Destiny and the narrator discover that they are both familiar with Shakespeare's character Desdemona:

Something was released inside Miss Destiny and something established between us in that moment by the simple fact of the mutual knowledge of Desdemona: that something released and that something established which she had yearned for with others from per-

son to person in this locked world—and trying always futilely before, had given up. . . . the loneliness churning beneath that gay façade desperately every awake moment shouting to be spoken, to be therefore shared: . . . erupting out of the depths of her consciousness, aroused by the earlier rejection, resulting in that rare fleeting contact made rarely somehow like a match struck in the dark for a breathless sputtering instant. (115)

Their familiarity with Desdemona, who herself defies societal norms by marrying the Moor Othello, suggests a certain degree of cultural literacy and respectability, which marks them as different from others in their socially nonconformist underworld. Miss Destiny and the narrator share a sense of not fully belonging to this world, yet both are simultaneously unwilling to rejoin the mainstream, and this realization, crystallized in the figure of Desdemona, fuels an intense emotional connection. United through shared feelings of isolation and vulnerability, they recognize the other's detachment—their ambivalent investment in their present surroundings—and yearn for an intimacy based on this shared sense of difference.

At the end of this conversation, Miss Destiny, with "a franticness that only abysmal loneliness can produce," whispers to the narrator, "*Marry me please, dear!*" (117). This desperate plea, which remains tactfully unanswered, suggests exactly how rare, intense, and intimate the interaction is. Although they do not have sex, Miss Destiny and the narrator truly touch each other through the revelation of their shared loneliness—"that something released and that something established which she had yearned for." In an examination of trauma and lesbian sexualities, Ann Cvetkovich suggests that the category of touch "creates a continuum between the physical and psychic, between the sexual and emotional" (2003, 51). As both an emotional and a physical category, the concept of touch produces "metaphorical slippages that enable the physical dimensions of touch to stand for, or make material, emotional forms of power and that make it possible to refer to being emotionally affected as 'being touched'" (68). Miss Destiny's plea for marriage is thus also metaphorically physical; their emotional intimacy feels akin to sexual intimacy, resulting in Miss Destiny's cheeky proposal of marriage.

In addition, the phrase "that rare fleeting contact made rarely somehow like a match struck in the dark for a breathless sputtering instant" is evocative of the scene of cruising. To the knowing stranger in the proper context, the request for a match with which to light one's cigarette can be a form of casual solicitation, as historian George Chauncey affirms in his study of gay New York in the 1930s and 1940s (1994, 118). The image of the struck match likens the narrator and Miss Destiny's interaction to a cruising en-

counter, thus introducing a sexual component, but, more significantly, connecting cruising itself to a particular kind of intimacy—one defined as a similar attempt to experience physical and emotional contact through shared isolation with another. Although such a formulation might seem paradoxical, Miss Destiny and the narrator's intimacy is based on a shared sense of difference—on feeling somehow outcast or displaced from one's surroundings—rather than on similarity. The unlikeliness of this connection between the male hustler and the drag queen emphasizes their status as misfits and suggests that, for “a breathless sputtering instant,” intimacy—whether sexual or emotional—might be attained across that divide, through shared despair and tender, mutual recognition.

An earlier passage describes cruising in these very terms. Immediately after leaving New York and before arriving in Los Angeles, the narrator reflects on his recent sexual encounters:

As I remembered those short, short, short interludes with the street-people, . . . would they also remember me?—as someone of a long line who had expelled, with them, momentarily, the loneliness: yet, ironically, increased it perhaps in the instants following the vagrant soon-to-recur contacts—with others? I had an acute sense of the incompleteness intrinsic in sharing another's life. You touch those other lives, barely—however intimately it may be sexually—you may sense things roiling in them. Yet the climax in your immediate relationship with them is merely an interlude. Their lives will continue, you'll merely step out. A series of encounters multiplying geometrically . . . (Rechy 1984, 81–82)

The attempt to “[expel], with them, momentarily, the loneliness” appears to be a primary motivation for the narrator's cruising and resonates strongly with the description of his interaction with Miss Destiny. Yet rather than indicating a wish for mere companionship, this passage suggests that, for the narrator, loneliness is a permanent condition permitting only intermittent moments of relief. In Rechy's world, humans are autonomous but isolated, caught up in their own concerns and fundamentally indifferent to others. In this context, intimacy is necessarily partial and incomplete, a transitory moment that accords recognition of the other's loneliness but does not eliminate it. Cruising represents an attempt to share briefly this state of emotional isolation with another through sexual contact.

For Rechy, sex is a way to shed temporarily the armor of self-protective detachment and to experience intense bodily sensations in the presence of another individual: “With those many people—only in those moments when I was desired—the moments before we became strangers again after the

intimacy—I felt an electric happiness, as if the relentless flow of life had stopped, poised on the very pinpoint of youth; and for those moments, youth was suspended unmoving” (120). As this passage suggests, sex for the narrator is an inwardly directed experience; although shared with another person, it remains focused on the self. Rather than indicating a desire for closeness or mutual attunement, this form of intimacy involves experiencing one's own sexual power while in the presence of another; it provides a form of recognition that reaffirms the self and has little to do with the specific characteristics of one's sexual partner.

Rechy's formulation of intimacy also pertains to more conventional sexual practices, such as those linked to the romantic dyad. His belief in the fundamental impossibility of real, lasting human connection is not specific to the homosexual experience but, instead, reveals a more generalized frustration at the nature of human existence: “Out of the darkness and the shadowed loneliness, like you I tried to find a substitute for Salvation. And the loneliness and the panic have something to do with that: with surfeit; something to do with the spectacle of everyone trying to touch and giving up, surrendering, finding those substitutes which are only momentary, in order to justify the meaningless struggle toward death” (372). The “you” addressed in this passage is the imagined straight reader of the novel, which implies that for Rechy, the world of underground cruising is not that different from the mainstream in terms of intimacy. The metaphor of touch as descriptive of human connection evokes the idea of whole, complete human beings who temporarily bridge the distance between one another in order to experience a moment of mutual contact. In this sense, it differs markedly from other terms commonly used to describe intimacy, such as desire, which indicates a need based on lack; complementarity, which implies individual insufficiency; and domination and its synonyms, which involve an incorporation or obliteration of the other. Touch, by contrast, refuses the breaching of personal boundaries and conditions of emotional or physical dependence by positing a state of adjacency and coexistence. In addition, touch is generally localized and not diffused throughout the entire body. Rather than involving the complete immersion of self, touch suggests the partial connection of discrete and self-contained subjects.

Rechy presents cruising as an activity focused on contact and indifferent to the psychology of others. As a way to touch another emotionally and physically, cruising is not an attempt to truly know another person, in the sense of desiring them for specific qualities or attaining a state of mutual attunement. Rather, it provides the pleasure of partial knowledge, of not really knowing others in their complexity but of still recognizing them, for a moment, as sexual beings. Furthermore, as in Bersani's theorization of

cruising, the narrator recognizes in his sexual partners their shared, subordinate status within mainstream society and their willful acceptance of marginality. The emotional and physical contact they make allows them, temporarily, to break through their masks of toughness and detachment, but, more significantly, involves an awareness of mutual social defiance and vulnerability. In other words, the narrator and his tricks are socially marked and hence somehow affiliated because of the sexual acts they engage in, regardless of their actual identities or self-identifications. Despite differences of gender presentation, race, ethnicity, or class, they are united through bonds of queer intimacy and ambivalent belonging.

Rechy's narrator participates in a project of queer world-making or counterpublicity that occurs on the level of self-perception and interpersonal relations. Instead of involving the production of queer cultural forms or institutions, this project entails viewing the world from a position of marginalization and recreating it from one's own iconoclastic perspective. Stigmatized and outcast because of his sexuality, Rechy's narrator fashions his own poetic, symbolic system of meaning and way of living in the world, as his alienation from mainstream society produces a sense of autonomous difference and conscious deviation from the norm. Cruising additionally produces community through individuation: while social exclusion may inspire isolating feelings of narcissism or shame, it also provides a context within which one can sexually connect with and recognize others on a similar basis. Through its portrayal of cruising, *City of Night* presents homosexuality from the perspective of the outcast, who has nothing to lose except individual self-respect and so risks everything in the pursuit of meaning and the self-stylization of his life.

Notes

1. See Doan and Prosser (2001) for a collection of articles on *The Well of Loneliness*.

2. Increasingly, marriage is seen within the gay movement itself as an antidote to promiscuity and AIDS. See, for example, Eskridge (1996), Rotello (1997), Signorile (1997), and Sullivan (1996, 1997).

3. Patrick Moore argues that the demonization of gay male promiscuity marks a betrayal of the current generation's gay forebears and the sexual institutions they struggled to create: "Shame motivates our forward movement as we fearfully suppress images of gay people as sexual beings, encouraging instead non-threatening roles (parent, homeowner, or campy friend) that prove 'we're just like you.' In our community of shame, we believe that by actively forgetting the past we can erase it, and many impor-

tant parts of our legacy are now being lost or willfully abandoned" (2004, xxii). As Moore notes, such whitewashing of history provides a disservice to younger generations of queers, who might instead see the sexual experimentation of the 1970s as a creative and inspirational force for social change.

4. My wariness of psychoanalytic discourse reflects an attempt to interpret sexual, psychological, and emotional deviations outside a framework of normalcy/pathology. I also find psychoanalytic theory's traditional focus on early familial configurations somewhat limiting, as it fails to account for social factors that emerge in later life and that may prove equally, if not more, influential in the formation of adult identities and relationships. My use of social theory additionally reflects a preference for thinking of power in terms of structures of oppression, rather than in the symbolic terms of phallus, castration, and lack. My insistence on social theory reflects no value judgments as to the validity, relevance, or utility of psychoanalytic theory, and I see psychoanalysis and psychotherapy as capable of providing highly valuable insights. I do not think that psychoanalytic and social theories are incompatible; rather, together they might provide a richer, more nuanced, and analytically complex understanding of sexual identities in social context.

5. The analytical framework of public sphere theory provides an innovative and underutilized method of thinking about cultural politics and contemporary queer identities. Recent studies within lesbian and gay studies that draw on public sphere theory include Clarke (2000), Cvetkovich (2003), Duggan (2000), Gamson (1998), Muñoz (1999), Nealon (2001, 99–103), and Warner (2002).

6. For a discussion of the mainstreaming and commodification of the gay and lesbian movement, see Chasin (2000).

7. Rechy's 1967 novel *Numbers* focuses entirely on this aspect of the cruising game, with the protagonist maniacally accumulating thirty sexual contacts while on a ten-day vacation in Los Angeles.

8. Other queer theorists have also taken up the question of shame. See Crimp (2002), Halperin (2002), Halperin and Traub (forthcoming), Sedgwick (1995), and Warner (1999).

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