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# Masculinity (Re)Defined: Masculinity, Internalized Homophobia, and the Gay Macho Clone in the Works of John Rechy

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CHAPTER  
SEVENTEEN



*Daniel Enrique Pérez*  
*Masculinity (Re)Defined: Masculinity,*  
*Internalized Homophobia, and the Gay Macho*  
*Clone in the Works of John Rechy*

*Masculine, rough, straight-acting, chiseled, and muscular* are just a few of the many adjectives that John Rechy (b. 1934) uses to create images of men in his novels. The hypermasculinization of the male body and limitations placed on sexual roles are used in his work as a means of underscoring and praising masculinity while deflecting and chastising notions of femininity. This study postulates that the hypermasculinization of men-who-have-sex-with-men is the result of a heightened internalized homophobia that the protagonists, and perhaps even the author, possess(ed). This study explores the dynamics of this internalized homophobia and how it shapes characters and their behavior in Rechy's work. Furthermore, it suggests that these Rechian images have been a significant contribution to the development and establishment of the universal gay macho clone.

It will behoove us to focus on three of Rechy's earlier works: *City of Night* (1963), *Numbers* (1967), and *The Sexual Outlaw* (1977).

Analyzing these three novels as a trilogy will allow for a more thorough examination of internalized homophobia in these works over an extended period of time. In each of the three novels we evaluate three variables: masculinity, internalized homophobia, and the gay macho clone. We will witness an obvious steady decrease in the internalized homophobia that the protagonists exhibit during this particular fourteen-year span (1963-1977) in Rechy's writing career. Such a decrease in internalized homophobia, however, will be met by a marked increase in the masculinization of the gay male body.

For the purposes of this study, one can consider each of the main protagonists in the trilogy to be one in the same. There is substantial evidence that the protagonists in all three novels are the same character and there also exists a plethora of autobiographical references to the author. Therefore, we will refer to all of the protagonists in the novels as "the protagonist."

As we will show, *City of Night* is the most homophobic novel of the three under investigation. Our protagonist at this stage demonstrates traits representative of the pre-Stonewall homosexual male who suffers from an acute case of internalized homophobia. Denial of his sexuality, performance of exalted idealized forms of masculine behavior, and hatred directed towards nonmasculine behavior are just a few of these traits. We see images of masculinity in their most idealized form as dictated by the constraints of society during the era in which the novel was written and the corresponding narrative takes place. Also, internalized homophobia is at its highest and we witness the early signs of the development of the gay macho clone.

The protagonist is a former military man who only recently left the army. He is a nomad wandering through various major cities. There is no indication that he is particularly muscular, but we must consider that masculinity during the early 1960s did not place a great emphasis on muscles, instead there was an emphasis on other aspects of physical appearances (e.g., clothing and disregard for personal appearance),

occupations, and behavior. In fact, in the novel there are very few references to the protagonist's physical appearance. We do know he is young, attractive, has a slender to average build, and has no difficulty picking up "scores" (men who hire hustlers). The protagonist does personify masculinity as it was perpetuated in the social structure of the 60s. As Daniel Harris suggests, during this era, someone was considered masculine if they were: indifferent about their physical appearance, unkempt, unrefined, blue-collar, unintelligent, criminal, and stoic—all characteristics that the protagonist and other hustlers in the novel either possess or pretend to possess. The novel is replete with masculine stereotypes. The reader is exposed to a cornucopia of images, real and unreal, of cowboys, motorcyclists, military men, criminals, and blue-collar workers.

Throughout the novel the hustlers are forced to play traditional masculine roles whereas the "scores" and other homosexual men are free to be whatever they want, often with a price to pay for digressing from the masculine ideal. The author's description of the hustlers remains consistent throughout the novel; he continues to use words representative of the masculine ideal: "tough-looking," "young," "fugitive," "masculine," etc. It becomes evident that possessing these traits renders big rewards: you are desired, you receive money, you are praised, etc. If we compare the author's descriptions of the men identified as homosexuals in the novel: "queer," "faggots," "old," "queen," "fairyqueen," effeminate," etc., we see how possessing nonmasculine traits results in retribution: they have to pay to have sex, they are the victims of violence and gay bashing, they have low self-esteem, they are old or middle-aged, and they live lonely lives.

The protagonist and other hustlers must be doing what they are doing under the pretense that it is to make money, never reciprocate nor initiate a sexual advance, and pretend that they are heterosexual. They remain under the guise that if they did not need the money, they would be having sex with females. They consistently make comments about having sex with women—the only form of desire they are allowed to

demonstrate. This pseudoheterosexuality forces the hustler to play rigid, nonreciprocal sexual roles when engaging in sexual activity with “scores.”

For example, the first “score” with whom the protagonist has sex tries to convince himself that the protagonist is heterosexual, but acknowledges that it is all a game. He offers the protagonist ten bucks to allow the former to perform fellatio on the latter, a service the protagonist pretends not to enjoy. He offers much resistance as the prospective client proceeds to talk him into the sexual encounter:

Now stop squirming and don't hold it—relax, if you're gonna go along with it—at least pretend you enjoy it—what the hell, I should pay and you act like you don't give a damn?—punks allasame. I was like you once—you believe it?” he says, “and now look at me, playing the other side of this goddam game. What the hell, pal, people change, remember that, don't forget it for a moment, remember that and don't be so fuckin' cocky. Now lay back, close your goddam eyes and stop staring at me like I'm a goddam creep—hell, I ain't ashamed of nothing. Pretend I'm some milkfed chick back in—wherever the hell you're from. . . .Thats it, thats better...Relax...Thats it...(26)

It becomes evident that the protagonist has adopted behavior representative of the Chicano/Latino macho figure as described by Tomás Almaguer and Ilán Stavans: repression of nonmasculine traits, exalted virility, and performance of rigid sex roles. One result of this type of behavior is the inability to reciprocate desire during sexual activity. Not reciprocating becomes the single most important rule that the protagonist upholds.

That the protagonist is desired without him desiring back is the first requirement for any sexual encounter in which he engages. The second requirement is that he is paid for sex. The money he receives both confirms the one-way desire relationship and protects his masculinity.

Engaging in sex with someone without the pretense of money would imply that the protagonist is acting on his desire to be with men and identify him as a gay man—a stigma that possesses many negative consequences.

The protagonist possesses the traits associated with the gay clone prior to the gay liberation movement. He becomes aware of the masculine ideals perpetuated by society, he demonstrates disdain for what is not masculine, and he has very low self-esteem. The protagonist's need to continually don a mask indicates his lack of self-esteem. There are few examples of the protagonist ever admiring himself or saying anything positive about himself or his behavior. His biggest fear is that he is related to what is most despised in *City of Night*—stereotypical gay men. Therefore, our protagonist remains in constant motion; he moves from city to city, escaping what he most fears: himself and his homosexuality. The protagonist's indefatigable itinerancy, especially from a traditional Chicano heteronormative space to that of an Anglo homoerotic urban space, facilitates his identity deconstruction and reconstruction throughout the course of *City of Night*. We witness the protagonist's slow transformation from that of a closeted homosexual to an openly gay male as our protagonist begins to look in the mirror, and begins to accept and like what he sees in *Numbers* and *The Sexual Outlaw*.

Both *City of Night* and *Numbers* were written prior to the gay liberation movement, which was at its zenith in 1969 with the Stonewall riots. Therefore, there are more similarities between these two novels than there are between either of these two novels and the third, *The Sexual Outlaw*. Nonetheless, a look at *Numbers* reveals some of the changes in attitude, behavior, dress, and sexual practices related to masculinity and internalized homophobia. By 1967, representation of masculinity in Rechy's work begins to undergo a transformation. We see less of an emphasis on clothing worn by traditional masculine figures and more of an emphasis on body type and physique. We also see the protagonist begin to look at himself in the mirror. The protagonist admires those traits in him that are considered most masculine, yet still demonstrates a profound fear of and hatred for those characteristics that are not.

In the first few pages of *Numbers*, the reader is finally given a vivid description of the mysterious protagonist of *City of Night*: “A slight crook in his nose keeps him from being a prettyboy and makes him, therefore, much more attractive and masculine” (16). According to the narrator, the protagonist “looks to be in his early 20’s” (17). He has also spent the last few years lifting weights and toning his body. His muscularity is not exaggerated; his muscles are just the right size to make his masculinity more authentic. The protagonist exhibits a narcissistic attitude throughout the novel. He constantly looks at and admires himself; throughout the novel he looks for “numbers” which most resemble him physically. He is the paragon of masculinity and he is desired by both men and women. In *City of Night* his masculinity was attributable to his youth, his deviance, his walk and talk, his pseudoheterosexuality, and his roughness, whereas in *Numbers*, it is primarily due to his newly developed physique and his pseudoheterosexuality.

It is evident that the protagonist maintains the Latin model of homosexual identity and behavior. As the paragon of manliness, he insists that he does not desire other men, never reciprocates advances, and plays rigid sex roles (primarily that of the dominant inserter) as a means of justifying his encounters with other men and avoiding the stigma that comes with the homosexual label. The other men with whom he has sex play the role of the receiver and validate the protagonist’s masculinity, however, they are unequivocally gay according to both the narrator and the protagonist. The other images of men in the novel are primarily descriptions of gay men. The narrator often refers to them as “youngman” and in general, they are “goodlooking.” The protagonist’s exhibition of such strong narcissistic behavior renders it necessary for the men with whom he has sex to look a lot like him, but, inevitably, there is something that makes them nonmasculine or not “real men.” There is usually some very attractive feature associated with masculinity (muscles, clothing, facial features, etc.), but there is almost always a nonmasculine feature (too many muscles, white-collar clothing, too pretty, etc.).

Without the pretense of money in exchange for sex, the protagonist must create another pretext in order to engage in sex with other men—that he is on a mission to count how many people desire him and/or initiate a sexual encounter with him. The protagonist is on a conquest that resembles his conquest in *City of Night*: to validate his masculinity via other's desire for him, his body, and his phallus. The first thing he has to do in both novels is dehumanize and objectify his targets. Whereas in *City of Night* his sexual object choices were considered “scores,” in *Numbers* they become “numbers”—both terms representative of men engaging in some sort of sporting event. The protagonist's “numbers” replace the “scores” as the virtually non-human things that both desire the protagonist and become pawns in his game, the sexhunt.

Let us consider one encounter he has with a “lithe goodlooking youngman” in a park who follows the protagonist into a cave and starts groping the protagonist immediately. When the protagonist pushes the man's head down so that the latter can perform fellatio on him, the man says, “No—fuck me!” in a voice “shattered by desire” (244). The protagonist then insists that the man get him aroused first by performing fellatio. Even though the man does not seem to enjoy performing fellatio, he has to satisfy the protagonist's desire in order to get the latter to penetrate him. The man has to remove his own clothes and has minimal contact with the protagonist. The only contact allowed is between the protagonist's penis and the man's orifices: “Fiercely, Johnny pushes his cock into the other in one savage thrust. The youngman utters a gasp that softens into a long sigh. Pumping angrily in and out of the other's tight opening. Johnny comes immediately” (245). The words “fierce,” “savage,” and “angrily” create an image of deviant, violent, almost animalistic sex. Immediately after the protagonist ejaculates, he leaves the scene without uttering a word, but the man remains “bent over the branch whimpering” (245)—leaving the reader with the image of a symbolic rape. The protagonist then goes to a bathroom and begins to wash “his prick obsessively with soap, over and over (though there was no trace of the act.)” (245). The protagonist feels a need to cleanse himself of the “dirty act” (243) he



just committed. Having just performed the manly feat of rape, he looks at himself in the mirror and realizes that he is now “as goodlooking, as exciting as ever” (245).

That the protagonist derives pleasure from his encounters is obvious, but the fact that the narrator does not acknowledge or demonstrate his pleasure is an attempt to protect the protagonist’s masculinity. The protagonist does take on a traditionally nonmasculine position in a couple of sexual encounters. In one scene a blond man licks his nipples and in another the protagonist leans back and spreads his legs while a man, lying flat on his stomach, rims the protagonist while the latter straddles the man’s shoulders. The latter scene described is the only scene within *City of Night* and *Numbers* where the protagonist is penetrated in any way. His orifices, mouth, and anus had never before been penetrated by any type of phallic symbol: penis, finger, or tongue. It is obvious that the act of rimming produces pleasure in the protagonist. In fear that this could be construed as a nonmasculine or homosexual trait, the narrator insists that the protagonist ejaculate into the man’s mouth—an attempt to regain the protagonist’s status as penetrator or conqueror during the sexual encounter.

The two scenes described above are the two where the protagonist demonstrates the most pleasure when he is with another man. The sex roles he plays are still very rigid and limited, but the minor representations of the pleasure he derives are indications that internalized homophobia is subsiding. This transformation takes place as the image of the gay macho clone develops.

Although the protagonist has a muscular body, it is important to note that muscles do not equate to masculinity—masculinity is still determined by attitude and behavior. The protagonist must always be “straight acting.” The protagonist is no longer required to wear uniforms traditionally associated with masculine men and, instead, wears less clothing or clothing that is almost representative of the gay macho clone. If the protagonist wears a shirt at all, he wears one that accentuates his upper body. He has also adopted the narcissistic attitude associated with

gay macho clones: constant looks in the mirror and constant admiration of his body. These attributes combined with the hypermasculine performance he carries on make him the mold from which the gay macho clone will be created. Physically, he does not represent the ideal mold for creating the said clone only because there are imperfections in his appearance (i.e., his crooked nose), but, as we have shown above, this can be construed as a means of concealing his homosexuality.

As far as behavior is concerned, the gay macho clone exhibits a sense of pride in his homosexuality, a sexuality our protagonist has not even accepted. The said clone is also not afraid of that which is nonmasculine and he is free to perform multiple roles during sexual intercourse with other men—two traits the protagonist is still lacking. Furthermore, although the protagonist is not as peripatetic as he was in *City of Night*, he does remain in one city and interfaces much more with the gay ghetto. He maintains his distance from this gay space by remaining an outsider who only visits for a short period and then leaves. These are all traits that change in *The Sexual Outlaw*.

*The Sexual Outlaw* relays the story of Jim, the protagonist, and three days and nights of his “sexhunt” in Los Angeles. Images of masculinity in this novel differ markedly from the first two. We find an even greater emphasis on the male body itself, especially the focus on muscular bodies. We also see less of an emphasis on what the men are wearing. The traditional, stereotypical images of masculine men, as cowboys, criminals, uniformed men, and bikers, are also less prevalent. These images cease to be necessary to accentuate or legitimize masculinity. Finally, and most importantly, we see less of an emphasis on traditional masculine behavior. The protagonist is more inclined to engage in what could be construed as nonmasculine and nonheteronormative behavior without jeopardizing his masculinity.

Even though our protagonist had a muscular build in *Numbers*, in *The Sexual Outlaw* he is more muscular and he spends much more time bodybuilding. His physical appearance and strength become the essence of his masculinity. His walk, talk, behavior, and dress are no

longer defining features of his masculinity. The protagonist is obsessed with his body and he continually maintains his body on display. He generally walks around with no shirt at all.

The other images of men created in *The Sexual Outlaw* are almost all mirror images of the protagonist. The comparisons the narrator makes between the protagonist and other men in the novel are unprecedented. In both *Numbers* and *City of Night* the narrator underscores the differences between the protagonist and his sexual object choices whereas in *The Sexual Outlaw* there exist far more similarities than differences between the two. Unlike *Numbers* or *City of Night*, the men with whom the protagonist has sexual encounters are considered to be just as masculine as the protagonist and the narrator does not undermine their masculinity by identifying or relating a nonmasculine characteristic.

Like the protagonist, the other men also no longer have to play roles as traditional or stereotypical men. Their masculinity is no longer determined by the clothes they wear nor their behavior, but by the clothing they do not wear and how well defined their bodies are. Traditionally nonmasculine traits are also used to describe men without threatening their masculinity. The men are often described as both “manly” and “beautiful”—something we did not find in the other novels. The men are also considered “outlaws” as opposed to “scores” or “numbers” and it is obvious that the protagonist considers himself an “outlaw” as well. The term outlaw is used to describe all men who have sex with men—especially in public spaces.

In *The Sexual Outlaw*, the protagonist exhibits much more freedom and less internalized homophobia in his sexual encounters with other men. There is a consistent and strong sense that the protagonist is acting exclusively on his and his partners’ homoerotic desire. There is no longer any type of guise for the protagonist to be engaging in sex with men. He is not hustling nor is he playing a formal numbers game. There are no women (or female figures) in the novel nor are there any references to heterosexual desire. More importantly, the novel is replete with examples of the protagonist reciprocating during sexual

encounters. Not only does this signify a resonant decrease in internalized homophobia that the protagonist possesses, but, for the first time, we have an overt indication that the protagonist is unequivocally gay and identifies as such.

Instead of the protagonist getting through encounters quickly, he tries to make them last as long as possible. Whereas in the earlier novels the protagonist reaching orgasm took place in a relative short amount of time with a minuscule amount of stimulation, during sexual encounters in *The Sexual Outlaw*, the scenes last for an extended period of time with maximum stimulation. The protagonist holds back orgasms and participates substantially to satisfy his very own and his partners' desires. We see the protagonist engaging in a new level of intimacy with other men.

While the protagonist is cruising at Griffith Park, a “very handsome man” drives by. This man is described as “very muscular, obviously a bodybuilder too” (128). Once the man shows interest in the protagonist, the latter leads the former into the park. The protagonist goes out of his way to find an isolated spot to be alone with the man instead of settling on an easily accessible spot as customary. The protagonist makes every attempt to reciprocate everything the man does to him, but when it comes to the protagonist rimming the man, he retracts. He even takes the man’s testicles into his mouth as a sort of substitute for the pleasure he received when the man rimmed him. Rimming—as seen by the narrator—becomes the only act that the protagonist is not fully able to reciprocate in this scene even though he is aware of his desire to reciprocate fully. There is a unique combination of traditionally masculine and nonmasculine words to describe the scene that forces us to re-evaluate our notions of masculinity:

Their eyes are open wide, studying naked muscles outrageously flexed; limbs, organs. Jim touches the other’s flaring thighs, his fingers awakening the soft field of hairs; his hands about the other’s buttocks, stretching them, touching the knotted hole with his finger—as the other explores his with his tongue.

Masculine, beautiful, muscles, male. Quickly the bodies shift, head to head. Lips grasp flitting tongues. Naked, cocks, male, outlaws. They inhale deeply the sweet odor of their mixed, clean sweat. They taste it on their tongues. (130)

The use of the words *soft*, *beautiful*, and *sweet* combined with other words like *muscles*, *masculine*, and *sweat* would be considered oxymorons in the Rechian genre prior to 1977, but the masterful and consistent way the narrator utilizes these historically contradictory terms in *The Sexual Outlaw* normalizes these unique combinations and new notions of masculinity materialize. The protagonist's encounters with other men are no longer one-sided, mechanical, violent, nor dirty; instead they are reciprocal, intimate, beautiful, and natural. Also, an orifice of his is often penetrated by a phallic symbol, although he never assumes the position of penetratee during anal intercourse. Both the protagonist and most of the men with whom he participates sexually are the physical manifestations of idealized manliness despite their unquestionable gay self-identification. It is obvious that internalized homophobia has decreased markedly when compared to Rechy's previous novels. In *The Sexual Outlaw*, the protagonist no longer exhibits disdain for the gay men with whom he has encounters and, instead, he associates himself with them. The protagonist also exhibits a heightened sense of pride and self-esteem—traits often associated with the gay macho clone. Our protagonist has adopted the majority of the characteristics associated with this figure: he wears related attire, possesses the same physical attributes, lives in the gay ghetto, exhibits similar behavior, and performs similar sexual acts. The protagonist develops a new sense of self. He has absolutely no qualms about being an "outlaw" or being gay. He exhibits a sense of pride that is unmitigated by his same-sex desire.

The protagonist's sexual liberation is a significant example of his decreased homophobia and his relation to the gay macho clone. As we have shown, he demonstrates very few inhibitions about reciprocating

during his sexual encounters and he participates increasingly in traditionally nonmasculine roles during sexual encounters. He also no longer hides under the guise of heterosexual desire and engages in intimate physical contact with other men. The protagonist is no longer forced to wear a mask or play rigid sexual roles.

We have analyzed masculinity, internalized homophobia, and the gay macho clone in the first fourteen years of John Rechy's literary production: 1963-1977. We have seen a paradigm shift in idealized forms of masculinity that have forced us to reconfigure our notions of masculinity. In the span of fourteen years, masculinity has undergone a significant transformation in the Rechian genre. In *City of Night* (1963), masculinity is synonymous with youth, violence, criminality, uniforms, lack of intelligence, heterosexuality, and stoicism; in turn, homosexuality is synonymous with weakness, intelligence, effeminacy, unattractiveness, and sexual subordination. On the other hand, in *The Sexual Outlaw* (1977), masculinity becomes synonymous with: muscles, strength, beauty, intimacy, and homosexuality. Masculinity has truly been redefined. The fact that homosexuality could now be associated with masculinity and strength attests to this transformation.

Our evaluation of Rechy's work reveals that as our protagonist adopted more and more physical traits associated with the gay macho clone, he became more free from the masks he once wore. It is important to note that the protagonist still shows signs of internalized homophobia (e.g., his continued apprehension to perform select sexual roles, namely the role of receiver during anal intercourse). Nevertheless, We have traced the transformation of the protagonist in *City of Night* who was running and escaping from what he most fears and detests—himself and his homosexuality, to the protagonist in *The Sexual Outlaw* who is running and chasing after what he most admires and desires—himself and his new gay identity



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