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The Representations of Drag Queen Characters in Pre-Stonewall Literature: John Rechy's *City of Night* and Hubert Selby Jr.'s *Last Exit to Brooklyn*

Abstract: This paper is a comparative analysis of two novels—John Rechy's *City of Night* and Hubert Selby Jr.'s *Last Exit to Brooklyn*—in terms of their presentation of drag queen characters. The analysis focuses on the novels' revolutionary potential and argues that since the authors present their characters as sympathetic and genuine despite the hardships they have to endure, the two novels could be seen as examples of early forms of gay rights activism. Such an assumption questions the approach of many scholars who treat pre-Stonewall literature as purely an expression of homosexual people's trouble with accepting their sexual orientation.

Keywords: drag queen, pre-Stonewall literature, gay rights activism, John Rechy, Hubert Selby Jr.

The riots which were sparked by the raid on the Stonewall Inn in Greenwich Village, New York on June 28, 1969 are commonly referred to as the turning point in the history of gay rights movement. They have become a symbol of “gay resistance to oppression” and are often believed to have been “that moment in time when gays and lesbians recognized all at once their mistreatment and their solidarity” (Duberman xvii). Those events had an unquestionable effect on the development of the gay rights movement, leading to the emergence of such organizations as the Gay Liberation Front, starting the tradition of annual gay pride marches and greatly increasing the visibility of gay people in the American society. However, there is clearly a tendency to consider Stonewall to have been the starting point and disregarding any forms of activism that happened before. As Duberman remarks: “The decades preceding Stonewall... continue to be regarded by most gays and lesbians as some vast neolithic wasteland” (xvii). This clear division of gay history into pre- and post-Stonewall periods does not give justice to early activists who made Stonewall possible.

Larry Gross points to the post-WW2 period of the Cold War as the time when the topic of homosexuality first became a matter of public interest (21). Homosexuals, just like communists, were targeted by “witch hunts” whose purpose was to identify and persecute the enemies of America, and they were only mentioned in the media in the context of arrests and crimes, under such headlines as *Los Angeles Hearst's* “State Department Fires 531 Perverts, Security Risk” (Gross 21-22). It was during this time of “political and sexual repression” that the first examples of gay activism occurred (21). Gross refers to homosexual press as the first medium which had a

great influence on forming gay and lesbian identities before Stonewall; titles such as *Vice Versa*, *ONE*, *Mattachine Review*, or *Ladder*, all founded in the late 1940s and the 1950s, gave homosexual people a chance to start sharing their experiences and ideas and become a community (24-29). Furthermore, in 1951 Donald Webster Cory published *The Homosexual in America: A Subjective Approach*, the first book in America arguing for equality, which “served as a stimulus to the emerging homosexual self-consciousness” (Gross 23). Its popularity encouraged Cory to publish another book, *The Homosexual and His Society: A View from Within* (1963), co-written with John LeRoy, which even more openly called for “a struggle for the rights guaranteed to all citizens of a free democratic society” (qtd. in Gross 23). These early forms of activism were aimed exclusively at homosexual people, which meant that their reach was limited. As Gross points out, in the 1950s the gay magazine with the largest circulation was *ONE* with 5,000 subscribers (27-28). Nevertheless, the role of pre-Stonewall advocates for gay rights should not be underestimated. Had they not worked towards raising awareness and creating a sense of community among homosexual people, the eruption of the Stonewall riots would not have been possible.

The beginning of campaigns for the rights of homosexual people in the 1940s was also the time when gay topics started appearing in American literature. This was when books such as Truman Capote’s *Other Voices, Other Rooms* (1948) or Gore Vidal’s *The City and the Pillar* (1948) became best-sellers. Since then, the popularity of homosexual fiction began to grow, with “a flood of work” in the revolutionary 1960s (Cady 30). However, the increasing number of publications did not mean a growing acceptance of homosexual topics by the public. What is more, it did not seem to express the acceptance of their own sexuality by gay writers either. As Joseph Cady argues that:

The remarkable achievement of twentieth-century American gay male writing before Stonewall might at first appear to be offset by the fact that much of it seems concessive. For example, in their association of homosexuality with violence, suicide, murder, or other kinds of pathetic death or at best with lives of freakishness or isolation, many works in the post-World War II outpouring of published gay male writing seem to confirm Mart Crowley’s famous line in *The Boys in the Band*, ‘Show me a happy homosexual, and I’ll show you a gay corpse.’ Even some positive portrayals surround the subject with distracting reassurances, like the bisexuality in Baldwin’s and Goodman’s work. (38-39)

Such representations are not surprising, given the fact that at that time homosexuality was still considered a mental disorder by the American Psychiatric Association and was outlawed in the United States by the sodomy laws. Any more positive depictions would be banned from publishing or would not find a wide audience.

By the 1960s homosexuality became such a visible phenomenon in America that some mainstream media attempted to explain it to the heterosexual majority. In

1963 the *New York Times* published the first-in-history front-page article concerned with gay people (Gross 30). The headline left no doubt as to the article's approach: "Growth of Overt Homosexuality in City Provokes Wide Concern." The author quoted the opinions of such "experts" as psychiatrists, religious leaders, and the police, with very few comments by homosexual people. This became the standard format for discussing gay issues in the mainstream media, and it was adopted in the articles in such magazines as *Life*, *Time*, and *Newsweek*, following the *New York Times*' story (Gross 31-32). Furthermore, in 1967 the CBS, as the first network television, aired a report on homosexuality. Even though it gave more time to homosexuals by inviting gay men to talk about their experiences, their stories were also "balanced" by the opinions of psychiatrists, the clergy and the police (Gross 38-39). The conclusion of the program said exactly what the audience should think about gay people: "The dilemma of the homosexual: Told by the medical profession he is sick, by the law that he's a criminal. Shunned by employers. Rejected by heterosexual society. Incapable of a fulfilling relationship with a woman or, for that matter, with a man. At the center of his life, he remains anonymous... a displaced person... an outsider" (qtd. in Gross 39).

This highly negative public view of homosexual people made the early advocates for gay rights focus on "normalizing" gay people's image. For example, Robert Duncan in his 1944 essay "The Homosexual in Society" argued that homosexuals should unite in their struggle for equal rights, though their primary focus should be "human freedom" (210). This meant that they should fight for universal rights rather than create a culture of their own, which he described as "a cult of homosexual superiority to the human race; the cultivation of a secret language, the *camp*, a tone and a vocabulary that is loaded with contempt for the human" (210). Duncan further expressed his disapproval of identifying oneself as a member of the homosexual community by arguing that it only offered its members "self-ridicule" (211). Despite his claim that homosexuals were one of the most oppressed social groups, he believed that they, in fact, partly shared the responsibility for such a state of things because of their tendency to exclude themselves from society (209-210).

Duncan's stance was not uncommon. As Betty Luther Hillman argues, "as homosexuals first began to form organizations to fight for their rights, combating stereotypes about homosexuality and separating their sexual identities from gender deviance became two of their primary goals" (156). One of the consequences of this was that crossdressing became a highly controversial issue among gay people. It was viewed as a very harmful phenomenon which upheld the popular opinion that "all homosexuals [were] nelly drag queens" (Hillman 153). This was not a rare statement. When scientists such as Richard von Krafft-Ebig first started studying the phenomenon of crossdressing at the end of the nineteenth century, they arrived at a conclusion that it "was simply a *visualization* of homosexuality" and drag has since then become "a potent symbol of male homosexuality" (Silberman 180). For this reason, many early gay rights movements refused to advocate for the rights of people whose gender identity or gender presentation was non-normative (Hillman

158-159). As a result, there was little effort to change the public perception of such figures and they remained largely misunderstood.

According to Seth Clark Silberman, this tendency to misrepresent drag queens and other cross-dressing individuals found its clear realization in pre-Stonewall literature. In an entry on crossdressing in *The Gay and Lesbian Literary Heritage*, he classifies the typical representations of male and female crossdressing in literature and establishes some recurring motifs in such stories. According to the critic, typical drag queen characters are “crazy (naturally or drug-induced) and superficial”; they are misogynistic but they are “dedicated to passing as [women] in order to ensnare a ‘real’ man”; finally, they can never be truly happy and are doomed to a tragic end (180). As examples of such representations he quotes, among others, two characters from 1960s novels: Miss Destiny from John Rechy’s *City of Night* (1963) and Georgette from Hubert Selby Jr.’s *Last Exit to Brooklyn* (1964). The two characters undoubtedly have most of the negative characteristics listed by Silberman. However, the fact that the two novels were published before Stonewall riots might have influenced the critic’s analysis. The common misconception that it was only after Stonewall that the struggle for gay rights began might have clouded the revolutionary potential of pre-Stonewall novels. This article sets out to compare the two representations of drag queen characters in Rechy’s and Selby’s novels and argue that despite their dependence on stereotypes, the authors’ approaches make them quite unconventional, even subversive. Their unprecedented presentation of drag queens as sympathetic characters may be seen as an example of early activism since it worked towards raising awareness among homosexual people.

The two novels address the phenomenon of cross-dressing from different perspectives and in varying degrees. Rechy’s novel is entirely devoted to the description of the homosexual world; it is told from the perspective of an insider, as it is based on Rechy’s own experiences as a hustler on the streets of New York, San Francisco, Los Angeles and New Orleans. On the other hand, Selby’s *Last Exit to Brooklyn* is not a gay novel. Written by a heterosexual author, its main focus is on the lives of the lowest classes inhabiting Brooklyn, New York, drag queens and homosexuals being only a part of them. However, both novels seem to have a similar goal; they both address controversial issues, showing the reality of the lives of the people whom society wants to keep invisible. The fact that authors from two different backgrounds discussed the situation of homosexual people so openly before it became a major issue with the outbreak of the Stonewall riots proves that the attempts of early gay rights activists at raising awareness of their cause were largely successful.

The first impression one has when introduced to Miss Destiny and Georgette is their strangeness. This is how Georgette is first described in *Last Exit to Brooklyn*:

Georgette was a hip queer. She (he) didnt try to disguise or conceal it with marriage and mans talk,... but, took a pride in being a homosexual by feeling intellectually and esthetically superior to those (especially women) who werent gay...; and with the wearing of womens panties, lipstick, eye

makeup..., long marcelled hair, manicured and polished fingernails, the wearing of womens clothes complete with padded bra, high heels and wig (one of her biggest thrills was going to BOP CITY dressed as a tall stately blond (she was 6'4" in heels) in the company of a negro...); and the occasional wearing of a menstrual napkin. (39-40)

What is apparent in the description of Georgette is that Selby seems to repeat the common misconception that crossdressing is a projection of homosexuality—she is presented as a “fully-fledged” “queer,” as opposed to many gay men who are too afraid to admit their orientation. Selby’s characters also express this belief—Georgette’s lover, Vinnie enjoys her affection for him “even if it is a fag” (44), and her brother yells at their mother that “hes nothing but a filthy homosexual [and she] should throw him out in the street” (54). No one seems to accept Georgette for who she really is except for her “girlfriends” who are, like her, “hip queers.” Despite the overwhelming hostility, she is proud of who she is, which may be understood as a fault. In his analysis of “the American literature of homosexuality,” Stanton Hoffman argues that the “gay world” is presented in novels as a punishment, it is “the result of [a homosexual’s] guilt over his choice of a way of life” (196). The world presented in Selby’s novel is definitely a hellish place full of violence and drugs and void of hope. The fact that Georgette does not accept the surrounding grim reality could be understood as a sign of her obliviousness, though it seems more likely that it is a coping mechanism. As James Giles argues, “she has bravely chosen to create from within an identity that denies those aspects of external reality that are unbearable to her” (*Understanding* 21). This ability to create alternative realities in one’s mind is a fascinating phenomenon for Selby and this is what may have made it so easy for him to write from a drag queen’s perspective (Vorda 293, 301).

Rechy’s first description of Miss Destiny introduces her as an even more outlandish figure:

Indeed, indeed! here comes Miss Destiny! fluttering out of the shadows into the dimlights along the ledges like a giant firefly—flirting, calling out to everyone: ‘Hello, darling, I love you—I love you too, dear—so very much—ummmm!’ Kisses flung recklessly into the wind.... ‘What oh what did Chuck say to you, darling?’ to me, coming on breathlessly rushing words. ‘You must understand right here and now that Chuck still loves me, like all my exhusbands (youre new in town, dear, or I would certainly have seen you before, and do you have a place to stay?—I live on Spring Street and there is a ‘Welcome!’ mat at the door)—oh, they *nevu*h! can forget me ... Oh I am, as everyone will tell you, ‘A Very Restless Woman.’ (102-103)

This description clearly presents Miss Destiny as a colorful figure whose presence is impossible to ignore. While Georgette, on a few occasions, struggles to draw everyone’s attention to herself, for Destiny it comes naturally, and she clearly enjoys it. What is more, similarly to Georgette’s portrayal, the issue of gender is brought

up very quickly, though not immediately, allowing the reader to first imagine her as a woman. First, she calls herself a “Very Restless Woman,” but then the narrator refers to her as “She-he” and states that “Miss Destiny is a man” (103). However, this happens only during their first meeting. Later on, Destiny does not experience hostility or lack of acceptance. On the contrary, she is very respected in her environment because she once was arrested for masquerading when she “went to this straight party in High Drag” and danced with a police officer from the vice squad (103-104).

Marjorie Garber, while analyzing the representations of cross-dressing in detective fiction, notices that it is mostly expressed through language (188). She points out that the way characters speak often gives them away in their attempts to hide their identity by pretending to be a member of the opposite sex (188-190). This linguistic distinctness is not specific to detective stories and it is also employed in Rechy’s and Selby’s novels to emphasize the difference between the drag queens and other characters. In *Last Exit*, the narrator’s voice and the dialogues are blended together, with no quotation marks to distinguish the latter. This is why Selby had to devise a unique way of speaking for every character. In the afterword to the novel, he writes: “when Vinnie is the subject the language and rhythms reflect him with their harshness; and with Georgette the sounds and rhythms are sibilant, soft, feminine, a lot of alliteration, the images romantic.” This aspect is even more pronounced in *City of Night*. Miss Destiny’s dialogues are full of exclamations and exaggerations. Here is how she describes her biggest dream:

A real wedding... like every young girl should have at least once.... And when it happens oh it will be the most simpuhlee Fabulous wedding the Westcoast has evuh seen! with oh the most beautiful queens as bridesmaids! and the handsomest studs as ushers!... and Me!... Me... in virginwhite... 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 puhfawn the Ceremony! (106-107)

This description makes it apparent that Destiny’s over-the-top manner of speaking is expressed not only through her colorful language, but also graphically, by capitalizing the most important words, marking numerous pauses in the utterances and using a peculiar form of transcription in words such as “simpuhlee,” “evuh,” or “puhfawn.”

It is significant that the queens’ way of speaking is considered by other characters as a sign of their intelligence. Vinnie is proud of Georgette because she “[is] smart and [can] snow [his friends] under with words (at the same time hating anyone else who might use polysyllabic words and thinking anyone who went to school was a creep)” (44). Moreover, Georgette is interested in the opera and literature, which sets her apart from all of her friends. During a party, when everyone seems to have lost their spirits, she believes it is a good time to do “something that would make it her moment and night... something that would once more make her

the nucleus of the night” (78). She picks up Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Raven” and starts reading it out loud. Everyone else is startled but they are all listening to her in awe, this being probably one of the very rare moments they have ever had contact with poetry.

Similarly, Miss Destiny is considered to be the best educated person in her environment. This is because she has a habit of explaining the meaning of the more “complicated” words she uses: “But, baby, it was a turbulent marriage (that means very stormy, dear)” (104-105). She also enjoys misquoting Shakespeare: “The quality of muhcee is mighty strained indeed—as the dear Portia said (from Shakespeare, my dears—a very Great writer who wrote ladies’ roles for dragqueens in his time)” (106). The narrator, who is a hustler but has college education, immediately notices her inaccuracy. At first he does not comment on it, since he prefers to keep his background a secret. However, he later admits to Miss Destiny that he also knows Shakespeare, which she finds unbelievable. She decides to test him by asking him who Desdemona is. He answers in a way which he believes she will understand best: “Desdemona was a swinging queen in the French Quarter who married a spadestud who dug her until a jealous pusher turned him on that his queen was making it with a studsailor, and the spade smothered the queen Desdemona and the heat came for him and he killed himself” (124). At first Miss Destiny does not respond but later she exclaims: “You *do* know who Desdemona is!” (124). It is clear that the narrator sees through her lack of education but decides not to use it against her. Even though he has a much more down-to-earth, not to say grim, view of the world, he never does anything that would disrupt her fantasies. This shows his great fondness of her.

Silberman insists that one of the features which accounts for the oddity of the drag queens described in the two novels is their addiction to drugs and alcohol (180). Georgette is “high most of the time on benzedrine and marihuana” and her life “[doesn’t] revolve, but [spins] centrifugally, around stimulants, opiates” (40). After she has been wounded in the leg by Vinnie’s friends and he insists on taking her home, her main worry is not the inevitable confrontation with her aggressive brother, but the lack of narcotics: “In the house a week or more with nothing. I’d crack. I cant stay down that long. Theyll bug me. Bug me. O jesus jesus jesus...” (50). She soon starts experiencing withdrawal symptoms and, despite her bad injury, runs away from home to one of her friends who she knows has some drugs: “Goldie handed her half a dozen bennie and she swallowed them, gulped hot coffee and sat silent... trying to think the bennie into her mind (and the room and the past few days out); not wanting to wait for it to dissolve and be absorbed by the blood and pumped through her body; wanting her heart to pound *now*; wanting the chills *now*; wanting the lie *now*; Now!!” (57). What is more, drugs are not only an addiction to Georgette and her friends, but they are perceived as a symbol of status, a way of life. During a party at Goldie’s place, to which Georgette has invited Vinnie and his friends, one of the queens is disappointed with their behavior: “Cant even take a few bennie and a little pot without simply drifting off. How ridiculous. I must say Georgette that I dont think much of these *men* friends of yours. I thought they were hip” (64-65).

However, for Miss Destiny and her friends drugs are much less significant. Queens and hustlers meet in bars where they get drunk, but alcohol and drugs are not considered to represent any higher value, unlike in Selby's novel—one of the queens chooses not to drink alcohol and nobody finds it shocking (111-112). During a party at Miss Destiny's place, they drink alcohol and take drugs (joints and pills), but it is not presented as the main event. Finally, even though the reader knows that Miss Destiny is not an abstainer, as she mentions getting high in her conversation with the narrator (125), there is not a single description of her taking drugs.

Silberman argues that drag queens' substance abuse is a way of coping with their constant depression, which is a result of their desire to become "real" women (179-181). He claims that in fiction crossdressing is mostly explained by characters' transsexualism, which serves as a way of normalizing such behavior by upholding the binary nature of gender: "To 'explain' drag queens by saying that they want to be women solidifies our gender binaries—everyone is, or wants to be, either a *man* or a *woman*" (180-181). It is interesting that in American literature of the 1960s there seem to be no descriptions of "recreational drag," i.e. donning women's apparel only for the purpose of entertainment. Such a phenomenon existed long before the Stonewall riots and even gay rights organizations that opposed crossdressing in public organized "drag balls," during which gay cis men (biological males identifying as men) dressed up as women for entertainment (Hillman 160, 166). The portrayals of crossdressing in novels, however, invariably suggest the characters' desire to be identified as women and *City of Night* and *Last Exit to Brooklyn* seem to be no exceptions.¹

The first description of Georgette reveals that not only does she dress like a woman, but also wears sanitary napkins from time to time (39). This is something that no one else can notice, therefore it is likely caused by her need to feel like a woman, not only resemble one. When she flirts with Vinnie, she feels like "a young girl on her first date" (40). She clearly considers herself a woman, as she wears makeup and women's clothing in her everyday life, though she never explicitly talks about her gender identity. It is very different with Miss Destiny, who mentions it on virtually every occasion. When she talks about getting arrested for masquerading, she comments: "I can see them bustin me for Impersonating a man – but a woman! – really!" (104). She also worries that her "exhusband" Sandy, who was sent to jail, "might turn queer" from spending so much time away from women (106). However, she is not always so confident. One time, she asks the narrator "dont you think I look *real*?" (114) and when she tells him about the first time she came to Los Angeles, she says:

1 The relationship between transvestitism, transsexuality and drag is a complex one and its analysis lies outside the scope of this article. Here, the term "drag queen" is used to refer to the way it was understood by the particular authors in the 1960s and the analysis does not account for its wider meaning.

And I know it sounds crazy but I came here believing—no, not really Believing—but *hoping* maybe, maybe somehow crazily hoping!—that some producer would see me, think I was Real—Discover me!—make me a Big Star! and I would go to the dazzling premieres and Louella Hopper would interview me and we would stand in the spotlights and no one would ever know I wasn't Real. (125-126)

Her dream to be a “real” woman is something that does not allow her to be truly happy. Despite often coming across as “all gayety, all happiness, all laughter” (108), she really feels “trapped”: “but I want to fly out of my skin! jump out! be someone else! so I can leave Miss Destiny far, far behind” (126).

According to Silberman, one of the key motifs in stories featuring drag queens or transsexual characters connected to their gender identity is “finding, or finding what happened to the penis” (181). For drag queens in pre-Stonewall literature, their male sexual organs are a source of shame and repulsion. When one of Vinnie’s friends approaches Georgette with a knife in his hand, he says, “Stand still and I’ll makeya a real woman without goin ta Denmark.” He then continues, “You dont want that big sazeech gettin in yaway Georgie boy. Let me cut it off,” and Georgette protests that “it is *not* big” (46). Miss Destiny is even more outspoken about her disgust with her penis. She calls it “That Thing between her legs which should belong there only when it’s somebody else’s” (104) and when she talks about the moment when she realized her true identity, she says that Miss Thing (a voice in her head, “a fairy perched on [her] back like some people have a monkey or a conscience” (106)) told her: “Why, how ridiculous!—that petuh between your legs simpuhlee does not belong, dear” (115). She has also been hurt by people who discovered her biological sex. When she tells the story of one of her first relationships, she says that her lover’s parents “Idolized her” but only “until they Found Out.” After this discovery, they disinherited their son, who soon after died, which was the end of Miss Destiny’s perfect romance (117). She also mentions a situation when a group of sailors attacked her and started undressing her to check if she was a real woman: “If youre a girl wow the world is yours honey, but if youre a goddam queer start praying” (118). She managed to escape, but it was only the beginning of a series of numerous abuses she had to endure.

The fact that both Georgette and Miss Destiny have experienced abuse but nevertheless remain true to their conceptions of themselves against the society’s expectations is something that both authors present as admirable. James Giles notes that “the narrative voice in [*Last Exit to Brooklyn*] makes it clear that Georgette is to be admired... for the sheer honesty of her life” (*Understanding* 20). Similarly, Jennifer Moon points out Miss Destiny’s “[strife] for personal authenticity,” which makes it possible for her to establish a real connection with the narrator (53). Even though it may seem contradictory, what other characters see as a costume, is what actually allows Georgette and Destiny to be the most genuine characters in both novels.

One of the most common accusations leveled at drag queens to this day is that their representations of femininity reinforce gender stereotypes (Schacht 166-

167). In his book on the history of drag and transvestitism, Peter Ackroyd argues that drag queens are misogynistic because drag “parodies and mocks women” and it is “a vehicle for satire at women’s expense” (14). Interestingly, he does not view transvestites as similarly dangerous, since, according to him, they try to “create at least the illusion of femininity—‘to pass’ as a woman” (14). Moreover, as Hillman notices, early gay rights organizations opposed the inclusion of drag queens not only due to the fear of reinforcing the stereotype of the “effeminate” homosexual, but also to show their support for feminists who opposed drag (158). Literary depictions of crossdressing in the 1960s also contributed to this association of drag queens with misogyny. Drag queen characters are usually presented as envious of “real” women and, therefore, unable to establish any relationships with them. Georgette is repulsed by the idea that one of her friends, Goldie, lives with a woman, even if she is treated like a servant: “Rosie had always been more than taken for granted—she had never been thought of. Not even as a demented human, but as a scooper: someone to scoop up the empties; to buy the bennie; to meet the connection” (66). Another example of the queens’ misogyny is when a pregnant sister of one of Georgette’s girlfriends arrives at their party and her waters break—the queens are disgusted, calling the woman a “dirty slut” and a “filthy whore,” yelling to “get her out,” no one wanting to help her (76-78). They are only worried that the incident might ruin their chance of having sex with Vinnie and his friends.

Similarly, Miss Destiny and her friends see women as rivals and, therefore, despise them. When Destiny had a relationship with Chuck, she was extremely jealous of a neighbor who used to walk around her apartment in her underwear: “But I fixed that!... I nailed the damn windowshades so no one can look at that cunt anymore” (105). Furthermore, Destiny gets furious when the narrator and two other hustlers pick up three girls to “prove their masculinity” (120). When they get back, she starts yelling at them: “You know whats the crazy matter with you, all of you? Youre so dam gone on your own damselves you have to hang around queens to prove youre such fine dam studs, and the first dam cunt that shows, you go lapping over her like hot dam dawgs!” (120). However, this is not the only portrayal of relationships between queens and biological women to be found in Rechy’s novel. In the final part he introduces Sylvia, a bar owner who repents for her sin of throwing her queer son out of her home by acting as a mother figure to the local queens and hustlers. Her bar is a safe space where everyone in need can get help—be it food, medical help, a place to sleep or simply a good word. When she firsts introduces herself to the narrator, one of the queens says that “she’s a real darling” (319). She has unwavering authority and the queens depend on her whenever they get into trouble. When one of the queens loses consciousness, her friend goes straight to Sylvia: “I Just Didn’t Know What To Do!—except to run to you as fast as I could!” (330). This portrayal definitely shows the issue of queens’ relationships with women from a whole new perspective, making room for meaningful connections and questioning the misconception that drag queens are necessarily misogynistic.

In both novels, the environment plays a major role in the formation of the characters. In *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, Selby sets out to provoke traditional, middle-class readers by addressing issues which previously were “ignored or, perhaps worse, distorted or even glamorized”—the lives of the members of such “repressed” subcultures like prostitutes, street gangs, homosexuals, or drug addicts (Giles, *Understanding* 11). His novel is filled with descriptions of gruesome violence and there is no sign of hope for any of his characters. However, as some critics have suggested, Selby’s characters cannot be entirely blamed for their condition. Giles states that “the people of *Last Exit to Brooklyn* are victimized by the cruel environment in which they are trapped” (*Understanding* 13). Similarly, Lane argues that “Selby’s characters [are] dumped into an ashcan environment which perverted their drives towards love and pride and achievement” (303). Selby’s deeply flawed portrayals, therefore, do not serve as a critique of the lower classes who engage in despicable actions, but rather of the society that allows this to happen.

In *City of Night*, the influence of the environment on the characters is not as manifest but equally important. John Rechy has been a dedicated advocate for gay rights from the beginning of his career. *City of Night* may seem to represent the author’s ambivalence about his orientation; after all, the narrator never admits that he is homosexual and claims to engage in gay sex only for money. However, the openness with which Rechy describes the homosexual world, unprecedented at the time the book was published, clearly offsets the narrator’s struggle with his sexuality (Goshert 12; Moon 48; Giles, “Religious Alienation” 379). What is more, Rechy studies the limits to homosexual identities and emphasizes their performativity. His narrator feels like an outsider both in the heterosexual mainstream and in the homosexual communities because he does not fit into any of the “accepted” roles. As John Goshert points out, “gay culture often reinforced and legitimated the injurious roles into which it was cast by dominant prejudices, and did so at the expense of its revolutionary potential” (12). The source of the oppression, which greatly limits Rechy’s characters’ ability to find fulfillment, is, therefore, identified in the mainstream’s animosity towards homosexual people.

Finally, according to Silberman, drag queens’ transgressions entail punishment at the end of their stories (184). The very title of the chapter about Georgette, “The Queen is Dead,” foreshadows her tragic fate. Her story is thoroughly sad with no hope, at any point, for a happy ending. Her biggest dream is to finally be loved by Vinnie and it is clear from the beginning that it is never going to happen, as he is only playing with her, enjoying her unlimited devotion. At the end of the story, Vinnie has sex with one of the queens and then lets Georgette “do him” but without any sign of affection (86). Georgette struggles to rationalize it, but it proves to be too difficult. She shoots herself up twice with morphine and leaves the party. Her last moments are described by her stream of consciousness which shows how desperately she craves love:

O yes my darling, I do I do. I love you. Love you O d'Amore. O see how the stars soften the sky. Yes, like jewels. O Vinnie, im so cold. Come, let us walk. *Sone Andati*. Yes my love, I hear him. Yes. He is blowing love. Love Vinnie... blowing love... no NO! O God no!!! Vinnie loves me. He loves me. It. Wasn't. Shit. (93)

Georgette's thirst for love is the most important feature that makes her a sympathetic character and her death so moving. As Giles notes, Selby presents "the deadening... consequences of living in the world that denies God and rejects love," and a character who "rejects a consuming hatred to pursue her quest for love" stands out as someone positive, even despite her serious flaws such as misogyny or drug addiction (*Understanding* 19). When Alan Vorda asked Selby in an interview whether "most readers should be sympathetic when Georgette is a weak-willed, speed freak-transvestite," the author replied: "It depends upon how well the reader communicates with themselves. If they insist upon denying that there is a bit of Georgette in them, then I guess they would have to attack Georgette just as Vinnie and Harry do. They weren't willing to accept that Georgette exists within you and me" (293).

Rechy spares Miss Destiny a tragic end by simply making her disappear. The narrator leaves Los Angeles for some time and when he returns, she is gone. He walks around asking old friends what happened to her, but everyone tells him a different story. Some people say that her dream of a "Fabulous Wedding" came true and she lives happily with a rich husband; others claim that she did get married but it all went wrong and she got arrested again. Finally, there are rumors that she was "cured": "she ain a queen no more, she has honest-to-jesus-gone-Christ turned *stud*, man!... she is getting married, man!—*to a real woman!*" (129). The narrator never learns what really happened to Miss Destiny, though the final words of the chapter express his hope and true affection for the larger-than-life queen: "I imagine Miss Destiny sitting lonesomely in Somewhere, Big City, America—carefully applying her makeup—and I think: *Oh Destiny, Miss Destiny! I don't know what's become of you, nor where you are—but that story Chuck just told me, as you yourself should be the first one to admit, is oh Too Much to believe!*" (129, original italics).

John Rechy's *City of Night* and Hubert Selby Jr.'s *Last Exit to Brooklyn* discuss the situation of gay people in a transitional moment. Even though homosexuals were more visible in the 1960s than ever before, this visibility was turned against them with the rise of homophobic media coverage. The Stonewall riots were still a few years away, but early activists were already working toward developing a sense of community among homosexual people. Both novels discussed in this article could be seen as examples of such early activism due to their sympathetic representations of drag queen characters. Some critics claim that Miss Destiny and Georgette are so flawed that it must be a sign of the authors' prejudice (Hoffman 201, Schaw 188, Silberman 180). It is true that both characters have a lot of shortcomings, but, as it has been argued in this article, these should be understood as a result of the influence

of the hostile environments the queens inhabit. They are surrounded by hostility and violence and still they choose to express themselves freely, which makes them appear more authentic than other characters in the respective novels. Despite all their flaws, they elicit the reader's sympathy, making him or her feel mournful after Georgette's death and hope that Miss Destiny's dream of a "Fabulous Wedding" comes true. I wish to argue that by creating such vibrant characters who not only stand out among others, but do so in a positive way, both Rechy and Selby wanted to show drag queens from a perspective that was new to the public. By doing that, they took risks, since it was still considered inappropriate to bring up the topics of homosexuality and gender identity in fiction. Both authors faced the consequences—Selby's novel was put on trial in England for obscenity (Giles, *Understanding* 3) and Rechy got the reputation of a "hustler-novelist" which made it difficult for him to be treated seriously in the literary world (Castillo and Rechy 113). These two examples of a revolutionary approach to the topic of gender identity from the pre-Stonewall period call for a re-appraisal of other literary works from that time whose subversive tone might have been overlooked. This could greatly improve our understanding of early homosexual activists by showing a greater variety of voices.

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