

# On Becoming Chicano in Europe

## John Rechy's Immanently Queer Latino Soldado Razo Flâneur in Paris, 1950–52

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When I was about 15, sexual urges started coming but without direction—men or women? My first male sexual contact was in the Army when I was about 20 in Paris, on leave. A lot of sexual conflicts came into play, a lot of ambiguity. Finally, I identified entirely as a Gay man.

—John Rechy

*Parlez-vous français, Bato?*

In John Rechy's episodic memoir, *About My Life and the Kept Woman* (2008), the author's strategic identitarian performances undergird a narrative about his global wanderings through closets, militarized cages, and cosmopolitan margins. Complicating the interstices of race, sexuality, and ontologies of space and mobility in Latina/o/x studies, Rechy's work deploys a model of flânerie self-fashioning to explicate the nuanced life experiences of a white-passing and hypermasculine American male who navigates his saliently gay and equally sublimated Chicano identity in 1950s France. His memoir thereby illuminates an ironic yet constitutive globalization of Chicanidad that has always been part of Chicana/o/x self-fashioning and broader ontological meditations, even as this global dimension remains underexplored and undertheorized. For Rechy, supra-US venues such as Paris—which he visits as a US Army 101st Airborne Division infantryman from 1950 to 1952, at the dawn of the Korean War—enable further exploration of the convoluted nature of his double coming out as gay and Chicano. Significantly, although Rechy maintains a racial and sexual anonymity while in Europe, passing, here and elsewhere, becomes a methodology that is part of a multilayered coming-out performance to reclaim his unique

space as a gay Chicano in the United States, albeit with profound ambivalence toward both categories—an attitude that continued throughout much of his life and is reflected in the scholarly treatment of him.

Ironically, if not for Rechy's sojourn in Paris, the Chicano, gay, and Chicano gay canons may never have been able to claim him in their localized galleries. Complicating his incorporation into the Chicana/o/x literary canon, Rechy never refers to himself as Chicano in his memoir. And the tone he uses to distinguish his mother as "Mexican" ("my mother is Mexican"; 2008, 99, 115) seems more intent on deferring this racialized otherness onto her while overemphasizing his Americanness throughout the book. One such incident occurs during an encounter with US Border Patrol agents who comment, "Thought you was a wet-back, sonny" (150). Rechy, shirtless from swimming in the Rio Grande, states, "I'm American" (150). At a time when being "Mexican" and queerness were seen as the antithesis of Americanness, which was punctuated by formal segregation and legal statutes outlawing homosexuality, Europe would become epiphanic in Rechy's multilayered *concientización*, or coming to consciousness about his racialized gay identity. His rendering of this process presents important opportunities to meditate on what leads someone to identify as Chicana/o/x.

This geopolitical and personal mobility and transformation, however, is never fully complete or without lingering contradictions and complications. In an interview with Debra Castillo, Rechy expresses his dislike of the word *gay* while also refusing to associate himself with *queer* in representations of his authorship. To him, such labels have the potential to restrict readership (Castillo and Rechy 1995; cited in Bost 2019). As critics situate his corpus and corporeality into various canons—gay, Chicano, regional American, among others—Rechy's memoir ultimately sheds light on an individual who empirically resists any typological labeling even as he becomes an acclaimed gay Chicano author. Challenging conventional enunciations of Chicanidad, his rendezvous in Paris provides a unique shift in Chicana/o/x

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loci of enunciation that have the potential to offer new insights into the complexities of the local-global dialectic in Chicana/o/x identity formation.

Responding to Michael Hames-García and Ernesto Javier Martínez's imperative "for in-depth work in the histories and creative life strategies of gay Chicano and Latino men" (Hames-García and Martínez 2011, 6), this essay focuses on Rechy's expression of a gay Chicano subjectivity in spaces not marked as explicitly gay or Chicano. Nomenclature is among the most contested aspects of Chicana/o/x and Latina/o/x studies, and I am choosing to identify Rechy as "Chicano" for specific reasons. First, he grapples with a borderland, working-class politics, even as he gains critical acclaim and is not necessarily associated with the politics of the Chicana/o movement. Second, I am reclaiming "Chicano man" in my reading of Rechy as part of a critical masculinities study that reexamines homosocial relations between closeted cis men and their heterosexual counterparts. Gayzing from, through, and outside the closet, such a recovery then forces one to recognize gay Chicano and Latino men as men, because sexual and gender expressions should not impact their male subjectivity or be read as "x" for the sake of inclusivity.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, this excavation operates simultaneously to and as part of the larger effort that decenters the cis heterosexual male as the primary enunciation of what it means to be a "man." It is precisely this task that then allows for a multiplicity in the expressions and manifestations of masculinity to flourish and, most important, to hold space within the complexities of male identity formation as racialized, gendered, and sexualized.

Throughout his memoir, Rechy's obsession with the two "kept" women of the title provides him with the imaginary space to postulate what life could be like beyond the closet. The first "kept" woman is Marisa Guzman, Rechy's sister-in-law, who has been living in exile, disowned by her father for being the mistress of Augusto de Leon, a prominent Mexican politician. Rechy becomes infatuated with the memory of Marisa smoking a cigarette, fingering the hem of her extravagant dress, and, potentially, smiling at him: she "smiled, definitely smiled, this time," he notes (2008, 29). The other "kept" woman is Rechy's high school classmate Isabel Franklin, whose real name is Alicia Isabel Gonzales. After making plans to go on a date with her, Rechy hears gossip from his sister Olga about Alicia Isabel's true identity: she uses her Anglicized surname as a coping mechanism to move away from the intense bigotries of her borderlands roots in El Paso, Texas (2008, 61). Occupying both material and imaginary spaces, Rechy's memory and the community's gossip are crucial to keeping these "kept" women present despite their physical absence. Noting that Rechy "[recalls] their beauty

and [reflects] on their exile,” Suzanne Bost proposes that Marisa and Alicia Isabel symbolize individuals who sacrifice an original identity “[to] achieve wealth and glamor” and tie themselves “to men who support their created identities” (2019, 48). She adds that Rechy is like Marisa and Alicia Isabel because he “[leaves] his hetero-patriarchal family behind to achieve fame and success by passing within and writing about queer underworlds that his family would never understand” (48).

However, simply associating Rechy’s likeness with these “kept” women does not account for the singularity embedded in the title. Alongside coming to terms with his gay borderlands identity, he has recurring fantasies about Marisa and Alicia Isabel, with a particular interest in their assertiveness in forging their paths to glamour and wealth through racial and class shape-shifting. They soothe Rechy’s anxiety and guilt as he embarks on his own racial and sexual passings and immanent self-fashioning outside his multiple closets. Specifically, these two women also provide Rechy with a palpable model for reimagining and refashioning his figural drag performance as the “Kept Woman” in Paris, which he seeks to fashion as empowering, albeit as a still-ambivalent, white-passing gay Chicano. In flâneur fashion, his passing enables him to navigate the closets, as well as the military cages and outsider positionings, pursuant to a gradual coming out as a complex globalized—yet always already local—subject of history.

## Gayzing from the Closet

John Francisco Rechy was born in El Paso on March 10, 1931, one of five children of Guadalupe Flores and Roberto Sixto Rechy. Of Mexican Scottish heritage, Rechy read as a *güero*, or “Mexican who didn’t look Mexican by entrenched standards,” as he states in *About My Life* (2008, 38). His fair skin, blondish hair, and blue eyes allowed him to avoid intense racial stigma before the civil rights movement, a time when “No Dogs, Negroes, or Mexicans” signs and anti-Mexican sentiment were ubiquitous in the Southwest (Maese-Cohen 2014). Growing up impoverished “one block into the North Side” of El Paso, Rechy attended El Paso High School (the “American school” as he notes; 2008, 49) instead of Bowie High (the “Mexican school”), which was “where the poorest children from [the] South [side] went” (49). Leveraging his ability to cross racial and class lines, Rechy succeeded in establishing a semblance of relationality with the popular “rich Anglo” students, all the while feeling “fraudulent” (50). Such racial and class passings also became central to life as a student

at Texas Western College, where he received a BA in English literature in 1950. At age nineteen, Rechy enlisted in the US Army. His two older brothers were World War II veterans: "Robert, the older of the two, in the South Pacific; and Yvan, the younger, in Germany" (2–3). As a young man both uncomfortable with and unaware of his own burgeoning racial and sexual identity, the hypermasculinist, homophobic, and racist ideologies of the US Army in the 1950s created an environment that allowed Rechy to continue obfuscating his dissonance and avoid confronting his self. Indeed, the discursive apparatus of the military became a mechanism for Rechy to solidify a hypermasculinist persona that masked an immanently gay identity. Ironically, it was this persona—the cocky paratrooper with the bulbous phallic sparkling jump boots—that brought Rechy toward the epiphanic self-discovery through which literary critics came to recognize the gay Chicano icon he is today.

Through his queering of the US Army, as it were, Rechy expands the salience of the US military as a vehicle for the empowerment of Mexicans, as Mexican Americans were more commonly known in the era, aside from epithets. Significantly, he queers the *Soldado Razo* long before other documented cases of LGBTQIA+ *Soldado Razos* (Olguín 2002; Rincón 2017; Vigil 2014). Despite confessing his hatred for the US Army, Rechy's deployment to Germany in his early twenties affords him the opportunity to leave a "home" that encompasses the ascriptive ideologies chaining his identity to multiple iterations and valences of the closet. In transit after being deployed, he wanders through Frankfurt, Fulda, Berchtesgaden, and back to Fulda, all the while dressed in an airborne infantry uniform that functions as a form of drag in reverse, which inevitably brings him into contact with other hypermasculinist men who also share his burgeoning homosocial and homosexual desires. Serving as a low-rank private assigned to staff in a colonel's office, Rechy eventually earns ten days of leave and flees to Paris, where he stays a total of seventeen days that ultimately will change his life.

In quintessential flâneur fashion, Rechy finds himself reaching the outskirts of Paris's cosmopolitanism, a space he presciently describes as "grown dark" (2008, 191). He stumbles upon a party where young men and women are dancing. His observation that some were "tipsy" gives him an excuse in the event that something sexually charged might occur as everyone's judgment is impaired (191). Nourishing his still-evolving gendered and sexualized identity and desires, a female figure draws Rechy to join in the dance, then fades away, leaving him with another man. Experiencing this

homosocial and immanently homosexual encounter beyond the United States, the significance of “moving together and laughing” marks the first instance where the distance between Rechy and another man ceases to exist (191). Evading criminal punishment for going AWOL in Paris, Rechy serves a new assignment in Frankfurt, then leaves the Army and attends graduate school on the GI Bill (197).

Once discharged, Rechy goes to Dallas and stays at the YMCA for a few days before returning to El Paso. Looking to distance himself from his years in the service, he finds himself surrounded by naked and half-naked men on the sundeck (201). As his first US cruising experience, Dallas becomes linked with Paris as a site where Rechy wanders the margins, teasing unnamed men (195, 201). He then foreshadows his eventual life as a hustler, cruising cosmopolitan and rural spaces not yet menaced by the HIV pandemic. He ponders, “I had taken another step into the tempting world of men, only men. What essential step was next before I joined it?” (201). Paris and Dallas thus bridge his transformations in the metropolitan centers of the country, specifically New York City and Los Angeles. Indeed, these *flânerie* wanderings make him (in)famous; however, the process of Rechy’s multilayering coming out is long and drawn out.

Rechy travels to New York with the intent to enroll at Columbia University, and in the process discovers the “world of Times Square,” where he “would invade the streets and live within their world eagerly” (Rechy 1963, 15). This space anchors his oeuvre, featuring first his young self as a male prostitute and later his yearnings for this time in *City of Night* (1963), *Numbers* (1967), and *Sexual Outlaw* (1977). But Paris had set the stage for this performance, with the sojourn in Dallas serving as a bookend to his global and highly mobile cruising toward a new synthesis. Significantly, for a substantial part of his life, this new synthesis had no formal name or category that he could or would claim as validating.

In his vacillating and, indeed, *flâneuresque* positions on nomenclature, Rechy has expressed resentment at not being considered a “real ‘Chicano writer’” (Bost 2019, 53). Yet, ironically, he had been recognized as one since the early 1970s (Bruce-Novoa 1986; Giles 1974; Saldívar 1997). Sixty years after his debut novel, *City of Night*, there is no questioning Rechy’s contribution to the Chicano canon as an early gay Latino male writer, as noted by Hames-García and Martínez (2011). However, to date, no one has explored how Rechy’s long, circuitous route to acceptance as a Chicano, and specifically a gay Chicano author worthy of canonization, begins in Europe and continues to spaces such as New York City that are far outside

the conventional understanding of Chicano spaces at the time. This mobility, I believe, reminds us of the fluid spatialization of Chicano—and broader Chicana/o/x—ontology that challenges earlier iterations of Chicana/o/x spatial studies by Mary Pat Brady (2002), Raúl Homero Villa (2000), and others who variously have figured the US-Mexico borderlands and the barrio as the axis mundi of Chicanidades in general and LGBTQIA+ Chicanidades as well.

Supplementing El Paso, Paris, Dallas, and New York in Rechy's mobile coming out, Germany represents a space where his borderlands subjectivity crystallizes within a military cage and the securitization of an Army uniform, which he describes as "olive pants bloused over boots, Eisenhower jacket with the Screaming Eagle emblem, a sky-blue scarf, blue-bordered cap" (2008, 178). As noted, this uniform enables Rechy's cross-dressing, as it were; however, in Paris he is met with an "excitement [for] a new world of freedom, in another country, away from the army" (190). Upon arriving in Paris, Rechy quickly changes out of that straight male and heteropatriarchal drag and into something more comfortable: a pair of Levi jeans and T-shirt that his older brother sends from El Paso (189). In this transported borderlands drag, he strolls through Paris's cosmopolitan world, free from the military cages that kept his identity closeted. He is misrecognized repeatedly and in specifically racialized and sexualized ways. For instance, Rechy recounts an American tourist asking him for directions in "mangled French": "That pleased me, because, looking around, I saw so many wondrous beautiful people" (190). Encountering this American tourist who treats him *as if* he is Parisian, Rechy successfully establishes an otherworldly relationality that goes beyond the physical and social geography of US borderlands. That is, it is his passings, crossings, receptions, and rejections in Europe that set the stage for his queer globalization of Chicanidad.

Rechy's global passing also allows him to read as un-American and assists with radically transforming his queer flâneur self beyond the multispatial forms of confinement in the postwar United States. During this time, it should be noted, Paris was gaining a metonymic, almost mythic status for gay male American writers, including James Baldwin, whose relocation to the city set the foundation for *Giovanni's Room* (1956). Like Rechy's memoir, Baldwin sets forth a bildungsroman of a white-passing American (albeit fictional) who comes to terms with his sexuality while occupying the cosmopolitan margins in Paris—complicating the interstices of race, gender, and sexuality in African American literary and cultural traditions. Paris also was the site of exile and self-exile for intellectuals from the 1920s

through the 1970s, which led to important countercultural syntheses and various counterhegemonic political praxes.

Paris becomes a site of liberation where Rechy engages clothing as a radical novelty to self-fashion, quite literally, as a cosmopolite away from the racist, segregated, and homophobic United States and its army. He uses the city to escape the choreographed identity in Germany, especially, and as a site that goes beyond the material and linguistic borderlands of his native country. He does so by reclaiming the controversial figure of the hypermasculinist flâneur. The flâneur is generally the idle man-about-town and is often associated with Charles Baudelaire's ire and Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project*. However, even in these and other provocative readings of the flâneur as self-fashioning and anonymous, this figure has not been queered. Yet, for Rechy, the flâneur enables him to refashion his self as a permutation of the "kept" woman paradigm, albeit the one he remembers from his youth, in which these scorned women had broken free of their heteropatriarchal cage. Rechy's flâneur represents his queer desires for unrestrictive wandering, exploring, and becoming.

I argue that Rechy queers and racializes this otherwise decadent and quintessentially European figure to actualize a new identity. Combining the practice of relationality with acts of self-fashioning and the flâneur's strolling, Rechy becomes a flâneur agent who is radically different from the heteropatriarchal European flâneur, who is most known as an alienated urban spectator wandering through the capitalist milieu (Birkerts 1982). The flânerie Rechy embodies brings forth what he subconsciously treats as the "me" who is not "myself," who threatens him with a haunting awareness that "something ineffable [is] about to happen here, in [Paris]" (2008, 190). Finding himself penetrating in and out of closets, militarized cages, and cosmopolitan outskirts, Rechy's cruising flânerie in Paris highlights the possibilities for an immanently queer global borderlands subjectivity—the abject yet defiantly proud but still somewhat ambivalent gay Chicano from Texas . . . and the world.

## The Diasporic Queering of the Flâneur

As a global borderlands subject wandering back and forth across the Atlantic Ocean and throughout US and European cities, Rechy's flâneur is shaped by the commodity culture in the US Southwest after the Great Depression and before the civil rights era. Extending the flâneur to underclass, racialized contexts, Shane Vogel engages with the idea of self-making by taking



up Harlem's nightclubs as sites for testing society's racial and sexual limits. Vogel declares that the "cabaret scene . . . played a key role in the Harlem Renaissance by offering an alternative to politics of sexual respectability and racial uplift that sought to dictate the proper subject matter for black arts and letters" (2009, 29). Exploring nightlife performance to understand the racial and sexual politics of the early twentieth century, the flâneur becomes a crucial symbol for demystifying African American flânerie (150). From a "rural street life before northward migration" to the "modern mapping of the metropolis," Vogel sees the genealogy of flânerie as an African American act of relationality, as a practice that is void of the anonymity that a European conceptualization of the flâneur promises (150). Expanding on Vogel, I recognize Rechy's flâneur queerness as disrupting heteropatriarchal but also nationalist—including Chicana/o/x cultural nationalist— notions of race and sexuality that enable him to reinvent his identity, especially as it pertains to the abjection projected onto him in the US borderlands and in general.

While scholars usually focus on Rechy's hyperlocal queer cruising through US rural and cosmopolitan spaces, they fail to recognize the importance of Paris as a site in a local-global dialectic of queer coming out and supra-Chicano identity formation. This creates a narrow reading of Rechy's gay identity as distinctly American when, in fact, he first performs a closeted queerness while establishing an otherworldly relationality with people in 1950s Paris, as argued above. Rechy's clothes, skin, hair, eyes, and temporary discarding of his US Army uniform visibly render him un-American and unrecognizable by the American tourist, enabling him to achieve a global passing *as if* he were Parisian. This pleases him and intertwines with fantasies of the "kept" women, with whom he identifies precisely because of their confidence and performance, which mirror his own gay borderlands subjectivity. Unknowingly, this links his corporeality to the wave of Americans frequenting gay bars and cafes in 1950s Paris. These multilayering relationalities contextualize the juggling act Rechy masochistically endures in order to effect his global passing. Marcelle Maese-Cohen contextualizes the migratory nature of Rechy's work by engaging the "untold narrative of movement that is paradoxically the story of stasis and segregation" and by introducing the El Paso "I": "a borderland subjectivity and narrator who attempt to historicize North-South patterns of migration, racialization, diaspora, and empire of *América*, with an accent" (2014, 88). The El Paso "I" harbors the "[desire] to escape the migrant home because it signifies . . . not the trajectory of movement, upward mobility, or shifting national consciousness, but the indoctrinated logic of entrapment

and racial segregation” (95). If the El Paso “I” intends to seek relationality, then it will incorporate a *flânerie* that exposes Rechy’s empirical positionality as the opposite of that of his father and brothers. It is important to note Maese-Cohen’s imperative in order to perceive the untold narratives of borderland abjectness. This then allows for a reading of Rechy’s queer performance in Paris as not odd, ironic, or unexpected but as fundamentally necessary for him, at least in this era.

Dragging the El Paso “I” across the Atlantic, Rechy complicates the understanding of borderland subjectivity by historicizing diasporic trends from América to Europe. Diaspora is “a process [that] is always in the making, and . . . a condition [that] is situated within [a] global race and gender hierarchies” (Patterson and Kelley 2000, 11). One could lean toward coding Rechy’s diasporic movement as expatriating, but he never settles down in one specific location or becomes a resident beyond the United States. Rather, even after his discharge, Rechy’s queer diasporic imaginings allow him to occupy multispatial globalities, especially once Paris becomes central to the genealogy of his sexual identity. As both a process and condition, the use of diaspora highlights migration patterns and identity formations as empirically evolving and not lodged in a spatial and temporal stasis. Drawing on Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley’s notion of queer diaspora, Rechy, as a closeted passing figure, complicates queer theory paradigms and reinforces the need to “start with explicit formulations of racialized sexuality and sexualized race” (Tinsley 2008, 205). Materializing a queer diasporic imaginary, *About My Life and the Kept Woman* encapsulates “the creative domain of the displaced subject’s imagination and [his] . . . ability to perceive, interpret, and reimagine the world from a diasporic lens” (Clitandre 2018, 2). Rechy’s El Paso “I” goes beyond the confinements of América with a *flânerie* movement across the Atlantic that incorporates an oceanic fluidity to his queer diasporic performance throughout the world.

## Mask for Mask

While a return may mark the end of a material diaspora, Paris becomes central to Rechy’s queer imaginary that accompanies his diasporic performance through rural and cosmopolitan spaces in a pre-HIV pandemic United States. Examining a “Europe-inflected supra-Chicanidades,” B. V. Olguín challenges “conventional Chicax studies paradigms” that “confine Chicanidad to the Americas” by highlighting “Spain and other parts of Europe” as constituting “a growing and virtually ignored discrepant archive” (2021, 19). Decentering

the Americas as a principal locus of enunciation for Chicana/o/x identity, I argue that Rechy's author/narrator "I" complicates disciplinary paradigms by detailing the process for coming out as gay and ambivalently Chicano while casually cruising the cosmopolitan outskirts of 1950s Paris. Empirically slipping away from any attempt to entrench his racial, gender, and sexual identity, he provides an in-depth account of passing identity that responds directly to the ascriptive ideologies that permeate migrant home narratives.

Moreover, Rechy historicizes queer borderlands migration patterns and diasporic performances from América to Europe—from the colony that now colonizes to the previous monocolonial geographic space. Roberto D. Hernández, co-founder of the seminar series Decolonial Dialogues, underscores the importance of going back to Spain, and, more broadly, Europe because it provides a way to unsettle "founding fictions of the monocolonial world" that simultaneously forces the Americas to be excavated as a heterogeneous space (quoted in Olguín 2021, 33). This allows for "stable concepts and categories . . . of race [and] also nation-states" to be seen for what they are: "historical constructions that have a very specific racial colonial history" (33). Challenging transnational paradigms and academic disciplinary practices that focus solely on the question of identity, Rechy's memoir further decenters the United States and Aztlán as root enunciations for his gay and ambivalently Chicano identity. Paris is a site where Rechy's queer diasporic imaginary materializes life beyond the closet. Through the drag fantasies of the kept woman, Rechy's flâneur is that of a diasporic borderlands identity sauntering through cosmopolitan spaces with ultimate anonymity. From mask to mask, he becomes made and unmade through moments of completeness that are empirically met with incompleteness. Treating identity as a palimpsest, Rechy ultimately articulates how queer diasporic identity is a process and condition while navigating within and beyond the material and linguistic outskirts of a given space—be it El Paso, San Antonio, Morganfield, Frankfurt, Fulda, Berchtesgaden, Paris, Frankfurt, Dallas, El Paso, New York, Los Angeles, and so on.

## Notes

1. Epigraph: Quoted in Eric Andrews-Katz, "John Rechy: From Bedsheets to Printed Sheets: A Candid Conversation with the Author of *City of Night*," *Seattle Gay News* 41, no. 28 (2013).

2. I am putting my position in alignment with Richard T. Rodríguez's article "X Marks the Spot" (2017).

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