

# ***Brown and/or Pink?***

The Intersection of Ethnic, Sexual, and Gender  
Identity in John Rechy's *City of Night*, Richard  
Rodriguez' *Hunger of Memory*, and Arturo Islas'  
*The Rain God*

Leonardo Gonzalez Rodriguez



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Leonardo Gonzalez Rodriguez

<http://www.duo.uio.no/>

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# Abstract

This thesis aims to analyze the intersection of ethnic, sexual and gender identity depicted in two queer Chicano novels and one Chicano autobiography published in the U.S between the 1960s and 1980s. It seeks to address the question whether ethnicity prevails over homosexuality in Chicano literature, as portrayed John Rechy's *City of Night* (1963), Arturo Islas' *The Rain God* (1984), and Richard Rodriguez' *Hunger for Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez* (1982). The juxtaposition of these determiners of identity during a period of evolution and modernization in the Chicano gay community is studied by means of ethnicity and gender-related literary criticism. On one hand, ethnic traits from Chicano culture, such as religion, customs, traditions, and social structures are discussed from an identity viewpoint. On the other hand, sexual and gender identity is discussed based on gender performance, male and female role models, and homophobia at a social and individual level. This analysis sheds light on the fact that, among Chicanos, ethnic identity seems to be a greater source of oppression, control, and identification than gender or sexual orientation.



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Particularmente dedicado a María mín...





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## **1. Introduction**

According to the United States Census Bureau (2012), Hispanics constitute around 16% of the population in the country. Hispanics with any sort of Mexican background, who are frequently referred (depending on the state) as “mexicanos”, “tejanos”, or “nuevos mexicanos”, are understood to identify themselves as Chicanos. “The term ‘Chicano’, a form of ‘mexicano’ truncated by dropping the first syllable, had a somewhat pejorative connotation in the first half of the century, but it has been taken by many young Americans of Mexican descent as a badge of pride since World War II” (Meier & Rivera xiv). Within this group, there are individuals who do not subscribe to predefined notions of gender identity or fit into the most widely accepted gender roles and sexual identities. Since literature is in many ways the written reflection and expression of imagined, but also reality-based situations and characters, Chicano literature opens a window into the lives of this often forgotten part of American society. Moreover, Chicano literature delving into “queer” topics sheds light on the experience of belonging to an ethnic and sexual minority at the same time. This dissertation seeks to analyze the crossroad of these two fundamental components of the human experience, as it is mirrored and presented in two novels and one autobiography covering a span of twenty years. John Rechy’s novel *City of Night* (1963), Richard Rodriguez’s autobiography *Hunger for Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez* (1982) and Arturo Islas’ novel *The Rain God* (1984) will serve to illustrate and dissect the interaction of gender, sexual, and ethnic identity in the Chicano community and the relative importance of these various forms of identity to members of that community.

### **1.1 Research question and rationale**

This dissertation seeks to analyze the juxtaposition of ethnicity, sexual orientation, and gender identity, as they are presented in three Chicano literary works written during the 1960s and

1980s. The goal is to answer the following question: Is sexual identity a more defining constraint than ethnicity in the Chicano queer text? In this thesis, I intend to show the relationship, and intersection of ethnic, sexual and gender identity, as they are depicted in three texts considered to be representative of Chicano fiction and Chicano autobiography during a period “in which the contemporary Chicano literary Movement flourished” (Bruce-Novoa 70). Central to this project is to examine the above-mentioned texts from three viewpoints. The first one entails an analysis of the role played by ethnic and sexual identity constraints within the identity of the queer Chicano characters. The main focus here will be on considering whether central characters are mainly influenced by their ethnic background or their sexuality, or both equally. The second angle will be the identification and recognition of the processes which define these characters as the ‘Other’. At this point, it will be necessary to analyze ‘otherness’ within the Chicano community from the social, ethnic and gender standpoints. The third viewpoint will be a dissection of the condition of Chicano gay male authors as models of literary representation. The study will be conducted by applying critical analysis of the above-mentioned literary texts. The main focus will lie on the interpretation of the status and the role of identity, the self and the ‘Other’ in Chicano texts from a gender perspective.

The representative pieces chosen for this analysis are understood to exhibit examples of the three areas of difference upon which Western social structure have been built: gender, class, and ethnicity. Two theoretical approaches will be central to this analysis. On the one hand, in *The Second Sex* (1949) Simone de Beauvoir creates an appropriate distinction between gender and sex, introducing an engaging opposition between “the natural” and “the normal.” This theory will facilitate the analyses of sexual orientation and gender identity as presented in queer Chicano texts. It will also lie at the core of understanding the constraints of both female and male subjects within Chicano queer literature. On the other hand, I have been inspired by Toril Moi’s approach, as developed in *Sexual Textual Politics* (1985), where she

engages into an extensive analysis of modern feminist criticism and its influences on modern (feminist and gender) literary theory. Her criticism of patriarchy will be useful to illustrate the situation of both the patriarchal and the matriarchal figures in the Chicano narrative. Along with the deconstruction of the Chicano gay literary text by implementing feminist literary criticism, it seems appropriate to shed light on the stigmatization and stereotypization of ethnicity, gender, life style and social class among Chicanos. As the three literary works are rather different in their form and structure, close reading will be applied to demonstrate how these three Chicano authors interpret the situation of Chicano homosexual identity in literary texts dating between 1960s and 1980s.

Ethnic, sexual orientation and gender identity will be analyzed in a uniform manner in each chapter following a chronological order, beginning with the earliest date of publication. The first chapter will analyze the situation of gay Chicano identity represented by a homosexual hustler from 1960s in John Rechy's *City of Night*. The chapter will be divided into two sections, introducing first the situation of ethnicity based on aspects such as the effects of racial passing, the role of religious doctrine, and the case of internalized homophobia. Section two will analyze the situation of gender and sexual identity based on the topics of performance and preconceptions about masculinity. Chapter two will analyze the status of the homosexual Chicano identity depicted in the autobiography of Richard Rodriguez in 1982. The first section will analyze ethnic traits such as language, race and family ties; and the second will analyze gender and sexual traits based on machismo and social perceptions concerning the Chicano homosexual figure. Finally, chapter three will analyze the role of the gay Chicano identity presented in Chicano fiction in Islas's *The Rain God* (1984). The situation of ethnicity will be analyzed first by exploring different Chicano traditions mentioned in the novel, such as gastronomy, popular beliefs and the symbolism of U.S.-Mexican border. Section two will evaluate the figure of gender and sexual identity based on the situation of matriarchy and patriarchy among Chicano communities and the inclusion

of homosexuality as synonymous with disability. Each chapter of this dissertation will open with an introduction of both the author and the literary work respectively, and it will end with an analysis of the intersections of both aspects of identity. This dissertation aims to serve as a contribution to a field which has not been widely researched, reviewed and discussed, if compared to other types of American literature.

## **1.2 Juxtaposition of gender and ethnicity in Chicano literature**

Seen from a sociological standpoint, identity has been defined as the “sense of self that develops as the child separates from parents and family and acquires a place in society” (Bruce and Yearley 144). In this sense, identity is regarded as an extension of learnt values, attitudes, and mentality that results from processes of interaction and socialization. Describing identity as a reflection of the self, sociologists George Herbert Mead and Charles Horton Cooley have shown that identity is a “social product” (Bruce and Yearley 144). In this sense, its meaning varies according to the changeable socially construed structures common to individuals within a given group. Identity is then a situational and malleable notion, because individuals can subscribe to groups and ideologies voluntarily; this is particular true in the case of Western societies. Changes in how individuals prioritize the way they see themselves according to the situation can trigger a set of identity traits to become more salient. These traits can be internal or external and vary in the degree to which they are perceivable to the naked eye. It is easier to notice that someone belongs to a certain religion, if his or her behavior and clothes indicate so. A devoted Catholic woman wearing a veil to attend mass on a Sunday states her religious affiliation as part of her identity more strongly than a woman who wears a hat or nothing on her head. Similarly, football fans are only known for painting their faces when their teams are about to encounter an opponent. In both cases, individuals are urged to stress that a specific trait is part of their identity at a specific time. The advantages of many acquired identity constraints are that individuals can choose to unsubscribe from them.

Except for totalitarian societies, both a religious woman and a football fan are free to decide to seek another faith or sport affiliation.

Contrastingly, this is not the case with identity traits that cannot be easily modified or altered. This is seen in the case of gender identification and sexual orientation whereas ethnicity is often a salient trait and therefore “people are increasingly thinking about their own identities in genetic terms” (Bruce and Yearley 144). Traits which are easily perceived, like a different cultural background distinguished by a particular racial, linguistic and religious visible components, have become strong unifying factors of a cultural minority among society. Although popular among many cultures and societies, ethnicity remains a questionable and problematic assumption, because identity is understood as a social product and not as a biological one. Once socially disadvantageous identity traits are externalized, individuals risk being outcast or isolated. As shown in the literary texts, exclusion can derive from these less desirable identity features. How self-consciousness and labelling of ethnic and gender traits are understood as parts of identity will be analyzed in the subchapters to come, based on the inaccurate Anglo American views of Chicanos. Special attention will be paid to the historic and social context of the United States during a period of social revolution at the time the selected literary works were written.

Historically, the situation of the relationship between the Chicano community and the Anglo society has been alienated by a sequence of endless clashes. Before the colonization of the Americas by Europeans conquistadors between A.D 500 and 1400, great empires of civilized Indians societies like the Mayas and the Aztecs inhabited the North American region. Thus, after the gradual conquest of the Americas by Spanish colonizers between 1500 and 1800 in the region that today encompasses the south of the United States and the North of the Mexico, it produced a new cultural group, product of the fusion between the Indian and Spanish bloods, the mestizos. Major areas of settlement by mestizos were in what is today the Mexican peninsula. Later, two decades after the end of the French revolution, the Spanish

colonies in the Americas loose political control of its territories, becoming independent nations like it was the case of Mexico, that at the time it included the territories of what are today the territories of California, Texas and New Mexico. Between 1845 and 1950, political, social and economic upheavals that went on Mexico altered the geography and political situation of the frontier between both, the American and Mexican territories, affecting drastically the life and the course of many of its inhabitants.

The peoples with certain degree of Mexican American background were condemned to live within a no man's land with a certain degree of foreign status and even establishing themselves as a minority cultural group. This continual pattern of change and acculturation created a negative image of the Mexican American individual among the Anglo American majority. In fact, in general in many American territories along the U.S and Mexican border "Mexican Americans were considered innately inferior and an obstacle to a progressive economy and society" (Meier and Rivera 88). The prosperous periods of the American economy between 1900s and 1960s brought a huge influx of both legal and illegal Mexican immigrants into the country. Along with it, during the same period, economic recession brought massive deportations of illegal Mexicans and it contributed to downgrade the image of Mexican Americans as dangerous, dirty and unskilled. Thus, terms such as "Mojado" (an illegal worker of Mexican background) and "Bracero" (a legal worker of Mexican background) came into use and reshaped the image of Mexican Americans, also known as Chicanos. Thus, in relationship with ethnicity, the thesis will be focused on the situation for the Chicano literary movement, which encounters its maximum level of literary expression at the end of 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s with the publication of literary works dealing with the social situation for Chicano communities in the United States. Equally, this thesis will focus on the contexts presented in the selected Chicano literary texts where Chicano homosexual figures are represented before and after the Stonewall riots in New York in 1969.



Ethnic traits, although widely regarded as a differentiating factor in scientific terms, still play a central role in the self-proclamation and definition of most individuals. Even if Americans or Mexicans should be aware that they are “not genetically programmed” (Bruce and Yearley 144), ethnic identity stands out as a dividing line within American society. Ethnicity as a term is understood to entail endless social connotations and a varied range of cultural traits. Cultural identity is often linked to ethnicity with many notions and ideologies stemming from the intertwined understanding of these terms. For instance, the concept of nation is often built upon the similarities which characterize the inhabitants of a place or what unifies them as a social group. Although language, cultural traditions, and a common history are often cited, cultural background traits stand out. Ethnic identity is understood as the result of merging language, religion, culture, ancestry, regionality and physical appearance (Nagel 154). Most societies prefer to regard themselves as mono-ethnic in order to attain a better unification as nation. Most advanced countries today include several minorities or are made up of groups which define themselves as minority segments of society, e.g. Ainu tribes in Japan, Sami in Scandinavia, Bushmen in Botswana, Walloons and Flemish in Belgium. In many cases, a history of oppression, differentiation and abuse support their case. Given its history as a nation built by immigrants, the United States has become a classical example of a modern multicultural society. Within its boundaries, several cultural identities are acknowledged and embraced. Still, ethnicity has been since the beginning a hindrance in the process of amalgamation. For example, even today Anglo Americans regard themselves in ethnic terms and a wide racial taxonomy is encouraged and publicly recognized. There are African Americans, Pacific Islanders, Asian Americans, Native Americans, Hispanics and the distinctive “American” or “All American.” The political and economical interests of the majority have maintained ethnic identity as a social marker (Du Preez 5). In fact according to Meier and Rivera, historically Anglo-Americans’ views of Chicanos are inaccurate

stereotypes, on the one hand, as the Spanish Hidalgo ignoring the Native American background, and, on the other hand, as a lazy, dirty Native Americans.

At the time the selected primary texts were written, just as is the case today, Americans of Mexican American origin were an underprivileged minority. Although more present in society now than during the sixties, seventies, and eighties, ethnic stereotypes of this subgroup still prevail. It is crucial to note that this does not mean that ethnic identity in the United States has remained unchanged during the last five decades. Several episodes in U.S. history are considered as decisive factors in the formation of the national identity. For example, the terrorist attacks of 9/11 are understood to have altered the sense of identification of the American people (Li and Brewer 728). These events are believed to have propelled a re-evaluation of the meaning of American identity and what it entails. Questions such as what is to be a true American and who can become part of America were central to debates in the aftermath of the attacks. Many seem to think that America is a mixture of cultures and ethnicities and that the identity of an American citizen is neither based on the colour of the skin nor the ethnic group to which an individual belongs.

Historically, since the end of the Second World War, North America has been known for being a multicultural and pluralist region; for many truly a melting pot. Contradictorily enough, the definition of American identity varies once the terms Caucasian, Asian, or Native are added (Nagel 155). It remains to be seen whether this system and the hierarchical taxonomy that it encourages stays unchanged. Nominalization of groups has gone through several phases during the history of the United States. For example, several “white” cultural groups were not considered Caucasian enough at the beginning of the century, e.g. Irish and Italians. The assumption that ethnic identity is a social product is reflected in a system that privileges certain ethnic groups over the others. In spite of the resilient capacity of the American nation to negotiate the coexistence of different ethnic groups, there is a visible social division within American society based on ethnic traits. Other relevant aspects that

create social difference, such as social class, regional and communal traditions, and lifestyle are often linked to ethnicity too.

This is the particular case of Chicanos, that is to say, those communities of peoples with any sort of Mexican background, who are born and raised in the United States. Ethnically speaking a Chicano may be described as a Mestizo agricultural worker with both an American and Mexican heritage who is able to speak fluently either English or Spanish (and in many cases masters both) and who is usually of Catholic upbringing. In many cases, Chicanos belong to communities who have lived in the territories along the border between Mexico and the United States for many generations. Many have pointed out that this term entails discrimination on ethnic grounds. For example, for the activist and writer Ana Castillo, in her lecture “How I became a genre-jumper”, the term is understood to refer to a “marginalized, brown woman who is treated as a foreigner and is expected to do menial labour and ask nothing of the society in which she lives”. Historically, conflict has been always present in the relationship between Anglo Americans and Mexican Americans, on the one hand, characterized “by the aggressive, land-hungry Anglo, not appreciating the unique Mexican life style, looked upon Mexicans as lazy, deceitful, foreign and incapable of assimilation” (Meier and Rivera 72); and on the other hand, by the excluded situation of the Chicano where “his found his lands gone, his religious seriously challenged, and himself a citizen of a country whose language, laws, and social customs he did not understand” (Meier and Rivera 72). Thus, exclusion has led many Chicanos to identify themselves as Americans first and foremost and to reject their Mexican heritage, while they still preserving their Mexican cultural traditions. Feelings of otherness are experienced by Chicanos once racial and linguistic differentiations are made.

Throughout this dissertation, ethnic identity will be understood as the set of socially defined markers which set a group apart from other groups. As it has been noted, many subscribe to a group by claiming “descent from common ancestors and (feeling) usually

united by a common language, religion, culture and history” (Bruce and Yearley 84). In the case of Chicanos in the United States, though, it is not completely a matter of self-proclamation. As it applies to other non-Anglo Americans groups, Americans have grown accustomed to classify its inhabitants based on their origins. Mexican descended communities are no exception to this system. Ethnic identity has lead Chicano writers to write stories based in their experience of difference within American society. In the case of the selected literary works, their experiences have also been moulded by the importance that society gives to gender identity as the next chapter intends to show.

Given the role played by masculine figures and heterosexuality through human history, identity has commonly been linked and defined according to gender. An evident and striking difference is still common between the possibilities and power to which women and men have access. The notion of gender was historically attached to the biological understanding of what women and men were able to achieve. Even in the Western hemisphere, where homosexuality is today relatively accepted, prior to changes motivated by the Second World War gender and sexual identity did not count as a relevant trait in the definition of human’s identity. This was because no difference was made between gender role and biological gender. The notion that “biology does not always determine gender identity” (Bruce and Yearley 121) was formerly not recognized. Male and female identities were determined based on human beings’ reproductive sexual organs and sexual orientation was not clearly distinguished from gender. Education and social modernization facilitated the incorporation of a change of mentality in terms of gender identity.

For example, Simone de Beauvoir, one of the most notable thinkers of the twentieth century, introduced the importance of gender identity in her book *The Second Sex* (1949). Praised by many thinkers at that time, and condemned by religious institutions like the Vatican, Beauvoir not only advocates for the liberation of women. She also condemns the hidden and precarious situation of the ‘Other’. According to Beauvoir’s revealing

observations, men have historically been situated at the core of society. Heterosexuality and masculinity, as extension of maleness, have become synonymous with the human and the universal. The social constraints that this has engendered are reflected in the terms used to label and classify members of society. Beauvoir insisted that nominalization only served to propel discrimination and exclusion. According to her, gender externalization has never been free from social constraints. It can be concluded that “gender identity arises out of complex patterns of interaction between the self and others (as result of) psychological internalization of feminine or masculine traits” (Bruce and Yearley 121). This interaction is dictated by male-conditioned patterns and therefore masculine traits are given priority.

In the case of gender and sexual orientation, although it is not a choice, it has partly become the subject of self-proclamation during the last decades. In order to obtain more rights and be acknowledged as members of society, homosexual individuals have increasingly voiced their concerns as never before in history. If gender identity results from the interaction between our own desires and those of others, society’s role is to accept individuals’ choices. As Beauvoir notes, this is not the case and individuals are denied the right to be something other than heterosexual men and women, at least in 1949 when she wrote her book. After the end of the Second World War, new conceptions of American identity flourished (Smith 226). This was because lawmakers were given the task to legalize or penalize the externalization of sexual desires. Social condemnation has followed homosexuality throughout history, because mainstream society regards itself as heterosexual. As explained by Beauvoir, the ‘Other’ is invisible, because it is a minority and therefore misrepresented politically. A decade after the publication of her book, new ideologies were introduced in the aftermath of the sexual revolution of the 1960s.

Within a pluralist, multicultural and diversified American society, the dominant majority was the first to incorporate the notion that there was not always overlap between sexual orientation and biological gender. A change in the dominant ideology can be explained

by the principles of freedom, tolerance and coexistence in which Americans unconditionally believe (Smith 226). History has shown, though, that it has not been an easy process; prejudice hindered the process of integration and social coexistence. The Stonewall riots in New York in 1969, where thousands of members of the gay community protested against their precarious situation in American society, proved that the United States was not inclusive in terms of sexual identity. Individuals have needed courage to self-proclaim themselves based on their sexual orientation. The position of the homosexual Chicanos in literary texts remains problematic, because they find themselves at the crossroads of two misrepresented, condemned and unacknowledged subgroups. To exemplify this, it can be noted that at the time these three literary works were written (between 1963 and 1984), no other relevant Chicano literary text had mentioned directly and explicitly the topic of male homosexuality among the Chicano community, with the exception of the Chicana writers Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Morraga, who introduced for the very first time to the Chicano literary text the figure of the Chicana lesbian around 1982.

Within Chicano culture, gender identity is synonymous with heterosexuality and therefore individuals with other sexual orientations are even today socially marginalized. Traditionally speaking, women are treated as inferior and homosexuals and lesbians are virtually invisible during the sixties and the seventies (Bruce-Novoa 69). Gender identity as the notion of an internalized desire to interact socially according to gender traits which do not need to be biological is not yet deeply rooted in the Chicano community. The two novels and the autobiography written in the 1960s and 1980s introduce a world in which many Chicanos might be living even today, though certainly some changes have taken place.

There has been a reassessment of the way homosexuality is regarded within Chicano communities, even though the change in mentality is less significant than in mainstream American society:

Contrary to the prevalent approach which conceptualizes roles in terms of cultural values alone, recent research indicates that behavior of Chicanos varies

according to life conditions and situations. The gender roles of Chicanos are changing both as a result of alteration in the broader society and in response to internal changes. (Zinn 9)

In general terms, the new Chicano family model which encourages youth to attend higher education centers, live on their own and establish friendships outside the immediate community has had an impact on attitudes towards gender and sexual identity. Yet religious assumptions and patriarchal and matriarchal power structures remain strong and keep affecting a large part of homosexual Chicanos, who decide to escape from home or lead a secret life. It has been argued, though, that the main hindrance that most homosexuals belonging to minorities face in the United States is not necessarily their cultural background, but rather their gender and sexual orientation (Nagel, "Ethnicity and Sexuality" 124).

Current revisionary critiques show that the prototypical "American" in representative works of American literature has usually been Caucasian, male, middle- or upper-class, heterosexual, and a spokesman for a definable set of political and social interests. The inclusion of women, African and Asian and Native Americans, Hispanics, homosexuals and lesbians, and others in such narratives usually entails that they are also representatives for traditional values and schemes. Their "assimilation" into American literature comes at the cost of their cultural heritage and obscures their real antagonism and historical difference in correlation to the privileged classes (Jay 267). The idealized and privileged position given to heterosexuality, masculinity and whiteness remain an obstacle in the integration processes of double minorities. In the case of literature, it has been claimed that literary texts have focused on gaining recognition mainly within a single area. In this sense, most Chicano literature has been devoted to voice Chicano concerns from an ethnic standpoint, ignoring discourses such as homosexuality almost completely (Bruce-Novoa 70). Essentially, Chicano literature is recognized for its permanent struggle in denouncing themes of social marginalization and social exclusion. Central to Chicano literature is to exemplify how Chicano "normality" is understood, which does not include less conventional lifestyles.

The first publications of Chicano queer literature emerged between the 1960s and the 1980s. It is worth mentioning that John Rechy's *City of Night* (1963), Richard Rodriguez' *Hunger for Memory* (1982) and Arturo Islas's *The Rain God* (1984) have been criticized for failing to openly discuss the situation of homosexuality within Chicano families. These authors have also been accused of underestimating the relation between Chicano socialization patterns and the sexual norms of the dominant culture (Kimmel and Messner 474). These texts have nevertheless been selected because they are understood to represent Chicano literature from two standpoints. On the one hand, they exhibit those narratives and stylistic elements that have come to define the genre known as Chicano queer literature. On the other hand, these works illustrate the intersection between ethnic, gender and sexual identity as salient traits of the main characters. Moreover, they are believed to shed light on the Chicano gay experience, which is crucial in order to address the main research question.



## 2. John Rechy and *City of Night* (1963)

John Rechy is an acclaimed Chicano writer and an international bestseller, who became popular in the decade of the sixties after publishing his first novel *City of Night* (1963). He was the first American writer who shed light on homosexual prostitution at a time when this topic was taboo. Rechy is known for having touched upon subjects which conservative American readers were not ready to embrace. He soon became a controversial figure, because of his crude, poignant, and straightforward style of narration in which homosexuality played a major role. After their publication, his outspoken and undisguised novels were primarily catalogued as outrageous, cynical, and even pornographic (Arnold 116). This stems from the fact that marginalized portions of American society were until then unknown to mainstream readers, i.e. homosexual African Americans, drag queens and male hustlers. Even remote knowledge about their existence did not render them topics acceptable in American literary circles. In fact, *City of Night* is a narrative of the *underworld* with scandalous and detailed descriptions of flamboyant gay characters, sexual encounters, interracial homosexual intercourse, and allusions to subgroups of homosexual sadomasochists.

From a ghettoized perspective, Rechy was also considered to be the first Chicano writer dealing with male homosexuality within Chicano culture. Both Chicano and homosexual sentiments lie at the core of many of his novels, where uses allegories that represent the link between identity, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation. A discourse on the social power of mainstream values is perceived in the difficulties that the main characters face trying to accept themselves. In fact, “Rechy’s novels may be set up around a realistic narrative of coming out, but ultimately they articulate the impossibility of this narrative, as the narrative circles around endlessly, never really getting anywhere, never really satisfying us with any truth of the subject” (Arnold 117). An underlying impossibility of the main characters to take control of their lives seems to be a common trait in all his novels.

Another salient idea is the notion that childhood can be a painful and traumatic experience. Rechy's works make clear references to the consequences that his parent's failed marriage has always had on his life. Born to an alcoholic father of Scottish-American heritage and a devoted Catholic mother of Mexican origin, Rechy soon learnt what marginalization and oppression could do to individuals, both from an ethnic and gender standpoint. Maybe trying to avoid further stigmatization, Rechy caused controversy among the Chicano community for his disengagement from his Chicano background. In part due to his condition as a white Chicano, according to many critics, Rechy pretended to pass as an Anglo Saxon American writer at the beginning of his career (Castillo and Rechy 114). Finally, however, and after putting an end to the controversy, he recognized his status as a Chicano. Today he is in fact recognized by the Chicano community as one of the most important intellectual figures in both the American and the Chicano literary realms. This is of particular importance in light of the prizes he has been awarded for his gay-themed works, i.e. the Pen-USA-West's prestigious Lifetime Achievement Award (1997) and the William Whitehead Lifetime Achievement Award (1999).

### **2.1 The case of ethnic identity in *City of Night***

John Rechy's first novel *City of Night* was published in 1963. The novel was published some years before New York's Stonewall riots in 1969, considered by many the climax of the gay revolution in America. The novel was published during a period of development of the Chicano Movement of the 1960s and 1970s, which changed drastically the way Chicano's observations about themselves, their heritage and the condition of their relationship between identity and society. For instance, the novel tends to be considered as a literary classic both in the Chicano and the mainstream American gay culture of the seventies and the eighties. *City of Night* revolutionized the situation of the gay male Chicano figure in an epoch plagued by anti-homosexual sentiment, explicitly during a period without the appropriate political

representation of the Chicano movement nor of an organized gay rights movement. The novel set in the decade of the sixties narrates the story of a young nameless, attractive man, who travels across the United States. This journey was well known by the author, since he had made it himself before he settled down in Los Angeles. In the novel, though, the main character is a male prostitute, a *hustler*. Besides titles like George Vidal's *The City and the Pillar* (1948) and Hubert Selby's *Last Exit to Brooklyn* (1957), Americans were introduced for the very first time to a story which suggests that the male body could be used as a commercial commodity, and that the potential clients were other men. The novel caused major controversy among readers because of the entire nature of the story, depictions of homosexual eroticism, and outspoken representations of men oppressed by the weight of heterosexual values. The novel also received mixed reviews because of the straightforward style of narration and its representation of the homosexual culture in America.

In each passage of *City of Night*, readers are introduced to characters from different backgrounds, whom all have in common their sexual encounters with an unnamed sex worker. As the main character, the narrator is the one giving an account of the men he meets along his journey in cities such as New York, San Francisco, Chicago and New Orleans. The novel introduces with a charismatic and entertaining tone the figure of the male hustler and his situation both as a human being and as a sexual instrument. The underlying paradigm in the novel seems to be the disguised identity of a male homosexual who seeks in prostitution a way to act out his otherwise suppressed desires. In a larger context, *City of Night* also touches upon the gender constraints that the homosexual ethnic minorities of America faced during the sixties. Two salient examples include the detailed descriptions Rechy gives of the social marginalization faced by African American and Chicano homosexual communities.

This chapter aims to delve into the identity traits of *City of Night's* main character; a Caucasian *hustler* of Chicano origin struggling to distance himself from his true self, both ethnically and sexually, in a time of conservatism and social oppression. Since the main

character contests mainstream values and represents a marginalized portion of American and Chicano societies, *City of Night* might be understood as an attempt to voice a doubly marginalized group. This chapter also seeks to establish whether Rechy attempts to do so by drawing attention to the intersection between gender and ethnicity, and introducing the figure of gay Chicano for the first time in American literature. In order to explore the junction between gender and ethnicity in *City of Night*, two notions need to be considered based on de Beauvoir's theory of gender/sexual individual's freedom in its role as the 'Other'. On one hand, the main character, the hustler, is presented as a straight male, who exchanges sexual encounters with other men. "Hustling" in the story is then depicted as a profitable and exchangeable line of work, where homosexual/social encounters are not entwined with the hustler's identity and his "self". On the other hand, along the same line, gender is considered as a performance adopted and adapted by each individual, and responding to their needs.

In *City of Night*, the author explores the struggles of identity experienced by members of the American gay male community residing in various places and coming from a diverse range of backgrounds. Rechy touches upon the issue of ethnicity as an essential part of self-acceptance, but also social rejection at a time homosexuality was widely condemned, especially among minority cultural groups. Even if Rechy does not intend to, *City of Night* ghettoizes the notion of homosexuality and how it is challenged by different ethnical communities within American society. Plenty of examples denote the role that ethnicity played among gender marginalization, and also it is evident that in connection to gender exclusion, discrimination is not ruled out specifically on ethnic traits.

In spite of the notion that external oppression might serve as unifying element, ethnicity plays a central role in terms of differentiation and stigma within homosexual communities. The author gives an account of the importance that ethnicity has as part of the self and an inseparable constraint of identity. In many passages of *City of Night*, Rechy points

out how relations are built from an ethnic point of view, which also includes class, education and even linguistic traits:

“The Negro queen’s eyes open wide. “Are you trying to dish me, Mary?” she angrily. “Honey,” said the blond one, “all Ah asked was a simple question. Wasnt thuh Queen of Shayba White? For all Ah know, you painted youhself White.” (50)

Rechy is establishing a paradigm of ethnic and sexual freedom by exposing a nexus among the relationship between nature and culture with the self. For example, language in the novel becomes a manner of liberation and autonomy. In the underworld described by Rechy in the novel, an individual like an African American who happens to be a drag queen is potentially free to act, interact and express himself without any kind of 'social' formalities. However, in spite of detailed descriptions of situations where ethnicity plays a central role, Rechy ironically omits to touch upon this subject in the case of the main character. In fact, no passage in the novel gives an account of how a Chicano gay sex worker can find a place where he can harmonize his self and his ethnic background. It has been claimed that the narrator remains an uncommitted outsider of both this Chicano background and Anglo gay community, “he is always performing the ‘Other’ in an endless pursuit of the self” (Christian 45). Thus, in the introduction of *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir writes: “The demeaned position of other is not uniquely suffered by Women; all racial, ethnic and sexual minorities and economic marginal's are ascribed this location” (Stavro 456). In other words, as is the case for the main character in Rechy’s novel: the gay male Mexican American with a strong spiritual Catholic-oriented posture in the mainstream Anglo American realm has to be able to avoid social conflict by interposing a vague image of his true identity. Rechy depicted in the main character the stigmatized figure of the ‘Other’ (the Chicano gay hustler) who is trying to justify the situation of his identity, apparently, in order to be understood by an ultra-conservative society (both the Anglo American and the Chicano). Three situations stand out, though, as identity markers of the main character throughout the novel: 1) the effect of social and personal passing; 2) a disproportional sense of spiritual (Catholic) sentiment; and 3) a

serious case of internalized homophobia. It is neither reasonable nor necessary to conclude that Rechy deliberately omitted to endow his character with more Chicano elements, or passages on the origins of the narrator. This is because a careful dissection of the novel reveals how passing, the first aspect to consider, sheds light on the main character's true self.

### **2.1.1 Passing**

Racial passing refers to a person classified as a member of one racial group attempting to be accepted as a member of a different group. In a wider sense, passing is used to refer to ethnicity rather than race since, at least in the case of many minorities, their inferior status derives from easily perceivable differences, i.e. skin colour, hair texture, academic education, speech, and traditional customs. In American literature, this phenomenon is found predominantly within the Harlem Renaissance's literary period, reflected by African American literature, with racial identity as the main subject. Nella Larsen is one of the best known African American writers who introduced to the American public to this concept both from the ethnic and the gender perspectives. In the novel *Passing* (1929), Larsen "stresses the interpretive anxieties and sexual paranoia that make convention-bound people reluctant to allow others the freedom to travel freely throughout the many worlds, identities and sexualities of the American society" (Blackmer 52). As in the case of Rechy, Larsen explores the intersection between ethnic and gender identity experienced by a non-Caucasian-American individual depicted in the literary text.

Thus, in *City of Night* passing is understood to be partly autobiographical, since Rechy wanted deliberately to be considered as a mainstream Caucasian writer (Castillo and Rechy 50). Just like the unnamed main character, Rechy wanted to distance himself from his Mexican background. In general, passing entails "a deception that enables a person to adopt certain roles or identities from which he would be barred by prevailing social standards" (Kennedy 11). The term was used especially in the U.S. to describe a person of mixed-race

heritage assimilating into the white majority during times when legal and social conventions of descent order classified the person as a minority, subject to racial segregation and social discrimination. In *City of Night*, the unnamed main character is only partially willing to share his origins with the reader:

That man who alternately claimed French, English, Scottish descent depending on his imaginative moods—that strange man who had travelled from Mexico to California spreading his seed—that turbulent man, married and divorced, who then married my Mother, a beautiful Mexican woman who loves me fiercely and never once understood about the terror between me and my father. . . . When I think of that glass case, I think of my Mother. . . a ghost image that will haunt me—Always. (13)

No additional notes or references are made on his mother's origin, birthplace, extended family or any possible indications of his entailment with the Mexican heritage. Any capitalized reference to his "Mother", evidences nevertheless the importance that she has in the life of the main character. She is presented as a symbol of motherhood worth mentioning and promoting. Even if her origins are omitted, she is presented as a better parent than her Caucasian husband. Rechy illuminates how 'passing' does not mean that individuals are not proud of the ethnic group they belong to, but rather that society makes it difficult for them to choose to belong to a marginalized minority. If given the option of passing for a member of mainstream society, as Rechy did in his private life, the main character chooses to do so.

In *City of Night*, the narrator makes clear that his allegiance to his mother is by no means comparable to the repulsion his father inspires in him. It is rather the Mexican part he relates to, at least in terms of affection and closeness: "There is nothing brutal about my Mother: only a crushing tenderness, as powerful as the hatred I would discover later in my father" (11). Most passages of the novel referring to his origins insist paradoxically on the life of his father rather than his mother. Her life prior to her arrival to the United States remains frozen in time, and excluded from the narrator's thread of events. An expected account of how a redundant heritage has an impact on the narrator is avoided. Most importantly, *City of Night* strives to obviate any 'labelling' of the main character according to preconceived schemas.

In light of Beauvoir's struggle against "merely human beings [being] arbitrarily designated" (14), individuals are free from explaining themselves in terms of predefined categories. However, central to *City of Night* is a continuous interpretation of the narrator's reality based on a taxonomy of ethnicities, classes, backgrounds, physical characteristics, cultural traits and sexual preferences. Inevitably, this leads to question why Rechy presents a character who is only able to read the (under-)world surrounding him through the lens of preconceptions, but is still unable or unwilling to define himself. Readers are invited to interpret his vagueness in terms of his ethnic background. In many passages, youth is mentioned as an important commodity in the prostitution world. Rechy gives an account of the benchmark used by clients to stratify the objects of their sexual appetite. Since Caucasian straight boys top the wish list of most of them, *City of Night* could be read as the narration of a mixed-raced street worker who chooses to exalt his all-American ancestry in order to attract more clients. It remains unknown whether the main character does so because his position as Chicano might marginalize his position. From a Rechy's standpoint, it can also be argued that a self-identified Chicano gay 'hustler' would have raised more eyebrows in the sixties than an all-American one.

Karen Christian states that Rechy recurs to passing as means to safeguard his condition as a Latin and homosexual at the same time. According to Christian, since subcultures mirror mainstream societies, power structures within them are vivid copies of systems where "those who can claim to be white and heterosexual" (50) are in charge. *City of Night* is understood to oppose any grid of systems where ethnicity does not overlap with gender and power, all at the same time. Along this line, heterosexuality is being trespassed by homosexuality, while mixed heritage forces its way into a space dominated by a Caucasian majority. Christian concludes that Rechy's main character "infiltrates the Anglo centric gay community and avoids discrimination by passing as a non-ethnic white" (50). Christian suggests that societal hierarchies are built on grounds of predefined values and rules about



deviations and difference. Along this line, heterosexual dominance is strongly linked to the homogenous background of the members of a group; Caucasian in the case of American realm.

Within this system, there is limited room for 'other' possibilities, which is why oppression is enforced. However, "undetected 'contamination' of white cultural space by people of colour, and of heterosexual space by gays and lesbians" (50) does occur. By trespassing on the boundaries of predetermined ethnical boundaries, *City of Night* reminds the readers of the institution of ethnic traits and its validity even within oppressed subgroups. In the novel, there are clear references to what ethnic and racial stereotypes constitute and how they unfold in daily lives. In fact in the novel, there are other ethnical characters inevitably stereotyped exclusively for being part of other minor cultural groups. In order to be socially understood or accepted among the hustling community, an individual has to pass and fulfil certain conditions. In spite of the marginalized nature of the street world, the promoted rules are generally premeditated and derive from social environment. Rechy employs the mechanism of passing both from an ethnic and gender standpoint.

From the viewpoint of the Chicano community, ethnicity does challenge the sexual liberties of individuals that other cultural ancestry might take for granted. Since the intersection of homosexuality and Chicano values has been tinted by disapproval and condemnation, it is reasonable that *City of Night* does not stress the Mexican heritage of the main character. Rechy jeopardizes the Chicano identity in his novel in order to avoid the stigmatization of the Chicano culture, leading to disownment and rejection. In other words, Rechy is trying to avoid Beauvoir's marginal situation of the oppressed subject. It remains unclear, nevertheless, whether he infers that homosexuality and hustling activities in the case of Chicanos hide behind the shield of heterosexuality. In spite of the main character passing as a Caucasian sex worker, his insecurity and lack of self-confidence in relation to his background strip his authenticity off in many passages of the novel. This particular case

seems to be reflected specially in the way the nameless main character establishes relationships among other hustlers, among his clients and among his so-called new friends. He starts his journey alone and he ends alone among the company of outsiders and strangers. He seems to be uninterested in constructing any kind of familiar strings. In fact, the narrator makes reference to the 'alienation' he has felt ever since he can remember and that stretches beyond his lineage:

And I knew, too, why earlier I had been able—so easily, at last—to vindicate my father.... I had seen enough in that journey to know with certainty that the roots of rebellion went far, far beyond that. Beyond the father, beyond the mother. Far beyond childhood—and even birth. An alienation that began much earlier. From the very beginning.... (Rechy 357)

Stating that he has felt alienated his whole life supports the idea that he has sought in passing a way to evade marginalization. Along this line, Christian stresses that Rechy endows his main character with personality traits not stereotypically related to Chicano heritage. She points out that the unnamed 'hustler' is depicted as an avid book reader (55), a highly sociable, tolerant and emancipated individual able to engage in deep conversations at any level. Although Christian does not imply that minorities do not possess these characteristics, she does suggest that Rechy aims to transmit to the reader an image easily associated with Caucasian male individuals (50). *City of Night* presents a persona who could with difficulty match the stereotypical profile of African Americans or Latinos found in literature at that time. This becomes evident when more traits of this character are dissected from an ethnic viewpoint. In line with Christian's definition of ethnicity as an amalgamation of "ancestry and to traditional practices such as language, customs, religious practices, and so forth that differ from those of the national majority" (6), religion and spirituality in *City of Night* will be analyzed in the next subchapter.

### **2.1.2 Religion and spirituality**

As will be further analysed in chapters three and four, religious doctrines such as the role of a radical Catholic sentiment among Chicano communities, triggers a series of personal and

communal conflicts evidently represented in Chicano literature. Beauvoir, who was raised as a Catholic, condemns and rejects in *The Second Sex* the manipulation that religion establishes in the relationship between society and identity. Throughout most chapters of *City of Night*, the unnamed main character draws attention to guilt, repentance, spiritual frustration and a profound need to review his life from a moral and religious standpoint. Readers are introduced to his timeline of devotion development from his early years and up until the time he decides to become a sex worker. Selling his body is not the only 'sinful' part of his life though. His idealized self-image of heterosexual 'macho' leads him to judge and reject his homosexual inclinations. His Chicano identity rises to the surface when he gives an account that his first encounter was with a Catholic God: "I was very religious then. I went to Mass regularly, to Confession. I prayed nightly" (11). He elaborates on the grid of obligations and rules on which Catholic faith is built and that he inherited from his devoted and God-fearing mother. *City of Night* presents a man tortured by guilt after each sexual encounter, his fascination for a world rejected by his childhood's religion and his own ideas of what morality entails. Long conversations with clients, observations of street life and reflections on the role that religion should play in people's lives prove that religious notions are an important part of his identity. He recognizes that he leads a life different from the one he had expected before leaving religious assumptions aside:

The world was revealing its death to me by the process of slow discovery: the slowly gnawing loss of innocence; and I found myself longing for the God in Whom, unquestioningly, I had believed as a child. But this world of loneliness and desperation belied Him. The sky was now a black cave where once it had been limitless, stretching into that Heaven of childhood angels and peace.  
(Rechy 124)

These passionate feelings are no surprise in light of the fact that the Catholic Church has "conflated homosexuality with sickness, criminal activity, and sin" (Christian 73). Knowing he was brought up under Catholic influence suggests his sexual inclinations have been repressed ever since he became aware of them. Since God remains as a salvation way, even if only a distant one, our main character seems to believe he can return to him at any time.

This denotes a sense of acknowledgement of his existence, but also repentance for something he truly believes he should not be doing, i.e. selling his body and having feelings towards other men. Rechy endows his character, though, with a sense of spiritual independence and the conviction that he could distance himself from his religious upbringing in order to find peace:

But our unbudging standards of morality impose certain ugly names:  
The only immorality is 'morality' -which has restricted us, shoved into  
the dark the most beautiful things that should glow in the light, not be  
stifled by dark-words, darklights, dark whispers. Why is what I do  
Immoral, when it hurts no one?—no one! an expression of: . . . Love. . . .  
Yet this unreasoning world ignores the true obscenities of our time:  
poverty, repression, the blindness to beauty and sensitivity—vide, the  
sneaky machinations of our own storm troopers—the vice squad! (Rechy  
70)

An attempt to seek a place where he does not oppress and marginalize his own existence denotes a desire to accept himself. Dissecting the dubious role religion has been given in conditioning social structures bring spiritual power back to his life. A notorious gay activist, Rechy voices his opinions on the illogical nature of homophobia and gender-disparity. Having inherited from his mother the Catholic notions of morality and sin, homosexuality remains nevertheless ingrained at the core of his perception of himself. Rechy frames his protagonist as a homophobic homosexual incapable of overcoming the most difficult hurdle, his own mentality.

### **2.1.3 Internalized homophobia**

*City of Night* is a cocktail of homosexual freedom blended with a certain level of negative feelings towards homosexuality itself. The main character is willing and able to engage in all sort of sexual practices, embrace all sort of lifestyles and reject religious ideas, but his own homosexuality remains a taboo: "Whatever a guy does with other guys, if he does it for money, that don't make him queer. You're still straight. It's when you start doing it for free, with other young guys, that you start growing wings" (40). According to the main character, since his body has become a commodity, any external act remains far from his internal self.

Engaging in bodily contact with many men and developing, at times, feelings of attachment and even love, does not render him gay, according to him. It is only when there is no monetary compensation that an individual is truly being himself making evident the nature of his condition. This mindset prevents him from ever having sexual intercourse without asking for money. His “denial of reciprocal desire may be genuine representation of their sexual orientation or a product of internalized homophobia” (Christian 44). The fact that he refers to homosexuals as individuals ‘with wings’ denotes lack of acknowledgement and respect.

It is also evident that he renders ‘queers’ as the ‘Other’ and stresses his desire to distance himself from them. As Beauvoir might have put it: gays are for him the unnamed character, the differentiated, incidental and inessential other (17). His mixed ethnic heritage, which he also chooses to ignore, added to his sexual inclinations could position him as part of a marginalized ‘Other’ he would rather avoid. However, what emerges from his pronounced *macho* mentality is a strong affiliation to his Chicano side, where traits from Catholicism dictate that only mainstream values are to be promoted. His reproduction of the idea that homosexuals have ‘wings’ also sheds light and echoes hate discourses he has been exposed to as member of Chicano community. This is not to say that Anglo American communities are more tolerant. Still, having dissected the religious origins of his homophobia, it can be concluded that it obeys notions deeply rooted in Chicano mentality. *City of Night* presents a character who has internalized rejection and marginalization and has come to believe homosexuality is deviant and undesirable. Central to the next section is how Rechy illuminates and elaborates on his main character’s sexuality.

## **2.2 Gender and sexual identity: performance and stereotyping masculinity**

In a novel where prostitution plays a central role, sexual identity might be expected to overcome and colour every passage. This is not the case in *City of Night*, though, because this is a tale of unlabeled difference. In terms of Beauvoir, the story perforates the traditional

notion that a penis does not make a man, and a man does not need to be heterosexual. In this same sense, a transsexual does not need to be gay, or a man passing as woman, because none of these notions are recognized as steady and solid concepts. Rechy manages to prioritize and strengthen the notion that identity is the biased perception of our desires and how we externalize them. Society remains nevertheless the authority and measuring unit of our possibilities and difference remains a condition for those who do not comply with standards.

Stuart Hall maintains that “what is said about racial difference could equally be applied in many instances to other dimensions of difference, such as gender, sexuality, class and disability” (225). Nominalization of the ‘Other’ through mechanisms of difference are responsible for the marginalization of subjects (Beauvoir 17), which make oppression evident. In *City of Night*, Rechy reminds the readers the true nature of carnival, and how it constitutes a way of unleashing the ‘Other’ from his condemned existence:

And with much more care and planning than that of the initial wave of masculine vagrants, the queens (prematurely sentenced to a purgatory of half-male, half-female) will begin their female plans, selecting their women’s clothes lovingly. The golden image of at last being Women—for that one glorious day!—of not possibly hassling getting busted (as they were in New York, Los Angeles, Points In Between) — is a fulfilled daydream in which The Newsreel Cameras—The Eyes and Ears of The World—will focus on them. Hips siren curved, wrists lily-delicately broken, they will stare in defiant demureness from theatre screens and home screens all over the country; and those painted male faces will challenge—and, Maybe, for an instant, be acknowledged by—the despising, arrogant, apathetic world that produced them and exiled them.  
(Rechy 284)

It is during New Orleans’ Mardi Gras that our unnamed character becomes aware that only a celebration of the deviant and uncommon recognizes and celebrates the existence of ‘queens’. His own homophobic opinions come to the surface when he justifies society for choosing to promote certain values and relegates difference to a corner. Rechy presents in the male characters, both the one who buys and the one who sells sex, a desperate sentiment of self-justification in order to avoid rejection and gain acceptance. Just like in the case of ethnic boundaries, the main character is able to recognize and accept himself only after achieving “the hustler’s position of power by denying his desire for men by passing as straight”

(Christian 50). Passing emerges, then, as a doubly convenient strategy in order to deal with unwanted traits of difference, i.e. belonging both to a racial and sexual minority. *City of Night* is the story of a man striving to compensate and attain normality even though he is aware it might not exist:

Too, there is always the threat of meeting someone who looks perfectly “normal” and who turns out to be psycho—like the man in the raincoat in New York who had pulled a knife on me. In a life that thrives on the arbitrary stamp of “differentness” imposed on it by the world that creates it and then rejects it, the more “regular” the person (the more he defies the usually easy classification of masculine homosexual, queen, score, hustler, fairy), the more suspect he becomes. (Rechy 223)

Rechy suggests a paradoxical conceptual system in which normality is far from being the norm, but still the object of desire of his unnamed character. Thus like Beauvoir's philosophy, he seems to imply that normality implies freedom and for instance freedom implies liberation and recognition. His ironic homophobia is fore-grounded in the idea that heterosexuality, just as whiteness should prevail. The reader is confronted with an underlying Foucaultian notion that power is always present and that *City of Night* presents a character unwilling to belong to the weak segment of society, either as a gay man or as a Chicano.

The same reductionist structures in which men lead only if they fulfil certain requirements relegate him to isolation: “I pretended I hadn’t heard him. . . . But long before that night when I had resolved to explore this world not with one person but with many, I had become aware that there was something about someone getting too close to me which suffocated me” (50). Intimacy becomes a threat for someone willing to reproduce a distorted and self-complying reality in order to accept himself. Letting clients inside of his most secluded core would only mean to expose himself and give up the power that anonymity offers him. Rechy challenges the idealized self-image of his character by revealing one of the few passages in the whole novel where there is a glimpse of authentic self-reflection, and possibly self-acceptance:

Lying on a couch was a darkly handsome, masculine youngman who looked immediately to me like a hustler . . . His name was Dave, and I had been wrong about his scene: He was not a hustler. He worked in an

airplane factory, he told me, and he went to school at night. He quickly explained that he merely shared that apartment with the giddy Italian; that there was nothing between them. For a long while we spoke about many things—but not about the homosexual scene. I was beginning to think he was straight, despite his roommate. Then he said: “That male nurse you were with that night, he just likes hustlers.” He was obviously trying to find out about me. I said nothing. “I can’t see just going to bed with a lot of people—different ones every night,” he said. “I mean, a person, whether he’s queer or not, he’s got to find someone. . . . Nothing like a lonely fairy,” he said smiling. I liked him right away. (215)

His goal of passing “as straight” (Christian 51) nevertheless leaves room to imagine a future in which he can be truthful to his own desires. It can be argued that this passage is a continuation of a goal he had set himself long before his encounter with Dave: “Because even before I got there, New York had become a symbol of my liberated self, and I knew that it was in a kind of turbulence that that self must attempt to find itself (Rechy 20). Rechy facilitates a confrontation between an idealized self and a tormented soul that struggles to reconcile his religious, social and gender status. It is no surprise that nominalization, as described by Beauvoir, is ruled out from the main character’s narrations. Embracing the idea that he would ‘grow wings’ would jeopardize any possibility of accepting who he is. Passing remains as a particular convenient strategy, which allows him to play a role where all unwanted traits of his identity are left out. Performing and impersonating a new self makes it possible for him to feel empowered in a similar way makeup enhances femininity in a transvestite, but in opposed directions. Although these sort of binary oppositions “have the great value of capturing the diversity of the world within their either/or extremes, they are also a rather crude and reductionist way of establishing meaning” (Hall 226). Through performance, an amended version of self is given the possibility to emerge and prevail over those constraints that render self-acceptance an impossible task.

Questions of performance have come to the fore in terms of gender, because of the array of possibilities that sexuality offers against the limited acceptance of anything besides heterosexuality. In the case of ethnic structures, “dress, tradition, behaviours, and language associated with Latina/o cultural heritage operate as performative acts that the dominant



culture has identified as signs of ethnic excess” (Christian 31). A similar situation occurs in the situation of gender structures, where a hegemonic system calls for less ambivalent preferences to conform to a norm. Within homosexuality, Rechy elaborates on how performance exempts from difference and marginalization, but also enhances roles within structures of ‘otherness’ beyond social acceptance:

I learned that there are a variety of roles to play if you’re hustling:  
youngmanoutofajob butlooking; dontgiveadamnyoungman drifting;  
perrenialhustler easytomakeout; youngmanlostinthebigcity  
pleasehelpmesir. There was, too, the pose learned quickly from the  
others along the street: the stance, the jivetalk—a mixture of jazz, joint,  
junk sounds—the almost-disdainful, disinterested, but, at the same time,  
inviting look; the casual way of dress. (Rechy 32)

In *City of Night*, the narrator gives an account of how he can present and impersonate a character according to the situation. Like Beauvoir points out in *The Second Sex*, persons or individuals are responsible for giving meaning and value of the life chosen (27). In fact, he explains how the fluidity of his identity allows him to inflate or deflate certain traits depending on his needs. It is inevitable to wonder why he slips away giving details on the way he ‘performs’ as Caucasian and as heterosexual. A reason for this could lie in his conviction that external traits, rather than internal ones, play a major role in how we are perceived as individuals: “He touched his face as if to feel if the skin is still smooth. In this world, more than in any other, Youth is a badge; Beauty a treasure” (186).

It can be argued that, as in the case of beauty, the narrator assumes homosexuality could be overlooked as long as it did not become salient or obvious. This might stem from the fact that is pointed out by Kevin Arnold, “Rechy’s body is a signifying, *representational body* whose sexual value is contingent upon its ability to articulate a sexual position or even identification, especially a masculine one” (124). In fact, most of the passages where he condemns homosexuality are those in which he perceives that predetermined stereotypes of masculinity have been trespassed on:

A flamboyant, flagrant, flashy queen. A queen in absurdly grotesque,  
clumsy drag. But there was something else. There is something else that  
accosts you immediately about this flaming, reckless, gaudy queen

contemptuously puffing out smoke as if it were something burning  
fiercely from within that will force you to acknowledge her blazing anger.  
(325)

He stresses in many passages of the novel that for him “masculinity is more than a hegemonic regulation of the subject: masculinity is sexy” (Arnold 124). Through his observations, the narrator voices the idea that he embraces a system in which subjects are to use masks unless they conform to the predefined rules. Through the gaze of transvestites and transsexuals, he has learnt that their performance entails entering ‘otherness’ by exposing their real self. His interpretation of performance, on the other hand, leaves him to choose an empowered image amidst a world of difference.

In the novel, there are also clear stereotypes in terms of masculinity and masculinisation. Rechy follows a certain pattern of maleness where the real male seems to represent masculinity according to the social model of the 60s exclusively (exposed years earlier by Beauvoir) where the figure of masculinity is established entirely by the masculine genital organ, the penis. Along with it, according to Daniel Harris in *The Rise and Fall of the Gay Culture* (1977), “someone was considered masculine if they were: indifferent about their physical appearance, unkempt, unrefined, blue-collar, unintelligent, criminal and stoic” (qtd. in Pérez 243). In fact, many characters of the novel follow these social patterns generalizing and stereotyping the concept of maleness. Masculinity is exemplified in the violent character of the narrator’s father (15), in Pete’s criteria concerning sexual orientation (40), in the professor’s speech about morality (56), and in the narrator’s own preconceptions concerning the definition of “normality” (223). Certainly in the novel “The reader is exposed to a cornucopia of images real and unreal of cowboys, motorcycles, military men, criminals and blue-collar workers” (Pérez 243). Masculinity is introduced as a preconceived and standardized notion and in fact, all “the masculine” characters in the novel are defined under the same patron: colourless, depressing and brutal. This unequivocal representation of masculinity seems to be attributed to a certain level of the so called Chicano machismo of

which Rechy seems to be a victim. This would lead to conclude that homosexuality and masculinity are two notions difficult to associate. In other words, masculine characters as double and feeble figures mirror the fact that masculinity is understood as a tradition to keep, a norm to be followed, and an aptitude man were expected to have. As it will be analyzed in the two chapters to come, image of masculinity in Chicano literature seems to follow a cyclical pattern in which an individual who is endowed with a penis is expected to wear pants, act ruthless, avoid displaying any kind of feelings and emotions, restrain his thoughts properly, behave in an arrogant way, never give in, and stand for normality, stability and serenity in order to maintain a male-ruled order within Chicano communities.

Identity in *City of Night* is a fluid entity, but one deliberately built by a narrator who refuses to accept his affiliation with marginalized minorities. On one hand, a culturally meshed heritage is obviated except for references to his father's European ancestry. Allusion to Chicano elements are not deliberately introduced, but can be deduced from traits in his character, i.e. religious background, macho mentality, and homophobia. On the other hand, sexual identity is paradoxically presented as the externalization of a corrected perception of the self through performance. The main character, unwilling to give up favorable position as heterosexual and masculine figure attempts to convince himself that he only engages sexually with other men because of financial remuneration. In both the ethnicity and gender identity case, the true persona emerges in passages where the externalisation of his idealized self is stripped off by his emotions. Driven by guilt after numerous sexual encounters, his Catholic upbringing emerges and leads him to wonder about his childhood, his relation with God, his condition as sex worker and his hidden sexual inclinations.

His perception of how society is built according to structures in which ethnic matters are perceivable in his accounts of the interaction between street workers of different backgrounds. In spite of a detailed taxonomy of the characters he has met, the narrator exempts himself from any ethnic affiliation. This opposes the importance he places on

external traits, such as beauty, youth and masculinity. Rechy introduces a character willing to portray himself as a somehow sophisticated and emancipated subject; someone who reads avidly and can engage in conversation with high-end clients. Nevertheless, the effects of internalized homophobia likely stemming from a Chicano upbringing are evidence of fissures in his well performed character. From a sexual standpoint, many passages illuminate his preference for men over women. On two occasions, the narrator shares with the reader his fascination with a man he has met. *City of Night* serves alternatively as the arena to air his resistance to embracing homosexual lifestyle. Ironically, the main character in the novel refers to 'queens with wings' as the 'Other' excluding himself out of this condition. This does not exempt him from lying at the intersection of an ethnic and sexual minority. In spite of his condemnation of transvestites, open homosexuals and ethnic minorities, the reader cannot help but excluding him from the mainstream all-American majority to which he strives to belong.

Rechy voices in *City of Night* the difficulties that gay Chicanos face by not fitting in the predefined grid of social expectations, either from an ethnicity or gender viewpoint. In many ways, it could be argued that homosexuality within Chicano society in America is doubly challenging for those in that position. On one hand, Chicanos who opt for embracing and accepting themselves risk being outcast, or being accused of affiliating with Anglo American society. In fact, nowadays this could be the case since Chicanos are less tolerant towards homosexuality than mainstream Americans (Christian 50). More importantly, the binary notion man/macho within Chicano culture renders it impossible for men to be acknowledged as homosexuals and as males. The transgression that homosexuality implies within Chicano culture seems to be parallel to a prospective contamination of ethnic elements such as dress, traditions, behaviors and language associated with Chicano cultural heritage within white communities (Christian 31). In *City of Night*, the narrator agrees with the perpetuation of a system where an empowered majority oppresses deviant lifestyles and

minorities. He sheds light on the fact that heterosexuality and whiteness view diversity as synonymous with sporadic celebration and carnival. Rechy presents a binary system in which masculinity and whiteness are intersected by homosexuality and Chicano-ness. In *City of Night*, ethnicity and gender do not compete with each other; they are rather entwined under the shield of *passing* that the narrator uses to avoid that his true self comes to the surface.

Thus, following the same pattern but rather with a total different tonality, the next two literary works, explore Chicano gay identity twenty years after the publication of *City of Night*. Thus after the eruption of the so called gay liberation of the seventies, these two literary works seem to explore the situation of the gay male Chicano individual in a remarkable, direct and intriguing way.

### 3. Richard Rodriguez and *Hunger of Memory* (1982)

After the publication of Rechy's novel, almost two decades passed before the topic of homosexuality emerged once more in a significant manner in Chicano literature. Although other minor and less popular works were published, like Floyd Sala's *Tattoo the Wicked Cross* (1967) and Oscar Zara Acosta's semiautobiographical work *The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo* (1972), only Chicana writer Cherríe Moraga's *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1981) and the Chicano autobiography of Richard Rodriguez *Hunger of Memory* (1982) stand out. Through Moraga's writings in 1981, the image of queer Chicano literature emerged more clearly and a lesbian and feminist critical dialogue was begun. Moraga is considered a pioneer figure in the Chicano queer literary field, because she introduced a new vision of the juxtaposition between feminism, sexuality and ethnicity.

Published in 1982, the autobiography *Hunger of Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez* sheds light on the status of Chicano homosexual narrative and its position within American literary canons. It was a controversial piece of work, because it contested ethnic and gender stereotypes in mainstream American society and Chicano minorities at the beginning of the eighties. Unlike the main characters in other gay Chicano literary works, the protagonist does not attempt to understand or justify his situation as someone deviating from the norm. The path chosen by Rodriguez is to disclose his feelings and experiences regardless of the impact this might have on the reader. Although *Hunger of Memory* bears a close resemblance to other Chicano narratives, it stands out for revealing intimate details that had been considered taboo among the Chicano community prior to its publication. With the similar "timid" approach that John Rechy uses in *City of Night* with regard to the topic of Chicano ethnic identity, Rodriguez deals in his autobiography with the figure of the Chicano homosexual. In other words, both authors downplay one or the other of these two identity markers.

Due to Rodriguez' background, the author is believed to have been aware of the controversy his autobiography would cause before it came out. He was born in San Francisco of Mexican parents and grew up in an atmosphere where Chicano values, religion and macho mentality played a central role. His trilogy of autobiographical narratives written between 1982 and 2002 turned him into a controversial yet significant figure within the Chicano literary movement of the 1980s. Central to this trilogy is describing the transformation he undergoes from being the son of Mexican immigrants into becoming a prominent figure in the literary and the academic worlds. Above all, the trilogy focuses at greatest length on the role that education played in Mr. Rodriguez' professional achievements. His works have gained great recognition within American literary circles examples of the spirit of Chicano narrative. Since he is understood to represent Chicanos as a minority group, the fact that his books also deal with anti-Chicano topics has been contested by other Chicano literary figures. Yaakov Perry observes that Rodriguez awakens anti-Chicano feelings among his readers by presenting a narrow-minded, backwards and judgmental society not willing to evolve from religious preconceptions. Rodriguez has been criticized for using his position as a prominent American literary figure to overtly condemn the foundations of Chicano cultural and religious values. *Hunger of Memory* is perceived to lack impartiality in the narration (Rodríguez, "Rodriguez Reconsidered" 397).

In the opinion of some commentators, Rodriguez' perspective both as a writer and a literary character makes him unfair and biased towards his own people: "He is irrational, deceptive, extravagant, calculated, superficial, sentimental, and selfish. According to critics, he does not exhibit the rational, objective, resistant, integrated consciousness of a properly historically and ideologically conscious agent" (Rodríguez, "Rodriguez Reconsidered" 399). There are broadly speaking three aspects on which Rodriguez' novels are understood to base their criticism of Chicanos as a minority within American society: first, the role of bilingualism and the linguistic struggles between native speakers of both English and Spanish;

second, the instigation of ethnic customs and traditions or the Chicanization of the American social realm; and, third, the condition and social status of gender and sexual orientation among Chicanos living in the United States. His literary works also make reference to other aspects of Chicanos as an ethnic group, such as the sense of cultural and familiar traditions, and the importance given to education. In a less direct manner, they touch upon the issue of gender and homosexual orientation. An intriguing aspect of his autobiography is that he depicts the role of the Chicano homosexual identity through a character (himself) that does not feel comfortable in his situation and, as a result, ends up transmitting a sense of anti-Chicano and homophobic sentiments (Almaguer 256). Here the key point is to realize that Rodriguez seems to be testing the reader by to some extent, victimizing, degrading and underestimating both the Chicano culture and the homosexual individual. He does not seem to be interested in addressing Chicano homosexual readers; instead, the autobiography is portrayed as if the intended readers were mainstream, heterosexual Americans. In spite of not wanting to be perceived as a Chicano writer and in light of the resentment his works have provoked within minority literary circles, Richard Rodriguez, like John Rechy, is considered to be one of the most significant Chicano writers.

### **3.1 *Hunger of Memory* and ethnicity**

*Hunger of Memory* was published in 1982 amidst a boom of Chicano literary works sweeping onto American bookshelves. The popularity of his memoirs, though, did not counterbalance a high sense of skepticism that topics such as sexual orientation and emancipation raised among readers. For different reasons, the autobiography was widely criticized within American and Chicano literary circles: “Reviews by left-leaning intellectuals and activists were decidedly more mixed: while Rodriguez's beatific prose brought praise, he was often scorned for his polemical stance against such shibboleths of the Hispanic agenda as affirmative action and bilingual education” (Decker 124). In terms of Chicano literature, male homosexuality has



never been a very popular topic commonly used in narratives, perhaps because it is still perceived as an unnatural phenomenon. Before *Hunger of Memory*, being a male homosexual Chicano and what this entailed was not regarded as a situation commonly worth mentioning in a narrative explicitly. The reason might be distance that Chicano communities feel to what they perceive as deviant and, traditionally speaking, socially unacceptable. However, “of the seven novels published by Chicanos between 1959 and 1970, the three written by John Rechy have homosexuality as the main concern. Another, Floyd Salas’ *Tattoo the Wicked Cross*, privileges homosexual violence as the pivotal factor in the plot whereas José Antonio Villarreal’s *Pocho*, often cited as the first contemporary Chicano novel, utilizes homosexuals and attitudes towards homosexuals as key elements in the development of the story. In other words, during the decade in which the contemporary Chicano literary Movement began to flourish, five of the seven novels gave, in some way, central importance to homosexuality” (Bruce-Novoa 70). Thus *Hunger of Memory* was published in an epoch where both the gay and the Chicano movements were gaining more and more recognition in the Anglo-American literary field.

Rodriguez’ autobiography is written in such a way that the reader is aware of how the narrator’s dual identity as Chicano and Anglo American defines his view of the world. The narrative is divided into six chapters and each of them represent different stages of the main character’s life, starting with Rodriguez’ childhood and his coming of age. The technique of first-person narration provides the reader with Rodriguez’ immediate viewpoint on the events that take place in his life. Aspects such as sudden changes of mood, detailed first-hand descriptions and incorporation of realistic elements enhance the narration. Out of the few published narratives that can be categorized as homosexual Chicano literature, *Hunger of Memory* stands out for deconstructing gay Chicano identity constraints. This chapter aims to analyze and contrast the intersection of two of them: sexual identity and ethnicity based on Beauvoir’s criticism concerning the status of the ‘Other’ as being different from the

Chicano/Anglo American mainstream based on the fact of incorporating her belief that social categories such as ethnic traits and gender are not created but constructed. Throughout the narrative, three significant facts need to be considered in order to understand how ethnic and gender identity are portrayed in the narrative. Firstly, Rodriguez introduces a new style in which Chicano reality is described in an uninvolved, simplistic, but veracious way. Secondly, the tone of the autobiography is not submissive, as is the case in other narratives of the same type. Conversely, the story is told with an objective but challenging undertone. Thirdly, in spite of being criticized by prominent Chicano critics for the use of an overtly gloomy and depressing tone (for many anti-Chicano), Rodriguez still manages to narrate his own life with a peculiar, particular and unique style.

As seen in chapter one, throughout this thesis ethnicity is understood as the ascription of common cultural identity traits shared by a group of people. In this sense, Chicano ethnicity is analyzed as the common set of characteristics that are proper to those communities living in the United States but retaining their Mexican heritage elements, or mixing them with American values. In *Hunger of Memory*, Rodriguez associates his sense of self-identity with his ethnic heritage as a Chicano:

In a way, it was true. I was a minority. The word, as popularly used, did describe me. In the sixties, *minority* became a synonym for socially disadvantaged Americans-but it was primarily a numerical designation. The word referred to entire races and nationalities of Americans, those numerically underrepresented in institutional life. (Thus, without contradiction, one could speak of 'minority groups.')

And who were they exactly? Blacks-all blacks- most obviously were minorities. And Hispanic-Americans. And American Indians. And some others. (It was left to federal statisticians, using elaborate surveys and charts, to determine which other precisely.) I was a minority. (146)

As a matter of fact, an average American reader could interpret the story as the tale of social integration and academic success of a second-generation immigrant in the United States.

From a Chicano reader's perspective, the story could be perceived as a denunciation of traditional values that have prevented Chicano communities from adapting to American society.

Moreover, Rodriguez does not hide that he is willing to embrace the freedom and personal development opportunities that he has found outside his ethnic community. Contrasting aspects of Chicano and American cultures has been widely deployed as the reason why this autobiography is understood to represent Chicano narrative (Kaup 372). Rodriguez has opposed this categorization by pointing out that above all, this narrative is written in English, by an American and about a story that takes place in the United States. In the introduction to *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir establishes the differences, the acknowledgement and the encounter with the 'Other': the different, the oppressed, and the weak individual due to his/her ethnic condition and sexual orientation. Although Rodriguez clearly avoids being stereotyped as the 'Other', still, the autobiography does touch upon ethnic, religious and heritage issues typical of multicultural literature. In fact, in the autobiography, Rodriguez points out that at least in the America of the eighties, ethnicity marks the social status of any individual hopelessly. For example, in chapter five "Profession", Rodriguez demonstrates the contrast between social status and ethnic identity:

To evade his criticism, I wanted to side with him. I was about to admit the injustice of affirmative action. But he continued, his voice hard with accusation. 'Oh, it's all very simple this year. You're a Chicano. And I am a Jew. That's really the only difference between us'. His words stung anger alive. In a voice deceptively calm, I replied that he oversimplified the whole issue. Phrases came quickly: the importance of cultural diversity; new blood; the goal of racial integration. They were all the old arguments I had proposed years before- long since abandoned. After a minute or two, as I heard myself talking, I felt self-disgust. (170)

It also comments on the constraints that make up an individual's identity living between two cultural realms. Plenty of examples are given throughout the narrative of situations where the intersections of ethnicity, social struggles, linguistic affiliation and proficiency, race and to some extent, education have defined the subject's persona.

### **3.1.1 The magnitude of academic formation**

The main character draws attention to the few similarities to be found between his own story and other Chicano narratives by enhancing the role his intellectual skills have had in his own

development. In this sense, *Hunger of Memory* is primarily the chronicle of personal success which emerged based on intellectual traits. Rodriguez portrays education as the key to success for members of the Chicano community and accounts for the situations uneducated Chicanos face within U.S. society. Throughout the novel, ethnicity conditions the possibilities of minorities in America and explains why academic formation grows in importance among Chicanos. Central to “Profession”, the fifth chapter of the autobiography is to explain to the reader what it has meant to Rodriguez to be a ‘minority student’:

Nineteen sixty-nine. 1970. 1971. Slowly, slowly, slowly, the term *minority* became a source of uneasy. It would remind me of those boyhood years when I had felt myself alienated from public (majority) society- *los gringos*. *Minority*. *Minorities*. *Minority groups*. The terms sounded in public to remind me in private of the truth: I was not-in *cultural* sense- a minority, an alien from public life. (Not like *los pobres* I had encountered during my recent labouring summer). The truth was summarized in the sense of irony I’d feel at hearing myself called a minority student: The reason I was no longer a minority was because I had become a student. *Minority student!* (147)

For him, his lack of academic formation (due to the inability to access to proper education) is what separates him from the average Chicano individual, including his parents. Education transforms in many ways Rodriguez’ identity as student at the beginning and later on as an educator. Thus in the light of Beauvoir's approach to identity, in the autobiography, Rodriguez transmits the sentiment that each individual is responsible completely for giving value and meaning to his/her own life through personal choices. In fact, like Beauvoir points out in *The Second Sex*, intellectual and professional independence creates autonomy and confidence in any individual. Rodriguez is clearly disturbed by the fact that those who are not given the opportunity to have access to education are prevented from reaching self-realization and are condemned to social marginalization:

You who read this act of contrition should know that by writing it I seek a kind of forgiveness-no yours. The forgiveness, rather, of those many persons whose absence from higher education permitted me to be classed a minority student. I wish that they would read this. I doubt they ever will. (153)

Rodriguez defends the idea that the uneducated Chicano is the only one to blame for his lack of initiative or for failing to develop himself at an intellectual level. In addition, uncultivated Chicanos are also responsible for the status of their minority community within the American

education system. In terms of ethnicity, *Hunger of Memory* concludes that although Chicanos have started to understand the importance of education, academic formation has never been a cultural trait of Chicano mentality. He concludes that he is being stigmatized as a minority student not necessarily because of his background as Chicano, but rather because of the lack of presence of other Chicanos in the American school system. Rodriguez focuses at greatest length on education in order to introduce the reader into the constraints of social class for U.S. minorities. After all like Rechy portrays in *City of Night*, a cultivated and educated individual is exposed to be more socially "accepted" among the Anglo American social realm.

In *Hunger of Memory*, Chicanos are explained as a minority trying to find the place within American mainstream. To do this, the author chooses to recreate his own stories of frustration and how he overcomes the barriers he finds in his way. He recalls what the lack of opportunities can lead to: "It became easy to underestimate, even to ignore altogether, the importance of class. Easy to forget that those whose lives are shaped by poverty and poor education (cultural minorities) are least able to defend themselves against social oppression, whatever its form" (149). Rodriguez describes the situation of Chicanos in general, and how their identity is forged by ignorance and scarcity. He uses his autobiography to exemplify that access to social and economic sources can reshape Chicano identity in a positive way. Since opportunities are entwined with education and status, the author points out that social class is a decisive element in determining a person's identity.

### **3.1.2 The case of language and race**

According to Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*, the human body is an instrument of perception and expression which establishes a connection between the individual and social interaction.

Social acceptance and recognition are, according to Rodriguez, also linked to aspects such as language and race. In the case of language, linguistic affiliation is widely acknowledged as an identity marker. In this sense, *Hunger of Memory* zooms into the association between Chicano

identity and different degrees of proficiency in English. A token of the duality of this minority in America is bilingualism at all stages of social and private life. In “Aria”, the first chapter of the narrative, the reader encounters Rodriguez’ thoughts on Chicanos’ linguistic duality:

“Memory teaches me what I know of these matters; the boy reminds the adult. I was a bilingual child, a certain kind socially disadvantage the son of working class parents, both Mexican immigrants” (12). *Hunger of Memory* opens up by revealing Rodriguez’ resentment about the social displacement tightly linked to what it means to be bilingual in America.

Although it is not mentioned explicitly, the author correlates prestige to the linguistic heritage of minority groups. Throughout “Aria”, the author elaborates on the uncomfortable dimension of belonging to a bilingual family and in particular, his discomfort and shamefulness every time his parents spoke English. At least outside his familiar territory, or what Rodriguez calls private society, he develops a sense of social shame, inferiority, difference and embarrassment:

I grew up victim to a disabling confusion. As I grew fluent in English, I no longer could speak Spanish with confidence. I continued to understand spoken Spanish. And in high School, I learned how to read and write Spanish. But for many years I could not pronounce it. A powerful guilt blocked my spoken words; an essential glue was missing whenever I’d try to connect words to form sentences. I would be unable to break a barrier of sound, to speak freely. (28)

Those language-related feelings, as the author explains, became central to new behavioral patterns he developed through the years. Having parents whose linguistic skills deviated from the mainstream is thought to have shaped Rodriguez dramatically: “He cannot afford to admire his parents and he is forced into a relationship of identification, with his teachers. Academic and ‘social’ success is predicated upon a violent disavowal which is both personal and cultural” (Lawtoo 236). He recognizes from the beginning that language separates his family from the mainstream. Along with it, he is aware that it creates a feeling of underestimation, and distance in his relation with the public world. Along the same lines, linguistic heritage has an impact on his relationship with his parents; he is underestimated by American society, and similarly he underestimates his parents. As illustrated in *Hunger of*

*Memory*, language as a feature of ethnic identity alters and manipulates the individual and social condition of Rodriguez, and his sense of belonging and pride. In the public sphere, speaking English differently from the mainstream Americans makes evident their ‘otherness’. Thus, one of the most obvious features that differentiate his family and himself from others, according to Rodriguez, is the racial trait. In fact, throughout the whole autobiography, there is a strong connection between Chicano identity and physical appearance; for example, in his definition of what he called “scholarship boy” (48), in the situation about his membership to the Catholic Church (81), in his embarrassment about being racially alike to a bracero (or a manual laborer, the one who work with his arms) (113) and in his definition of what he called “minority student” (146). Thus, in “Complexion”, the fourth chapter of the autobiography, race is defined as an intrinsic pillar for the construction of identity within Chicano communities. Certainly, although ethnicity does not imply necessarily a set of specific racial features, in *Hunger of Memory* it seems to be the opposite. Rodriguez’ underlying tone is that his identity as a Chicano is defined in terms of tints, hues and colours of skin. The chapter is fundamentally a narration of the personal struggles experienced by Rodriguez during his lifetime in his condition as a brown skin colour Chicano. Although he is aware of the differentiation between ethnicity and race, Rodriguez exalts the importance that racial identity has within Chicano society:

I didn’t really consider my dark skin to be a racial characteristic. I would have been only too happy to look as Mexican as my light-skinned older brother. Simply, I judged myself ugly. And, since the women in my family had been the ones who discussed it in such worried tones, I felt my dark skin made me unattractive to women. (125)

Darker skin colour is perceived as something negative, gloomy and bizarre among Chicanos, because it seems to imply less desirable personal characteristics. It conditions individuals like Rodriguez to undergo a path of self-acceptance as a response to widespread social rejection. Although it appears that the main character portrays an image of inferiority and marginalization because of his racial complexion, there is also an evident sense of duality. It has been suggested that what Rodriguez implies is that being brown is synonym of being

special: “What does Rodriguez mean by Brown? Rodriguez uses the colour brown of his skin as a metaphor for apprehending and domesticating the unknown; as a way of representing the unrepresentable. Being brown and thinking brown is basically, being tolerant, open, sensual, on the move, in-between” (Duran 63).

For Duran, brown Chicanos are emancipated, broad-minded, exotic, and humble; therefore their otherness is a set of positive qualities that differentiate them from mainstream Americans. Rodriguez’ case exemplifies, according to Duran, that although there might be a certain connection between social status, and racial attributes; race is not always a symbol of marginalization. In *Hunger of Memory*, Chicano ethnic identity is strongly defined by racial elements. At times, Rodriguez explains himself based on his interpretations of how particular racial traits are perceived in a social context:

The registration clerk in London wonders if I have just been to Switzerland. And the man who carries my luggage in New York guesses the Caribbean. My complexion becomes a mark of my leisure. Yet no one would regard my complexion the same way if I entered such hotels through the service entrance. (137)

In other words, Rodriguez suggests that being a mestizo relegates him to become a subordinate subject among the Anglo-American realm similar to the approach Beauvoir argues in *The Second Sex* about how minority groups such as women and blacks experienced a life full of social restrictions. Although the main character is convinced that race can be a conditioning element, he concludes that social class plays a larger role in defining an individual’s identity. Rodriguez seems to imply that the essence of his being as a social individual lies at the heart of his social class. His new position within society is what has led him to redefine his perception about his roots.

### **3.1.3 The situation of social class and family ties**

In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir establishes how power and welfare structures are a condition of any individual’s relationship with the environment. Thus following a similar pattern, Rodriguez exposes in the autobiography particularly the importance that social class and



strong family ties have on Chicano identity. Social class is what differentiates the rich and the poor, putting physical appearance in a secondary role. In the autobiography, Rodriguez makes clear enough to the reader the importance of social class among Chicano communities. In fact, Rodriguez opens the narrative highlighting the significance that money and wealth have played in his own case:

I write: I am a writer. A part-time writer. When I began this book, five years ago, a fellowship bought me a year of continuous silence in my San Francisco apartment. But the words wouldn't come. The money ran out. So I was forced to take temporary jobs. (I have friends who, with a phone call, can find me well-paying work.) In past months I have found myself in New York. In Los Angeles. Working. With money. Among people with money. And at leisure-a weekend guest in Connecticut; at a cocktail party in Bel Air. (3)

Thus, Soldan and Zavaletta claim that Chicanos like Rodriguez seek to leave the system they are born into, because of the constraints they face as a minority. Rodriguez, in fact, has chosen an identity of (cosmopolitan) Americanness, "because he escapes powerlessness, dislocation and marginalization, and emerges with a self-determined and integrated identity" (Soldan and Zavaletta 318). He weighs his possibilities and seems to conclude that social class has remolded his identity to the extent that marginalization does not apply to him anymore. He alleges that he has distanced himself from Chicano culture and values by becoming a successful high class academic; becoming a distinguished figure among respected American social institutions. Throughout the whole narrative, the only bonds that remain between Rodriguez and his original heritage are his family ties.

Rodriguez explains the importance of family values for Chicanos and the crucial role his immediate relatives have played in his life. *Hunger of Memory* testifies to Rodriguez' close ties to his mother and siblings, but also to a distant and cold relationship with his father. Failed attempts to get closer to him result in resentful descriptions about his parental skills, social conformism and macho personality. In a similar approach the violent and undesired figure depicted by the father's nameless character in *City of Night*, Rodriguez indicates that his father never showed a friendly and talkative approach towards him, and this has affected him psychologically. Like Rechy, Rodriguez depicted in his memories an antagonist and

gloomy paternal figure: “In contrast to my mother, my father never verbally encouraged his children’s academic success. Nor did he often praise us. My mother had to remind him ‘say something’ to one of his children who scored some academic success. (55).” For instance, he resents his father for having never praised his sons for any of their academic achievements, in particular in his own case. No sign of a healthy relationship between father and son is mentioned in any part of the autobiography. In fact, two detailed situations reveal the tension between Rodriguez and his father.

The first one takes place during his childhood, when he is discovered by his father while reading inside a shut closet: “he was startled to find me inside, reading a novel” (45). Although there were no recriminations, comments, or any verbal interaction between them, Rodriguez experienced this situation clearly as a traumatic one. The second crucial event took place when Rodriguez and his father argued on the telephone over how to determine what a good job offer was:

My father, however, clearly understood. Silent for a moment, he seemed uncertain of what I expected to hear. Finally, troubled, he said hesitantly, ‘I don’t know why you feel this way. We have never had any of the chances before’. *We*, he said. But he was wrong. It was *he* who had never had any chance before.” (172)

Rodriguez points out that his father channels his frustration by failing to show real support, but without stepping out of his life. His father remains as a constant figure in his life in spite of major changes in other areas. Rodriguez distances himself from his condition as Chicano (159), gives up his relationship with the Catholic Church (109), turns down honorific academic positions (171), and leaves behind his youthful preconceptions about his physical appearance (137). Besides his father’s steady presence, machismo is a second figure throughout Rodriguez’ life. As it will be explored in the next subchapter, an aspect of Chicano identity lies at the intersection of ethnicity and gender identification. It is here where machismo plays a crucial role.

### 3.2 The case of sexual and gender identity

Gender becomes a dimension of ethnicity when certain masculine or feminine, values are praised or frowned upon based on cultural preconceptions. It has been suggested that “in the narrative Mr. Rodriguez confronts his desire to be more masculine. As Rodriguez, states, masculinity or what he calls machismo, is not so much defined by words as it described by actions” (Herrera 4). It is understood that Rodriguez wishes he was more of a macho figure than he already is: “I knew that I had violated the ideal of the macho by becoming such a dedicated student of language and literature” (128). By acknowledging his condition of “less of a macho” and by desiring to be more masculine, Rodriguez like Rechy, ascribes to the ideals of masculinity typical of Chicano mentality. At the same time, he recognizes that he fails to fulfil the ideal of a heterosexual male while exploring the structures of gender identity and sexual orientation among the gay Chicano community. It has been suggested that although Rodriguez caused controversy among American and Chicano readers due to his anti-Chicano sentiments, the most interesting fact of his autobiography is his vague approach to sexual identity.

As in most Hollywood cinematic representations where Chicano characters are depicted as inferior, negative and insignificant, Chicano gay males in Chicano literature are represented as transparent, absent, and intangible characters. They are present, but are camouflaged under many different images, contexts, and situations. Overlooking Rodriguez’ ethnic background, and focusing on the fact the he is representing a homosexual character somehow, *Hunger of Memory* is a metaphorical representation of homosexuality within both Anglo American and Chicano societies. Likewise, it is a description of the intersectional elements that make up the social condition of the gay male Chicano in America as a double minority group. Attention is given to the relationship between what Rodriguez calls social and private realms. Socially, he was expected to comply with the Chicano definition of a man, while privately his undisclosed

sexual orientation revealed itself. Jeffrey Decker points out that this division between public and private worlds leads to conflict and weakens Rodriguez' standpoint: "Any consideration of Rodriguez must address the way in which he deploys the private/public opposition, a binary which structures nearly all of his work. "I am preoccupied", he admits, "by the distinction between public and private society". Rodriguez privileges the public over the private, associating the former with American society and the later with the immigrant home. Rodriguez's specific deployment of this opposition functions to evacuate a private but collective Chicano identity in favor of a public but individual American self. To the degree that he fails to recognize the manner in which the private, like the public, is socially inscribed within the political and historical arena, the distinction maintained by Rodriguez is mischievous" (Decker 125).

Because of the different set of options each realm offers to him, Rodriguez fights to make a clear distinction between how he wants to present himself. Besides failing to embrace his ethnicity, Rodriguez fails to accept his sexual orientation to the fullest, like the main character of *City of Night*. Restrained from talking openly about his experience as homosexual, he struggles to share his real thoughts about this part of his life. His social and private sides are not dealt with in an equal and fair way throughout the autobiography, nor with the same depth. The story touches nevertheless upon issues excluded from Chicano literature before 1982. In the whole narrative, there are clear examples of his own intimidation when approaching his private life, for example, in the discovering of his own linguistic struggles while being a child (37), in the total self-realization and acceptance in his position as immigrant (115), and in the recognition of his non-straight appearance during his adolescence (128). Thus, although there are many interpretations of the representation of both realms, both the public and the private worlds can be read as a dimension of Rodriguez' duality. On one hand, he is Chicano but on the other, he is a homosexual man. It can be concluded that his public realm represents "the self", while the private one reveals his

situation as the 'Other'. Rodriguez' social realm can be understood as resembling Chicano reality. It is the place where he experiences being outside, exposed, in contact with the social environment, and socializing outside his own territory. It is this social interaction with the outside world that allows him to express himself and to discuss his situation as being different. This reality allows him also to compare, judge and form his own standpoint about his social and individual status.

In terms of his image, his sexual orientation is sensed as a threat to his public life. It is not clear whether Rodriguez feels intimidated by what Chicano, American, or perhaps both communities might think of him as a gay individual. In either case, this intimidation inhibits him and renders him less free, as it is portrayed in Rechy's narrative. His public realms prevent the self from showing its own essence. This seems to happen as response to the masculinity constraints he has grown up with as a Chicano. Proper to this mentality is the perception of masculinity as a synonym of macho superiority or like Beauvoir maintains in *The Second Sex*, the male penis seems to represent virility, normality and security. In the case of men, it has been suggested that their machismo exclusively "serve to reinforce the special bonds men create with other men, bonds that serve to validate their hegemonic heterosexists views that value prowess in men and bonds that ironically displays an emotional, homosocial attachment to one another" (Rodriguez Kessler 231). This leads to the conclusion that although the primary functions of machismo is to praise masculinity; it also serves as way to strengthen proximity between men.

In a satirical way, this closeness can be comparable to homosexual behavior. Furthermore, "there are homoerotic suggestions or relationships, but the environment does display an important emotional kinship that is easily felt an experienced among them" (Rodriguez Kessler 230). This sheds light on the fact that the 'special bonds' created by the Chicano men is what indeed fortifies the macho sentiment among them, creating an exclusive sentiment of manhood and kinship. Originally elaborated by Judith Butler, Rodriguez Kessler

suggests that anticipatory behavior might explain the relation macho-gayness. The underlying argument is that Chicanos disregard “the biological construction of a male to determine his sexual identity” while they fix on the “physical of machismo” (Rodriguez Kessler 231). According to this analysis, Chicanos determine sexual identity based on appearance and performance. Different from Anglo homosexuals, Chicano male homosexuals are not necessarily regarded as such except in two cases.

The first one is when an individual portrays himself as feminine or shows signs of effeminate behavior. The second case is decided in terms of his role, either as receiver or giver during sex with another male. Within the Chicano male world, masculinity needs to be externalized and failing to do so undermines a male’s status within society. This explains why gay male identity is somehow a delicate and unpopular topic to deal with within Chicano communities not only in the ‘60s, ‘70s or in the ‘80s, but even nowadays. Homosexuality is a taboo rooted in Chicano culture, because of several cultural, social and religious constraints. *Hunger of Memory* illustrates how the gay male Chicano is seeking to fit in according to canons dictated by society, his family and himself. The fact that religious constraints play such a crucial role in Chicano communities has determined the low grade of acceptance towards homosexuals.

Originally, religious prohibitions were founded on grounds of social restraint that later evolved into more elaborated unwritten rules. Not observing these rules has consequently led to exclusion, discrimination and stigmatization. It has been pointed out that there is an emphasis on “the sexual aim: the act one wants to perform with the person toward whom sexual activity is directed and gives only secondary importance to the person’s gender or biological sex” (Almaguer 256). For Almaguer, although social stigma is affixed to every Chicano homosexual male by the dominant culture, “being stigmatized does not equally adhere to both partners” (257). Among Chicanos, the homosexual who, sexually speaking, performs as the top, or the one who penetrates, and who is a heterosexual-mannered, macho-

acting male is not at all labelled as homosexual. Almaguer argues that such a condition is sexually and gender-wise unclassified among Chicanos, an attitude clearly portrayed by *Rechy in City of Night* also.

Central to the definition of homosexuality among Chicanos is the idea that the receiver male plays a feminine role, and therefore shows signs of weakness. Homosexuality within Chicano society is misinterpreted and leads to homophobic sentiment, because of the absence of gay Chicano role figures who externalize their masculinity. Ignorance of what homosexuality entails and lack of public debate on the issue has turned homophobia into an accepted, rampant trait of Chicano mentality. Thus, more than controversy, *Hunger of Memory* caused aggressive attitudes among Chicano readers, because of a non-existent tradition of Chicano gay characters in literature. Rodriguez depicts himself as the 'Other' who fits the role by being less expressive and more obscure. As a result of social constraints, a less dynamic tone in his narrative, when referring to his own persona, might be read as a reflection of the shadows his real identity is bound to live in: "When Rodriguez toys with the doorknob on the closet of 'Mr: Secrets', perceptive readers hear the rattle. Internal contradictions in the text reveal much that the author does not say directly. He illustrates that he 'felt such contrary feelings', simultaneously pride and shame, pleasure and guilt, self-love and self-loathing" (Newton 296). Rodriguez internal confusion and contradictory thoughts are what places his 'Other' at the center of the narrative, but only partially. In light of his Chicano background, his sexual identity does not allow him to be as sincere and expressive as he is pretending to be. The reader realizes that Rodriguez' silences in the story are those moments when he is probably preventing his 'Other' from taking control of the narration. A condition of isolation and auto-flagellation seems to be the result of Rodriguez' past encounters with the Catholic religion. Homosexual Chicanos' identity is then perceived as disturbed and contradictory and the figure of the 'Other' is parallel to the ambiguous situation of Chicano identity, i.e. not Mexican nor American. At the same time, Chicano identity is built on religious pillars

difficult to ignore; especially in a narration where spirituality is mingled with passages of homoeroticism.

Throughout chapter five, “Complexion”, special attention is given to the shape of the male body, whose main characteristic is being perceived by Rodriguez as exotic:

I continued to see the *braceros*, those men I resembled in one way and, in another way, didn't resemble at all. On the watery horizon of a Valley afternoon, I'd see them. And though I feared looking like them, it was with silent envy that I regarded them still. I envied them their physical lives, their freedom to violate the taboo of the sun. Closer to home I would notice the shirtless construction workers, the roofers, the sweating men tarring the street in front of the house. And I see the Mexican gardeners. I was unwilling to admit the attraction of their lives. I tried to deny it by looking away. But what was denied became strongly desired. (126)

He straightforwardly approaches the reader and introduces him into this homoeroticism in an innocent but impersonal way. By describing his memories about the changes of his body from adolescent rejection into adulthood acceptance, Rodriguez invites the reader to share his definition of male eroticism. This invitation tends to be more atypical when he describes his experiences as worker in the fields. He describes his physical pain, as result of hard work and contrasts it with the pleasure of watching his co-workers working shirtless under the rays of sunshine (132). In each line, he makes evident the image of a repressed identity; probably marked by his spiritual beliefs. Rodriguez is perceived to have formed his identity as a by-product of Catholic theology and, according to Rodriguez, it is through the eyes of his Catholic faith that he encounters the union of both, the self and the ‘Other’ .

In his narrative, “the church alone, as he remembers it from his days as an altar boy, seemed to accept his developing passions within legitimate communal membership. The Church appeared to be the place where his public and private lives met congruently” (Newton 302). Thus, Rodriguez suggests that in his relationship with his Catholic faith he encounters ‘help for a solitary man to comprehend God’s word’ (90), the respect of his parents as thinkers (90) and it ‘excited more sexual wonderment than it repressed’ (84). Rodriguez clearly pinpoints the fact his Catholic faith helped him to motivate his condition as a thinker, what it could be interpreted as direct self-recognition in his condition as homosexual. Religion



also introduced him to a path of self-rejection, guilt and remorse for having unnatural feelings. The entire third chapter, “Credo”, elaborates on his relationship with his spiritual side. There he gives an introduction to how the Catholic church functions and how it has an impact on communities, families and individuals. Rodriguez also gives insight into how the church has moulded his relations with American mainstream society. For instance, a strong sense of duty is perceived to come from his Catholic upbringing. More importantly, as George Newton suggests, “his devotion towards the Catholic community rather than his devotion towards his Catholic faith is what deprives him to be open with his true sexual identity” (Newton 302). Although his sense of belonging and the impact of the church is strong, it does not prevent him from distancing himself from it. After years of academic instruction, Rodriguez’ sense of rationalization helps him to be critical about the Catholic views on his own self. He develops as a result a distinctive taxonomy between ‘they’ and ‘us’. In the first group, Rodriguez includes his Chicano family, his roots, and the Catholic Church. His second group is comprised by academics, open-minded Americans and himself.

In *Hunger of Memory*, Rodriguez displays a dual persona in which there is a social and a private realm. His social realm stands for his reality as a successful scholar and intellectual who fulfils any social requirement imposed on him. Different from his social side, his private realm becomes a symbol of interiorized expectations. Rodriguez expresses frustration of not being able to fit into the ideals of the society he was born into:

Despite the fact that my parents remain even now in my mind a critical, silent, chorus, standing together, I continue to write. I do not make my parents’ sharp distinction between public and private life. With my mother and father I scorn those who attempt to create an experience of intimacy in public. But unlike my parents, I have come to think that there is a place for the deeply personal in public life. This is what I have learned by trying to write this book: There are things so deeply personal that they can be revealed only to strangers. I believe this. I continue to write. (185)

An undisclosed side of his personality, tinted with the confusion of his unaccepted sexual identity, is the foundations of his ‘otherness’. His disillusionment is rooted in not being the ‘macho’ he would need to be or a persona that would fit his social status in a more natural

way. The whole narrative depicts situations where Rodriguez' expectations or aspirations fail to become reality: his aspirations of becoming a true American (136), of becoming white (125), for becoming powerful (169), and of becoming heterosexual (127).

As a reader, it is difficult to believe his autobiography is a sincere attempt to share his experiences. His ethnicity, sexual orientation, and social affiliation are all aspects he wishes he could change. As a result of unfulfilled aspirations, his private realm renders his narrative isolated from the real Rodriguez. He maintains that the private world is closer to him, it is the known, the familiar and what he calls home. However, the private realm keeps him in a world away from his reality, because his Chicano homosexual identity is depicted as an unattainable goal. Rodriguez exposes his life and his feelings to be judged by American and Chicano communities, but restrains himself from talking openly about his homosexuality. In the narrative, he displays a typical Chicano behavior by not liberating himself from traditional values; in spite of wanting to distance himself from his roots. Rodriguez admits that his sexual orientation prevents him from speaking with the same tone of frankness and honesty as he uses when referring to other topics. Avoiding speaking openly about his sexual orientation and classifying it as a less central topic than his ethnicity, such a strategy can be interpreted as a homophobic attitude. Rodriguez' silences tell more than his own words. His homophobic condition seems to be a product of a heavily religious upbringing where the church filled his life. Although he manages to distance himself from the church and its canons, he does not do so because of the clashes between his sexual being and Catholic doctrine. He separates from it, in his own words, because "they respect no notion of privacy. They intrude into a family's life. They ignore the individual's right to be private" (109). His Chicano roots call for him to defend his family ties at any cost; however, his sexual orientation does not move him to take radical actions of this kind.

In *Hunger of Memory*, ethnicity seems to overpower Chicano sexual and gender identity, even though Rodriguez' Chicano/Catholic/straight/virile/homophobic condition

suggest quite the opposite. Firstly, because although he wants to depict in his autobiography sincerity, honesty and transparency, his rejection of being part of a racial minority like the Chicano, along with his macho idiosyncrasy, prevent him from showing to the reader his true identity driving him to construct a conflicting image of his 'otherness', which is less accessible and tends to clash with the other parts of the 'self'. It is in this territory where his sexual identity seems to be camouflaged and he is not ready to come to terms with it. Secondly, because of Rodriguez' attitude towards his own sexual orientation, it stereotypes his sexual identity and divulges his identity as the true Chicano he is attempting to distance himself from in the whole story.

In Rodriguez' autobiography, the main character suffers from two conditions: On the one hand, his situation as conservative and old fashioned Chicano, and on the other hand, his homophobic feelings about his own persona. In fact, he illustrates it openly by stating that a true macho male is defined by the three f's: *feo* (ugly) or to have a rustic and unpopular physical appearance, *fuerte* (strong) or to have both inner and physical strength, and *formal* (steady) or being a serious, responsible, reliable and humble male figure (128). Rodriguez is clearly the antithesis of the typical macho Chicano. In many entries of the autobiography, although he describes his personal unconformity with his physical appearance and mainly his skin colour, he is perceived publicly as being rather handsomely exotic. Rodriguez also degrades himself by repeating how small and soft his hands are and makes evident his shortcomings in terms of strength. Further descriptions of himself include his talkative attributes and his poor skills doing physical work. Rodriguez also comments on his academic qualities and his efficiency in any intellectual work which separates him from a typical macho Chicano prototype.

He introduces the reader into his own definition and the Chicano definition of the ideal macho only to find out that it is the same. Portraying himself as an unnatural macho male leads him to sound homophobic, because his understanding of manhood, in spite of his

personal growth, has not evolved or emancipated. In *Hunger of Memory*, Rodriguez is not explicit about his sexual orientation. Through indirect, ambiguous and vague allusions to his daily experiences, there are clear signs of discomfort and self-rejection about his sexual orientation. Rodriguez resents his ethnicity and homosexuality, but only the latter excludes him from a central part of his life, namely his family. After all, like Toril Moi points out in “I am a Woman”, there are situations in which we freely choose to be recognised as sexed or raced bodies, where that recognition is exactly what we need and want (13). Evidently Rodriguez and many homosexuals Chicanos tend to prefer to be recognized among family members and society as extremely macho and even homophobic. Homosexual Chicano men lack a place within society, because of cultural, traditional and religious factors. Their non-existent condition renders them invisible within Chicano society, which they might tend to resent because of its requirements and social constraints. Central to *Hunger of Memory* is that the main character’s ethnicity filters his view on his own sexual identity and prevents him from acting on it. Equally important is that, although Rodriguez wishes to distance himself from his roots, his homophobic views are rooted in the Chicano mentality he despises so much. Unquestionably, for Rodriguez his ethnicity comes before his gender and sexual identity.

In *City of Night*, Rechy consequently omits any direct relation to Chicano culture and Chicano identity and instead it blends the culture of the so called sexual, and to some extent homosexual liberation in the sixties. On the same level, twenty years later Rodriguez omits in his autobiography a direct link to his homosexual identity and what is even worse, he seems to reject his situation as a Chicano. Both novels tend to stereotype the figure of the gay male Chicano, as absent, irrelevant, and uncivilized. Thus, the reader tends to perceive in the main characters a certain attitude of shame, insecurity, and embarrassment. At some point in both texts, there is a certain tone of vindication and justification in relationship with the figure portrayed by the gay Chicano in a supposed epoch of liberation and modernization. Both

works describe the story following the same patterns of “openness”. However both narratives seem to fail to convince the reader, for example, on the veracity of the situation of homosexuality among hustlers in the sixties or the unprivileged social condition of the brown Chicano of the eighties. In the chapter to follow, dedicated to Islas’ *The Rain God*, there is a more explicit account of the condition that ethnicity and gender identity creates within the Chicano queer literary text during this period.

#### 4. Arturo Islas and *The Rain God* (1984)

Since 1980, there has been evident progress in the representation of queer characters in Chicano literature. With the publications of Sheila Ortiz Taylor's *Faultline* (1982), Arturo Islas *The Rain God* (1984) and Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* (1984), finally, lesbianism and homosexuality became a more prominent topic among some Chicano writer-activists, who were attempting to gain more recognition among both Anglo-American and Chicano readers. Arturo Islas has been recognized as one of the most important figures in gay Chicano literature during the decade of the eighties in the United States. Born in El Paso, Texas in 1938, Islas experienced first-hand the impact of being part of a Chicano family living along the border between Mexico and the United States. He managed not only to become a prominent scholar and an intellectual figure within Chicano cultural circles, but also to gain recognition among American mainstream intellectuals. This explains the widespread controversy that his death sparked among scholars at the time. Since Islas had always been publicly open about his sexual preferences, his death from an AIDS-related ailment was entwined with the wrongly assumed idea that this was exclusively a homosexual disease. Despite the fact that he only wrote two novels during his lifetime, both literary works were considerably influential and established him as a literary explorer of Chicano gay culture. In both novels, there is a wide exploration of the Chicano figure. On the one hand, they depict the essence of living in the vicinity of the border, and on the other hand, both texts denounce the cruelty of the social situation of the Chicano people in the United States. For the writer, some elements can be pinpointed as risks Chicanos are overexposed to: "Islas unflinchingly depicts the effects of substance abuse, infidelity, gay bashing, suicide, unrequited love, medical malpractice, religious fundamentalism and political corruption" (Minich 694). Thus the sense of identity portrayed by the author in his novels is based on a sense of human suffering and self-desolation, which are understood to be partly autobiographical.

For the reader, this raises questions about the condition of Chicanos and the well-being of their communities. Islas traces in his novels a thread of pain that unifies all Chicanos through typical patterns in their personal and social affairs. This suffering tends to be interpreted as an association of unity among the Chicano community, where “the agony that features so prominently in his novels serves the process of unification and community formation, bringing together Mexico and the United States, Spanish and English, Spaniard and Indian, straight and queer, saint and sinner, soul and body, gut and colostomy bag” (Minich 695). In two of his major literary works, *The Rain God* (1984) and *Migrant Souls* (1990), Islas makes use of complex situations as a catalyst to bare the emotions of his characters, and to expose the way they are attached to the Chicano community and the American environment. Through antagonistic and detrimental experiences, the underlying goal seems to be to disclose the essence of the individuals he creates.

Particular attention is paid to the symbolism that the notion border/frontier acquires among the Chicano female and gay community. Beyond the endless social and political conflicts that have tinted Mexican-American history, the border offers the possibility of variation, alteration and instability for all Chicanos, but especially for those who are dissatisfied or do not conform to certain norms. For many women and gay Chicanos, the border creates the option of “separation” from their native culture, in order to reconcile with the socially rejected self. Thus, conversely with what it has been analyzed in the case of John Rechy and Richard Rodriguez’ stories, tells brutal and explicitly the story of a community plagued by endless situations of trying to survive in the middle of what is perceived as a “hostile environment”. As it will be developed in the subchapters to come, *The Rain God* (1984) exposes the juxtaposition of gender, tradition and a grey area where two worlds meet.

#### **4.1 The Ethnicity of *The Rain God***

Islas' first novel, *The Rain God* (1984), depicts the story of the Angels, a Chicano third generation family who lives in El Sapó, a small town in the middle of a deserted region along the border between Mexico and the United States. The three generations of the family present the personal struggles that the Chicano identity tends to face principally based on ethics and familiar tradition. The novel is a tale of the hybrid culture that results from the clash and mixture of elements from Mexican and American cultures. If compared to other Chicano literary works in terms of reception, *The Rain God* exceeds all levels of popularity among readers and scholars. Paradoxically, before its publication, the novel did not have sufficient support among publishers. They were initially not interested either in the story or the author at all (Saldívar 112). For many white American middle-class editors and representatives of publishing houses, the novel was "part of the hemisphere's pan-American traditions" (Saldívar 111). As many of these editors pinpointed, the novel did not deserve the chance to be published because, on the one hand, it was written by a Chicano author, and on the other hand, its content was directed exclusively to a minor fraction of the American public. After a few years of struggle between Islas and the editors, he finally got it published and the novel became an unexpected hit.

Unlike the opinion of many critics, the popularity of the novel "lies not in the authors' depiction of traditions alien to American readers but in the specific way he bridges the gap between North American and Latin American cultures and unites literary and transnational traditions" (Saldívar 111). Islas' literary style overwhelmed the American reader of the eighties by displaying a new tonality of the Chicano heritage to those unfamiliar with it. Special attention has been drawn to the fact that identity in *The Rain God* is built from an ethnical viewpoint, but with gender as the main focus. A central role is given to the many faces that gender and sexuality can display, i.e. dominant females, chauvinist males, and secretive homosexuals. Chicano identity is depicted in a background set up of cultural and ethnic elements, such as the richness of Chicano gastronomy, the symbolism of the U.S.-



Mexican border seen from a social standpoint, and the importance of the Chicano's popular beliefs and superstitions. *The Rain God* also presents Chicano identity based on the performance of gender roles. Islas aims to remind the reader that, as pointed out by Simone de Beauvoir, "humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him" (15), and that this certainly applies to Chicano culture. The novel exemplifies the ways in which women are assigned roles within Chicano society and how otherness extends to males once they trespass the boundaries of heterosexuality and tradition. Most importantly, Islas developed two key aspects mostly ignored in the Chicano literary texts of the '60s, and the '70s. On the one hand, downgrading the structures created by Chicano machos, and on the other hand, elevating the role played by women. These processes all take place within the context of a society sandwiched between two realms where ethnicity is defined by tradition. The novel is written within a period of social awakening, liberation and modernization and Islas takes advantages of that. In fact, at the beginning of the eighties, gay rights were beginning to be more widely accepted in the Western world and particularly in the United States. Also, the Chicano literary movement became a powerful form of Chicano expression. However, as in John Rechy's and Richard Rodriguez's narratives, the theme of Chicano identity depicted in the literary text caused controversy and alarm both among Anglo Americans and the Chicanos.

Islas draws an image of Chicano identity using ethnic traits as his palette and selecting mainly darker hues to convey a pessimistic message. In *The Rain God*, as in Rodriguez' *Hunger of Memory*, Chicanos are depicted as a rather fragmented and marginalized subgroup within American society. In the process, the novel stresses and explains clearly the differentiation between American, Mexican, and Chicano cultures. As in most literary works of the same genre, Chicanos are defined based on their racial, linguistic and cultural traits. They are not monolingual Spanish speakers, and might even only know English, since they are born and brought up in the United States. The vast majority is not white-skinned and is

likely to have an Amerindian among their ancestors. They are profoundly religious-minded, but stay faithful to superstitions and beliefs characteristic of syncretistic societies. Chicanos remain equally loyal to their cuisine, household habits, and lifestyle. From the physical world, the border stands out as a marker, division, and reminder of the dislocation that Chicanos are a product of. The Mexican-American border is shown as a crucial representation of the Chicano personal, social and political conflict, that goes back many generations. In the following subsection, Chicano ethnic identity portrayed in *The Rain God* will be evaluated in terms of allegoric representations of gastronomy, the symbolism of the border among the Chicano community, and the status of superstitions as defining elements of life.

#### **4.1.1 Gastronomy**

The role of gastronomy in relationship with psychological and social interaction among humans is frequently discussed by Beauvoir. Thus, “in her novels and memoirs, which offer a more immediate and subjective experience of the body, the act of eating, has many positive connotations, promising the pleasures of exploration and discovery, both of the world and of the self” (Hellerstein 205). Attention has been drawn to the fact that “food has played a key role in the definition of the Chicano culture and the Chicano identity” (Lomeli and Ikas 39). In *The Rain God*, the most decisive turns in the story take place either in the kitchen, or in the aftermath of a cooking session, family dinner, or selection of ingredients. Islas seems to suggest that food is to be complemented by stormy incidents that can serve the role of spicing whatever is in the pots. He tends to present the idea that these moments are as inseparable from his characters as chili, salt, or avocado are from guacamole. In spite of how excruciating the situations can turn out to be, Chicano cuisine will remain a steady and unifying element. This is of particular importance, because women are the ones in charge of cooking the food, and by doing so, they might be thought to have power over men. Islas presents food as an ethnic trait that deserves to be subjectivized, and Chicano gastronomy becomes an active part

of the narrative; just as if it was an ingredient used to make a dish. In fact, one of the chapters is called *Chile*, paying a tribute to the species typical of Latin American food and an essential part of the Chicano diet:

The two of them sat side by side on the sand like children, knees drawn up to their chests until the first stars appeared. They astonished him. He was seeing them as it for the first time. A few moments, later he and Juanita got up and went into the house through the kitchen. Ernesto began to weep when he saw chiles on the stove. Their smell filled the house and he went from room to room opening all the windows. (50)

In the narrative, Islas clearly strives for a crucial association between gastronomy and Chicano heritage/identity. From an American viewpoint, this unfamiliar connection might stress otherness and invite the reader to distance him- or herself from the narrative. However, it also serves to associate Chicanos with nature and perceive indigenous ingredients like chili as complements of the human body. The process of cooking is regarded as a manner of cultural expression, which tends to benefit the mind. Both acts are then to be disseminated in the process of eating, considered a sacred rite, which raises the state of the spirit and allows for life to continue. In the entire novel, there are allegorical illustrations of the kitchen as a symbol of Chicano alliance and evolution, the place where Chicanos find refuge, consolidation, and shelter. It is in the kitchen and pantry, where the fraternity between Nina and Juanita consolidates (40-43), where the whole Angel family finds a place to interact, rejoice, and celebrate (74, 132-133), consult one another (44), meditate (64), and even confront and disclose untold truths (92). The physicality of the kitchen is complemented by the presence of the border as a defining element.

#### **4.1.2 The Border**

Traditionally, since the time of the Spanish conquest of American territory, the border between Mexico and United States has been redrawn back and forth according to political interests of both countries. Between 1800 and 1850, the U.S.-Mexican border was constantly moving. After Mexican independence from Spain in 1821, the Mexican territory included

what it is today the American West. By 1848, the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo separated Mexico and the United States politically and geographically, but not culturally. While the United States doubled its size, Mexico lost half of his land, leaving thousands of Mexicans with the status of foreigners in what was formerly their own homeland. Since then, long standing hostilities between both cultures have been spreading along the border. Chicanos “were considered innately inferior and an obstacle to a progressive economy and society” (Meier and Rivera 112) by Anglo-American society. The American expansionist policy over Mexican territories in the 1890s relegated Mexican settlers of the region to the status of Beauvoir’s “Other” (Klahn 1994). A newly defined frontier “was not only the geopolitical border recently established but also the cultural border between Anglos and the ‘region’s former owners’ who remained in the new U.S territory” (Klahn 29). In other words, the border became part of the identity of the new American citizens.

Thus the line dividing Mexico and the United States becomes a symbol for Chicanos, because it represents the good and bad, old and new, strong and weak, difficult and easy, known and unknown:

The border town where Felix spent most of his life is in a valley between two Mountain ranges in the middle of the south-western wastes. A wide river, mostly dried except when thunderstorms create flash floods, separates it from Mexico. Heavy traffic flows from one side of the river to the other, and from the air, national boundaries and differences are indistinguishable. (Islas 115)

For each Chicano, it is the symbol of exile, dispossession, abandonment, separation, oblivion and departure. The border has particular meaning to those living next to it, working by it, crossing it, avoiding it, exploiting it, and building it. It constructs Chicano identity, because many of the social conditions of this minority group in the United States derive from what takes place along the border from a cultural, political and social standpoint. Marginalization has become a synonym of boundary in an area where central hegemonies, American and Mexican, clash. Chicano writers have highlighted two main public sites of resistance and repression, namely the barrio and the border (Bus 121). *The Rain God* is set in a fictional small town, but which prototypically resembles any real Texas agglomeration in the vicinity

of the border. This politically defined line is commonly depicted in Chicano fiction as a convulsive territory where historical and socio-political events have hardly distorted its geographical situation.

Mexican-American literature of the nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries depicts the border and the life in its vicinity as a crucial and debatable, open theme of cultural expression (Tabuenca Córdoba 281). For Jose David Saldívar, *Islas* depicted in his novels the boundary as “profound explorations of U.S.-Mexico border geography” (Saldívar 78) and an exploration of the consequences these processes have had for both cultural realms. Other scholars are more pessimistic in their descriptions of what the border entails. Lavie and Swedenburg understand representation in Chicano literature of life at the border as the image of an attempt to live amidst “minefields, mobile territories of constant clashes where formations of violence continuously signify zones of loss, alienation and pain” (15). Probably in order to shed light on this violence, *Islas* introduces the character of Felix, someone whose life is built upon the possibilities that the border’s chaotic nature offers him. On one hand, he is a secretive homosexual married to a woman he betrays with men and male illegal aliens, some of whom are forced into sexual practices (*Islas* 116). On the other hand, he is involved in ruthless activities, such as human trafficking, physical abuse, and other dubious activities (*Islas* 113-117); all consequences of the border condition as a no man’s land. Felix is Mickie’s uncle and he has four children who lose their father after he is brutally killed somewhere in the desert near the border. Violence is again depicted as a crucial constraint in people’s lives, and the border is presented as the source of this disturbed environment. It is presented as an open wound that marks the identity of all Chicanos and that might never heal completely. This is because, as *Islas* suggests in his novel, the border has become synonymous with misery, poverty, desolation, starvation, remoteness, and injustice. Just like gastronomy, the violent character of the area reshapes how Chicanos lead their lives, because it is part of their own fabric. Their mere existence as a group is the result of clashes, almost always with fatal

consequences. Lying at the heart of this volatile climate, Islas introduces religion and belief as a tool Chicanos use in order to persevere against all odds. In particular, he invites the reader into the world of popular beliefs and their role as life guidelines for Chicanos.

#### **4.1.3 Popular beliefs and superstitions**

In general in *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir points out that human identity is the product of the amalgamation between individuality and the collectivist community that the person belongs to (Gothlin 57). The culture and traditions that any individual possesses, depends on the implementation of traditional codes from previous generations. Thus, probably due to the instability, insecurity, and untrustworthiness of the social environment they cohabit, Chicanos are understood to hold on to rites, traditions, superstitions and beliefs in order to know what to expect from life. As part of the heritage passed from generation to generation, popular beliefs constitute the only institution Chicanos fully trust. Examples include the idea that clothes of certain colors bring good or bad luck, boys will turn homosexuals if they play with dolls, marrying an indigenous person will result in bad-looking children and an impoverished household, Spanish spoken in Spain has more prestige than Mexican Spanish and elevates its speakers socially, a severe illness is a well-deserved punishment from God, and women become stronger by wishing they were men, to name but a few.

Roger Fowler suggests that cultural ideology is the systems of beliefs, values and categories through which a person or a society comprehends the world (130). In Chicanos' case, superstitions or the belief in the supernatural is a relevant element of their heritage, because it explains outcomes, or justifies unwanted events. Islas' depiction of "Mickie", the main character of the novel and considered by many critics to be the hero of the story, for instance, as the victim of a possible AIDS-related ailment is no coincidence according to Manuel de Jesus Vega. He points out that along the line of Chicano cultural ideology, homosexuality could only be expected as a sign of disability or disease. As in the case of his

uncle Felix, Mickie is doomed for trespassing the limits set by society. Vega elaborates on how corporal suffering and health deterioration amidst a deserted region are proof of divine retribution for a sinner's life:

Lying on a gurney in the recovery room, Miguel Chico came to life for the second time. Tubes protruded from every opening of his body except his ears, and before he was able to open his eyes, he heard a woman's voice calling his name over and over again in the way that made him wince. (Islas 7)

He notes that "the notions of sin and punishment suggested by the desert motif have particular significance" (Vega 115) within the system of superstition that all Chicanos are familiar with. In a similar way, Susan Sontag interprets AIDS as a symbolic plague (Sontag 53). Miguel Chico's physical deterioration is understood as sign that a plague is consuming him. Islas reminds the reader constantly that nothing in Chicano life takes place without anticipatory signs. The notion of "the accidents of life" in the Angel family (Sánchez, "Arturo Islas' *The Rain God*," 294) conjures up a mentality in which superstitions and supernatural beliefs are important to anticipate, prevent, or change the course of things. A mere hand movement, avoidance of forbidden words, or the right choice of where to place valuable items can have either a positive or negative impact. For instance, the celebration of the twenty-fifth wedding anniversary of Juanita and Miguel Grande called for the guests to wear the right colors, according to their wishes for the couple. The association between power and colors in deciding over one person's fate led Mama Chona to wear grey rather than black (53). A similar symbolism is observed in what material things are believed to represent, such as the belief that Compa's house represents his legacy after his death (57). Superstition extends to the myth that the natural conditions of a tree announces the end of the world (19), and that a feminized boy is under the spell of a doll once he plays with it (15). Syncretism of beliefs taken from indigenous cosmology results from Chicanos seeking "to displace Western myths and origins with Native American mythology and traditions" (Sánchez, "Reconstructing" 357). *The Rain God* suggests that Chicanos opt for certainty as opposed to their lack of trust in any external institution. Understanding the role of superstitions and popular beliefs is

central to unlocking Chicano's cultural ideology. An important aspect of this trait of their idiosyncrasy is that it applies both to men and women, and no one is exempt. This is exceptional, since gender constrains women to conditions that do not always apply to males, as will be explored in the following chapter.

#### **4.2 Gender and sexual identity: patriarchal fiasco vs. matriarchy and female power**

In a culture where males play the dominant role, female characters are presented in *The Rain God* as antagonists to the system imposed on them. Islas presents the reign of men through patriarchy, the retaliation of women through matriarchy, and the unaccepted nature of homosexual characters through disability. Gender studies, and particularly, French feminist critical thinking has been deconstructing the image of the patriarchal figure in Western literature for half a century at least. Thus intellectuals and thinkers such as Freud, Lacan, Irigaray and Cixous have studied and analysed the situation of patriarchy in Western philosophy and in the literary text. As exposed by Beauvoir, man's ostensibly superior condition has privileged his role in society since the beginning of time. Lacking convincing criteria to explain their superiority over the 'second sex', societies have been built from a masculine standpoint (Beauvoir 18). In the literary text, according to Toril Moi, creativity is purely defined as male and patriarchal standards are imposed (57). As such, Chicano literature this is no exception. However, in *The Rain God*, Islas draws the image of men who fail to run their households in spite of being considered the 'heads' of their families. As was the case with the patriarchal figures depicted in Rechy's and Rodriguez' narratives, the Chicano patriarchal figure is obsolete, incoherent, unfair and rather arrogant:

“Devils daughters!” their father had bellowed at them when he found out that they had been to a social and not to a religious function. “You are lost!” He, like others from the provinces, was unable to separate the body from the soul. Their father could be vicious in his rage and was capable of beating them severely when he drank too much. (Islas 43)

Their biological nature proves to be of no use. As Beauvoir points out, western society has decided that men are to be obeyed. Islas recreates a world where machos are not sources of



inspiration, but rather of shame, resentment, and disappointment. In the novel, gender is established by the performance of male and female roles in relationship with power and reputation. Chicano culture is framed by a traditional patriarchy based on male familial and social domination. Aware of this cultural trait, Islas exemplifies in several passages what the notion of patriarchy entails for Chicanos (Sánchez, “Ideological Discourses” 119). Family legacy seems to be in charge of the head of the household, which is generally represented by a father, grandfather, uncle, older brother, or nephew. In the case of the Angel family, patriarchy as an institution is perceived as old fashioned and deteriorated, a patriarchal fiasco in many ways. Four specific cases of marginalization of the male dominant figures are present in the book. The first case is framed by the sudden death of Carlos, Mama Chona’s husband, who passes away in 1916 leaving her with six sons. His absence is felt as a gap in the continuum of a family, where the male is supposed to be in charge. Islas is understood to introduce a new model of family life, where the mother is left alone; an atypical twist in Chicano literature, since machos are perceived as the pillars of the family in most novels of the genre. Male dominance and the importance of paying tribute to masculinity is presented as a way of social control. Carlos died and left his wife alone, but did so believing his name would be honored by his descendants. After all, he had lived his life driven by this principle. This mentality had kept him going, and led him to embrace the death of his first son during the Mexican Revolution. He convinced himself that this was as heroic act that would honour the name of the family (Islas 163); an unfeeling posture that Mama Chona could never forgive. Even more, this resulted in strong feelings of bitterness from her towards Carlos that lasted until she died. This is how patriarchy and a tendency to elevate maleness instigated resentment in the first generation of the Angels.

The second case worth exploring takes place in the next generation and is represented by the two male sons of Mama Chona who have become heads of families. On the one hand, Felix, probably the most controversial character in the narrative, is presented as an immoral

and reckless man. Felix lost his first wife not long after their marriage, found in Angie a second wife, and together they had four sons. His dubious reputation in the community stemmed from the unethical situation of his businesses, which included exploitation of workers and human trafficking. Felix was known for being a homosexual, who would secretly meet younger lovers in the vicinity of the border. His inclination became public after his sexual desires led him to be killed in a most brutal way. This patriarchal figure is annihilated as soon as his family realizes in which circumstances he has been murdered. Felix' double lifestyle caused profound disgust and resentment among his wife and sons. His position as the head of the family is erased and his image as father and husband became instead a symbol of treason and disappointment among the Angel family and in the community he belongs to.

The third case involves Miguel Grande, one of the main characters of the novel. Married to Juanita and father to Miguel Chico, he is a salient example of patriarchal fiasco in *The Rain God*. For the Angels, Miguel Grande's social situation as member of the local police and father to the only intellectual of the family, might render him as the ideal head of family. This image is tainted though by his rude personality, and frequent scandals resulting from a double life as a married man and womanizer. Among his many sexual affairs, Lola stands out because his love for her leads him to confess to his wife that his feelings for his mistress go beyond superficial desire. Owning up to his emotions arouses both in his wife Juanita and his only son Miguel Chico deep feelings of pity, disappointment, and resentment. Loving Lola debunks his authority as head of the family and frees both Juanita and Miguel from his macho yoke, downgrading his sense of leadership.

A fourth case of patriarchal fiasco is perceived among the youngest generation of the Angels, specifically embodied in Miguel Chico, the main character of the story. He is presented as the antithesis of the average prospective patriarchal figure among Chicanos, particularly in light of his intellectual, rather than physical achievements, his deteriorating health, and essentially his homosexual condition. Considered by many critics as the hero of

the plot because of his capacity to psychoanalyze the Angel family (Sanchez, "Arturo Islas' *The Rain God*", 286), Miguel Chico represents the end of the Chicano patriarchal legacy. Not only because of his apathy for heterosexual institutions, but as a consequence of the past, he also develops resentment towards the macho condition of his father.

Examining the feelings of three generations, it is clear that patriarchal figure is abandoned as the result of decades of disappointment and bitterness. Resentment is widespread in the whole novel, but different from that to be found in other Chicano narratives. In *The Rain God*, bitterness is elicited among "sons and daughters who reject the authoritarian position of the father and the deleterious effect of the family on its members" (Sánchez, "Ideological Discourses" 119). It can be concluded that patriarchal fiasco is mostly present among contemporary generations of Chicanos who are exposed to Anglo-American family structures. Each generation of the Angel family has been known to reject the model of the patriarchal condition socially imposed by imposing a new condition of liberation and autonomy, as is the case with Miguel Chico. In fact, his "rejection of patriarchal norm has to be viewed in terms of other social practices" (Sánchez, "Ideological Discourses" 121). In other words, his rejection of his father's male domination allows him to step out of a predetermined model where males of the Angel family are expected to fit in. In *The Rain God*, alternative family structures are given a space as well.

Chicano families are grounded on the strength of the men, but with support of the women in terms of raising the children and running the household. As previously discussed, Islas does not believe males can lead a family if they are not able to have control over themselves first. Apparently, women do manage to put their offspring ahead of their own desires, which renders them stronger and more trustworthy. Trust is important in Chicano culture, because males have grown accustomed to the idea of not displaying their true self. In the event of an extramarital affair, a psychological war begins once the wife finds out about the indiscretions of her husband and that trust has been breached. Chicano women are

supposed to be submissive to their husbands, but still have the power to get their own way. By being strong enough to endure infidelity, Chicanas force their husbands to stay even though they might want to leave. Pretending that nothing happens until they have made up their own mind about the marriage keeps men from deciding what the next step is.

Islas is aware that although men run and maintain the institutions that keep women dependent on their husbands, the wives are the ones who have the last word. In the novel, there is a clear manifestation of the significance of female power within Chicano culture. As in most Chicano literary texts, women are portrayed in a secondary role, submissive, stigmatized, and left behind. The concept of 'woman' is understood as an empty nominalization of an idea that portrays her figure as weak, unprivileged, which occupies a second class place. However, although in *The Rain God* women seems to follow "a true to patriarchal prescription, they are passive, spineless, gentle creatures" (Sánchez, "Ideological Discourses" 122); women and the condition of female power is rather depicted as Toril Moi maintains in *Sexual/Textual Politics*, with the use of a particular rhetorical strategy, which immediately places them in a new, non-male context (141). Thus, Islas insists that Chicanas can also be tough, strong-minded and quite ambitious. Mama Chona's figure is in fact a symbol of female power that could be interpreted as an example of the Chicano matriarchal legacy. She is the center of the family, and an example of tenacity and bravery, although she is also prejudiced, unfair, and ignorant in many ways. In fact, Mama Chona's matriarchal situation shatters the Angels, and drives them to an irreversible fragmentation (Cárdenas 134). Her petulance and anti-Indian and anti-Mexican sentiment makes her look short-sighted, arrogant, and unfair. Her matriarchy is acknowledged, though, and has a major impact on Miguel Chico by "imparting cultural patterns which become an integral part of his life" (Cárdenas 134). For Mickie, Mama Chona becomes a model of female self-determination, independence, and bravery. A particular symbolism is found in *The Rain God*, where women

of the community can be read as synonym of *female power*, a notion probably introduced by the matriarchal figure of Mama Chona.

Many of the female characters tend to represent figures of subtle female insurrection, which is quite unusual in Chicano texts. This type of female insurrection is presented in both the old and new generations, although in neither case does it manage to overcome, in Beauvoir's words, the condition of women as the second sex. Two of the most salient examples of female insurrection are the characters of Juana and Lola. On the one hand, Juana, Miguel Grande's wife, is drawn as a selfless, faithful, consecrated and down to earth woman. Popular within her family and the larger community because of her image as a loyal wife and devoted mother, Juana seems to be under the mercy of her unfaithful, arrogant and chauvinist husband:

He carefully avoided saying "mother", knowing the very word would rekindle his father's jealousy over Juanita's deep and abiding love for her son. Years ago, upon learning of the Oedipus complex, Miguel Chico had savoured the intuitive knowledge that his father was no rival for his mother affection's. It was clear to both mother and son that Miguel Grande at his most brutal could not break into their intricately woven web of feeling for each other. (Islas 94)

Her charisma, popularity, and intelligence make her emerge as a Chicana who does not want to submit without fighting back. Beauvoir states that "if woman seems to be the inessential which never becomes the essential, it is because she herself fails to bring about this change"(18). Islas recreates many key situations throughout the novel where Juana demonstrates a nonconformist approach to her reality. Juanita is known for protesting when she witnesses situations of injustice and oppression. For example, she does not hesitate to protect Maria, the Mexican illegal woman who works as a maid, from the racial discrimination of Mama Chona and humiliations of Miguel Grande (13-19). Ready to assist others, she acts like a good advisor to Nina by alerting her about the disastrous end of her son Tony in light of the bad path he has chosen to follow (47). The pivotal moment of her character is, though, when she faces the infidelity of her husband with Lola, her best friend. Central to her figure as an unconventional Chicana is for example that Juanita chooses to pity

Miguel without any signs of anger or hostility (98). In her mind, men remain mysterious creatures difficult to comprehend (99), which for her is an explanation of why Miguel Grande is known for being unfaithful and disrespectful. Although protecting her marriage could be one reason, Juanita's calm reaction might be best explained as her way to gain control over the circumstances. She is the one who handles the whole situation by learning to accept her husband's desire for Lola (106), and preventing him from leaving her. Juana confronts this situation by excluding herself from it, and by turning into a spectator.

Paradoxically, another example of Chicana protest is Lola, the woman involved with Miguel Grande, a stunning, ambitious and charismatic widow, known for being stylish, and ambitious; a woman who also portrays an atypical role of female insurrection camouflaged under her confident, cynical, and demanding exterior. Lola radiates an impressive level of self-confidence and security, both as Juana's friend and as Miguel's lover. Thus, after Juana discovers the romance, and despite the complexity of the situation among the three of them, Lola stays loyal to their friendship and not to her feelings for Miguel. Camaraderie between Juana and Lola turns into an alliance that manages to tumble Miguel from his pedestal as husband, lover, and patriarch. After all, both women keep secret their impression of the whole situation (106) leaving him and the readers in the dark. A woman is being chosen over a man. *The Rain God* gives the impression that Juana and Lola are playing with Miguel (109), putting him in an uncertain, pitiful, and embarrassing position. The complicity between the women degrades and ridicules Miguel's manhood, leaving him astonished by their behavior. In the line of analysis exposed by Beauvoir, women in the novel become the predator and not the prey, as usually the case in Chicano society. But Islas has also found other places in his narrative where he sheds light on women as more than secondary followers of men. Women's female power is represented in the refined and intellectual character of Tia Cuca, Mama Chona's sister (142), in the bravery of Nina who defies her father for mistreating her oldest sister Juana (43), and in the frankness of Lena, Felix' eldest daughter, who accuses her uncle

Miguel of being negligent regarding the investigation of her father's death (86). As Beauvoir would argue, in *The Rain God*, although women are portrayed as 'shit' (97) according to some of the macho characters, there is indication that Chicanas are not perceived, or stereotyped, as an absent other. If in both Rechy's and Rodriguez' narratives, Chicanas are ignored and rather absent, in Islas' novel, Chicanas are present and they undergo processes of liberation and autonomy from the tyranny and oppression of Chicano masculinity. Even if the shift in authority does not secure autonomy for women, it does destabilize male Chicano supremacy and might pave the way for other oppressed minorities, e.g. lesbians and homosexuals.

#### **4.2.1 Homosexuality as disability**

With publication of *The Second Sex* in 1949, Beauvoir changed social notions about the gender and sexual roles of man and woman, on the one hand, by questioning the norms, and, on the other hand, by criticizing the foundations of heterosexuality, leaving in some way gender and sexual performance explicitly at the level of individual choice. Still, nowadays in societies such as the Chicano, the male homosexual is perceived as being handicapped. As discussed previously, in *The Rain God* two characters are homosexual: Felix, the handsome, promiscuous, and cruel uncle, and his intellectual but unappealing nephew, Mickie.

Concerning their degree of openness, since homosexuality is a taboo within Chicano communities, neither of them are open about their sexual preferences. Readers do sense that 'people' talk about Felix' indiscretions with other boys, and that homosexuality might be the reason why Mickie lives in San Francisco. Homosexuality in the novel can be summed up like as intersection of genders, because it is parallel to female representations, in the sense of being secondary to the predominance of male heterosexuals:

“Apologize to your father for playing with dolls,” Juanita said to Miguel Chico. He did but he did not understand why he needed to say he was sorry. When his father was not there, his mother permitted him to play with them. She even laughed when Maria made him a skirt and they watched him dance to

the jitterbug music on the radio. “Yitty-bog”, Maria called it. Miguel Grande had caught them at once and made a terrible scene. Again, Miguel Chico was asked to apologize and to promise that he would never do it again. His father said nothing to him but looked at Juanita and accused her of turning their son into a *joto*. Miguel Chico did not find out until much later that the word meant “queer”. Maria remained silent throughout these scenes; she knew enough not to interfere. (Islas 16)

Still this is parallel to the position of women, since men remain men as long as their homosexual inclinations are concealed. Physicality is used as a measuring unit in order to display the homosexuality of both characters within the Chicano context. The corporal condition of both Felix and Mickie as characters is described in a particular, awkward way, so that the reader might interpret corporal features and physical disability as traits proper to homosexual figures. Chicano gay identity is scripted in the novel from a biased perspective in relationship with human disability. The colostomy that afflicts Miguel Chico’s body (7) and the physical condition of Felix’s corpse after he is murdered (81) seem to recreate an allegory of the condition of Chicano homosexual identity.

Homosexual individuals are understood to inhabit sacrificed, condemned, and afflicted bodies (Rice 180). In the novel, the male body seems to be punished as a consequence of the sexual immorality of both characters, trespassing any professional achievement as in the case of Mickie, or leaving a disappointed memory among his family, as in the case of Uncle Felix. *The Rain God* also implies that there is not a prototype of normality in the way homosexuals interact with each other from a sexual standpoint. While Mickie is portrayed as asexual, Felix is presented as recklessly promiscuous, which introduces the idea that there is a lack of role models, if any, for gay Chicanos to follow. On the one hand, the figure of Miguel Chico is presented as heroic, successful, attached to a non-functional disabled and asexual body. To a certain degree, Islas’ description might be read as a way to ridicule the typical male heroic straight-macho figure, downgrading this ideal by giving him a weak body, unable to engage in hetero- or homosexual intercourse. On the other hand, Uncle Felix, the model of the anti-hero, the villain, the cheater who is simultaneously attractive, exotic, and popular is far from being



a role model. Every single betrayal towards his wife and children, his community and those innocent illegal immigrants with whom he was sexually involved during his lifetime, seem to have been compensated by his atrocious end. To some degree, the decomposition and disfiguration of his exotic body after having been brutally murdered represents a paradox of punishment and retribution. Thus homosexuality among Chicanos is represented in the novel as an unclear and rather decadent lifestyle, where normality is completely absent. Chicano homosexuals give the impression of being socially and morally disabled, and in no position to become full-fledged and recognized members of society. Two factors explain why their condition lies at the intersection of ethnicity and gender. Firstly, marginalization of homosexuals based on cultural norms stems from ethnically defined paradigms. Secondly, gender patterns force gay Chicanos to lead a life they do not recognize as theirs, and to rely on with a system where only heterosexuality prevails. If in Rechy's *City of Night* homosexuality is depicted as an undeniable condition and in Rodriguez' *Hunger of Memory* it is perceived as an ignored circumstance, in *The Rain God*, homosexuality is present, but it remains an irresolute, debatable, and marginalized frontier.

Throughout the narrative, Islas suggests that Chicano ethnicity is constructed on pillars of various nature. Gastronomy, vicinity to the Mexican-American border, and popular beliefs and superstitions are identified as the salient elements of Chicano mentality. Ethnicity determines the importance that family is given as core of social life, and which results in male dominance. Islas makes evident that, as Beauvoir has pointed out, men do not necessarily fulfil their leading role better than women because their status is biologically determined. Male power leads men to underestimate the consequences of their actions and to undermine the responsibilities that patriarchy entails. In the narrative, Islas presents four examples of male heads of family who, blinded by delusions of macho grandeur, caused resentment, grudges and hatred among their own family members. Ethnicity is displayed as the reason why patriarchy is a generations old institution, where gender defines which role characters are

to play. Women in Chicano culture are given the status of “the second sex”, in Beauvoir’s words, but many of them manage to endure male dominance and show signs of insurrection. These women exemplify the possibilities that Chicanas have to hack into a system where they lack acknowledgment.

Gender juxtaposes ethnicity also in the notion that Chicanos exist as a by-product of boundary clashes and political changes. The border is then seen as a source of conflict, but also of alternatives for younger generations seeking less traditional ways of leading their lives, or who refuse to accept gender predefinitions, for example homosexuals. The U.S.-Mexican frontier can also be interpreted as a feminine or masculine figure, since it marks the division of two realms where otherness is perceived on both sides. Islas might suggest that the border is feminine, because it is the line demarking the beginning of a place where women and other minorities are less exposed to male dominance. But the border can also be read as a masculine figure in its constant request for Chicanos to submit to a new way of doing things, and without the possibility of going back. As an inflexible, rugged and harsh fence, it might represent the male sense of arrogance, self-sufficiency and power. From a gay viewpoint, the border might also be interpreted as the neutral, grey-tinted zone where black and white, masculine and feminine, norm and exception meet. It can be read as a source of conflict, similar to the complexity lived by homosexual Chicanos who are powerful in their disguise as males, but persecuted even by women once their true self is revealed.

From an ethnic standpoint, the relation between gastronomy and the border can be understood as if the frontier remains an uncooked, undigested, and tasteless ingredient on the Chicano table. As chili, it calls for other ingredients in order to become a dish that can be consumed and processed by the members of the Chicano and American communities. Ethnic and gender traits are thus inseparable in *The Rain God*, and Islas renounces privileging one over the other. Some Chicanas and homosexuals trespass the ‘norm’, just as Chicanos trespass the border, and therefore ethnicity and gender become one in Islas’ masterpiece.

## 5. Conclusion

Central to this dissertation is to examine the intersection of ethnic, sexual, and gender identity based on an understanding of the socially constructed nature of the male homosexual figure as portrayed in three Chicano literary texts between 1960s and 1980s. In all three literary texts, there was evidence that identity is a fluid entity that may alter to a certain point. In light of Beauvoir's philosophy, the identity of an individual will be structured by the biological, historical and cultural situation he or she is exposed to in relationship with the surrounding social environment. Thus ethnicity and gender performance establishes a crucial paradigm in the structure of the gay male figure depicted in the Chicano queer literary text since 1960s. From an ethnic standpoint, *City of Night* (1963) depicts a character that refuses to accept and acknowledge his own roots. John Rechy describes a man who is not willing to embrace the idea of belonging to an oppressed minority. This is rather similar to the case of *Hunger of Memory* (1982). In both cases, success and privilege are linked to the idea of minimizing or even hiding any affiliation to the Chicano community. *The Rain God* (1984) frames a different situation. Maybe due to a more open debate on the importance of heritage, Islas presents a character that does not question his Chicano background or attempt to conceal it.

In *City of Night*, the main character insists on the European ancestry of his father and gives an account of his life, even though he describes him in negative terms. Contrastingly, in spite of confirming that his relationship with his caring mother is much better, he omits to mention anything about her life before moving to the United States. The reader can only doubt that the protagonist remembers detailed information about his father, but only knows superficially anything about his mother's past. *Hunger of Memory* presents a character aware of the social differentiation that he faces due to his background. He touches upon this topic openly in many passages of the narrative. In his autobiography, Rodriguez depicts a character who feels urged to explain his decision to lead a social and a private life and keep them apart one from the other. His dual lifestyle, he believes, allows him to portray himself as a

successful scholar without sacrificing his own desires. Ethnicity becomes evident in the way Chicano condemnation is presented through the main character's self-flagellation. Having been taught within a Chicano household that homosexuality is frowned upon, in spite of his academic accomplishments, he rejects his own inclinations. In *City of Night*, the main character's sense of shame does not stem from racial connotations, although they have had impact on his life. In the case of *The Rain God*, ethnicity is a widely discussed topic, because family plays a central role in the story. Inclusion of family in *The Rain God* offers endless possibilities to dissect, contrast, and understand Chicano ethnicity, because interaction and socialization patterns are described in detail. Matriarchy and patriarchy, the authority of older siblings over the younger ones, the importance of keeping up appearances, and the role of reputation are some of the features that seem to characterize Chicano mentality. Due to the nature of the stories, *City of Night* and *Hunger of Memory* do not give direct access to the families in which the main characters were raised. Ethnic traits such as exotic gastronomy, popular beliefs, and superstitions are mostly omitted from both texts. It could be concluded that both Rechy and Rodriguez were less interested in shedding light on this side of Chicano culture, or aimed to avoid common stereotypes.

This is taken to the extreme in *City of Night*, where no references are made to Chicano elements of any sort. In a contradictory way, the story leads us to believe that the absence of those cultural traits is deliberate. Rechy's character avoids mentioning anything about his religious background, upbringing, and family situation or his experience as someone born to a mixed race couple. Ethnicity is only presented as a possible hindrance in the aspirations of the main character to become an acclaimed hustler. An unconventional topic such as prostitution might lead one to assume that Rechy was more interested in exploring the street life where American and Chicano cultures clash, rather than focusing on what a domestic lifestyle looked like. In fact, ethnic traits, although subtle, do become more apparent both in *City of Night* and *The Rain God*, since outer socialization is closely registered.

In different worlds, academia opposed to the sex industry, Islas and Rechy give an account of how Chicanos interact outside their family clusters. In all three stories, Chicano ethnicity becomes apparent in the central role that machismo plays in the life of both the men and women of the community. Men are to be obeyed and listened to, while women are given secondary tasks and are expected to not question the decisions taken by the male figures. An exception to this rule is the power that an older female figure gains within the family. Machismo is seen as an endemic characteristic of Chicano mentality and is observed to be an extension of patriarchal ideology. In the case of *Hunger of Memory*, Rodriguez presents a character willing to acknowledge the damage that the macho mentality has done to him. He admits that he lives a double life, because his heritage demands him to be heterosexual, even though he is not. The result is that the reader gets an impression of him as being dishonest, secretive, and rather contradictory. Rodriguez elaborates on how aware he is of the cultural oppression that Chicano mentality places upon him. He rejects the idea of belonging to an uneducated, Mexican-descended minority, which fails to become American enough. Yet his lifestyle is evidence that he is not ready to stand up against the social norms of his native community. His true identity is concealed by fears derived from a macho-oriented upbringing. *Hunger of Memory* serves as sample of the power that cultural values can hold over individuals, beyond education or socialization.

In fact, Rodriguez' ideals include becoming one of the machos he pretends to condemn. Ever since his childhood, his unattained aspirations have included wanting to excel in fields beyond his range. Rodriguez shares his frustration over not being able to fit into the models determined by Chicano society by complaining about the small size of his hands, his weak posture and lack of confidence in the presence of "real" men. He stresses that masculinity plays a central role to Chicano ethnicity, because it is an external trait. According to Rodriguez, Chicanos praise men who are naturally endowed with masculine features. A connection is made between biological properties and the idealization of the male figure.

Along the same line, Islas pinpoints that Chicano men do not believe they need to excel in order to attain authority and respect within their communities. He suggests that they assume their biological gender is empowering enough. In *The Rain God*, macho-derived structures lead men to underestimate the consequences of their choices and to minimize the responsibility they have as the “strong” gender. The story offers plenty of examples of men who lead their families convinced of their unquestionable supremacy and self-proclaiming right to be in charge. Instead, Islas demonstrates the devastation that machismo as an institution can create within communities, because it encourages inequality. Chicano ethnicity is shown to revolve around the idea that males are to play the central role, either in the form of patriarchy or as leading figures of any kind. The notion that women are to be relegated to the position of Beauvoir’s “second sex” is shown as an endemic characteristic of Chicano mentality.

An extension of this system is understood to apply to gender minorities, especially homosexuals, since the whole system is built upon men’s duties as male figures. In fact, men are believed to give up their right to be part of the hegemonic system by admitting their homosexuality. Moving away from heterosexuality is seen as a breach within the system both by Chicano men and women. This is because sexual identity is presupposed to be the externalisation of masculinity in the form of endurance, performance, strength, and dominance. In a paradoxical twist, the novels seem to transmit the idea that engaging in homosexual encounters does not strip men of their masculinity unless they are acting upon deviant desires. According to Chicano cultural parameters, machos retain their status as long as they remain faithful to the idea of not being gay. *City of Night* is a clear example of this mindset.

Rechy’s main character refuses the idea of giving up his favorable position as heterosexual and masculine figure by convincing himself that his encounters with men are only a way to earn money. Financial retribution and curiosity to explore a world where he can

feel desired are, according to him, the only reason he enjoys having sexual intercourse with men, engaging in conversations with them, contemplating the idea of sharing experiences and developing feelings for them. The reality is that the novel evidences his preference for men over women, and the fascination he feels for a couple of men he meets along his way. The ethnic background of the main character becomes evident in his homophobic attitude towards some of the men working with him. *City of Night* serves as a showcase of the internalization of macho ideologies Chicano boys are brought up with. Referring to homosexuals as “queens,” he distances himself from the idea of being one of them. Far from realizing that homosexuality and masculinity are not necessarily contradictory terms, Rechy presents a man consumed by denial and self-rejection. His lack of self-approval stems from his mixed origin and the feeling that he does not truly belong to any community. Rechy presents a character roaming around, seeking adventures, but more than anything, avoiding his own lack of self-acceptance.

Similar to Rodriguez in *Hunger of Memory*, fleeing from a predefined family structure and an oppressive Chicano community is seen as a solution to the problem of being different. In both cases, the main characters find reasons to live far from the settings where they could easily feel questioned, condemned, or attacked. Homophobia is present in all three novels, but specially in *City of Night* and *Hunger of Memory*, because both characters voice their aversion towards transvestites, open homosexuals, and other minorities. However, since their homophobia is mainly derived from their macho mentality and Chicano upbringing, the reader soon realizes that they both belong to two underprivileged minorities.

Having the main characters of the two novels and of the autobiography externalize their homophobia serves to illustrate the obstacles, oppression, exclusion and loneliness that Chicanos must face if they are to embrace who they are. Chicano social expectations towards men and women are framed as a set of inflexible behaviour parameters. This seems paradoxical in light of the fact that the Chicano experience in America has not been an easy

one. It can be concluded that homosexuality within Chicano society in the United States is challenging, because men in this position face exclusion and condemnation from four standpoints. Firstly, they reject themselves, because they fear being outcast for losing their role as respected figures. This is clearly seen both in *Hunger of Memory* and *City of Night*. Secondly, this community does not assume that homosexuality exists and there is no space for it within the societal structures, leading individuals to conceal their identity. This is not only because society might judge them, but equally because there is no place for them to go or role models to follow. Thirdly, the binary notion man/macho within Chicano culture renders it impossible for men to be acknowledged as homosexuals and as men. This is the case in *The Rain God*, because the characters do not even see as the possibility of accepting themselves, not because they are not willing to do so, but because of lack of flexibility within their community. Finally, Chicanos risk being judged for being Chicanos and gay within American mainstream society. They are already a minority struggling to find a place within the context of an enlarged, ethnically diversified nation. Being homosexual would only deepen any sense of stigma they might awake in people's minds. This is mainly the case in *Hunger of Memory*, because the character is already aware of the obstacles that Chicanos-even heterosexual ones-need to tackle when merging and socializing outside their immediate community.

In order to assess the relative weight and importance of ethnic, gender, and sexual identity within these texts, special attention needs to be paid to what constitutes being ethnically Chicano. In the case of homophobia, it is far from being a purely Chicano phenomenon. Homophobic discourse is also present within white American society, although Chicanos are understood to be less tolerant. As it has been noted, homosexuality is perceived to transgress normality, both within American and Chicano societies (Christian 50). Homosexual individuals are placed outside conventional norms and within the boundaries of otherness. Dominating self-promoting structures are heterosexual both in an American and Chicano context.



This system is described by the main characters in the three narrations, validating the perpetuation of a structure where an empowered majority oppresses deviant lifestyles and minorities. It could be argued that a general disillusionment is rooted in not being truly 'macho' among gay Chicanos, but this does not mean that individuals of other ethnic origins do not struggle with the idea of accepting their homosexuality. The general idea of fitting into a predefined system applies to all members of a community, even if they do not belong to a subgroup within a larger society. A marked difference emerges from the frustration some Chicanos might feel for not being "true" Americans. Ethnicity overlaps gender mainly in the sense of exclusion that homosexuality entails in terms of power, entitlement within family structures, and the respect of other Chicanos. It could be argued that this situation differs from the American societal scheme, where power is not entirely linked to biological gender.

The three stories focus mainly on showing that open homosexuality within Chicano society is an unattainable goal, because society follows predetermined set of values, derived from religious premises and engrained deeply within all scales of society, regardless of the American context. Lack of understanding and flexibility are sensed as endemic traits of Chicano mentality in terms of gender and sexual orientation. If the case of women within this subgroup is analyzed, even though their existence can hardly be considered deviant or unconventional, their biological gender renders them inferior according to Chicano parameters. This being the case, there is little hope that Chicano homosexuals can embrace their sexuality and be accepted socially at the same time. In fact, Chicano women themselves are noted for being strong supporters of a system in which society revolves around the male figure and masculinity is praised as a confirmation of the superiority of men over women. Gender identity seems to be a stronger constraint than ethnic identity, because Chicanos could not possibly judge what define them as a community: their cultural heritage, their traditions and their customs. In fact, normality to them is the fact that all of them claim the same ancestors, sharing linguistic traits, religious traditions and belong to the same racial group.

Homosexuality is not endemic or common to all of them, and therefore the status of difference that gay Chicanos experience does not stem of the fact that they are not white or have Mexican ancestors. A lack of explanation and justification for their existence is precisely what Chicanos condemn. Similar to the exclusion they are victims of, this society rejects the idea that difference transgress their boundaries. These boundaries and the clashes that trespassing them create are comparable to the notion of the border as a source of conflict. Throughout the two novels and in the autobiography, escape into the wider American society is seen by many of the characters as an alternative to seeking less traditional ways of leading their lives.

As Islas exposes in his novel, the border invites being read as the line demarking the beginning of a place where women and other minorities are less exposed to male dominancy. In this sense, ethnic identity is seen as a greater source of oppression than gender or sexual orientation. Seen through the lens of homosexual discourse, the border might be interpreted as a neutral crossroads where normality recovers many more meanings than those offered in the context of rigid, Catholic Mexico. Overall, it can be argued that ethnicity is more significant than gender and sexual identity in John Rechy's *City of Night* (1963), Richard Rodriguez' *Hunger for Memory* (1982), and Arturo Islas' *The Rain God* (1984), because the main characters are mainly oppressed by prejudices engrained in their native cultures. If ethnicity was taken out of the formula, their self-acceptance would be expected to increase in light of the societal changes seen in the United States after the 1960s. Chicanos mainly face obstacles imposed by their upbringing and culture, and this is central to all three texts.

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