
”homeless, countryless, raceless”: Formations of Queer American Urbanities in Rabih Alameddine’s *The Angel of History*

David Deutsch*¹

¹University of Alabama – Alabama, États-Unis

Résumé

John Rechy, Richard Bruce Nugent, and Essex Hemphill, among others, have long noted the emotional and environmental alienation of queer men of color in the U.S., even in more tolerant queer urban societies.[1] Rabih Alameddine complicates this tradition by considering the ambiguous American-ness of queer immigrants of color in the era of HIV/AIDS.[2] Jacob, Alameddine’s protagonist in *The Angel of History*, seeks the superficial comfort of a partial oblivion as he distracts himself from his simultaneously euphoric and degrading geographic, religious, and social dislocations mediated through his failed attempts to find love in late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century San Francisco. Born in Yemen, raised in Cairo and Beirut, where his father coerces his conversion from Islam to Catholicism, Jacob subsequently moves to San Francisco, which he calls ”*My New Sana’a*,” a reference to the constitutional if no longer practical Yemeni capital. Highlighting the multifaceted nature of any home and of any nationality, Jacob underlines his having merged his Yemeni, Egyptian, and Lebanese experiences with his newer urban American culture. Alameddine indicates the psychological and even physical difficulties of this merger, however, as Jacob formulates his sense of belonging through visits to San Francisco’s queer leather clubs wherein he experiences what critics have identified as the painful alienations and excruciatingly sublime pleasures of community inherent in sadomasochistic subcultures.[3] Enacting rituals of endurance, shame, lust, and survival in the pre- and early AIDS era San Francisco, Jacob forges a troubling and fragile sense of community that ruptures as he subsequently endures the trauma of losing his closest friends and his partner to the disease. This loss, combined with his previous dislocations, only heightens his feelings of isolation as a queer immigrant and his desire to repress too painful emotions. Alameddine counters what become ambivalent ecstasies in Jacob-his anger at his losses mixed with his loving memories of friends in his subconscious-as he forces Jacob to re-assess these past emotions by retracing old paths around San Francisco. This movement through the city recalls old friends and lovers and indicates how the past can enliven the present if approached in a responsible psychological fashion.

This responsible psychological fashion involves Jacob’s reclaiming a queer urbanity from San Francisco’s increasing gentrification and politics of respectability in the early twenty-first century. Jacob reasserts the pleasures of his past and the queer outlaw potentials of the city by watching public displays of queer intimacy, by writing poetry on public bus stops, and by scratching his friends’ names on buildings where they used to live. If public indecency and vandalism from institutional and legal perspectives, Jacob’s voyeurism and his improvised art also combines his past spiritual, erotic, and literary experiences to re-establish his unique

*Intervenant

form of a queer urban American identity through queer versions of street theater and through monumental re-inscriptions.

See Rechy, John. *City of Night*. New York: Grove, 1963; Nugent, Richard Bruce. *Gay Rebel of the Harlem Renaissance*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2002; Hemphill, Essex. *Ceremonies*. Jersey City: Cleis Press, 2000; Boyd, Nan Alamilla. *Wide-Open Town: A History of Queer San Francisco to 1965*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003; Chauncey, George. *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890–1940*. New York: Basic Books, 1994; Turner, Mark. *Backward Glances: Cruising the Queer Streets of New York and London*. London: Reaktion Books, 2003.

Alameddine, Rabih. *The Angel of History*. New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2016.

Carrette, Jeremy. "Intense Exchange: Sadomasochism, Theology and the Politics of Late Capitalism." *Theology & Sexuality* 11(2) 11-30; Rubin, Gayle. "Leather Menace." *Deviations*: Durham: Duke University Press, 2011; Bersani, Leo. *Homos*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018.

Mots-Clés: literature