

LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

Mapping Queer Diasporas in Literary Second Cities: Benjamín Alire Sáenz, Gabby Rivera, and Ocean Vuong

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Abstract:

This study focuses on the personal metaphorical maps of queer protagonists in three diasporic coming-of-age novels. These novels are, Benjamín Alire Sáenz's *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* (2012), Gabby Rivera's *Juliet Takes a Breath* (2019), and Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019). The study does not use the concept of 'literary cartography' to refer to actual cartographic renditions or mappings of literary texts, but rather as an intradiegetic tool that enables the study of how characters metaphorically map their fictional milieus and geographies. The geographic marginalization of the protagonists, a consequence of their alterity in terms of class, ethnicity, and sexuality, renders specific symbolic maps of their cities and limits, which foreground the places where queer sexuality becomes intelligible and multicultural communities can gather. The novels show three different ways of allegorically mapping coming-of-age processes onto the spaces 'secondary literary cities': El Paso, TX, Portland, OR, and Hartford CT. The coming-of-age framework enables the notion of the characters' cartographies as ongoing processes (rather than accomplished facts), traced simultaneously to their developing identities. Finally, this study reworks Michel Foucault's category of the heterotopia to analyze the counter-hegemonic sites where most of the key moments of queer maturation take place in the novels.

Keywords: queer; diaspora; migration; coming-of-age; literary cartography; heterotopia.

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Young protagonists of diasporas in fiction frequently parse their geographic marginalization with significant consequences for their identity development. As they forge their identities by negotiating the often-conflicting expectations of their milieus (for example, balancing their parents' traditions with the host society's cultural practices), they also trace metaphorical maps of their diasporic communities, their surrounding neighborhoods, and cities. This study uses a framework that combines literary cartography with attention to the conventions and subversions of the coming-of-age genre to study the spatial representations of diasporic dwellings located at the limits of three 'literary second cities' where migration has scarcely been studied as a mundane experience of its inhabitants: El Paso, Texas; Portland, Oregon; and Hartford, Connecticut. This paper does not use the concept of 'literary cartography' to refer to actual cartographic renditions or mappings of literary texts, but rather as an intradiegetic tool that enables the study of how characters (within the texts) metaphorically map their geographies. I use Robert Tally's metaphorical connotation of the term 'mapping narratives' to analyze how the novels' protagonists, Aristotle, Juliet, and Little Dog, in the process of growing up, figuratively 'map the real-and-imagined spaces of human experience' by dwelling, interacting, and ascribing meaning to imagined spaces (Tally 2014: 3). In Tally's metaphorical sense, literary cartography studies how 'the writer of narrative engages in an activity quite similar to mapmaking' in which 'the map becomes a figure for the linguistic and imaginative activity of writing,' constituted by words instead of charts or images (Tally 2013: 46). This definition of literary cartography underscores the role of narrators as symbolic map-makers of their imaginary milieus and, figuratively, of their own selves—how they fit into their communities and cities. Similarly to the formative processes of these coming-of-age novels, 'the mapping project of narrative is necessarily incomplete, provisional, and tentative' (46). City planners will not use the metaphorical maps of Aristotle, Juliet, and Little Dog to build streets and bridges. Instead, these maps are meaningful because they trace how intersectional marginalization in terms of class, gender, sexuality, and race limit the spaces where the protagonists forge communities, live, work.

Intersecting with the marginalization implicit in the class oppression often found in diasporic enclaves and neighborhoods, the young protagonists of the three analyzed novels face bullying, harassment, and shame due to their sexuality (see Zavella 2011). The coming-of-age processes of 15-year-old Aristotle Mendoza in Benjamín Alire Sáenz's *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* (2012), college student Juliet Palante in Gabby Rivera's *Juliet Takes a Breath* (2019), and 14-year-old Little Dog in Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019) feature difficult developments into adulthood where the protagonists do not want to—and indeed often cannot—fit into hegemonic markers of maturity (such as heterosexual desire and rituals, incorporation into the work force, or achievement in formal educational settings) due to *Othering* in terms of subaltern categories of class, ethnicity, and sexuality. Because Aristotle, Juliet, and Little Dog find restrictions in the places they can inhabit or visit, and experience sexuality and community in specific ways (as a consequence of their identities), they render narrative maps intimately linked to their habits and formative processes.¹

This study analyzes those personal literary maps to ponder how the diasporic and queer identities of characters affect their interaction with (and imagination of) space.² Their

interaction with their settings results in the creation of metaphorical mappings of celebratory marginality that enable queer connections and sex, and—in the particular cases of *Juliet* and *On Earth*—the intermingling of multiple diasporas.

Finally, this paper reworks Michel Foucault's category of the heterotopia to analyze the counter-hegemonic sites where most of the key moments of queer maturation take place in the novels. Heterotopias are a useful concept for pondering the ways in which the margins of cities become meaningful places of queer sexual exploration that contrast with hegemonic places within the city boundaries.

What does literary cartography enable in the study of identity development? Tally argues that, in the act of writing as a metaphor of mapping, the map-maker 'must survey territory, determining which features to of a given landscape to include, to emphasize, to diminish' (Tally 2013: 43). The protagonists of coming-of-age narratives as map-makers carry out this metaphorical cartographic work by depicting the spaces in which their key moments of maturation take place. Aristotle, Juliet and Little Dog represent 'the textures, rhythmic complexities, and uneven progressions of temporal movement' (Barrows 2016: 151), through the prism of their perception and personal understanding of place—which depends on their experiences (especially in terms of community and sex). Since coming-of-age novels present the development of identity episodically, they also present cartographies of cities episodically. Therefore, growing up in a city is a process of symbolically drawing its map: the city is traced through story. Specific places (personal landmarks) are associated with memories, experiences that shape the characters' mental representation of their settings. And, because the stories in this study are characterized by marginalization, the narrated cartographies of the three novels challenge 'the totalizing, supposedly authoritative version of world geography' found in standardized/scientific maps that follow a logic of accuracy (Rao 2017: 117), and instead portray individual experiences of place.

A cartographic approach to coming-of-age novels enables readers to think of the concepts of identity formation and mapping as parallel processes. Importantly for novels centered around the development of identity into adulthood, Stuart Hall characterizes *identity* as 'production, which is never complete, always in process,' rather than an 'accomplished fact' (Hall 1989: 68). In an analogous sense but in terms of cartography, Jon Anderson explains that 'the notion of place has changed from one that is sedentary and stable to many that are provisional and emergent' (Anderson 2014: 22). Anderson's approach rejects a static ontology of 'being-in-the-world' (associated with Heidegger), and embraces a more emerging ontology of 'becoming-in-the-world' (associated with Deleuze)' (22). This emerging ontology of place is echoed in Sheila Hones's view of geographical space:

The primary line established in this study connecting literary and spatial theory is anchored at one end in a view of geographical space as 'the product of interrelations,' as a dimension of multiplicity and plurality, as always unfinished and under construction, and at the other end in a comparably spatial view of the literary text, as the result of interaction and the product of multiplicity, as permanently in a state of production. (Hones 2014: 8)

Hall, Anderson, and Hones thus describe identity and cartography in analogous terms: both are ongoing processes, never accomplished facts. Moreover, rather than cartographies of the cities' main streets and landmarks as in more classic *Bildungsromane* such as industrial London in Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield* or New York in J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, the characters in these diasporic coming-of-age novels map primarily the margins of their cities, where many of their key formative experiences take place: the desert outside El Paso, the forest outside Portland, and the tobacco farm outside Hartford. Their personal maps underscore the importance of their cities' eccentric (outside the center) limits because they are necessary for their processes of disidentification with the normativity of the city centers (see Quintana-Vallejo 2021).

This paper shifts away from a previous focus on 'literary primary cities' such as New York, San Francisco, and London. New diasporic narratives call for a shift in attention to cartographic representation of smaller cities. Finch, Ameel and Salmela (2017) argue that 'virtually unchallenged 'first' cities' have traditionally received 'disproportionate attention [...] in urban policy, urban studies, and indeed in literary urban studies' not only because of biased city hierarchies, but because national literatures often magnify the importance of capital cities (4). Diasporic literature has contributed to the prevalent mapping of cosmopolitan megalopolises because these cities have historically been more attractive diasporic destinations than smaller counterparts. But, in recent years, many diasporic novels take place in smaller urban centers where the diasporic communities are not homogenous, but rather have multiple diasporas commingling in multicultural and multilingual exchange. As opposed to the Spanish-speaking community, for example, of *The House in Mango Street* (1983) in the 'first city' of Chicago or the Indian community of *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990) in London, the diasporic communities of Portland in *Juliet* or Hartford in *On Earth* hail from variegated origins (although not so in El Paso in *Aristotle and Dante*, where the diasporic community described is exclusively Mexican-American). Roberts and Hohmann define smaller urban centers as secondary cities: 'urban jurisdictions performing vital governance, logistical, and production functions at a sub-national or sub-metropolitan region level within a system of cities in a country' (Roberts and Hohmann 2014: 3). The diasporic shift of preference for secondary cities both in real life and fiction comes in a context of an avalanche of journalism reporting millennials moving to smaller urban areas mostly for economic reasons (see Hart 2019; Lucking 2020; Tonar and Talton 2020; Tate 2020). And, beyond Americans' internal migration, foreign immigrants also move to smaller cities. For example, the U.S. metro areas with the largest proportional increase in foreign-born populations from 2014 to 2017 were not Los Angeles or New York, but rather Akron, OH, Seattle, WA, Tampa, FL, Omaha, NE, Indianapolis, IN, and Raleigh, NC. (Hart 2019). While secondary cities do not offer a completely clean slate in terms of literary representation, they are fresher settings for personal mapping, especially when the cartographers are queer diasporic characters whose realms of community, consumption, education, work, have historically less-charged 'extratextual references' than the Spanish Harlem, the Bronx, or Queens (see Pimentel 2001). Moreover, secondary cities are smaller, which enables the characters in these novels to find liminal spaces, located a short bike- or car-ride away, where they feel free to explore their sexualities and disidentify with heteronormative mores and expectations.

In the context of literary first cities, definitions of the coming-of-age genre have hinted at the intimate relation between identity and cartography before, underscoring the geographic mobility of characters necessary for self-evaluation and self-forging. Jerome Buckley's archetypal plot, still useful in its description of the horizon of expectations of the classic *Bildungsromane* (that is, eighteenth and nineteenth-century, middle-class, European novels dealing with formative experiences), highlights the importance of place when he explains that, in this originating iteration of the coming-of-age genre, a sensitive child 'grows up in the provinces, where his lively imagination is frustrated by his neighbors'—and often by his family's—social prejudices and intellectual obtuseness' (Buckley 1974: 18). Per Buckley, the child is only able to become a 'citizen and worker' towards the end of the narrative because 'he goes to the metropolis, where his transformative education begins' (18). Buckley argues that the shaping of the hero *needs* to happen in a primary city. In the related matter of the parallel emergence of character and world, Thomas Jeffers argues that 'in the event-racked revolutionary years of the late eighteenth century, the emergence of the hero's character increasingly mirrored the emergence—socially, economically, politically, ideationally—of the world around him' (Jeffers 2005: 2). To add to Jeffers's definition, the emergence of the hero also mirrors the cartographic emergence of the world, since the protagonist of the genre necessarily maps their settings in their path through it, negotiating which places they can access or inhabit and adding texture to cities' maps by means of their experiences.

Subverting Buckley's foundational definition of *Bildungsromane*, in which identity development must happen in a large metropolis, the secondary city of El Paso, in the summer of 1987, serves as the setting for *Aristotle and Dante*. This novel traces the identification process of narrator Aristotle and his best friend Dante, two fifteen-year-old Americans with Mexican ancestry, in the process of discovering their feelings for each other and negotiating how their families grow to accept their burgeoning homosexuality. The key moments in the developmental processes of these characters do not happen in hegemonic institutions or places—as might be expected in a story centered on adolescents who attend high school thus spending most of their time there and at home. Rather, Aristotle's and Dante's key bouts of growth happen in the desert, in what Aristotle calls his favorite spot, where 'some Friday nights, I'd drive my truck out into the desert after work. I'd lie in the bed of my pickup and look out at the stars' (Alire Sáenz 2012: 221). This spot makes it possible for these characters to say and do things that could not take place in their respective parents' houses or in school, where they are expected to behave according to traditionally-Mexican heteronormative norms. Aristotle's spot is a *heterotopia*—a type of place of vital importance to queer characters in general and, in Aristotle's case, a place where he can forget about the expectation of heterosexual masculinity from his Mexican parents.

In addition to Aristotle's painful grappling with his sexuality, he struggles throughout the novel with being Mexican, an identity he most evidently inhabits within his home. When Dante tells Aristotle, 'It bothers you that you're Mexican, doesn't it,' Aristotle replies 'Yes, it bothers me... I think Mexicans don't like me' (Alire Sáenz 2012: 39). For Aristotle, the prospect of being a masculine man, even *macho*, conflicts with his repressed desire for Dante's body. In this sense, the heterotopia of the desert, where the freedom of

homosexual contact becomes intelligible, contrasts most clearly with the shame he feels in his diasporic home, which exacerbates his internalized homophobia. The desert offers an escape from being both Mexican and heterosexual, which are the same thing from Aristotle's limited understanding of his parents' expectations.

But before analyzing the importance of the desert for Aristotle's formative process, it is vital to state that the respective houses where Aristotle and Dante grow up are a key part of their initial descriptions. Their families' class identities are expressed in terms of place, communicated to the reader by the contrast between their homes. Aristotle explains that unlike himself, Dante 'lived less than a block from the swimming pool in a big old house across the street from the park' and, in the same breath, expresses his surprise that Dante's father is the only Mexican-American man he has ever met who is a university professor and has the luxury of an office in his own home (Alire Sáenz 2012: 24). When they head upstairs, Aristotle is surprised to find that Dante has 'stuff everywhere. Clothes spread all over the floor, a pile of old albums, books scattered around, legal pads with stuff written on them, Polaroid photographs, a couple of cameras, a guitar without any strings, sheet music, and a bulletin board cluttered with notes and pictures' (24). In contrast, when days later Dante sees Aristotle's room, Dante insensitively exclaims, 'There's nothing in your room.' [...] 'Nothing on the walls' (34). Their difference in class and the education level of their fathers (Aristotle's is a mailman and a veteran of the Vietnam war) is portrayed by the size and clutter of their rooms. Because their experiences of home are so different, the desert—as heterotopia—also serves to bridge the gap between them, as there is no occasion to focus on material wealth there.

Per Foucault, heterotopias are 'real places—places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society— which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted' (Foucault 1967: 3). In *Aristotle and Dante* the desert enables possibilities otherwise unintelligible within the borders of El Paso. Here is where people go to do drugs and where Aristotle and Dante go to dance naked in the rain and eventually confess their love for each other. The term heterotopia is useful to name the desert because it highlights it as a site for both crisis and—in Foucault's terms—deviant sexuality. For these adolescents, the desert is a 'forbidden place, reserved for individuals who are, in relation to society and to the human environment in which they live, in a state of crisis' (4). Foucault himself recognizes adolescence as a state of crisis. The desert is thus ideal for their 'first manifestations of sexual virility' (5), which cannot take place at home or school, because they deviate from the norm. In contrast to the homosexual desire made possible by the desert, one of the first scenes of the novel shows Aristotle in the showers of the public pool, a key site of heteronormativity in his map, where heterosexual teens are discussing their burgeoning attraction to women:

When I got to the pool, I had to take a shower. That was one of the rules. Yeah, rules. I hated taking a shower with a bunch of other guys. I don't know, I just didn't like that. You know, some guys liked to talk a lot, like it was a normal thing to be in the shower with a bunch of guys and talking about the teacher you hated or the last

movie you saw or the girl you wanted to do something with. Not me, I didn't have anything to say. (15)

Although Aristotle does not fully understand his sexuality at the time, he recognizes that his desires are far from what he terms 'normal' (as he understands the chat about women in the showers). Rather than his desire becoming intelligible in this *usual* space where young men learn the vocabulary to express heterosexual desire, Aristotle needs the freedom afforded by the heterotopia because he is an individual 'whose [sexual] behavior is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm' (Foucault 1967: 5).

Imagining the Texas desert as a heterotopia also calls our attention to the fact that it constitutes part of the border between the U.S. and Mexico. The desert is a culturally hybrid space that separates nations but where they culturally bleed into each other in what Gloria Anzaldúa famously termed 'una herida abierta' [an open wound] (Anzaldúa 2007: 25).³ The cultural hybridity of the place is mirrored by that of the characters. Aristotle and Dante constantly ponder their 'Mexicanness,' recognizing that they are not Mexican enough for their families in Mexico, but not precisely American either. Immediately after the painful conversation cited before (during which Aristotle recognizes that Mexicans don't like him), the boys venture into the desert for the first time, when 'Dante's mom and dad took us out into the desert so we could use his new telescope' (Alire Sáenz 2012: 41), reiterating the importance of this place as the site where crises of identity are foregrounded—if not always resolved or even resolvable.

In addition to this initial contact, two other key moments shared by Aristotle and Dante (and the most important moment between Aristotle and his father Jaime, when Jaime first opens up about Aristotle's brother who is in prison—another heterotopia), happen there. The first is when Dante comes back from Chicago after spending one year there. The friends are in the process of reconnecting and Dante has come out as gay to Aristotle. It is clear to both that Dante is in love with Aristotle, although his feelings are (at this time) unrequited. Despite Aristotle's (momentary) assertion of his heterosexuality, this euphoric event in the desert enables them to explore new ground in their relationship. Having smoked 'two joints,' the boys see a storm brew in the desert (Alire Sáenz 2012: 271). Feeling 'crazy,' they take off their clothes and step into the rain:

I stripped off my T-shirt and all my clothes. Except my tennis shoes. We looked at each other and laughed. "Ready?" I said. "Ready," he said. We ran out into the rain. God, the drops of rain were so cold. "Shit!" I yelled. "Shit!" Dante yelled. "We're fucking crazy." "Yeah, yeah!" Dante laughed. We ran around the truck, naked and laughing, the rain beating against our bodies. [...] And then the rain stopped. That was the way it was in the desert. [...] Dante was standing next to me. I could feel his breath. I don't know what I would have done if he had touched me. (Alire Sáenz 2012: 272)

Although they do not touch while they are naked, sexual desire becomes fathomable. While the phrase 'I don't know what I would have done' has a ring of aggression to it, it also implies the possibility that what Aristotle would have done is touch Dante back. And,

indeed, this is what happens when this scene finds its counterpart at the very end of the novel.

Before this final rendezvous in their spot, Aristotle's parents have finally opened up about their past. They tell Aristotle about his lesbian aunt, who was shunned by their family, except for them; about Aristotle's brother who is in prison for killing a prostitute that he thought was a woman but in fact 'was a transvestite,' a term that his parents use without any ill will (Alire Sáenz 2012: 331). It is his parents, and not Aristotle, who suggest that he is in love with Dante, and assure him that they love and accept him, even though Aristotle feels 'so ashamed' by his homosexuality (349). Aristotle's parents open the definition of an acceptable Mexican adulthood by asserting their tolerance of both the shunned aunt and their son. This tolerance is uncharacteristic in their community as evidenced by their family's reaction to the aunt's life and death. Because Aristotle's parents are unexpectedly accepting of his sexuality, this moment constitutes a homecoming that unbinds the connection between being Mexican and heterosexual in this central space, which Aristotle had assumed necessary.

In the final scene of the novel, Aristotle and Dante return to their heterotopia. Aristotle reminds Dante of the time Dante kissed him in the normative space of Dante's house and how Aristotle had said it 'didn't work for me;' but then, in the desert, Aristotle is able to confess that he had lied (Alire Sáenz 2012: 357). After they kiss again, Dante wishes it was raining, remembering the last time they were there, to which Aristotle answers, bringing the novel and their formative processes to a close, "I don't need the rain," I said. "I need you" (358). In their paramount personal landmark, coming to terms with their sexuality and mutual attraction as a final marker of maturity seals their passage into adulthood. In the end, Aristotle's map of El Paso deemphasizes the urban areas, formal institutions of the city, and his house; instead, it magnifies the marginal site—far from the heterosexual and hegemonic rules of the city—where queer adolescence can blossom.

A heterotopia also plays a crucial role in Rivera's *Juliet Takes a Breath* because the final moment of reckoning between Juliet and her mentor, second-wave white feminist Harlowe Brisbane, takes place in Portland's natural counterpart to El Paso's desert: the forest.⁴ However, unlike *Aristotle and Dante*, many key moments of maturation in *Juliet Takes a Breath* happen within her communities of queer women (specifically in their houses) in both Portland and Miami, FL. As much as the concept of heterotopia is useful in *Aristotle & Dante* throughout the novel to theorize the site where the characters return time and again to work through issues of shame and sexual identity, the heterotopia in *Juliet* is useful only at the end. Most of her formative process happens within the boundaries of Portland because she is a student of feminism who blindly idolizes her problematic mentor. The heterotopia is key not because Juliet lacks queer models of imitation within the city, but because she needs it to outgrow her role of dutiful student and confront her mentor, in the process creating her own definition of feminism, and community, and thus maturing into adulthood.

Importantly, her formative process does not take place in the primary literary city of New York—where she hails from—and where she feels 'there isn't enough air to breathe,' because her neighborhood of the Bronx 'is stuck in a sanctioned and fully funded cycle of

poverty' (Rivera 2019: 4-5). In order to set her formative process in motion, Juliet moves in the opposite direction to that which Buckley describes in his archetypal plot. In the summer of 2003, she exchanges the metropolis (where her family and social setting thwart her queerness and burgeoning feminism) for Portland.⁵

Her place of outset is by no means monocultural. As can be expected from a multi-diasporic community in the Bronx, Juliet lives among a multiplicity of ethnicities, people connected to each other by their businesses and local consumption of goods and services, as well as intimate relationships:

The sun was setting over the neighborhood. Jamaican men stood in zigzag patterns on the block, shouting, "Taxi, miss?" [...] I dipped around them and made a left toward Paisano's Pizza Shop. Black and brown bodies were in full motion. A solid line of people shuffled in and out of the liquor store. It was owned by Mrs. Li. She sent flowers to my uncle Ramon's wake when he died two years ago from cirrhosis. (Rivera 2019: 12-13)

Yet this diverse setting, populated by small stores and the comingling diasporic communities who own them, makes Juliet feel breathless. Her quest westward for space and peace follows in the footsteps of an eighteenth-century American myth of expansion towards the 'open' space of the western frontier, enshrined by the Oregon trail. And what she finds in Portland is another multiethnic, multicultural society—albeit not as large or varied as that of the Bronx—where queer women of color take Juliet under their wings. Because of its metaphoric spatial openness, and its tightly-knit queer community, Portland enables Juliet to explore her sexuality and achieve a sophisticated understanding of her feminism and lesbianism in political terms.

The role of the houses of Portland contrasts with that of the houses of El Paso. While Aristotle needs to escape the houses that bind his diasporic identity with compulsory heterosexuality, Juliet is nurtured in the houses where her queer feminist mentors live. It is only when Juliet is betrayed by her mentor that the need for a liminal space in the outskirts of the city becomes necessary for the final step in her formative process. The forest contrasts with Harlowe's house, a middle-class space where Juliet is under threat of racist microaggressions and unconsented nakedness. In this house, representative of white, un-intersectional feminism, Juliet is relegated to the attic, but in the forest Juliet and Harlowe can speak on equal terms, rather than within the power structure of mentor-student. It is in the forest that Juliet surpasses the notion that feminism can only be white and middle-class. In the forest, Juliet is able to come to the conclusion, in confronting the racism of her mentor, that feminism can—and must—foreground the experiences of women of color. The heterotopia is necessary for Juliet to reach maturity, but not in the same sense as in *Aristotle and Dante*. While Aristotle needs his desert to even consider the reality of his homosexuality, Juliet needs her forest to distance herself from the racially-blind ideology of her mentor and create her own intersectional path forward.

In her development, Juliet's relationship of identification and disidentification with her mentor is key. Harlowe Brisbane is the author of *Raging Flower: Empowering Your Pussy by Empowering Your Mind*, a spoof of second-wave feminist works. Juliet flies to Portland to

start an internship with her. She describes her first impression of both Portland and her mentor in terms of her perception of Harlowe's house. A wild front garden full of overgrown flowers is part and parcel of Harlowe's performance of what Juliet terms 'the extent of her hippiness' (Rivera 2019: 48). Juliet is surprised to find 'that the doors weren't locked' and 'there weren't bars on the window,' an indication of Harlowe's middle-upper socioeconomic class and Portland's provincial character (48). This description comes in direct contrast to Juliet's recollection of her own home, where 'my dad locked the door to the house when we were sitting in front of it getting some fresh air "just in case"' (48). Juliet's experience of surprise with the hippiness of Harlowe's home is afterwards epitomized by Juliet's first encounter with Phen's naked body, 'a naked Filipino dude, about my age, maybe a little older,' a friend of Harlowe's whom Harlowe reprimands for not asking Juliet whether she is comfortable with his nakedness (57). This involuntary confrontation with a male naked body inside the intimate space of Harlowe's house forces Juliet to reevaluate her boundaries, occasioning a key moment of identity development where Juliet ponders what spaces she can inhabit and how, 'Kids in the Bronx always told me I was too weird or white-acting to be Puerto Rican. Now this Phen dude was telling me that I was too indoctrinated by mainstream society to be down with nakedness. I didn't even know what to say. Can I live, yo?' (59). Outside the house, Juliet starts to map Portland in walks and bus rides that she insists on taking by herself, through a city with plenty of 'rainbow flags hanging from outside people's homes,' packed with vegan, gluten-free, coffeehouses, that 'didn't just sell coffee, [...] they sold Portland' (79, 86). Juliet makes note of the 'wide-open sidewalks, trees bursting toward the sun, and houses that didn't have bars on their windows,' a peace so different from the traffic noise in the Bronx (92).

Yet it is not in the streets of Portland that Juliet undergoes her key bouts of growth, but rather in two closed public sites: an 'Octavia Butler-inspired writer's workshop' in a classroom and in the presentation of Harlowe's second book in Portland's landmark bookstore *Powell's City of Books* (Rivera 2019: 96). Juliet attends the workshop with Harlowe and Harlowe's primary lover Maxine, 'a professor of theology with a focus in Black womanist liberation theology' who is 'confident, Black, and vibrating with good-ass energy' (94, 100). Juliet finds that it is not white women like Harlowe that command the space, but rather 'Black and brown women of all shades and sizes organized and worked this space' (105). The recognition of women of color is thrilling to Juliet because she begins to appreciate that feminism (in terms of the variety of bodies that exist within a specific space) is not exclusively 'too white, too structured, too foreign; something I can't claim,' as she had originally thought (3). This space also enables Juliet to realize that her mentor is not as perfect as she once hoped.

During the workshop, two young white women express their frustration at not receiving attention from the group. One of them explains: 'It's like in my feminism we're equals. Why does any group have to have the dominant voice? I know reverse racism isn't technically real, but, like, this kinda felt like that' (Rivera 2019: 111). Juliet and Maxine just roll their eyes, but Harlowe decides to correct them:

It's not about having a "dominant voice." It's about women of color owning their own spaces and their voices being treated with dignity and respect. [...] Our entire

existence is constantly being validated and yeah, we have lots of shit to deal with because of the patriarchy. But for goodness sake, check your privilege. We're the ones that need to give women of color space for their voices. (Rivera 2019: 111)

Harlowe has good intentions. However, Maxine becomes enraged at the racist notion that white women need to give women of color space: 'Y'all don't need to give us anything' (Rivera 2019: 113). This event not only shows Harlowe's misunderstanding of intersectional oppression in general, but also, in her mapping of public life and the political sphere, Harlowe imagines the public forum as hers, and the admittance of voices of women of color as something that is hers to give or share. This experience enables Juliet to question who has the discursive power to place themselves at the center of a conversation about feminism. Re-centering herself, Juliet is able to provide her own definition of feminism at the end of the novel, placing herself—alongside women of *all* races—in the middle of the discursive map.

The second key bout of growth happens when Harlowe is confronted about her racial insensitivity in a reading of her new book. During the Q&A, Maxine's lover Zaira provocatively asks: 'Harlowe, do you think that tacking on a message of unity and solidarity for queer and trans women of color at the end of *Raging Flower* was powerful enough to make a difference? [...] Do you think that this message is enough to rally non-white women to your particular brand of feminism?' (Rivera 2019: 205). Harlowe, visibly uncomfortable, responds with a statement that dishonestly flattens Juliet's identity:

Do I think that queer and trans women of color will read my work and feel like they see themselves in my words? Not necessarily, but some will and do. I mean, I know someone right now sitting in this room who is a testament to this, someone who isn't white, who grew up in the ghetto, someone who is lesbian and Latina and fought for her whole life to make it out of the Bronx alive and get an education. She grew up in poverty and without any privilege. No support from her family, especially after coming out, and that person is here today. That person is Juliet Milagros Palante, my assistant and friend, who came all the way from the Bronx to be a better feminist, and all that is because of *Raging Flower*. (Rivera 2019: 206)

Harlowe's betrayal crushes Juliet. Harlowe's dishonest speech shows a deep misunderstanding of who Juliet is and how intersectionality operates as a combination of systems of oppression that make Juliet's experiences fundamentally different from hers. Juliet's family has not abandoned her, especially her aunts and cousin. Her family is not as poor and uneducated as Harlowe makes it out to be—both of Juliet's parents have college degrees. And Juliet is not there to be a 'better' feminist in Harlowe's definition, but to forge her own definition.

The final resolution of this conflict happens—much like in *Aristotle and Dante*—outside of the boundaries of the city, in Oregon's Sandy River. While Harlowe insists on hugging the trees, Juliet becomes increasingly exasperated and, because she did not bring her inhaler, she cannot breathe. This space, unencumbered by the heteronormativity of Juliet's family back in the Bronx or the weight of the performativity of Harlowe's white

feminist allyship enables Juliet to confront the racism of Harlowe's feminism. The forest lacks the middle-class decorum of the Portland's bookshop, from which Juliet is only able to run. It also lacks the protection of other women of color provided in the workshop who can stand up to Harlowe while Juliet remains quiet. But in this heterotopia, Juliet has grown up. Instead of running from her breathlessness across the country, she stays in place and confronts Harlowe:

I was so fucking mad at you for saying all that stuff about me at the reading, that I was dodging bullets and grew up in the ghetto. I never made my life out to be rough like that [...] that's why I'm frustrated right now and probably why I can't breathe, okay? [...] That shit was racist. I thought you could really see me, beyond all of that. (Rivera 2019: 293)

This liberating outburst at the margins of the city finally forces Juliet to stop running away and catch her breath. As Juliet emerges an adult in this heterotopia, able to stand up for herself, her mappings of Portland comes to a close. In the final letter to herself, rather than belonging in a specific city, Juliet foregrounds her placeless community of 'other beautiful brown and black and indigenous and morena and Chicana, Native, Indian, mixed race, Asian, gringa, boricua babes' (Rivera 2019: 302). Because she is able to have this final moment of maturation in a counter-space outside the city, and has encountered different forms of feminism that inform her own understanding in variegated geographies, placelessness is a logical conclusion for her sense of belonging. She finally comes home to her imagined community of queer women of color, not located in a particular city, but rather everywhere.

Marginal spaces of crises, as in *Aristotle and Dante*, and spaces of community, as in *Juliet*, provide the settings for Little Dog's coming-of-age process in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*. For Little Dog, a fourteen year-old Vietnamese boy, the heterotopia at the geographic margins of Hartford is a tobacco farm, a crop representative of the colonial history and current political body of the U.S. Northeast: 'First cultivated by the Agawam, broadleaf tobacco was soon planted by white settlers as a cash crop after they drove the Natives off the land. And now it's harvested mostly by undocumented immigrants' (Vuong 2019: 107). Like Aristotle and Dante in the desert, this farm and a nearby river are the places where Little Dog first explores his queer desires. This farm also serves as a meeting point for many immigrants that enables Little Dog to reflect on his place in Hartford in particular and the U.S. in general. In addition to this place, I also analyze the importance of the Dunkin Donuts where Little Dog comes out as gay to his mother Rose, as well as a bike ride through the city where Little Dog maps his important memories onto the streets of Hartford.

Yet before discussing the farm, Dunkin Donuts, and the streets of Hartford, it is vital to mention two instances of marginalization that Little Dog experiences in a store and in school (early in his coming-of-age journey) because they illustrate the difficulty of fitting in, especially in everyday spaces, for a queer and migrant child. In a butcher shop, Little Dog resolves to become his family's translator after he is unable to translate the word 'oxtail' for his mother. Her linguistic barrier moves her to awkwardly act like as an ox to

communicate with the butcher, to Little Dog's mortification and the butchers' amusement. In school, the other children bully and slap Little Dog because of his race, short stature, and apparent femininity. He explains that the kids 'would call me *freak, fairy, fag*' and slap him in groups, telling him to 'speak English' (Vuong 2019: 14, 24). These experiences of linguistic alterity inspire Little Dog to begin his 'career as our family's official interpreter [to] fill in our blanks, our silences, stutters, whenever I could' (32).

For Little Dog, the bouts of growth characteristic of coming-of-age novels do not then happen in school. His development is not marked by the passing of grades or other hegemonic rites of passage, but rather by an accomplishment common in queer coming-of-age stories, his coming-to-terms with his sexuality, first with himself (by means of his relationship with Trevor), then with his mother (by means of coming out). Little Dog first meets Trevor at the tobacco farm. This heterotopia enables the intelligibility of a type of crisis of existence that Foucault does not mention: that of undocumented migrants in need of work. Because the workers are paid 'under the table, in cash,' most of them are 'undocumented migrants from Mexico and Central America, save for one, Nico, who was from the Dominican Republic [and] Rick, a white guy in his twenties from Colchester, who, it was said, was on the sex offender list' (Vuong 2019: 86, 88). Either because of a criminal record, as in the case of Rick, or a criminalization of their existence because of their status in the U.S., the farm facilitates the creation of a community outside of labor rules whose members are 'legally ineligible [...] not just racialized but rightless, living nonbeings, or, in Judith Butler's words, as "something living that is other than life"' (Cacho 2012: 6). It is in this lawless place that Little Dog first notices a 16 year-old boy, the grandson of the farm's owner, working there not to evade the hegemonic structure of formal employment, but rather to 'get away from his vodka-soaked old man' (Vuong 2019: 94), an encounter that enables Little Dog to reevaluate his prejudice against white men: 'Up until then I didn't think a white boy could hate anything about his life. I wanted to know him through and through by that very hate [...]. 'I hate my dad, too,' (94). Like Aristotle and Dante, Little Dog and Trevor share their first sexual experiences in their heterotopia, and eventually have penetrative sex in the climactic moment of the novel. This experience is a watershed moment for Little Dog because, not knowing 'how to prepare myself,' he has a bowel movement (203). Little Dog feels embarrassed to have dirtied Trevor 'with his faggotry, the filthiness of our act exposed by my body's failure to contain itself' (203). Yet contrary to Little Dog's notion of queerness as filth, Trevor, in a 'wordless act ... of mercy' (205), cleans his body with his tongue in a nearby river. Trevor's kindness enables Little Dog to reassess his idea of queerness, thus revealing the farm as a landmark for maturity that enables both multi-diasporic comingling, support, and understanding, and the resignification of queerness counter to shame and closer to sweet affection.

Three years after coming to terms with his own notion of queerness, Little Dog comes out to his mother in a 'bright Dunkin' Donuts, two cups of black coffee' between them (Vuong 2019: 129). The public nature of the chain coffeeshop contrasts with the private nature of their conversation. Because these shops look and even smell the same across the U.S. and abroad, this place is a simulacrum of all the other places that it repeats. So even though they are in Hartford, they could be anywhere, and the conversation itself becomes de-localized. The shop is a neutral ground, insignificant as a landmark, detached

from its context, thus an ideal site for a momentous talk. Rose accepts her son's queerness, in an analogous way to Trevor, not with words but with a gesture: 'I'll pull my chair and, taking off my hood, a sprig of hay caught there from the barn weeks before will stick out from my black hair. You will reach over, brush it off, and shake your head as you take in the son you decided to keep' (140).

Unlike Aristotle and Juliet, Little Dog presents the personal map of his city in a bike ride with Trevor, where Little Dog traces his major sites of memory, so intimately related to his—and his community's—experiences of alterity due to class, gender, race, and sexuality. Because it so clearly illustrates the process of personal cartography emerging parallel to identity, it warrants quoting in full:

I saw all the blocks in our city [...] I saw the lights on Asylum Ave., where there used to be an asylum [...] But I know it as the street where my friend Sid lived with his family after they came over from India in '95. How his mom, a schoolteacher back in New Delhi, went door-to-door, hobbling on her bloated diabetic feet selling hunting knives for Cutco to make ninety-seven dollars a week—cash. There were the Canino brothers, whose father was in jail for what seemed like two lifetimes [...] There was Marin, who took the bus forty-five minutes each way to work at the Sears in Farmington, [...] her Adam's apple jutting out, a middle finger to the men who called her faggot, called her homomaphedite. [...] We passed the tenement building on New Britain Ave. where we lived for three years. Where I rode my pink bike with training wheels up and down the linoleum halls so the kids on the block wouldn't beat me up for loving a pink thing. [...] Trevor and I kept riding, past Church St. where Big Joe's sister OD'd, then the parking lot behind the MEGA XXXLOVE DEPOT where Sasha OD'd, the park where Jake and B-Rab OD'd. Except B-Rab lived, only to be caught, years later, stealing laptops from Trinity College and got four years in county—no parole. Which was heavy, especially for a white kid from the suburbs. [...] There's Mozzicato's on Franklin, where I had my first cannoli. Where nothing I knew ever died. [...] We made our way down Main Street. When we came upon the Coca-Cola bottling plant [...] It was Harford. It was a cluster of light that pulsed with a force I never realized it possessed. [...] But for now, the city brims before us with a strange, rare brilliance—as if it was not a city at all, but the sparks made by some god sharpening his weapons above us. (Vuong 2019: 145-51)

The people that populate Little Dog's map of Hartford hail from variegated backgrounds: India, Latin America, the white suburbs. Their stories of financial struggle, sexual liberation and harassment, as well as drug overdoses infuse the map with texture and soul. Little Dog's Hartford is the people he knows, the buildings where he rode his bike, scared of the bullies, and shared the adversities of poverty with his multicultural community. Both Little Dog and Hartford are the stories that make up the city. He finally describes Hartford not as a collection of streets and institutions, but as cluster of pulsing light, vibrating energy generated by the people, accessible and knowable only through narration.

The novels show three different ways of mapping coming-of-age processes onto the physical spaces at the margins of secondary literary cities. These smaller urban hubs enable

the characters to de-center the hegemonic institutions of the city so that they become secondary stages for their formative processes precisely because the desert, forest, and farm are quickly accessible. The city limits—characterized by nature, which signals an escape from urban material and ideological constructs—allow their disidentification with the heteronormative social norms present in their family homes, schools, and workplaces. By disabling the heteronormative expectations of adulthood, the desert, forest, and farm facilitate sexual exploration (until-then unintelligible because of shame), a redefinition of feminist ideology and confrontation with the mentor figure, and multi-diasporic and sexual interactions. The characters go to these spaces to freely ponder their passage into adulthood, away from the impositions of families and mentors. The personal maps that emerge simultaneously with the characters' adult identities highlight the cities' limits as key in their personal stories because their metaphoric cartographic focus is analogous with their experiences of class, ethnic, linguistic, and sexual marginality. In particular, the queerness of the characters requires them to find spaces outside the home and school to explore their desires because of the possibility of consequences to coming out in heteronormative spaces: shame, rejection, and violence.

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Notes

¹ The definition of city as a tension between material aspects and intangible associations is relevant here. Steve Pile (2005) explains that 'often enough it can seem that what is real in cities is all the material stuff of life: buildings, infrastructures, money, labour, processes, schools, housing, hospitals, consumption and so on' (1). However, it is also true to think of cities as subjective experiences: 'it can sometimes seem as if the city's state of mind — its sentiments, its attitudes, its sense of self, its mood' (2). Robert Park further adds 'The city ... is something more than a congeries of individual men and of social conveniences ... something more, also, than a mere constellation of institutions and administrative devices ... The city is, rather, a state of mind, a body of customs and traditions, and of the organized attitudes and sentiments that inhere in these customs and are transmitted with this tradition. (Park 1984: 1).

² In Eve Sedgwick's terms, 'queer' is 'the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically' (Sedgwick 1990: 10). For a study of the ongoing debate about the definition and meanings of the term 'queer,' particularly its rejection in communities of color, see Domínguez-Ruvalcaba (2016).

³ Recently, Valeria Luiselli characterized the nearby desert of Arizona as a ‘no-man land,’ a ‘big common grave’ where ‘at the forensic institute of Pima County, Arizona, alone, more than 2,200 human remains have been registered since 2001, the majority of which are still unidentified’ (Luiselli 2017: 40).

⁴ Nancy McHugh defines second-wave feminism as ‘The feminist movement, sometimes called the ‘Women’s Movement’, that began in the late 1960s. In the US it was influenced by the strategies and tactics of the Civil Rights movement and in the UK by the labour rights movement. The phrase ‘the personal is the political’ became a rallying cry in the movement to argue for such things as the right to an abortion and equal pay for equal work. Furthermore ‘the personal is the political’ made clear that domesticity, marriage and gender norms were political, reflecting social values that were made to appear to be biological givens.’ McHugh further explains that the critiques of second-wave feminism ‘have noted its largely heterosexual, middle-class and white focus. Especially in the US movement, feminists were not especially concerned with working-class labour issues. In both the US and UK feminists frequently treated the concerns of Black women and lesbians as divisive to the movement instead of an important rallying point’ (McHugh 2007).

⁵ A study centered on relationships rather than spatial meaning and representations would explore the development of queer identity in *Juliet* as it involves two queer relationships, one with Lainie, a white woman who breaks up with Juliet in a cruel letter sent from Washington D. C., another with Kira, a woman who works in a library in Portland and that Juliet describes as having ‘jet-black hair, thick bangs, green eyes, olive skin, tattooed wrists kind of foxy’ (Rivera 2019: 153).

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