

BOOK REVIEW

Irivera's Debut Novel Offers a Refreshing Coming-of-Age and Coming-of-Age Latinx Tale

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Juliet Takes A Breath by Gabby Rivera. Riverdale, NY: Riverdale Avenue Books, 2016. Pp. 264. \$19.99 (paperback).

In her debut novel *Juliet Takes a Breath*, Gabby Rivera introduces us to the audacious and entrancing Juliet Milagros Palante, a self-described “closeted Puerto Rican baby dyke from the Bronx” (4) who embarks on a journey into forging a queer Latinx identity. After finishing her first year in college, meeting her first girlfriend, and taking her first women’s studies class, 19-year-old Juliet begins asking questions about feminism, sexuality, and gender. The novel opens with Juliet’s letter to famed feminist author Harlowe Brisbane in which Juliet praises her book *Raging Flower: Empowering Your Pussy by Empowering Your Mind* and begs to work as Harlowe’s summer research assistant in Portland, Oregon. Before leaving, she must come out as “gay” to herself and her family. As one of the few coming-out and coming-of-age Latinx narratives, *Juliet* voices the struggles that many Latinx youth experience as they explore, disclose, and embrace their sexuality—a topic that goes largely underexplored in mainstream YA literature.

Juliet’s internship with Harlowe includes researching significant women throughout world history for Harlowe’s next book, but she also inadvertently learns about white feminist privilege. Initially portrayed as a “half-baked hippie white lady” (48), Harlowe epitomizes the well-meaning feminist who, despite her progressive stances, is not above tokenizing women of color for

her own aggrandizement. Early on, Juliet challenges the kind of feminism that Harlowe represents: "Can a badass white lady like you make room for me? Should I stand next to you and take that space? [...] if you can question the patriarchy, then I can question you" (2). Harlowe's inability to fully practice intersectional feminism makes her a catalyst in Juliet's education. Not only does Juliet learn how women of color are often marginalized in feminist circles, but she experiences a different form of rejection by Lainie, her wealthy white girlfriend. Thus, the novel underscores how race, ethnicity, and class contribute to the failures of allyship and the complexities of interracial romances.

Juliet retreats from Harlowe's and Lainie's betrayals by heading to Miami to seek solace from her cousin Ava where she experiences a transformative moment of self-acceptance in the company of a loving LGBTQI community of color. The movement between geographic places (Bronx, Portland, and Miami) and racialized spaces (Latinx neighborhoods, white Portland coffee shops, and queer of color parties) produces feelings of displacement, isolation, and vulnerability that take a physical toll on Juliet, whose asthma flares up whenever she becomes anxious such as when coming out to her family or when meeting Harlowe. While the asthma attacks signal the novel's emphasis on embodiment, Juliette's ability to regulate her breathing is also metaphoric and becomes a sign of personal growth as she uses adversity to further define and embrace her identity. The novel's attention to dis/location and queer place-making encourages an analysis of queer spatiality as Juliet learns how race, gender, class, and sexuality produce space and then models for YA readers how to navigate unknown and unwelcoming spaces.¹

Juliet's role as a researcher serves as the ideal motif for incorporating terms (such as PGPs, Ze, Trans, and non-queers) and historical facts that

YA readers might not know. Indeed, a central theme of the novel is how knowledge is critical to identity formation. Rivera's use of "Palante" as Juliet's last name signals Juliet's affinity with the Young Lords Party, a Puerto Rican social justice organization from the 1960s-70s. Rivera aligns both Juliet and the novel itself with the mission of the Young Lords who celebrated Puerto Rican history and used it as a foundation for promoting community activism, cultural pride, and anti-colonial critique.

As one of the few Latinx-authored YA books to focus on a queer Latina and to explore so thoroughly community formation and white feminist privilege, *Juliet Takes a Breath* marks a path for future instantiations of queer Latinx YA characters. Moreover, the book's didacticism makes this an ideal novel for introductory gender and sexuality courses as its focus on epistemology invites students to consider how knowledge shapes subjectivity and how it is produced, de/legitimated, and disseminated. While the YA publishing world lags behind in publishing works about Latinx youth in general, it is egregiously deficient in portraying the lives of queer Latinx youth.² Because literary representation fosters self- and social acceptance, *Juliet* plays a vital role in promoting personal and community growth and social activism related to the needs and experiences of queer Latinx youth. Rivera's subsequent rendering of América Chavez, Marvel Comic's first queer Latina teenage superheroine, shows that she is actively creating representational space for LGBTQI Latinx youth across literary genres that celebrates intersectional identities and that critique exclusionary ideologies and their discourses.

Notes

¹ For work on feminist and queer spatiality in Latinx literature, see Mary Pat Brady. 2002. *Extinct Lands, Temporal Geographies: Chicana Literature and the Urgency of Space*, Durham: Duke University Press.

² Consuelo Martínez-Reyes states that *Juliet* is only the second coming-of-age novel written by an author of Puerto Rican descent that features a queer Puerto Rican protagonist (327). See Consuelo Martínez-Reyes. Summer 2018. "Lesbian 'Growth' and Epistemic Disobedience: Placing Gabby Rivera's *Juliet Takes a Breath* within Puerto Rican Literature and Queer Theory" *Centro Journal* 30(2): 324-346.