CREATING PLACES: *PASEOS, VAIVÉN* AND *COMPADRAZGO* IN LATINX ROMANCE

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Abstract

This article examines the practices of place-making in 21st-century Latinx romance. In specific locations characters feel safe and connected within a thriving intergenerational social world indissociable from civic engagement rooted in local histories. Through the lens of geographical theories of place-making, I examine the Love & Tacos series by Alana Quintana Albertson, the Vega Family series by Natalie Caña and the Milagro Street series by Angelina M. Lopez, in which gentrification and agroindustry threaten to erase the many historical traces that make places meaningful when culture and context intersect, to argue that the romantic plot is a reclamation story which locates Latinx communities at the heart of urban life and economic activity in the US.

Keywords: Latinx romance, Place-making, Millennial romance, GenZ romance.

CREAR LUGARES: PASEOS, VAIVÉN Y COMPADRAZGO EN LA FICCIÓN ROMÁNTICA LATINX

Resumen

Este artículo examina las prácticas que crean lugar en la ficción romántica Latinx del siglo XXI. En ubicaciones concretas lxs personajes se sienten segurxs y conectadxs en un próspero mundo social intergeneracional indisociable del compromiso cívico enraizado en la historia local. Usando como punto de partida la teoría geográfica del lugar, examino la serie Love & Tacos de Alana Quintana Albertson, la serie de la familia Vega por Natalie Caña y la serie Milagro Street de Angelina M. Lopez, en las que la gentrificación y la agroindustria amenazan con borrar los muchos rastros históricos que dan significado a los lugares en el cruce entre la cultura y el contexto, para argumentar que la trama romántica es una historia de recuperación que ubica a las comunidades Latinx en el centro de la vida urbana y la actividad económica en Estados Unidos.

Palabras clave: Ficción romántica Latinx, crear lugar, ficción romántica milenial, romance, generación Z.

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1. INTRODUCTION

This article describes the processes whereby characters in 21st-century Latinx romance cultivate a strong sense of place as a precondition for the establishment of a home in a caring environment. To this end, the everyday intergenerational sociality of care work, civic engagement, economic prosperity, cultural activity and heritage-making connects with a quest to balance personal integrity and autonomy with social stability and justice. For second- and third-generation Latinx this place-making process is precipitated by a sense that they are "citizens but not Americans" (Flores-González 2017, 11). In the eight novels analysed here, as the romantic plot evolves, protagonists enact forms of belonging by assimilating their unique cultural legacies into their daily interactions in specific locations defined by long histories of immigration and settlement. As they make sense of the self by weaving their personal story into collective narratives, these characters deepen their emotional attachment to their communities, mobilise to ensure their survival and set about making a home at the intersection of these processes.

Latinx romance borrows more from the popular romance than *chica lit*, an adjacent genre: having dropped "tropes such as the first-person narration, humorous tone, middle-class status for the protagonist, city setting, professional job, college education, and a group of friends" (Hurt 2019, 1) typical of cosmopolitan *chick lit,* this fiction features moral integrity, professional fulfillment, intergenerational family solidarity, a dual point of view and, often, a less playful tone. This shift from the pursuit of neoliberal values and consumer culture to a focus on community and a strong sense of place anchored in local histories differentiates Latinx romance from early 21st century *chica lit*. *After Hours on Milagro Street* (2022) and *Full Moon Over Freedom* (2023) by Angelina M. Lopez, *Ramón and Julieta* (2022), *Kiss Me, Mi Amor* (2023) and *My Fair Señor* (2025) by Alana Quintana Albertson and Natalie Caña's *A Proposal They Can't Refus*e (2022), *A Dish Best Served Hot* (2023) and *Sleeping With the Frenemy* (2024) depict the experience of MillenniGenZ Latinx men and women who reach a happy ending by resolving the conflict between a quest for self-realisation and a preoccupation with the prosperity of their workplaces and neighbourhoods.[1] Place is entangled with these processes as the novels show that, contrary to their stigmatisation as always already foreign racialised others, "Latines have shaped economies, classrooms and communities. ... Latines have also shaped the built environment" (Rast 2023, 86). Characters' status as 'legal' citizens is a given, their ability to 'integrate' into mainstream US culture proven (they are native English speakers, college-educated, politically liberal), yet they settle in their place

[1] MillenniGenZ are generational cohorts for whom diversity, inclusion, social justice, equity and rights are normalised in schools and work settings; they are also aware of climate and restorative justice. In the novels, characters' ages fall within this range, born between 1982-1998 and 1999-2020 (Wachs & Yu Danico 2025, 5).

of origin to make a stand for themselves and their multigenerational communities by actively contributing to their economic security.

This generational cohort has a foundation of rights won by previous generations, has witnessed the Black Lives Matter and #MeToo movements, but has also felt increasingly disenfranchised since 2016 (Wachs & Yu Danico 2025, 8). Lopez explicitly references Trumpism and the importance of history in Latinx storytelling in the contest against the white-washing of the past:

> I developed the Milagro Street series in the shadows of the 2020 election, when we'd elected a man who made brown people feel unwelcome and unsafe in this country and who had enough voter support that they might elect him again. I felt my family's story, about Mexican-Americans who've lived and contributed to a small town in the Midwest for several generations, was an important story to make known. We've been here in the heart of the country, I wanted people to know. We'll continue to be here and this country is better for it. (Lopez 2023)

Latinx romance demonstrates that the friction between Latinidad and mainstream US (white) culture cannot be resolved through a process of integration because individual agency alone will not transform structural racism, sexism or economic exploitation. Thus, two phenomena frame contemporary Latinx romance: the racialisation and criminalisation of Latinx since the first Trump administration and the fictionalisation of the Latinx MillenniGenZ "fight to belong" to an ethnic community rather than American mainstream culture (Flores-González 2017, ix).

This essay cannot do justice to the complexity and distinctiveness of each novel because its primary purpose is to signal shared preoccupations arising from their moment. Therefore, the novels will be discussed relative to topics directly related to place-making, while many other issues such as the cost of health care, the labouring body, employment discrimination, disability, neurodivergence, Afro-Latinidad, body positivity, have been set aside for reasons of space, although they are an integral part of the narrative worlds.

2. LATINX ROMANCE

I read these novels as Latinx because they are "written by Latinxs exploring Latinx life and culture" (Sánchez-González 2020, 200). Quintana Albertson identifies as a "Latina" author, Lopez describes her Milagro Street books as a "small town, Latinx series" and Natalie Caña rejects "the identity of Afro-Latina" for herself (Threads 09/09/24) but identifies as "Latine" and Puerto Rican (Boswell Book Company, min. 5.15), while using "Latinx" in the novels to encompass people beyond the immediate Puerto Rican social world. Perhaps because the novels focus less on individuals than on interdependent groups of people, the experience of ethnocultural specificity is central to the resolution of the main characters' transformation, showing an awareness that Latinx is an inclusive "category of naming" (Guidotti-Hernández 2017, 142).

In the context of the Trump era, "Latine" racial ideologies homogenise difference "regardless of national origin, race, class, or generation" (Canizales & Vallejo 2021, 153), so the cultural specificity depicted in the novels may be a strategy that pushes against this blanket racialisation. Latinx, for Guidotti-Hernandez, refers to an affective, antiessentialist community grounded in inclusion rather than identity fixity, a liberatory and post-nationalist gesture from a generation that is uncomfortable with the nationalist paradigms of previous immigrant generations and feels less pressure to assimilate into mainstream culture, transforming cultural resources into a strength rather than a liability. Indeed, in *Kiss Me, Mi Amor*, Julieta is acutely aware of the power of naming and categorisation: "Could we please use the word *Latines*? It's more inclusive" (Quintana Albertson 2023,13). Natalie Caña in a Threads post on October 30, 2024 sums up the Latinx experience in the current political landscape thus:

> It's not hard to understand that, to the enemy, we are all the same. We may have different skin tones, speak different languages, love different genders, and practice different beliefs BUT to them we are just "other" and "less". They might tolerate certain kinds of people more, but that doesn't change the fact that they hate us all. We need to be fighting for each other all of the time, not some (n.p.)

Guidotti-Hernández notes that labels such as *Puerto Rican* or *Chicano/ Nuyorican* operated within ethno-nationalist and patriarchal frameworks, excluding many groups (Central Americans, Afro-Latinxs, Indigenous peoples, queer and trans subjects), so Latinx appears as a response to gender fatigue and nationalist exclusions in the late 2000s when millennials, especially queer communities, popularised Latinx through digital media as an emblem of collective belonging anchored in care, empathy, and shared affect rather than nationalist ideology. The term carries an "affective overload" –the weight of histories of exclusion and the emotional charge of asserting belonging against racism, heteronormativity, and whiteness. According to Guidotti-Hernández, millennials prioritize inclusivity, fluidity, and coalition-building over fixed categories rooted in shared affective experiences of exclusion. Thus, in her view, Latinx becomes not just a linguistic innovation but an emotional and ethical project– a practice of inclusion that allows individuals to belong without erasing difference. In this respect, the novels focus less on the experience of discrimination (although awareness of it is ever present) than on working out strategies to harmonise the exigencies of a fulfilling personal life with the ethical imperative to create the conditions necessary for a community to thrive as it contends with gentrifying forces and unethical business practices disruptive of the collective lives of Latinx long-time residents and institutions.

"Did she want to be the selfless warrior her community needed or did she want to be happy?" asks Lola in *A Dish Best Served Hot*. "Why couldn't she do both? What was preventing her from being happy and continuing the work she loved?" (Caña 2023, 203). I argue that this is the central dilemma of the Latinx romance novels discussed here and it is resolved when the protagonists accept that their lives are meaningful as they actively collaborate in the making of their community: happiness

and emotional integrity are thus not about personal fulfilment alone, but embrace the practice of sustaining and being sustained by that which The Care Collective has named "circles of care" (Chatzidakis et al 2020, 20). To enable the relationship of mutuality upon which these circles rely, trust is indispensable because it depends on the assumption that the other person "always intends your good" (hooks 2001, 46). In contrast, deception "diminishes and erodes the possibility of meaningful, caring connection" (hooks 2001, 42) because it opens the door to betrayal and disloyalty; in this respect, the common plot device of the secret and secrecy provides an obstacle to true commitment, though once revealed, the truth not only explains behaviour but also paves the way for the characters to take responsibility for their own actions and their impact on others, which can be positive or negative, a lesson learned as they negotiate their various relationships.

Notably, the most oppressive forms of violence in the novels are patriarchal. Be they white, Mexican or Puerto Rican, patriarchs enact an out-moded manhood manifested as *machismo* (Cowan 2017). Caught between the stereotype of the hypersexed, criminalised "bad hombre" (Canizales & Vallejo 2021, 151) and the "ever-present yet totally absent" (Aldama & Aldama 2020, 3) Latin American family patriarch, the journey of Latinx male characters fashions a different masculinity. The exploration of caregiving and caretaking masculinities may be one answer to the questions: "What will it take for Latinx folx, families, and communities to decolonize toxic/macho masculinities? [...] When will Latinx boys be encouraged to practice ways of being that are 'strong' and 'down' with a deep politics of caring, compassion, and love for all humans and nonhumans in a world of ever-increasing racist, misogynistic, and homo/transphobic violence(s)?" (Aldama & Aldama 2020, 5). Latinx romance fiction is one step in this direction: in Quintana Alberston's *My Fair Señor* Jaime Montez acknowledges that "machismo had benefited him clearly, but it didn't sit right with him" (Quintana Albertson 2025, 146). He and his brothers keep their father at arm's length as they integrate into the heroines' "communities of resistance," understood by bell hooks as "places where people can return to themselves more easily, where the conditions are such that they can heal themselves and recover their wholeness" (hooks 2004, 153). The Montez brothers "heal" the painful cultural distance from their Mexican heritage by attaching themselves to women who have never lost their place in the community and are keenly aware of injustice. To move away from the role of the patriarchal "protector" (hooks 2004, 131), these Latinx heroes learn to become carers: caring implies reciprocity between care givers and care receivers, while protecting assumes the subordination of those who are perceived as having need of protection. For example, in Natalie Caña's *A Dish Best Served Hot* the hero, Saint, against his soldierly instincts, must learn to respect Lola's risky activism while she, in turn, acknowledges that there are ways to fight for justice without putting herself in danger (Caña 2023, 320).

Decolonizing "generational reproductions (ongoing since our colonization) of toxic masculinity" (Aldama & Aldama 2020, 9) is one of the issues concerning these generations: in Angelina M. Lopez's *After Hours on Milagro Street* the male protagonist, Jeremiah Post, has changed his name to distance himself from a white East Coast family, his father's attitude towards him described as dismissive (Lopez

2022, 290); in *Full Moon Over Freedom*, also by Lopez, Nicky's father, "Raymundo Mendoza, had driven away in his ice-blue tractor trailer with everything except the girl he'd knocked up in high school, two boys, and a crate of classic rock tapes" (Lopez 2023, 50). Similarly, in *Ramón and Julieta* the hero repudiates his father to reclaim his Mexican identity and by the end of the novel has "not yet reconciled with his father, but they had begun therapy" (Quintana Albertson 2022, 266) while his brother, Enrique Montez, acknowledges "his father's deeply ingrained machismo" (10), his quest is to "be his own man – out of the shadow of his father and brother" (Quintana Albertson 2023, 12) in *Kiss Me, Mi Amor*; Jaime in *My Fair Señor* also takes up therapy and leaves San Diego as part of the process to distance himself from his domineering father, who "saw his three sons as mere extensions of himself" (Quintana Albertson 2025, 41). Natalie Caña's heroes also undergo a transformation: Leo in *Sleeping with the Frenemy* is forced to reinvent himself with an injured body, "struggling with his place in his own life" (Caña 2024, 102), while Liam recovers from childhood trauma in *A Proposal They Can't Refuse*, and Saint unexpectedly becomes a single father with PTSD in *A Dish Best Served Hot*. Contrary to the idea that Latinx men are unskilled labourers and criminals, we encounter a wide range of highly trained, self-aware, confident, articulate and sensitive men, ranging from an ex Special Forces contractor to a renowned artist, a salsa-singing firefighter, the guitarron-playing CEO of a family company who surfs and a horticulturalist who practices yoga and meditation, a popular influencer, model and owner of a tequila brand who funds a soccer academy to provide opportunities to poor children. Even gang membership and drug addiction are rewritten as products of failed social systems in *A Dish Best Served Hot* and *Full Moon Over Freedom* respectively. These are not the "pelados, machos and pachucos" (Cowan 2017, 609) of Trump's gendered racial ideologies but men who challenge the idea of the patriarch for their own – and others'– welfare.

The oppressive shadow of an outdated masculinity unites the couple as a key marker of generational identity, articulated by the dual point of view. The heroines' fierceness is a product of circumstance in that they have learned to make themselves visible and audible in both their family and the workplace: although seemingly reproducing the stereotypical image of the sensual, impassioned Latina, heroines use it to their advantage, as Alex declares in *After Hours on Milagro Street*: "The world expected an angry brown woman" (Lopez 2022, 65) so she strategically plays up to the expectation. This deliberate performance of Latinidad de-essentialises notions of gender, ethnicity and race, a process often witnessed when lovers adjust their misconceptions about each other by replacing prejudice with empathy. The following change of perspective from *After Hours* is illustrative of a common process:

> At last, he understood who that woman was and why she was so fascinating to so many. She was good at her job. And she showed everyone what she had to do to be successful at it. People didn't adore her because they liked to be flogged; they admired her because she gave an inspiring example of a way to be. Proud. Uncompromising. Unwilling to accept anyone's crap. Alex's flaming sword would help protect Milagro Street's limitless potential. (Lopez 2022, 249)

This dismantling of stereotype and prejudice may be read as a gesture towards a form of love described by Chela Sandoval as decolonial because it eludes dominant narratives of love by incorporating other signifying systems into the process of embracing the lover's complexity. In this respect, the centrality of art, music and food in courtship is vital as these creative practices are different languages (Sandoval 2000, 147) that engage the senses, involve rituals, public celebrations such as the *Fiestas Patronales Puertorriqueñas*, the Day of the Dead, lowrider cruises, *Cinco de Mayo* and *Pastorela* and the multigenerational and multicultural conviviality these strengthen. Unlike other forms of love, in Latinx romance courting is displayed, indicating that it is a public ritual because the community is implicated in its fate: the couples in Caña's Vega family series are thrown together by meddling grandparents, for example. Couples romance in public through various embodied, sensual languages which are integral to their cultures. In *My Fair Señor* the *Cinco de Mayo* festival is a "sensory delight" (Quintana Albertson 2025, 161) during which love "take[s] root" (Quintana Albertson 2025, 165): "Families, friends and couples wandered throughout the streets, laughing and enjoying the festivities that had taken over the town park. It was so heartwarming to see a community that suffered so much come together and be part of so much joy" (Quintana Albertson 2025, 161). Here, to accommodate the couple within an extended family, love is comprehensive rather than exclusive, a modification of Western "couple-normativity" (Roseneil, Crowhurst, Hellesund, et.al. 2020, 4) and its orientation toward the nuclear family. When it becomes a social rather than a private bond romantic love metamorphoses into a daily oppositional practice because it defies the obstacles that hinder the bond between individuals and their community, such as divisive structural inequalities and the ideologies that reproduce them. Throughout the novels, public spaces are occupied by cultural activities to which the characters voluntarily contribute, thus confirming their right to be there.

In Quintana Albertson's *My Fair Señor*, for example, Alma's brother Carlos lobbies several Latinx-owned companies to participate in a festival to raise money for the youth soccer team he coaches in the impoverished community of San Rafael. Alma, the heroine, has thrived in a wealthy area, yet she unhesitatingly offers support because "it didn't matter by what means she could help the members of her community; it mattered that she helped them. Period" (Quintana Albertson 2025, 19). As in the other novels, civic engagement and service are inextricably entangled with ties to families of origin and neighbours, a material expression of a type of "communal love" (hooks 2001, 141) which accepts the need of interdependency and "mutual giving" (hooks 2001, 143) for survival and flourishing: irrespective of their personal story and motivations, characters' goals and interests coincide when the fate of the community is at stake. The love story evolves as the lovers collaborate to ensure the existence of their communities by drawing upon a wide range of resources, including cultural practices (muralism, music, cuisine), heritage, as well as professional expertise, money and influence (Jaime Montez is an influencer, as is Alex in *After Hours on Milagro Street*).

Gender inequalities and sexism are challenged when the heroine's struggle for autonomy implies a break with fathers or paternal figures and, often, a reclamation

of female role models. Thus, in *After Hours on Milagro Street,* Alejandra must make peace with a negligent white alcoholic father, whose surname –Armstead– she has dropped in favour of her mother's, Torres, while her sister Juliana returns to Freedom having divorced her white husband, whose "toxic masculinity" (Lopez 2023, 210) is controlling, manipulative and emotionally abusive; in a similar rejection of anachronistic masculinity, though a hard-worker, Julieta's father drinks and smokes himself to death in *Ramón and Julieta*; in *Kiss Me, Mi Amor*, Carolina "is sick to death of Papá's archaic rules about women" (Quintana Albertson 2022, 23), while Alma's Papá and Mamá who, though "progressive" (Quintana Albertson 2025, 86), are conventional in their notion that "Alma, at the tender age of twenty-five, was an old maid" (Quintana Albertson 2025, 87). Lola Leon's father in *A Dish Best Served Hot* is an incarcerated gang leader unconcerned for his daughter's life, Sofia Santana accepts that she is "*broken*" as she cannot trust anyone, never having felt protected and loved by hers (Caña 2023, 309; italics in original). A father who is not shunned outright is Kamilah's Papi in *A Proposal They Can't Refuse*, although his conception of her as an "aimless daughter, who went through the motions but never really accomplished anything" (Caña 2022, 36) is a major obstacle in her plan to save the family business.

Inevitably, *machismo* destroys families: parents are divorced, fathers absent, mothers distant, unlike grandfathers for example, who are benevolent and symbolically powerful, often replacing absent parents, or grandmothers, whose power is bequeathed matrilineally. Thus, Lola inherits her "social justice and warrior tendencies" from her grandfather, Benito, who fought "tooth and nail toward the independence of Puerto Rico" (Caña 2023, 26) and taught her the story of her namesake, Lolita Lebrón, a Puerto Rican hero who spent 25 years in prison for shooting at the ceiling in the House of Representatives while shouting "Viva Puerto Rico Libre" (Caña 2023, 78), whereas the Torres sisters choose to ensure local livelihoods by continuing the community work of their female ancestors. Jaime Montez's reluctance to commit himself to Alma in *My Fair Señor* derives directly from his parent's "horrible" marriage (Quintana Albertson 2025, 221) and "nasty" divorce (Quintana Albertson 2025, 218). Despite the lasting effect of their fathers' *machismo*, extended family is the source of a nurturing, loving form of shelter and joy. As suggested by bell hooks, unlike isolated, atomised nuclear families, extended families which incorporate "nonblood kin" exist as part of larger communities (hooks 2001, 132). Both heroes and heroines learn to care for the self while caring for loved ones and community (hooks 2001, 5), following a process of self-transformation which entails a rejection of individualism and a disposition to accept caregiving, here not exclusively about tending the infirm, disabled or elderly, but a "social capacity and activity involving the nurturing of all that is necessary for the welfare of life" (Chatzidakis et al 2020, 13), encompassing a stray dog in *Sleeping with the Frenemy* and an abandoned train station in *Full Moon Over Freedom*, restored as a public museum.

Characters' civic engagement can be understood as an expression of a "differential form of consciousness," a type of oppositional practice Chela Sandoval traces back to U.S. third world feminism of the 1970s-1980s. In line with this form

of resistance, the characters bring to bear a multitude of weapons and tactics to their battles over their right to direct the transformation of their neighbourhoods: awareness of legal and property rights, financial savviness and historical knowledge, professional know-how and talent, ethical work practices, respect for tangible and intangible heritage and alternative narratives of place. Sandoval argues that a differential mode of social consciousness requires flexibility and strength, the "practitioner's ability to read the current situation of power and self-consciously choosing and adopting the ideological stand suited to push against oppression, a survival skill well known to oppressed peoples" (2000, 59). In *Full Moon Over Freedom* Juliana turns her back on corporate America to offer financial planning services to women, people of color and the disadvantaged (Lopez 2023, 269), her award-winning mixologist sister, Alex, saves Loretta's bar from closure by revamping the menu and the venue and using social media to her advantage; both join the community's effort to prevent the death of the previously vibrant east side of Freedom that has historically catered to Mexican Americans (Lopez 2022, 17). Sofia in *Sleeping with the Frenemy* resigns from her grandfather's company to set up her own event planning business after being harassed by a client in front of her unperturbed father, while Lola León, the queer heroine in *A Dish Best Served Hot,* teaches at a community center and fights for the rights of unhoused queer youth. In *Ramón and Julieta*, Julieta introduces fresh and sustainable seafood into the fast-food industry and her restaurant, Las Pescas, receives a Michelin star; in *Kiss Me, Mi Amor*, Carolina Flores (with a combined bachelor's and master's degree in agricultural science) owns a farm that pays a living wage, offers healthy working conditions for her workers and access to affordable housing, while and Alma Garcia, in *My Fair Señor* is a "female tequiladora" (Quintana Albertson 2025, 16) in the "male-dominated liquor industry" (Quintana Albertson 2025, 16), owns Mexcalifornia, a successful tequila bar and deliberately partners with other women in the industry: "Women who harvested their own agave. Women who bottled their own brands. Women who distilled their own liquor" (Quintana Albertson 2025, 17). For a generation devastated by the Great Recession in 2007-2009, economic security is imperative: the protagonists use their expertise to save their parents' flagging businesses (or establish their own) with a more ethical approach, environmental awareness, pro worker rights and attuned to shifting patterns of consumption. Again, as Canizales and Vallejo have pointed out, "Latine" women and children are perceived as "public resource drainers" (2021, 152) in the Trumpian "Latino threat narrative," a stereotype countered with these stories of enterprising women. Indeed, there is explicit contestation of this narrative in *Sleeping with the Frenemy*: "*She wouldn't call her mom a workaholic, but she was definitely a hard worker. When Sofi was a kid, she'd held multiple jobs while also going to nursing school .... She always said that single moms didn't really have any other choice unless they were going to live off the state and she wasn't going to do that*" Caña 2024, 44; italics in original).

Their oppositional consciousness and practice encompass a wide variety of caregiving experiences: for example, work is a means to an end and the foundation of a sense of self and purpose, but also an expression of emotional and civic engagement with family and community, a "sharing of resources" (hooks 2001, 163) such as time, skills, money, shelter, food. The *cuidados* (Chabram, Deeb-Sossa and Flores 2024,

3) required by the infirm, vulnerable and injured are shared among family members and friends. Couples learn mutual care as their love evolves, that is, to see each other as they are with clear eyes, respect, trust and responsibility for each other's wellbeing (hooks 2001, 7). Simultaneously, protagonists learn to be cared for by accepting their need for "mutual support" (Chatzidakis et al 2020, 3): the heroines return to their place of origin after experiencing hostility while away from home to realise that they are no longer alone, or they acknowledge that they cannot singlehandedly achieve their goals; the male characters undergo their own transformation by rejecting a protective masculinity, which is explicitly articulated, for example, when Kamilah advises her brother Leo that he needs to "let [Sofia] know that she's safe with you physically, mentally, emotionally. Her well-being is your priority" (Caña 2024, 304). Leo goes on to realise that he must "stop trying to change" Sofia and instead "be there for her" as she tries to make better, less harmful choices (Caña 2024, 305). Moral integrity is prioritised over compliance with paternal sexist expectations of a "patriarchal maleness" (hooks 2004, 155).

These diverse caregiving experiences embody the nature of characters' many relationships (Chabram, Deeb-Sossa & Flores 2024, 3): that is, caring for a business, caring for an injured partner or caring for the psychological and physical well-being of a marginalised group of queer youths exist on a continuum that is spatially mapped. The novels thus point to a geography of care in that it is presented as an everyday occurrence, often framed as a familial obligation which is neither resented nor devalued, and thus a collective responsibility situated at the heart of the community in a "localised environment" (Chatzidakis, Hakim, Littler, Rottenberg & Segal 2020, 38).

3. MAKING PLACE

Places are "imbroglios of *traces*" (Anderson 2015, 6), concentrating tangible and intangible, large and small, enduring and ephemeral "marks, residues or remnants left in place by cultural life" (6), dynamically tying together cultural practices and geographies, thus converting places into vibrant "ongoing compositions of traces" (Anderson 2015, 6-7). According to Jon Anderson, they have three constituent parts: location (an objective point in space), locale (which refers to the composite of "all the traces that come together in one place" [Anderson 2015, 53]) and sense of place, that is, the emotional, experiential and affective traces that tie humans to particular environments and which are key to uniting people, in short, their "lived emplacement" (Seamon 2025, 23). The novels are locatable on a map: Chicago's Humboldt Park, a small town in Kansas, Barrio Logan and Chicano Park in San Diego, and Santa Maria and Marin County, California. As the love plots become entwined with the experience of lived emplacement, a dense plethora of traces come into play to signify place: buildings, monuments, activities, events, emotions, sounds, smells, tie geographies and cultures together (Anderson 2015, 7). The sense of belonging does not hinge exclusively upon affinity with culturally similar others but involves rootedness in the history of places and the cohesion of locale, location

and attachment: place becomes "a way of seeing, knowing, and understanding the world" (Cresswell 2015, 18), a worldview. Couples fall in love in specific places as they simultaneously fall in love with those places, two apparently independent processes that become inseparable emotions elicited by memories and new experiences. Although their love of place may initially differ or indeed conflict, by the end it is shared as the couples join forces to protect communities. So, place is not merely a backdrop to their encounter as it shapes the very nature of the relationship, just as their own stories become traces that contribute to the "becoming" (Cresswell, 2015, 65) of place.

To focus the significance of place in the development of an undivided self, mobility in many forms is at the center of the action. Latinx characters are aware of the relationship between transnational migrant flows, past and present U.S. imperialism and immigration policies, but the horizon for their sense of belonging is not the US nation-state or their parents' homeland, but bounded, vibrant places shaped by social, cultural and economic forces past and present. These places are ethnically marked by a spatial politics that dictates who belongs where, who is a trespasser and who a local: for example, in Lopez's *After Hours on Milagro Street* Alex Torres initially considers the white male protagonist –Jeremiah Post– a "Stranger. A foreigner" (Lopez 2022, 34) who is "playing white saviour" to her community (Lopez 2022, 54). Freedom, Kansas, is divided along ethnic lines: Milagro Street's two boarded-up blocks are economically and symbolically distant from the more prosperous Main Street, "a four-block-long string of neoclassical and Classic revival buildings ... anchored by the pretty Carnegie endowed library on one end and the Art-Deco-styled city hall on the other" (Lopez 2022, 77). In Quintana Albertson's first two novels of the series the heroes are unwelcome in traditionally Mexican areas because their social class has displaced them geographically, while Jaime in the third novel becomes Mexican by traveling to Mexico to gain knowledge of the tequila industry and returns "full of potential for something genuine, something real" (Quintana Albertson 2025, 194). Marin County is marked by the contrast between wealthy Tiburon and impoverished Canal, "the most segregated part in the Bay Area" (Quintana Albertson 2025, 21). The cultural and physical borders that shape fictional places are a source of political and emotional conflict as well as the expression of active boundary-making, an assertion of collective identity and of the right to inhabit specific places despite the pressures of "Americanization" such as corporate culture, capitalist individualism and the commodification of ethnicity driving urban change.

Thus, *Ramón and Julieta* maps a clear contrast between La Jolla, Coronado and Barrio Logan. Class conflict is played out in the novel between local family-owned small businesses and the Montez Group, with over two hundred franchised Taco King "fast-casual" Mexican food restaurants and thousands of employees in San Diego. Ramón, the CEO, is identified as a "coconut," "brown on the outside, white on the inside" although he feels "Mexican in his soul" (Quintana Albertson 2022, 11). He is accused of being a "gentrifier" and his family traitorous because of their unethical business practices: they buy a block in Barrio Logan to expand their company, which has profited from a stolen taco recipe and caters to tourists by

reproducing the stereotypical image of a Mexican restaurant and decoupling food from place. Ramón's narrative arc describes a deepening of his understanding of the ties between place, class, people and culture:

> Ramón exited off the freeway. The vibrant Aztec warriors on the mural greeted him. Cultural pride beamed in his chest. The artwork in Chicano Park was legendary. His own father had once protested to preserve the park when the city of San Diego wanted to turn it into a parking lot for a future California Highway Patrol station. Papá had joined other Chicanos and made a human chain around the bulldozers. The irony hung heavy on Ramón – Papá had once fought hard to preserve the culture of this community, and now he would battle to strip the town of its vibe. (64)

Ramón imagines the branding of ethnicity on a "Starbucks Barrio Logan mug with a drawing of Chicano Park" (Quintana Albertson 2022, 84), which mirrors the commercialization of "gaudy" (Quintana Albertson 2022, 45) Mexicanness by Taco King: waitresses in Mexican gowns, hair braided with colorful ribbons, giant margaritas, mariachis, "basic Mexican food at affordable prices" (Quintana Albertson 2022, 46) prepared with frozen and canned ingredients. Ramón eventually ousts his father from the company to protect Barrio Logan after recognizing "an important element. The People" (Quintana Albertson 2022, 88) in the making of the neighbourhood. He transfers ownership of the block to Julieta's mother in compensation for stealing her fish taco recipe and as Julieta's partner, plans to open a vegan location (Quintana Albertson 2022, 265). Here, the barrio is made by cooperative human interaction and creativity expressed as street art, public infrastructure, conflict and emotion, the past engraved in memory and materially. Ramón sets out to find his way as a "proud Mexican man" (Quintana Albertson 2022, 254), resolving his crisis of identity: "Who was he without his wealth and name?" (Quintana Albertson 2022, 42). The novel indicates that change is necessary to survival, but it cannot occur in isolation: as his relationship with Julieta progresses towards the happy ending, his world becomes increasingly populated with those others committed to protecting embodied place: "There would be no La Jolla without Mexicans. They were the gardeners, they were the cooks, they were the maids, and they were the nannies who raised the children of these millionaires –like his own nanny Berta. They were important, and they had voices, and for years Ramón hadn't heard them. But today he listened to their words, loud and clear" (Quintana Albertson 2022, 143). In La Jolla they are service workers, taking care of employers' needs, in Barrio Logan –on the other side of the bridge– they are business-owners, caring for clients, workers and suppliers.

In contrast, Las Pescas, the heroine's "sea-to-table taqueria," experiments with traditional Mexican cuisine by fusing ingredients, techniques, flavours, uses sustainable seafood and locally sourced ingredients, caters to the community and is fiercely loyal to "the barrio, where she belonged" (Quintana Albertson 2022, 60). Unlike the fare offered by Taco King, hers is a place-specific cuisine. We also see the same historic landmark from Julieta's perspective when she observes the biweekly

La Vuelta Lowrider Cruise from within, one of many cultural practices that give meaning to the area:

> Classic cars would line the streets, music blasted from the radios, and drivers would bounce their automobiles, defying gravity. Julieta loved her town. She greeted everyone she passed on the block. Children from the local day care slid down the slippery slide at Chicano Park. Toddler's laughter rang through the air, and Julieta smiled. She would often make the local kids bean and cheese burritos for lunch. Many of their parents couldn't afford food and their siblings' only meal of the day was at the local elementary school. But the people in the community always took care of one another. No matter what. What would happen when they were all displaced? ... Chicano Park was the heart of her community. Nestled under the Coronado Bridge was the most magnificent artwork. It was full of historic Chicano murals featuring Mexican-American leaders. The scent from the dream sage in the herb garden mingle with the sweet smell of her mango. A little girl's ball bounced and became stuck between the legs of Mexican revolutionary Emiliano Zapata. Joy flushed through her. She remembered coming here. Every week with her parents. This place was the brightness in their concrete jungle. (Quintana Albertson 2022, 74)

The same location and locale mean differently. Ramón has been cut-off from his cultural heritage by upward mobility but becomes aware of class conflict while working the kitchen of Julieta's restaurant and interacting with the locals: manual labor puts him in place. Julieta struggles against conservative gender norms and loyalty to her community, facing the choice between personal autonomy and tradition: initially she is too invested while he is disinvested in the future of the community. Similarly, in *Kiss Me, Mi Amor* Ramón's brother, Enrique, gives up his life to partner with the heroine, Carolina, a Latinx farm owner: he becomes aware of the back-breaking labour of farmworkers after working alongside them. Jaime, the youngest brother, feeling used by brands as the "token Mexican" (Quintana Albertson 2025, 26) hired for the sake of diversity although he doesn't speak Spanish, eventually feels a "deep connection to this land. It was more than just a place; it was a living, breathing tapestry of culture, tradition and beauty" (Quintana Albertson 2025, 177). In these three novels by Quintana Albertson the heroines do not question their ethnic identities but face the enduring hold of *machismo* on Mexican-American men, though tensions arise when young women are caught between their loyalty to their people and self-care.

Promenading and lowrider cruising are ways to "make the past come to life in the present and thus contribute to the production and reproduction of social memory" (Cresswell 2006, 121). *Las Posadas*, a Christian festivity celebrated in Quintana Albertson's *Kiss Me, Mi Amor*, is reinterpreted as a representation of immigration: "Many immigrants related to the experience of Mary and Joseph seeking shelter and being refused. It was cultural, even if you weren't a Catholic" (Quintana Albertson 2023, 25). Enrique courts Carolina by walking with her in the procession and afterwards, through her fields and Carmel-by-the-Sea, California. *Ramón and Julieta* begins with the Day of the Dead and, as mentioned above, includes car cruising (that dates back to the 1940s) in Barrio Logan: there were "lifted cars and

low cars, old cars and new cars, expensive cars and beaters. And every one of them was glorious" (Quintana Albertson 2023, 189). *My Fair Señor*, the most recent novel in the series, describes the *Cinco de Mayo* festivities in Pickleweed Park and the *Fiesta de San Isidro* in Jalisco, Mexico. All the *paseos* taken by the couples immersed in these festivities are "ways of not getting anywhere, but a way of being somewhere, and its movements are essentially circular, whether on foot or by car" (Solnit 2000, 52). Public *paseos* are fundamental to the development of romance but also means of inscribing culture in space and thus foster conviviality, because public spaces are presented as "egalitarian" (Chatzidakis et al 2020, 40).

Although MillenniGenZ protagonists are highly mobile, within the narrative time frame they move back to their place of origin. Excepting Carolina, who moves away from her family in *Kiss Me, Mi Amor*, female protagonists begin anew in the places they initially abandoned for various reasons, a return that acknowledges that systemic discrimination can only be transformed by resourceful collective action in specific locations that have historically embedded, resilient immigrant communities. In their absence places have changed, of course, so their integration into a once-familiar environment involves an emotional journey as protagonists resignify their attachments to place by negotiating different forms of connectedness. Latinx romance suggests that the safest and vital locales are those that are stabilized through relationships to spaces that exist in a "nested fabric of smaller and larger places" comprising a lifeworld, "e.g. household, workplace, shopping venues, places of recreation, worship, and so forth" (Seamon 2018, 49). The novels offer elaborate descriptions of buildings and their uses, as well as public infrastructure such as parks and roads, and provide detailed histories of neighbourhoods and built environments, the smallest unit usually a workplace.

Much like *Ramón and Julieta*, *A Proposal They Can't Refuse*, *A Dish Best Served Hot*, *After Hours on Milagro Street, Full Moon Over Freedom* by Natalie Caña also describe how buildings represent different sets of ideas for different people, illustrating how clashing value systems and unequal access to power give meaning to specific places that are at the crossroads of processes such as 'forward-looking' gentrification, economic survival and emotional attachment to "places-past" (Anderson 2015, 13).[2] In these novels, buildings become "saturated with cultural [and personal] meanings" (Anderson 2015, 51): trade and professional pride, financial well-being, migration, material objects, pain and conflict, personal memories and collective and family histories transform brick and mortar into lived spaces: indeed, in the Milagro Street series, the old Hugh Building, home to Loretta's bar for forty years, comes alive, haunted by both the racist ghost of Wayland Hugh, whose equally dehumanizing descendant, Dutimeyer, is laying claim to the building to "develop" the run-down area described as a "shithole," stating that he seeks to "wash out the trash, then put the Hugh shine back on it" (Lopez 2022, 81), and the ghostly presence of Alex's

[2] Set in West San Antonio, Texas, *West Side Love Story* by Priscilla Oliveras also addresses the local resistance to gentrification by the people served by a neighbourhood community centre.

great grandmother, Rosalinda Padilla, married to Edward Hugh, repudiated by his father for marrying her. Dutimeyer, in cahoots with local authorities, is buying cheap abandoned and foreclosed properties along Milagro Street with the intention of building a "few properties that'll make that side less of a blight on the whole town" (Lopez 2022, 80). The spatial segregation is shown up as an illusory ethnic mapping once Alex discovers that she is "half-brown-Mexican and half white-American" (Lopez 2022, 14): the "tear" (Lopez 2022, 341) in the fabric of the town, originated by Wayland Hugh's repudiation of his son, can only be repaired by his Mexican-American descendants. In a letter found hidden in the bar by Alex, Rosalinda explains her active nurture of ties between place and people:

> *This town is my home and my children are its citizens. I have lived my life working to strengthen it. And yet a tear began when Wayland Hugh repudiated the son who loved him and lied for him. The tear, I fear, will only rend further with my husband's refusal to forgive his father and accept his effort to make amends. I will not go against my husband's wishes, but I will protect our children's inheritance, in life and in death. If you have discovered this, it is because you are nuestra sangre, of our blood, and you have the will and might and love to mend what was broken. Be strong, do good with what your grandfather left you, and remember, in your strength, to have love in your heart.* (Lopez 2022, 341; italics in original)

Just like Alex's innovative cocktails lead "the movement connecting Midwesterners with Mezcal" (Lopez 2022, 11), her ancestry proves that migration has cultivated cultural hybridity. Here it is not immigrants who destroy the social fabric but white racists, whose xenophobia is of long standing: the novel demonstrates how many traces, from extant documents to Prohibition-era bottles of bootlegged alcohol and *milagros*, volunteer associations such as the Freedom Historical Society, ghosts and a host of unique emotional attachments come together to shape the meanings of the building.

The second novel involves the restoration of the train station to house a museum dedicated to the story of Mexican-Americans in a community currently reduced to "three blocks with a few struggling businesses" (Lopez 2023, 42). In *Full Moon* Gillian/Juliana also becomes aware of the structural discrimination of Mexicans and Mexican-Americans as she involves herself in rewriting local history when she assembles a grant proposal: initially neither she nor her sister Alex intend to settle in Freedom, yet the discovery of a (her)story of survival based on cooperation in which they insert themselves, grounds their choice to stay. The novel incorporates elements of magical realism to bind Juliana to place; she too is haunted, this time by a figure that she initially takes to be La Llorona, but eventually is confirmed to be the ghost of a Mexican woman whose child was taken away by a vindictive white husband who cheated her out of her business by tarnishing her reputation with false rumors.

Cariña de la Cruz, the owner of a professional laundry service, haunts Juliana until her descendants are located in the present. Juliana recovers her sense of self as she reconstructs Cariña's life, just like Alex reclaims the legacy of Rosalinda. The past returns to the present through these ghostly figures who "demand a reckoning for a message that went unheard or was ignored" (Coverley 2020, 5). The sisters liberate

a future by freeing the ghosts from the past: ghosts are neither present nor absent and thus suggest a temporal dislocation as they face backwards and forwards. With money garnered from the manufacture of bootlegged whisky (Lopez 2022, 295), Rosalinda had set up the "Sociedad de Mexicana Señoras y Señoritas [sic]" (Lopez 2022, 260) to loan money to women who took charge of families and communities in the absence of Mexican traqueros, hired to build the railroad after the Chinese Exclusions Act of 1882. Families followed immigrant workers to Freedom, "then those families would invite their compadres, and pretty soon, you've got chain migration connecting a little village in Guanajuato, where our family is from, to a growing Mexican immigrant community in Kansas. They all knew each other, they relied on each other, they were all compadres y commadres [sic], sharing food, resources, childcare, and pride of culture" (Lopez 2022, 182). Juliana goes on to establish a nonprofit fund to help enterprising women. Again, in this series, the couple chooses to relocate in order to serve the community by recuperating family bonds on their own terms: Freedom, the name of the town, is significant because choice and possibility are motives for migration and settlement.

Third-generation Latinx characters may belong politically to the American polity, but they are subjectively a racialized other. Juliana embodies this phenomenon. She is the "Pride of the East Side" who adopts the name Gillian, wears green contact lenses, dyes her hair blond, has surgically altered the "wide bridge" of her nose and has married into a white "pure blood" Boston family (Lopez 2023, 203). Upon her return to Freedom, she struggles to recover her inner "bruja," a cultural symbol that mixes "Mexican paganism, Spanish Catholicism, and American self-determination" (Lopez 2023, 59). The bruja is less a witch than a worldview, described by her mother as a crossroads:

> You are where everything meets: Mexico and the United States, big city and small town, math and logic, wealth and poverty, the masculine and the feminine, devotion to la familia and admiration for the outside world, the logical and the spiritual. You've felt pulled in two different directions your whole life but you've never needed to struggle to choose one spot over another; you are the doorway. So is La Virgen. You two are made for each other. (Lopez 2023, 207)

Gillian has followed all the rules as defined by that (white) world, convinced that she has freely chosen to follow them, yet returns feeling "cursed" for having failed to live up to those expectations. She grows back into her name, Juliana, as she revisits the past to track the history of the buildings along Milagro Street, making place with others by materializing their history in a mural painted by the hero and the community, the creation of library boxes for children (Lopez 2023, 218), the repurposing of old railroad ties to create walls and benches in Loretta's, where the outside bar is a red boxcar like the ones that had served as homes for the families of Mexican immigrants (Lopez 2023, 83). Creating the new with the remnants of the past consolidates their historical claim to place by making visible their uninterrupted presence in the US. Memories and emotions are layered and superimposed: both heroines return to places that elicit negative and positive feelings as they reconnect

with family and a past associated with specific familiar buildings, geographies and landscapes, navigating the internal and external conflicts which can only transpire in Milagro Street, a unique place which, they realise, is a "caring community," that is a local environment characterized by mutual support, public space, shared resources and local democracy (Chatzidakis et al 2020, 38). *Full Moon Over Freedom* and *After Hours on Milagro Street*, like the other novels, describe how the younger generations accept the need for care as an ethical orientation in personal and public life, not as the creation of something new but as a readaptation of their cultural heritage and practices of survival; indeed, resilience and adaptability are tools worked by their inventive ancestors to overcome hardship. Just as they repurpose old buildings and materials, they reclaim and restore local *saberes* which constitute their intangible heritage, shared between generations.

Nationhood is fundamental in Natalie Caña's series about the Boricua community in Chicago because of Puerto Rico's political status as an unincorporated territory of the United States. The MillenniGenZ generations are proud of their grandparents' and parents' political nationalism, but their sense of belonging is rooted in the US mainland and expressed as cultural nationalism (Duany 2002). *El vaivén*, Puerto Rican transnational circular migration between the continental US and the island, complicates the relationship between territory and identity and ushers in what Jorge Duany has called "mobile livelihoods" (2002, 222)[3]. The series depicts this dynamism by emphasizing the interconnectedness of different locations in Chicago's Humboldt Park neighbourhood, as characters are constantly on the move between houses, parks, gyms, hospitals, senior care facilities, schools, offices, businesses, community centers, alleys, sidewalks, kitchens, bars, and to and from Puerto Rico itself. Mobility itself is constitutive of place because it creates and sustains relations between people as they go about their everyday lives. In contrast to the other two series, culture is "more about routes than roots" (Cresswell 2006,1); routes are established and sustained through the reiteration of everyday practices of mobility.

The transition from one (political) identity to another (cultural) is materialised in the transformation of El Coquí in *A Proposal They Can't Refuse*, in which the heroine, Kamilah Vega, takes over the family-owned restaurant established by her grandparents:

> El Coquí had been the hub of their family since its founding in 1979. Every holiday and almost every milestone was celebrated here. The restaurant had seen the most lively parties to the most solemn memorials. It was the most stalwart family member: a pillar of kinship offering a sense of self and comfort and belonging to everyone in the family. (Caña 2022, 38)

[3] "Mobile livelihoods" refers not only to the crossing of geopolitical borders, but to the movement "along the edges of cultural borders, such as those created by language, citizenship, race, ethnicity, and gender ideology" (2002, 222).

El Coquí has also been a hub for the Boricua community because "no one did Puerto Rican food better than Abuela Rosa Luz. And because no one entertained more than Abuelo Papo and his salsa band, Los Rumberos" (Caña 2022, 20). At the beginning of the novel, the business is about to fade "into nothingness" (Caña 2022, 22) because the previous generation has failed to adapt to a changing customer base: Kamilah's modern American cuisine is described as "*bougie* food" by her mami (Caña 2022, 17; italics in original). The business has stagnated because her parents have simply replicated their own parent's practices, but her approach is different: "It's not about catering to any one group of people, Papi. It's about making sure everyone who comes here feels welcome and valued and that they leave feeling happy and satisfied. All we have to do is update the menu and give the place a face-lift" (34). Kamilah associates her cultural identity not with the nation but with an aesthetic and an atmosphere, replacing national symbols with a "feeling of Viejo San Juan" (Caña 2022, 196). Originally, the venue was decorated with flags and Puerto Rico's mascot, a native frog, together with palm trees, a neon sunset mural, a group table shaped like the island, and

> the entire left side of the building's exterior was a mural of a cartoon coquí frog waving the Puerto Rican flag, in case people weren't sure what they were. Abuelo like to call it branding, but they should be honest: it was a brightly colored and tacky hodgepodge of kitsch. Back in the day, customers had loved it, but those were also the same people who'd put huge metal Puerto Rican flags across Division Street and named it Paseo Boricua. (Caña 2022, 35)

Kamilah has sacrificed her dream to attend culinary school in Paris to fulfill the promise made to her dying Abuela that she will keep the business afloat, her future hence "tied irrevocably to El Coquí" (Caña 2022, 37). Her commitment to protecting her legacy from gentrification is evidence of her love for family, community and hero.

Both Kamilah and Liam, the male protagonist, are battling on two fronts: against their (grand)parents' reluctance to adapt to inevitable urban transformation driven by a combination of changing consumption patterns, demographics and the interests of property developers. El Coquí centres social interaction in the sequels, confirming Caña's belief that they are about "the essence of community and the ways we, not only, affect it as individuals, but how it affects us in return." Referring specifically to *A Dish* in an interview, "the story became about how we have the tendency to base our value off our communities (whether a neighborhood or a family) and how we serve them" (Caña 2023).

This experience is explored through the effects of everyday encounters, trajectories, activities, practices, code-switching that take place in an area bounded by culture and the built environment. Place is meaningful to the people who come together in both harmony or conflict and gives rise to different types of attachment, involvement and identification. The series deploys the childhood sweetheart/enemies to lovers tropes and intratextual references to reinforce the idea that longstanding social bonds are vital to weave a strong, local social fabric. The serial form is particularly apt at depicting the many "imbroglios of traces" involved in place-

making: the fictional social world is densely populated by secondary characters whose experiences of "lived emplacement" enrich the meaning of the neighbourhood. Intergenerational care is crucial here: the elderly, children (and pets) are cared for by all the family members, as are the local businesses and community services, but care work also ensures the continuity of social bonds that stretch back into the past and into the future as we move forwards in time from one novel to the next. This is true of all three series because rather than a depiction of individual development at odds with society, they trace the inevitable transformation of the self by virtue of the dynamism and versatility of the communities of resistance and care whose fate is willingly shared.

4. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The three series discussed offer three forms of emplaced sociality that counter the far-right dream of exclusionary white ethno-states in the US. *Vaivén* is, according to Duany, a culturally dense word that refers to the constant comings and goings of Puerto Ricans: "It implies that some people do not stay put in one place for a long period of time but move about incessantly" (2002, 14). This type of interconnectedness is mapped in the Vega series, in which a sense of belonging to a caring community is created by the constant movement of many characters within a bounded area; crossing paths and boundaries is constitutive of place. In the Milagro Street series, we see how the historic practice of *compadrazgo* is essential to the survival of a Mexican-American community in Kansas, as one character explains: "Technically, it means godparenthood. But what it represented in the colonia is the way Mexican immigrants turned their shared understanding of culture, food, societal rules, and religion into ties that bound them and made them feel safe in a foreign place. That 'family-hood' turned Miracle Street into Milagro Street. It created a unique, nurturing community that still exists today" (Lopez 2022, 190). Promenading and car cruising, the *paseos* in the Love & Tacos series are courting and cultural rituals connecting past and present in specific landscapes: feet and wheels, like farming and commerce, culinary and automotive art leave their mark on the land. The public nature of these cultural practices suggests that romantic love is not exclusive –between two people– but expansive and festive because the couples actively assimilate and share responsibility for their circles of care and resistance as they are simultaneously sheltered by them.

MillenniGenZ Latinx romance reacts to Trump's explicit portrayal of Latinx as a threat to the nation based on his "nativist nationalism, anti-immigrant policy agenda, and misogyny" (Canizales & Vallejo 2021, 151). As Flores-González suggests, young Latinx are made to feel like trespassers in places and spaces which are still constructed in exclusionary ways (32), so it is unsurprising that one response has been a return to places that are made safe for nonwhite communities by active

boundary-making, understood as a form of resistance to the encroachment of a normative white world.

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