

No Shame in this Queer Thang: Sex, Place, and Belonging in Charles Rice- González's *Chulito*

Robert LaRue

Abstract

This paper analyzes depictions of sex within Charles Rice-González's novel, *Chulito*, which focuses on the sixteen-year-old Puerto Rican American Chulito as he grapples with the impact of his same-sex desires on his place within his South Bronx community. I argue that sex in the novel functions as (1) a resistance to notions of

shame that suggest queer sex as base or deviant by representing intimate and affirming acts of sex; and (2) a challenge to boundaries of belonging as it couches these depictions within reflections on its actors' understandings of their neighborhood and place within its community.

In his 2009 study, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, José Esteban Muñoz declared that we are not and may never truly be queer (*Cruising* 1). But to be or not to be queer is not Muñoz's question. Instead, Muñoz attends to the temporality of queerness, articulating queerness as "a doing for and toward the future" (1). These doings are a matter of choices, and these choices make possible queer utopias. Emphasizing the fluidity of temporality and hope at the expense of a fixed state of being, Muñoz represents a school of queer thought that rejects recent turns in queer studies toward an anti-social position that eschews promises of the future (e.g., Lee Edelman's *No Future* and its disinterest in the logics of reproduction), instead privileging the here-and-now of queer desire, bonds, and citizenship. In his theory of hope and utopia, Muñoz reminds us that, for many queers, the deferral of the future comes at a hefty price. Despite expanding how we conceive queerness, Muñoz leaves us focused on individuals not only capable of making their own decisions, but also invested with agency and independence to do so. Such agential subjectivity remains unavailable to some queer individuals.

Children, for example, are one group for which the freedom to choose remains unavailable. Against a queerness dependent upon an agential subject, often posited as adult, scholars such as Kathryn Bond Stockton and James R. Kincaid direct the queer gaze toward the queerness of children—capturing those from birth to the age of fourteen. According to Bond Stockton, the creation of the image of the child remains incumbent upon narrating adulthood as a state apart from childhood (40). As Kincaid acknowledges, it is commonly held that narratives play a formative role in a child's memory, that "we know that what we are and have been comes to us from narrative forms that take on so much authority they start looking like nature" (15). Embracing the power of narratives, Kincaid proposes that by eschewing established authority and creating new narratives, "we might find that, all along we have been afraid of the wrong things. We might even find stories that are not fueled by fear" (15). While such proposals corroborate arguments seeking diversity in the stories made available, the turn to the queer child continues to leave a portion of society unattended. Caught

between the queer adult and the queer child, are queer young adults, whose experiences fall through the cracks.

Charles Rice-González's debut novel, *Chulito* (2011), works to fill this gap. Set in 2005, in the predominantly working-class South Bronx neighborhood of Hunts Point in New York City, the novel follows its titular character, sixteen-year-old Puerto Rican American Chulito, on his journey toward reconciling his romantic feelings for his childhood best friend, Carlos, with his loyalty to the (neighbor)hood he resides in. Focusing on the novel's approach to sex, I contend that its explicit depictions of sex license the reimagining of the relationship between sex, race, community, and individual identity as it circumvents the shame permeating many queer texts. The novel refuses the politics of innocence—which demands the purification of anything that might suggest queerness as threatening, vile, salacious, and/or different—that preoccupies many contemporary queer young adult (YA) works, such as Benjamin Alire Sáenz's novel, *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* (2012). In these works, innocence demands that queer characters eschew the more sexual aspects of their attraction. As the cinematic embodiment of Becky Albertalli's Simon asserts, apart from his secret homosexuality, he is "totally normal" (Berlanti). All this implies that no matter how mature a teen may be, they lack the maturity to handle, or discuss, sex. *Chulito* refuses this assertion, choosing a more honest realism by depicting young adults in all their glory...quite literally.

Below, I first contextualize Rice-González's novel by reading it against Sáenz's *Aristotle and Dante*, a similarly gay-themed YA novel that centers queer Latino characters in the process of coming to terms with their sexuality. I then proceed to examine how two of *Chulito*'s depictions of sex reimagine place and belonging within presumably hostile environments. Finally, I conclude by reflecting upon the contributions Rice-González's novel makes to discourses of representation and inclusion. Ultimately, I hope to contribute to Muñoz's push toward a queer utopia. Before I begin, I must offer the following caveats: first, this study addresses the experiences of cis-gendered males. While there will be overlapping concerns, trans and gender-nonconforming peoples cannot be reduced to or subsumed under those discussed herein. Second,

the apparent fungibility of gay and queer is intentional. Variably, the characters' same-sex desires position them as queerly placed in relation to their otherwise heteronormative environments, but this queerness remains fastened to readings of them as male and reading their maleness through their Latinoness. Therefore, I use *gay* to indicate an identity and *queer* when speaking of a potentiality (or, as Muñoz might say, *doings*). Recognizing this distinction becomes important for understanding *why* Chulito resists the label “gay,” even as he so clearly recognizes his attraction to other men.

***Chulito* Contextualized, or How Chulito Refuses to Follow Suit**

Charles Rice-González's novel, *Chulito*, offers a poignant example of how to write a narrative “not fueled by fear” (Kincaid 15). Through its portrayal of sixteen-year-old Chulito's coming of age, the novel reflects an urban queer experience reconciled with its environment. This is particularly useful for queer young adults. As Sean P. Connors and Rita Seelinger Trites observe, literature written to and for adolescents has in many ways been invested in changing society, particularly in the United States (67). While Connors and Seelinger Trites address the relationship between twenty-first-century YA protest literature and neoliberalism, their argument holds beyond this context. *Chulito* presents what Muñoz might call a gesture toward utopia as an intentional act of reflection and validation, while resisting the demands for innocence or purity that structure much literature—young and mature adult alike.

As a gesture toward utopia, *Chulito* shares similarities with other queer-themed twenty-first-century YA novels, such as *Aristotle and Dante*, in their engagement with a politics of representation directed toward diversifying depictions of queer experiences. These texts are remarkable for how they integrate issues of race, desire, sexuality, and identity into their narratives, all while offering stories that refuse the isolation and potential destruction that proliferate in queer works of the previous century, such as E.M. Forster's *Maurice* (published in 1971), James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* (1956) and John Rechy's *City of Night* (1963). Although

not technically YA novels, these early works focused on the coming-of-age of male protagonists struggling with the realities of their sexual desire, and offered solace to countless queer individuals searching for evidence that they were not alone. Yet, in these earlier texts, sex often serves as either a threatening marker of the darkness lurking within, or as a sign of the character's dangerous deviancy. Or to put this differently, sex figures as a manifestation of shame or the site upon which the battle against it is fought.

However, in more contemporary stories, while shame often remains present, the physicality of sex is deemphasized, and a more abstract desire becomes the driving force—manifested in the image of the protagonist's love interest. This substitution of desire for sex is part of the politics of innocence against which I contend Rice-González writes. For each of these contemporary young male protagonists, for which Sáenz's *Aristotle and Dante* serves as a representative model, sex neither occupies a central position nor plays an integral role in their worldview or identity formation. Or, to borrow from Adam Silvera's bisexual protagonist Rufus's observation concerning his gay love interest and co-protagonist, Mateo, "it's probably safe to assume sex isn't on the brain" for these characters (335). Love is the goal. Romance is a possibility. But sex, according to these narratives, is something that just happens when the timing is right—which presumably means some time beyond the novel's own.

Benjamin Alire Sáenz's *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* represents this trend not only because of its narrative but also because of its temporal relationship with *Chulito*. *Chulito* might be claimed as part of the legacy of YA texts such as Alex Sanchez's *Rainbow Boys* series (2001-2005), yet despite being published only a year apart, Sáenz's novel belongs to a branch of YA novels that include Albertalli's *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda* (2015) and Silvera's *They Both Die at the End* (2017), among others. The difference in the critical and social reception between Sáenz's novel, which has recently been made into a movie, and Rice-González's, which suffers from a dearth of attention, speaks to differing approaches to the creation of queer utopias. Where *Chulito*, as I will show, understands utopia as a product of intentional

doings, *Aristotle and Dante* suggests it as a space privileging fixed beings. Notwithstanding similarly attending to more mature topics such as national and cultural belonging, the appropriateness and use of violence, and incarceration, for these later YA texts, the realities of sex seem too much to handle. However, for *Chulito*, the explicit descriptions of sex signal an embrace of the novel's rejection of a politics of innocence. There can be no purification if we are to, as Muñoz and others suggest, arrive at a queer future. If we are to witness the character's struggle for acceptance and space, we must also witness their pleasure precisely because it is for this right to be able to live a pleasurable—not simply pleasant—life that they fight.

Queer desire in Sáenz's novel participates in the sanitized representation of queer life by privileging an abstracted desire at the expense of sex. Preoccupied with coming out, *Aristotle and Dante* explores the absurdity of denying oneself. It is perhaps for this reason that the novel is set in the 1980s. The past permits the stabilization of a politics of innocence, even as it provides for a wider range of masculinities. Throughout, Aristotle's shame regarding his queerness—which gets juxtaposed to his pride as a Mexican American—propels the narrative, leading to the final moment of embrace in which Aristotle finally accepts his queerness, reciprocating Dante's desire, and marvels at the fact that doing so took him so long. Nonetheless, kissing serves as the most sexual contact imaginable for the sixteen- (Aristotle) and seventeen-year-old (Dante) characters.

Two kisses in particular structure the sexuality explored in Sáenz's novel. The first kiss comes after Aristotle attempts to affirm his heterosexuality: "Look, it's just a kiss. You know. And then we'll both know" (255). While the kiss fails to rev Aristotle's queer engines, so to speak, and temporarily drives a wedge between the two characters, I am interested in how it repackages the threat of sex seen in earlier queer texts in the innocence of a kiss. The sexual currency of the kiss is mitigated by an economy of sameness in which kisses are shared not only by sexual partners, but also by the teens with their parents (41). Kisses as a sign of desire, therefore, are rendered impotent and divested of their potential for challenging the status quo. The second kiss, which ends the novel,

continues this trend, promising coupling not copulation: “I placed my hand on the back of [Dante’s] neck. I pulled him toward me. And kissed him. I kissed him. And I kissed him. And I kissed him. And I kissed him. And he kept kissing me back” (358). This series of kisses, taken as a sign of intimacy, overrides the earlier kiss from which Aristotle retreats, denying his feelings for Dante. This ending inspires Aristotle to wonder rhetorically, “How could I have ever been ashamed of loving Dante Quintana?” (359). Consistent with the trend found in similar novels, such as Albertalli’s and Silvera’s, sex must be read broadly as intimacy. And while the innocence retained in this move aids the development of a romantic ideal, it does little for young adults anxious about the more intense urges which they are coming to terms with.

As *Aristotle and Dante* demonstrates, queer YA literature often tacitly promotes the idea that sex belongs to adults, even as shame and sexuality are tightly bound. Characters’ search for acceptance and struggle with shame disrupts their sex drives, leaving them artificially stuck in a state of innocence that contradicts lived experiences. Teens think and talk about sex, see it depicted (e.g., *Elite*), hear it celebrated in music (e.g., Lil Nas X’s “Montero”), and engage in it themselves—never mind the social expectations for (appropriately timed) procreation. When portrayed, queer sex occurs between seemingly committed couples and when the characters are alone in the safety—if not comfort—of private spaces (a point I return to below). Although this isolation provides the stability sought by these narratives, it disconnects individuals from others capable of offering practical guidance and information. The individual becomes an island of desire.

Unlike *Aristotle’s* use of the bedroom, *Chulito* differs in that the bedroom does not dislocate Chulito and Carlos from their surrounding reality. They discuss their relationship in other locations, which include a larger queer community. For instance, the two visit the gay neighborhood travel agent, Julio, who provides the boys with advice and sanctuary. Furthermore, sex is integral to the narrative of Chulito’s journey. The novel opens, for example, as, “Chulito awoke with a hard-on *as usual*” to which Chulito familiarly responds, “Hola, papito” (1). Chulito’s response shows both the normalcy of his morning erection and

his comfort with it. By normalizing the erection, and speaking about it frankly, Rice-González signals to the reader the novel's rejection of sexual shame one might expect—particularly given its characters' racial and socio-economic background. Instead, Rice-González's novel resituates shame from within the individual to the external space of his environment so that, while Chulito deals with the fear of coming out, his fear stems not from who he is but from the possibility that access to his community might be lost when his queer desires are made public.

Chulito's fear, then, is tied to his location or place. As Chulito states after coming out to his best friend and mentor, the twenty-six-year-old Kamikaze, "I'm scared, man. I'm scared of losing you and my mom and the fellas, but I don't want to lose Carlos either" (277). Still, refusing to relinquish that which risks disordering his universe, Chulito discovers a form of pride that refuses the either/or binary. In this way, Rice-González's novel enacts the sort of counterposing Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes suggests in his discussion of gay shame and the Latino/a community. Against the contemporary mainstream queer movement's use of shame as a political tactic, La Fountain-Stokes deploys the notion of *sinvergüenza* (or shamelessness) as a counterbalance. Maintaining the degree of play and redirection of authority contained in its earlier use, La Fountain-Stokes adds that "to be a *sinvergüenza* is to have no shame: to disobey, break the law, disrespect authority (the family, the church, the state), and in a perverse and curious way to be proud of one's transgression, or at the very least lack a feeling of guilt for such disruptions" (72). In Rice-González's novel, Chulito lives *sinvergüenza*, as he rejects the shame his community expects him to feel about his desires for Carlos, choosing instead to make room for himself and his love(r).

Scenes of Sex or an Opening of Possibilities?

Exploring how the coming-out story queers the novel's setting, Sina A. Nitzsche argues that *Chulito* challenges the division of queer and heterosexual spaces as discrete sites (141). For Nitzsche, the novel "re-imagines the South Bronx neighborhood of Hunts Point as a space of possibility and transgression" by extending "the Eurocentric idea of queer space"

(129). Similarly, I maintain that the novel queers its setting in Chulito's efforts to reconcile his same-sex desires with the (neighbor)hood's demands that a man be heterosexual and demonstrably masculine. I, however, extend Nietzsche's argument by positing that *Chulito* does not just challenge queer and straight spaces as distinct sites, it refuses an either/or logic entirely—a logic that undergirds the call for a discrete space made famous by Virginia Woolf. For Woolf, a proprietary space, set apart from pressures of the world, permits a woman to write her truth. Chulito seeks such a space. He simply resists calls to find this space outside of his hood. Instead, he consistently asserts Hunts Point as *his* space, leading to the novel's climax in which a civil war erupts in the neighborhood when Chulito's former friends attempt to exile him from the community. The narrative corroborates this by establishing the borough of Manhattan, and its queer village of Greenwich, as a temporary excursion rather than an escape. And it is this fear of separation, I suggest, that hinders his coming out and inspires the moments in which he denies being gay (43-44), not a sense of shame. Accordingly, the novel urges a reconsideration of how the spaces we inhabit can accommodate a diverse range of desires without losing the integrity of their unity.

In the fifth of twenty-four chapters, Chulito dreams of a group masturbation involving himself and several of the young men with whom he associates. Set along the novel's main avenue, the narrative makes explicit Chulito's sexual urges while emphasizing his proximity to the men on the street. The dream intensifies, describing how the visibility of Chulito's "stiff cock" displayed in his bedroom window excited the men of the street and resulted in them "sprout[ing] their own erections" (70). The excitement continues until each participant "shoot[s] and cover[s] Garrison Avenue with a thick coat of semen" (70). This dream comes only two chapters after the recounting of Chulito's first sexual encounter, involving Chulito's mentor, Kamikaze and a sex worker, Yolanda, who Kamikaze commissioned for the purpose of "popping" Chulito's cherry (45). Although frightening for Chulito because he has never slept with anyone—man or woman—the moment becomes filled with intense pleasure precisely because he and Kamikaze have sex in the same room, exchanging the proof of their pleasure, though this exchange is

made possible only by the mediation of Yolanda's body: "The first shot [of Kamikaze's ejaculation] hit Chulito right below the chin and the second shot hit him between his nipples. The rest landed on Yolanda's round breasts and soft belly" (49).

In Chulito's dream, however, where the avenue serves as the only barrier, the guys from his group are drawn out by a common urge (71). The intensity and vividness of the dream's language, describing Chulito's urge "to shoot and cover" the avenue "with a thick white coat of Chulito juice," reflects Chulito's desire (70). In Chulito's dream, the men's semen gushes forth, contrasting the heteronormative flow of Kamikaze's ejaculation, allowing Chulito to extend the moment he "imagined rolling his tongue around Kamikaze's balls" (51). However, unlike this first scene that both literally and figuratively inserts the body of a woman between Chulito and the male objects of his desires, the dreamscape evacuates all women, emphasizing the explicitness of the description. Often, explicit descriptions of sex emphasize the power relations of the sexual act (e.g., E.L. James' *Fifty Shades of Grey* or Rechy's *City of Night*). In this dream sequence, which itself serves as a precursor to the later sexual encounter between Chulito and Carlos, the streaming ejaculation serves as a bridge democratically bonding the participating men both to one another *and* to the space of the neighborhood: "When the streams met they bathed the block in a white, luminescent light then exploded into a tidal wave of jizz—splashing down the walls of [Chulito's] building, dripping off the newly painted fire escapes, covering the bright auto glass shop signs, all the cars, the hydrant near the corner, and milk crates in front of Rivera's Bodega. The street was filled with cum and all the guys collapsed with pleasure" (71). At this point Chulito *really* awakens.

As intimated above, this dream serves as something of a middle point on Chulito's journey to his coming out. As such, the novel resists the assumption that a gay Chulito would disrupt the cohesion of his homosocial community preoccupied by what Leo Bersani identifies as "the terror of being looked at" (16). There, then, is no need to make Chulito's desire innocent as Sáenz does for Aristotle and Dante. In the dream, bodies do not touch, and there is an absence of shame. Each

man pleases himself, sensitive to his own needs while aware of those in his company, representing a community of men that can come together, working toward a common objective. The goal here, directed by Chulito's own concerns, as suggested by the dream, is to unite the spaces standing between them with a composite pleasure to which each man contributes. The common metaphor of jizz (semen) as seed assists in this reading. The scene is one of collective planting, a gesture toward a queer utopia in which the semen distributed might sprout into a community grounded in pleasure and not fear. As such, it indicates Chulito's desire to reconcile his relationship with the men he fears losing with the disclosure of his sexual desires, thus explaining why other males important to Chulito (Kamikaze, Brock, Julio, and most notably Carlos) are absent from the scene.

Yet, perhaps the most explicit scene of queer sex occurs near the end of the novel and precipitates the final battle for the boys' place in and right to the neighborhood. Returning from a night on the piers with a group of Carlos' openly queer friends, Chulito and Carlos have sex, beginning in the safety of Chulito's room before colonizing other rooms in the house with their passion and desire. After almost an entire novel in which they variably chase and run from one another, the boys finally approach the climax of their journey. Beginning with language resembling that found in YA novels such as Sáenz's, the novel's descriptions intensify as the boys grow in their embrace—of their passions, their desires, and one another. It moves from erotic statements such as “Carlos pressed his face against Chulito's neck and inhaled” (264) to the overtly sexual, such as “[Carlos] held Chulito's soft round ass in his hands and pressed his face against his stiff cock” (264). Choosing the seemingly vulgar terms *ass* and *cock*, Rice-González's diction transgresses the limits established by other YA texts while shifting the prose from a literary representation of their sex to a more colloquial depiction.

However, I argue that as with the dream sequence, this shift is not a venture into pornography. It is a recognition of its audience and the importance of representation. This, after all, is a novel about a sixteen-year-old Puerto Rican American male growing up in the South Bronx, written for both adults and youths—from the Bronx and

beyond—many of whom recognize their own realities in the experiences of Chulito and Carlos. From here, the novel fully commits to reflecting the fullness of the boys’ engagement—the sex is a manifestation and release of the closeness hitherto withheld. In a sense, this turn might be articulated as an instance of what José Esteban Muñoz terms *disidentification*, as it resists the normative conventions of decorum and appropriateness and functions as a strategy for surviving the exclusions of the mainstream. As Muñoz argues, disidentification is about the ways in which those outside of the public mainstream respond to and disrupt the social codes and conventions that “continuously elide [...] or punish [...] the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship” (*Disidentifications* 4). Reading the novel’s language as an act of disidentification reminds us that Rice-González’s is not a novel simply meant to re-present a polite queer aesthetic. For *Chulito*, sex is not the end or climax of the narrative but an opening that makes possible the novel’s actual resolution: Chulito finally comfortably himself, looking down at his street and into the future he now knows is his.

Unlike the sex scene between him, Kamikaze, and Yolanda, which takes place in Kamikaze’s flat away from the avenue, both Chulito’s dream and the sexual encounter between him and Carlos occur in Chulito’s room *on* the avenue and *across* from the very men whose ideas of masculinity disrupt his embrace of his queerness. As if dramatizing Virginia Woolf’s argument that one “must have money and a room” of one’s own if they have any “hope to tell the truth” (4), Rice-González’s use of private spaces, manifested in the form of Chulito’s bedroom, allows for the resituating of shame and the solidification of his queer identity. Though tiny, Chulito’s room permits the removal of his “South Bronx armor” (Rice-González 72). He claims this space by filling every inch of it with himself with music and images of the “thug life” he aims to embody. In the room, he listens to Tupac and Fat Joe, among other male hip hop icons—men who integrate the pain of living racially and socio-economically marginalized lives with heterosexual worldviews and demonstrate the perimeters of racial belonging to be porous, especially in mixed working-class areas like Hunts Point. Puerto Rican drums seep in off the streets, as do Carlos’s eclectic playlists from his

room above (59), offering alternatives to the masculinity permeating Chulito's spaces. As Chulito decides to follow his heart over his crew, the soundtrack of his space expands.

However, Chulito's challenge to Woolf's criteria for creative independence is contestable. His room is not exactly his own. For one, his single mother's labor pays for his room. Moreover, its accessibility to the avenue makes his room permeable. After he and Carlos first have sex, Chulito wonders if someone saw them, even though "they'd kept the shade down and the lights out. He remembered a soft breeze lifting the shade every now and then" (274), but assured himself the room's darkness concealed them. Furthermore, reading Chulito's room as a closet is shortsighted. Rather than a closet meant to conceal a shameful secret, Chulito's room opens into what Michel Foucault defines as a heterotopia—a real space that reifies, challenges, and flips the other real spaces within culture (24). As such, the room challenges the assumed divisions of space (i.e., inside/outside, queer/heterosexual) by allowing Chulito the opportunity to unburden himself—if even momentarily—of the baggage of his "thug life" while also demanding he imagine any queer future in connection with the life on the avenue. This permeability enables the discovery of the material needed to live *sinvergüenza*.

In a novel populated by men, Chulito is one of four males to be given his own space and one of the few males whose private spaces we are permitted to enter. Apart from Chulito, only three other men have spaces of their own: Julio, the older gay male who somewhat ironically owns a travel agency in the neighborhood, Kamikaze, and Carlos. While Kamikaze's and Julio's spaces are frequented by Chulito, often in times of need, they are different from his own in that, in each, he maintains his South Bronx armor. For instance, anyone walking on the street can peer inside Julio's storefront agency, and Kamikaze's apartment remains inaccessible to all males save Chulito—though it never fully sanctions the manifestation of the forms of queerness it may contain.

Similarly, Carlos' room, which sits directly above Chulito's, remains accessible only via Chulito's imagination. For instance, needing space to process Carlos's recently confessed romantic interest in him, Chulito cloisters himself in his room where he listens to the sounds of Carlos

dancing above him (115). Through Chulito's ruminations, Carlos' room symbolizes a space of incubation and growth—a space in which Carlos has been able to develop and come to terms with his own sexual identity in the early stages of his life. Yet, because of the space's inaccessibility, the privacy of Carlos' room offers little more than an imagined space, what Foucault would describe as a utopia (24). Therefore, while Carlos suggests an example of living *sinvergüenza*, like Aristotle's ultimate acceptance of his queerness, he can do so only because he physically and mentally separates himself from the street against which Chulito has grown. Chulito refuses this division.

Despite coupling Chulito and Carlos in ways suggestive of the romantic innocence structuring Sáenz's novel, *Chulito* challenges this innocence by refusing the sort of self-contained turns Sáenz and others take. Although Chulito and Carlos are romantically committed to one another, their queer romance is buttressed by Chulito's desire for other men, as evidenced in the masturbation scene and by Chulito's attraction to Kamikaze. The climactic fight scene between Chulito and the crew serves as another example while also underscoring Chulito's rejection of an either/or binary that requires him to choose either Carlos or his place in Hunts Point. Shortly after their night of sex, and after having come out to Kamikaze, Chulito takes his stand, claiming both Carlos *and* the neighborhood as his. Passing Damian and the crew, Chulito *chooses* to hold Carlos' hand. Responding to having a glass bottle heaved at them (a situation reminiscent of an earlier scene in which a jealous—and intimidated—Chulito throws a bottle at Carlos and his date), Chulito realizes, “it was now or never. He could run, but he knew better. He had to stay and fight. And he had to protect Carlos if need be” (291). The brawl pits the crew and their supporters against Chulito, Carlos, and their allies, which include Julio and Brick, as well as the femme queer character, Puti (289-96). Surviving the ordeal, Chulito wonders, “would he have to leave Hunts Point” to have a life with Carlos “or did he have the balls to do it here? Was that even possible?” (297). And in its final scene, the novel answers, yes, living his authentic queer self *in* Hunts Point was possible. Watching Carlos return to college, Chulito stands on the roof of his building, surveying the neighborhood for which

he has bled. Though still on the avenue, Chulito now has room to dance unbothered, opting for a song he heard in a Manhattan gay club while with Carlos. The novel ends as “Chulito danced because it was alright and he felt it” (317), claiming not only the space of his room for himself but the entirety of his hood while also indicating his relation to a larger queer community.

In both sex scenes, the privacy often used to defend queer sex lives and to underwrite contemporary queer politics of innocence is rejected. Instead, a space of peace in which individuals can freely express themselves and their desires is sought. Privacy is an illusion few in Chulito’s position can afford. Chulito’s bedroom, if anything, queers these arguments, demonstrating them to be part of the politics of innocence that sustains YA texts such as Sáenz’s. Where Sáenz’s novel embraces a pure and innocent love that appeals to a universal experience, *Chulito* resists the purification of his social order, emphasizing Chulito and Carlos’s love as grounded in the specificity of their environment. As Hiram Pérez points out, following Jasbir Puar and others, the language and logic of privacy has often served to benefit the project of the nation and notions of whiteness, even as it has variably incorporated queers into this project. Or, as Pérez articulates, “the reduction of freedom to privatized space, (whether that of the bedroom or that of the individual psyche) ironically reifies the closet” by reifying zones of exclusion and foreclosing the intersections of and interconnectedness with class, race, gender, nationality (Pérez 5). In the space of Chulito’s bedroom I find a challenge to the logics of privacy and exclusion. The power of Chulito’s space rests in its permeability. Sounds from and the essence of the people on the street seep into it, reminding us that while the bedroom might allow Chulito the freedom to throw off his South Bronx armor, he carries the community inside. Sex amplifies this permeability. It must be messy and explicit, because this is the context in which he exists.

Conclusion

Framing Chulito's journey as a matter of reconciliation, the novel eschews the binary logic that suggests that one can either be queer and apart from one's community, or, borrowing from Essex Hemphill, remain committed to their community while presenting an image in which "nothing appears out of character" (50). Ultimately, *Chulito* challenges the boundaries of the neighborhood—particularly as they are transposed onto the bodies of its inhabitants—informing who does and does not belong, demonstrating that young adults possess agency and the capacity to handle the complexities of life, and that they can do so without retreating to a politic of innocence.

To be clear, I have not offered a defense for the sexualizing of children, but an argument on the importance of acknowledging, responding to, and honoring the experiences of the communities about which we write and speak. Representation matters. As Charles Rice-González explains, growing up he saw "no Latino coming out stories. So *Chulito* and the characters in this book were tapping on my shoulder saying, 'Tell our story.' [. . .] So, it mattered very much for me to write this book" (PrideIndex). But if *Chulito* demonstrates anything, it is that how you represent experiences is equally as important as which experiences you represent. For too long, queerness has been approached as a spectacle, when not a dirty secret—and markets and capital are only partly to blame.

To return to Muñoz, we must answer the "call to think about our lives and times differently" that has rung for far too long (189). As a representation of life as a queer young adult, *Chulito* imagines a queer utopia, where one can live freely and without fear or shame, as a product of intentional choices and actions. In so doing, Rice-González's novel, with its fearless telling of Chulito's journey, honors the realities of being a sixteen-year-old gay youth, while also demonstrating how we might honor those often rendered invisible by the stories in circulation. Recognizing the importance of not purifying the narratives meant to represent our experiences is a gesture in this direction. After all, as arguments against professions of racial color-blindness have long pointed out, pretending that something is not visible leaves systems of

inequality in place while erasing the individuals who suffer under and because of them. Perhaps I might sum up my argument as this: If you're gonna do it, make it honest, yet sensitive and relevant. Anything less is pornographic.

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Biography

Robert LaRue is an Associate Professor in the Department of English at Moravian University and currently directs the university’s Africana Studies program. His work addresses the intersections of sexual, racial, gendered,

and (inter)national difference. He has published on topics ranging from queerness in the work of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. to race and gender in Jordan Peele’s *Get Out*.