GO WEST! (VILLAGE): QUEER DISPLACEMENT AND NEW YORK AS THE LIBERATORY WEST IN AMERICAN LESBIAN FICTION

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Abstract

This article analyzes the idea of the American West as the promise of hope for freedom, as it was repossessed by United States queer literature after the 1950s. Hope is promised as a total contrast from tradition: for queer, specifically lesbian characters, it switches Eastwards, looking for the *dreamland* not on *going west* but on going to New York. Queer narratives since the 1950s draw on the displacement of the lesbian characters from their homes, forcing them to relocate, recurrently the West Village in New York. The analysis of storyline repetitions present in representative lesbian fiction throughout the decades will be done on several works. I show that the ideal of the West, core to the construction of the American Dream, was reversed in American lesbian fiction, relocating hope after displacement to the queer populated West Village in New York City.

Keywords: Lesbian Fiction, The American West, Queer Displacement, Lesbian Studies, Queer studies.

¡VE AL OESTE! (DE NUEVA YORK): DESPLAZAMIENTO QUEER Y NUEVA YORK COMO EL OESTE LIBERADOR EN LA FICCIÓN LÉSBICA AMERICANA

Resumen

Este artículo analiza la idea del Oeste Americano como la promesa de libertad y esperanza, reposeída por la literatura queer estadounidense después de la década de1950. La promesa de esperanza se opone totalmente a la tradicional: para los personajes *queer*, específicamente lesbianas, la promesa se vuelve hacia el este, buscando el Sueño Americano, y no en irse al oeste sino a la ciudad de Nueva York. Las narrativas *queer* desde los años cincuenta se alimentan del desplazamiento de las protagonistas lesbianas de su hogar, del que están forzadas a marcharse, recurrentemente hacia el West Village de Nueva York. El análisis de las repeticiones narrativas presentes en ficción lésbica de diferentes décadas se estudiará en varias obras, demostrando que la idea del oeste, tan central en la construcción del sueño americano, se invierte en la ficción lésbica estadounidense.

Palabras clave: Ficción lésbica, Oeste Americano, Desplazamiento *queer*, Estudios Lésbicos, Estudios *Queer*.

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NEW YORK CITY AND QUEER AMERICAN FICTION

New York City has been considered for decades a beacon of commerce, culture and social revolution. The literary scene is no exception to this tendency. For the LGBTQ community, New York City has been a key setting, even before the Stonewall riots in the West Village in 1969 set a precedent for queer rights everywhere. Similar to Eastern Coast Americans expanding westwards in hopes of becoming landowners, or the next generation, rushing to California in search for the promised gold, the queer community found a symbol of opportunity and identity in this East coast capital. In this article, I argue that New York City has been repeatedly used in sapphic fiction from the 1950s to today as the land where the promise of prosperity is equal to everyone who seeks it, thus being used as the concept of a new West but for the sapphic identity. The city of New York becomes the uncontested destiny for sapphic characters who flee their hometowns, families, and cities, (oftentimes in the Western side of the United States) in order to live their identity, which had been until then repressed or unacceptable.

For this, I will be looking at several fiction works across history, all of which have a sapphic[1] protagonist as a driving narrator or a main character. The works mentioned are also, except for *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo*, written by sapphic or queer identified authors. By looking at the motivations for the Western Expansion and the Gold Rush of the 19th century in the United States of America, it becomes clear that the character's motivations and narratorial devices used to describe them are parallel. The works included for comparison are, chronologically, *The Price of Salt* (1952) by Patricia Highsmith, *Odd Girl Out* (1957) by Ann Bannon, *Rubyfruit Jungle* (1973) by Rita Mae Brown, *The Color Purple* (1982) by Alice Walker, *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo* (2017) by Taylor Jenkin Reid and *One Last Stop* (2021) by Casey McQuiston.

THE IDEA OF *THE WEST*

Renditions of the United States West in Hollywood are not singled-out movie scripts starring Clint Eastwood. The widely-acknowledged tradition stems from a long line of migration stories across history, which spread their ivy branches as the ideology that was to be reproduced over and over in fact and fiction. Cowboy moods, empty deserts, and lonely cabins (or tents) are all a part of a complex context that sprung during the Westward Expansion and consequently led to the phenomenon of the heavenly West that narratives had used over the years. The idea of the *Manifest Destiny* mainly influencing the settler duty to expand and conquer the land towards the Pacific Ocean of the United States people, would develop as an idea in the late 18th century. Motivation for the Westward Expansion peaked when gold was discovered in the western side of the infant country, near Sierra Nevada, which would come to be known as the Gold Rush. The news that gold was to be found in Sierra Nevada and Northern California *rushed* citizens to the territory in search of quick wealth from 1849 onwards. The Gold Rush stimulated not only a patriotic meaning of *going west,* but also an economic significance that made a few of these eastern Americans wealthy. As thousands of young citizens rushed to find the beacon of what could lead them to a wealthy future in this newly acquired land (California) the idea of the American Dream rooted even deeper. The economic motivation behind the Gold Rush marked a historic migration movement, but the ideal promise of prosperity made a much deeper mark.

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[1] Throughout this article, I will be using the term *sapphic* to refer to female characters who are romantically or sexually involved with other female characters, including bisexual, lesbian or pansexual.

To understand the dimensions of the imagery of the United States West as the land of chance I am mostly interested in highlighting that (1) Land exploitation and farming became a synonym of American pride, as well as national identity and (2) the West as we know it, never was. The western frontier provided the working class with the possibility of self-development free from the old order. The Homestead Act of 1862 made it possible for many Americans to get a piece of land by simply moving into it, which would, in five years' time, become their property. Naturally, certain conditions had to be met, including the building of a home, and the testimony of neighbors and a minimum stay of five years' time in the working of the land. Many Americans could grab their lives in search for acres where to become landowners, contributing to the great expansion in the West.

(1) The establishment of farms with its consequential rural life, contributed greatly to the folkloric ideal of the western landowner who was an agent of his own future on the undiscovered land that he conquered. Examples of this idyllic setting and the pride that it ended up entailing flood the paragraphs of literature representing the ambiguity of the American West, as shows in the landmark work *The Grapes of Wrath*. Steinbeck's focalizer emphasizes the key component of the land: the nobility of exploitation of the land:

> The driver sat in his iron seat and he was proud of the straight lines he did not will, proud of the tractor he did not own or love, proud of the power he could not control. And when that crop grew, and was harvested, no man had crumbled a hot clod in his fingers and let the earth sift past his fingertips. (Steinbeck 2008, 46)

(2) The West as we know it, never was. The leading representative images passed down through the artistic rendition of an idea of the West existed only as so. In fact, "the West in media representation was seen as a testing ground for the national experience" (Varner 2013, 4). The dreamland that *frontiersmen* or *cowboys* founded in the West and would become one of the most representative chapters in the history of the United States survived through the decades as an ideal and took many shapes and forms until its decay later in the second half of the 20th century as described through the literary scene of the times, like the works of the Beat Generation.

Given the tempestuous nature of the expansion of the frontier, narratives set on the west enhanced the identity markers that had characterized the Western Expansion. In other words, it was in the world of literature that the idea of the American Western developed and has survived through the generations. "It [The Western frontier] also became a concept synonymous with US national identity […] the geography of the American West becomes conflated with an idea not just of what the West was, but what it meant" (Cooper 2016, 70). These concepts of conquering, land exploitation and farming powerful cowboys in literature set in the American west bond very closely with the ideal characters of the Western narrative, both literal and figuratively. Men in the American West are in search of their inherited right to power, personal development, and freedom. Western novels provide us with innumerable examples of what this masculinity went on to mean, as well as the pursuit of the American identity that they were trying to establish (Davy Crocket, Deadwood Dick, Diamond Dick…). Dime western novels, like E.Z.C. Jackson's *Buffalo Bill* narratives, depicted the ideas that ended up representing the ideas of the western man and served ideological purpose for soldiers during the American Civil War.

The protagonists of the western spirit were men who brought forth their own demise, becoming a symbol of self-made men, oftentimes a romanticization of lawlessness, the promise of liberation of indigenous land. Cooper analyzes the idealization of outlaws like Jesse James who appear as the physical representation of the frontier, all of them an embodiment of the power over a lawless, undiscovered land (2016, 71). New York City, serves in sapphic stories in the United States the same purpose as this lawless, undiscovered land. The idea that *going west* had served for United States fiction. Characters in sapphic fiction decipher the unwelcomeness that they are experiencing in their home lands and seek refuge in the movement. Movement to the West Village, or the queer west that I have been referring to, thus relates to the North American Westwards Expansion in three ways, in the first place, displacement from the home, or lack thereof, secondly, the discovery or reassurance of an identity and lastly, the hope for growth and development.

DISPLACEMENT AND MOVEMENT: "BUT WE HAD TO GO *SOMEWHERE!*"[2]

Sapphic characters start to make a mark in published American novels that confer them with a voice not earlier than the 1950s. Pulp narratives provided the American public with cheap sensual stories that ranged in diverse topics, being the first best-selling pulp fiction one that featured a lesbian relationship. Publishers filled convenience store shelves with narratives about young women falling in love written by men, causing an unsuspected result: actual sapphic women were reading these narratives. They were learning, maybe for the first time, that there were other sapphics who existed in the United States. Publishing houses soon started to receive manuscripts under pseudonyms, works by sapphic authors who now knew they could write about the type of love they felt.

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[2] Marijane Meaker referring to covert queer bars in New York City in Scheidegger's documentary *Loving Highsmith* (2022).

Sapphic fiction from the United States shares with Western literature and the idea of The West a need for special movement. This literature perseveres through the displacement of characters throughout the decades, translating the metaphorical expulsion from the family institution and the status quo to a physical expulsion from the territory. Two main causes can be cast for this physical and metaphorical displacement. The first, the need of a narrative ending with reparation of heteronormativity (the queer character is cast out, thus normality is restored) The character can also make an individual choice, triggered by the feeling of discomfort that the original setting of the novel provides. This is normally presented as rejection from a familiar setting. Chesire Calhoun and others have referred to this displacement because of the perception of queers as a "threat to the family" defending that "anxiety about the possibility that the family disintegrating from *within* can be displaced on to the specter of the hostile outsider to the family" (2003, 141 *emphasis in the original*). The consistency of this family disruption by the queer in the writing of characters in sapphic fiction responds to this need to construct "gay men and lesbians as outsiders to the family" and adds that it "also facilitates stigma-threatening comparisons" (2003,141) including the accusations of women of being sapphic lesbian if they "fail to comply with gender norms". The stigmatization of non-compliance with feminine standards has consistently been used as a reason for physical outcasting in what is commonly known as American lesbian literature, including canonical works such as Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues,* Bannon's *Odd Girl Out* (1957), *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop* by Fannie Flagg, *Spring Fire* by Marijeane Meaker and other more recent works of sapphic fiction including *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* (2015) or even the recent *Delilah Green Doesn't Care* (2022). The consequence of the displacement from the nuclear heteropatriarchal family pushes for re-location. In situations of outcasting, American fiction interprets the American West, as previously mentioned, as a feeling of hope. The reading of this land would normally push North American outcasts to the West, but it pushes sapphic characters to New York City in the east.

Bannon's *Odd Girl Out* sets a precedent on what could be published. This work marked a first in the sapphic subgenre of pulp fiction: identity awareness. The protagonist in *Odd Girl Out,* Laura, is refreshingly aware of her lesbian identity. Her voicing her identity as a lesbian settles her decision to abandon her small college town to find a new life in New York City. Restoration of order, usually death or expulsion, in sapphic fiction was devised to destroy what was thought to be a threat to the institution of the family. Laura 's decision is somewhat forced, having been publicly shamed and abandoned by her lover. However, she is one of the first protagonists to recognize her own sexual identity without the shame attached to it: "I know what I am, and I can be honest with myself now. I'll live my life as honestly as I can, without ruining it. I can't do that here and I can't do it with you. That's over now"

(Bannon 2015, 110). This betrayal and shaming narrative repeats in modern lesbian works, such as Linda Hill's *Never Say Never* written over 30 years after. However, Laura's identity assertion imprisons her in her outcasting and consequent move to the *promised land* that the city is for sapphic characters.

The journey Molly Bolt (in Rita Mae Brown's *Rubyfruit Jungle)* undertakes is an arduous one, the same as the one leading the Joad family to their Western demise in Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath.* Unwelcomeness in the familiar home, together with a lack of economic and cultural resources for a fresh start, requires a queer rebirth that she finds in New York City. Molly Bolt's journey to the LGBTQ scene is the key that she uses to grow her own hope and freedom. *Ruby-fruit Jungle* provides its protagonist, Molly Bolt, with the necessary tools to engineer a happy ending, eliminating the need to punish her with death, which had to be endured by many sapphic characters before her. Molly, however, is displaced and cast out in response to her sapphic identity assertion, leading her to her outcasting.

Highsmith's *The Price of Salt* served as a first window into the scene that Molly Bolt was able to enjoy. The setting of the novel in the early 1950s emphasizes the domesticity of sapphic women in the city at the time, but it also highlights the undercover sapphic community that the novel's protagonist (Carol) was as a part of. Carol's friends, more explicitly Abigail, are oftentimes past lovers that the married woman has kept in her close circle, which helps portray the private, yet existent and strong, relationships between women in the anonymity of the big apple. The traditional United States west makes an interesting appearance in this landmark piece. Therese and Carol's two-week trip Westwards drives the two lovers to physical freedom, where they reach the peak of their physical intimacy in the novel. Nonetheless, said triumph quickly overturns, as the plot pushes the trait of the poisoned West for sapphic American characters: the two lovers are caught by a private investigator and must immediately return to New York City. The recordings that the private investigator collects in the west will serve as proof of indecency in court, making her lose custody of her daughter. The custody battle was the protagonist's main concern during the entire narrative. The fact that these tapes are recorded in the west points at a tendency to portray the west as a non-safe space for the queer community in American fiction.

The lesbian migration east-wards, inverting the liberatory qualities of the American literary West is consistent in these works of fiction. Other examples are shown in *Rubyfruit Jungle* where Molly's mother kicks her out as soon as her relationship with her childhood friend is made public: "A queer, I raised a queer, that's what I know. You're lower than them dirty fruit pickers in the groves, you know that?" (Brown 2015, 3). There is no space for Molly's queerness in her western home, there is not even room for a conversation about it: "I don't want to hear nothing you can say." (Brown 2015, 3 ch.4). The situation makes the home an unsafe space one that has to be fled. The trip that Molly takes, unlike the one in Steinbeck's narrative, is not transformational, but rather a means to an end. The quality of California as a promise land, described in dime novels since the 19th century, is reverted in the case of the queer community. The end of the sapphic journey is New York City where they can finally start developing a life with no punishment.[3]

Using terms like *relocation* or *movement* in these contexts can be tricky. Contrary to journeys in United States literature towards the west for its figurative hope and promise, the journeys undertaken by many of the female protagonists in these narratives should be referred to as a displacement. Following the words of Caren Kaplan, movement promises the contradiction of security and freedom, in that there is "oscillation and tension between the liberating promise of mobility and the security of fixed location" (Kaplan, see Sheller 2021, 32). Movement has landed a liberatory capacity, but it is inseparable from making a choice about it. The lack of choice in a character's narrative for movement prevents the liberation. If the choice is not made, then there is displacement. Thus, sapphics in American fiction are displaced from the *fixture* of their original location, which they are forced to abandon.

Movement, as exemplified by the ample tradition of roadtrip bildungsroman fiction in American literature, fictionalizes the growth in a controlled-sphere metaphor. In queer terms, movement serves not only as a metaphorical walk towards growth to places where they can expand and develop, but also a literal one. North American sapphic fiction has fed from the tradition of narratives of the American West.

As it is the case with Therese, Laura and *Molly*, August Laundry, protagonist in the 2021 best-seller *One Last Stop,* makes her way to New York City searching for liberation. August has recently transferred to Brooklyn College to escape her family situation and feel more at ease with her life. Even though the protagonist lives in San Francisco, another of the most accepting places for LGBTQ population in the United States, her choice to move east-wards links the narrative to the inherited trait of the endless possibilities of NYC. The narrative establishes the tone of immersion in the queer scene with the very first few lines, when August responds to an advert on a room for rental:

> "SEEKING YOUNG SINGLE ROOMMATE FOR 3BR APARTMENT UPSTAIRS, 6TH FLOOR. $700/MO. MUST BE QUEER & TRANS FRIENDLY." (McQuiston 2021, 12)

In *One Last Stop*, the protagonist's lost uncle, fled his hometown for New York and later California. This is also the case for August's love interest, Jane, who landed in New York after experiencing several places in the Western side of North America. The journeys of these characters were both experienced in the 1970s, a time of great LGBTQ liberation, also adding to the queer migration to NYC.

Other modern works have also perpetuated the idea of the West as a place not suitable for lesbian women. In the 2017 best-seller *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo* Taylor Jenkins-Reid provides her main character, Evelyn Hugo, with happy queer ending only when the couple is in New York City. Encompassed in the strict rules of Hollywood stardom, Evelyn falls in love early in her career with her screen-nemesis Celia St. James. The two women are stuck in the Western cinema industry, whose pressure drives them to never being able to publicly live together or have their identity accepted. Although the two spend most of their lives in an on and off relationship, the only time the narrative allows them to be truly at ease with their love is when they establish their residence in an apartment of the Upper East Side. Immediately after the move, Evelyn felt liberated "I was free to go wherever I wanted" (Jenkins-Reid 2017, 360) so much so that the women could walk around as a couple confidently, a problem that had been the main struggle in their relationship up until that point "And then she [Celia] calmly, confidently, took my hand" (2017, 360). The weight of their movement or migration to the city does not seem to have such a strong hold in Jenkin-Reid's text, but it does suggest the inheritance of the lesbian idea for the liberatory qualities of this city.

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[3] Similarly, although from the focalization of an outside spectator, Alice Walker presents in her work *The Color Purple* the ideal of the sapphic liberation of New York City.

THE WEST VILLAGE

Using the words *allow to exist* to describe the situation of the LGBTQ community in the second half of the 20th century New York City might seem surprising, but it is not that far from the truth, at least for sapphic women. The fact that many of the novels with queer protagonists set the city as the LGBTQ West is not a random choice. In fact, past and present American sapphic narratives in this field happen in New York, they have their protagonists escape to New York City or mention the liberating atmosphere of the Big Apple (examples range from the analyzed in this article to Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues* (1993) to *Delilah Green Doesn't Care* (2022) by Ashley H. Blake. Registered sapphic organizations are nonexistent in North America until 1955, contrary to the scarce gay organizations that existed in the late XIX and early XX century in the United States (Mattachine Society founded in 1950, Student Homophile League, in 1966). Another way of queer women to gather was conforming a part of other minorities organizing meetings, to avoid attention. One of the most popular areas for these groups was New York City and most specifically, neighborhoods like Greenwich Village or the West Village, home to the *Stonewall Inn*. The city did not lack state laws against the practice of homosexuality, but it let these groups slip through some cracks, which will eventually drive to it becoming the first city in the United States to reduce sodomy to a misdemeanor:

> Although police and law enforcement agencies frequently kept records on suspected homosexuals, they often adopted a policy of ignoring these files except when it was convenient to do otherwise. [...] Although only a handful of these people were arrested during my tenure in that job, their activities were observed (perhaps unknown to them) and their files were periodically updated. Such a practice could pose threats to any gay person [...] in any attempt to elicit change. There was also a kind of unofficial censorship on the topic. (Bullough 2008, 4)

There is a key component of the way in which the NYPD is described to act in relation to any suspicion of homosexual behavior: they possessed the ability to look over it. This would have been impossible in many other United States cities, let alone small towns in the mid-western side of the country, that most sapphic protagonists are running away from. Laura, for instance, the protagonist in *Odd Girl Out* left her town for New York City, where she will move to Greenwich Village and go on to discover more of her sexuality in subsequent novels of the *Beebo Brinker Chronicles* series. She is far from being the only one. New York City neighborhoods also represented a haven for the protagonist of Rita Mae Brown's *Rubyfruit Jungle* (1973): "And that's where I was going. There are so many queers in New York that one more wouldn't rock the boat" (Brown 2015, 164).

The constant raids that transgender, sapphic, gay and bisexual citizens of New York City suffered throughout the decades before and after the Stonewall riots add up to the evidence literature shows that this city provided, at least in theory, a bigger scenario for the development of sapphic women and consequently, sapphic characters in American literature.

IDENTITY

The principle of the sapphic eastward migration described above draws similarities with the ideal of the westward expansion. Sapphic characters across the second half of the 20th century needed a place to run to, a symbolical West that could bring them the prosperity that they were not achieving in the society they were brought up in. Like the heroes and anti-heroes in Western novels, the protagonists of the sapphic lesbian fiction I am centered on have a clear objective when leaving their homes, goals more established in some narratives than others. There are two crucial differences with the protagonists of western fiction, the first variation lies in the destination. The second difference is the ultimate necessity to flee in need of survival. Not leaving their home states could suppose the abandonment of their identity and lack of development outside of the norm that had been established, as well as consistent violence. In contrast to western dime novels, where leaving the home state aligns with a duty to expand and *conquer* western land.

Sapphics in novels from the 1950s on did not escape the wild gunshots of saloons, but rather the inherited roles expected from their gender. Mid-western women had a specific binary oppositional role in western fiction, if any, which did not allow for much development. Gentle tamers' role "has been sentimentalized and given a rhetorical mystical importance approaching sainthood" (Irwin and Brooks 2004, 11). Breaking out of these roles, necessary for the balance of the developed idea of the western territory, would imply making a statement against patriotism itself. As it has been previously discussed, fixed ideals were key for the development of a worthy new American mind, which prided in the purity of intention in its functionality. This shows even in the late second half of the twentieth century, where "women have remained invisible to most writers […] the impression is left that women played insignificant roles in settling the American West" (2004, 12).

The protagonists in *Odd Girl Out* by Ann Bannon, Laura and her lover Beth, struggle to recognize their love for each other and identity in their small college town. They had been in a stormy relationship for a while when the shunning of an unmarried pregnant student changes their perspective. Consequences would be far worse for them was their relationship to be discovered. Their decision to flee is imminent: they are going to try their luck in New York City, but in a final plot twist, only one of them builds up the courage to actually abandon everything. Although the mandatory punishment of the novel for Laura (for being openly happy with her queerness) is her having to give up the only life she has known, as well as losing her lover to a man, to her, this decision is a bold statement. Laura might not be allowed to love women in the small Illinois town she was raised in, but she is going to find the place where she will be allowed to. Not moving would push her into a life of social shame, isolation and lack of identity.

The main protagonists in *The Price of Salt* (by Patricia Highsmith) further exemplify the impossibility of survival in their trip westwards. The private investigator that destroys Carol and Therese's relationship could only get the necessary evidence in the western town of Colorado Springs, and it is only when they return to New York City that they achieve a happy ending. Similar escapism from the west in sapphic characters is present in the story of August (*One Last Stop, 2021),* who "Always wanted to try it" (McQuiston 2021, 20), and discovers that the solution to her ever-present family secret had always been in New York City. Her identity gets resolved only in her time in the city, and not in the other places she has tried: "New York, it's … I don't know, I tried a couple of cities. I went to UNO in New Orleans, then U of M in Memphis, and they all felt … too small, I guess." (2021, 20). The anonymity that August finds in the big city helps her find her smaller, chosen community.

In Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982) the presence of displacement and absence of movement creates an interesting switch in Celie. When forced to marry Mr. ______, she is displaced from her home entirely, lacking the ability to move. Her nemesis and eventual lover, Shug Avery, turns moving into her identity. Shug Avery moves around the country finding music gigs that provide the musical stardom that she is after while Celie watches from afar, only allowed to self-identify through Shug.

SURVIVAL

Susan Lee Johnson states in her chapter on American Western masculinities that "That [white masculinity] rhetoric not only has obscured the vast diversity and stubborn inequities of western life but also has informed configurations of power and politics from Hollywood to Washington, D.C., and has been exported by U.S. media to far corners of the globe" (1996, 93). The established positions women developed during this time are now intrinsic to them and run well into the current times that are described in novels from the 20th century.

NYC held an institutional environment that proved to be relatively safer for queer people, but it also was home to an endless array of professional opportunities that still today makes it one of the most popular cities of the country. This can be found in Highsmith's *The Price of Salt* with the character of Therese Belivet, who had an undiscovered identity until she moved to New York. It provided her with the possibility of pursuing a career in scenography and most importantly to discover and take a chance in her lesbian affair with Carol. Although debatable, Highsmith's *The Price of Salt* is described to be the first lesbian American narrative with a happy ending. Among other facts, publishing houses refused for years to give up mandatory moralistic punishment for their lesbian protagonists, but for Therese, who got to not only stay alive at the ending of the novel but also to successfully move in with her love interest Carol, New York City seems to have served its liberatory purpose. Similarly, in Jenkins Reid´s novel, Evelyn Hugo and Celia St. James manage to live their relationship fully only when they are in New York City. The shame and secrecy that the paparazzi scene forces upon them in Los Angeles almost vanishes in the city, giving them a taste of the domesticity, they could never achieve on the west coast.

Independence is also a key feature of the sapphic survival of Molly in *Rubyfruit Jungle* after her mother banishes her from their family home as soon as she discovers she has been involved with women. The focalizer makes important remarks about this in the story. Her financial situation does not improve until she manages to get a job and save to go to school and pursue her projects as a filmmaker: "I had $14.61 in my jeans, that's what was left over from Faye's money and the remains of mine after the bus ticket. That wouldn't get me half to New York City" (Brown 2015, 164). New York City was the place for Molly to be able to explore her identity as a lesbian in an environment that allowed it more than her hometown and had a platform for it, but most importantly, it was the place where she had a chance of, as a queer woman, getting a job and an education that would allow her to move in the queer scene and build a life.

Movement for survival, especially movement to New York City brings a recurrent topic in sapphic United States fiction as is also seen through Laura (*Odd Girl Out*), who had to move in order to survive social outcasting and identity crises. Molly Bolt fights for the entire narrative to be taken seriously, once she has found her place in New York:

> Damn, I wished the world would let me be myself. But I knew better on all counts. I wish I could make my films. That wish I can work for. One way or another I'll make those movies and I don't feel like having to fight until I'm fifty. But if it does take that long then watch out world because I'm going to be the hottest fifty-year-old this side of the Mississippi. (2015, 291)

She is determined that she has found the place where she will be able to survive, regardless of how much time breaking barriers takes.

CONCLUSIONS

The American literary West has served as one of the most influential developments of cultural history in the 19th century. Its influence ranges to the literary scene of today. The strong hold of tradition and masculinity in the idea of the West, did not make room for the sapphic characters who suffered from displacement in the 2Oth century fiction. The feeling of unwelcomeness would not go unnoticed by these characters in lesbian fiction written from the 1950s on. It became ingrained and rooted in the psyche of a community that would have to go on to find a new idea of the freedom of the West.

In this article, I have shown how the sapphic community went on to find a *new west* in the LGBTQ populated neighborhoods of New York City, such as the West Village and Greenwich Village. The inherited trait of migration from the Westward Expansion, the hope found in moving to a place unknown in search of a new way of living, is common in sapphic narratives, which largely portrays New York City as their preferred destination.

In the first two texts chronologically, *The Price of Salt* by Patricia Highsmith and *Odd Girl Out* by Ann Bannon, the pattern of escape is very clearly shown through the characters of Therese Belivet and Laura Landon, who chose New York City to construct their own identity. Although Therese's origin is not described in the novel, it is made clear through the narrative that moving out was her only option in order for her life to become her own. In the case of Laura, whose reason for escape is her relationship with Beth in her small-town college campus, New York City is the first and only place coming to her mind. The narrative makes it clear that the city will be the place where she can become free from all the shame and ideals of the past to explore herself and her sexuality.

As we advance further in time, the same narrative can be extracted from Rita Mae Brown's 1973 *Rubyfruit Jungle,* whose protagonist must flee the western town she was raised in for a chance at the rebirth she finds in New York City. This allows her to know love and achieve a filmmaking career, which is something her Western town shunned her for. New York City serves as the new West the lesbian community found in the literary world. Migration has a role to play in both recent best-selling novels 2017 *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo* and the 2021 novel *One Last Stop.*

In spite of the unwelcomeness that Lesbian American fiction depicts in the traditional American West, some recent narratives are starting to promise a reconciliation. The 2022 novel by Ashley Herring Blake, *Delilah Green Doesn't Care,* shows a main protagonist who, felt unaccepted in her native western US town in Oregon under color of her queerness, manages to come back from her adoptive New York City to build back her life and pursue her lesbian relationship. Until then, one thing becomes clear: in sapphic American fiction, New York City becomes the queer West.

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