

Bodily Boundaries:
Space, Place, and the Self in Elizabeth Acevedo's *The Poet X*

Jaydene Van Eaton

For many, familiar spaces and places provide a haven for navigating the emotional and bodily experiences of adolescence. One's bedroom may function as an impermeable fortress, while a childhood park may recall joyous memories of early life. For Xiomara Batista, the once-habitual places of family, religion, and friendship transform into murky spaces of exploration, entrapment, and self-doubt in teenagehood. In Elizabeth Acevedo's *The Poet X*, Xiomara traverses the diverse cityscape of Harlem, New York through verse as she ventures into the unclear world of adolescence and growth. Through physical and metaphorical spaces, Xiomara challenges the binaries and boundaries established in her Harlem community, building a new, fully formed sense of self through slam poetry. Faced with unrelenting hyper-sexualization and sexism, Xiomara feels voiceless and vulnerable as she straddles the uncomfortable space between childhood and adulthood. Since she began to grow older, Mami, Papi, the boys in town, and even Twin have been acting different towards her. Now, Xiomara only feels noticed for her external body, rather than her inner self. For Xiomara, poetry provides the safe sanctuary that she cannot achieve from the spaces, places, and people around her. Through the pages of her trusted notebook, and eventually, her developing voice, Xiomara slams her away across Harlem and the globe, traversing issues of puberty, sexuality, religion,

friendships, and family by reimagining herself as empowered, rather than entrapped.

As the grounding boundary in Xiomara's life, Harlem holds more significance than simply being Xiomara's hometown. Rather, Harlem embodies the effects of mixed heritage, diaspora, and cultural pride for the Batista family. In the United States, Harlem is a central space for Dominican residents and their cultural traditions. After a long, horrific dictatorship from 1930-1961, thousands of Dominicans immigrated to the United States for safety against reprisal and social revolt (Cyr slide 6). Dominicans settled across the country with pronounced communities in New Jersey, Florida, and New York. In New York, Harlem represents the thriving culture of Dominicans in their diaspora. The history of Harlem and the Dominican Republic provides a basis on which to figure Mami, Papi, Father Sean, Caridad, Xiomara, and Twin. From the associations of black, female bodies to Mami's desperate reliance on religion, Xiomara is inextricable from the impacts of diaspora around her. Although Xiomara feels removed from her Dominican heritage, the effects of Afro-Latina diaspora seep into the cracks of her everyday life. While Xiomara initially attempts to distance herself from the Dominican, her struggles with body image, religion, and family can only be resolved when Xiomara figures herself within her heritage as an Afro-Latina girl.

In her Harlem home, Xiomara and Twin's shared bedroom is a confined space that restricts the growth of Xiomara's physical and emotional self. Since entering puberty, Xiomara's body has grown to an "un-hideable" (Acevedo 5) size. At home, Mami remarks that she "has too much body for a young girl" (5), while

the *vendedores* outside her stoop relentlessly comment on her body. No matter where or what Xiomara does, her body remains the focal point of attention. While her bedroom shelters her from the catcallers, it only partially keeps her family out. Older, smarter, and more timid, Twin is an ever-present figure in their room. Despite being physically close to Twin, his constant presence suffocates Xiomara further. She lacks the privacy and space necessary for her growing self. Caroline Hamilton-Mckenna's article, "Beyond the Boundaries: Negotiations of Space, Place, Body and Subjectivity in YA Fiction," provides a basis to figure the impacts of space on the body. For adolescents, "conceptualization of place, identity, and the body" are defined through "boundaries and binaries" (308). As a safe space to "put [her] headphones on / and listen to Drake" (52), Xiomara and Twin's overstuffed room reflects the overspilling of boundaries that Xiomara struggles to contain. Moreover, spaces that function as "fixed constructions of place and identity" (308) may limit a teen's ability to redefine space, place, and consequentially, the self. For Xiomara, her bedroom remains stagnant and unchanging since childhood. The physical size of the room positions Xiomara as "too much" (Acevedo 5) for its walls, suggesting that Xiomara's changing body is the root of her problems, rather than the limited surroundings that cannot accommodate her growth. From the beginning of the novel, Xiomara's bedroom is a space of entangled bodies and stripped privacy, establishing Xiomara's inescapable, rooted turmoil within.

Although Xiomara's home is in the United States, her struggles in identity are inextricably linked to the Dominican Republic, where Mami and Papi emigrated prior to her birth. For Xiomara, her relationship with body and family are

complicated by her connection to the Dominican Republic. While Xiomara notes early on that the name “Xiomara isn’t even Dominican” (7), she still recognizes her ties to Mami and Papi’s homeland. Outside of the home, Caridad, Twin, and Xiomara are friends largely due to their shared ethnicity, despite all three sharing contrasting outlooks on life. In the home, Mami’s experience with immigration harbours unaddressed resentment for Papi, who she “was forced to marry” as part of “a business deal” so “she could travel to the States” (22). For Mami, the “only man [she] wanted / was nailed to a cross” (22), a figure that a younger Papi directly contrasts. Mami’s trauma from diaspora and marriage is perpetuated within Xiomara, who consequentially recognizes her father as a shallow, unnecessary figure in her life. Despite Mami’s harshness, Xiomara knows that life was harder for Mami in the Dominican, “where the priests and the nuns know / how to elicit true piety” (17) through abuse and punishment. Still, her mother’s internalized experiences from the Dominican haunt Xiomara by enforcing rigid prayer rituals and bodily restrictions. When Xiomara gets her period at age eleven and turns to Mami for assistance with her tampons, Mami accuses Xiomara of “having relations” (40) rather than comforting her daughter. For Mami, signals of puberty and growth in Xiomara represent the loss of autonomy that she suffered as a young woman. For Xiomara, Mami’s experience as a Dominican immigrant exemplifies the fear that Mami holds for Xiomara as an Afro-Latina woman. Consequentially, Mami cannot view Xiomara’s transition to womanhood as beautiful due to her own complicated relationship with womanhood, sex, and safety.

Similarly, Xiomara's own understanding of religion is bound to her experience as an Afro-Latina girl. From the beginning of the novel, Xiomara asserts that she began to "really see / the way that church / treats a girl like me differently" (14). Significantly, Xiomara does not conflate her experience to that of all women. Rather, she is acutely aware that her position as a Dominican girl with "D-cups and swinging hips" (5) leads to feeling like "all [she is] worth is under [her] skirt" (14). At home and in church, Xiomara is villainized for other men's oversexualization of her body despite being an inactive and non-consenting participant. In the poem "After," Xiomara releases the fury she feels when being sexualized by "boys – and sometimes – / grown ass men" (53). Regardless of what actions she takes, Xiomara is hypersexualized and consequentially punished by herself, Mami, and the religious sermons that deem the female body as a taboo object. K.C Barrientos's "'Strand-ed': Interrogating the Shame of the Afro-Latina Female Body in Elizabeth Acevedo's 'Afro-Latina' and 'Hair'" further discusses the villainization of Afro-Latina bodies in a colonialist world. Barrientos critiques "the spectacle of a black body in the white world" (1), in which black bodies are simultaneously fetishized and dehumanized. Since enslavement, "mythologies of primitivism, animality, sensuality and sinfulness" (1) have been inscribed into the black body, breeding shame for the diasporic self. As such, the "far-reaching impacts of colonialism" (2) have driven many black women to "deny and find shame" in their "Africanness" (2). When Xiomara attempts to show pride and celebration for her body by dressing for her own pleasure on a date with Aman, she is punished with excessive, unwanted prayer.

Thus, Xiomara continues to associate her body with shame, sin, and secrecy, a space that cannot exist without facing disapproval from Mami and the church.

Linked to Xiomara's nuanced association of religion and body is the origin story of Catholic-Christianity itself. Throughout the novel, Xiomara figures herself to Eve as a woman who is bound to perpetual shame and sin. For both Xiomara and Eve, their identity as women is punished for breeding curiosity and questioning the governance around them. According to the Genesis story of Creation, Adam and Eve lived in innocence until Eve is deceived by "an evil serpent" that offers her fruit from the "forbidden 'tree of the knowledge of good and evil'" ("Garden of Eden"). In many understandings of the text, the forbidden fruit takes form of an apple and represents sexual temptation. For centuries, Eve's deception has therefore been regarded as the female tendency to give in to sexual temptation and sin. In "The Routine," Xiomara enjoys her favourite snack, apples, before hurriedly cleaning the home alongside Mami. While Xiomara cleans, Twin is not obligated to perform the same tasks. Xiomara notes that the unequal routine is "one of the few things Twin and [her] ever fight about" (Acevedo 42). The passage reflects the unequal punishment of women in Genesis, which asserts that women will remain "[subordinate] to man" ("Garden of Eden") as punishment for Eve's sin. Xiomara is bound to implicit, unexplained punishment that she must perform. Later, Xiomara's curiosity in sexual experimentation is similarly regarded as inherently sinful and worthy of severe punishment. For Mami, and subsequently, Xiomara's inner voice, purity is tied to dignity and self-worth. When Xiomara is caught kissing Aman on the subway, Mami asserts that Xiomara's actions render her untrustworthy, undignified, and unholy.

Despite being punished with isolation, pain, and forced devotion, Xiomara knows that she truly “didn’t do anything at all” (197). Like Eve, Xiomara is unable to resist temptation. Yet, her persistent pursuit of curiosity reveals Xiomara’s rebellion against the unjust villainization of sexual female bodies, instead embracing an image of power and self-confidence.

At the skating rink with Aman, Xiomara is confronted with her own problematic beliefs of gender performativity and bodily expectation. When Xiomara realizes that skating is “a secret thing he’s loved / that he never felt he could talk about” (186), she wonders how he acquired such talent. Moreover, Xiomara notes that for Aman, skating is not a broadcasted skill. Her perplexity reveals Xiomara’s inability to imagine men partaking in passion-centered activities like skating, which are deemed sinful and weak for men like Papi. When Aman shares that his Papi never allowed him to take skating classes for fear of being “too soft” (188), her prior notions of masculinity shift. For the first time, Xiomara openly considers “all the things we could be / if we were never told our bodies were not built for them” (188). Thus, it is at the skating rink that Xiomara conceptualizes gender performativity and its hazardous impacts on the self. Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* further analyzes the role of gender performativity in limiting the self. For Butler, traditional gender categories “support gender hierarchies” (2376) that aim to categorize people in distinct, binary groups. In the colonized, patriarchal world, actions and markers that defy these gender binaries are wholly rejected. Despite this, Butler figures gender as a norm that is not stable and binary, but performative and fluid. Importantly, gender “requires a performance that is repeated” (2387) through the reproduction of

dominant media, such as television, religion, and music. Prior to her skating date with Aman, Xiomara's understanding of gender is limited to the binaries which have been established by Mami, Papi, and the church. When she witnesses Aman perform stereotypically feminine tricks, however, she recognizes "gender as a fantasy" (2384) that is inscribed upon the surface of bodies. As a symbolic space of freedom for Aman, the skating rink represents Xiomara's newfound potential for bodily pleasure. For the rest of the novel, Xiomara continues to reveal that she is no longer bound to the gendered expectations of femininity or masculinity, but rather pursues an image of the self which is defined by empowerment and joy.

In Ms. Galiano's poetry club, Xiomara further develops a complex understanding of self, love, faith, and family. For Xiomara, the poetry club provides a private space where she can exercise her voice freely and without fear for judgement. The club is comprised of "a cute little mix of people" that includes Isabelle, another mixed-race girl who is "from the Bronx" (Acevedo 256). In befriending Isabelle, Xiomara recognizes the potential in black female voices. After reading her poetry for the first time, Xiomara realizes that "[her] little words / feel important" (259) in Ms. Galiano's room. Throughout the novel, Xiomara has struggled against a lack of power and agency. Uncomfortable in her oversexualized, over-grown body, writing and reciting poetry enables Xiomara with a newfound sense of control and autonomy over the challenges she cannot seem to escape. When Mami burns Xiomara's precious notebook, "the poems and stanzas [she] memorized spill out" (305) of her mouth. To Xiomara, the burning of her poetry is equivalent to a loss in self. After the incident, Xiomara recognizes in Ms. Galiano's class that she

“had the right to stop it all / without [knuckles] / but with just some simple words” (333). From this moment on, Xiomara utilizes poetry to heal the broken relationship between her body and voice, which Xiomara had previously figured as distinctly separate. Moreover, Xiomara reconciles her resentment for faith through spoken word and communication. By recognizing the power of her own words, Xiomara frees herself from the painful vice of hatred, granting her the freedom to perceive herself, faith, and family as nuanced, rather than absolute.

Through poetry, Xiomara discovers the power in her voice as an Afro-Latina teen. Prior to writing, Xiomara understood herself as little more than a voiceless, cruel body bound to the emotional needs of Twin, Mami, and Caridad. It is in poetry that Xiomara creates new friendships outside of her Dominican community and heals her resentful relationship with the world around her. Aman, Ms. Galiano, and her new friends in poetry club recognize Xiomara for more than her heritage, body, or strength by acknowledging her as a complex being worthy of friendship and voice. Further, poetry club prompts Xiomara to discover that the world around her is not easily definable, but is impacted by nuances of gender, religion, diaspora, and self. Now, Xiomara’s relationships gain new depth as she recognizes that Mami, Papi, and Twin are influenced by the same struggles that she faces. By the end of the novel, Xiomara utilizes slam poetry to express suppressed emotions of childhood, leaning on a new chapter of faith and family to guide her through the nuances of teenagehood.

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