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Mapping Portland's Cultural Landscape: City Identity Formation in Selected Literary Representations

WKRAZAJĄC W KULTUROWY KRAJOBRAZ PORTLAND – O TOŻSAMOŚCI MIASTA
W WYBRANYCH REPREZENTACJACH LITERACKICH

Summary

This article reconstructs Portland's cultural identity through an analysis of selected literary representations of the city by Katherine Dunn, Ursula K. Le Guin, Chuck Palahniuk, and Peter Rock. The research objective is to examine the concept of "otherness" as a constitutive category of Portland's identity. By employing an interdisciplinary approach – combining literary analysis and hermeneutic reflection with elements of the anthropology of space – the study systematizes knowledge regarding the city's local identity. The analysis highlights unique elements of the city's topography (Portland's *genius loci*), which have changed significantly in recent years. Furthermore, it addresses how social, environmental, and economic challenges have triggered a transformation of the city's cultural topography. The study emphasizes the connection between literary representations of Portland's space and the real-life concerns of its residents. A cultural studies narrative captures the performative nature of the urban landscape and illustrates the evolution of Portland's identity from the 1980s to the present.

Keywords: Portland; literature; urban identity; cultural and social context; *genius loci*

Streszczenie

Artykuł ma na celu rekonstrukcję tożsamości kulturowej Portland poprzez analizę wybranych literackich reprezentacji miasta (K. Dunn, U.K. Le Guin, C. Palahniuk, P. Rock). Założeniem badawczym jest studium koncepcji „inności” jako kluczowej kategorii konstytuującej tożsamość Portland. Podejście interdyscyplinarne (perspektywa literaturoznawcza, refleksja hermeneutyczna z elementami antropologii przestrzeni) pozwala na uporządkowanie wiedzy o lokalnej tożsa-

mości miasta. Wskazano na unikalne elementy topografii samego miasta (*genius loci* Portland), które znacząco zmieniło się na przestrzeni ostatnich lat. Wyzwania społeczne, środowiskowe i gospodarcze wywołały też transformację jego topografii kulturowej. Wskazano na łączność literackich reprezentacji przestrzeni Portland z realnymi problemami mieszkańców. Narracja w kluczu kulturoznawczym umożliwiła uchwycenie performatywnego charakteru miejskiego krajobrazu i ukazanie ewolucji tożsamości Portland (od lat 80. XX wieku).

Słowa kluczowe: Portland; literatura; tożsamość miejska; kontekst kulturowy i społeczny; *genius loci*

Portland isn't a typical American city, because there is no such thing; but it has pretty much what most American cities have, and it does, in its own way, what American cities do... . Of the five great West Coast cities, the northern four, San Francisco, Portland, Seattle, and Vancouver, B.C., have much in common, in looks and in mood. They are ports, built on hills above water, their skies are often grey and their winds cool, they have compact, lively, walkable downtowns, and people live in them, not only in the suburbs.¹

1. "Otherness" as a Constitutive Category of Portland's Identity

Approaching the city as a hybrid space allows for the examination of both its physical shifts and the underlying transformations of its sociocultural fabric. As Elżbieta Rybicka notes, in research discourse, the city becomes a "unique laboratory of cultural transformations" – an area that is experienced, interpreted, and ultimately, "the description of cities leads, in essence, to a diagnosis of contemporary culture."² In the context of established geopoetic studies,³ it is justified to speak of the "city

1 Ursula K. Le Guin, "A Street That Crosses America", in Ursula K. Le Guin, *Blue Moon over Thurman Street*, with photographs by Roger Dorband (NewSage Press, 1993), 7.

2 Furthermore, in detailing the links between urban issues and cultural studies, the author points to the influence of Georg Simmel's thought – developed by Walter Benjamin and Siegfried Kracauer – the research of Raymond Williams, the significance of Michel de Certeau's work (*L'invention du quotidien*), the discourse of Michel Foucault, and Kenneth White's essay, which is fundamental to geopoetics in the contemporary sense. Elżbieta Rybicka, "Geopoetyka (o mieście, przestrzeni i miejscu we współczesnych teoriach i praktykach kulturowych)," in *Kulturowa teoria literatury: Główne pojęcia i problemy*, ed. Michał Paweł Markowski and Ryszard Nycz (Towarzystwo Autorów i Wydawców Prac Naukowych Universitas, 2006), 472–473, 474, 483–484. Cf. Oksana Weretiuk, "Próba określenia i uporządkowania znaczeń związanych z geopoetyką," *Porównania* 12 (2012): 25–42, <https://doi.org/10.14746/p.2013.12.11047>.

3 In her discourse, Rybicka proposes treating space as an active factor shaping cultural and literary phenomena. In the monograph *Geopoetyka: Przestrzeń i miejsce we współczesnych teoriach i prak-*

text” as a specific form of narrative embedded in architecture, spatial topography, the imaginaries of inhabitants, and, finally, in cultural products. The topographical turn in the humanities treats cultural texts, including literature, not merely as static forms, but as dynamic records of the experience of space.⁴ Specific elements of the urban structure (such as the layout of buildings, districts, communication routes, and recreational areas), as well as the city as a whole (as a sociocultural phenomenon), evoke particular meanings, thereby constructing the identity of the place.

In this article, the concept of “otherness” serves as the primary category for reconstructing Portland’s cultural identity. Through the analysis of selected literary works, a multilayered examination of Portland’s space is conducted, treating it – with reference to the anthropology of place – as a configuration of experience and a living “cultural archive.” The analysis focuses on the central question of where “otherness” is situated within this landscape. By applying spatial anthropology, the study explores how urban transformation impacts the local community’s sense of belonging and identity. Within the selected texts, the tension between the “familiar” and the “foreign” acts as a primary vehicle for exploring Portland’s evolving urban and social landscape, with literary analysis revealing these boundaries through descriptions of place, character narratives, and emotional responses to the changing city.

In literary discourse, Portland’s “otherness” manifests in various forms. It appears as a deliberately crafted, programmatic “weirdness” – a category rooted in the “Keep Portland Weird” slogan, which became the foundation for a city image based on celebrating a distinctiveness that counters the culture of other American metropolises.⁵ This category of “otherness” escapes strict, particularly pejorative qualifications, and its main determinant remains the indefinability of the phenomenon as understood by the local community in multiple ways.⁶

tykach literackich, the researcher situates geopoetics as a research orientation and proposes a network of methodological concepts (including: auto/bio/geo/graphies, narrative maps, literature of idiolocality, reading as a geographical event, emotive topographies, literature as a place of memory). Cf. Elżbieta Rybicka, *Geopoetyka: Przestrzeń i miejsce we współczesnych teoriach i praktykach literackich*, *Horyzonty Nowoczesności* 109 (Towarzystwo Autorów i Wydawców Prac Naukowych Universitas, 2014).

- 4 Elżbieta Rybicka, “Od poetyki przestrzeni do polityki miejsca: Zwrot topograficzny w badaniach literackich,” *Teksty Drugie*, no. 4 (2008): 22–24.
- 5 In 2003, the motto was introduced by Terry Currier, the owner of Music Millennium, after he heard about the “Keep Austin Weird” movement. Eventually, it evolved into a slogan promoting individuality, local art, and the unique Portland lifestyle. *Keep Portland Weird*, 5 April 2025, <http://www.musicmillennium.com/Home>.
- 6 Portlanders proudly manifest the “otherness” of their space, which is clearly reflected in the slogan used in the city’s image branding: “Keep Portland Weird.” There is a significant number of annual

Within this narrative, the urban space serves as a haven for those living on the “peripheries” of mainstream American society, as seen in the works of Katherine Dunn and Chuck Palahniuk. Palahniuk’s *Fugitives and Refugees* serves as a seminal map of the city’s subcultures, formalizing the idea that Portland is a sanctuary for those who do not fit in elsewhere (the “most cracked of the crackpots”). Applying Marc Augé’s concept of “non-places” to Palahniuk’s depiction of Portland highlights the city as a functional, temporary transit space.⁷

“Otherness” is perceived and depicted as a lifestyle and a constant element of everyday life, manifesting through unconventional life choices, local customs, and the characters’ individualism, whereby the local acquires a sense of the *sacrum*. Furthermore, literary representations of the city address “otherness” as a condition imposed by social norms – one that is often painful and marked by exclusion related to homelessness, race, alienation, and a lack of belonging. In these instances, the physical difference of the characters or their inability to adapt to prevailing norms is foregrounded.⁸ Ultimately, literature serves as a sensitive diagnostic tool, recording and reflecting profound sociocultural shifts.

In media discourse, Portland itself is portrayed as an urban center that stands out on the U.S. map in terms of sustainability. Portland is one of America’s most outdoor-friendly cities, largely due to its multitude of urban green spaces.⁹ The scenic

gatherings (festivals, parades, and celebrated holidays) that reveal Portland’s “otherness”: Filmed by Bike, PDX Adult Soapbox Derby, Portlandia Mermaid Parade & Festival, The Portland Urban Iditarod, The Portland Weird Festival, Wordstock, PDX SantaCon, and The Portland Rose Festival. “Unique Culture in Portland,” Travel Portland, accessed May 6, 2025, <https://www.travelportland.com/culture/weird/>. Cf. Anna Maria Reglińska-Jemioł, “Keep Portland weird – wokół tematu migracji i zjawiska gentryfikacji na przykładzie stanu Oregon (USA): Tropy kulturowe, marginalia literackie, strategie adaptacyjne w kontekście doświadczeń codziennych,” *Turystyka Kulturowa*, no. 1 (2020): 87–91, <https://doi.org/10.62875/tk.v1i0.1113>.

- 7 While Augé views these areas as voids lacking deep relational identity, Palahniuk reimagines them as fertile ground for creating new, albeit chaotic, social identities, particularly for those he terms “fugitives and refugees.” See: Marc Augé, *Nie-miejsca: Wprowadzenie do antropologii hipernowoczesności*, trans. Roman Chymkowski, Pogranicza (Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2010).
- 8 The category of “otherness” can be applied to the very mode of literary world-building, where the boundaries between reality and the fantastic become blurred. Imagery maintained in the convention of magical realism becomes a tool for social critique (Bethany C. Morrow, *A Song Below Water*) or a means of expressing challenging themes for young readers (Michelle Ruiz Keil, *Summer in the City of Roses*; Aimee Bender, *The Butterfly Lampsbade*).
- 9 Among the more recent titles on urban studies and tourism literature promoting such an image of the region are: Barry Locke, *Portland Renaissance: When Creativity Redefined a City* (Alden Corner Publishing, 2023); Bruce Johnson, *The Pearl District: Placemaking From the Ground Up* (Pearl Light Publishing, 2022); Sy Adler, *Planning the Portland Urban Growth Boundary: The Struggle to Transform Trend City* (Oregon State University Press, 2022).

Portland area is home to hundreds of miles of hiking trails, while also boasting access to some of the most appealing nature spots in the Pacific Northwest. The region's eco-heritage, co-created by Portland residents, is clearly indicated by Floyd J. McKay. As the researcher points out,

These icons were created by not-so-ordinary citizens willing to challenge conventional wisdom and take to the streets or beaches on their own time and their own dime. Neighborhoods, schools, beaches, and rivers prospered from the efforts of activists, predominantly women and often immigrants from other places.¹⁰

Portland-based literature has long served as a powerful medium for shaping perspectives on ecological consciousness. Ursula K. Le Guin's profound, visionary ecological warnings have become an integral part of Portland's cultural identity. The entire creative oeuvre of Le Guin – a prominent representative of science fiction and fantasy,¹¹ an iconic figure in Portland's literary milieu, and a writer associated with the city for almost 60 years – is imbued with pro-environmental themes. In 1971, she published her novel *The Lathe of Heaven*, which is set in a future Portland (2002, to be precise). In this dystopian vision, the world struggles with overpopulation, the prospect of famine, and war, while climate change has wrought irreparable damage:

Very little light and air got down to street level; what there was was warm and full of fine rain. Rain was an old Portland tradition, but the warmth – 70° F on the second of March – was modern, a result of air pollution. Urban and industrial effluvia had not been controlled soon enough to reverse the cumulative trends already at work in the mid-twentieth century; it would take several centuries for the CO₂ to clear out of the air, if it ever did.¹²

The “Rose City”¹³ is also known for its vibrant arts scene, unique neighborhoods where the focus on local businesses genuinely matters, its famous food carts, and

10 Floyd J. McKay, *Reporting the Oregon Story: How Activists and Visionaries Transformed a State* (Oregon State University Press, 2016), 243.

11 Ted Hamilton, “Speculative Constitutions in Ursula K. Le Guin’s Hainish Cycle and the Rights of Nature,” *Law & Literature* 36, no. 3 (2023): 419–441, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1535685x.2022.2157102>.

12 Ursula K. Le Guin, *Lathe of Heaven* (Diversion Books, 2014), 38. In *Always Coming Home* (1985), the author excavates a possible future (set in a post-apocalyptic Napa Valley in Northern California), depicting a decentralized, peaceful society living in harmony with nature. The narration highlights the importance of topophilia as a driver of sustainability. For more, see: Ben Garlick and Liesl King, “A Geography Beyond the Anthropocene: Ursula Le Guin’s *Always Coming Home* as Topophilia for Survival,” *Cultural Geographies*, October 4, 2022, online first, <https://doi.org/10.1177/14744740221126984>.

13 Portland has been known as the “Rose City” since the late 19th century. The Term “City of Roses” was adopted as an official nickname in 2003.

its blend of liberal and progressive values. Popularized by the TV show *Portlandia* (2011–2018) the phrase: “The dream of the 90’s is alive in Portland” humorously reflects the nostalgic strangeness of Portland culture.

A useful instrument for exploring the cultural phenomenon of Portland’s “otherness” the comprehensive framework of the anthropology of space (viewing the city not only as a physical territory but also within a cultural and social context). In tracing the phantasms associated with Portland’s “otherness” and the traces of experiencing the space of the Oregon metropolis, a performative approach is informative. In such a perspective, Martyna Pryszmont-Ciesielska emphasizes the significance of the city’s everyday rituals. The scholar considers them a representative source of research that engages all the senses in the process of cognition, which in turn captures the dynamics of the urban iconosphere.¹⁴ Piotr Szczepański, on the other hand, draws attention to the relationship between hermeneutics and cultural urban studies, pointing out that the multilayered (material and immaterial) and multivalent model of the city also consists of the act of interpretation by the subject who experiences this space.¹⁵ This practice of “being-in-the-city,” in addition to everyday activities, can have a reflective, creative, and critical dimension.

2. Portland’s *Genius Loci*: Following the Trail of Selected Readings

In 1993, Le Guin collaborated with photographer Roger Dorband on a collection of poems and images celebrating a single Portland street.¹⁶ The photographs were taken along Thurman Street, in all seasons between 1985 and 1989 (mostly as it appeared to the pedestrian at street level). Accompanying stories from neighbors highlighted a diverse community of residents. Thurman Street is one of the principal thoroughfares in Portland’s Northwest District, extending from the river up to Willamette Heights. The book *Blue Moon Over Thurman Street* depicts a neighborhood that, despite change, maintains its own character. The street acts as a symbol of Portland’s

14 Martyna Pryszmont-Ciesielska, “Podejście badawcze inspirowane sztuką w projekcie pt. ‘Czytanie miasta – urban collective texts’,” in *Czytanie Miasta: Badania i animacja w przestrzeni*, ed. Kamila Kamińska (Instytut Wydawniczy Książka i Prasa, 2017), 17–29.

15 Piotr Szczepański, “Zrozumieć miasto: Hermeneutyka jako metoda badania fenomenu współczesnego miasta,” *Przestrzenie Teorii*, no. 30 (2019): 253, 257, <https://doi.org/10.14746/pt.2018.30.12>.

16 “To walk a street is to be told a story. Through the years that I have lived in Portland, as I walked up and down my street, Thurman Street, it kept telling me a story... And the street has changed again. But it keeps telling its story. And the more I listened the more I thought, What an American story this is. This is a street that crosses America...”; Le Guin, *Blue Moon over Thurman Street*, 6.

unique urban development, originating in industrial working-class areas and ending in a forest.

But when I called Forest Park “old growth,” I was taking poetic license. Forest Park – the largest urban wilderness in the country, with seventy miles of trails though the big firs – is second growth. It was logged early in the century. The beauty of it and the lesson of it that it was allowed to grow again, unhelped, unhindered. . . . A street that ends in a forest – there is a magic there.¹⁷

In local narratives, Portland's Forest Park is defined by its dual identity: “one-city's wilderness” (a term introduced by Marcy Cottrell Houle) and a wildlife sanctuary.¹⁸ Peter Rock, in his novel *My Abandonment*¹⁹ (upon which the film *Leave No Trace*, directed by Debra Granik, is based), explores the tension between this vast nature area and the encroachment of the surrounding civilization. The narrator of *My Abandonment* is 13-year-old Caroline, who, together with her father – a war veteran – builds a refuge in Forest Park over the course of four years. The forest is depicted as a magical and safe place, acting as a refuge for the lost while simultaneously being a liminal and lawless space. Inspired by a true story, the book is a narrative from a world that remains hidden, excluded from the official map of Portland, and relegated to the margins of local community life. The category of “otherness” can be applied to the theme of existing within the city while remaining completely outside its social rules and cultural norms.

As Le Guin notes: “This beautiful, strange novel takes us into the foreign country where those called homeless are at home, **the city is a wilderness**, and the greater wilderness lies beyond. Fascinating and moving, it tells us with great tenderness how human love goes wrong” [emphasis added].²⁰

17 Le Guin, 9. Colin Meloy (frontman of the Portland band “The Decemberists”) in his children's fantasy novel *Wildwood* transforms Portland's Forest Park into a forbidden, taboo area that is rarely even whispered about. Laika, an award-winning animation studio known for its unique, artisanal stop-motion aesthetic, has announced a release date for the film adaptation in October 2026; “Wildwood,” Laika, accessed February 25, 2026, <https://www.laika.com/our-films/wildwood>.

18 Marcy Cottrell Houle, *One City's Wilderness: Portland's Forest Park*, 3rd ed. (Oregon State University Press, 2010).

19 Peter Rock, *My Abandonment* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2009).

20 Ursula K. Le Guin, “Review of *My Abandonment* (2009),” The Peter Rock Project, accessed August 9, 2024, <https://peterrockproject.com/projects/my-abandonment/index.html>.

The place that inspired Dunn²¹ to write her most famous novel, *Geek Love* (1989) – a unique entry in the canon of contemporary American literature – was the Rose Test Garden in Portland’s Washington Park.²²

It was in Oregon, up in Portland, which they call the Rose City... .

He had been restless one day, troubled by business boondoggles. He drove up into a park on a hillside and got out for a walk... . “And there was a big rose garden with arbors and trellises and fountains... .” It was a test garden, and colors were design. Striped and layered. One color inside the petal and another color outside... .

The roses started him thinking, how the oddity of them was beautiful and how that oddity was contrived to give them value [emphasis added]. “It just struck me – clear and complete all at once – no long figuring about it.” He realized that children could be design. “And I thought to myself, now that would be a rose garden worthy of a man’s interest!”²³

In creating the story of the Binewski family’s bizarre circus troupe travelling across the United States, the author examined American society from the perspective of a person marginalized by society due to their otherness. The novel’s primary narrator is Olympia, a hunchbacked albino dwarf. Oly was created, or rather bred, by her parents using primitive genetic technology and experiments with drugs and radioactive substances. Her parents performed similar procedures on her siblings to save their declining business: Arturo (the AquaBoy with flippers for limbs and leader of a powerful cult), Iphy and Elly (Siamese twins), and the seemingly normal Chick (Fortunato), who possesses telekinetic powers. The scholarly discourse surrounding the novel focuses on disability studies, class marginalization, patriarchy, the genre of the feminine grotesque, and cult fiction.²⁴ As Victoria Warren points out,

21 Dunn was a central figure in “The Impossibilists,” an avant-garde collective of artists and writers active as performers and impresarios in Portland in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The group was known for its absurdist aesthetic and *The Impossibilist Manifesto*, which explicitly challenged established reality and authority. Cf. “Impossibilists Publications Collection, 1977–1985,” Archives West, accessed February 24, 2026, <https://archiveswest.orbiscascade.org/ark:80444/xv53915>.

22 The inspiration for *Geek Love*, came while Dunn was walking alone through the Rose Test Garden (after her son had refused to go with her): “I sat on the brick steps there and looked out at all these hundreds of roses,” she later remembered, “each of which had been bred very differently for particular qualities... . I started thinking about a topic that had engaged me for a long time, nature vs. nurture, and about the manipulation of genetic heritage. It occurred to me that I could have designed a more obedient son.” Marlena Williams, “Katherine Dunn (1945–2016),” *Oregon Encyclopedia*, accessed May 19, 2025, <https://www.oregonencyclopedia.org/articles/dunn-katherine/>.

23 Katherine Dunn, *Geek Love: A Novel* (Vintage, 2002), 25–16. Where quoted, the spelling and punctuation of the original has been retained.

24 Cf. Nell Sullivan, “Katherine Dunn’s *Geek Love* and the Vicissitudes of Class,” *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 54, no. 4 (2013): 410–421, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00111619.2011.609193>;

Dunn elides the boundaries between social definitions of the normal and the abnormal, forcing readers to recognize their common humanity with the physically different and others who have been culturally othered. . . . Dunn's readers are brought to recognize the limitations of simplistic cultural binaries and the paradoxes inherent in an [American] individualism that is intolerant of difference.²⁵

The almost perverse eccentricity of Dunn's novel, ostentatiously venturing beyond established reading experiences, fits well with the atmosphere of the book's setting. In her work, the writer mapped the backstreets of the Oregon metropolitan area that are slowly disappearing due to gentrification and metropolitan expansion. Portland has come to appreciate Dunn's nostalgic account, and it has become a *credo* of sorts for many artists associated with the city (such as Palahniuk²⁶ in *Fugitives and Refugees: A Walk in Portland, Oregon* or Karen Russell in *Swamplandia!*²⁷). Rock (the author of *My Abandonment*) paid tribute to Dunn's work shortly after her death:

Her great novel *Geek Love* has no real precursors, and no clear offspring, but it's shaken a generation of readers with its fierce, unapologetic vision, and given a generation of writers heart to take chances. It makes us re-think what humans are, what families might be. **The ways in which Portland now aspires to keep itself "weird" might be traced back through Katherine's visions, and these ways may well be lost or unattainable** [emphasis added]. We can go back to her writing to remind us of what was so startling.²⁸

A unique vision of the city is brought to life by Palahniuk in his unconventional guide to Portland, where he creates an atlas of the city's peculiarities.

Katherine Weese, "Normalizing Freakery: Katherine Dunn's *Geek Love* and the Female Grotesque," *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 41, no. 4 (2000): 349–364, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00111610009601597>; Kathryn Hume, *Aggressive Fictions: Reading the Contemporary American Novel* (Cornell University Press, 2012).

- 25 Victoria Warren, "American Tall Tale/Tail: Katherine Dunn's *Geek Love* and the Paradox of American Individualism," *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 45, no. 4 (2004): 333–336, <https://doi.org/10.3200/crit.45.4.323-336>.
- 26 Palahniuk, in his memoir of his writing life (*Consider This: Moments in My Writing Life after Which Everything Was Different*), mentions, "No one is born to do this job. Storytelling, yes. But when you become an author you seek out other authors the way an Anne Rice vampire seeks vampires as *mentors*. I was lucky. My first book was endorsed by four great writers: Robert Stone, Katherine Dunn, Thom Jones, and Barry Hannah. Under the pretense of thanking them, I stalked them." Chuck Palahniuk, *Consider This: Moments in My Writing Life After Which Everything Was Different* (Grand Central Publishing, 2020), 22.
- 27 Karen Russell, *Swamplandia!* (Vintage, 2011).
- 28 Fiona McCann, "Portland Writers Pay Tribute to *Geek Love*'s Katherine Dunn," *Portland Monthly*, May 18, 2016, accessed April 21, 2024, <https://www.pdxmonthly.com/arts-and-culture/2016/05/portland-writers-pay-tribute-to-i-geek-love-i-s-katherine-dunn>.

The Pacific Northwest is “America’s Killing Fields,” because **the people are so friendly and trusting** [emphasis added]. The wilderness is always nearby. It rains, and things rot fast.

What follows are sort-of snapshots of Portland. A sort-of photo album of the moment. From axe murders to penguins with a shoe fetish. From underground opium dens to riding fire engines to live sex shows... Here’s just the tip of the Portland, Oregon, iceberg. Myths. Rumors. Ghost stories. Recipes. What follows is a little history, a little legend.²⁹

A key to perception helpful in reading *Fugitives and Refugees: A Walk in Portland, Oregon* may be the category of heterotopia created by Foucault³⁰ – for the places mapped by Palahniuk are not exclusively reduced to objective, purely physical space. The author demonstrates the phenomenon of a place where “every corner does have a story.”³¹ In his typical style – full of black humor and bitter sarcasm – he reflects on the non-normative aspects of Portland culture (Psycho Safeway, the Vacuum Cleaner Museum, the 24 Hour Church of Elvis, The Portland Memorial – the basis for Palahniuk’s novel *Survivor*, or Powell’s Rare Book Room). The writer sketches a picture oscillating between actual social space and the utopia of the city’s bizarre otherness, which is gradually disappearing. “The trouble with the fringe is, it does trend to unravel... People don’t live forever. **Even places disappear** [emphasis added].”³²

Fugitives and Refugees reframes “weirdness” not as mere eccentricity, but as a deliberate form of familiarity for people traditionally excluded from mainstream society. Palahniuk’s book premiered in 2004. Over the past 20 years, Portland’s cultural landscape has undergone significant evolution.³³ However, Portlanders still aspire to see their city first primarily as a space devoid of barriers, non-homogenized, resistant to globalization despite undergoing gentrification, and, finally, conducive to all kinds of creative activities. To once reference Palahniuk’s narrative:

“Everyone in Portland is living a minimum of three lives,” says Katherine Dunn, the author of *Geek Love*. She says, “Everyone has *at least* three identities.” ... “They’re a grocery store checker, an archaeologist, and a biker guy,” she says. “Or

29 Chuck Palahniuk, *Fugitives and Refugees: A Walk Through Portland, Oregon* (Vintage, 2004), 17–18.

30 Michel Foucault, “Inne przestrzenie,” trans. Agnieszka Rejniak-Majewska, *Teksty Drugie*, no. 6 (2005): 117–125.

31 Palahniuk, *Fugitives and Refugees*, 174.

32 Palahniuk, 173.

33 The images of Portland’s spaces (The Governor Hotel, Washington Park, and the Video Follies adult store) captured in the frames of *My Own Private Idaho* (1991), directed by Gus Van Sant, have become a permanent part of the cinematic history.

they're a poet, a drag queen, and a bookstore clerk." ... "It's tricky because all the rich people are in disguise."³⁴

The search for Portland's *genius loci* is linked to the city's "otherness," a difference that Portlanders cherish, eagerly using it as a regional brand or a specific tourist product. As Małgorzata Solska notes, there is a relationship of partial synonymy between the concepts of "uniqueness of space" and "*genius loci*." The researcher emphasizes that *genius loci* furthermore possesses "a special aura of friendliness, generated by the positive energy of history and the memory of events and incidents that have contributed to the formation of perhaps a part of our individual and social ego."³⁵ Prominent among these special points on Portland's cultural map are: the entire Pearl District (once an industrial part of the city, which has undergone a marked transformation into a fashionable arts district since the 1980s); *Portlandia*, the Raymond Kaskey sculpture (the second-largest copper structure in the United States after the Statue of Liberty); Powell's City Books; the Georgian-style Central Library; the murals in the Alberta Arts District, Cinema 21 (an locally owned and operated art movie theatre); and the Beverly Cleary Sculpture Garden, with figures represent beloved by Portlanders characters from the author's books: Ramona Quimby, Henry Huggins, and Henry's dog Ribs.³⁶ The families in Beverly Cleary's children's books about Huggins and Quimby are far different from the drug-addicted misfits of Gus Van Sant's 1989 movie, *Drugstore Cowboy*.³⁷ *Genius loci* (also preserved in literary representations) shapes local identity and collective memory, which serve as carriers of the cultural landscape. Through a spatial anthropology framework, it becomes evident that Portlanders cultivate a distinct sense of place by transforming urban spaces into lived, meaningful landscapes that reflect their collective values.

34 Palahniuk, 13.

35 Małgorzata Solska, "Duch miejsca, a współczesna przestrzeń życia człowieka," in *Fenomen genius loci: Tożsamość miejsca w kontekście historycznym i współczesnym*, ed. Bartłomiej Gutowski (Muzeum Pałac w Wilanowie, 2009), 71. Cf. Mikołaj Madurowicz, "Hermeneutyka miejsca w świetle fenomenologii przestrzeni," in *Fenomen genius loci: Tożsamość miejsca w kontekście historycznym i współczesnym*, ed. Bartłomiej Gutowski (Muzeum Pałac w Wilanowie, 2009), 51–59.

36 Laura O. Foster, *Walking with Ramona: Exploring Beverly Cleary's Portland*, People's Guide (Microcosm Publishing, 2016), 53–55.

37 Carl Abbott, "Urbanism and Environment in Portland's Sense of Place," *Yearbook of the Association of Pacific Coast Geographers* 66, no. 1 (2004): 120–127, <https://doi.org/10.1353/pcg.2004.0018>.

3. Exposing the Myth of *Portlandia*: Changes in Urban Space and Social Dynamics of Portland

The first season of *Portlandia* was seen by 5.4 million viewers, far exceeding the creators' expectations.³⁸ With such a mass audience, the series clearly reinforced the stereotype of the city as an oasis for a privileged white group of organic coffee lovers, unleashing their creativity in the strangest possible ways. The format of the program and its irreverent formula are reminiscent of *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, broadcast on the BBC in the 1960s. Indie music, a penchant for artisanal food and a general embrace of counterculture are among the assortment of quirks that reinforce Portland's urban lifestyle. In *Portlandia*, Fred Armisen, Carrie Brownstein, and Jonathan Krisel created a flashy satire of urban pretentiousness, obviously not a true picture of "a city where young people go to retire."³⁹

As Carl Abbott points out:

the turmoil of the spring and summer of 2020 was an opportunity for white radicals and a bitter reminder to Black Portlanders that not every city dweller is a character in a *Portlandia* episode. . . . The sight of homeless people camping on sidewalks became increasingly ubiquitous, not only downtown but in dozens of pods among neighborhood streets.⁴⁰

Changes in the city's cultural topography intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent economic crisis, the most visible effect of which is homelessness. Additionally, the wave of protests by the Black Lives Matter movement highlighted unresolved issues of social inequality. *The Weight*, the debut novel by Jeff Boyd (2023), explores themes of racial identity, focusing on a young Black drummer navigating his life in the overwhelmingly white social and musical landscape of Portland.

38 Elia Powers, "Building Buzz and Episodes with Bite-Sized Content *Portlandia*'s Formula for Turning a Video Project into a Television Series," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 58, no. 3 (2014): 343, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08838151.2014.935849>.

39 Carrie Brownstein and Fred Armisen captured the essence of Portland life in their music album (Fred Armisen and Carrie Brownstein, *Portlandia*, Single, Broadway Video, Originally released in 2011, accessed March 27, 2024, <https://music.apple.com/us/album/portlandia-single/416623526>): "Public transport and recycling, shopping local and always biking, book sellers, farmer's markets and eco-dwellers, underemployed coffee drinkers, vintage clothing and forward thinkers, Bridgetown, food cart nation, hippies of endless variations, arts and crafts and moviemakers, hacky-sackers and vegan bakers, beards on ladies, beards on men. Keep it weird and make it zen." *Portland, Oregon [You're My Home]*, Lyrics.

40 Carl Abbott, *Portland in Three Centuries: The Place and the People*, 2nd ed. (Oregon State University Press, 2022), 357–358.

A difficult picture of child homelessness in Portland appears in the pages of the novel *The Butterfly Girl* (2019) by Rene Denfeld, who is based in the city. She admits that this fate was also hers: “I wouldn’t be a writer today if not for the public libraries of my difficult childhood, and the books that saved me with story. I will never forget the librarians of the downtown Portland, Oregon, library who expressed care for me when I, too, was a homeless kid.”⁴¹

The effects of Portland’s gentrification are exposed by Willy Vlautin in his novel *The Night Always Comes* (2021). Particularly telling in this context is the resigned narrative of the protagonist, thirty-year-old Lynnet (who struggles desperately to survive, trying at all costs to find the money to buy her shabby, rented house, which would represent a hope for stability):

I’m realizing that the whole city is starting to haunt me. And all the new places, all **the big new buildings, just remind me that I’m nothing**, that I’m nobody... . The Pearl District... . Now, as you know, it’s all fancy buildings and skinny people who look like they’re in magazines. I don’t know where they all come from, but they sure are coming. And then ... Then all you do is cross another street and there’s homeless people camping everywhere. They’re coming, too. **You can’t drive around Portland without seeing a hundred tents. People living in tents!** [emphasis added].⁴²

In his book *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*, James Clifford paints a picture of the modern world in constant motion, paying particular attention to the aspect of “traveling cultures” and pointing to the permanence of the change to which our living space is subjected.⁴³ In the Portland metropolitan area, the cultural topography is indeed subject to constant processes of transformation (and is primarily dependent on inbound migration rather than tourism). In decades past, the migration process more clearly than today involved newcomers and refugees (to use Palahniuk’s language) curious about the otherness of the borderlands. In the new millennium, economic factors became the primary impulse for settlement.

Conclusion

Literary representations of Portland stand in sharp contrast to the city’s image as constructed in popular culture (specifically the series *Portlandia*), preserving and

41 Rene Denfeld, *The Butterfly Girl: A Novel* (HarperCollins, 2019), 331.

42 Willy Vlautin, *The Night Always Comes: A Novel* (HarperCollins, 2021), 108.

43 More: James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Harvard University Press, 1997).

providing access to the traces of the region's shifting identity. In the literary works discussed, the space of Portland does not function merely as a backdrop for events; rather, it is an active factor shaping the narrative, deeply embedded in the process of constructing local identity. The analysis encompassed representative titles that have shaped Portland's literary identity throughout various stages of the city's cultural landscape – ranging from the rebellious anti-consumerist stance of the 1980s to contemporary literature addressing marginalization, exclusion, gentrification, and the homelessness crisis.

Among the local community, the strong belief in the “otherness” and cultural difference of the inhabited space translates directly into the way the city is portrayed. Over the years, a system of perceptions regarding the mysterious aura of the urban landscape of the Oregon metropolis has been created, which has made Portland's identity idiosyncratic and unique.

In the face of changing realities, social needs, the city's cultural heritage (largely based on a sense of “otherness”) is being transformed. Currently, a vibrant, evolving literary scene is actively reconfiguring the city's identity, moving beyond the “Keep Portland Weird” slogan toward more complex, inclusive, and socially conscious narratives.⁴⁴ Marginalized voices are being increasingly highlighted.⁴⁵ Viewed through the lens of spatial anthropology, literary representations of Portland depict the city as a palimpsest. It is a dynamic landscape where new socioeconomic layers constantly emerge, creating a complex coexistence with – rather than a total erasure of – the old.

To write about Portland's “otherness,” a phenomenon so multifaceted and heterogeneous, is to confront a multiplicity of topics (the semantics of the city, cultural ecology, identity, social topography, history, revitalization, gentrification, and ghettoization) and cultural texts (artistic testimonies of experiencing the city, media and pop-culture transmission, and various forms of writing, often transcend traditional generic divisions). Framing Portland as a shifting space rather than a “monolith,” this analysis uses “otherness” to highlight the city as a site of active negotiation. Through

44 The nostalgic echo of time before the city's widespread gentrification, highlighting the gritty, artistic nature of Portland's past, can still be explored in literary representations. For instance, Chelsey Johnson, in the pages of *Stray City* (2018), transports her readers to the queer culture of 1990s Portland, to which the novel's protagonist (Andrea Morales) moves from Nebraska.

45 While Portland is widely recognized as a bastion of progressivism, it grapples with the difficult reputation of being the “whitest city in America.” Mitchell S. Jackson's 2013 novel, *The Residue Years*, offers a critical literary study of this “topography of otherness,” which is deeply linked to race and class. By exploring the realities of life in Portland's impoverished Black community during the 1990s crack epidemic, Jackson's work has become an essential contribution to understanding the city's often-ignored racial and social complexities.

this lens, literary and cultural narratives challenge mainstream perceptions, reclaim spaces, and amplify marginalized experiences.

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