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"The Queer Nuyorican: Racialized Sexualities and Aesthetics in Loisada" by Karen Jaime

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BOOK REVIEWS

***The Queer Nuyorican: Racialized Sexualities and Aesthetics in Loisada.* By Karen Jaime. New York: New York University Press, 2021. 207 pp.**

Reviewed by Kristopher Pourzal

In *The Queer Nuyorican: Racialized Sexualities and Aesthetics in Loisada*, Karen Jaime argues for the constitutive presence of queerness in the cultural life of the Nuyorican Poets Cafe. Popularly known for the slam poetry competitions it started hosting in 1989, the Cafe began in the 1970s as a noncompetitive artistic hub in New York City within the Nuyorican movement. Reclaiming the Spanglish term “Nuyorican”—initially used as a pejorative against Puerto Ricans living in New York City—these poets and artists articulated a countercultural consciousness born of their particular diasporic location. Previous historicizations and analyses of the Cafe have tended to emphasize it as a space of masculinist literary production. Patricia Herrera’s book, *Feminist Nuyorican Performance: From the Café to Hip Hop Theater* (2020), is a notable exception, reframing the Cafe’s history to centre its cisgender women performers. Jaime’s book extends this historiographic intervention into the realm of queerness. To do so, she looks to the oppositional aesthetics of the Cafe’s queer and trans artists, demonstrating how they both formed and were informed by the political thrust of its Nuyorican genesis. Coining a lower-case-“n” version of the term, Jaime theorizes the “nuyorican aesthetic” as a queer/trans-of-colour performance strategy that shares the resistive orientation of the original term but departs from its ethnic fixity and (hetero)sexual presumptions. Through “recombination, positionality, gesturality, and orality” (5), the nuyorican aesthetic entails both drawing and intervening upon multiple cultural lexicons, especially hip-hop.

Methodologically, Jaime foregrounds her experience as “a queer of color, a first-generation, butch Dominican lesbian born in the United States” (4) who has performed and hosted events at the Cafe since the late 1990s. In addition to autoethnography, she uses aesthetic analysis and literary criticism, deploying a myriad of theories and frameworks to trace a performance genealogy of the nuyorican aesthetic. Overall, Jaime incisively demonstrates how the artists she considers contend with the logics of US imperial domination that mark them as raced and sexualized minoritarian subjects; in so doing, she lucidly—and lovingly—recovers a queer history of the Nuyorican Poets Cafe.

“Chapter 1: Walking Poetry in Loisada” firmly roots us in the time and place of the Cafe’s beginnings—1970s Loisada (a colloquial term for the Lower East Side amongst its largely Puerto Rican, Spanish-speaking enclaves). Tracing Cafe cofounder Miguel Piñero’s “queer strut” (45) around town, Jaime posits his many activities—performing poems, cruising for men, buying and selling drugs—as resistive to the encroaching gentrification of the area. Piñero’s explicit expression of his (racial and sexual) minoritarian subjectivity enacts a tactical recodification of the abject, a manoeuvre which, for Jaime, prefigures the shift from Nuyorican as an ethnic identity marker to “nuyorican” as a queer aesthetic. Jaime ends the chapter by describing a walk of her own to the Cafe in 2012, by which point it had become a well-known bastion of slam poetry that often lacked the insurgent political edge of Piñero’s work. She notes the effects of gentrification on the look, feel, and structure of the venue and neighbourhood.

In “Chapter 2: This Is the Remix: Regie Cabico’s *Filipino Shuffle*,” Jaime charts the nuyorican aesthetic in the 1990s through the work of Regie Cabico, a queer Filipino American artist and 1993 Nuyorican Grand Slam Champion. Through analyses of Cabico’s monologue-like performances across multiple venues, his uses of queer aesthetic tropes—e.g., camp and parody—are

foregrounded for how they both articulate and intervene upon the emergent hip-hop and spoken-word aesthetics of the time. In his enactments of what it means to be queer and Filipino in the US, Jaime identifies the expression of a diasporic minoritarian subjectivity that bears the imprint of US imperialism; such a reckoning, offering potential coalition between Filipinos and Puerto Ricans in an era of postcolonialism, is a hallmark feature of the nuyorican aesthetic.

“Chapter 3: Tens across the Board: The Glam Slam at the Nuyorican Poets Cafe” centres on a drag ball poetry series started at the Cafe in 1998. Dubbed the Glam Slam, this event merged the Harlem ball community with the slam poetry scene and—importantly for both Jaime’s project and personal formation—expanded the expression and presence of gender variance in the Cafe. Chronicling her own gender presentation “devoid of queerness” (94) at that time, Jaime recalls attending her first Glam Slam, and “unlike the predominantly heterosexual and gender conforming crowd” of other events, being “surrounded by queer Brown and Black bodies expressing verbal and corporeal realities in ways completely new and thrilling to [her]” (94). Through analyses of the heterogeneous minoritarian subjects in the many roles of the Glam Slam—audience, judges, performers, host—Jaime argues that they collectively comprise a forceful rejoinder to heterocentric histories of the Cafe.

In “Chapter 4: Black Cracker’s ‘Chasing Rainbows’: Hip-Hop Minstrelsy, Queer Futurity, and Trans Multiplicity,” Jaime turns to the Afrofuturist poetics of the work of Ellison Glenn. Glenn, a Black American trans artist who uses the moniker Black Cracker, performed at the Cafe early in his career. Jaime figures Glenn’s near-constant travel and move to Berlin as constitutive of his oppositional aesthetic, generated by what she terms “a trans(itory) queer Black Atlantic” (125). Analyzing Glenn’s performances and representations of himself across multiple different modes—performed poems, a Myspace profile picture, a music video—Jaime underlines his tactical recodification of racist forms and tropes (e.g., minstrelsy), queering them towards unfixed yet liberatory futures.

The conclusion highlights Stephanie Chapman, a lesbian musician active in the Cafe scene from its beginnings, yet heretofore absent from its historical accounts. For Jaime, such recovery of queer lives is key to fleshing out a fuller understanding of the Cafe’s countercultural aesthetics. Her case studies, taken together, demonstrate how these aesthetics have travelled far and wide, distinctively recombined to express the racialized sexualities of minoritarian artists and their communities.

Jaime’s book is a pleasure to read. Her authorial voice is pithy, personal, and forthright. Most of all, I appreciate her allegiance to artists, as she powerfully illuminates the realm of aesthetics as political. By quoting at length the poems she analyzes, the artists’ works are given space to speak for themselves, underscoring Jaime’s intention to analyze what these poems do rather than define what they mean. Toward the book’s end, Jaime mentions conversations she had with cofounders of the Cafe as she was writing it, receiving their blessing and gratitude for her work. This moment underwrites what is otherwise already palpable throughout, which is that Jaime, as a community member involved with the Cafe for over two decades, is uniquely situated to critically historicize it. Moreover, the book is peppered with photographs and screenshots taken by the author, inviting us into a sense of her embodied proximity to the venue and its archival presences.

On the whole, Jaime’s theorizing is deftly wrought, and the “nuyorican aesthetic” effectively propels the project. Her methodological manoeuvre is emblematic of performance studies in that the object of analysis simultaneously serves as a distinct analytic as well as a historiographic intervention. The

book will appeal to scholars of performance studies, hip-hop studies, Latina/o/x studies, Black studies, and queer and trans studies. It is essential reading for all those thinking through minoritarian cultural production and its worldmaking capacities—a women-of-colour feminist intellectual lineage taken up by the late José Esteban Muñoz, with whom Jaime studied. The book demonstrates the continued efficacy of such thinking to animate and incarnate queer/performance genealogies. Ultimately, Jaime’s prismatic analyses move alongside and through her own becoming in the artistic milieu of Loisada, bodying forth an ardent countermemory of the Nuyorican Poets Cafe.