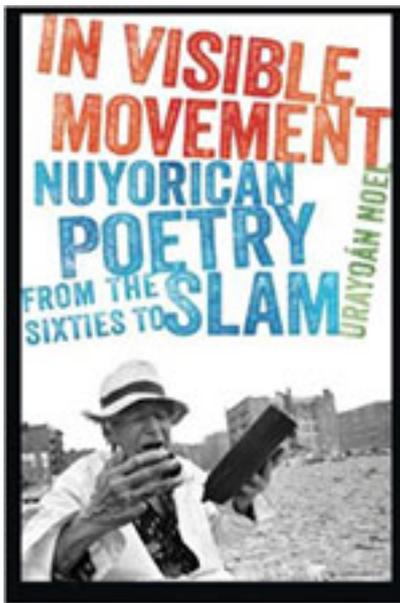


***In Visible Movement: Nuyorican Poetry from the Sixties to Slam* by Urayoán Noel**

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Noel, Urayoán. *In Visible Movement: Nuyorican Poetry from the Sixties to Slam*. University of Iowa Press, 2014. 230 pp. \$49.95 paper.



Recently published in a distinguished series on contemporary North American poetry by the University of Iowa Press, *In Visible Movement: Nuyorican Poetry from the Sixties to Slam*, by the poet and critic Urayoán Noel, is in my estimation the best book on New York Puerto Rican or Nuyorican poetry from the 1960s to the contemporary spoken word or slam scene. A thoroughly researched and informed book on this fascinating and much-debated subject, *In Visible Movement* is also a meditation and a bold proposal on what we might call (as a shorthand term and certainly not as a quote from Noel's carefully nuanced prose) "the Puerto Rican condition." By this I mean that condition both of invisibility and hypervisibility that defines Puerto Ricans' historical reality and being in the world—that blurred in-between-ness of West-Side-Story notoriety, on the one hand, and outcast, outlaw abjection, on the other, that determines not so much who Puerto Ricans are, but how they are seen and reacted to in public, in the world. It is between those two enemies of Puerto Rican cultural agency and expression that New York Puerto Rican literature and art, according to Noel, "moves" or mediates. The New York Puerto Rican or Nuyorican poetic "movement" is thus, in his account, more than an appendage to political activism or, to say it in the language of the 1970s New York Puerto Rican political renaissance, more than the "cultural arm of the revolution." It is instead the utopia or no-place where the tensions between Puerto Ricans' hypervisibility and abjection are worked out in the hopes of producing not so much a solution or escape, but a network of routes, alternative rhythms, and logics, in the hopes of elaborating a contrapuntal dynamic that puts into

dialogue all those inchoate, fragmented, and uncomfortably dislocated ways in which Puerto Ricans, to the embarrassment of many of the island's traditional intellectuals, are either invisible or hypervisible, notorious or abjected.

A comprehensive though nonlinear account of the movements or counterpoints generated by Puerto Ricans in their attempt to “*bregar*”—as the cultural critic Arcadio Díaz Quiñones would call it—or negotiate that intractable condition of marked hypervisibility and outlaw abjection, *In Visible Movement* does not, however, offer a narrative of transformation. It does not propose (as Raphael Dalleo and Elena Machado Sáez, among others, have done) that New York Puerto Rican or Nuyorican cultural expression has evolved from a 1970s resistant aesthetics that attempted to decolonize by calling on colonial subjects to withdraw from the system and its mass-media industries to a more supple, ambiguous, and playfully postmodern aesthetics that assumes the market and its sanctioned spectacles in order to create alternate counterpublics. Nor does it posit a constant, seamless evolution or development of a popular street-based aesthetics over time from its foundation in the 1960s to its resurgence or revival in the multicultural slam and spoken word poetics of the 1990s, through the mediating agency of the Nuyorican Poets Cafe, the way its founder, the poet Miguel Algarín, would narrate this story in his preface to his and Bob Holman's anthology *Aloud*. Instead, working against the important historical contexts or frames proposed by Juan Flores, Arlene Dávila, and Ed Morales on the transformation of New York City as a diasporic, neoliberal, and globally multicultural urban space, Noel sets out to identify and analyze how Nuyorican poets have negotiated the disparate and mutually contradictory or aporetic ways that were meant to render them silent by wittily and astutely articulating the fragmented, dislocated, and blurred in-between pieces of their lives. Articulating these pieces, Nuyorican artists have created virtuoso contrapuntal expressions where language is mediated through the body and constantly displaced on and off the page to other alternative linguistic, musical, visual, and corporal registers, intonations, mannerisms, vocalizations, gestures, and sweat. If New York Puerto Rican expression has been considered by some to be stunted, stuttering, *balbuceante*, or weak, we may surmise from Noel's book that it is because it has been solely considered from the vantage point of one these fragments or judged lacking in relation to some pure, predetermined foundation or norm, rather than from the perspective of the articulate and resistant counterpoint that its authors engender in performance as a response to a mutually contradictory or aporetic social condition of marked hypervisibility and outcast abjection. Noel's great achievement in *In Visible Movement*, we might say then, is to give us, for the first time, dense descriptions of these performances of Nuyorican poetry that identify their resistant mobile counterpoints, restoring thus their multiple references on and off the page, their virtuosity and wit.

Certainly by temperament and in his own creative work, Noel identifies with the wit, dexterity, and virtuosity of these New York Puerto Rican poetic performances, a virtuosity that in his

reading would seek to sidestep or overwhelm the encroaching condition of spectral in/visibility under which Puerto Ricans labor, love, and create. Indeed, *In Visible Movement* is itself a virtuoso performance of Nuyorican aesthetics, the most comprehensive contrapuntal articulation of poetic, political, theoretical, performative, and visual texts so far assembled by a critic of New York Puerto Rican literature. And yet, though early on we as readers are encouraged to displace the poetics of abjection of Piri Thomas's New York Puerto Rican foundational text *Down These Mean Streets* in favor of the humorous, playful performances of Thomas's poems in his CD *Every Child's a Poet* and the engaged, collaborative, community-oriented activism of his later novels, abjection keeps rearing its spectral head in the figure not only of one of the founding members of the Nuyorican Poets Cafe, Miguel Piñero, but in the contemporary poetry of the brilliantly moving wordsmith Willy Perdomo. Long before Nuyorican poetry and long before Slavoj Žižek would critique deconstruction's penchant for linguistic, discursive displacement, confronting it with the hard kernel of the real, the great Latin American virtuoso and Cuban neobaroque master José Lezama Lima had taught that writing, if it is to be effective against the strictures of the Law (the Law, that is, that determines the politics of visibility in Latin America for populations both marked and rendered invisible by the West), must reach beyond virtuosity to an area that is resistant because it is inexpressible, where writing, visual art, and performance meet, clash, and break. And it is here where I think that *In Visible Movement* can also teach a lesson—a lesson perhaps *contra la letra*, against the grain. For all its virtuoso contrapuntal performance, in the density with which it documents the Nuyorican poet's struggle between hypervisibility and abjection, *In Visible Movement* also registers something that is neither the outcast, spectral body, nor the infinite and artful displacement of signs, but a trace—the ephemeral residue that the hard labor of the poet's performance leaves in its wake, something unrecoverable yet insistent and durable, *perdurable*, that incites us with its resistant absence and loss. Uncannily, José Esteban Muñoz, in what would become his last book, *Cruising Utopia*, shortly published before his untimely death, argued that all performance is a sort of “not-vanishing point,” elusive and lost in the very instant that it is produced, yet always insistently calling from that utopian “out there,” from that loss (2009, 80-81). Felicitously, Noel's outstanding new book, *In Visible Movement*, incites us both to recover the virtuoso counterpoints that the Nuyorican poetic imagination has woven out of the contradictory dislocations and fragmentations of diaspora's in/visibility and to listen, as well, for the call of that elusive and resistant residue that New York Puerto Rican performance does not fail incessantly to proffer.

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