

Arnaldo Cruz-Malave's *Queer Latino Testimonio, Keith Haring and Juanito Xtravaganza: Hard Tails*

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In the fall of 2007, I attended the packed reading/celebration of the publication of Arnaldo Cruz-Malave's *Queer Latino Testimonio, Keith Haring and Juanito Xtravaganza: Hard Tails* at the Upper West Side Barnes and Noble in New York City. In *Hard Tails*, Cruz-Malave presents us with the story of Juan Rivera, aka Juanito Xtravaganza, who was the lover of pop-art superstar Keith Haring in the years prior to Haring's death from AIDS in 1990. In so doing Cruz-Malave gives a moving, theoretically rich, and complex social history of New York City in the seventies and eighties as the scourges of crack, AIDS, and gentrification wrought havoc on the lives of impoverished queers of color. The author, a Fordham University professor of Spanish and Comparative Literature, was at the Barnes and Noble reading along with Rivera and his family, as well as a diverse audience of academics, artists, and activists from the various queer and Latino worlds that both the author and his subject inhabit. Rivera, who had just been released from the hospital, was too weak to speak, and remained seated throughout the event. As a means of working around Rivera's inability to speak, the Cruz-Malave and a well-known Puerto-Rican actor recreated the interview between Cruz-Malave and Rivera that makes up the first section of the book in a staged reading. This tableau that had Rivera silently looking on with obvious enjoyment and pride as he surveyed the packed room while others spoke his words, beautifully encapsulated the layered and messy politics of representation that Cruz-Malave so brilliantly analyzes throughout his book.

One of the central problems of *Hard Tails* is this: how does one tell the tale of another without enacting the epistemic violence that so often accompanies such projects of representation? We know all too well from the various critiques of *testimonio* and conventional

ethnography that have emerged in the last twenty years, the dangers of the project of “giving voice” and speaking for the socially marginalized other. Cruz-Malave is exquisitely aware of his own positionality in relation to Rivera—indeed he recalls how he was paralyzed by an awareness of the traps of entering into such a project to the extent that it took him ten years to tackle the partially transcribed tapes of his original interviews with Rivera.

The end product that is *Hard Tails* is a necessarily hybrid text: the book begins with a thoughtful introduction that frames and contextualizes an edited interview with Rivera that is at the heart of the book. He follows with two insightful essays: one on Keith Haring’s “aesthetics of identification” and the other on the genre of testimonio itself. The book ends with an extended glossary of the people, places and terms that populate Rivera’s testimony, and that acts as an invaluable archive of queer of color subcultural practices and communities that are wiped out within conventional histories of the period. The unusual structure of the book, one that defies easy categorization or progression but instead loops and sometimes repeats itself, reflects Cruz-Malave’s central concern with queering the genre of testimonio. In a recent interview in *The Advocate*, Cruz-Malave notes that while conventional iterations of testimonio efface the work of the author in an attempt to produce a seamless narrative that promises entry into the heretofore unknown world of the marginalized other, he instead chooses to do the opposite. Cruz-Malave states: “I wanted the reader to be self-consciously aware of the text’s production, to engage with it, to stop and listen before rushing to judgment, to interpret and reconstruct, not merely as an experimental flourish but as an ethical act, as a way of giving back.” Throughout the book, Cruz-Malave theorizes the act of listening as a crucial political and ethical practice: he listens to Rivera’s voice for its silences, recaltrances, and digressions, and allows this voice to determine the shape and structure of the book. The book’s final section, entitled “Spanglish Glosses,” is a testament to Cruz-Malave’s commitment to this practice of listening, as well as his skills as a literary critic: here he engages in a careful close reading of Rivera’s “Spanglish code-switching” in order to uncover its nuances and contradictions.

Hard Tails can thus be read as an extended meditation on the possibilities and limits of collaboration across hierarchies of power and privilege: between Cruz-Malave and Rivera, and Haring and Rivera, but also between the reader and the text itself. As readers we are compelled to interrogate our own positionality as we are drawn into the circuits of exchange and “trade,” in all senses of the word, that indelibly mark the various relations that Cruz-Malave traces. In one particularly telling moment during the interview that speaks to the blurred boundaries between collaboration, appropriation and cooptation, Cruz-Malave repeatedly asks Rivera if he did not feel used by Haring, whose art was fueled by his encounter with (and, some might say, cannibalization of) racial and class difference. Rivera and the other brown boys that Haring was drawn to gave Haring entry into the Black and Latino cultural spaces that inspired his art, even as the importance of these spaces was minimized by the art world that made Haring a star. Rivera forcefully resists

Cruz-Malave's suggestion that Haring merely appropriated "the street" and instead responds: "A lotta people would say *that...*'Cause the aborigines had used the same images and Keith had just *swiped* them! But it wasn't a matter of swiping—Keith knew how to continue the conversation. And he knew how to continue the line with the street artists"(44). Rivera thereby frustrates Cruz-Malave's desire, as well as, perhaps, that of the reader, to neatly characterize the relation between Haring and the queer of color subcultures that inspired him as simple appropriation and cooptation. Instead Rivera's response compels us to conceptualize a more nuanced model of power and agency.

If testimonio often speaks back to the state, and attests to and witnesses state violence, the queering of testimonio that Cruz-Malave enacts here also speaks back more broadly to a logic of social death that consigns entire populations—queer, of color, poor, HIV positive—to oblivion. The inescapable power and importance of this book lies in its courage to write against such oblivion and to ask profound questions around the nature of evidence, archive and historiography. Queer scholars have for some time written about the necessity for new ways of archiving the past in relation to queer lives: Jose Esteban Muñoz, Ann Cvetcovich, Judith Halberstam and others have powerfully theorized the importance of ephemera and alternative archives (of affect, popular culture, performance) in writing queer pasts. Cruz-Malave's book is a crucial addition to this body of work. If, as Rivera states, Haring knew how to "continue the line" with the street artists, Cruz-Malave's *Hard Tails* continues the line with Rivera and those who are no longer with us—lost to AIDS, poverty, and the various forms of violence that bear down on queer of color lives. Ultimately, however, *Hard Tails* is not simply about loss and mourning, of conjuring forth the ghosts of those no longer present, but also, insistently, about the joyous labor of queer worldmaking and the centrality of queer of color lives, communities, and cultural practices to the making of the cultural life of the city.

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