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REVIEW

Kristie Soares. *Playful Protest: The Political Work of Joy in Latinx Media.* University of Illinois Press, 2023. 294 pp. $28.00 (paper) ISBN 978-0-252-08742-4.

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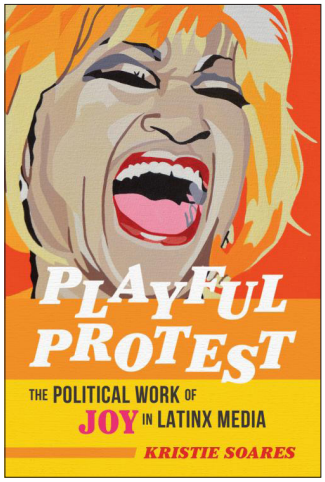

KEYWORDS

Latinx Media

Gender and Sexuality

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In *Playful Protest*, Kristie Soares suggests that there is more than meets the eye in expressions of joy in Latinx media. If joy is often dismissed as frivolous, silly, or unpolitical, Soares thinks seriously about what this affective stance has been able to accomplish for Latinx artists and activists in the context of racial, sexual, political, and economic marginalization in US history. More specifically, Soares's thoughtful book is a study of "the social and political work performed by joy in Latinx media," especially "Puerto Rican and Cuban diasporic media created within the mainland United States" from 1960 to the present (p. 2). The work particularly shines whenever it moves close to home, as it does in Soares's personal and brilliant opening narrative and the book's many forays into the particularities of social life and political economy in our shared hometown of Miami, Florida. Soares's study is also exemplary in how it refuses to avert its gaze from racialized gender and sexuality, even while exploring subjects that in other hands might escape a feminist or queer analysis.

In the introduction, Soares reflects on how joy has been a response to "racist and sexist stereotypes about Latinx people," and then they situate their conception of joy in relation to relevant conversations in performance studies and the study of racialized gender and sexuality (p. 4). Soares paints a complex picture of joy: If colonial and imperial powers were eager to represent Caribbean people as joyful and thus passive, able to be conquered, then scholars have also overlooked the political possibilities of joy as a tactic toward more liberatory projects.

Each chapter of *Playful Protest* examines a particular register of joy, assessing how it has been deployed in a specific arena within the history of Latinx media and performance. In chapter 1, Soares considers the role of *gozando*, or having fun, in the sound and imagery of early salsa. In particular, Soares reads the differences between the uses of gozando in the work of Ray Barretto and La Lupe in the 1960s and '70s. If, for Barretto, gozando was one way to get beyond early salsa's investments in toxic masculinity, Barretto was also afforded certain license given his own gender subjectivity. For La Lupe, on the other hand, even her infectious gozando could not overcome the sexism of the music industry and the ways she was set up for failure by decision-makers in the world of early salsa.

Chapter 2 builds on the work of Audre Lorde to offer "precise joy" as a way to understand the affective contents of media related to the Puerto Rican nationalist organization the New York Young Lords Party in the 1960s and '70s. For Soares, precise joy "serves as a source of energy for activists working toward liberation" (p. 59). Looking at media depictions of the Young Lords in the wake of its restructuring after the formation of the Women's Caucus in 1969, Soares suggests that photography was a medium by which men could "rewrite the norms of racialized

masculinity," while women could complicate the trope of the feminist killjoy through expressions of "affective kinship" (pp. 71, 74). Music, meanwhile, especially salsa, was a kind of cultural weapon that portrayed the Young Lords as joyful in the face of white supremacist depictions of the organization as violent or dangerous.

As a diasporic Cuban from Miami myself, I was thrilled to see that chapter 3 focuses on the quintessential Miami sitcom *¿Qúe pasa, U.S.A.?* Here, Soares thinks about the humor of *¿Qué pasa, U.S.A.?* through the lens of *choteo*, an idiosyncratic Cuban form of joking around, to suggest that joy in the sitcom serves to complicate understandings of racialized gender/sexuality in Cuban Miami and, thus, Latinx US. Specifically, choteo in *¿Qúe pasa, U.S.A.?* turns its attention back on its own US Cuban community, in particular its investments in whiteness and heteromasculinity. In an analysis of one episode, Soares notes that *¿Qúe pasa, U.S.A.?* satirizes Cuban homophobia, this right in the middle of Anita Bryant's terrifying crusade against gay rights in 1970s Florida and the US. Soares then turns to a second episode to notice how *¿Qúe pasa, U.S.A.?* makes fun of Miami Cubans' anti-Blackness while pointing out the racially mixed realities of Cuban history, even if the cast of the show was exclusively fair-skinned.

In chapter 4, Soares examines Celia Cruz's signature exclamation "¡Azúcar!" to see the racial-sexual work it was doing in Latinx media in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. If in Cruz's earlier work *azúcar* reflected the racial and gender frame within which mainstream critics understood her, by the early 2000s azúcar began to do more vocal and heterogenous work. In Cruz's music from this time, azúcar became a philosophy for getting out of the present what you can despite harrowing circumstances surrounding you. This approach, Soares suggests, facilitated Cruz becoming a queer icon and, thus, a key referent for drag performance in Miami. Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, Cruz's music became an important tool for trans and queer Latinx people trying to endure the horrors of the shooting at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando, in which forty-nine predominantly queer Latinx people were murdered.

Soares's final chapter situates the music of Pitbull, especially his use of the distinctly Miami Cuban word *dale* (loosely "go ahead," among many other uses), in relation to the racialized political economy of Miami in the early 2000s. Dale plays with Cuban heteromasculinity and racialized experiences of the 2008 financial crisis in Miami to suggest excess as a way of surviving the precarities of being non-white and working class in the US. In the end, Pitbull's joyful uses of dale are examples of a "radical, if always incomplete, act" that centers pleasure in demoralizing contexts (p. 183).

In a brief coda, Soares turns to the role of silliness in the social media presence of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, US representative from New York. If silliness as an affect has historically been marked as white, off-limits to Latinx people aiming to be taken seriously, Ocasio-Cortez is somehow able to access silliness as a tool to combat racist and sexist attacks on her and her political positions. Soares understands this as one example of a broad use of joy in Latinx media and performance that includes her subjects in the preceding chapters as well as more recent events, like the Perreo Combativo movement in Puerto Rico in 2019, which used dance as a means to organize toward the resignation of Governor Ricardo Roselló Nevares.

In the intervening time since Soares's book was published, "joy" became a keyword in US electoral politics. When Vice President Kamala Harris rose to be the Democratic Party's nominee for president, joy became a brand that the party hoped would counter the unhinged doomsday tones of former President Donald Trump's seemingly ubiquitous rallies. What does Soares's book offer us to better understand this moment? For one, we saw the important role media played in the Harris campaign, when the vice president was smiling broadly while Stevie Wonder sang "Happy Birthday" to her, gathering up adorable children in her arms, or joining Lance Bass of NSYNC to say "Bye, Bye, Bye" to Trump. Or, drawing from Soares's complex treatment of joy, we might notice how joy was used to pepper over the political exigencies of our time during the Democratic National Convention. "Please don't notice," they seemed to say, "that not a single Palestinian person will speak in these four days. We are having a good time!"

In the end, of course, the Democratic Party's brand of joy was not enough to overcome the Republican Party's relentless transphobia and xenophobia. It might be tempting to suggest that this loss was a blow to Soares's suggestion that joy "can serve a role in not only offering counternarratives of gender, sexuality, and racialization, but also in working toward structural change" (p. 193). I am more inclined, however, to listen to Soares as they tell us that the cultural producers they write about have demonstrated that "there is no need to subdue joy, even in moments of crisis" (p. 194). We will no doubt need such tactics as we step into the next four years.

Playful Protest was prescient, then, in marking joy as a key political term just before its primetime debut during the 2024 election. Anyone interested in the politics of Latinx media, especially as they relate to racialized gender and sexuality, will be glad that they picked up a copy.

AUTHOR BIO

M. Myrta Leslie Santana is an ethnomusicologist and performer whose work examines the social and political significance of trans and queer performance in the Americas. She is the author of *Transformismo: Performing Trans/Queer Cuba* (2025), an ethnography of drag performance in contemporary Cuba. Other writing has appeared in *Small Axe*, the *Journal of the Society for American Music, Queer Nightlife* (Michigan), and *Queering the Field: Sounding Out Ethnomusicology* (Oxford). Originally from Miami, Florida, she is currently an assistant professor of music at University California San Diego.

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