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ROJO ROBLES

Jazzoetry: Maroon Freedoms Against Colonial Time

Afro Boricua poet Louis Reyes Rivera reclaims Black labor and diasporic memory as a rehearsal for liberation.

In an undated YouTube video, Afro Boricua poet Louis Reyes Rivera performs the poem “for tom and judy” with the Jazzoets—Ahmed Abdullah, Atiba Kwabena Wilson, and Ngoma—creating a sonic dialogue in which words move alongside trumpet, digeridoo, percussion, and breath. The low-fi recording, which ends abruptly before the poem concludes, was filmed sometime in the late 1990s or early 2000s at the long-standing Bedford-Stuyvesant jazz club and cultural center Sista’s Place. The video is a treasure for people like me, devoted to Black Diasporican culture. It represents one of the few recordings of Reyes Rivera and the Jazzoets, demonstrating the fragility and unkept nature of the Black Diasporican archive, and the online platform’s chaotic status as an informal repository of performance.

Although the captured sound isn’t terrific, I was moved by the dense, sacred soundscape the Jazzoets created. For me, it signifies a moment of soulful grounding and immersion in a collective consciousness. Through a slow, always-Black diasporic call-and-response—particularly between Rivera and Abdullah—the ensemble highlighted the foundational labor of Africans and their descendants within an urban landscape that reads as both city and nation. “I walk along streets/paved in their blood/walk along streets paved in their blood/ stomp on tar cracks made by their skins/ stomp on tar cracks churned from their skins,” Reyes Rivera repeats at the start of the video, receiving an abeng-like response from

Abdullah’s trumpet. This performance reflects Reyes Rivera’s larger project as a poet-performer committed to emphasizing Black diasporic histories across the Caribbean and the United States. The poet delves “into buildings/ where foundations crushed their bones/ whose only foundation/ was their bone dust.” In essence, Reyes Rivera repositions Black life and labor as central to the modern world rather than on its margins.

Louis Reyes Rivera (1945–2012) was a Black Puerto Rican poet, historian, and cultural practitioner whose work linked political education, performance, and collective sound. His collaborations with the Jazzoets at Sista’s Place in Brooklyn, New York, form part of a broader tradition of anticolonial Black music that views sound as a space of struggle, memory, and world-building. Reyes Rivera’s practice of jazzoetry functioned as a collective sonic method that challenged colonial time. By placing poetry in direct dialogue with jazz improvisation, jazzoetry disrupts linear narratives of progress and productivity, foregrounding diasporic memory through groove and ensemble play.

Through an analysis of the poem “for tom & judy,” read alongside Reyes Rivera’s collaborations with Abdullah and the broader Afrofuturist lineage of the jazz bandleader, poet, and space philosopher Sun Ra, I situate Reyes Rivera as an often-overlooked figure in hemispheric left histories whose work demonstrates how Black liberation is collectively rehearsed through

sound. Revisiting his collaborations with the Jazzoets is especially urgent today. Reexamining his poetics and diverse artistic and educational projects provides a model of the cultural laborer as organizer, archivist, and strategist. Rooted in the performance circuits of the Nuyorican and Black Arts movements and sustained by editing and self-publishing, Reyes Rivera viewed poetry as political work oriented towards community needs and shaped by Black radical traditions that blend jazz, speculation, and anticolonial struggle.

Colonial Time in Puerto Rico

Reyes Rivera's performance practice invites listeners to reconsider not only the sonic archive of Black diasporic life but also the broader structure of colonial rule that has shaped it. In this sense, the political importance of the revival described above becomes evident when situated within Puerto Rico's long colonial history, which continues to shape the archipelago and its diaspora. Often called the oldest colony in the modern world, Borikén underwent a violent shift from Indigenous-centered lifestyles—organized around sustenance, land and maritime movement, and ecological harmony—to a colonial system rooted in extraction, as the name change demonstrates: Puerto Rico, or rich port. Conquest led to gold mining and the enslavement of Indigenous peoples, prompting resistance through flight, refuge in caves and mountains, and engaging in guerrilla warfare.

"In discussing the slave trade from Africa to America," Reyes Rivera observed in the endnote to his 1996 poetry collection *Scattered Scripture*, "most textbooks focus on the hardships of sailors, the failures and successes of plantation owners... the European pilgrimage in search of personal freedom." Yet, he contends, "the segments of humanity least discussed are... the disinherited—those who lost their lands, or as slaves and servants worked the ships and the docks, built each mansion and saloon, cleared and planted every road and field." Read alongside "for tom & judy," these writings deepen the political imprint of Reyes Rivera's curricula as an educator and poet centered on the lives and labor of the dispossessed.

As monoculture and plantations expanded, colonial power was reinforced through systems of forced labor, racial hierarchy, and gendered and sexual discipline. Over time, this system grew to include cultural domination, suppressing Indigenous and African languages and knowledge systems. It is this broader erasure that Reyes Rivera directly challenged with the Jazzoets.

By the 19th century, these colonial structures shaped Puerto Rican social and cultural life both on the island and abroad. Within this system, racial technologies determined whose time and labor were valued and whose were considered disposable. In response, practices of marronage—escape, disappearance, and protective relationships with the land—fostered forms of collective autonomy beyond colonial control. In one of his most famous poems, Reyes Rivera celebrates the 1868 anticolonial rebellion or outcry, called *El Grito de Lares*, as the "first claim to national sovereignty" and to abolition. Crucially, he situates the rebellion within a broader pan-Caribbean revolutionary network of decolonial struggle, including acts of marronage that predate *El Grito*.

Following the U.S. invasion of Puerto Rico in 1898, this colonial experiment was reorganized and expanded over many decades, shifting from sugar production to manufacturing, pharmaceuticals, and today's visitor and real estate economies. Meanwhile, migration to cities in the United States exposed Puerto Ricans to new forms of racialization and pressures to assimilate. It is within this longer continuum of displacement, resistance, and historical erasure that Reyes Rivera's work emerges, positioning jazz poetry as both an aesthetic practice and a historical method for recovering maroon freedoms against colonial time.

A Black Puerto Rican Movement Intellectual

Reyes Rivera's work combined scholarship, poetry, teaching, and activism. He famously described himself as a "janitor of history," a phrase that reflects his approach and ethics as a working-class cultural campaigner. It echoes throughout "for tom & judy," where he focuses on a Black couple: tom, an elevator



Still image from the short film *Are You with Me?* Directed by Martina Starosta & Iva Radivojevic. (Vimeo)

operator, and Judy, a custodian in an office building, along with their son Junior, who is compelled to follow in their footsteps. “Even though/ I don’t even know/ who they even was/ are real to me/ they are dear to me,” Reyes Rivera recites in the performance. The poet recognizes their importance because of what they symbolize: a strong commitment to honest, often unseen labor that sustains the modern world while being ignored. Like these three symbolic figures, who serve or clean up after executives without acknowledgment while getting sick in the process (Tom “cough a death rash/ from the polish he used”), Reyes Rivera saw historical work as exposing what mainstream archives often overlook.

Reyes Rivera followed the teachings of Arturo Schomburg, whose anti-racist project sought to preserve and promote knowledge of the African diaspora in response to colonial erasure. His involvement with the City College of New York and the City University of New York (CUNY)-wide student takeover of campuses in 1969 led to the creation of open admissions and the establishment of Black and Puerto Rican Studies departments throughout the university system.

In addition to CUNY, Reyes Rivera operated largely within oral traditions, underground publishing, and music scenes. His approach was rooted in the mid-20th-century fusion of jazz and poetry, which became even more influential in the 1970s through the free jazz movement. His jazz poetry performances served as platforms for diasporic education, promoting radical awareness while challenging distorted historical narratives. During a telephone conversation, Reyes Rivera’s long-time collaborator Ahmed Abdullah told me that in 1999 they “organized a series of open forums among poets, musicians, visual artists, and the community called *Conversations*, which were held immediately prior to Jazz Poets performances.” These gatherings at Sistas’ Place positioned the jazz concert as a key space of Black study. By learning from the musicians and poets themselves, the community could form deeper bonds with the ensemble, seeing them as griots, or storytellers, rooted in Bed-Stuy’s cultural life.

Jazz poetry describes a performance-based poetics that blends lectures, writing workshops, and spoken word with the core principles of jazz. It highlights

Reyes Rivera viewed every poem and poet as a drop of water that helps form a river. Its flow links wordsmiths, readers, and audiences in a nonlinear sense of time, where beings are entangled through their mutual interactions.

collective interaction as a key element of composition. Instead of viewing the poem as a fixed literary object, jazzoetry sees it as an event unfolding within a shared sonic and writing environment. In his landmark essay “Inside the River of Poetry,” Reyes Rivera defined it as a “blending of sound (the rhythm), sense (the experience), and color (the given image). A voice raised in celebration of itself.” In this way, music and mystery forge an “embodied literature” that is inherited and passed on to future generations, centered on a fundamental question: how we live and how we might live differently. Reyes Rivera viewed every poem and poet as a drop of water that helps form a river. Its flow links wordsmiths, readers, and audiences in a nonlinear sense of time, where beings are entangled through their mutual interactions.

Jazzoetry: A Poetics of Conversation

Ingrid Monson’s conceptualization of the jazz ensemble is also helpful here. The ensemble functions as a space for Black textual creation organized through what can be understood as a poetics of conversation. In this framework, the relatively stable roles of the rhythm section coexist with the more spontaneous, improvisational input of soloists, including wordsmiths. Musicians constantly decide what to play, when to join in, and how to respond. The result is an open-ended, interpersonal, multi-voiced process of intensification, more like collective speech than a single-authored text. In this way, jazz acts as a political practice of the “undercommons,” in the sense articulated by Fred Moten and Stefano Harney in their book of the same title, organized through incessant study,

participation, listening, and negotiated expression. In the undercommons, according to Moten and Harney, people meet others who “carry bags of newspaper clippings, or sit at the end of the bar, or stand at the stove cooking, or sit on a box at the newsstand, or speak through bars, or speak

in tongues. These other ones have a passion to tell you what they have found, and they are surprised you want to listen, even though they’ve been expecting you.” The undercommons—and, ultimately, jazz—refer to a fugitive social space of collective life that exists within, against, and “in the break” of dominant institutions.

Jazzoetry originated in the late 1960s with spoken-word collectives like the Last Poets and the Watts Prophets, as well as with performance groups around the Sun Ra Arkestra. These groups expanded poetry’s sonic range by adding conga drumming, jazz, funk, and later Afrobeat instrumentation, moving away from snobby literary circles by capturing the live energy of community-based underground Black cultures. Likewise, in Cuba and Puerto Rico, the nueva trova movement, rooted in native musical forms and known for poetic lyricism, also expanded the concept of poetry as a performed, communal art.

Jazzoetry draws on African and Afro-diasporic expressive methods like call-and-response, repetition, exclamatory phrasing, and a continuous openness to innovation. Its aim is to promote cooperative practices that imagine different social arrangements. These techniques activate what can be seen as embodied archives of Black life, through which memory is passed down. In this context, “groove” is an organizational principle that requires mutual listening, horizontal coordination, and shared decision-making among performers. Poet and vocalist Monique Ngozi Nri, who performed with Reyes Rivera in the jazz collective Diaspora (Dispersions of the Spirit of Ra), explained to me that she places Reyes Rivera’s work within the Black Arts tradition of poet-performers such as Ntozake Shange

and Jayne Cortez. Though they are now ancestors, she continues to perform their poems live, ensuring their work is remembered and remains part of an ongoing tradition, the “river of poetry,” as Reyes Rivera called it.

Politically, jazz poetry aligns with the original Black radical traditions of marronage as conceptualized by Cedric Robinson. Marronage began as a historical act of fleeing but also embodies a broader politics of revolutionary survival and creativity. Throughout the Caribbean and the Americas, enslaved Africans sought freedom not only by escaping plantations but also by creating insurgent ways of life within and against systems designed to capture, discipline, and destroy them. Marronage thus represented both an immediate fight for survival and a long-term dedication to preserving culture, kinship, ecological knowledge, and dignity amid sustained violence.

Marronage also included everyday acts of resistance: slowing work, reshaping tools, maintaining forbidden spiritual and love practices, and creating atypical social spaces within the plantation system. Historically, maroon communities developed their own political structures, ethical systems, and ways of knowing that did not fully submit to colonial authority. Over time, Black activists have redefined the word maroon from a colonial label for supposed criminals to a symbol of courage, resistance, and insurrectionary independence.

Maroon Time: Improvisation, Memory, and Refusal

From this history emerges what I describe as maroon time. While plantation time centered on extraction, surveillance, and strict discipline, maroon time followed different principles. It aligned with seasonal cycles and ecological rhythms, emphasizing subsistence, mobility, and concealment. Instead of the linear temporality of Western modernization, organized around progress, efficiency, and accumulation, maroon time is nonlinear and situational. In settled maroon communities, time was governed by collective agricultural rhythms. In mobile groups, it remained

flexible, shaped by irregular movement and strategic pauses that reduced exposure to colonial capture, akin to jazz poetry itself.

Within “for tom & judy,” time appears as something to be demolished if linked to corporate greed, but also recoverable for the oppressed: “tom & judy & junior/ are dear to me/ they bought me some time/ it cost them a lot/ but/ they bought me/ some time,” Reyes Rivera recites. For the poet, the office becomes a stage for manufactured time, where social mobility demands conformity to norms that erase community memory and meaningful relationships. However, like outlier maroons who stole tools and food from their former plantations, these workers recontextualize time to meet their needs, their right to rest, and their personal bonds.

Maroon time also resonates within Afro-futurist philosophical and musical traditions. Reyes Rivera’s collaboration with Abdullah—including their co-authorship of Abdullah’s memoir *A Strange Celestial Road*, which recounts his experiences with the Sun Ra Arkestra—places jazz poetry within an interplanetary Black sonic lineage. Abdullah shared with me that, even after rehearsing 10 to 12 hours a day, each Arkestra performance was unique and fugitive because the ensemble transformed itself at every moment. This spontaneous structure highlights Black vitality as a form of world-building, spirit traveling, and performance. In the Sun Ra universe, jazz poetry suggests journeying through spaceways toward reverie, new dimensions, rigorous rehearsal, and improvisational risk. I can attest to Abdullah’s insight. Last March, I saw the Sun Ra Arkestra, led now by the 102-year-old saxophonist Marshall Allen, in Bushwick, and each composition was rebuilt on the spot through physical cues, interjections, new hooks and lyrics, and an overflowing second-line parade among the audience.

Influenced by Sun Ra’s aesthetics and poetics of space, myth, and collective performance, Abdullah and Reyes Rivera also edited and incorporated Sun Ra’s poetry into their repertoire. In the Arkestra and in Abdullah and Ngozi Nri’s band Diaspora, which

included Reyes Rivera as a resident poet, poetry functioned both as semantic expression and sonic texture within a communal space. In the Jazzoets and Diaspora performances, improvisation served as disciplined listening and relational response, a survival tactic heightened by diasporic histories of restriction and under-the-radar possibilities. A magnificent example is Diaspora's reworking of Sun Ra's "Enlightenment." Abdullah told me on the phone that their compositional practice was based on the art of flow and dialogue, letting each encounter dictate the sound and language organically. These ensembles challenge racial-capitalist demands for efficiency and individual authorship, focusing instead on collective timing and negotiated differences. Here, performance becomes cosmology: an enacted theory of togetherness and ancestral roots that redefines time.

This orientation is clear in Reyes Rivera's depiction of the office building as a keeper of history, but not that of executives. In "for tom & judy," the city is layered with hidden Black labor: streets, foundations, and air carrying ancestral presence. The work restores suppressed histories, as the group "mingle with the very people/ whose ancestors blew their ashes to the sun/ whose ancestors/ blew their ashes to the sun." Reyes Rivera challenges the equation of colonial futurity with assimilation into whiteness and power. Instead, he builds counter-narratives that break "the glass/ on the door/ of the office," rejecting capitalist boundaries of recognition and visibility defined through capital, the nation-state, clock time, and citizenship. In this reimagined space, the Jazzoets acknowledge the secret and limitless reach of Black people and art, even seeing themselves as time-traveling grandchildren at a holiday dinner where judy feeds them a feast of "gristle and bone," tom shares a few dollars, and the couple offers a "warm glow inside." This warmth is an abstract feeling sustained by love.

Afrofuturism from the Barrio

Reyes Rivera's practice aligns with Afro-futurist traditions that challenge Western ideological

ideas of limitless conquest. Afro-futurism portrays space as a fugitive, unknown terrain rather than a new opportunity for imperial expansion. Yet Reyes Rivera's Afro-futurism remains rooted in El Barrio: a diasporic, anticolonial future grounded in Black Puerto Rican history, from Ramón Emeterio Betances's Antillean federation—an archipelagic project of decolonization developed by 19th-century Caribbean revolutionaries in exile—to 20th-century armed struggles for self-determination. As the poet writes: "did you hear Betances/ beating his fists against/ lost/war new/world causes/ bought by brutal conquistadores/ dividing pardos, free but colored/ from morenos, simply colored/ from prietos negros/ warm but black." For Reyes Rivera, a future of racial justice arrives through understanding the centuries-long histories of racial classification and abolitionist resistance to them.

This historical consciousness and continuous search for Black freedom appear in the endnotes of *Scattered Scripture*. One poignant example is Reyes Rivera's observation that "chattel/ indentured slaves and slave-wage laborers working alongside one another often shared their aspirations, which also manifested in conspiracies and in interpersonal relations and marriage." Yet he does not romanticize these coalitions. Caribbean unity, he notes, was often fractured by "competing caste conflicts based in color gradations and cultural differences that have carried over to the present."

In "for tom & judy," Reyes Rivera creates a symbolic break with dominant ideas of time and material reality structured by racial capitalism. As cited above, the poem concludes with an ambiguous act of destruction directed at the office building—the new plantation—where tom, judy, and junior labored under conditions of constant exploitation and health hazards. Whether this act destroys the building itself or simply disrupts its regime of control, the message is clear. Reyes Rivera breaks the glass and leaves his "wristwatch" behind "in the office/judy's wrinkles/ used to scrub," symbolically rejecting the discipline of wage time. The wristwatch represents the structured temporality of salaried work: tracked productivity,

monotonous low-wage routines, and the draining of vitality in service of capital. By abandoning it in the building, the poem refuses the colonial equation of progress with submission to labor discipline.

Reyes Rivera deepens this critique by saying he also left “fifty pounds of plastic.” The substitution is intentional and symbolic. Where workers had been rendered disposable, treated as interchangeable parts within a system of accumulation, plastic, the ultimate disposable material, replaces them. This inversion reveals the moral absurdity of an economy that preserves synthetic materials while depleting human lives. Plastic also signals inauthenticity: a metaphor for the respectability masks and assimilationist identities forced by corporate norms.

Jazzoetry Against Racial Capitalism

Within this framework, jazzoetry emerges as a counter-economy. Reyes Rivera and the Jazzoets create an undercommons that challenges commodification, cultural containment, and linear narratives of success. Their performance model emphasizes ongoing collaboration, even after someone has “left the planet,” as Abdullah told me, where thinking happens in groups. It is a collective effort that highlights mutual responsiveness. Sound becomes a form of social organization: a practice of listening that revalues time not as productivity but as presence. Against the isolating pace of the workplace, ensemble performance sets a different rhythm, one grounded in showing up for each other and prioritizing cooperation over competition.

The poem’s final acknowledgment that tom and judy “bought us time” repositions earlier generations of exploited workers as active participants in a longer history of resistance. Their labor, although captured by capital, laid the groundwork for future resistance. Jazzoetry thus transforms memory into strategy, presenting collective performance as both critique and rehearsal for dismantling the colonality of wage time. Through jazzoetry, Reyes Rivera promoted marronage as a political necessity: a lived practice of time centered on mutual care and collective play. In this framework,

listening itself becomes a method. Ensemble sound rejects the linear, disciplinary temporality of colonial modernity and rehearses freedom in the present—an improvisation of relation against extraction.

His abolitionist commitments reinforce this stance. As a prison educator, Reyes Rivera viewed the carceral regime as a continuation of plantation logics. He publicly defended political prisoners such as Mumia Abu-Jamal and engaged incarcerated writers as co-creators of cultural life, as his 2016 posthumous book *Jazz in Jail* illustrates. Abdullah noted that this book also offers a historical critique of how white executives who controlled the recording industry positioned jazz as a captured Black diasporic culture. For the Jazzoets, if Black people are to be free, then jazz itself must also be freed from the industry’s jail and delivered to the Palenque, the maroon enclave.

Reyes Rivera’s performances function as oral classrooms, presenting counter-histories like those in “for tom & judy” while groove and soundscapes guide attention and foster responsibility. Maroon time here becomes a tuning of memory towards fragmented archives and silenced diasporic voices, as well as towards musical lineages across Puerto Rico, the Caribbean, and the United States. In an era of rising authoritarian discourses that view Black and racialized communities as disposable, his work affirms that performance can serve both as a communal space and an archive. Reyes Rivera reminds us that freedom is something we rehearse together in liberated time. **n**

Rojo Robles is a Puerto Rican experimental writer, playwright, and scholar of Black literature, cinema, and culture. An assistant professor at Baruch College, CUNY, he publishes extensively and is working on books about Afro-Diasporican maroon poetics (with a chapter on Reyes Rivera and Pedro Pietri’s temporal ruptures) and Black cinemas in the Caribbean and Africa.