

## *Gender Jawn* Season 1 Episode 3: Jorge Sánchez Cruz

Transcription by Emma Davies

[*Gender Jawn* theme song]

(0:30)

Maria: Welcome to *Gender Jawn*, a podcast out of Philly, about the politics, practices, performances and pedagogies of gender and sexuality, sponsored by the Alice Paul Center for Research on gender, sexuality and women.

[Music Transition]

(0:57)

Maria: This month, I'm joined by APC ACLS Emerging Voices Postdoctoral Fellow, Jorge Sánchez Cruz, whose research takes up Undocu-aesthetics, affect theory, cultural production by undocu-queer writers, poets and artists, AIDS in the Americas, and queer world-making. I'm your host, Maria Murphy, Interim Associate Director of the Alice Paul Center, and all of my queer sensibilities are tingling because my guest today has a real gift--a real way of enacting queer world-making in his writing. In a way, that, to me, just renders these queer worlds so vibrant, even in the written word. So here's a little bit about Jorge: Jorge Sánchez Cruz holds a PhD from the University of California Riverside from 2018. His research operates at the intersection of Latin American literary and cultural studies, queer and trans studies, indigenous and performance studies and critical theory. His current book project, *Aesthetics of Dissent: AIDS and Sexual Politics in the Americas*, investigates how the HIV/AIDS pandemic of the 1990s and new emerging embodiments of this century have reconfigured subjectivity, sexually, corporeally, and racially. Jorge's work also addresses literary and cultural productions by undocu-queer subjects living in a landscape of debilitation and a climate of negative affect. Welcome, Jorge.

(1:58)

Jorge: Thank you, Maria, thank you for the kind invitation. And I am so happy to be here in conversation with you in Pacific time, and I know you're in three hours ahead, so good to have a talk in different times and spaces.

(2:12)

Maria: Well, I have so much to ask you. In part, because I was so excited by your Work-In-Progress that you shared in October, which if listeners are interested in checking that out, you can look at it on the Alice Paul Center YouTube page. But I was really blown away by the way that you integrate in your work, affect theory, queer of color, critique, and aesthetics really broadly taken up and you do it in such beautiful ways. I think that, in addition to doing this kind of queer world-making in your writing, you also address some of these really long-term problems of neoliberalism and biopolitical control that I think are really missing in public discourse about some of the art and aesthetic projects that you're addressing. So if it's all right with you, I first want to ask you to tell me and our listeners, what you mean by undocu-aesthetics and what that term is doing and what comprises that term?

(2:57)

Jorge: Well, good questions, Maria. This, I want to start by kind of describing how this project started, or how this article started. Last year, after my Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals got rejected by USCIS , [United States Citizenship and Immigration Services] and I was very infuriated, but at the same time, very sad. So it was a whole year of thinking: how do I write something that has to do with the ways in which the current government or the current administration targets to maximize documented position of vulnerability? And because I am a fan of aesthetics and cultural productions and visual practices, I wanted to see how undocumented artists in general were, were thinking these strategies of survival and strategies that bypass the techniques of the nation state. So initially, I was looking at undocumented literature and undocumented pieces, like film or art, but then I got pretty interested in undocumented queer artists. We're also thinking about how communities, amongst each other, amongst ourselves, can support our stay here in the US in spite of these policies and laws that are constantly attacking us, right? So I came up on three artists that I presented about. But then I was I was thinking, yeah, these artists are queer and they're non-conforming subjects, but I wanted to learn how the aesthetics in general are queer in themselves, right? So they are queer, in the sense, that they critique the normative frameworks of legality, right? What constitutes a legible subject or resident, right? We are, in some way, made visible and apprehended by the nation-states because we were born here, right? Because we are in a residence status, right? So queer aesthetics, I guess, are queer, in the sense, that not only are they produced by queer subjects, but they are also critiquing all the legal frames, and normative violent legal frames that we can trace, all the way from the 19th or 18th century in the subjugation of the Black and African American communities. So that's what I was thinking. I'm thinking about how they are undocu-queer or also by undocumented artists. But at the same time, queer, in the sense, that they are made by queer people, but also queer in itself, of how they are disentangling and deconstructing these normative frames.

Maria: I want to talk about part of your critique of DACA. You refer to it as a policy of practice that is an exemplary biopolitical scenario. You call it a provisional bandage policy. You also say that DACA operates as both a capture and a managing of undocumented subjects. I want to ask you about this because you're thinking about biopolitical management that gets built into that policy, which I find has dropped out of public discourse about, you know, DREAMers, and DACA under this current administration. Yet, you really remind readers and people who are engaging with your work that this policy gets enacted under Obama, and insinuates that folks should be very grateful. And you really peel away the layers to explain, basically, this is the policy that gaslights undocumented folks, constantly, by practices of surveillance, the constant biometric appointments, everything. Your writing really crystallizes that distinction that this is not just a problem of our current presidential administration, right? This isn't just a Trump problem. This was a problem that also took shape under the Obama administration, and obviously earlier. I'm wondering if you can talk about that critique, which I just think is lacking in some of the conversations we're having about this issue?

Jorge: Yeah, absolutely. Of course, I think we should be grateful for the Obama executive order. I mean it kind of gave us an "official" legal way (and I put it in quotation marks) to work. Even for some undocumented academics, [an official legal way] for us to be part of an institution. But I think people ignore that this policy has us in this kind of state of exception or a state of

suspension, where we don't know when this policy is going to end, right? And we see this through the constant attack offered by the Trump administration, right? But the most scary thing is that through the application process, we have to submit all of our bio data, right? Where we were born, when we when we came into the US, where we work, where we live, things like that. Our addresses, the information of our family or parents who may not be eligible for deferred action, right? So it is a scary thing, how the state in some ways, conspicuously, is policing us and policing our families. And secondly, I state that it's a form of management that capacitates because yes we can work and we can contribute economically to the economy. But this right to work, this right to thrive through a temporary work permit that needs to be renewed every two years, it kind of sustains the US as a nation. Right? But at the same time, it kind of debilitates us because it puts us in a state where we live day by day thinking: what is going to happen with DACA? Or, what is going to happen, for example, if we violate the laws that constitute DACA? People don't know that DACA recipients or beneficiaries have to be the most perfect citizens compared to other residents and citizens in order for us to keep our DACA status. Right? No breaking of laws whatsoever. Perfect record with no criminal charges or anything, right? So it kind of puts us in a very vulnerable position, where we are given the right to thrive, but at the same time, we can see our state of vulnerability with ease. We can be deported or there can be deportability intentions instituted for and against undocumented subjects. I think it kind of operates as a double bind, the DACA, as an institutional, legal practice and policy. But I think it should be given more attention because what if they decide to end DACA? Right? What would happen to all those peoples whose records are recorded through USCIS and twice, right? It is a very scary thing. I think.

Maria: I wonder, I didn't ask you to prepare this, would you consider reading an excerpt of that, or a different poem that we could include?

Jorge: Alright, so the name of the poet that I analyzed in this article under review is Alan Pelaez Lopez and the title of the poem is "sick in 'america.'" I'm going to read the entire poem, excluding the footnotes, which are about seven footnotes. So here I go. "sick in 'america;'

before the crossing<sup>1</sup> our family could understand the whispers of the water<sup>2</sup>. we bathed our cuerpos morenos as if we we were holy: as if our humanity was valuable, as if we were worth life. it is hard to remember anything before the crossing<sup>3</sup>. how do i tell myself i had a childhood if at the age of five i am a fugitive<sup>4</sup> of the law? it would be easier to remember life before the crossing<sup>5</sup> if we didn't become paralyzed for the rest of our lives: the doctor tells me i have post traumatic stress disorder. he says it is because i am an immigrant<sup>6</sup>, but that in a few years, i will be american<sup>7</sup>.

[footnotes included below the podcast transcription]

So I really liked this poem, because it does go along with the continued debilitation or debility of undocumented populations, where we're constantly "sick," right? In quotation marks. It's a continuous state of sickness, right? Where, when crossing the border, right, is kind of like a continual, open wound, kind of conjuring Gloria Anzaldúa theoretical framework.

Maria: In the piece, you talk about how you offer these reparative readings, even through negative affect and negative feelings. And you actually seem to leverage those negative feelings

as part of thinking through the possibilities of and beyond this poem. You know, the visual work of Julio Salgado, and a couple of other artists. I'm wondering, can you talk about how you do that reparative work? How do you derive, you know, undocu-joy, as a technique of survival through negative affect?

Jorge: That is a very good question. I mean, I'm very influenced by the type of negativity through queer theory, like Lisa Lowe and Lee Edelman but I'm thinking, this specific poem about how can we build a reparative reading, and I'm thinking that in spite of enduring this continuous state of sickness from these constant forms, filling....being off, right. We can find strategies to move ourselves in the everyday, and I'm thinking mobility or strategies of choice in the constant everyday, right. In the simple act of getting up. In the simple act of going to work, even in spite of our lives being devalued by the targeting through policies of this administration and other administrations. I think that we can build strategies of survival or of joy that do not apprehend themselves to the dominant ideas of happiness, right, as we think. And, of course, in thinking about Sarah, Sarah Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, right? I think happiness and joy can also be thought through the non- normative negative ways of, or in spite of the negative ways of subjective subjugation. Like getting up and still enduring, in spite of what Alan Pelaez Lopez describes as a post-traumatic stress disorder. I think in some way, negative affect is constitutive of strategies, strategies of joys that are non-normative.

In kind of thinking about along my project, theorizing aesthetics of dissent, I'm thinking how queerness or queer theory can deploy a sense of dissention, right? The dissent from what we typically think about queer theory, right from the Global North or queerness of Queer Studies from the Global North, right? Can we go beyond the consensus of queer theory from the Global North and direct our attention to Global South's narratives and aesthetics, strategies of world building and world-making. Strategies, right, that are that do not conform to the either idealization of what we think about community building and community strategies of going beyond the nation state. Right. So, yeah, that's, that's what I'm thinking about how aesthetics perform and act dissensus or dissension in kind of, like different levels in different ways.

Maria: Yeah, I mean, this is like a common critique leveraged, especially in the US, against queer theory that it you know, it gets projected onto the Global South as this, you know, homogenizing approach. And this is actually part of the topic, of a course, you are going to be teaching for GSWS [Gender, Sexuality, and Women's Studies Program at UPenn] in the spring, right. Can you talk a little bit about that course? And if it connects to the book project, can you talk about how that works?

Jorge: Yes, yes, yes, I'm very excited about this course. Because I've taught this course at Northwestern, under the critical theory program, which was very heavy on theory. This one at UPenn titled, "Latin American Cuir", that is C-U-I-R, in Spanish phonetics, and queer critique. This course will be focusing much more on more popular productions like visuals, music, street art, performance, even a series on Netflix, for example, where we can see queerness performed an iPad for the viewer, right and along with the viewer. So this course is going to be very, very fun, but at the same time, I want to offer some theoretical interventions and theoretical national conversations between the global north and the global south that doesn't necessarily promote an opposition between one or the other but more like developing a conversation. On how Latin

America and Latin American queer sexualities, and American aesthetic productions can contribute to the field of Queer Theory and Queer Studies of large. So for example, we're going to be starting with the famous song from Bad Bunny, "Yo Perreo Sola," [I twerk alone] which that song is so... I don't know if you've seen it--

Maria: Yeah, actually, I have.

[Musical excerpt from Bad Bunny's "Yo Perreo Sola"]

Jorge: That song, and that video is charged with so much queerness. Right? In, it's a very interesting. And I'm going to be translating the song because I know there's going to be students who do not read or speak Spanish. Yeah, that course. I'm excited for it.

Maria: It sounds really great. And if I can just turn back toward your book project, of course, which also is considering AIDS in the Americas and having the more sort of transnational scope for the project. And I'm wondering, you know, 40 years on, what are some of the interventions that you're making, that kind of are addressing, just addressing the amount of knowledge production about, you know, the conditions of this Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome?

Jorge: This book project, of course, arises from my dissertation. But what I explore in this manuscript is, like I was saying, right, how aesthetics perform and act in different levels and different planes. What I am more interested in this specific sort of archive or canon of the 90s, specifically in Mexico and Chile, is zero positive subjects. Right? These are the times of the neoliberal transitions in both Mexico and Chile. Right. And so, I think about how, for example, visual pieces or artifacts or even novels, short novels, direct our attention on different vectors that condition minoritarian, zero positive subjects. Right? And one of the most, I think, I think, that is important in this specific manuscript is the question of hospitality. So I've been thinking hospitality through this novel [Beauty Salon], by a Mexican writer, Mario Bellatin, in which a salon is transformed into hospitals, right, and instead of seeing this "Zero positive," or in fact the subjects as "the pill," or "the infected," or "the contaminant subject," the narrative turns those linguistic registers through, by calling the ill or the most miserable as they call them in the novel "the most miserable." He calls, or the novel calls them, guests. Right, or in Spanish is called Huesped or Huespedes. So I think that through this novel, we can kind of start thinking about moving beyond this homosexual and trans and post phobic registers that arose in the 90s. Right. And so by hailing these subjects as guests, right, come into our house, and when given hospice away from all sorts of violence. The novel, published in the 1990s, kind of proposes new ways to apprehend the "Other," right? To embrace the "Other" who's in need, right? So there is one of the things that I'm working on right now, which comes from the book project. New ethical, political ways of embracing the Other who is different from us.

Maria: That framing is really beautiful--that thinks of folks who are living with HIV, or late stage HIV, which I guess we call AIDS, as guests, which is obviously a huge pivot from the viral panic of, you know, the 80s and 90s, when communities were basically forced to take care of each other, become their own pharmaceutical companies, their own hospices, because those services were either being denied to folks with AIDS or that those services just weren't available. So it's interesting to me that even beyond the kind of baseline necessities that were being met in

the text that you're talking about, that the salon actually gets figured as something one step above that. So not just having necessities met with kind of basic hospice care, but thinking of a salon that has obviously a much more hospitable take and environment, to cultivate community and show care.

Jorge: Yeah, absolutely. Of course, what the manuscript does, like you said, kind of deconstructs what made or what gave rise to this viral terror, viral paranoia, right? And kind of attributed from the work that I'm doing to the false narratives initiated by the medical scientific discourse, which initially labeled HIV as GRID. Okay, Gay-related immune deficiency disorder, right? So, it's a project that moves from deconstructing to moving our attention to alternative forms of care. In that sense, through this novel, I kind of posit about how--and this is what I'm thinking right now, maybe I may be wrong--, how do we de-idealize the ways of building communities, right? Because in this text, it is basically about a trans narrator, or who I call it a trans-narrator, who does not attempt to save the subjects from dying, right? Because there's no cure, right? There's no constant medical intervention or constant medical forms of trying to get them out of that stage of dying, right, but rather, building a community where there is just bodies across the salon, where the character gives them a comfortable place for them to die in peace. Rather than being outside, right, where they're constantly being discriminated, criminalize. And of course, it's a fictitious narrative set in the 90s. I'm kind of thinking about de-idealizing community building.

Maria: So Jorge, I know, you also sent me some musical examples to talk about. So for part of your next project, you're thinking about indigenous soundscapes, and the state of Oaxaca [in Mexico]. You have included a couple of clips and I'm wondering if you can introduce them and talk about how you're analyzing them in terms of your other established work on performance and world-making, and again, like moving away from frames of citizenship, away from the nation state.

Jorge: Yeah, absolutely. So the sounds that I'm going to showcase are from two different regions from the state of Oaxaca, Mexico, which is southwest of the Mexican Republic. And these two sounds from two regions are in conversation with the other regions of Oaxaca. There's eight regions in Oaxaca. Each specific region has its own forms of music, sounds, dances, as well as its own languages, indigenous languages and they meet every year at a weekly festival in the state of Oaxaca. That's where they can perform and showcase their sounds and music, as well as their dances. The festival is called Guelaguetza and that's G-U-E-L-A-G-U-E-T-Z-A. And basically what it means it's a form of reciprocity, right? People think that it's just a big festival, that the state will have in its regions where they come together and they celebrate but it's actually a practice of every day living, right? My family and I are from Oaxaca. And every time when we were there, or even when we here [in the US] when they want to, for example, borrow or asks their fellow friends or family from the state to contribute to something they would ask, would you be able to give some? Can I get some like, in exchange for this, if you help me now? Later on, I will help you with this, or I'll pay you back. So it's a formula of indigenous reciprocity, right? People think it is just the name itself. It's a music festival. But it's not right. It's a form of indigenous everyday living. So the first one is from the region where my family and I are from, and it's called Valles Centrales, or in English, Central Valley. It's the heart of the state of Oaxaca. And this song, and this sound, every time I hear it, it gives me life, not only because of the sounds right, but also because of the dance itself.

[Musical excerpt of “Jarabe del Valle”]

So this song, which is also a dancing song, it’s called “Jarabe del Valle,” which basically translates to, Jarabe means syrup, but jarabe also means a genre mix, a genre mix with different kind of sounds or influences of the Valley. What interests me about the song is well, most of the instruments used, like the tuba, the French horn, the trumpet, basically a lot of brass instruments, as well as they use a lot of hand symbols, right, which kind of like marks a change of beat. But overall, I’m interested in musical indigenous sounds, because of the different I mean, as you were able to tell, there’s different textures. And in general, I’m interested in the performance of this song because it kind of tells a story. I mean it’s the combination of interchanges between peoples in the community. Basically this song is mainly danced by women. In the state of Oaxaca, they dance it mostly in big celebrations, I think specifically during the summer. The dance is basically a celebration of life. That’s why they carried these big baskets on their heads when they’re dancing. And if you’re able to hear there was some fireworks blasting off a basket, right? So if you actually there in Oaxaca and you are in the crowd, it’s very fun because then they have this big gigantic constructed giants, which are made out of, I don’t even know, I don’t even know what the materials are, they are but the specific clothing that the women are wearing, which is specific of this region. Each region has specific type of traditional clothing that symbolizes or represents themselves among all the other regions.

Yes, so the second song or sound that I chose is from another region from the state of Oaxaca. And this region is called the Isthmus. It’s the most famous region of Oaxaca because in that region, they have what they call muxes. That is M-u-x-e-s. Muxes are basically non-conforming sexual people, or what they call a third gender. They kind of oscillate between the male and the female. They also wear the traditional women’s clothing of a specific region. This community of muxes is one which animated one of my chapters of the dissertation, right? How they are bypassing forms of gender imbricated since colonialism, and which is attached to the nation state. How they’re building other forms of intimacy and kinship amongst other muxes who are also gender non conforming. The song that I chose, it’s called “Tanguyu.” It’s Zapotec. It’s a combination of Zapotec or Mixtec. Same as the other song, where we speak or my parents speak a little of Mixtec and Zapotec. The song here from the isthmus called Tanguyu basically it is derived from a story about a goddess of the wind who came down from the clouds in the isthmus, and people were able to see her and she descended from the from the cloud right at the time when it was going to be New Year’s. So the people of the Isthmus, in order to give tribute to this goddess, decided to make a mud doll in representation of her. So the muddoll basically has the traditional clothing of that specific region. So Tanguyu basically means it’s a doll made out of mud. And a song that I’m gonna play basically, it’s a lullaby of a mother singing to the child, son or daughter, fall asleep and tomorrow I’m going to buy you a Tanguyu so you can remember me forever, right? So even though the song sounds a little bit sad, it’s a it’s a lullaby that puts children to sleep. It’s also very personal because it reminds me of my grandmother and my great grandmother who I grew up when I was in Oaxaca. I was brought up by women. This song is very personal, but at the same time, it kind of sets the relationship between mother and child with indigenous background and indigenous symbolism.

[Musical excerpt from “Tanguyu”]

What I like about this song is, and it's very interesting because in most Zapotec or Mixtec stories or legends, they're all related to the wind, water or air, so I kind of like that connection because everything is related in some way. One, during my undergrad I presented about this music from the isthmus at the President's Academic Showcase. And one person told me, it was very noisy. It seems like too much noise. They're out of tune. And I was thinking, boy, yeah, it kind of seems noisy, because maybe it's live and they are not performing in synch. But then as I continued my studies, right, and I was thinking about noise and discourse and then I read Rancière and how noise can become discourse. So this music in general, like, for me, it's not just the performance of folklore, right, but it's sort of noise that is not imbricated to the dominant, harmonious sounds that we think as good to the ear, but one that tells a different story from the precolonial period to the present, and how this specific performances along with the songs is a political discourse, right? That tells a different story.

Maria: The concept of noise is so dense with like, ideological assumptions. And I love how you're thinking through, you know, noise that becomes discourse, through Rancière you know, thinking about all the ways that these aesthetic projects circulate and work in unintended ways.

Jorge: I mean, this this music gives me life, Maria. Every time I listen to it, it brings me back, not only brings me back many good memories, but it also makes me think about how to think performance through and via indigenous communities, in the performance of delegates, in the everyday, but performance in the musical genres and music. And I'm not saying that we should read only through Rancière, right, but it is how this aesthetic practices are already in some way theorizing what Western ideological and philosophical traditions have been arguing as well.

Maria: Jorge, thank you so much for sharing your work and going into such detail. I will link to these videos in our show notes. Folks can find them and watch, so they can understand also, what you're describing visually is going down. So thank you so much for sharing with me today. If you're interested in learning more about Jorge's work, you can read his bio and check out some of his stuff at [gsws.sas.upenn.edu](http://gsws.sas.upenn.edu) and he will likely be presenting another Works in Progress next semester, so stay tuned for more information about that, thanks for joining me Jorge.

[*Gender Jawn* theme song]

### [Full Text for Alan C Pelaez Lopez, sick in "america"](#)

before the crossing<sup>1</sup> our family could understand the whispers of the water<sup>2</sup>. we bathed our cuerpos morenos as if we were holy: as if our humanity was valuable, as if we were worth life. it is hard to remember anything before the crossing<sup>3</sup>. how do i tell myself i had a childhood if at the age of five i am a fugitive<sup>4</sup> of the law? it would be easier to remember life before the crossing<sup>5</sup> if we didn't become paralyzed for the rest of our lives: the doctor tells me i have post traumatic stress disorder. he says it is because i am an immigrant<sup>6</sup>, but that in a few years, i will be american<sup>7</sup>.



<sup>1</sup>during the crossing // we were faced with // the reality // of what it means // to be Black and Indian // in an Empire // that constantly measures us // on production // production // and production. // our blood // a sustenance // for those // who deem us “illegal.”

<sup>2</sup>the water here // has been cut through // by wooden logs // that demand // we show them // papers that say // we are not poor // nor Indian or Black.

<sup>3</sup>i only crossed once // (location: // San Diego/ Tijuana border // age // five // how // by foot and car.)// but every story heard // becomes another crossing // my body remembers every crossing // every crossing becomes mine // my body has experienced every crossing // in dreams.

<sup>4</sup>fugitive: american indian boarding school runaway// fugitive: runaway slave// fugitive: runaway soon-to-be-lynched negro// fugitive: assata shakur // fugitive: mike brown // fugitive: sandra bland // fugitive: alan carlos pelaez lopez.

<sup>5</sup>crossing: the precise location in a five-year-old’s life where they lose their humanity, health, and livelihood. // the site where the child realizes their guiding spirit is weakening // the body, changing // the mind, confused // the flesh, shivering // eyes, watering // digits, dancing. // the site where “Americans” will blame the child for “infecting” the “American Dream.”// the site where a child is just a child visiting occupied Indian land.

<sup>6</sup>“the black body does not migrate, it is shipped”- tavia nyong’o

<sup>7</sup>american: i guess i’ll be forever “sick.”