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## Book Review: Lyons, Daniel Jack (2022) *Like a River. Loose Joints*

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It intends to serve as a platform for testing, circulating, and debating new ideas and reflections on these topics, expanding beyond the geographical, cultural and linguistic boundaries of Latin America - Abya Yala. We hope to contribute to connecting ideas, and to provide a space for intellectual exchange and discussion for a nascent academic community of scholars, devoted to counter-balancing mainstream understandings of development.

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## **Book Review:**

### **Lyons, Daniel Jack (2022) Like a River. Loose Joints**

At least to the European coloniser, the Amazon was born gendered: “There was no one in it but women, the Amazons,” allegedly said Francisco de Orellana as he reached the Tapuya territory in 1542. The Amazon was also queered up from the outset “Dresses made of different coloured feathers”, that caught the traveller’s attention.

The devastation of Amazonian communities and their populations over the centuries has only found any sense of relief in the survival of these coloured feathers. The continuation of some of this landscape and its inhabitants thrive in small vestiges of everyday life, either in the pieces of forest that are possible to visit or in the emollient sights the indigenous people release toward the impending modernity.

Conversely, less of the white man’s gaze focuses on modern Amazonians. Less yet has appeared to depict them while sexual and gendered beings conforming or not to modern hierarchies of representation. Queerness has come unperceived in the lenses of their most prominent Western readers: From the Rondons to Levi-Strauss in the 20th century; from Sebastião Salgado to Claudia Andujar recently.

In this context emerges *Like a River* by Daniel Jack Lyons. An American photographer based in Los Angeles, Lyons has seen his work featured in mainstream fashion publications, such as *Vogue* or *Dazed*. But instead of models wearing expensive outfits or celebrities, Lyons’ book wants to give the reader another perception of individuals living “at the margins.”

The photographer now approaches the young, the queer, and the trans living close to the city of Manaus, Brazil, who pose against the natural landscape.

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Taken shortly after Covid-19, Lyons' photography draws on relationships he created with Casa do Rio, an institution providing assistance and shelter to youth facing difficulties in life.

Like a River came out in 2022 with no shortage of media coverage about it. The press has hailed the book as a "coming of age" tale of queer Amazonian folks. In fact, beyond the models' youth, the work comes at a time when the legitimacy of Amazonian portraits and what they represent to the broader politics comes at stake.

On the positive side, bits of indigenous culture are captured here and there in the models' bodies, either in painted faces or limbs. The photographer privileges silent faces who face the viewer as youngsters who refuse to be exoticised. Still, this kind of portraiture is not entirely free from the so-called cool aesthetics found in Western fashion magazines. Essays are produced under similar low light, colour balance, and framing, not plausible for the typical sunshine of the tropics.

In any case, Like a River advances the queer gaze to the Amazon as a territory that should not be excluded from contemporary visual politics. In times of social media acceleration, Lyons' photography convincingly emerges as a language that repositions the Eurocentric bias of always telling a story, invariably a gendered one, to cover instead inner realities which lie beyond interpretation.

For example, a systematic bias in photojournalism is to depict that region of the world as a prisoner of unfathomable realism. That is, daily press images do not allow for light-hearted or lyric depictions, as they represent the region as put under permanent surveillance to avoid destruction.

Lyons' work unmakes their entrapment to centre on metaphorizing queer existence as fluid and fragile. This place is no longer where the rivers of different tones meet for tourists to rejoice, but where the fishnet stockings and high heels meet the brown earth, where a blonde wig rests on a wooden table, where one finds the red lipstick and a dead tree trunk in close rapport to one another. Second, Like a River portrays queerness as a state of inexorable isolation that affects all, either split by gender, geography, or citizenship rights. It is not only the LGBT folks who appear in this book, but the subjects materialise as in a lonely intersection.

Echoing Levi-Strauss in his famous quote, "the barbarian is first and foremost the man who believes in barbarism", queerness appears first and foremost for those who believe in the right of being queer whatever the circumstances. These photographs approximate the viewer to existences that, for the first time, do not need binding to the coloniser or outsider, nor come at the expense of sensationalism.

In 1952, the influential *Cruzeiro* magazine loudly reported the first legal marriage between a Brazilian white man and an indigenous woman. This example

would become the hallmark of an integration model pivoted mainly through the dictatorship that governed Brazil for decades.

Lyons' portraiture frees itself from that allegorical harmony between mainstream and indigenous Brazil as it is not interested in the dialogue between worlds but in conversations among Amazonian queers. Those who inhabit the streets, the roads, the open markets, the tupanás, or the rivers' margins, and who are not always protected and safe as in front of his lenses.

When foregrounding Wendel, a trans woman smoking a cigarette, Lyons does more than show them in a cowboy hat and jewel-embroidered outfit from the Parintins carnival. It is the unmaking of a heavy representation of the Amazonian travesti who, as Don Kulick highlights in his 1998 homonymous book, has drawn the collective imagination because of its mysterious presence. Prostituted beauties boosted by industrial silicon, large thighs, and buttocks, persecuted but thriving on their terms.

Lyons avoids this layer of violence to provide candidness, which works as pauses of resistance far from granted by the white man but achieved through this intimate contact with nature. Let us not forget that the book happened in the final years of the Bolsonaro government, which proved catastrophic for the people of the Amazon, particularly for gays, lesbians, and trans populations who had become a target for religious, cultural, and legal reasons.

Initiatives such as Casa do Rio have for decades provided sanctuary for young people that are not only spared a fulfilled life because of violence or poverty but invariably become victims of heterosexual oppression, caught in the crossfire of territorial tensions that pushes them into compulsory masculine brutality.

Like a River proves a symbolic but relevant effort to un-victimise queers living in the Amazon by portraying their silences as convincing gestures of defiance. On what is not expressed in these portraits, there lacks a more frequent discussion on resisting the categorisation of queerness in the Amazon according to modes of power challenge its epistemologies, and a political scoring orientation.

This book hints at this but does not do more to find new visual or political repertoires, like we see in artists such as Uyria Sodoma and a growing ecosystem of radical queer artists in the region. From the sultriness of the forest, Like a River accomplishes to portray an intermediary state of recognition for queerness in the Amazon, a sort of meditation while queers find their own pace and models of liberation. I quote another excerpt from poet Thiago de Mello's verses that give Lyons' book its title:

*To change, always on the move,  
Sustaining the same being,  
Different yet in each moment:  
Like a river.*