

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

The Golden Age of Loisaída

Erika Sequeira · Wednesday, February 17th, 2016

1. Playing House

In my building (A), there were four Mexican families raising their kids in cramped apartments, mine included. There was also one Middle Eastern family where my friend Farhana lived. Her world was always the most intriguing to me for countless reasons, including that I could look into her home through our windows and often witness a life that was strikingly different from my traditions. In Building B, there was one Mexican family of five kids, a Puerto Rican family who had two similar-looking, slightly older than the rest of us, sons; and my substitute teacher, Mr. Azerlin, had a much-younger-than-us infant. Families were few in buildings that housed 28 apartments each.

Growing up in Alphabet City in the '90s was dangerous. It didn't help that almost all of us were also First Generation immigrants and our parents had no community to entrust us with; so a lot of our "play time" was spent on the basement level of our building. On this desolate level, you could find a rarely used laundry room, a couple of hallways that housed recycling and trash receptacles, home to a plethora of rats, and us.

I was the oldest girl in this circle of friends, there was Maria who was older than me, but old enough that she no longer played kids' games and therefore wasn't really part of our group. When we played house, I played Mom—always. Steven, who officially wins the *first kiss* title, was usually the Papa to my Mami role and we loved each other. We had three kids: Farhana, my younger brother Jesus, and his younger sister, Jessica. Our games always followed traditional roles. I would spend my entire day doing faux-laundry for hours, cooking and cleaning and rushing to get food on the table. Steven would be off at work, somewhere between the trash bins and the cardboard recycling area that I was always too scared to really go close to for fear of rats hiding between boxes.

He would come home with a huge smile on his face and hug the children and me and eagerly ask about our day. On tough days with the kids, he'd take over my stresses and discipline them. He was "perfect." Then either darkness or the holler of one of our mothers would come from four to six stories above us, and we'd have to get divorced and go back to our respective homes. The lot of us, a family destroyed as we joined our other families.

2. Sauer Park



I arrived in New York City, February 14, 1991. I can barely remember the days of my arrival, I'm sure the cold weather and new surroundings were too much trauma for my memory bank.

Somewhere, in the few items that recount the footprint of my childhood in New York, there is a photo of my niece and I gushing over snow. Why is it that when you're a kid, your superpower is to simply not care for anything else but the moment you're in? I can recall my countless attempts at a perfect snowball, and even more important, the discovery of snowmen. The feeling of wet gloves and hands raw from the cold that simply would not give up.

In this photo, that may or may not exist in some crevice of our home—I am in Sauer Park, before it was what it is today. Nancy, my niece, and I are happy in this photo. I'm wearing a coat that can only be described as grandma-purple, and she's wearing '90s teal. My bangs chopped, my braid to the waist. We are tiny. I'm standing on tubing from a construction site. I've learned that Sauer Park underwent a major renovation that got approved in 1991 and was executed '92-'93, reopening in August 1993. My family didn't get the memo, this was not a park zone; and like much of my neighborhood at the time, it was not kid-friendly; heroin addicts roamed.

I cannot remember the period of renovation, but I can imagine it's because we rarely left the house those days. People were shot in front of my building. Drug users and pushers would make their way to our roof and line the hallway corridors leaving needles, broken crack pipes and sometimes themselves.

Somewhere along 1996, I can remember starting to go to Sauer Park after school. I remember being a terrible big sister and only wanting to play with my friends. My brother is five years younger than me, and when you're 9 or 10, tag is the only game you really play. I would ignore him, and he would chase me unsuccessfully while I tried hard to just be in my world.

There was this time that a boy from my class started to chase me, and I remember I did something to really piss him off because then he came after me with a vengeance. I struggled to run upward on a coiling slide and he caught my foot and started to pull me down as I struggled to hang tight to the railings above. Suddenly, he yelled, "Oww!!" I could barely catch my breath when he followed up with, "your brother just bit my ass!" It was true. While I was busy ignoring him, my brother went above and beyond to save me. As his friend ran towards my brother to punch him, I suddenly found myself rescuing him and bolting from the park before he got help.

On a different occasion, I can remember the summer where I essentially lived in Sauer Park. Kickball & baseball season in full swing, a neighborhood organization funded karate and art & crafts programs and I loved it! I remember getting my karate uniform and practicing my *mawashi geri*, roundhouse kick, ad nauseam. This was also the summer I learned to make: a cobra head, staircase and box stitch with lanyard. I was the queen of key chains and I always took excess lanyard to keep me busy at home.

This was also what to me will be the Golden Age of *Loisaida*. There were community block parties. Each street would have its neighborhood celebration at some point during the summer, all having been kicked off by the Loisaida Festival that would typically happen on Memorial Day weekend. I remember the year I helped paint the banner for the 12th Street block party. Claudia, our art instructor, was amazing. She encouraged my idea to create the numbers and letters out of stick figures that would curve in ways to help spell out "Community Block Party." We took over the tiny kickball field and rolled out the banner and painted to our heart's content. It is because of her, that I can walk to the corner of 12th street and Avenue B, and still see the carrots and anthill I helped paint in a community garden mural. Every so often, I run into some of the community organizers, but we're all older and barely recognize each other.

This entry was posted on Wednesday, February 17th, 2016 at 11:04 pm and is filed under [Discourse](#). You can follow any responses to this entry through the [Comments \(RSS\)](#) feed. You can leave a response, or [trackback](#) from your own site.

