

Book Review Symposium – Queer Geographies

Julio Capó Jr., *Welcome to Fairyland: Queer Miami before 1940*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017. ISBN: 978-1-4696-3520-0 (paper); ISBN: 978-1-4696-3519-4 (cloth); ISBN: 978-1-4696-3521-7 (ebook)

Julio Capó Jr.'s *Welcome to Fairyland* is an ambitious project that explores the history of queer life in a city “just south of the US South” (p.27). The book keenly teases out how queer identities were leveraged for the production and consumption of a particular urban image: that of a “fairyland”, a playground of sexual and gender transgression for America’s wealthy white elite which evolved at the expense of working immigrants and people of color. Drawing on a series of marketing and advertising materials and strategies, historian Capó traces how Miami was framed and formed. Whether discussing the techniques of urban boosterism that construct fairyland as a “myth-like fantasyland of hedonism and indulgence” (p.99), gender-bending stage performances and minstrel shows (p.145-147), or seasonal policing strategies that produced a city amenable to tourism (p.271), Capó is attentive to the power dynamics that entrench normativity, police deviance, and regulate bodies. By focusing on the intersecting matrices of gender, race, sexuality, ethnicity, age, nationality, and (dis)ability, the author provides a strong contribution to work in LGBTQ historical geography, showing how transgression was commodified and sanitized, but also how such commodification was resisted.

A pleasure to read both in its writing and structure, *Fairyland* is organized topically rather than chronologically. Capó begins by analyzing the US settler founding of Miami in 1896 as a “queer frontier”, turning his attention on the expulsion of indigenous Seminole people, the exploitation of sexual, ethnic, and racial minorities, and the masculinist gaze of white capitalists who sought to regain their manliness by rejecting

civilization – that is, by “conquering the Miami frontier” (p.29). After establishing the conditions under which Miami was founded, he dedicates the following chapters to issues like the queer eroticization of black Bahamian bodies (Chapter 2); the centrality of sexuality, gender, race and more in the production and construction of fairyland (Chapter 3); linkages between the sexual economies of Nassau and Miami (Chapter 4); the racialized policing and surveillance of transgression (Chapter 5); the construction of a normative heterosexual culture through the commodification of women’s bodies (Chapter 6); and the (trans)national politics of prohibition (Chapter 7). In particular, the first three chapters establish how “fairyland” was constructed as a playground for the white and wealthy elite, teasing out its conditions of becoming. The latter chapters then take deeper dives that continue to trouble and contest that assumption.

Speaking foremost to queer historians, *Fairyland* makes a significant contribution to the field of queer studies with its transnational and de-colonial analysis. Mainly interrogating the years 1890 to 1940, Capó’s engagement unfolds on the stolen land of the Seminole people that is known today as Miami. However, Capó’s analysis is not restricted to the space of the city. Instead of limiting his engagement to the metropolitan area, or even the US South, Capó employs a decidedly transnational lens at the junction of three colonial spaces: the borderland, the frontier, and the city (p.6). In his attempt to destabilize the nation-state as a mode of analysis, Capó focuses outward, foregrounding the relationships, negotiations, and mobilities of people who navigated interstitial spaces of colonialism and imperialism. His approach shines, for example, during discussions of how transnational migration simultaneously produced gendered spaces of homosociality in Miami and the Bahamas (p.68-69), as well as how homosocial spaces on the Greek island of Kalymnos “afforded women greater social and political power” (p.185). In doing so, Capó avoids the potential pitfalls of US-centrism that would neglect transnational connections.¹

¹ For example, see Jackson’s (2005) critique – if a bit harsh – of Manalansan’s *Global Divas* (2003).

Capó envisions *Fairyland* in conversation with queer histories from authors like N. D. B. Connolly, Chanelle N. Rose, and Siobhan B. Somerville. In this regard, the text is mainly an empirical project. A wide range of queer theorists has clearly influenced Capó, but his strategy is to introduce theory as a jumping-off point for archival exploration rather than to enter into theoretical debates – a strategy that has benefits and drawbacks. While Capó scarcely returns to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s conceptualization of the glass closet after introducing it in Chapter 3’s early pages, he uses this to effectively frame the ways in which wealth, whiteness, and citizenship could protect queerness, constituting it as an “open secret” rather than something to be policed or condemned. Drawing on the specific examples of Alden Freeman and Dewing Woodward – a pair of important urban boosters for the city’s fairyland image – he argues that white and class privilege is “what made these women and men, particularly the latter, so influential in shaping Miami as a fairyland” (p.117). It is less effective in Chapter 4, where Capó draws upon Michael Warner’s notion of counterpublics, Judith Butler’s theory of performativity, and José Esteban Muñoz’s “disidentifications”, to establish a framework for thinking about “Miami as stage”. Unfortunately, the notion of the “stage” feels unevenly developed; at times, Capó seems to use it referring to “the spectacle of fairyland’s marketing campaign”, while at others, he discusses it literally in the context of gender-bending stage performances and minstrel shows (p.127).

That said, geographers will appreciate *Fairyland*’s seamless integration of queer theory and methods with historical urban geographies of tourism. After explicating the settler colonial relations and masculinist gaze intrinsic to Miami’s founding in the opening chapter, Capó takes a deep dive into the different mechanisms by which fairyland was constructed and sustained. Methodologically, Capó describes his approach as “queer as method and archive” (p.17). His research is broad in scope, drawing on “historic ephemera” like souvenir programs, postcards, and matchbook covers; a General Index to Criminal Cases for Dade County; immigration logs and records; newspaper and

magazine reports, films, paintings, postcards, memoirs, and literature; and transnational archives in the Bahamas, Cuba, and Haiti. Here, especially considering his focus on the “ephemera” and arrest records, the works of scholars such as Martin Manalansan (2003) and George Chauncey (1994) serve as important methodological guides for Capó.

In this “queer archive”, he treats absences as invitations rather than limitations. Following Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s engagement with the power dynamics of collective Western memory about slave revolts, Capó often acknowledges the silences and omissions of the records that he analyzes, using them as moments of opening-up – of “unsilencing” – rather than foreclosure. Discussing the “female impersonator” Karl Russell Denton, for example, Capó notes that while “the historical record does not yield any definitive answers” about Denton’s sexual proclivities, Denton’s need to “shield himself from accusations of homosexuality” exemplifies the patterns of appropriating queer identities in the interest of constructing a fairyland image while simultaneously condemning queerness, same-sex intimacy, and effeminacy in practice (p.156-157).²

Capó’s thoughtful analyses of silences bring the archive to life, but his attempts to quantify the archive yield less-than-fruitful results. In Chapter 2, the author discusses how the black male Bahamian body was commodified, and that different kinds of white male gazes gave shape to a “queer erotic that served as a building block for diverse expressions and subjectivities – and perhaps, in years to come, identities – of gender and sexuality” (p.63). As part of this argument, Capó writes that Bahamians’ sexual identities were overpoliced, drawing on sodomy arrest records as evidence. In his estimation, while Bahamians only constituted a fifth of the population, they comprised 36% of sodomy arrests. However, this figure was generated from only 14 records in total, five of which were attributed to Bahamians (i.e. 36%), and the attempt at quantification rings quite hollow for a sample size so small (p.84).

² For other instances, see discussions of Freeman and Charles Daniel Boulton (p.108) and John Singer Sargent’s paintings (p.77-78).

This limitation should not discourage readers, and indeed Capó is far more often nuanced and convincing in his analysis than he is not. While discussing the policing of Greeks in Miami, he interprets “the relatively small number of crimes against nature felony charges” as evidence that “local ordinances proved more effective in criminalizing homosexual acts in Miami” (p.185-186). Elsewhere, Capó makes a compelling case that Bahamians were over-policed by arguing that the punitive “white male gaze” of the police saw their bodies as prone to sexual deviance and “depravity” (p.84, 185). Here, the punitive gaze of the police force is brought into conversation alongside the desiring gaze of the white male capitalist. Drawing on the paintings of the well-known, white, male John Singer Sargent and Winslow Homer, Capó discusses the fetishization and eroticization of black Bahamian migrants as labor potential (p.81).

The author does not limit his analysis to queer or LGBTQ bodies, but extends a queer approach to interpreting the construction of heterosexuality through the “Miami mermaid” image. Through his examination in Chapter 6, he shows how urban boosters aggressively marketed this figure of femininity – that she was not just sexualized, but very intentionally *hetero*-sexualized (p.198). These analyses stand out among the most impressive analyses in Capó’s book, as he demonstrates with clarity the fundamental imbrications between sexuality, gender, and capitalism, but also the potential for queer readings of how straightness is produced – how the local state and its actors “straightened” things out. In this way, Capó echoes work by Natalie Oswin (2008, 2018) that calls on geographers to recognize the broad utility of queer theory in envisioning how power plays out across space.

Altogether, Capó’s *Fairyland* accomplishes what it sets out to do, and more. His book is certainly a strong contribution to scholarship in queer history, the application of queer theory to transnational analysis and archival research, and queer of color critique more broadly. Equally important, however, it should excite historians and geographers whose interests are not specifically in the realm of queer studies. It is engaging and lucid

from start to finish, reminding readers of the radical potential for queer approaches to productively open up, expand, and trouble.

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