Susana Peña

¡Oye Loca!: From the Mariel Boatlift to Gay Cuban Miami. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013. ix + 224 pp. (Paper US$ 25.00)

¡Oye Loca! makes an outstanding contribution to migration studies, gender and sexuality studies, and Cuban and Caribbean studies. Susana Peña provides a rich account of the way a convergence of events can create a particular historical moment that transforms communities. Focusing on the events preceding and following the Mariel Boatlift of the early 1980s, which led to a mass migration of Cubans to Miami, she shines a bright light on the geopolitics that led to that migration, including the politics concerning gender and sexuality in both Cuba and the United States, particularly Miami. Peña credits the politics of the time for producing the arrival of a significant number of men claiming to be homosexual as well as those perceived as gay due to being effeminate or gender transgressive. Their migration provided a catalyst for the advancement of what would become a gay Cuban American culture in Miami. Along the way, Peña interrogates national and political discourses on masculinity and heteronormativity as well as the connotations of visibly transgressive bodies that defy state policies. By employing multiple vantage points in telling the story of this migration and its impact on building a visible gay Cuban presence in Miami—from official documents/reports, news stories, and documentaries to in-depth interviews and participant observation—Peña has produced a wonderful example of interdisciplinary scholarship.

The book is organized in two parts. The first three chapters are focused on the role of the state and state institutions in Cuba and the United States (in particular Florida), where gay male visibility challenged heteronormative ideals as well as the state image and interests. Peña skillfully provides a parallel construction of the homosexual “menace” in Cuba and Florida. It is often assumed that Caribbean and Latin American queer migrants leave their countries of origin due to homophobia and are seeking greater freedom to be gay in the United States. Peña’s book complicates this simplistic understanding. The “culture of visibility” that she attributes to the advancement of an openly gay Cuban and Latin American presence in Miami furthers our understanding of how the institutional “gaze” and repression can lead to visibility and resistance. As the prominent sexuality theorist Jeffrey Weeks has noted, “the history of sexuality is not a simple history of control … regulation[s] give rise to transgressions, subversions and cultures of resistance” (Sexuality 2003:27).

The five chapters in the second part of the book explore this larger gay Cuban male culture in Miami and gay Cuban experiences consisting of both first- and second-generation immigrants. Peña explores the interconnections of gender,
race, class, and sexuality in the immigrant experience. She notes that transgressive immigrant bodies are not just visible gay men but also racialized and classed subjects. Thus, she reveals the fractures among immigrant communities, illustrating how each wave of immigrants re-defines established communities and the sometimes uneasy relationships between the earlier waves of immigrants and the new ones. As she notes, the established Cuban American community referred to these new immigrants as Marielitos to distinguish themselves from the recent arrivals, in particular the queer and racialized bodies. Through strategies such as naming, fractured sponsorships, and social or geographical segregation, the new immigrants were marked as representing ideals, esthetics, and politics that were different from those of the previous waves. Their integration, however, bolstered a distinctively Cuban ethos and culture in Miami, in particular among its gay and transgender population. The book is especially successful at capturing the way that relationships among different waves of Cuban immigrants are reconciled and later remembered.

While ¡Oye Loca! may be centered on a specific group of Caribbean queer migrants, it also provides more general insights about the structural field involved in migration and the lives of queer men of color. Peña offers persuasive social analysis of the role of the state, in both Cuba and the United States, in maintaining heteronormativity and their strategic silences in the negotiation of identities, practices, and relationships, whether involving intimate partners, the family, or the state and its institutions. She also demonstrates, through her elucidation of “transculturation,” how “u.s. gay culture is changed by extensive contact with immigrant, non-English speaking homosexual men and women” (p. 82). Nevertheless, some of these exchanges, especially in the context of Cuban drag performances, are not particularly liberatory, as Peña explains.

¡Oye Loca! furthers our understanding of the politics and dynamics of queer immigration and the lives of queer men of color. It shows that the experiences of “visible” immigrants, whether through sexuality, race, gender, class, or a combination of these, become part of state monitoring, decision-making, and exchanges. This visibility also frames the experiences of immigrants and the influences on the communities they inhabit. Both scholars and lay readers interested in migration, gender, and sexuality will find a treasure trove in ¡Oye Loca!

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