**REVIEW**


**Cora Gaebel**  
University of Cologne, Germany

*Queer Carnival: Festivals and Mardi Gras in the South*, by Amy L. Stone (they/them), is a multisited ethnography that examines Mardi Gras in Mobile, Alabama, and Baton Rouge, Louisiana, in the US Gulf South and fiestas in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and San Antonio, Texas, in the Southwest. All of the traditions studied are not queer per se, but within these traditions, the author locates events that are central to the local LGBTIQ+ communities. As the author notes in their conclusion:

> This book addresses questions at the heart of cultural citizenship. Am I valued because of (not in spite of) my difference? How do I build a community in which difference is valued? Am I treated in an equitable way by others? Can I take care of members of my own community? The answers to these questions depend on who is speaking, where they live, and when the question is being asked. This kind of cultural citizenship is constantly being made, undone, and remade in a dynamic process. (p. 199)

In addition to the introduction and the conclusion, the book is organized into seven chapters. The appendix provides insight into the author’s approach and methods, although the latter are also elaborated on throughout the book. The introduction and the first two chapters can all be considered introductory chapters. The introduction highlights how and why Stone chose the places and festivals studied: most research on LGBTIQ+ lives focuses on major cities (San Francisco, New York, Los Angeles, Chicago) and on Pride celebrations, gayborhoods, bars, and activism. But, as Stone notes, “beyond LGBTQ spaces, we need to understand the complex ways that LGBTQ people become citizens of the city” (p. 16). The author therefore examines how LGBTIQ+ people carve out their own spaces in urban events.

In the next two chapters, “Thinking about the South, the Southwest, and Festivals” and “Mardi Gras and Fiesta in the American Gulf South and Southwest,” Stone lays the theoretical groundwork for the chapters that follow. They debunk myths about the region and argue that “festivals are much more than the carnivalesque,” because “festivals exacerbate existing social inequalities and antagonisms” (p. 29). Consequently, the author describes “festivals as pluralistic, highly organized, linked to local culture and power dynamics, and a site of cultural citizenship” (p. 30). In addition, they present the festivals and sites and already hint at LGBTIQ+ involvement in these events.

The remaining five chapters can be described as the main body of the book. They analyze the different dimensions of the festivals that are central to queer carnivals. Chapter 3, “The Hottest Ticket in Town Is a Gay Ball: On Being Wanted,” looks at what the author calls “fabulousness” and the popularity of gay events among the local population—regardless of gender and sexuality. In
this chapter, they focus on three events in three of the four cities (Santa Fe did not have an event that was explicitly queer). All of these events “put the outrageous (and at times disreputable) parts of gay culture on display” and were simply fun for participants (p. 79). But the author also questions whether the culture on display is indeed solely gay: in fact, although the events were dominated by gay men, some of the organizational and artistic work was performed by queer women, whose contribution was often not recognized and/or downplayed.

The following chapter, “Inclusive Collective Partying: On Making Community,” is the longest in this book and discusses community and collectivity. The events selected for this chapter are (more or less) inclusive in terms of sexuality, gender, race, and class, often creating “a sense of togetherness across differences” (p. 87). Some LGBTIQ+ participants felt that heterosexual influence was changing the festivals, while others feared that heterosexuals were attending out of a desire to see the “spectacle.” Stone argues that even this superficial motivation could build a (more) inclusive community. Other queer participants, in contrast, perceived straight attendees as supporters. Additionally, Stone discusses events that are rooted in gay culture. And although gay culture is understood here as an umbrella term, it often means gay in the narrowest sense: men (or non-women) who are sexually and romantically attracted to men (or non-women). These events are now organized by straight-presenting white men with sometimes homophobic and transphobic content. During the Spanish Town Parade in Baton Rouge, for example, the author noticed several homophobic floats, many in support of Phil Robertson of the then-popular show Duck Dynasty. Yet many events emphasize inclusivity, particularly in contrast to other racially segregated events. True inclusivity, though, cannot be achieved without equity, Stone argues.

In chapter 5, “Social Elites, Glass Closets, and Contested Spaces: On Being Treated the Same,” Stone focuses on access and acknowledgment, on the one hand, and glass closets, on the other. Queer participants, like all other participants, seek access and acknowledgment during the events and beyond. These lead to a sense of belonging. In contrast, social elites control access and “reinforce cultural inequality by drawing symbolic boundaries and distinctions of taste, along with reinforcing systems of cultural imperialism, in multiple domains” (p. 134). Access and acknowledgment are often granted only when participants appear to conform to heteronormative standards, particularly for major festival royalty. As a result, the sexuality and gender identity of LGBTIQ+ people remain an open secret if they are to reign: they remain in the glass closet. The author further discusses other spaces where queer people are (almost) invisible in the cities studied.

Chapter 6, “Fundraising and Benevolent Aid: On Taking Care of Our Own,” talks about how fundraising events are used to take care of the LGBTIQ+ community and sometimes even the urban community beyond. Through fundraising, participants not only help their community but also gain respectability within their broader social environment. Yet gaining respectability is not the main reason why queer participants engage in fundraising. Instead, they do it to take care of those “who all too often [are] neglected by family, the city, and the state” (p. 178).

The final chapter, “Partying with the Mayor and Your Mom: On Progress,” looks at the participants at LGBTIQ+ events. And while it is true that queer participants perceive the substantial attendance and support of allies as validating, for many of them it is more important that certain
groups of people attend their LGBTIQ+ events and support them: relatives and (local) politicians. In the case of relatives, particularly family members who are not allies, their support and/or attendance “can even be reconciliatory, repairing damage done to parent-child relationships in volatile reactions to coming out, shaming reactions to living openly, and other harms that have cut closest because they came from family” (p. 183). While politics often invalidates, ignores, and/or excludes queer people, the attendance of politicians, in contrast, can send an important signal to queer participants and affirm their status as valued members of the urban community.

While reading the book, I was a bit surprised that the author never mentions nonbinary/genderqueer participants, even though they talk about cisgender and transgender issues in this context. Surely, the events studied are based in heteronormative standards, but in a study about queer carnival the author must have met participants outside the binary. This question is somewhat answered in the conclusion: “In many ways, transgender and non-binary people were invisible in these recognition processes” (p. 199). And while I would have liked to see more insight into nonbinary/genderqueer realities during the events studied, I can suspect why it might have been difficult to gain access to such a demographic.

In introducing the research sites, Stone provides accessible pronunciations for Mobile, Baton Rouge, and Santa Fe, and I think more authors should help their readers in this way. For the sake of consistency, however, the pronunciation of San Antonio should have been included. More important, they also acknowledge the names of the Native American territories that these cities occupy.

This book is excellent. I particularly enjoyed the author’s selection and comparison of the four sites, the stimulating theoretical discussions, and the author’s often personal approach to the material. Initially, I expected the book to be about queer people celebrating carnival. But Stone does more than that: much of the book is about people of color and Indigenous people and their space in these events. In addition, Stone illustrates how female participants and contributors to the events are visible—or not.

*Queer Carnival* is an academic book, but its accessible style and content as well as its wonderful photographs also make it an enjoyable book—a book you might read just for the fun of it. The book is a valuable read for anyone interested in queer lives and gender, festivals and carnivals, or community and belonging.
AUTHOR BIO

Cora Gaebel (she/they) is a cultural anthropologist affiliated with the University of Cologne. She did her doctoral research on two Hindu festivals celebrated in Puri (East India), examining the relationship between these events and the economy in a broad sense. She is currently laying the groundwork for their postdoctoral research project on LGBTIQ+ lives in Bangkok.

OPEN ACCESS

© 2023 by the author. Licensee H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. This review is an open access review distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/)

HOW TO CITE


The Journal of Festive Studies (ISSN 2641–9939) is a peer-reviewed open access journal from H-Celebration, a network of H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online, and is the inaugural journal published through the H-Net Journals initiative. It can be found online at https://journals.h-net.org/jfs.