Matthew Chin, *Fractal Repair: Queer Histories of Modern Jamaica*

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What does it mean to trace a queer history in Jamaica? Matthew Chin's *Fractal Repair* is an original and incisive investigation that both reclaims valuable Jamaican history and re-scales the scope of historiographical methodologies. Chin makes clear that his study is not a search for "queer heroes in Jamaica's past" or the roots of homophobia on the island (3). *Fractal Repair* is instead a thoughtful meditation on the ontology of history. History is fluid rather than fixed, subjective as opposed to neutral, and expressive of past practices that reify some narratives while erasing others. In Jamaica's case, for example, its indigenous research communities and archival structures that emerged in the productive era of early twentieth-century nation building bore imprints of colonial-era discourses that unevenly materialized different groups of Jamaicans in the country's historical narratives. Chin proposes queer reading as a reparative strategy that reinterprets archival material to foreground voices and experiences that have been overlooked, with *queer* being positioned as the unorthodox signifiers and praxes that defy the self-evidence of homogenizing conventions. He interrogates an impressive array of primary and secondary sources to suggest new ways of reading and producing history.

Chin frames his investigative approach through the conceptual lens of the fractal—a geometric pattern that repeats itself, but always with slight variations. He contrasts two types of lines in fractal patterns: passive lines that remain largely consistent, reflecting continuity with the past; and active lines that introduce ruptures or breaks, allowing for change. The book builds its dialectic along these strands, with the first section, "Archival Continuities," examining how colonial legacies continued to influence how archives were

created and maintained in Jamaica during the twentieth century. The second section, "Narrative Ruptures," examines sources that break from these colonial patterns and offer new ways of reading and understanding queer presence in Jamaica's history.

The fractal concept provides the schematic basis for tracing the lines of enquiry (or "breaks") ignored by the imperatives of national historicizing. Take, for example, Pukumina, an early Afro-Jamaican religious practice that Chin interrogates as a site of affective exchanges evocative of "non-normative" female intimacies indigenous to Jamaica's cultural landscape. Scholarship from the mid-twentieth century overlooked Pukumina's queer and anti-colonial evocations. Instead, because of prevailing preoccupations around illegitimacy, nation-building discourses predominantly interpolated working-class Black women through concerns of literacy, poverty, and population growth. At the same time, popular discourse on homosexuality filtered into the public arena through sensationalized reports on gay tourists, imaginatively yoking queerness to the white foreign male. Thus, while social-scientific enquiry necessarily interrogated the colonial legacies of abjection, the "fact that illegitimacy became a site of anti-colonial struggle in a way that same-gender intimacy did not," Chin notes, "means they were materialized as traces in [a] different way" (42).

With these investigative interventions, Chin places himself in a healthy lineage of queer or postcolonial scholars who have variously detailed *historicity* as a praxis of power. For instance, Lisa Lowe, in *The Intimacies of Four Continents*, reinserted the suppressed voices of the colonized to better reveal the function of archives as pillars of empire. The queer theorist Ann Cvetkovich detailed in *An Archive of Feelings* how the ontology of the archive precludes the kinds of affective storytelling necessary for comprehensively preserving queer histories. Chin's work is the only book-length project I can think of that examines Jamaica's queer history along both these reparative terms. In this conceptual regard, *Fractal Repair* also very closely aligns itself with Michel-Rolph Trouillot's groundbreaking *Silencing the Past*. Like Trouillot, Chin concerns himself with those formative moments when *silence* enters the production of history. The HIV/AIDS crisis in the 1980s is historicized as a galvanizing moment of national scientific research that transformed public attitudes towards sexual health and that formalized archives around same-sex intimacy. Yet, less salubrious narratives lay unbidden in these archives, some of them resulting from their very creation. Chin applies a contact-theory methodology, gleaned from the investigative methods of Jamaican contact investigators, to trace how the evolving mechanisms of research and risk assessment positioned working-class Black men as the presumed subject of "homosexual" (and its attendant health threats), while middle-class and upper-class Jamaicans largely escaped this scrutiny. A poignant example is the early HIV/AIDS testing system (launched *not* by Jamaica's Ministry of Health but by the Ministry of Labour) to screen the outgoing seasonal farmworkers in keeping with evolving US Department of Labor mandates. In other words, it is primarily working-class men, the majority of Jamaica's agricultural labour force, who

were first to "systematically become visible to the Jamaican state as HIV-positive" (Chin 83). His queer reading strategy, in this regard, brings attention to the persistence of the archive's politically embedded dispositions that differently subjectivize same-sex bodies according to class and racial make-up. What is curious is Chin's reticence to proclaim the liberatory ruptures he initiates in this analysis (perhaps owing to the book's structure). The stories he shares from the straight-identified front line health workers evidence the evolution of understanding and empathy towards queer sexualities so often missing from historical accounts of this turbulent era. The testimonials from the helpline workers and contact investigators are among some of the most poignant in the book, and suggest the transformative affect of *feelings*, to recall Cvetkovich, that exceed the limits of the archives and augur new ways of discursively charting Jamaica's queer history.

Other analyses of note include Chin's examination of the National Dance Theatre Company (NDTC) as an archival arbiter of shifting cultural attitudes at the dawn of Jamaica's independence and of the founding of Jamaica's Gay Freedom Movement (GFM) in 1977. Regarding the former, Chin deconstructs how its early dance repertoires, through their telegraphing of race and sexual politics, index ways of reading non-heteronormative behaviours intuitive on the island. His close read of the dance performance *Dialogue for Three* astutely teases out the queer gestures immanent in the exchanges between the narrative's two female leads. From this, Chin, gestures at the discursive potential of historical or cultural enquiries proceeding from these erotic artefacts. This is a rich and productive reading, but a brief mention of other material sources from the period on homosociality would have further substantiated this compelling claim on female-oriented or erotic kinships that have materialized Jamaica's cultural and identity formation. A particularly compelling aspect of this chapter is Chin's analysis of "loose talk" as a form of political rhetoric. The rumours that surrounded the sexual lives of NDTC performers played into stereotypes as much as they challenged dominant ideologies on gendered labour. Chin's chapter on the GFM is arguably the most positivistic in terms of queer archiving. Chin's anthropological skill sets are particularly rigorous here as he interweaves a suite of personal letters, newspaper editorials, artefacts, newsletters, and oral-history interviews to place the GFM as a queer archive contributing to narratives of Jamaica's cultural and political development both locally and internationally.

The scale of Chin's investigation is broad (he putatively begins his history in 1494). He employs a raft of disciplinary methodologies—as mentioned, oral histories, archival research, content analysis, close readings, and contact tracing—and draws on a library of sources to build a robust foundation for his arguments.[1] The opening chapter, "Queer Jamaica, 1494–1998," lays out the overlapping theoretical foundations of the book, notably how the concept of queer fractals can be used to narrate Jamaica's history. It covers the country's history from the Spanish arrival through to the late twentieth century, highlighting recurring patterns of Jamaican queerness over time. The chapter also delves into the various

ways Jamaican gender and sexual identities have been shaped by transnational race relations—how the exigencies of the two world wars or the construction of the Panama Canal, for example, reconfigured gendered notions of labour.

The second chapter, "Knowledge: A 'Native' Social Science," opens the exploration of archival continuities where the use of queer reading strategies "lay bare the durability of archival effects" (18). Chin situates the establishment of the University College of the West Indies in 1948 as a moment to examine the burgeoning of investigative approaches that challenged colonial ideologies while paradoxically instituting their own act of silencing in relation to queer subjectivities. It is here that Chin outlines the archives' pathologization of working-class Black women as abject figures and of white foreign men as signifiers of queerness. Chin also raises, in this chapter, the generative potential of analysing queerness among the Jamaican middle class prior to independence. In this latter regard, he performs a close reading of Roger Mais's 1955 novel *Black Lightning*. Chin foregrounds the homosocial relationship in that novel as a potential signification of queer male intimacy among Jamaica's rural brown middle class. As the only material source for this line of enquiry, however, it strains to evoke the restructuring impact on narratives of race, class, and national identity "at the nominal end of empire" that Chin cites as the potential result of meaningfully tracing queer modalities among the middle class (55).

Chin's third chapter, "The Body: Responding to HIV/AIDS," examines how the epidemic, first reported in Jamaica in 1982, became a way to produce knowledge about sexuality, especially regarding same-gender-desiring individuals who were closely linked to the illness. Chin shows how public-health workers navigated the crisis through a balance of surveillance (gathering information) and care (attending to patients), and posits that their actions impacted individuals, public health, and how sexual-health archives were formed. Chin's interviews with these workers offer a deeply humane perspective on how queer individuals and communities navigated the challenges posed by the crisis.

Chapter four, "Performance: The National Dance Theatre Company," unpacks the implications of the NDTC as an archive of "rupture." Founded in 1962, Jamaica's year of independence, the NDTC became a key cultural figure in shaping indigenous dance forms, blending Jamaican and Caribbean folk traditions with African and European influences. This chapter closely analyses the company's early performances and their reception locally, regionally, and internationally. It argues that these performances, and the ways they were interpreted, reveal how same-gender intimacy and gender nonconformity shaped Jamaica's post-independence identity, displacing conventional narratives on heteronormative kinship models.

The final chapter, "Politics: The Gay Freedom Movement," continues the theme of archival rupture through Jamaica's GFM, using first-hand accounts from its members to shed light on the ways queer identities were constructed, lived, and politicized in the

1970s and 1980s. This chapter argues that the GFM—the first openly gay-activist organization in the English-speaking Caribbean—framed same-sex erotic autonomy as central to Jamaican cultural identity and positioned the island as a key player in global gay activism. By examining the GFM as an archive, the chapter broadens prevailing narratives of the era, which largely equated Jamaican struggles for gender and sexual equality with heterosexual frameworks.

Chin's *Fractal Repair* is pioneering in its queer deconstruction of the archives as an institution that both promotes and silences salient narratives that shape the contours of national identity and modernity. By employing the fractal as a conceptual framework, Chin provides a nuanced understanding of how queer histories intersect with and rupture the colonial legacies embedded in Jamaica's archives. His multidisciplinary approach and use of diverse sources enrich his analysis and make a compelling case for the relevance of alternative methodologies in uncovering marginalized histories. As such, Chin lays the foundation for scholars of Caribbean history and anthropology to make visible the as-yet-acknowledged queer moments, formations, and affects immanent in key moments of Jamaican history. Despite the minor shortcomings mentioned, *Fractal Repair* stands as a crucial contribution to Caribbean queer studies, offering valuable insights into the complexities of Jamaica's queer subjectivities, the indefiniteness of the past, and the generative possibilities of exploring those indeterminacies.

Notes

[1] It is a truth cheekily acknowledged that scholars who indict the imaginative limits of the archives betray an astute fidelity to their protocols in the course of their prosecution. This is not a critique; the breadth of Chin's source catalogue is astounding.

Works Cited

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