JOURNAL
OF FESTIVE
STUDIES

REVIEW

Kemi Adeyemi. *Feels Right: Black Queer Women and the Politics of Partying in Chicago.* Duke University Press, 2022. 192 pp. $94.95 (cloth) ISBN 978-1478016076; $24.95 (paper) ISBN 978-1478018698.

Evan Martin-Casler
Tufts University and University of Arizona

KEYWORDS

Nightlife

Black Geographies

Black Queer Studies

Performance Studies

Kemi Adeyemi's *Feels Right: Black Queer Women and the Politics of Partying in Chicago* is one of those rare books that manage to balance their theoretical frameworks with a grounded materiality, an engrossing narrative, and a thoughtful and candid modeling of self-reflection. Years in the making, Adeyemi's exploration of the experiences of clubgoers sets a new standard for ethnography that is invested, compassionate, and analytical when dealing with the lives of her interlocutors, while also fully engaging with the complex power relations that are evident in the ethnography genre itself. For nearly a decade, Adeyemi involved herself in the Chicago nightlife scene, not only as an observer but also as a participant, as a friend, and as an accomplice. Using three Black queer nightclubs as case studies, Adeyemi masterfully weaves together thorough and nuanced readings of the aesthetics, geographies, histories, economics, and social tensions that make the nightlife setting such a rich site for critical engagement. Adeyemi dedicates each chapter to one specific club and to certain accompanying themes that the club especially exemplifies, and, in doing so, she leaves the reader feeling as though they have accompanied her to some of these events, so vivid and careful is her storytelling.

Adeyemi foregrounds the complexities of these spaces. Although situated as affective alternatives *to* or escapes *from* the status quo of daily life, they are simultaneously situated within the neoliberal machinery of an increasingly gentrifying metropolis. While these clubs are constantly under threat of being devoured and repackaged for the consumption of white, heterosexual opportunists with an appetite for Black and queer culture, the clubgoers themselves encounter conflicts, rifts, and failures when negotiating diverse approaches to partying as forms of resistance, vulnerability, and/or ordinariness that amounts to praxis.

Pushing against the critic's tendency—and against the audience's desire—to figure these Black queer spaces as utopian zones of pleasure and positivity, Adeyemi instead centers the affective richness of dance as a mode of critical and social engagement. Rather than the easier and more marketable "feels good," she opts for the more challenging "feels right," inviting the reader to enter into the calculus of her interlocutors, all of whom must nightly weigh the potential for feelings of connection and bliss against those of tedium, disappointment, and frustration, always already factoring in the ever-present threats of cultural theft and neoliberal burnout.[1] Crucially, she chooses clubs that have made a practice of building space not in formalized and commodified "gayborhoods" but rather in contested public areas, claiming space and time and the right to share both with more Black queer folks.

In chapter 1, "Slo 'Mo and the Pace of Black Queer Life," Adeyemi centers on the monthly Chicago dance party Slo 'Mo: Slow Jams for Homos and Their Fans. By sharing the thoughts

1. While Adeyemi primarily builds this framework of feeling "good" versus "right" on the interview data from her interlocutors—especially an interviewee named Tracy—as they describe what she calls "the productively impossible matrix of feeling itself" (p. 6), she cites other theorizations of race and affect, such as Ana Y. Ramos-Zayas, *Street Therapists: Race, Affect, and Neoliberal Personhood in Latino Newark* (University of Chicago Press, 2012); José Esteban Muñoz, "Feeling Brown: Ethnicity and Affect in Ricardo Bracho's *The Sweetest Hangover (And Other STDs)*," *Theatre Journal* (March 2000): 67–79; and

of its attendees, and by providing historical background from the event's years-long tenure, she grounds a theoretical contention about the power of slowness to counter the ceaseless energy demands and accelerationist proclivities of neoliberal modes of production and consumption. The song choices at Slo 'Mo emphasize slow and mid-tempo music, allowing, Adeyemi argues, for approaches to dance floor intimacy that are inaccessible in the far more common high-tempo, hypersexualized environments associated with sites of gay nightlife. The omission of trendy, up-tempo, choreographed numbers both removes the implied prerequisites of current pop-culture literacy and leads to fewer feelings of alienation for attendees, even for those who prefer to dance alone, and particularly in spaces with diverse age ranges. Vitally, Adeyemi's Slo 'Mo analysis identifies a point of friction shared by most small, curated Black and queer spaces: namely, that these spaces must eventually weigh the precarious long-term viability of a specialized nightlife environment against the likely disruption and cooptation of the scene's internal culture by white, male, and heterosexual interlopers when moved to larger, more financially sustainable spaces.

The powers of capitalist capture and recuperation are also a pivot point in chapter 2, "Where's the Joy in Accountability? Black Joy at Its Limits." Adeyemi records here her encounters with organizers and attendees of Party Noire, a collective hosting of events thematized around Black joy.[2] Mirroring critiques of Black joy's move from revolutionary affective arrangement to marketable catchphrase, these community members give voice to Adeyemi's interrogations of the shallow commodification of nightlife, a commodification that fails to integrate the choreographies of support that are quintessential to Black queer spaces. In this chapter, the term *choreography* itself dances through literal and figurative iterations, illustrating the liberatory and pedagogical powers of dancing in like communities, as well as allegorizing the gritty and often painful assembly and labor necessary to manifest Black joy on and off the dance floor. Here, Adeyemi continues an inquiry into the impact of spatiality on an event's internal affective investment. Where Slo 'Mo's foray into larger spaces means hypervisibility and the likelihood of intrusion, Party Noire offers a case study for the influence that different floorplans—for example, centralized and decentralized—can exert on the potential for true emotional and creative exchange, particularly in the form of cyphers. Like Slo 'Mo and Black joy, the organizers of Party Noire must deal with the threatening by-products of successfully cultivating meaningful space. When Black culture is fashionable, as it always has been, it is marketable, and that marketing saves "feeling good" by sacrificing the far less romantic and the far more political "feeling right."

Chapter 3, "Ordinary Energy," focuses on the power of the casual, the regular, the ordinary, by discussing E N E R G Y: A Party for Women + Their Buddies. This weekly gathering—and this chapter—offers a critique of the event-ization of queer life. The expectation that Blackness and queerness can be evaluated by their potential to disrupt, alter, or solve is baked into our academic work. Using E N E R G Y's frequency and casual atmosphere as an exemplar of queer ordinariness, Adeyemi problematizes queer studies' and ethnography's desires for events, for movements, for teleology. The reader is subtly invited to examine the responsibilities they subconsciously thrust onto the Black queer subjects of such narratives as *Feels Right*, responsibilities to reveal themselves and, in doing so, to reveal the real world. We readers are habituated and trained to saddle Adeyemi and her interlocutors with responsibilities to educate, liberate, and, ultimately, produce. Offering, alongside the organizers of E N E R G Y, the power of

Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Harvard University Press, 2005). All of these scholars engage with the impact of neoliberal capitalism on the emotional lives of racialized subjects.

2. Adeyemi points out that the circulations of Black joy and related terms (e.g., Black girl magic) have served to emphasize the positive "feeling-good-while-black" while countering "images of black criminality and black death," and she relates this to Sara Ahmed's concept of compulsory happiness (p. 65). However, she explains that "Black Joy is not a passive affect" but "a critical language, affective orientation, and embodied practice," an analysis that she and her interlocutor Diamond share with Rinaldo Walcott, who, she says, "is critical of how representations of Black Joy can lack a critical analysis of how feeling, good or bad, is shaped in conversation with our highly toxic relationships to capitalism" (pp. 63, 88). Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Duke University Press, 2010); and Rinaldo Walcott, presentation, Scenes at 20 conference, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ, October 7, 2017.

the *ordinary* as method, Adeyemi challenges the reader to consider what Black queer life might look like if it weren't thrown into an event-potentiality matrix, if it were allowed to be quotidian without signifying or eventuating something complex or consequential. She also invites us to consider how the very practice of ethnography, progressive as it has become, has the potential to default to an exercise in surveillance and interference with subjects' agency.

With extraordinary ingenuity and care, Adeyemi weaves in *Feels Right* a tapestry of modes, disciplines, and narratives. In doing so, she does more than contribute meaningfully to bodies of work in ethnography, geography, history, sociology, and theory; she furthers them. Always keeping close track of her theoretical thread when braiding stories about her interlocutors, and always mindfully entwining the geographical with a neat coiling of social analysis, Adeyemi challenges those engaging with any of these disciplines to think more critically, more creatively, and more compassionately. This book is likely to serve as one of the key texts of the still relatively new subfield of nightlife studies, especially when considered alongside the equally excellent work of Adeyemi's friends and collaborators Kareem Khubchandani and Ramón Rivera-Servera.[3] What one never loses sight of while wending through *Feels Right*'s varied and absorbing textures is the great love she has for the people who have populated her research for over a decade. Her sensitivity, matched equally by her incisive and grand ability to hold many conflicting truths at once, makes the book a pleasure that will challenge any researcher to return to their own work with an awareness of how it might be done more thoughtfully.

3. See Kemi Adeyemi, Kareem Khubchandani, and Ramón H. Rivera-Servera, *Queer Nightlife* (University of Michigan Press, 2021); Kareem Khubchandani, *Ishtyle: Accenting Gay Indian Nightlife* (University of Michigan Press, 2020); Kareem Khubchandani, *Decolonize Drag* (OR Books, 2023); and Ramón Rivera-Servera, *Performing Queer Latinidad: Dance, Sexuality, Politics* (University of Michigan Press, 2012).

AUTHOR BIO

Evan Martin-Casler teaches writing and communication at the University of Arizona. Their research focuses on alternative music genres, their subcultures, and the social and political economies of DIY spatialization. Their recent research explores punk communities as spaces of queer belonging and anarchist praxis.

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HOW TO CITE

Martin-Casler, Evan. Review of *Feels Right: Black Queer Women and the Politics of Partying in Chicago,* by Kemi Adeyemi. *Journal of Festive Studies* 7 (2025): 316–319. https://www.doi.org/10.33823/jfs.2025.7.1.303.

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.