



FEELS RIGHT

**BLACK
QUEER
WOMEN
AND THE
POLITICS OF
PARTYING
IN
CHICAGO**

**KEMI
ADEYEMI**

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**DEDICATED
TO EVERYBODY
WHO GETS DOWN
ON THE DANCE FLOOR.**

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PREFACE

People who don't work on nightlife love to comment that my research must be so *fun*, a comment that often doubles as a suggestion that nightlife research isn't really research at all. This suggestion often comes with the ancillary assumption that people who participate in queer nightlife are also not doing anything of interest or consequence—they're all just partying, just having a good time. Sure, going out at night can feel like an incredibly fun release from the doldrums of daily life. But this expectation that the queer night is simply about pleasure is often rooted in a fundamental misunderstanding of the many kinds of work that it takes to get to and on the dance floor. If you have ever gotten up to dance in front of people (or if you tried to get up and dance but couldn't bear to, or if you've gotten up and danced and felt shamed or ignored for doing so), then you know just how much physical and emotional work it takes. Dance is a very intimate practice of putting ourselves in relation to other people, often strangers. We build feeling by putting ourselves in proximity to other people, we make eye contact, we share gestures, we share touch, we share bodily fluids.

Everything that is empowering about dancing among other people requires an intentional practice of vulnerability and, moreover, optimism—and the vulnerability and optimism that are required to become in alignment with other people makes dancing that much more difficult and exhausting. You must think, hope, or assume that the party is going to be amazing and that you'll feel good; that you'll meet new sounds, movements, people, and, potentially, lovers. You have to trust everyone around you to work toward a shared goal of feeling good. The demands of vulnerability and optimism feel intensified for nightlife researchers who put their bodies on the line as a condition of doing their work, which can be hard for me as a person who

would generally rather that people not look at, talk to, or try to dance with me. My personal needs for the queer night had changed in my early and midthirties. I don't think I *needed* it in the way I had in my early twenties. Over the course of nearly a decade of working toward this book, I'd reached an age, which can be any age, when other modes of rest, relaxation, fun, and play simply felt better than those produced in the sociality of the bar or club: walks, daytime park hangs, dinner parties, watching TV, getting in bed at 9:00 p.m., and so on.

When I did go to parties, whether for work or play, everyone felt depressingly young; I would cross the threshold to the function and know immediately that I had aged out and that I couldn't (and maybe didn't want to) relate to the youth. Going out at night began to feel like a chore, yet I'd made going out a condition of my scholarly career. Going out had come to lose the spirit of spontaneity and, in turn, its charm, and this was shaping how I was approaching the party as a formal field site, as a place of work. Through my hundreds of hours dancing with black queer women, watching them dance with one another, and interviewing them about their experiences dancing, all I could see was that the hope for communal trust that the queer nightlife space depends upon almost always failed in some way; someone always fucks up the vibe somehow. As I lost my optimism about what the queer party could look and feel like, I withheld the very vulnerability that would require me to experience its expansive possibilities.

By the time I got to the E N E R G Y party, I was exhausted and not that much fun to party with. I had left Seattle for a summer research trip to Chicago in 2018, when I planned to collect final interviews with black queer women throughout the city and make final rounds at Slo 'Mo, Party Noire, and other parties and events I'd been visiting, thinking about, and writing about. I had been working on various permutations of this book for almost a decade at that point and I was tired of myself, tired of my project, and I was certainly very tired of being out at night. So I came to E N E R G Y, very late in my research process, with no intentions of taking it on as a field site. Doing so would extend my deadline for completion well over a year, and the process of conducting research would be difficult because the party is hosted every Sunday and I didn't live in Chicago anymore. These geographic and administrative restrictions made it so that I could go to E N E R G Y on any given Sunday without my "work hat" on, and I hadn't felt that way in ages.

I could show up exhausted from hot and humid Sundays of party hopping, or having convinced myself up and off the couch and into the night,

and be immediately welcomed in by the organizers, Tori and Jae, who circle the room making connections to and across attendees. I could settle in to one of the low lounge chairs or sit at the bar to feel quiet, still, and observant—until I’d regained the resources to be up and about, chatting and dancing. The party helped me escape the gentrified hell that was (is) Logan Square, where I often stayed on research trips, and it felt *so nice* to be around that many unapologetically black queer and lesbian people in the tight quarters of Tantrum, where the party was hosted. The party and the people within it were largely new to me, and the process of entering the space reminded me of all the feelings and energies and hard work that it took to build my queer nightlife community when I first arrived in Chicago in 2008. This many years later, when I thought (and continue to think) of myself as a nightlife curmudgeon, E N E R G Y simply felt *fun*.

For all the ways that E N E R G Y reminded me of the value of simply partying without expectation, the party was just too good to pass up and I decided to make it one of my field sites. I continued to travel to Chicago to attend E N E R G Y and interview its organizers and attendees, and to try to remain connected to the city, parties, and interlocutors that I had developed relationships with over the previous decade. With that came the physically, mentally, and administratively taxing elements of long-term research endeavors. The travel wore me down and strained my finances, but when I wasn’t in Chicago or at E N E R G Y I agonized that I was a “bad” researcher who wasn’t committed enough to my project. I fretted that I wasn’t adequately organizing my life and responsibilities to prioritize my research. I worried about whether I was sufficiently maintaining ties in Chicago, stressed that I wasn’t on the ground, tracking the minute changes that can transform a party, or a city, seemingly overnight.

These anxieties, and the already-existing exhaustion they intensified, continued even when I *was* in Chicago to conduct research. E N E R G Y opened me to entirely different groups of people than those who’d been circulating through the scenes that I was already embedded in. Each interview I scheduled felt undermined by my anxiety about all of the interviews I could have (should have??) been getting with the innumerable amount of black queer women at any given E N E R G Y party as well as people I saw on the train, who walked past in my neighborhood, who I swiped on Tinder, who I saw on my Instagram explore page, etc. etc. etc. etc. I was coming across a wealth of new lives and new stories and felt a desire and urgency to do more and more, but I was nearing a decade of the various permutations of what would come to be this book and I had simply burned out.

The tedious, draining work of doing research on queer nightlife, let alone hosting or participating in queer nightlife events, shapes every inch of this book's interests in how, when, where, and why black queer women dance in Chicago. Black queer women of course get on the queer dance floor to have fun and to feel good. It is also an intensely political space where they enact rigorous, detailed theories about the relationships between movement and feeling in a city that is entirely draining and on dance floors that are seemingly always threatened by many kinds of violence. This violence is rarely enough to stop the dancing, though. *Feels Right* looks at the queer dance floor through routine and spectacular moments of distress and discomfort so that we might take black queer women seriously as complex beings who adroitly navigate bad feelings and disagreement, and who do so in the pursuit of complex black queer community. We watch, we judge, we desire, we throw shade, we take it out on one another, we scheme to see one another, we flirt, we grip up on one another, we daydream about one another—all in one continuum. We do this against all odds, as spaces for us dwindle, as life for us feels as perilous as ever. We find one another on the dance floor even if we don't acknowledge or talk to one another. We're all exhausted but we get on the dance floor because we love each other, in some way. We believe in one another that much, want to be around one another that much. We want more for one another *that much*.

"Community" does not simply appear by virtue of sharing a dance floor. Our returns to the queer dance floor evidence black queer community as a practice, inflected by continual failure, but where failure feels like an invitation to possibility—and where possibility drives us back to the dance floor time and again. Black queer community is not an end point but is felt in the experience of returning to the queer nightlife function time and again in order to see and be around people who look and feel like us and who look and feel like who and what we desire. Black queer community is felt in the shared orientation toward the possibility that we might soon feel right together. This book is written in the meantime, as we fuss and fight and struggle and strive. It is written with deep exhaustion and a heavy dose of pessimism but also with an uncommon (to me) optimism tethered to my need to feel right among people who can reflect myself back to me.

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INTRODUCTION

In 2013, I stepped outside of a crowded, high-end cocktail bar in Chicago's Logan Square neighborhood to take notes on the white twenty- and thirty-somethings who were dancing to the DJ's catalog of late 1990s and early 2000s rap, an era characterized by baggy jeans, oversized white T-shirts, and hard rhymes laced over melodic, danceable beats. The crowd practiced bright, playful dance styles remembered from middle and high school years listening to Big Tymers, Outkast, St. Lunatics, No Limit Records, and Swishahouse Records on Top 40 radio stations, the regional inflections of Houston, Atlanta, New Orleans, and other black cities having a massive impact on popular culture nationwide. The night's black entertainment was increasingly common in this gentrifying neighborhood that young, white, upwardly mobile people were flooding to for its low rents, solid housing stock, accessible public transportation, and growing service industry. I was in the midst of taking notes on how black aesthetics shape the physical and social choreographies of such white, gentrifying city space when the DJ suddenly rushed out onto the sidewalk, breathless and frenzied as he explained to me that he had been in the middle of his set when

this black girl comes up on stage and starts scrolling through my iTunes and I'm like *Naaaaaw you can't do that* and she says, *All the music you're*

playing is about N-words and I'm the only N-word in here, and then she POURED her drink on the mixer and ruined it! The whole room just STOPPED.¹

When This Black Girl poured her drink onto the mixer, the music shorted out and the crowd immediately stopped dancing, confused by the abrupt sonic shift in the space but also suddenly attuned to the fracas brewing on stage. Bar staff rushed to physically remove This Black Girl from the stage, and in my note-taking I had missed her as she ran past me and jumped into a taxi. An hour later the bar was still buzzing from the drama. Crowded around someone's cell phone, bar staff tracked This Black Girl's activity on Facebook, where she referred to the event in a post, writing . . . *so I poured my very expensive cocktail on their very expensive mixer and am headed back to the South Side*. With that, This Black Girl physically and digitally absconded to the South Side, a conglomeration of neighborhoods south of Chicago's downtown area with a historically large black population, where she would, presumably, not be followed and where she was, potentially, landing in a space where the sound of hip-hop is more racially and ethically engaged.² She deleted her profile half an hour later.

In taking the stage to announce that it was improper for a crowd of white people to listen and dance to music that she had an authority over (an assertion she boiled down to the complicated utterance of the word *nigger*), This Black Girl called for people to be accountable to where they were in their dancing bodies, in this neighborhood bar, and in the city of Chicago writ large. Her intervention pointed specifically to how taking pleasure in black aesthetics in that bar was only possible through a conditional proximity to blackness: that the multiple forms of spatial, financial, cultural, and social value white dancers gained from reveling in the all-consuming black aesthetics that night was only possible because of the presumed absence of live black people therein. Indeed, the blackness that aestheticizes the pleasure economies of the gentrifying neighborhoods like Logan Square is often produced in direct proportion to the forcible removal of actual black people from them.³ This Black Girl's protest against using black aesthetics in a neighborhood with a historically small black population (<7 percent) was framed by the broader push to expel working-class black people from the region. Her protest threw into further relief how gentrification was steadily displacing white ethnic communities who had long called the neighborhood home and the Puerto Rican communities who moved there in the 1970s and '80s after they were priced out of the adjacent Wicker Park neighbor-

hood to the southeast.⁴ Just under five miles southeast from Logan Square, the last of the Cabrini-Green Homes, a sixty-nine-year-old public housing complex home to a majority-black population, was demolished by 2011 to make way for an encroaching commercial corridor that is anchored by an Apple Store, an Apple-owned Chicago Transit Authority train station, as well as a Crate & Barrel *and* a CB2. The complex of seventy-eight low-lying rowhouses and massive towers was dogged by poverty, aggressive policing, and infrastructural decay and deterioration and was slated to be replaced by new, mixed-income housing that residents could apply to live in. As each building was razed, however, residents were given residential vouchers and dispersed to other areas of the city and suburbs. High-end condominiums were built across the street from the demolition site that was itself rather efficiently turned into a Target—no more housing, mixed- or low-income, has graced the lot.⁵ The Julia C. Lathrop Homes public housing complex just east from Logan Square and north of the gentrified Wicker Park neighborhood faced similar circumstances. The units that long housed black, Puerto Rican, and immigrant families have been emptied through eviction and the complex has been redeveloped for mixed commercial use as well as market-rate and affordable housing—all on a property being developed to contain a river walk that will transform the landscape and raise property values. The changes in mixed- and low-income housing availability throughout the area have been further accompanied by shuttered social services like physical and mental health facilities, which have been replaced by ventures looking to take advantage of people's desires to buy food, drinks, and entertainment.

This Black Girl was not merely connecting the visible demographics of the room to the spatial politics of the broader city, though. She effected an entire, haptic reorganization of the space. She ruined the mechanics of sound production to halt all movement, disrupting the circulation of black aesthetics that were booming through the sound system and directly (re)shaping the physical and social choreographies of the white crowd. Her deeply performative critique was accompanied by a decrimal of the literal cost of participating in this milieu (*... so I poured my very expensive cocktail on their very expensive mixer and am headed back to the South Side*). This Black Girl's active upheaval of the racialized network of music, movement, and feeling in Logan Square, and her subsequent flight to the presumed safety and reassurance of the South Side, mapped the raced and classed assumptions of how people move through certain kinds of city spaces. As she questioned not only *how* blackness moves us but *where*, she charted the

racialized spatialized parameters around who is presumed to feel good in the neoliberal city.

Feels Right is interested in moments such as this that reveal how race and feeling are entangled with the geography of the neoliberal city and strives to document black queer women's incisive interrogations of these entanglements. In the Chicago neighborhoods that this book focuses on, private investments meant to wrench ever more value out of land, housing stock, and commercial, retail, and service economies are rationalized as providing people more opportunities to live easy, happy, healthy lives in areas full of stable housing, safe drinking water, abundant food, access to public transportation or plenty of vehicle parking, and diverse entertainment options. The question, of course, is which people? The access to good feelings that supposedly comes from inhabiting and/or consuming such gentrifying terrain often obscures the devastating effects that neoliberal economic policies have on the city and the black and brown communities who occupy it. As *This Black Girl* made plain, nightlife scenes serve as intensely political grounds upon which the dynamics of feeling—and feeling good, in particular—are inextricable from the racialized spatiality of these gentrifying neighborhoods and Chicago more broadly. In each chapter of *Feels Right*, we see how black queer women's practices of inhabiting queer dance floors pose similarly trenchant theorizations and palpable reconfigurations of how the city's neoliberal governance is an explicitly racialized regime of territorializing feeling and feeling good.

The book follows black queer women dancing through Logan Square, Hyde Park, and the South Loop, neighborhoods where economic and cultural capital has been concentrated in zones of (speculative) profitability to give wealthier, and often whiter, people many opportunities to simply feel good. It focuses on black queer women's movements in the small number of queer dance parties in these neighborhoods: how they get on the dance floor, move alone and with one another, hype up one another, sing along to the music, dance in playful competition, and dance to flirt and hook up. The queer dance party is not always an entirely pleasurable affair, however. Black queer women make a myriad of decisions to stop dancing because they're tired, to dance differently because they're receiving unwanted attention, or to get off the dance floor altogether because it's just not *right*. Their capacities to experience pleasure in any given party, bar, or neighborhood are seemingly always grounded by the difficulties of forging black queer life in a city that severely (and often violently) restricts their physical and affective capacities.

Black queer women's deft navigations of the dance floor are thus demonstrations of how they (re)shape a party's people, music, movement, and feeling to suit their immediate needs. The dance floor also serves as a site where they (re)theorize, (re)organize, and (re)narrate their relationships to the systems of neoliberalism that shape and overdetermine their lives once the function is over. For example, chapter 1 explores how, at Slo 'Mo: Slow Jams for Homos and Their Fans, in Logan Square, black queer women wield the pleasures of slow dance movements to contest the logics of acceleration and accumulation that define the neighborhood and the city, framing slowness as a distinctly black queer method of taking pleasure in sites bent on the rapid removal of black queer life. Chapter 2 examines how black queer women negotiate the choreographies of Black Joy at Party Noire, in Hyde Park, as they come to believe the party's deployment of such a racialized affect capitulates to the middle-class blackness of the neighborhood's gentrifying downtown core—which is set distinctly apart from the negative affects that shape the black geographies that surround the neighborhood.

Feels Right refuses the urge to narrativize black queer (night)life as a utopian outlet from neoliberal rule. Dance is ultimately a critical language through which black queer women articulate their spatial, embodied, and affective stakes of occupying neoliberal city space, and it is also a tool with which they imagine and enact black queer community in its midst—and both processes can seem impossibly difficult, look ugly, and simply feel terrible. However interested in pleasure this book is, it cannot avoid how utterly draining it is to throw, DJ, and attend queer nightlife parties. That's why *Feels Right* is full of frustration and disaffection. It's meant to reflect how good feeling is only ever temporary, if it arrives at all, amid the myriad of buzzkills that shape the queer party, whether they be bad music, whiteness, arguments between attendees and organizers, corporate greed, neoliberal capitalism, or just bad vibes. The stories of black queer women in this book circle far beyond the realm of good feelings to offer important insights into other, seemingly minor, sensorial registers through which black queer life is experienced. They are stories about the tedious stressors of going out into the night; of the dullness and boredom that can pervade the dance floor; of the frustration, failed expectations, and frequent disillusionment that can surround the queer dance floor and the black queer community it can only ever temporarily consolidate. The potentially productive outcomes of thinking with these lesser affects of queer nightlife come to a head in chapter 3 on E N E R G Y: A Party for Women + Their Buddies, held in the overdeveloped South Loop neighborhood. There, I consider how the extraordinary