

• *Book Reviews* •

The Fierce Tribe: Masculine Identity and Performance in the Circuit. By Mickey Weems. (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2008. xxiii + pp. 272, preface, bibliography, discography, index.)

In a society where homosexuality is becoming increasingly acceptable and open in its practices, popular media has been responsible for not only bringing more of gay culture into mainstream American society, but also expanding the growing amount of popular literature on queer studies. Simultaneously, there has been a rise in the amount of literature surrounding the study of masculinity, reflecting a push towards “gender studies” in academia. Masculinity, and the study of male communities from a male lens, is on the rise, and the field of folklore studies is no exception.

While his work is most definitely an ethnographic examination of a gay male community—specifically, the outlaw Circuit community—Mickey Weems, through his book *The Fierce Tribe*, hopes that such knowledge can reach out to a wider audience. Even more, he hopes that, in spite of the flaws of the Circuit community (e.g., drug-related issues), the group can utilize body arrogance in a positive way and “lead to self-improvement when embodied in communal dance fashion.” With such an agenda in mind, Weems strives to create a more peaceful world via his research, in a way that might be simultaneously positive and unique in its approach.

Weems’s approach is quite well-rounded, which is reflective of his own background as a folklorist, writer, and Marine who, according to his own description, has spent time in both the gay and straight worlds. His complex

background lays the foundation for describing the circuit, which in itself has a complex background in gay liberation movements, changing ideas about masculinity, and popular music history. By describing the details of those three topics, among others, Weems provides the reader with a detailed context for the development of the circuit movement. This diversity aids the book in appealing to a wide variety of readers, and is written in a way that most non-academic readers can understand. Combined with the inclusion of personal experience narratives from a variety of individuals within the gay community, the book combines the personal and the academic quite solidly.

The first part, "Fierce," begins with an anecdote from Weems' personal experiences of coming out as a gay man; while serving as a segue for explaining his motives for researching the circuit, the first chapter, "Banishing the God of Mediocrity," works to persuade the reader of the simultaneously volatile and ethical nature of the movement. The chapter's discussion of the difference in damage infliction between the gay and straight worlds—onto others versus onto self—is meant to address the consequences of violence yet, in the eyes of particular readers, might come across as a bit of a generalization about heteronormativity. Later chapters in *Fierce* discuss important aspects of the circuit, such as its inclusive nature ("The Few, the Proud, the Cracked"), the stigma it receives from both gay and straight communities ("Thousands of Dancing Gay Men"), and the concept of fierceness within the circuit ("Fierceness"). Such chapters are written concisely and continue to remind the reader of how the circuit is a complex movement that pushes

solidarity and democracy, while the last chapters of the section, “The Girlfriends” and “Harm Reduction,” speak more frankly of both the use of drugs and the work being done to maintain group safety.

The second part of the book, “Tribe,” is responsible for providing more of a historical context, not just about the circuit, but about homosexuality on the whole. For readers who are unfamiliar with either the gay community or the circuit, this section provides background information via three chapters. One of these, “A History of Festive Homosexuality, 1700-1969 CE,” reminds readers that the Circuit is rooted in a greater tradition: that of humorous expression that began in 18th-century parties held in “molly houses.” Weems transitions from molly houses to the discussion of adoption of the word “gay” to the first signs of LGBTQ resistance in order to discuss what is considered a major event in gay history: the 1969 Stonewall riots. Weems’s flow of writing is clean, detailed, and consistently informative, providing the reader with an accessible way of understanding the circuit’s roots.

“Pulse,” the third section, focuses primarily on the music and dance that are a part of the circuit culture yet continues the contextualism of the previous section by discussing the connections between popular dance, the Afro-Brazilian spiritual power known as *axé*, and combat dancing. All of these chapters are discussed in relation to how they fit within gay culture, and emphasize both the individual and group movements within the culture. The sense of a pulse, or rhythm, carries throughout this part of the book while discussing issues of religion, movement, and continuity between songs and dances; all are part of bringing a greater sense of

energy to the circuit, and Weems connects the three chapters together with a consistency that keeps the reader interested.

The final section, "Ecstasy," focuses on both the role of the DJ in the circuit and the push for a simultaneous sense of ecstasy and solidarity within the parties. Weems's explanation of the DJ—a religious-like figure within the movement who is responsible for guiding those dancing into another world—is well-constructed and touches on important issues concerning belief and community. This continues into the final chapter, in which ideas of *communitas*, tribe, and ecstasy come together to synthesize what Weems has been saying along: the circuit has the intention of promoting a *fierce* sense of solidarity, and does so through complex mechanisms. It is this last chapter that ties together all that Weems has discussed, and in a way that allows the reader to finally understand the necessity for the book to have such a wide scope.

Such a wide scope is one of the book's strong points, as it reminds the reader of the complex nature of folklore as a field; in order to understand the community that Weems writes about, one must know about masculinity, dance, ecstasy and all things that fit alongside them. The details within each section are so detailed that one of two things will take place: either the reader will become interested in the circuit themselves, or they will know all they need to know about it so as to not need to explore it. Weems's ideas about what the circuit can do for its participants, semi-utopian as they might be, are not naïve; they are frank, honest, and touch upon both the positive and negative sides of the culture. That honesty and that vision are

among the book's strongest points, and if Weems can help create a better future for the community, more power to him for doing his best to make it so, both on academic and personal levels.

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