
Book Review: *There is a Disco Ball Between Us: A Theory of Black Gay Life*

Jafari S. Allen. *There is a Disco Ball Between Us: A Theory of Black Gay Life*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2022. 440 pages.

June Jordan, a Black queer and bisexual poet who dedicated her “life-activism” to the liberation of Black (queer) people globally, once declared in the face of so much queer death that “some of us did not die.”¹ Jordan was speaking out against long-held beliefs that Black queer people either didn’t exist or were simply phased out of existence after the Civil Rights Movement’s legislative victories and the subsequent splintering of grassroots organizations that mobilized Black feminist, Black lesbian feminist, Black gay men’s, and Black trans women’s activist work. Jordan insisted, in no uncertain terms, that Black queer people have always lived within and against the histories that categorically deny their presence, cultural work, and activism. Indeed, Jordan’s formulation not only stands against time and declension narratives that defined historiographies of Black activism in the “post-civil rights era” but also demands a reconsideration of Black queer life, art activism, and intellectualism. Anthropologist Jafari Allen takes up this cause in his latest book, *There’s a Disco Ball Between Us: A Theory of Black Gay Life*. Like Jordan, Allen argues for not just a writing, recovering, remembering, or a redeeming of Black queer life, but a theorizing of their work that uncovers a beautiful, powerful, and nuanced intellectual history that lives beyond their life and into the/our now. In short, throughout *There’s a Disco Ball Between Us*, Allen posits that while some Black queer people might be literally dead—or “slip into the ether,” as he avers—their work, the spirit of their work, and the deep memory of their work *ain’t* (xi).

And I’m deliberate about ending my previous sentence with “ain’t” as opposed to “is not.” The “ain’t,” I contend here, evokes a Black vernacular that rhetorically challenges language standards that were established by hegemonic, authoritative, and colonial systems that labored to oppress, deny, and ignore Black ways of being, becoming, moving, working, thinking, writing, celebrating, reading, and loving. Like the Black gay filmmaker Maron Riggs’s documentary, *Black Is/Black Ain’t*, the “ain’t” I’m after here engages a decolonial praxis that *pushes on and against* the boundaries that often define academic fields’ legibility, ideological underpinnings, and methodologies as cultural gatekeepers. Thus, while Allen beautifully tells and re-tells Black queer life

1. June Jordan, *Some of Us Did Not Die: New and Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2002).

and culture in the United States and around the world through his concept of “re-narrativization,” he heeds both Riggs’ decolonial practices and Black feminist anthropologist Faye V. Harrison’s call to decolonize anthropology by advancing “a theory of Black gay life” (14).² For Allen, a “theory of Black gay life” is culturally and historically nuanced, methodologically rich, and held together with and through multi-faceted historiographies and intellectual traditions activated by Black feminisms, Black Studies, Black Queer Studies and what he calls “ethnographic sensibilities,” or taking the pieces of traditional approaches of ethnography that work for him and leaving behind, or abolishing altogether, those that don’t. He claims that “[e]ach chapter of the book, and movements within chapters, combine multiple methodologies or ways of seeing, invokes different disciplinary traditions and investments, and contains a wide range of close readings as well as quick glances” that do not “hold fast to the convention of ethnographic methodology and writing” (xv–xvi). This approach permits Allen to have “conversation[s] with those with whom I stand shoulder to shoulder across miles and seas and continents, listening to and in conversations, still, with our dead” (xi).

Although it would be right and easily digestible to argue that Allen’s theorizing capitulates to the imperatives of interdisciplinarity and intersectionality as legible and legitimate academic pursuits, doing so alone would miss his desire to move beyond “the race for theory”³ as he labors to spotlight the deep relationship between thinking and practice. This is why Allen complements “theory of Black gay life” with “gay habits of mind.” For Allen, these two concepts work in tandem. As a concept, “gay habits of minds” allows Allen to work through the complexities, challenges, differences, and heterogeneities of Black queer life. Black queer people are not a monolith and despite how we can read “a theory of Black gay life” in the singular, Allen undertakes a multiplicity of practices that enable him to travel across space and time to investigate and make meaning of Black queer heterogeneities. He maps out long U.S. histories. He navigates multiple geographies across North America, the Caribbean, and Africa. He moves within the liminal spaces of discos and grassroots organizations. He plumbs the imaginative depths of Black queer literature. He reminds Black queer people of the imperative of “Black gay time” that compels us to speak love into our lives as friends, colleagues, kinship families, and communities simply trying to navigate what Frantz Fanon called “the wretched of the earth,” while remembering, as Audre Lorde once told us, that despite our navigating “we were never meant to survive.”⁴ *There’s a Disco Ball Between Us* does not bill itself as a survival manual—although, in quiet yet perceptive measures Allen’s mapping of the book results in conversations among ourselves that if not had can kill us. We can glean these conversations from various sources: history, those overheard between Allen and his colleagues at Yale University,

2. Faye V. Harrison. *Decolonizing Anthropology: Moving Further Toward an Anthropology of Liberation* (American Anthropological Association, 1997).

3. Barbara Christian, “The Race for Theory,” in *African American Literary Theory: A Reader*, ed. Winston Napier (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 280–89.

4. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 2004); Audre Lorde, “A Litany for Survival,” in *The Collected Poems of Audre Lorde* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997), 256.

and his reflections as a Black queer researcher seeking to bridge the distance between himself and his subjects.

Allen maps the book across three sections: “A Stitch in Space Time: The Long 1980s,” “Black/Queerpolis,” and “Lush Life (in Exile).” “The Long 1980s” reads as history of the decade that remembers Black lesbian feminists’ role in shaping Black queer activism *and* in helping to launch Black gay men’s activist groups in North America. “Black/Queerpolis” entreats readers to engage with the unbounded spaces in which Black queer folks navigate, including the United States, the Global South, the Caribbean, and Africa. Allen uses these sections to illuminate the intellectual works of ancestors such as Audre Lorde, Pat Parker, Melvin Dixon, Joseph Beam, Essex Hemphill, and Assotto Saint. “Black/Queerpolis” shifts toward life in the now. In this now, Allen often shares his efforts to balance Black queer folks’ differing opinions with the love that both sustains him and helps him to decolonize the academy by practicing Black Queer Studies on the ground with an ethic of love and care. Thus, “Lush Life” imagines the possibilities of living Black queer life in ways that speak to the great need for Black queer people to love and support each other because neither time nor space is or will never be on our side.

Allen is at his most affective and effective in “Black/Queerpolis.” In this section, he shares letters between himself and his Black queer interlocutor and co-conspirator, Professor Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley. Allen offers these letters as “an evidence of love” drowned by the heavier demands of intellectual production to produce without bearing witness to the very ways in which Black queer scholars pour our souls into our work and into each other. He writes that “[o]ur intellectual work is both a labor of love and evidence of it” (168). For Allen, this evidence of love “announces itself ready and willing to embrace and be embraced—and to listen and negotiate” (168). Love as action undergirds Allen’s standpoint. But more, such letters and their love, promote “a gay habit of mind” and “ethnographic sensibility” that places intangible value on conversations that often Black queer folks don’t have time to have.

And time reveals the urgency of Allen’s intervention in Black queer life. Given the diminishing number of disco balls today, Black queer people need each other now more than ever. Shortly after I finished reading this book, another gay club was shot up. Six people were killed at Club Q in Colorado Springs. Although Allen did not anticipate such a murderous act, his symbolic use of the disco ball as an archival and traveling metaphor reminds us that queer clubs are often, at least we think, the safest spaces and most liberating places near and dear to our hearts and minds. And while readers may struggle to keep pace with Allen’s symbolic language, he stops and validates their frustrations when the disco ball becomes too heavy or theoretically dense to hold. During these narrative breaks, Allen addresses them directly as “dear reader” or “dear traveler.” These tender moments suggest that for Allen, understanding this work ain’t easy. You don’t have to fake it to make it or pretend you understand. Nor do you have to accept or hold gently the truth that Black queer people are under constant attack by physical and policy violence around the world. Given this, Allen checks in and validates your possible contention while inviting your continued participation in this collective journey until

we reach an end. An end that offers not closure but instead extends an invitation to dance. Indeed, the point is to live a Black queer life unscripted, and with joy and with love because we are all running out of time.

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