

## Sounds at the End/Beginning of the World: Black Gay Habits of Mind

Review by Rebecka Rehnström

JAFARI S. ALLEN, 2021, *There's a Disco Ball Between Us: A Theory of Black Gay Life*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 448 pp., ISBN: 978-1-4780-2189-6

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In his recent book, *There's a Disco Ball Between Us*, Jafari S. Allen presents a history of what he names “Black gay habits of mind.” Despite moving between various places around the world, this work is more “an ethnography of an idea” than multi-sited fieldwork. A key inspiration for this approach could be Audre Lorde’s neologism “Blackfullness,” “the space of possibility and belonging beyond any particular place” (p. 325n2). Allen emphasizes the importance that poetry, music, art, novels, theory, and historiography have to the archive of Black political philosophy, not least of the long 1980s. He takes us to the time of the 1980s AIDS crisis, the before and after, the ends and beginnings, for the “more possible.” The title, borrowed from the artist Wura-Natasha Ogunji and further inspired by performance artist and impresario Kevin Aviance<sup>1</sup>, speaks of losses and desires. In these numerous colored lights of the disco ball, communicating at various angles/times, Allen writes a theory of Black gay life.

The language of the book is poetic, lyrical, and conversational. It follows various rhythms, develops processually (like the rhizome) – the history is not, cannot be, teleological/”straight” (pp. 165-166). Nevertheless, I welcomed the moments when Allen encouraged me as a reader to pause for a second or to take a few breaths before continuing, but also the invitations to read with the voices of those behind the words (e.g., pp. 56, 222). This reader (me) is a white (Swedish), lesbian (femme) woman – positionings impacting on which layers of the text/history I will be able to reach and in what way. However, no matter how (un)familiar the reader is, it is a book to re-read in order to reach new depths, to see the reflections from the disco ball from yet another angle. Another aspect that stood out for me was how Allen uses the forenames of those he cites, an invitation to and reflection of intimacy he says. It also has another meaning, found in the history (of e.g., colonialism, religion, slavery) that has erased names and named by force (pp. 67-68). I found this way of citing at times confusing, but it also provides an opportunity to understand the words and the people behind them from a “different” perspective.

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<sup>1</sup> See pp. 1-4 for further discussion on work by Ogunji and Aviance.

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It is a thick book, both in terms of ethnography and number of pages. The book starts with an “Invitation” to the read from the author, then an introduction followed by ten chapters and a conclusion – divided into three parts. Hereafter come some acknowledgments, to be read as an additional (short) chapter. Readers are encouraged to take time to read the footnotes, constituting yet another layer of the book. Chapter 1 focuses on the foundational work of radical Black lesbian feminists, the endangered Black male/masculinity discourse of the long 1980s and the impact this time had on Black gay politics. Chapter 2 is about Black habits of minds – Black gay men writers of the 1980s (e.g., James Baldwin, Joseph Beam, Melvin Dixon). Allen brings forward the important lesson from this time of the AIDS crisis that “visibility is not equal to survival” (p. 63). The chapter also calls out the (white) statement that “the AIDS crisis is over,” pointing at the unequal access to adequate health care Black and brown people all around the world still experience (p. 71). In Chapter 3, Allen stresses the important contribution “femmes” and “queens,” like Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera, have to the archive. Another key discussion is on antiblackness, which is everything “from what and who is beautiful to who and what is true ... to no breath at all” (p. 112). Perhaps, Allen asks, in a world of antiblackness it is not interracial desire but Black folks (not least gay men) loving and desiring Black folks and blackness that is “the more radical or so-called ‘transgression of racial boundaries’” (pp. 102-112). Chapter 4 invites us to the Disco, to the sounds at the end (and beginning) of the world (i.e., the 1980s). Allen describes this era in the USA as a time of anticipation for the revolution, a waiting for the independence from European colonial powers to finally come to North America. It was also a time when the “War on Drugs” gained strong political ground and became equal to “War on Black and brown people.” In Chapter 5 we leave the 1980s and queer as a concept debut in the book. Movements and meanings of art, porn and digital media is here discussed in a transnational setting. The chapter also treats “blackness,” in terms of agency and also in relation to the doings of white supremacy.

The second part of the book starts (with a preface and Chapter 6) in the *Black/queerpolis* – “after ‘diaspora’ but before reparations and before freedom” (p. 165). It was the time when Black queer studies in the US academy were established and events such as the antiapartheid movement and HIV/AIDS had created space for the production of Black diasporic connections (p. 189). The chapter also turns to the alternative archive created by Black (especially lesbian) writers (not least novelists) and how it can help to reconstruct Black memory. After this chapter follows a triptych of methodological chapters. Chapter 7 takes the reader to the archival turn through a virtual roundtable. Chapter 8, in turn, treats transnational Black queer sociality and differentiates Black/queerpolity from “global gay” and “gay international,” formulations Allen stresses as uncritical. In Chapter 9 Allen goes deeper into the politics. Here he examines positionings of the Black anthropologist doing fieldwork/ethnography within/among African (descended) cultures. The chapter also looks upon ways activists are shaping a new political agenda. In Chapter 10 Allen discusses the overcoming of (“romantic,” masculinist) freedom dreams of the Black radical tradition. The chapter also emphasizes the importance of bringing forward the 1980s as a historically significant “break,” when analyzing relations between Black people. It was a time when Black gay (LGBT) activists, artists, and organizations shattered and reconstituted structures of the past (p. 262). Allen finishes by addressing how local activists reverse homo/transphobic discourses disguised as local tradition by foreign current/historical interests, this by referring to homo/transphobia as part of a colonial, racist, foreign heritage. In the conclusion, Allen asserts the importance of “advocating dynamic sociality tarrying with/for the dead and being alive to our messy and difficult-to-translate Blackfull nows” (p.

307). The acknowledgments that follow invites the readers/seekers to be inspired by the book, both its content and its form, when navigating their own routes.

An important takeaway from this book is what Allen states in the introduction. The world, he writes, needs us to both commit to “master” specific methods and theoretical frameworks and then loosen our grip around them. An anthological approach that is new in academe, he continues, but has “... a longer history in Black feminist, Black gay, queer-of-color activist work, artistic practice, and art of living life” (p. 20). I strongly recommend this book to scholars and student within academia, across disciplines, to artists, writers, and activists outside of academia – to anyone seeking to explore and become more intimate with Black gay (and queer) habits of mind.

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