There's a disco ball between us

a theory of Black gay life / *Jafari S. Allen*

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Jafari S. Allen

Duke University Press *Durham and London* 2022

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper ∞
Designed by Aimee C. Harrison
Typeset in Portrait Text Regular and SangBleu Kingdom
by Westchester Publishing Services

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Allen, Jafari S., [date] author.
Title: There's a disco ball between us :
a theory of black gay life / Jafari Allen.
Description: Durham : Duke University Press, 2021. |
Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2021013522 (print) | LCCN 2021013523 (ebook)
ISBN 9781478013662 (hardcover)
ISBN 9781478014591 (paperback)
ISBN 9781478021896 (ebook)
Subjects: LCSH: Gay culture. | Gays, Black—Social life and customs.
| Gays, Black—Conduct of life. | Queer theory. | BISAC: SOCIAL
SCIENCE / Black Studies (Global) | SOCIAL SCIENCE / Anthropology /
Cultural & Social
Classification: LCC HQ76.96 .A454 2021 (print) | LCC HQ76.96 (ebook)
| DDC 306.76/608996—dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2021013522
LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2021013523

Cover art: Jim Chuchu, "Pagans IX" from the Pagans series, 2014.
Courtesy of the artist.

To our "epidemic dead, and the living. Remember Them."

—MELVIN DIXON, "AND THESE ARE JUST A FEW"

& To the Children.

For Phillip: "Long may we live to free this dream"

—ESSEX HEMPHILL, "AMERICAN WEDDING"

contents

an invitation

Dear Reader,

There's a Disco Ball Between Us was expressly written to my students and to friends of my mind—some of whom I have never met, and among whom you may be counted. This account may seem to you a peculiar re-narrativization of a small story that you have never heard before, or something of a refraction, rather than a reflection, of what you already know. Perhaps you too feel called or curious—or *assigned*. Thank you. You are welcome to join this conversation, whether you find your experiences here, sit in silence struck by strangeness, or furiously jot your disagreements in the noisy, crowded margins of this book, chatting back with many others. Perhaps you have come only for the promise of Black bodies glistening in night light: swinging. In any case, you are invited to look again and to listen closely.

It is true: the stakes are, literally, life and death for African (descended) nonheteronormative and gender-variant individuals—not only in the global South, which is often labeled a homophobic place out of time with the "enlightened" North, but also in "developed" states. In many nations of the world they face criminalization of "sodomy" and "cross-dressing." In extreme examples, rumor and innuendo—perhaps plastered on the front page of a newspaper—are enough to cause one to be beaten, jailed, or killed for "being" homosexual or gender nonconforming. Nationalist rhetorics that cast lesbian, bisexual, gay, and transgender rights and recognition as foreign attacks on tradition or sovereignty resonate with fundamentalist religious

rhetorics in the former colonial world and in the metropole. An assortment of players—from Muslim clerics in northern Nigeria, Christian fundamentalists and racist white nationalists in the US federal and state governments, to parliaments of Western Europe and the Caribbean—imagine a great moment before the recognition of same-sex desire and support the installation or continuation of "antigay" legislation.

Racist and transphobic disenfranchisement, employment discrimination, and the lack of targeted public health interventions for LGBTQ individuals whose secondary and tertiary marginalization find them more vulnerable are widespread. Moreover, as they perform a celebration of sexual diversity, North Atlantic nations continue to deny the Black and Afro-hyphenated within their borders, affirming that their lives do not, indeed, matter. *Not to mention* those who lose their lives on the seas and over land, trying to get in or away. This all inarguably demonstrates that marginalization is in fact compounded and intersectional, as Black feminist work has averred from the beginning. It is also dynamically reiterative. Police violence, high and disproportionate incidence of HIV infection, cultural exclusion, and other forms of social suffering experienced by Black lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and *same-gender-loving* individuals are global. Contrary to the protestations of commentators who have hailed the end of the state, all minoritized and historically disenfranchised individuals and communities remain both dependent upon and vulnerable to *state power*, which has been steadily disinvesting from social welfare and reinvesting in various forms of police apparatus since at least the 1970s. Although there are certainly differences in intensity, formal political structure, and material resources throughout the world, we must make no mistake: whether state power is held by a democratically elected head of a nation-state, stolen by a crime syndicate, or administered by what Richard Iton called a "duppy state," propped up and animated by global capital headquartered elsewhere, it still largely and uniquely determines what Ruth Wilson Gilmore has aptly termed the "state sanctioned and/or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death": her definition of racism.[1] Of course, nonstate actors such as religious and cultural organizations, and families, often *see and think like the state.* The shared project of these strange bedfellows—driven by class, racial, and/or ethnic heteronormative respectability—is to discipline individuals into particular forms of subjectification, or nonexistence. Certainly, these push factors set Black/queer flowing. Nonetheless, we are more than the calculus of our compounded vulnerabilities. We create worlds that are yet unthought in pre-narrativized discursive dramas.

This is a book about desire: Black desire for political empowerment or autonomy, fun and carefree play in the face of social suffering, and erotic desire for one another. It is also one instantiation of an authorial desire to write the experiences and imagination of blackness into the record in another way. But dear reader, you likely want to hear about how imperiled and sick(ened) we are, or how always already dead we are. Perhaps you are convinced that there is no *we* at all: simply a nothing. With nothing between us. Or your orientation may be to resist alignment in any case: to throw off any affiliation with failed projects (and "failed" peoples). Admit that you think these academic positions are not only smarter but also more satisfying to your scopophilic drive. Although all of this is important to think with, we hope you will also consider other ways of seeing, listening, and sensing.

This ethnography of an idea emerges in *conversation* with those with whom I stand shoulder to shoulder (and shoulders joined to the hoe!) across miles and seas and continents, listening to and in conversation, still, with our dead. This register—that is, this way of speaking directly to you, with and about a variety of respondents, artists, scholars, and activists, whose names are sometimes written in the familiar first name and other times more formally—is essential to the structure (of feeling) and mode of engagement of this work. Citational practices are key to the rigor, structure, politics, and feeling of any work. Here I have chosen to sometimes efface, for example, the status of "theorist," "scholar," "poet," "DJ," "activist," "respondent," or disciplinary description in order to render everyone as an equal part of the conversation. In other cases, in the mode of Black vernacular English, I mark generational difference to indicate a particular regard for elders. Your author does not think at arm's distance from "Lorde," "Baldwin," "Alexander," or "Cohen," for example. By citing first names, I am attempting to reflect and invite the intimacy of invested conversation between intellectual forbearers/ancestors, colleagues, and/or friends (and indeed those who are friends only in the head of the author). Here's an important caveat: my (imagined) intimacy with these conversation partners has developed and deepened over many years of demonstrated respect for and intense study of their works. If this is not your experience, "do not try this at home."

All of this speaking out loud and directly to or about the living and our dead is an attempt at a live remix of a conversation in Black gay space time: here and there, then and now. Savoring the sweetnesses of this moment precisely because we know the bitterness too well. We know how easily any of us (all of us) can slip into the ether. As the author, I want to reconstitute and renarrate in languages and styles that reflect *how we do* (at least how I understand

and do how we do): our sensing, sound, and meter, our frames and paces and rubrics—our values, which include and sometimes messily spill over what some of us understand as scholarly "rigor." Or ease of "accessibility." You will hear this referred to as constitutive of a *Black gay habit of mind* or a Black gay aesthetic. The *voice* here is my own, as much as can be countenanced by astute peer reviewers and decently managed by generous copy editors. It is heard/read best if you imagine talking with a passionate friend from Southeast Queens who went to an HBCU as the sort of not-so-raw material they like to turn into leaders and Race Men. Imagine that he had an Afrocentric awakening followed quickly by a gay awakening, the compounded complexity of which prompted this author, your passionate friend, to drop out of school to be professionally Black and gay and political (which also meant catering and serving and being fired from a lot of restaurants). Your narrator, who by now was learning many ways to see, went back to school with more very smart Black folks after a while, then quickly off to graduate school, which found him listening-watching-doing in one new language on a new island, then writing about it in another. This traveling witness—still your passionate friend from Queens—became a professor who revels in the promise of Blackfull futures.[2]

There is much talk about *writing in a way that your grandmother can understand*. We ought to remember that Toni Morrison was a grandmother. The paradigm-setting theorists of my scholarly fields fit in the age cohort of Black and Latinx grandmothers. Yet this is not what or whom you imagine when you invoke the Nana clause. If you are not careful, your admonition to use simple language for Granny may unintentionally efface her wisdom. What might we hear if, instead of merely seeking to "explain to" or "write to" her, we listen carefully? Learn, as Black gay speech registers evidence, from grandmothers' sophisticated and highly elaborated intellectual practice of critical conversation. Depending on the sharpness of our reading/listening practices, the depth of our interest or attention, or in fact whether we are ready to engage, we may not be able to easily appreciate Grandmother's vast knowledge, intellect, wisdom, or artistry if our ears are not properly attuned.[3] Observers of Black women's rhetorical styles will tell you that it is not always perceivable on a shallow level. Her theoretical turn may be put to you in the form of a sly aside, a joke, or a one-word exclamation (even a look/gesture) that leaves it to the skill of the conversation partner to discern whether it is interrogative, declarative, or imperative.

Listen for what is quickly mentioned or elliptical or parenthetical (which an attentive conversation partner would never mistake as insignificant), and

that which is repeated in the author's attempt to "complete the line."[4] In this book some streams of the main argument should nearly imperceptibly come together, gain saliency, and then diverge again, finding rich new rivulets of particularity before spilling out toward other streams and swells in other parts of the work. Some longer quotations are set off, perhaps louder or in spotlight, and others remain in the main flow of conversation. Epigrams are whispers in your ear, asking "Put a pin in this." The endnotes and index here make me smile because they provide another set of voices that intervene in or signify on the narrator's voices and priorities. The conversation partners with the receipts. Meant for all readers, not just researchers, these endnotes are provocative pursed lips and raised eyebrows pointing to the object being discussed, perhaps without the subject knowing they are being "objectified." Like endnotes, good indexes complement and extend the main text. There's evidence and heritage there. A practice of not only expertise, but also community and friendship. This index, compiled by archivist Steven G. Fullwood, is a rich finding aid for further Blackfull reading and research.

No reckoning allowed
save the marvelous arithmetics
of distance[5]

Joseph Fairchild Beam (Joe) was my first. He was for a lot of us. But like my deep, forestalled adoration—meeting his intense gaze from the back cover of *In the Life* but never in person—his status as everyone's imaginary movement babydaddy would find him feeling lonely and dying alone, if his letters and the testimony of many who knew him are accurate. Here's a stumbling start to one story, retold: in the harsh Atlanta sun, when I temporarily lost sight of the grace I could hold, I imagined it was Joseph Beam's voice that first called me by my new name before putting his lips on mine, his hand in mine. Years passed until I confessed my schoolboy crush. I learned I would never meet Joe. He had been gone for two years by then. This *poem* (therefore) is for Joe.[6] Of course, Joe created the anthology that called brothers together: recruiting, cultivating, culling, and editing *In the Life: A Black Gay Anthology*. But it was also that skin. Those lips. Mustache and dimpled chin. The work, the man I imagined I could *become*, and one I could *have* collapsed and conflated with my nascent intellectual, political aspirations: all libidinal. Driven by desire, not shame. This is neither an apology nor a confession, and this author is not alone. It is more of a description that may make what Black gay

men were doing clearer and perhaps also generalizable for liberation projects of the living. They followed Black gay women—lesbians—who had already authored the project and politics of Black liberation in the context of radical socialist feminism, but only partly down the road, and they fought alongside Black gay men and women who today might name themselves as transgender. All these folks are our Black gay *epidemic dead and living*[7]—anthological world makers whom we refuse to let go. They also deserve more critical parsing and what Essex (Hemphill) called "ass-splitting" truths.[8] Audre (Lorde) offered in "Dear Joe" that "Nobody here will lean too heavily on your flowers / nor lick the petals of a lavender gladiola / for its hint of sweetness,"[9] but here we intend to lean heavily and greedily lick the sweetness. Here we are gathered together.

Today, the children are voguing in Paris and in Port-au-Prince, and Audre's words are on lips and hearts all over the world. US Black gay parlance and gesture—the snap, the read, the side-eye, and the intonation—have entered the realm of global mass culture, mostly out of context and poorly performed. Even as some of the affect and style of Black gay are mechanically reproduced, the politics of it is elided in mass culture and inadequately understood by scholars. Moreover, while the once and would-be Black LGBTQ movement in the United States has very little material connection with the activist work of Black "brothers and sisters" around the world today, the political sensibilities and aesthetics of this earlier period continue to resonate. This resonance or recurrence (perhaps reflection too?) is caused by both social and poetic forces. First, the habits of mind that we pursue here reemerge, taking on particular localized shapes because the global political-economic structuration that compelled it continues. The panoply of "romantic" visions can be seen in strongly held myths of "the Black family" as either always-already deracinated and broken (through de-gendering) *or* defiantly upstanding, "traditional," and heterosexual—led by a "strong (endangered/dangerous) Black man" with the help of a "strong (long-suffering and devout) Black woman" in the face of forces that would see "our men" "emasculated." This is narrative doxa in a variety of contexts: from conservative Islam, Christianity, and other religions to Black nationalism and various nativist, ethnic, and national movements in sites around the globe. In Africa, South and Central America, and the Caribbean, something similar is at work: Eurocentric "development" rhetoric that supplants local analyses and solutions. This policy-making framework is resonant with the popular drama in which the global South is cast as a fallen Eden (singular intended, as "the tropics" are undifferentiated in this fantasy) to be consumed all-

inclusive style via cruise ships, theme parties, and porn and sex work, but not taken seriously as complex geopolitical sites populated by people who strategically read and advocate their own vexed translocal positions. Note here the "First World" romance that holds the global North as the site of progress and ease, to which traffic dependably flows. But unbelonging is, paradoxically, powerfully constitutive: a Black radical "antiromance" orientation toward "home" inheres in translocal Black gay habits of mind.[10] Some of the most nettlesome or intractable political issues and methodological and theoretical conundrums that Black folks face can be illuminated by careful attention to this understudied intersection of race/place(lessness), gender, sexuality, and time(lessness) rather than relegation to the margins of Black studies, already at the margin.

There's a Disco Ball Between Us is based on more than three years of tracing various routes of works and flesh through field research in Trinidad and Tobago, Rio de Janeiro, Nairobi, and the internet, and other research travel to London, Bridgetown, Toronto, Paris, Ocho Rios, Miami, Vienna, and New York City. The excursions narrated here explore how legacies of enslavement, colonial oppression, heterosexism, and the well-worn routes that these legacies have created condition predictable itineraries and expected arrivals. But not all trips go as expected. Notwithstanding this fieldwork, the book is not a travelogue. Nor does it set out to offer a thick description of the lifeworlds of any particular place. As I wrote and revised (reiterated and revised again and again . . .), what emerged was much less a multisited ethnography of places but rather a work that reaches toward a new form: *ethnography of an idea*. Rather than hold fast to the conventions of ethnographic methodology and writing, this work deploys an *ethnographic sensibility*, or attunement with the social and the intersubjective, to pursue the politics and historicity of Black gay and Black/queer habits of mind. Archival work was undertaken in the Schomburg Center's In the Life Archive (formerly the Black Gay and Lesbian Archive), the Sharing Tongues collection at the London Metropolitan Archives, private collections, digitized internet archives of the Caribbean International Resource Network virtually housed at the Digital Library of the Caribbean, digital holdings of the New York Public Library and Lesbian Herstory Archive, and online curation of archives by public scholar/activists and artists Tourmaline and Alexis Pauline Gumbs.

The book holds and examines a variety of subjective motivations, scenes, and scales through an interrogation of "minor to minor" texts and social interactions analyzed in a relational and interstitial framework. Here we trace power and differential agency in the lives and works of desiring (and desired)

subjects across borders of geography, nationality, class, gender, sexuality, and citizenship—re-narrativizing the flows and friction of the idea of Black gay (and Black/queer). The book offers selfies, art reflecting harsh realities and fantastical visions, self-love as political practice, local activism, and travel as key sites for the exploration of desire, autonomy, and sociality. It is attentive to the legacies of slavery and colonialism, and to the current creeping neoliberalism that disproportionately affects the poorer, darker, and less powerful throughout the world. Some of the sites that the book visits are rarified, such as international conferences, high art, film, scholarship, literature, performance, formal archives, and the everyday lives of elites and their organizations and international meetings. Others are "low" sites of everyday expression and entertainment in the lives of nonelite subjects and their political struggles and quotidian pursuits. This includes digital activism and attempts at connection in cyberspace, which offers circadian circuits of professional and do-it-yourself pornography, local and international news, and interpersonal communication. Each of these new scenes—often with old scripts—provides exciting and potentially far-reaching new challenges and opportunities for scholars, artists, and activists. But we must be willing to take a new trip and to "seek beyond history" for something new and "more possible."[11]

I hope that you will be moved to allow me to bring you out to the club.

Your eyes may take a moment to adjust to the quality of light inside: the various flickers of experience, sensual movement, and rousing sound. Each chapter of the book, and movements within chapters, combines multiple methodologies or ways of seeing, invokes different disciplinary traditions and investments, and contains a wide range of close readings as well as quick observations. All of this is grounded in what I call an "ethnographic sensibility." I am aware that the world that we have re-narrated here, or created through narration, may be unfamiliar to most. Below, I offer incomplete orientation notes for the uninitiated. Still, these are merely the lowest bass frequencies of music that escape through the club walls and the momentarily opening doors. Only a few furtive glimpses of folk tipping in and others, only occasionally, stumbling out. Soaked. This gesture cannot capture the ineluctable experience of reading fully. There is much more in each chapter (self-consciously almost "too much") than listed here. For the more adventurous, I recommend simply turning to the Introduction now.

The Introduction will help readers come to understand the structure of the book's argument and evidence through discussion of our modes of atten-

tion and engagement. We introduce concepts of "Black gay time," narrative theorizing, "resonant reading," and the image of a kaleidoscopic disco ball. Beginning with acknowledgment of a conflation of the intellectual, erotic, and political in the work of Black gay men, including the author, this chapter reads "generations" and genealogies of Black gay (lesbian, transgender, bisexual, and gay male) politics and cultures through visual art and theorization from the dance floor, poetry, Black feminist theory, and historiography. There are three parts to the book: "A Stitch in Space Time. The Long 1980s," "Black/Queerpolis," and the "Conclusion. Lush Life (in Exile)."

"The Anthological Generation" is the book's first chapter. It inaugurates the sort of genealogical analysis that will recur throughout and introduces the central concept of the *anthological*. After situating the historical and conceptual foundations of radical Black lesbian feminism and the foundational importance of *Conditions Five: The Black Woman's Issue,* the chapter moves to discuss the long-1980s "endangered Black male" discourse, the Blackheart Collective's first two issues, Joseph Beam's *In the Life*, and critical political supplements offered by trans activists Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera.

The short chapter "What It Is I Think They Were Doing, Anyhow" begins an exploration of the habits of mind of Black gay men writers of the long 1980s, beginning with Joseph Beam. Here we witness Joseph Beam's, Essex Hemphill's, and Melvin Dixon's conceptualizations of home/belonging, inheritance, and blackness move beyond contending paradigms, including the foundational work of James Baldwin. The chapter ends with an extensive experimental reading of Charles Lofton's short film "O Happy Day: The Early Days of Black Gay Liberation."

"Other Countries" offers a granular exploration of the confluence of Black masculinity, desire, diaspora, and Black gay sociality. It begins with setting the scene of Gay Men of African Descent (GMAD), then moves to Melvin Dixon's rarely analyzed diaspora theorization before new readings/re-narrativizations of Assotto Saint, Marlon Riggs's *Tongues Untied*, Audre Lorde's "Tar Beach," *Gary in Your Pocket*, Essex Hemphill's *Ceremonies*, less remarked-upon works by Lorraine Bethel, *This Is Not an AIDS Advertisement* by Isaac Julien, and commentary on porn/erotica by Isaac Julien and Kobena Mercer. Salient themes of political organizing, intra- and interracial sexual desire, and transphobia and trans recognition are discussed here. The chapter ends with an autoethnographic scene in which race, class, and desire collide.

Speaking of music and dancing: the "Disco" chapter is an example of how this work invites the reader to participate with their imagination. It begins a transnational political-economic analysis of the contingency of Chic's 1979

proposition that "These. Are. The. Good. Times"; narrates a nostalgic dance through personal experience of "passing strange" from bridge and tunnel address to cosmopolitan subjecthood; and performs a musical analysis of performances of gay men's sibilance and the assumed stridence of Black women. We listen to works by Diana Ross, Grace Jones, Chic, Ashford and Simpson, Loleatta Holloway, and Luther Vandross. Extended close readings of Sylvester ("You Are My Friend," "Over and Over") and Carl Bean ("Born Gay") parse embodied Black gay ethics.

"Black Nations Queer Nations?" takes its name from the historic Black Nations/Queer Nations Lesbian and Gay Sexualities in the African Diaspora: A Working Conference, documented by filmmaker Shari Frilot. From the vantage of the author as a participant in the 1995 event, it offers an analysis of salient concepts of Black(ness), nationality/nationalism, queer (which makes its conceptual debut in this chapter), and finally, "Black queer counterpoise." Returning to Essex Hemphill's notion of "standing at the edge of cyberspace," we take up transnational meanings and circulations of art, porn, and self-made images in the digital present. This chapter closes out the temporal frame of "the long 1980s."

"Bonds and Disciplines" is the first chapter in part 2: "Black/Queerpolis." The preface proposes and defines the term, which seeks to supplement *diaspora, Afropolitan*, and *pan-African*, all of which are inadequate to the task of capturing the experiences and literatures invoked in *Disco Ball*. Here we turn to the contemporary moment, after the establishment of Black Queer studies in the US academy. The author reconstructs a transcript of the opening of the 2009 Black/Queer/Diaspora symposium—outlining theoretical, methodological, ethical, and genealogical (or rhizomatic) conundrums. Multivocal, the chapter proceeds as a mediated conversation with participants Natalie Bennett, Fatima El-Tayeb, Lyndon Gill, Rosamond S. King, Ana-Maurine Lara, Xavier Livermon, Graeme Reid, Matt Richardson, Colin Robinson, Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley, Rinaldo Walcott, Michelle Wright, and guests George Chauncey and Calvin Warren.

"Archiving the Anthological at the Current Conjuncture" extends this section's pivot toward the constitution of Black/queer study and Black/queer memory. It is also the first of a sort of triptych of methodological chapters. After discussing the "archival turn" and its prospects for Black queer memory, we visit the contested archive of Black lesbian activist Venus Landin ("another Venus") via the theorization of Saidiya Hartman, M. NourbeSe Phillip, David Scott, Matt Richardson, and others. Then, staging another conversation—this time between far-flung Black queer archival projects,

drawn from a "virtual roundtable" (with Steven G. Fullwood, Ajamu Ikwe-Tyehimba, Zethu Matebeni, Matt Richardson, Colin Robinson, and Selly Thiam)—we engage an array of international archivists and leaders of archival projects themselves, including Alexis Gumbs and Tourmaline. Appended to this is an invaluable short guide to Black (queer) archives indexed in this work, compiled by archivist Steven G. Fullwood.

"Come" analyzes transnational Black queer sociality and introduces some of the pitfalls of traditional ethnography, moving from critical reflections on embodiment, belonging, and inheritance in Rio de Janeiro to an ethnographic vignette set in Nairobi, Kenya. Drawing distinction between Black/queerpolity and uncritical formulations of "global gay" and "gay international," this argument takes us from East Africa to Rio, to Paris, and Ocho Rios. The chapter considers tourism, (im)migration, sex work, exile, self-discovery, transnational curiosity, and solidarity (sometimes without travel), departing from clubs and romantic relationships to literature, ethnography, social theory, and Thomas Allen Harris's film *E Minha Cara*.

The final part of this methodological triptych, "'Black/Queer Mess' as Methodological Case Study," contributes to ongoing discussions of ethnography of Black subjects and fieldwork practices by exploring concepts of "cognate," "stranger value," and "native anthropology" through the author's reconsideration of an unpleasant email exchange with friends/collaborators in the field. Here we query the limits of the project of transnational social science research and collaboration by resituating key formulations of "diaspora," "Afro-Modernity" (Michael Hanchard), "incorrigibility" (Charles Taylor), "ethnographic sincerity" over "authenticity" (John L. Jackson), "outsider within" (Faye Harrison), Brackette Williams's analysis of Zora Neale Hurston's famous "skinfolk not kinfolk" formulation, and Ted Gordon's activist anthropology. Returning to Marlon Riggs's definition of anthropology as "the unending search for what is utterly precious," we argue for the central inclusion of radical Black feminist lesbian formulations of transnational outlaw status (M. Jacqui Alexander), deviance as resistance (Cathy Cohen), and recognition of difference and status as "a relative" (Audre Lorde) as crucial interventions in these perennial ethical and intellectual dilemmas.

Whereas the final chapter of this section, "Unfinished Work," is named in honor of a poem by the long-term Trinbagonian activist/writer Colin Robinson and begins with an excerpt of Essex Hemphill's "For My Own Protection," this is the chapter that will be most readily identified as "about politics" (although I hope that readers will find that the entire book is political and elaborates *a politics*). The chapter follows currently unfolding political dramas

in Guyana and Trinidad and Tobago, where activists are shaping a new political agenda; the United States, where we grapple with the consequences of the "NGOization" of HIV/AIDS services and what once was a Black gay *movement* (beginning where we leave off in part 1); and East Africa, where we meditate on Afropolitanism and pan-Africanism, and read writer Binyavanga Wainaina in tandem with the political organizing underway in Kenya.

The tripartite concluding section "Lush Life (in Exile)" explicitly upends "romantic" and masculinist discourses of diaspora, travel, fugitivity, "vagabondage," and militancy through making good Black gay sense of these recurring freedom dreams of the Black radical tradition. First it re-situates "exile," then introduces readers to my good friend Nehanda Isoke Abiodun. Her story and my memories bring us briefly back to Special Period Cuba, then to Harlem—both pre–Columbia University expansion, then gentrified Harlem—on the occasion of the posthumous "return" of the New Afrikan freedom fighter. This (believe it or not) finds us making some explicit prescriptions for Black studies, which (no surprise) returns us to the anthological epidemic dead, and the living, of the long 1980s! There's music here, and more dancing.

Please also note that the "Acknowledgments" section reads more like a short chapter focused on literally acknowledging what (professional considerations and intellectual discoveries) and who shaped this particular work. Addressed in a way that emerging scholars or readers/seekers may begin to see how they might navigate their own routes, and for my mentors, predecessors, and conversation partners to understand how their work and their way shaped my thinking here, this is another gesture toward "resistance to containment" to traditional forms.

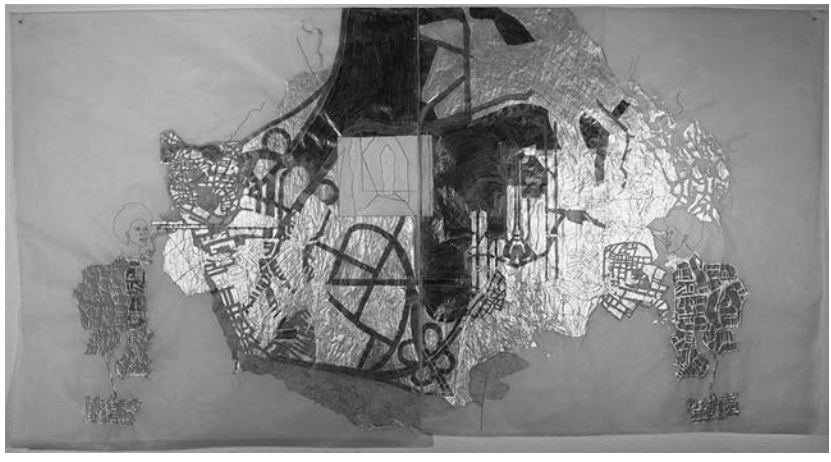
JAFARI S. ALLEN

Introduction

Pastness Is a Position

The disco ball is not made of a single mirror, but numerous tiny mirrors. Each reflects and refracts light at different angles, showing different colors of the spectrum—seemingly in a different time too, shifting on the walls, on the floors, on the face of dancers at different points in space and depending on where you stand. Relatively. So too are my readings (and yours) deictic and relational. Isn't that always the way, no matter how many accounts claim universality and precise authority? Defying funhouse-mirrored representation, and not seeking unified reflection, this account is characterized by generative flashes of nows in which pasts are present. I see W. E. B. Du Bois showing us how to create a portrait of *Black Folks Then and Now*. Closer in time, St. Clair Drake strongly echoes in space, responding to Du Bois by writing a testament of *Black Folk Here and There*. Then Michel-Rolph Trouillot intervenes with a deeply ethnographic sense of historicity that we intend to explore here: "But nothing is inherently over there or here. In that sense, the past has no content. The past—or, more accurately, pastness—is a position. Thus, in no way can we identify the past as past."[1]

This book's title, *There's a Disco Ball Between Us*, is borrowed from a friend: artist Wura-Natasha Ogunji. In *Oyibo versus Herself (That's not the Atlantic. There's a disco ball between us)*, Wura visually initiates a conversation about



1.1 Wura-Natasha Ogunji, *Oyibo versus Herself (That's not the Atlantic. There's a disco ball between us)*. 2013. Mixed media (thread, graphite, ink, colored pencil) on tracing paper with video projection. 2 panels (25 inches high × 24 inches wide each).

Black (un)belonging and sociality that this book joins, following disparate itineraries and tracing the contours of Black gay (and Black/queer) politics and culture through scenes of Black folks relating to one another in and between several places around the globe (see figure 1.1). In Wura's piece, *Oyibo* (the titular "stranger" or "white woman") is the artist herself: a Black woman of Nigerian and Jewish American background. The meeting of two hemispheres of rice paper constitutes her cartographic sea terrain drafted with streets and symbols. Her armless body(ies) made of red fragments and rivulets, estuaries, and roads, is topped off by a rendering of Wura's head. Each figure projects a narrow metallic laser-like gaze at the worlds before her and calls out on either side of the almost sculpted, metallic center. This reflective space Wura imagines is "not the Atlantic," she tells us (but of course it can be if it needs to be!), but a disco ball. It is an aerial rendering of islands in her father's birthplace (and now her home), Lagos, Nigeria, as well as her native St. Louis, Missouri. Stepping back, I see a face in profile on the right side of the work, which is more recognizable in the blue light of video projection. The eyes of this Ife-head-sculptured-face are cast down. To the left and center, I see a keyhole or a window, or a door (of no return?). In the exhibition space, lights flicker, and beginning in this center, ocean blue light begins to fill the space of the work while Chic plays "Le Freak." Of course, dancing ensues: arms in the air, asses shaking, lips bitten as flesh travels the space of the

gallery/dance floor and beyond. Wura says: "That space between Africa and the Americas is often imagined as an abyss, a space of loss or disconnection. With this work, I am imagining the sea as a collection of mirrors which are constantly reflecting and refracting, much like a disco ball. In the space of the nightclub anything can happen. Our futures are not (pre)determined by the past—be that history, or even memory."[2]

Our futures are not (pre)determined by the past. "Pastness is a position," Michel-Rolph (Trouillot) has already told you. And/nevertheless there is still much to navigate within that position. Indeed, *Oyibo versus Herself* is a visual example of what Dionne Brand might appreciate as a kind of *ruttier* (map) "for the Marooned in Diaspora."[3] This poetic, layered, navigational work of memory is a kind of multidimensional chart capable of imagining and plotting time and space travel. For us, the metaphor of the disco ball also refers to the theorization of Kevin Aviance—legendary performance artist and impresario—meditating on the final lowering of the disco ball at Club Palladium, at the moment in which northern LGBTQ urban milieux were transformed by conjunctures of "Race, Violence, and Neoliberal Spatial Politics in the Global City."[4] Kevin reflects:

> What I remember at the closing night at the Palladium [was] the disco ball being brought down to the floor. And looking inside the disco ball, and seeing all my girlfriends who had died. Seeing all their faces and realizing that that time was over for me. It was over. But they were all like this [*applauding slowly*]. I remember looking in that disco ball and I saw all their faces, and I gagged because I saw all my girlfriends. [*pause*] I may have known—this is a rough number—maybe three million faggots in my lifetime—known or seen that many. [*pause*] What is really fucked up is that number has gotten smaller because girls have gone on or died or passed on or whatever. And so, when I see this disco ball, which they don't have a lot in clubs anymore—that's when I see all those people again. I can see them, I can feel them, I can talk to them, they wave to me. I know this sounds really crazy—but that's the only time I can see those people again, and it's really amazing. An amazing time for me.[5]

Generative flashes in which pasts are present. Both Wura and Kevin reimagine loss in their understandings of the disco ball. Their memory making refracts violence, death, and disconnection. That is, it bends and can break it apart—or perhaps merely resides in that kaleidoscope of the break/wake.[6] The sanctity of the dance floor is upheld here. The audaciousness and vulnerability of our flesh: made, acknowledged, and remade holy in Black gay time.

Black studies scholars and artists have engaged in a number of memory projects in recent years, many turning to the Middle Passage as the constitutive moment of blackness and Black being.[7] You may think of this as another project of "recovery," or perhaps more precisely (re)constitution or (re)articulation—not of a "lost" or "absent" culture but of strategies and formulae, techniques, forms, and agenda needed to withstand recursive material attacks in the present. And, of course: recovery of warm, wet, sticky affect. Kisses, for example, can be adhesive. Bodily fluids, constitutive. What if we were to follow each for a spell—turning to Black folks then and now and here and there, all at once, and through the lenses of those only occasionally and conditionally invited to the margins of Black studies? What is the promise in an archive that sees "the spaces where others ought to be" on the dance floor at the club?[8] What remains in mourning's memory, recollected stories, and the ache (or the *aché*, small axe, or the *axé*?) of yearning lodged in our bodies (and our) politic(s)?

Black Gay Time

On the night that he recalled the lowering of the disco ball at Club Palladium,[9] what would be Kevin's eyebrows, had they not been shaven already to give full effect to his beautifully painted eyes, rise. He nods after softly squinting: "It was cute. . . ." Eyes to the side. Shoulders hunched. Filmmaker Wills Glasspiegel is interviewing Kevin for his film on the techno song "Icy Lake" that had been performed on the closing night of the Palladium.[10] Kevin turns his head and lifts his shoulders, preparing a rise in inflection to be delivered with the next line: "It was cute." This rising inflection is key to the transmission of meaning. There is a world of difference between what is "cute" and what Kevin later invokes as "the carry-on and the ki-ki" of Black gay sociality. "Yes. The 'Icy Lake' was icy dry. It was a very dry song," he tells Wills—a bit breathless and *verklempt* after his moving toasts and reunion with old friends. To say it was *cute* is at once to (begrudgingly) countenance a bit of value—tolerating another (flawed) perspective while pointedly holding a privileged space for something else that one values more. Kevin gives that side head movement that says "Perhaps." He goes on: "But it wasn't . . . *A Little Bit of Bass*. It wasn't Loleatta Holloway. It wasn't Diana Ross. It wasn't, you know, real *real* dance music." There it is. Holding the line on what is authentic in his estimation (and authentically Black cultural production). Songs like "Icy Lake" had sounded a loud atonal death knell for the house-music club (which continued the disco project) as Black and Latinx folks

and others in urban centers of the global North had experienced it. No soul and no gospel riffs. Not even the fresh high-energy danceable European electronica of a Kraftwerk or George Kranz, for example, which Larry Levan and, later, Frankie Knuckles mixed into the house-music canon. "But at that time and at that place . . . ," Kevin continues. There, again, is Black gay deicticity: recognition of relativity, contingency, and context, but also clearly not a concession. Although there is certainly what looks to some like resignation here—perhaps an analysis or recognition that this is the prevailing market—attend also to how he understands this as (merely) a temporal-spatial blip. It has not been always, is not everywhere, and will not be forever.

The twirling, cruising, and artistic production that emerged from the clubs of downtown New York, Chicago, and London in the 1980s and 1990s had been made possible by the (temporary) desertion of these urban centers, following the 1960s urban "unrest" or uprisings in the United States, which came to London in the late 1970s and 1980s, then to various places around the world. Gay folks created oases of nighttime revelry in daytime commerce deserts facing criminalization and violence and/but/also creating art, fashion, culture, and of course income in formal and informal markets. But developers realized that today's "blight" can equal tomorrow's low or no tax. In short order, they began transforming the inner city to havens for a global elite. By the late 1990s, it was clear that capital required the space of the city to be returned to its service by both day and night. Like many other clubs, bars, and small businesses felled by the changing New York real estate market (including, in this case, New York University, which built a dormitory on the site), the Palladium closed its doors.

This state of at once exceeding and belonging irreducibly to (one's) time invoked and enabled by the disco ball represents a Black gay temporality and sociality (time and ways of being together) that are processural, not teleological.[11] Within Black gay time space, one can cut into the past and project or imagine a future in which we are still dancing with friends and lovers gone too soon to the ethers of the dance floor and the flickers of the disco ball light. This temporality is one of time collapsed or at least reconfigured from "straight time" in which, for example, what is most important happens in the day, or in which one "grows out of" same-sex "play" or finally "settles down" into heteronormative or homonormative sociality. This excessive temporality spreads out broadly behind us and in front of us in the pursuit of an elaborated litany for thriving. In this space we claim family and children not merely from biological or legal means but by a process of nourishment and nurture. Audre (Lorde) gave us this vision of work, love,

and struggle many years ago, and I have repeated and remixed her words many times since:

> For those of us who cannot indulge the passing dreams of choice
> . . . seeking a now that can breed futures
> like bread in our children's mouths
> so their dreams will not reflect
> the death of ours. . . . [12]

Black gay is out of time. So much so, dear reader, that you may wonder why many of us (still) insist on identifying and self-identifying at all. It seems anachronistic to some. Certainly, *dépassé* in the academic-industrial complex in which folks are tripping over each other in a rush to denounce what they understand as "identity politics." The excessiveness of socialities that include and spill promiscuously over heterosexually reproduced families, crisscross polities, and could not care less what critics think of what and how they call themselves requires new ways of seeing. Black gay be *extra*. Often doing too much (for you to see with limited range). Black gay is outside bourgeois time, outside of nation time, ahead of time in culture—language, art, and fashion, for example—but also in many ways just out of time. Long ago, James Baldwin reminded us of how one passes time and passes on, with "coffins piling up around you."[13] Black gays be dying early, still.

Jack (Halberstam) defines queer time as occurring "once one leaves the temporal frames of bourgeois reproduction and family, longevity, risk/safety, and inheritance."[14] This is good to think with: the (white) queer temporal imperative celebrates the release of normative expectations and responsibilities. That is in fact what is most "queer" about it. It is the "turn away" from normativity and the negation of futurity. But *we* do not (get to) simply turn—we twirl, arriving inevitably out of sync with these expected bourgeois temporalities (if we are not permanently "detained," never to arrive at all). This is not to suggest that Black LGBTQ folks cannot be bourgeois or, on another register, *bourgie*. My point is the reckoning of time, value, and access within those systems. In the current moment, lives are differentially valued by their ordered relation to capital, aiming for the narrow bull's-eye of the "charmed circle" of (heterosexual or homosexual) monogamous marriage, home ownership, child rearing, long life, and bequeathing to children the means by which their trajectories find them within that charmed—that is, privileged, illusive for most—circle of putative security. This is certainly about material resources that can provide enough privacy so that the smoke and mirrors of this particular gag seem like moral triumph rather than inher-

ited ascription and luck. Black gay habits of mind are inexorably bound to this space-time orientation of living in the present, powerfully conditioned by history, but also attuned to radical possibility. They straddle the now and *the ether.* Imagine the ether as the space of transition, into which the dead pass and in which those who are not yet born await. Dynamic and simultaneously here and there—sometimes disoriented(ing). Always moving.

I cannot help remixing this nostalgic time travel once again: "Is It All over My Face?"[15] We stumble, gracefully, out of the blue-black club light. The eternal night of the club, with the flicker of the disco ball keeping suspended time. Walls painted with black acoustic tile and heavy velvet blackout curtains have cocooned our nascent comings, goings, and carryings on. "We are exhausted / from dreaming wet dreams / afraid of the passion / that briefly consoles us," Essex (Hemphill) said.[16] This is, of course, partly about my own nostalgic longing. What and whom has passed before my own eyes. But unlike discrete, individual melancholia, my longing is connected to that of a number of Black gays and other queers of color anthologized in books, archives, and treasured memories of friends, families, and lovers: "In the harsh glare of leaving that space and forgetting, we get distorted glimpses of our present. And I wonder about this current moment—half-past, or thirty 'til. This time fifteen, twenty-three, thirty-five years too late? And I wonder. I want to look for what we have forgotten, inside."[17]

Thomas (Glave), in a different moment of reflection and reassessment—the 2002 Fire & Ink Black Lesbian and Gay Writers' Festival—also turned to Essex. Addressing Essex-in-the-ethers about the inheritance he has left for the children who follow, as much as to the writers and activists and scholars who were assembled in the flesh, Thomas does not address whether one should or can turn away. Talking to Essex-in-the-ether, he offers this: "Our futures would without question be imperiled, you told us, if, sometime discarding vigilance, we dared curtsey to that enduring U.S. mind-altering favorite, ahistoricism. . . . In the fierceness of this now, it is exactly the radical art and life-effort of conscientious remembrance that, against revisionism's erasures and in pursuit of our survival, must better become our duty. Memory in this regard becomes responsibility; as responsibility and memory both become us."[18] In this elegant arrangement of future, peril, historicism, and urgent demand, Thomas reaffirms that we are made and marked by our responsibility to not be erased from the past or from the present. Damn. This is the Blackest conjuncture of all, is it not? A lot of work. Always at once arriving, emerging, and preparing for unpromised futures in uninvited spaces: "imprinted with fear," "like bread in our children's mouths," indeed. And/but I hear the children asking. They are clamorous and quite dubious

by now: when? Audre-in-the-ether, Essex-on-the-other-side and *just above my head*: when will it be my time to "indulge the passing dreams of choice"?[19] So in a process of conscientious and critical remembrance, it is now of the utmost importance to remember what and who bring us to a singularly Black gay understanding of this conjunctural moment.

This "theory of Black gay life" tracks practices and habits of mind that emerged during *the long 1980s.* Just as the smoke of the 1970s had begun to clear, the devastation of AIDS dawned harshly. Folks first began to dance, fuck, organize, and make art under the banner of "Black gay" in the 1980s and 1990s. Autonomous organizations arose to demand recognition and acknowledgment of the presence and contributions of lesbians/gay women and gay men within Black communities and within nation-states, and folks debated where the modifier should be placed—whether Gay *black* or Black *gay* would be the term of art—supposedly emphasizing gays who just happened to be Black or Blacks who were also gay, respectively.[20] The *idea* of Black gay (and, later, Black/queer) emerges directly out of the political, artistic, and activist work of radical Black lesbians of the 1970s who had cut their teeth in civil rights, Black power, peace, labor, antiapartheid, reproductive rights, and radical feminist movements—in the United States primarily but also connected to anticolonial liberation struggles and the organized Left around the world. This work happened mostly out of the view of professional academics, who rarely understand community organizing, archiving, academic work, sex parties, and the literature and art of Black lesbian, gay, transgender, bisexual, and *same-gender-loving* people as all of a piece and constitutive of a distinct politics. I draw the long 1980s roughly from 1979—the year that *Conditions Five: The Black Women's Issue* was published, months before the first cases of what we now call HIV/AIDS were identified and the globally consequential neoconservatism of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher first began to coagulate—to around 1995, when Black Nations/Queer Nations? Lesbian and Gay Sexualities in the African Diaspora: A Working Conference took place, at the same time that disco balls were lowered in cities across the North Atlantic as capital reclaimed urban space and scholars belatedly began to decry the "neoliberal moment."

Anthological Habits

Our re-narrativization of Black gay and Black/queer inaugurates a form (of critical ethnography) that builds upon the Black feminist imperative to produce purposefully embodied narrative theory, the queer mandate to resist or subvert normativity (including sometimes tactically performing it), and

the ethnographic warrant to poetically represent lived reality. Elsewhere, I have described the radical Black gay habit of mind that produces this as "relational," following Glissant; "nomadic" or "rhizomatic," after Deleuze and Guattari; or simply "promiscuous." Still, dear reader, you want an accounting of this author's textual stroll: "cruising" theories, as dear José (Esteban Muñoz) exemplified.[21] Now, with more force, I want to offer this as an *anthological* habit of mind. The mode of attention in this book—that is, its research methodology, theory, politics, and the aesthetic intentions supporting rearrangement of various modes of interdisciplinary inquiry—is anthological, meant to honor the often circuitous but also convergent temporalities, themes, sites, texts, and individuals represented. At the start of the long 1980s, the explosion of the poetry broadside, the reimagination of long-standing urban Black tradition of soapbox preachers and corner philosophers, and the expansion of popular poetry and spoken word to various sites within Black communities fomented new intellectual and political spaces and innovative thought. It is in this rich intellectual-creative environment that the anthology—not the academic journal, single-authored academic or trade book, or press-mediated reader—became the major repository of Black political philosophy of the long 1980s. In this anthological tradition the editor is not a single author or even necessarily the most important. She is, rather, a sort of arbiter, consensus builder, keen observer, and laborer—as well as shaper of discourse.[22] Multivocal anthologies such as *The Black Woman; Homegirls: A Black Feminist Anthology; This Bridge Called My Back: Writing by Radical Women of Color; In the Life: A Black Gay Anthology; Brother to Brother: New Writing by Black Gay Men; Other Countries: Black Gay Voices*; and *Afrekete: An Anthology of Black Lesbian Writing* are central to the Black gay intellectual "canon" and were essential to my own intellectual foundation. In the *anthological tradition* a collection purposefully makes a multivocal statement of the political and aesthetic commitments of a group of artists and/or scholars engaged in what they—or at least the editor—believe is a collective (that is, not necessarily "unified" but rather harmonious) project. This is how we compose a theory of Black gay life. One generous way to read this ethnography of an idea is to think of this book and its author as part of the anthological tradition.

"A Necessary Theater"

Margaret Walker Alexander's "I Want to Write" inscribes the at-once scholarly, political, and deeply personal motivations of this author. In it, the poet not only expresses her desire to, for example, "write the songs of my

people" but also demonstrates that to write, one must also listen to them "singing melodies in the dark / . . . floating strains from sob-torn throats," searching and shaping. Following Dr. Walker, I too endeavor to "frame" and "catch" what she describes as fugitive "sunshine laughter in a bowl." This classic Black *ars poetica* does not pose the intellectual-artistic project as sweatless or effete or dilettantish—there is work here. In the last lines she makes the dexterity needed to undertake this evident: expressing her own desire (brilliantly fulfilled in her illustrious career) to not only "fling dark hands to a darker sky"—that is, perhaps, to the ether from which more light emanates—but also to "then crush and mix such lights till they become / a mirrored pool of brilliance in the dawn."[23] Yes. "A mirrored pool of brilliance in the dawn" feels a lot like a disco ball. Like a sparkling ocean. Or a puddle we jump over—for example, on our way to the corner store in Queens. "I Want to Write" betrays my own perhaps unfashionable affection "for my people."[24] To explain "how"—derived from what methodologies, critical habits, and quality of sight, I turn, venturing a bit of reverential creative license, to Elizabeth Alexander. Here is her "Ars Poetica #100: I Believe"—for a moment trying on "ethnography," where she so beautifully and precisely placed "poetry."[25] For this occasion, I might, in part, read Elizabeth's poem this way:

> [Ethnography], I tell my students,
> is idiosyncratic. [Ethnography]
> is where we are ourselves,
> . . .
> [Ethnography] is what you find
> in the dirt in the corner,
> overhear on the bus, God
> in the details, the only way
> to get from here to there.
> [Ethnography] (and now my voice is rising)
> . . .
> (here I hear myself loudest)
> is the human voice,
> and are we not of interest to each other?

A fusion of the modes, genre, and habits of mind of ethnographic methodology and writing with the practice of poetry would more precisely name the writerly and political commitment to *see* and *say* reflected in this book. After all, Audre already told us that "the quality of light by which we scrutinize our lives has direct bearing on the product which we live. . . . This is

poetry as illumination . . . givi[ng] name to the nameless so that it can be thought."[26] One of the central meta-theoretical impulses in this book is to try to faithfully caress in between the material and affective: listening intently and occasionally showing the work, allowing the seeming messiness and unseemliness of everyday life to be felt, but also often economizing the language—sometimes only obliquely naming. Telling it elliptically (like we do). We are reaching for an "ethnopoetics" that seeks not only to describe or theorize Black gay poesis and sociality but also to perform it on the page. To *be it*. Following Sylvia Wynter: "Ethnopoetics can only have validity, if it is explored in the context of sociopoetics where the social firmly places the ethnos in its concrete historical particularity."[27] Naming sociopoetics, Professor Wynter insists that we ground ourselves in the high stakes of social and historical interaction. Aimé Césaire saw it this way:

> . . .
> In the current state of things, the only avowed refuge of the mythic spirit is poetry.
> And poetry is an insurrection against society because it is a devotion to abandoned or exiled or obliterated myth.
> . . .
> The vital thing is to re-establish a personal, fresh, compelling, magical contact with things.
> The revolution will be social and poetic or will not be
> . . .
> I'm calling upon the magician.
> . . .
> I'm calling upon the Enraged.[28]

The sociopoetics engaged here emerges from an intellectual tradition and aesthetic created by and for Black gays—bisexuals, lesbians, transgender, and gay men—that emerged within the "epidemic time" of *the long 1980s*. We will offer a fuller accounting of this soon, but, for now, meditate on Assotto Saint's manifesto "Why I Write"—in some ways remixing Monsieur Césaire's earlier Black social/poetic/revolutionary articulation:

> Right from the start, my writings . . . became what I call *a necessary theater*. I was cognizant of the wants and needs of our emerging community; my writings needed to serve its visibility and empowerment. Most revolutions—be they political, social, spiritual, or economic—are usually complemented by one in literature. . . . The best answer to the question

> of who we are resides in our experiences; from whence our strongest writings are derived. While we map out this new wilderness of our experiences, we must also bear witness. Like archaeologists, we have to file those reports in the form of our finely crafted poems and plays, which we then make available to the world.
>
> . . . We must strive before it is too late to realize this creative wish: that the writings of our experiences serve as testaments to those who passed along this way, testimonies to our times, and legacies to future generations. . . . [29]

Here is where I enter. This is where our conversation begins. Assotto issues a methodological mandate that we take up as our work in this book. A "necessary theater" composed of "testaments, testimonies . . . and legacies." *There's a Disco Ball Between Us* inaugurates an ethnographic register that aspires to represent the particularities of Black gay social experience in a "poetic" way as well as track the poesis, or *making*, of Black gay (and later Black/queer) here and there. Assotto assigns us, "like archaeologists," to keep finely crafted field notes that we "file and make available to the world." After all, Marlon (Riggs) has already redefined anthropology as "the unending search for what is utterly precious" in his *Tongues Untied*.[30] They understood. And they were prescient—this is precisely the anthropology we pursue here. Perhaps we can name this "*Ours* Poeticas?" *Ambas Poeticas*? The peregrinations and *makings* are, after all, at once those of respondents and conversation partners, their works, and the author. Here "the native" is neither noble nor savage: not insolent, and not merely a hapless victim, but rather a complex agent with a limited repertoire of actions, doing the best they can in a world structured in and through late-capitalist white supremacy and heteropatriarchy. This work given by Assotto, in service of testaments, testimonies, and legacies, is not easy. In some ways what I am offering can be read as a counterhistory in the way that Saidiya (Hartman) or Robin (Kelley) or Vincent (Brown) has shown us. But with a difference. *Something else*. Hall, the brother/narrator in Mr. James Baldwin's *Just above My Head*, may provide a productive way to see what we reach toward here. At the end of the novel, Hall summarizes:

> To overhaul a history, or attempt to redeem it . . . is not at all the descent one must make to excavate a history. To be forced to excavate a history is also to repudiate the concept of history and the vocabulary in which history is written, for the written history is, and must be, merely the vocabulary of power . . . power is history's most seductively attired false witness. And yet the attempt or necessity to find the truth about oneself—to

excavate a history—is motivated by the need to have power to force others to recognize your presence, your right to be here.

. . . Our history is each other. That is our only guide.[31]

Saidiya has contributed similar insight. She writes: "The history of Black counter-historical projects is one of failure, precisely because these accounts have never been able to install themselves as history, but rather are insurgent, disruptive narratives that are marginalized and derailed before they ever gain a footing."[32] In previous works I have attempted to describe and historicize the efforts of a preceding and continuous generation of decolonizing scholars (in anthropology) and have followed pathbreaking anthropologists' onerous labor to try to install "insurgent, disruptive narratives" as authoritative anthropological knowledge. This book does neither of those things. What we pursue here is a complementary but distinct project. I have no desire to force recognition of our right to be here, precisely because "our history is each other." It occurs to me that this is another way to ground the poetic in the sociocultural. In sociality. How we do. This work is therefore comfortable with permanent "disruption," as one would experience in a spirited conversation among intimate friends. Toni Morrison's educative insistence to turn away from the "white gaze"—her insistence and example that we (Black folks) already have aesthetic and intellectual traditions to attend to and refine, and that we are keen observers, participants, critics, and narrators of Black experience ourselves—pushes past the impulse to create exceptional heroic figures to rescue, revindicate, or "humanize" our folks. She teaches us that the truth, told as beautifully and meticulously as one can manage, is vindication enough for those who are already human and recognized as such among one another.

To be sure, *There's a Disco Ball Between Us* owes a tremendous debt to theoretical (and countertheoretical) interventions, after The French, to render a "writerly" Black gay work.[33] These theorists follow nomadic trips to capture and convey the complexities and ambiguities of everyday intensities through feeling, difference, embodiment, "nondualistic thought," "reparative reading," "weak theory," and "low theory."[34] Still, it would be ahistorical—treasonous, really—to not acknowledge the foundational work of Frederick Douglass, W. E. B. Du Bois, Zora Neale Hurston, Katharine Dunham, and St. Clair Drake, for example, which set the terms of engagement of anthropology of the Black world as we practice it today.[35] Largely uncredited work in the long Black intellectual tradition inaugurated what we now think of as affective scholarship long before it became sexy. *There's a Disco Ball Between Us*

therefore surges with Black gay flow: simultaneously here and there, then and now—reaching toward (re)connection and grounded in Black intellectual and aesthetic traditions that accent (even severely limited and contingent) Black agency and value nonlinearity, capaciousness, and serious play. What we offer in this work honors Faye Harrison's notion of and steadfast commitment to "reworking anthropology" to meet the demands of the twenty-first century,[36] but one of these demands must be to take seriously the critiques of Magubane and Faris, Ted Gordon, and others who have advocated abandoning the disciplinary enclosure altogether, or as Ryan (Jobson) has recently provoked, "let[ting] Anthropology burn."[37] Finding myself equally as engaged in *doing* the work as I am uninterested in the disciplinary enclosure in which it is currently entangled, I would be pleased if this "ethnography of an idea" contributes to the further decolonization and transformation of anthropology. Better would be the creation of something "more possible" (emerging from its ashes).

The anthropology of LGBTQ subjects has pushed queer studies significantly away from less empirically grounded theorization, attempting, as Tom (Boellstorff) has averred, to *anthropologize* queer studies—that is, not only to provide empirical grounding and humanistic context of "over there" but also, more fundamentally, to advance understanding of the inescapable social character of human beings.[38] Still, without the critical supplement of Black feminism's signal contribution—thinking gender, sexuality, race, class, and nation simultaneously, as it is lived—we cannot understand the dimensions of the social character of human beings. Note the full stop and lack of qualification here. Today, if you are not thinking intersectionally, you cannot see society. So we need to make this move to attend to Black gay and Black/queer desire in the context of here and there, not only because Black people have been viewed through jaundiced lenses but also because it is now clear that standard frameworks and optics do not allow us to see anyone or anything fully enough or clearly enough. We must attend to what folks are listening and dancing to, and reading, whom they desire, and who their people are. Some self-imposed limits of social science research would enervate this aspiration. Primary among those limits, we have needlessly dichotomized our research ambits: dividing affective desire, "tacit subjectivity," and "erotic subjectivity" in one bloc of study; and material suffering and HIV/AIDS, violence, and discrimination in another—engaging disparate and in some cases mutually illegible methods, theoretics, and writerly strategies. Previous work, including my own, has not sufficiently attended to the breadth and heterogeneity of practices, modes, and uses of desire. *There's a Disco Ball Between Us* grapples with Cathy

Cohen's entreaty to more carefully draft lines of intention to resist and her demand that we contend with the political reality of motivations and practices that cannot be read as resistance at all (yet).[39] For example, a few of my respondents seek their versions of freedom through contradictory (re)incorporation into the neoliberal nation-state and into often-unreconstructed cultural institutions and families. Some fashion themselves as citizens, tourists, and consumers and others as advocates on the inside of local governments and international organizations. The lines of lived experience are seldom straight, precise, or elegantly drawn. Upon close reading, these may be constitutive of practices and habits that may light our way to possibilities, potentialities, and forms of freedom that we have not yet recognized.

Open Your Umbrella

We are aware, dear reader: you will demand that we show our papers. *Black* (especially capitalized, as we insist here) never escapes suspicion and surveillance. "Define blackness," some will have already interjected in these margins. *What is this Black* in "Black gay" (and "Black/queer")? We offer this orthographic note: you may think of it as a capitalized line in soft white sand, via Ms. Gwendolyn Brooks. Here, "Black is an open umbrella."[40] The impulse toward parsing the particularities of difference had been mostly salutary in the beginning, as a correction of the unfounded notion of blackness as monolithic, which had been promoted by a few streams of Black nationalism. These streams regrettably and self-servingly misread assertions of ethnicity, nationality, women's autonomy, and—later—gay and lesbian identity as politically enervating "disunity." Since then, this lie has been uncritically and clumsily extended by individuals and movements that see themselves as the heirs to (one stream of) Black radicalism. Still, by now the incessant demands to continue to "deconstruct" blackness have gone well beyond this important critical caution against "essentialism," raised during the long 1980s by Black British cultural critics, Black feminists, and Black gay artists, activists, and scholars. They represent important contending streams of the Black radical tradition that are no less vital than the stream that has come to be identified, oversimplistically, as radical "Black nationalist." So clarion calls to antiessentialism well after *anti*-antiessentialism had already been theorized warrant a stern caution, a correction, and our refusal to capitulate to the diminution or erasure of blackness.[41] This to say nothing of how "whiteness" still floats innocently, remaining "a tale told . . . full of sound and fury." *Signifying*.[42] Calling the po-lice. And voting.

Language often fails, and the process of renegotiating more precise language is a worthy project. At the same time, too often the one thing that scholars and pundits who know nothing about blackness, or Black folks, (think they) know well is that it is not essential, transhistorical, or easily trafficked across borders. The fact that this is true is utterly beside the point here. Race (if you prefer it: "race"), like ethnicity (like gender, like nationality), is always constituted by and through particular political projects and conjunctures (everywhere). And "biology"—that is, genetic heritage and phenotype—though important, does not singularly determine blackness or any other social formation. I have argued elsewhere that no term, even those that may seem self-evidently autochthonous or "traditional," can be perfectly stable or synchronous with dynamic self-identification on the ground. Moving a bit further, allow me to offer this account: here "Black" refers to a set of complex and deeply held translocal historical, political, and affective ties among individuals, movements, and works—to, from, and beyond Africa and constitutive of and spilling over hybridity, Creole(ization), and national hyphenations and color designations. To focus on everyday Blackfullness as we do here is to offer a dynamic, textured, enduring feeling of common union among African (descended) peoples that is not only and not merely a condition of biology, history, global political economy, or common vulnerabilities. In some cases, it is all of these. In others, only the inescapable conjuncture of personal and global histories adhere. Here we see this unfold as what Michel-Rolph Trouillot named a "fragmented globality" played in a minor key.[43] It is perhaps a minor pan-Africanism. A blackness of both feeling and of objective political condition.

Put Your Body in It

You may have noticed that this groove is intramural. Here we are among friends, and our mode of intellectual engagement is a dance. Cue Stephanie Mills's 1979 invitation and command: "Put your body in it."[44] Picture yourself on a pulsating dance floor or in a comfortable spot among friends or fellow partyers at a tightly packed fete. (I hope that you have experienced this feeling of safety, generosity, and deeply embodied pleasure.) What we do here, moving through one theoretical position to the other, one disciplinary commitment, interpretation, or intellectual habit to one that might fit better or more precisely for the moment, is that ever-so-gentle hand on your back, hip, or shoulder. Unobtrusive, without disturbing your rhythm, it suggests/invites/impels: this way, please. We unconsciously move aside to

let another—stirred by the DJ or on the way to the bar—pass on their way. Straighter texts brusquely "push past" the writer whose pen precedes it. Not here. Our engagement is not a "sidestep" or "dance around." It is something more intimate and mutual. The gesture is in tandem if not syncopation. After all, this groove is not about supplanting or imitating other formulations, or strictly "arguing" our own (although some moves and positions will become apparent). This follows other modes of intellectual generosity, like Carole (Boyce Davies)'s "critical relationality"—likewise, a Hurstonian hermeneutic is at work/in play here—but this is much sweatier. It is perhaps more embodied, erotic, and taken over by the shared experience of feeling the bass in your chest. Sometimes the intimacy is less "personal"—simply a respectful sharing of space. Other times it inspires a little shimmy or reciprocated touch. In a few cases in our conversation the move will resemble that more suggestive furtive touch on the small of the back ("a tiny piece of perverse heaven," Yolanda called it). But most times we will simply waltz our way through from one end of the dance floor (conversation) to another.[45] I understand that some (in increasing numbers, it seems) prefer to haunt the perimeter of the party—perhaps suspicious of the laughter and what may look like intramural ease or fluency. Seeing these merely as gestures of everyday aliveness may allay your reticence to come closer. These are attempts at connection. Whether you dance or not, you too are an important part of this communion (assembly, if you prefer).

Like "critical relationality," this is an intellectual strategy of deep listening and conversation marked by going "a piece of the way" with one theoretical framework or discourse, then with another, knowing that the length of fellow traveling is contingent on how effectively (and affectively) it takes one where one wants to go. Farther north, and across the Atlantic, this is resonant with Stuart Hall's understanding of the function of theory—to "get a bit further down the road." Carole's "critical relationality" saunters elegantly along long, winding, and often rocky roads of the sort of critical/ethical stance we want to invoke here. One can almost hear the clink of her gold bangles and the smile in her warm, lilting voice: "Critical relationality . . . is a process and a pattern of articulation. . . . A way of relating to visitors or difference is embedded in this approach." She wants to "engage . . . a number of theoretical models, including feminism, postmodernism, Afrocentricity, nationalism, etc. as visitors."[46] To honestly engage in this way we must also eschew opportunistic shifts in scholarly fashion, in favor of more capacious and fluid models, including those that have been overlooked or misunderstood. I intend to follow Carole's generative and intellectually honest approach:

here at the fete, on the parkway, in the basement, on the dance floor, perhaps up on the sweaty wall: blue lights, laughter, and flickering lights in the dark. Fellow dancers, not only visitors.

So, what sort of moment is this in which to raise these questions?[47] Today, the political landscape is stony and contradictory, the economic outlook is dire, and there are "new" reminders every day of the banal denial of Black beauty, Black dignity, humanity, and life. That is, we are living through technologies of the changing same. As I complete the final revisions, another devastating pandemic has laid bare the murderous inequalities we have lived with for numerous generations. "Everything has changed." Again. Still, we make work and make love and make mistakes every day in ways that must be traced, vetted, and sometimes celebrated. Finally, and most importantly, real fists hit actual flesh. Material jails—those with physical bars and state-sanctioned torture from which some materially profit—imprison living human beings guilty only of poverty and desire. Right at this moment—near and far. This is no metaphor. And what is more, although writing a book will never un-punch or de-rape, and may not reverse the court decision or legislation, people deserve study and a record of some of the highlights and performance of their freedom. Thus, out of political-economic and cultural crisis, and precisely to stage the inauguration of "a new and more possible meeting" of disciplines, commitments, aesthetics, geographies, and temporalities, this work offers another way—exceeding the current limits of social science scholarship. You may think of this book as an uninvited new iteration of the Black radical intellectual tradition: re-narrativizing sociocultural analysis through an insistence on and/both, intersections and compounds, hyphens, strokes, parentheses, and messy interstices of real life and audacious imagination. Understanding that our Black interiors are neither inviolate nor completely destroyed, nor hollowed of humanity that reaches out to one another. Yes, that we have interiors. That we are. ("We out here!" I hear my students shouting in the streets.) We be. Let this confirm what we who live through this nadir already know and must remind ourselves: together, we add up to more than the calculus of our compounded vulnerabilities.

Quality of Light

These habits of mind in service of sociality, friendship, love—and yes, recognition of incalculable loss—reach toward connection across difference and across multiple borders. The current disciplinary divisions of academe are not capacious enough to hold these important contradictions of every-

day experience, or the ways that my colleagues and I are researching, living within, and narrating them. So how do we best *see* and *say*? What "quality of light"[48] shall we employ here? This is especially poignant in the current moment. Narrative theorizing is not only about the professional or vocational production of "texts" but also about the practice of everyday life among those who, though least authorized to produce "theory," create and enact theory in their works of art and representation, everyday language, and on-the-ground practices. Anthropologists often call these folks "respondents," but they are just as often the one who initiates/calls the question. Literary and cultural theorists may see their lives as "texts" to be bracketed and deconstructed. Here we are most interested in "grounding," as Walter Rodney would have it—narrating experiences and imaginaries, and vetting creative and programmatic solutions that emerge from those grounds.[49] As C. L. R. James has already told us, "Every cook can govern."[50] Everyone must therefore certainly be capable of telling their own story—of theorizing from experience, expertise, and practice.

Our understanding of Black subjects as complex, often contradictory agents emplaced within and negotiating multiple deeply consequential translocal political-economic dramas, and of the ethnographer/author as a fully participating, observant, coauthoring witness, comes from the "decolonizing" stream of Black anthropology. Faye (Harrison)'s groundbreaking *Decolonizing Anthropology: Moving Forward toward an Anthropology for Liberation* (alas, another anthology!) did not merely initiate a transformation of anthropology through the assertion of a generation of anthropologists who identify with or as "Third World" and shift what was "Afro-American anthropology" to a focus on the global problem of racism, rather than on "the problematic Negro," by centering Black agency. Moreover, this stream of work pursues practices that resist or critique modern projects of (post)colonialism, neoliberalism, and state racism.[51]

Owing a great debt to anthropologists who have challenged orthodoxy and provided provocative new frameworks, *Disco Ball* also significantly departs from them in a number of ways. Unlike St. Clair Drake's two-volume vindicationist masterwork, *Black Folk Here and There*, this book does not take on the heady authorial tone that unproblematically insists that we can deeply know another *there* (in Professor Drake's case, just as importantly drawn from archives of the distant past as from a contemporary field site), then return, *here*, to explain it all to an audience of monolingual elites, even from what he calls "a Black perspective." Still, I emphatically claim a similar politics of Black agency bequeathed by Professor Drake's work. It is part of

my intellectual inheritance.[52] As is Clifford and Marcus's *Writing Culture* and Ferguson and Gupta's rethinking of the boundaries of "the field" (if perhaps more problematically).[53] My respondents and their works are variously mobile, polyglot, slippery, and agentive. Some are self-consciously fugitive. As an ethnographer, a "native" participant in some of these lifeworlds, and a privileged holder of immense internet bandwidth and a US passport, this author can work or "be" more or less easily, and sometimes instantaneously, both *here* and *there.* This author is no wallflower/fly on the wall, and the words of my respondents are not magical or inerrant: they do not go unchallenged or escape the intentional framing, curation, and narrativization of the author. "How else . . . ?" (We hear the voice of Barbara Christian again.[54]) Black gay folk have always practiced "flipping the script." Rewriting it or merely acting the part—rehearsing lines with a very different feeling, for example. *How else* and how other than through transformative narrative theoretical practice could one withstand the multiple violences inflicted upon gender-insurgent or same-sex-oriented Black people? Thus, we do not aim to compose a "self-portrait" of Black globality as John Langston Gwaltney claimed for "core Black culture" in the United States in his enduring tour-de-force, *Drylongso: A Self-Portrait of Black America*. Instead, here the author has intentionally composed a mixed-media *collage* with respondents, collaborators, conversation partners, and their texts of representation found in archives, museums, and libraries.

Narrativization must simultaneously hold in tension several theories, methods, reading practices, disciplines, and writerly positions. This re-narrativization is not merely about restructuring just-so stories, single-issue politics, or old-school analyses. The world we live in now calls for an expansive engagement rather than jealous guarding of theoretical or disciplinary borders. It calls for a re-disciplining of the intellect, the widening of reading practices, and the political commitment to "master" particular methods and theoretical frameworks, and then loosen our possessive investments in them. This anthological mode of work is new in academe (and perhaps also confounding or frightening to some), but it has a longer history in Black feminist, Black gay, and queer-of-color activist work, artistic practice, and art of living life. This reflects my intellectual and political inheritance from paradigm-shaping radical Black gay lesbian feminist and Black gay male poets and essayists whose forms function to affect, inspire, and enact. After all, long before their emergence, Monsieur Césaire had admonished that "the revolution must be social and poetic, or it will not be."[55] It is the human voice and human interaction that is of interest and up for analysis

here, whether we find it at a beach fete, stubbornly sticking to us like sand, or overhear it on the minibus, on an activist listserv, or in the business class lounge at DeGaulle: "The only way to get from here to there."[56] If this mode of interaction is the only way to travel, perhaps an accounting of the excursion should mirror this—that is, it should employ conversation as a mode of presentation as well as inquiry. *There's a Disco Ball Between Us* invites you to enter a conversation that began before I arrived and that will continue long after me. We have attempted to retain the conversational quality of our encounters and to include voices other than that of the author.

In a conventionally disciplined book, or one in which the strategy was to perform the sort of interdisciplinarity that privileges disciplinary "tradition" while filling in with the color or flavor of feminists, queers, poor people, or "natives," for example, who is topping whom in the intercourse of high culture and low culture, or of interpellation and self-making, would be easily apparent and unremarkable. Not so here. We will stroll the road a piece with one, then the other, flip-flopping rather promiscuously, shamelessly, and, we hope, generatively. Doubtless, findings that I had already anticipated made their way into this account, along with the systematically researched and unexpected. And like all privileged travelers, this author *carries on* with a few bags and pre-chartered maps (along with a chic navy-blue passport embossed with a sad, worn, and shamefaced golden eagle). Like every work of scholarship, this book reflects the author's particularly constituted poesis, and this book consciously traces and reflects the author's particularly constituted Black gay habit of mind. Not unlike M. Jacqui Alexander offered of her work in the Bahamas, despite a number of personal and political connections, in most instances this author also writes as an outsider, "neither a national nor citizen," of most places I studied.[57] That is, despite at points abstract and at other moments expressly materialized solidarity, this researcher/sojourner is not only (at least theoretically) outside the repressive reach of those states but holds at least symbolic imperial power of his own emplacement as one sort of conditional "American" and one sort of unstably/precariously bourgeois or "elite" subject. Further, the consequences of being disloyal to heteropatriarchy certainly fall differently, if in any way I may consciously register in any given situation, on my adult cisgender male body than on the bodies of others—especially the trans and cisgender women I engage.

Although gatekeepers who claim to know better than the rest of us what systematically derived generalizable frameworks for understanding (or "theory") should look like, Black bisexual lesbian transgender gay and queer critics, and other Black radical theorists—mostly outside of academe but also

within—have taken the mantle of developing reading and writing practices that refuse both positivist science and postmodern "theoritism," which suggests that knowledge is not situated (everywhere) but lodged somewhere far from where Black folks live. In this work we highlight grounded theorization, suggesting that concepts are no less powerfully incisive and analytically bridging when we read them over borders and seas, speaking different languages, from strategy meetings to dance floors to texts of representation, to the author's own experiences, practiced habits of mind, and sensibilities. "For people of color have always theorized," Barbara Christian has already told us. "How else have we managed to survive with such spiritedness the assault. . . . My folk, in other words, have always been a race for theory—though more in the form of the hieroglyph, a written figure which is both sensual and abstract, both beautiful and communicative."[58] Riffing on her theme, I have already offered that "if in fact my people of color are a 'race for theory,'" Black gay is made up of sensual, abstract hieroglyphs *in motion*, seen best in black light: disco balls mirroring and refracting their complex facets. The poet's visions, the artist's eye, and the dancer's movements represent our courage to imagine a grace that would transcend stultifying hegemonies and abstractions that pretend to tell us who we are. Especially, in fact, if the answer is no one, absent(ed) in the Symbolic, connected to no one and nonpolitical.[59]

Our commitment in this work is to attempt to finally register more than "an encounter with power . . . [or] merely a sketch of existence," as Saidiya Hartman offers (after "a famous philosopher") regarding redressing the violent archives of Black subjection.[60] It inaugurates a critically engaged ethnographic practice that grows out of a radical Black lesbian feminist habit of mind. Through careful attention to both the praxis and poetics of everyday life, you will come to know and feel my respondents, conversation partners, and those whom Melvin Dixon called "the epidemic dead, and the living" as complex agents centered in global, deeply consequential political-economic dramas.[61] You will come to know the author as an observant and fully participating coauthoring witness—invited to the party, in on the joke, as deeply committed as my respondents and conversation partners to addressing the savagely uneven stakes of our encounters here and there, and as unavoidably implicated in this savagery (as are you, dear reader).

And if we lose? Hortense Spillers has already illuminated this in her examination of the consequences of another brand of discursive "beaching" of "ungendered," silent, yet hypervisible Black subjects.[62] Think about the real and rising stakes of continuing to rehearse old narratives of unchang-

ing, immobile, long-suffering blackness (often without redress or apology, and certainly without justice) on one hand and liberally consuming, antisocial queerness or conservative imperial settler colonial gayness on the other. What if "Africa" were to discursively remain the locus of inalienable "tradition" or "backwardness" or the Caribbean figured only through television commercials that promise neocolonial romance or blog comments that guarantee a machete to your queer neck should you step foot on one of those sandy shores? Now nearly thirty years after the original controversy, can you imagine questions of Black masculine desire continuing to be framed through a thirsty one-way white-only gaze, or Black women through oversimplified bimodal (neo)liberal feminist frames of "objectification" *or* "empowerment"—"leaning in" with a measure of confidence only to experience . . . la même chose? Of course, Hortense would emphatically agree that Audre's notion of "losing" is about much more than controlling images, psychodramas, patronymic rehearsals, and competing calypso, dancehall, and hip-hop lyrics. The stakes are not only discursive (queer) failure that may in fact point toward more capacious scholarly frameworks.[63] "If we lose . . . ," Audre tells us, "someday women's blood will congeal upon a dead planet."[64] Dear reader, look around at the blood already spilled. Now pooling.

notes

An Invitation

1 "The duppy, loosely translated from Jamaican patois, refers to the specter or the ghost that emerges when one has failed to properly bury or dispose of the deceased: therefore, emancipation is haunted by slavery, independence by colonialism, and apparent civil rights victories by Jim Crow." See Richard Iton, *In Search of the Black Fantastic*, 135. See also Gilmore, *Golden Gulag*, 247.

2 In a 1990 interview with Charles Rowell (published a decade later), Audre Lorde offered the neologism *Blackfullness*, which captures the space of possibility and belonging beyond any particular place (although she found it for herself in the Virgin Islands), which we reach for and return to throughout this work. Audre said, "Here in the Virgin Islands is where I've chosen to live. I feel that the strength, the beauty, the peace of life in St. Croix is part of my defense kit; it's a part of what keeps me alive and able to fight on. Being surrounded by Black people's faces, some of whom I like, some of whom I don't like, some of whom I get along with, some of whom I don't get along with, is very affirming. Basically, there is a large and everpresent Blackfullness to the days here that is very refreshing for me, although frustrating sometimes, because as in so many places, we have so many problems with how we treat each other. But that's part and parcel of learning to build for the future." See Charles Rowell, "Above the Wind," 56.

3 You have got to be ready. Ms. Georgia Louise Turner, the grandmother of my love (Phillip), gave sterling clarity to this idea one day in a conversation in which Phillip was startled to hear a crucial piece of a family story that he had not heard before. He asked why she hadn't previously told him this key information.

He assumed that she also didn't know about the story. Ms. Louise replied, matter-of-factly, "Well. You have to ask the right questions. . . ."

4 Kevin Quashie extolled the virtue of "completing the line" in a conversation we had about studying with care. My anthropologically disciplined ear also hears this as a form of ethnographic "thickness": striving to tell the story holistically. Here, fragments abound! Still, most find completion of the line throughout the work (and in your margin notes). For a sterling example of a new critical ethnographic holism that reveals the conceit of "thickness" for what it is and demonstrates "slic[ing] into a world from different perspectives, scales, registers, and angles," see John L. Jackson, *Thin Description,* 16. For another brilliant example of the scholarly and writerly rigor that our conversation reaches toward, see Kevin's *The Sovereignty of Quiet*.

5 Lorde, "Smelling the Wind."

6 Here I am also of course invoking Melvin Dixon, who wrote "this poem is for Joseph, remember Joe?" in his poem "And These Are Just a Few."

7 I owe this framing to Melvin's "And These Are Just a Few," which ends "This poem is for the epidemic living and the dead," refracting the first line: "This poem is for the epidemic dead and the living."

8 "I can't become a whole man simply on what is fed to me: watered-down versions of Black life in America. I need the ass-splitting truth to be told, so I will have something pure to emulate, a reason to remain loyal." See Hemphill, *Ceremonies*, 65.

9 Lorde, "Dear Joe."

10 Donette Francis theorizes "antiromance" in her *Fictions of Feminine Citizenship*.

11 See Lorde, "Age, Race, Class, and Sex."

Introduction

1 Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 15.

2 Ogunji quoted in Free, "Personal Ties."

3 Brand, *A Map to the Door of No Return*.

4 See Manalansan, "Race, Violence, and Neoliberal Spatial Politics."

5 Kevin Aviance interview in Glasspiegel, dir., "Icy Lake." I am very thankful to Wills, a former student in African American studies at Yale, who shared clips of his interviews with Kevin Aviance while his short film was in production.

6 See Moten, *In the Break*; and Sharpe, *In the Wake*.

7 Moving beyond what she has named "qualitative collapse," Michelle Wright argues in her *Physics of Blackness* for a multidimensional and dynamic conception of blackness that is at once material and phenomenological. Hers is one of a number of formulations helpful for the archival, ethnographic, and narrative time-space turns and leaps we are invested in executing here. She writes, for example, that "when a linear spacetime epistemology begins, as many Black diasporic epistemologies do, with object status—being enslaved, relocated and so on—the laws of cause and effect make it difficult to reverse the binary that is set in place, because oppression is asserted as the cause of

all historical events (effects) in the timeline, excepting those events that are caused by a Black (resistant) reaction. . . . Yet because it is a reaction to an action, we are again returned to a weird and dismally fixed race-ing of the Black physics, in which whiteness always retains the originary agency and, because origins dominate a linear narrative, white racism is always the central actor in Black lives condemned to the status of reactors." It seems to me that Stephen Best is centering whiteness/white racism in this way. Best's work argues vigorously not only against recovery of a "we" at the point of our violent origin but also advocates disaffiliation from a "we." Moreover, I believe he misses or deemphasizes the politics and potential of the projects of Saidiya Hartman, Vincent Brown, NourbeSe Philip, Toni Morrison, and other scholars of the archival turn. I worry about the politics of his pathologizing move—why melancholia and disaffiliation? What does disaffiliation do, and for whom? See M. Wright, *Physics of Blackness*, 116; and Best, *None Like Us*.

8 Reginald Harris, personal communication, 2007. See also G. Winston James, "At the Club."

9 Kevin hosted ArenA, a weekly event produced by celebrity DJ Junior Vasquez, at the Palladium: New York City's massive Greenwich Village dance club billed as "the gay man's pleasure dome" in 1985 by owners Steve Rubell and Ian Schrager (of Studio 54 fame). ArenA was one of the most popular parties in New York City in the mid- to late nineties. The gay men to whom Rubell and Schrager catered were white, but ArenA also drew crowds of Black, Latinx, and other mostly but not exclusively LGBTQ men and women of color from the island of Manhattan and beyond on Saturday nights and Sunday mornings.

10 Kevin Aviance in Wills Glasspiegel, dir., "Icy Lake."

11 Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 13. As Fanon famously averred, "I belong irreducibly to my time." For him, "the present" is to be considered "in terms of something to be exceeded."

12 Lorde, "A Litany for Survival."

13 Ové, dir., *Baldwin's Nigger*.

14 Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*, 6.

15 Loose Joints, "Is It All over My Face?," 1980.

16 Hemphill, "The Tomb of Sorrow."

17 Allen, "For 'the Children,'" 311.

18 Glave, *Words to Our Now*, 25.

19 Lorde, "A Litany for Survival."

20 Notes on nomenclature are important here. First, Assotto Saint as grammarian holds that "Afrocentrists in our community have chosen the term 'Black gay' to identify themselves. As they insist, Black comes first. Interracialists in our community have chosen the term 'gay Black' to identify themselves. As they insist, 'gay comes first.'" Both groups' self-descriptions are ironically erroneous: "It's not which word comes first that matters but rather the grammatical context in which those words are used—either as an adjective or as a noun. An adjective is a modifier of a noun. The former is dependent on the latter."

Assotto is certainly correct, technically, although his bright line between "interracialists" and "Afrocentrists" overstates the case. We will explore this in the next chapter. *Disco Ball* employs the convention of "Black gay." See Saint, *The Road before Us*, xix. Also, since the 1950s *gay* has been widely accepted among women, with gay girls, gay women, and lesbian used sometimes interchangeably. In other cases *lesbian* (and capitalized, *Lesbian*) denoted and still denotes a particular politics of autonomy and visibility. The explicit statement was necessitated by gay men's attempts to silence and invisibilize women. *Bisexual* and *transgender* do not seem to emerge strongly as identity positions distinct from gay until the end of the long 1980s and early aughts, respectively. Although the long-1980s Black gay formulation progressively gestured toward community adhesion of all nonheteronormative Black folks, the lack of consistent feminist and trans allyship and accomplice by cisgender gay men constrained the emergence of a movement that truly reflected this.

21 See Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*.

22 Of course there is: the work work wuk wuk wuk wuk of it all! Tremendous labor. A number of these were published by Kitchen Table Press. In the next chapter we will turn to Lisa C. Moore's RedBone Press, which began publishing just outside of the long 1980s, but it must be noted here that RedBone (and Steven Fullwood's Vintage Entity Press) continues the crucial work of serious Black lesbian and gay publishing—not only with respect to award-winning single-author works but also the anthologies that carry on the tradition in the best ways. As both a prime example of this and evidence of the work of Black LGBTQ publishing at the time of publication, see especially Fullwood, Harris, and Moore, *Carry the Word*.

23 M. Walker, "I Want to Write."

24 M. Walker, "For My People."

25 E. Alexander, "Ars Poetica #100: I Believe."

> Poetry, I tell my students,
> is idiosyncratic. Poetry
>
> is where we are ourselves,
> (though Sterling Brown said
>
> "Every 'I' is a dramatic 'I'")
> digging in the clam flats
>
> for the shell that snaps,
> emptying the proverbial pocketbook.
>
> Poetry is what you find
> in the dirt in the corner,
>
> overhear on the bus, God
> in the details, the only way
>
> to get from here to there.
> Poetry (and now my voice is rising)

is not all love, love, love,
and I'm sorry the dog died.

Poetry (here I hear myself loudest)
is the human voice,

and are we not of interest to each other?

26 Lorde, "Poetry Is Not a Luxury," in her *Sister Outsider*, 25.
27 Here Sylvia Wynter is arguing against an othering "ethnos" in which one must be estranged from historical and material particularities of intersubjective humanity. See Wynter, "Ethno or Socio Poetics," 78.
28 Césaire, "Calling the Magician."
29 Saint, "Why I Write," 3.
30 Yes, another anthological work—in film. Riggs, dir., *Tongues Untied*.
31 Baldwin, *Just above My Head*, 512.
32 Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 13.
33 I borrow the notion of a writerly work from Roland Barthes. See Barthes, *S/Z*, 5. See also Keep, McLaughlin, and Parmar, "Readerly and Writerly Texts." Sherry B. Ortner, who was my graduate advisor, had a wonderful (and only slightly shady) way of bracketing poststructuralist French theory in the classroom. This is not to say that the backhand wave that went along with her utterance of "the French" was a dismissal of this important work or a collapse of their differences. See her masterful reformulation of Bourdieu and Foucault in the refinement of her own theory of practice in, for example, *Anthropology and Social Theory* and her classic "Theory in Anthropology since the Sixties."
34 These largely follow Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. See her "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading." Other examples include Ahmed, "Happy Objects"; Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings*; and Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*.
35 This is not to diminish the important scholarly contributions of Herskovits, Mintz, and others who follow these foundational anthropologists, such as Richard and Sally Price, and John Szwed. The politics of their various citational practices is another matter—related, but not my aim to parse at this time. Here I am drawing the crucial distinction in perspective and politics between antecedent Afro-American anthropology and the decolonizing and/or Black anthropology that has emerged since the 1980s. See Allen and Jobson, "The Decolonizing Generation."
36 Harrison, *Outsider Within*.
37 See Magubane and Faris, "On the Political Relevance of Anthropology"; E. Gordon, "Anthropology and Liberation"; and Jobson, "The Case for Letting Anthropology Burn."
38 Boellstorff, "Queer Studies in the House of Anthropology," 26.
39 Cohen, "Deviance as Resistance."
40 Brooks, "I Am a Black."
41 Paul Gilroy wrote this in 1993: "My point here is that the unashamedly hybrid character of these Black Atlantic cultures continually confounds any simplistic

(essentialist or anti-essentialist) understanding of the relationship between racial identity and racial non-identity, between folk cultural authenticity and pop cultural betrayal. . . . Black identity is not simply a social and political category to be used or abandoned according to the extent to which the rhetoric that supports and legitimizes it is persuasive or institutionally powerful. Whatever the radical constructionists may say, it is lived as a coherent (if not always stable) experiential sense of self. Though it is often felt to be natural and spontaneous, it remains the outcome of practical activity: language, gesture, bodily significations, desires. We can use Foucault's insightful comments to illuminate this necessarily political relationship. They point towards an anti-anti-essentialism that sees racialized subjectivity as the product of the social practices that supposedly derive from it." See Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 99, 102.

42 See Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*; and Shakespeare, *Macbeth*.

43 Trouillot, *Global Transformations*, 47.

44 In parts 2 and 3 we will return to my perhaps not-so-subtle suggestion to mind Black radical feminist insistence on embodiment and community engagement. One example is the sort Stephanie Mills commands/invites in her 1979 hit "Put Your Body in It": "Don't be afraid . . . and if it takes you all night long / I'll see you through / put your body in it!"

45 I am grateful to Cheryl Roberts, Yolanda M. Martinez-San Miguel, Pat Saunders, Vickie Greene, LaShaya Howie, Ana-Maurine Lara, "Felicidades Gris," and Jackie Brown (who was the first to advise "some things ain't got no words") for engaging my last-minute efforts to Facebook crowd-source "a word" to describe this action I describe here. Many thanks also to Aimee Cox, Maya Berry, and Juana Maria Rodriguez, who encouraged me to abandon the search for the right word and keep the description! Cheryl offered "waltz" to name this action I had described. This resonated most: I pictured the side shuffle of the feet, with one hand in the air (holding a drink?) and the other on the side of another dancer.

46 Boyce-Davies, *Black Women, Writing and Identity*, 47.

47 This is riffing off of Stuart Hall, of course. But it is recursive in another way. Here I am posing the same question I asked in our special "Black/Queer/Diaspora" issue of *GLQ* precisely to push beyond that collection to include responses to it and the longer historicity in which it is embedded.

48 Lorde, "Poetry Is Not a Luxury," 36.

49 Rodney, *The Groundings with My Brothers*.

50 C. L. R. James, *Every Cook Can Govern*.

51 Following movements of "Third World" peoples, women, and LGBTQI folks, anthropology attempted a few corrective turns in the long 1980s. Decolonizing/Black anthropology is likely the most enduring of these, alongside moves toward reflexivity, experimentation, and attention to writing. More recently, there seems to have been a disavowal of this, leading to what George Marcus has termed a "crisis of reception (of ethnography)." See Harrison, *Decolonizing Anthropology*. See also Marcus, "On the Problematic Contemporary Reception of Ethnography," 199.

52 Allen and Jobson, "The Decolonizing Generation."
53 Ferguson and Gupta, "Beyond 'Culture'"; Clifford and Marcus, *Writing Culture*.
54 See Christian, "The Race for Theory."
55 Césaire, "Calling the Magician," 121.
56 See Agard-Jones, "What the Sands Remember"; and E. Alexander, "Ars Poetica #100."
57 M. Alexander, "Not Just (Any) Body Can Be a Citizen," 5.
58 Christian, "The Race for Theory," 68.
59 Allen, "For 'the Children,'" 322.
60 Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 2.
61 Dixon, "And These Are Just a Few," 71.
62 Spillers, "Interstices," 154.
63 See Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*.
64 Lorde, "Age, Race, Class, and Sex," 114.

Chapter One. The Anthological Generation

1 Black/gay is nomadic. Although there are territories that it might and sometimes strategically does claim, the realm it holds is de-territorialized. The nomad is a way of being in the middle or between points. It is characterized by change. To be nomadic in this way is the condition of being unsettled. What people of conscience can be settled with all that is de-territorializing, deracinating, and striated in seemingly enclosed sedimented political realities of our lives (and deaths) today? Of course, nomadism is also about (self-)naming. Recall Hortense Spillers's admonition to attend to how and what we are called. Whom, what—and where—are the children naming today? And to what uses have they put their lineages? What unsettles them and sets them flowing again?
2 *Tabanca* is a Trinbagonian word used to express the painful, depressed state following a breakup or (perhaps temporary) loss of an authentic heartfelt article. Carnival tabanca is the way I have most often heard this latter sense. For example, one of my respondents, in an interview recalling her recent trip "home" to Trinidad, expressed "some serious-serious tabanca" and displayed a forlorn affect regarding having to leave Trinidad and Tobago to return to the United States, where she has lived for most of her life.
3 Crystal Waters, "100% Pure Love," 1994.
4 Agard-Jones, *Body Burdens*.
5 Glave, *Words to Our Now*, 25.
6 "Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender." See A. Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, xi. Walker notably drew the distinction of her coined term *womanism*, poetically recognizing the resonance but incompleteness for Black women of a feminism without their perspectives and full inclusion. Still, there is no doubt that the work that she has done over more than fifty years as a writer, advocate, scholar, and activist qualifies her as one of the most important figures of Black feminism (as well as its sister, womanism).