brother to brother
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NEW WRITINGS BY BLACK GAY MEN

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Black men loving Black men is a call to action, an acknowledgment of responsibility. We take care of our own kind when the night grows cold and silent. These days the nights are cold-blooded and the silence echoes with complicity.

—Joseph Beam
“Brother to Brother: Words from the Heart”
Joseph Fairchild Beam
December 30, 1954 — December 27, 1988

Joseph Beam was the editor of the ground-breaking anthology of black gay literature, *In the Life*. Published in 1986 by Alyson Publications, it provided a generation of black gay men with affirmations for their sexual identities and desires.

In the Introduction to *In the Life* he wrote, “There are many reasons for Black gay invisibility. Hard words come to mind: power, racism, conspiracy, oppression, and privilege—each deserving of a full-fledged discussion in gay history books yet unwritten.”

Joe challenged the prevailing silence surrounding the lives of black gay men. “We have always existed in the African-American community. We have been ministers, hairdressers, entertainers, sales clerks, civil rights activists, teachers, playwrights, trash collectors, dancers, government officials, choirmasters, and dishwashers. You name it; we’ve done it—most often with scant recognition. We have mediated family disputes, cared for and reared our siblings, and housed our sick. We have performed many and varied important roles within our community.”

Joseph Beam died of AIDS-related causes at the age of thirty-three in Philadelphia. Prior to his death he had begun editing *Brother to Brother*. While a board member of the National Coalition of Black Lesbians and Gays, he became a founding editor of the organization’s *Black/Out* magazine. His commitment to ending the silence surrounding the lives of black gay men has been a most empowering legacy. He was a cultural and political activist dedicated to ending racism, homophobia, heterosexism, and the debilitating oppressions spawned by patriarchy.

In his essay, “Making Ourselves from Scratch,” he writes, “It was imperative for my survival that I did not attend to or believe the images that were presented of black people or gay
people. Perhaps that was the beginning of my passage from passivism to activism, that I needed to create my reality, that I needed to create images by which I, and other black gay men to follow, could live this life.”

Joseph Beam was a respected and important figure in the gay and lesbian world. He actively contributed to the empowerment of black gay men. His pro-feminism made him well informed of women’s issues and a staunch supporter of women’s literature. Reverend Renee McCoy, former executive director of the National Coalition of Black Lesbians and Gays and a good friend of Joe’s, noted in an Au Courant tribute to him that his work enriched the community on multiple levels. “Joe left behind a legacy of who we are as black lesbians and gays. His work is a resounding affirmation of our lives.” The Philadelphia Inquirer wrote that “Mr. Beam developed a national reputation as an articulate, sensitive voice for the black gay community.” But he was also a man who cared deeply about “black men loving black men.”

“The bottom line is this,” he said. “We are Black men who are proudly gay. What we offer is our lives, our love, our visions… We are coming home with our heads held up high.”
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...And now, brother? Is Kansas [still] closer?

Brother to Brother: New Writings by Black Gay Men indexes our collective injuries in blood, cum, fire and tears. But even more importantly, the words on these pages form “blackprints” for our futures. Essex Hemphill, in the original 1991 Introduction, writes: “If I had read a book like *In the Life* when I was fifteen or sixteen, there might have been one less mask for me to put aside later in life.” Essex “picked up [his fallen] brother’s weapons” to complete work on *Brother to Brother: New Writings by Black Gay Men*, amplifying and enlarging the “evidence of being” offered by *In the Life* and securing space for us. Thanks to Lisa C. Moore, RedBone Press, and the families of Joseph Beam and Essex Hemphill, we have these words again.

Created in the historical moment in which a new world order of neo-conservative ideologies and global capital took form, and marked by the advent of HIV/AIDS and the transformation of urban areas in the United States and elsewhere, *In the Life: A Black Gay Anthology* and *Brother to Brother: New Writings by Black Gay Men* critically and imaginatively laid foundations for life-saving institutions and ways of being, and ways of being together. Now, in the current moment, in which Joe Beam’s “cold-blooded” nights feel like nuclear winter, and *complicitous echoes* broadcast on 500 cable channels, podcasts, blogs, two-ways, i-phones and voices in my head, we need this “new” writing to become flesh.

* A palimpsest is a document that has been written on more than once. I owe a great debt of gratitude to Lisa C. Moore and Marvin K. White for allowing me to contribute to the new edition of this sacred text, and for their expert comments on earlier drafts. Thank you to Phillip Alexander for his consistent love and care. Any shortcomings are strictly my own.
when he stopped writing
his mother discarded the pen,
folded his hands,
donated the journal
to the church
with the condition
it be cloistered
and stored his memory
in Woodlawn Cemetery

We would be remiss in this re-consideration and re-reading
not to reflect on the ways in which our stories are endangered,
at risk of revision, reversal and erasure; whether by the ravages
of time on paper notebooks in a dank basement; or the best
intentions of lovers and friends holding on to genius journals,
rolled up paintings, recordings, cocktail napkins, xerographs or
out-of-print books. These stories are also endangered by our
own complacency, poor reading, self-appointed Divadom and
lack of vision. What other prescriptions might we find in
Donald Woods’ papers, and what gris gris awaits those who
profoundly explore Assotto Saint? How many secrets of
survival can be culled from the genius of sisters? Which parts
of us can be revealed by honestly approaching our trans family?
…Where must we go, toward making something out of our
inheritance? This offering looks toward re-articulating—that
is, both re-stating and putting back together—our fragmented
politics and faiths, re-tooling weapons, recipes, ministrations,
divinations, hints and threats that this book provides, toward
the emergence of “new Black men” and the full inclusion of
black lesbian, gay, bisexual same-gender-loving and
transgender individuals, issues and communities, within larger
black publics.

We do not have to begin anew as if we have no intellectual
genealogy, no aesthetic and political “tradition” to treasure,
critique and push forward. After all, not only is “our
loss…greater than all the space we fill with prayers and
praise,” but what we stand to gain from picking up the
weapons and wands of our mothers, fathers, sisters and brothers
may make all the difference in preventing more loss. We are worth more than “piles of nothing.” We weep while building and moving—writing and doing. Alongside. Underscoring. Beyond. This collection is one example of memory re-called. Re-membered. Re-collected. A return. This new introduction is a palimpsest—gently and lovingly writing alongside this sacred text—underscoring and analyzing, in an attempt to signpost some opportunities and pitfalls of our now and possible futures.

I only knew he had fallen
and the passing ceremonies
marking his death
did not stop the war.\textsuperscript{3}

We call the names Madame Edna Brown; Rashawn Brazell; Steen Fenrich; Brian Williamson; Michael Sandy; Roberto Duncanson; J.R. Warren; Lenford “Steve” Harvey; Marsha P. Johnson; Anthony Barnes; Jimmy McGuire and James Williams; John Whittington and Derrick Hilliard; Victor Jarrett; Nokia Cowan; Gregory Beauchamp; Stephanie Thomas and Ukea Davis; Lee Diamond Person; Emonie Spaulding; Amanda Milan; Ali Forney; Nizah Morris; Precious Armani; Ashley Nickson; Jerrell Williams; Chanel Chandler; James Rivers; Deasha Andrews; Robert Martin; Quincy Favors Taylor; Sidney Wright; Nireah Johnson; Timothy Blair Jr.; Nikki Nicholas; Kareem Washington; Dion Webster; Chareka Keys; Donathyn Rodgers; Tyra Henderson; Imani Williams; Charelle Pickett; Venus Landin; Shani Baraka and Rayshon Holmes; Sakia Gunn; Zoliswa Nkonyana; Sizakele Sigasa and Salome Masooa; Simangele NhlaPho; Fanny-Ann Eddy; Candice Williams and Phoebe Myrie; …. invoking them as representative/fraction of our bones. Our blood. We remember the real causes and high price of war. We call out preventable deaths from city hospital to Township to Crescent City to Baghdad… We invoke Joseph and Essex and Donald and
Walter and Melvin and Roger and Marlon and Assotto and Adrian and Rory and Charles and David and Craig and Craig through re-reading and feeling their urgent words.

But this offering is not merely a wake. A shiva. A celebration. Who can afford to sit and wait when there is so much work yet undone? This is a critical offering, hoping to suggest ways to read the genius of these thirty-five brothers. Given our current cultural and political-economic terrain, what is the intellectual and political significance of re-issuing and re-reading *Brother to Brother: New Writings by Black Gay Men*?

1. Home

When I speak of home, I mean not only the familial constellation from which I grew, but the entire Black community: the Black press, the Black church, Black academicians, the Black literati, and the Black left. Where is my reflection? I am most often rendered invisible, perceived as a threat to the family, or am tolerated if I am silent and inconspicuous. I cannot go home as who I am and that hurts me deeply.

—Joseph Beam, “Brother to Brother: Words from the Heart,” *In the Life: A Black Gay Anthology*

I ask you brother: Does your mama really know about you? Does she really know what I am? Does she know I want to love her son, care for him, nurture and celebrate him? Do you think she’ll understand? I hope so, because I am coming home. There is no place else to go that will be worth so much effort and love.

—Essex Hemphill, Introduction to *Brother to Brother: New Writings by Black Gay Men*

We never left home—and in some cases, not for lack of trying—but stayed, knowing that there is “no place else to go.”
Some days it seems our loyalties may be misplaced.

Although same-gender-loving black people have always occupied the complex position of the “sinner” to be conditionally loved, prayed over and consumed in black publics; today “the hood” is perhaps even less like home. At the same time that official heterosexism of “love the sinner, hate the sin” is now reflected in the larger culture as “tolerance” for sufficiently Abercrombied white men and women, black gays and lesbians are increasingly deemed surplus and expendable, both outside and within black communities. Witness the strikingly resonant rhetorics of folks for whom there is agreement on only two things: getting paid and homo-hate. Those who pretend to speak for black communities seem even more fearful of being included in the rapidly expanding list of the “deviant.” Reactionary U.S. state officials; Christian, Muslim, national and other patriarchs; platinum-selling rappers, award-winning gospel singers and middle-class gatekeepers; all call for our ouster, hetero-conversion, silence and/or death.

_Brother to Brother: New Writings by Black Gay Men_ both continues and significantly ruptures visions of home within the tradition of black literature. While canonical (assumed heterosexual) male writers presented a vision of home as imposed upon or interrupted by structures of white oppression (only), Harlem Renaissance writers Wallace Thurman, Langston Hughes and Richard Bruce Nugent exposed trouble at home around color, class and sexuality; writing about a life of poverty, drunkenness and good times in Harlem, which DuBois, Locke and others were loath to acknowledge, given their mission of Negro respectability. Black same-gender-loving writers contribute to the critical understanding, maintenance and necessary enlargement of possibilities for another sort of kinship and “homespace” (hooks). Among these writers, lesbian feminists like Barbara Smith, Pat Parker and Audre Lorde first revealed spaces within blackness that previously had been concealed and silenced, “yield[ing]
unexpected ways of intervening and could make space for something else to be,” as Roderick Ferguson notes. Likewise, silence has been broken with words in this volume, but also with bodies, shattered violently against the norms of “home.” It seems we are called not merely to go or stay home, but to attend to the ways we come and be and do—serving mother and father and the children, fiercely, as difference and critical intervention. Reflections on and imaginings of homespaces in the first section of Brother to Brother, “When I think of home,” beautifully illustrate multiple ways we make home.

Let us return to the often told partial truth of “The Black Community” as idyllic village collectively and lovingly raising children. Remember, back in the day, when you would do something blocks away from your home and get disciplined and punished—beaten—by several aunties and other fictive kin before being carried home, where you were once again beaten for the trouble and embarrassment, or for G.P.? In fact, that “general principle” was to discipline you into a certain sort of black folk. As Charles R.P. Pouncy’s re-imaging of the block, “A First Affair,” underscores, for many, the constant surveillance or “keeping an eye out” disciplines, not only for safety and instruction, but to maintain the mask of respectability; necessitating, it seems, insult and injury at the hands of every religious zealot, moralizing elder, young thug and community HNIC on the block.

Still, while the surveillance of folks on corners, bus stops and (in front of) churches may make you act one way in the street, it cannot police desire and fantasy. Pouncy’s protagonist Stanley finally gets language for this when he attends his first gay function at the home of “Willie the Woman” at fourteen. Pouncy’s re-telling of home and community demonstrates that we must often leave (even temporarily or occasionally), or more to the point be driven out of, the putative place of safety and nurturing, to find a more authentic home on the stony and scary ground of “the street.” This street is sometimes figurative—the public sphere peopled by “riffraffs and
rudipoots,” as John Keene imagines in “Adelphus King”; but all too often this means, quite literally, the street. Without a home. Without shelter and food and warmth and protection.

To recall the now legendary short story by John Keene, “Adelphus King,” to black gay men of a certain experience or age is to get an “ooooh, baby!” as if he actually knew or “had” Del King himself. When seventeen-year-old Marcus is introduced to this saxophone-playing stranger, he could not name his feelings or identify the place to which he was being led, inevitably:

…I heard only “Del”… Nearly six-four I reckoned, and built just like my Uncle Richard… [dressed in] white pima cotton sports shirt cut from far too small a piece of cloth… the intoxicating scent of freshly washed clothes and sweat.⁶

Itself intoxicating, this short story beautifully captures the longing for a return of familial comfort to chase one’s nightmares away and give form to one’s future. Keene delivers a romance of anticipation with Del’s line to young Marcus, “…you ain’t got nothing to worry about, you’ll see…” His arms clasped against my shoulder blades…an eternity…embracing…right here, he in my arms. …” He leaves us with “When Del?”… ‘In time, Marcus.’”⁷ As Brother to Brother vividly points out in prose and poetry, there is a particular quality to the love and sexual relationships of black gay men. Hooking up, breaking up, defending your love, and negotiating yours and another’s family and friends takes on a number of dimensions. We would do well to consider this rarely remarked upon suggestion of what it means to be a “faggot”: Friendship. Partnership. Lovership. With or without ossifying into little statues on top of rubbery fondant on dry cake. David Frechette charges us to “regret nothing.” Believe me, I know Reginald T. Jackson was right:
...the cruelest part... [is] there was no one able to ... say that along with the daily anguish ... there would also be the love of a man. A black man. If someone had told me then what I now know about being a faggot, I would have gladly withstood the name-calling.  

*Brother to Brother* moves beyond discourses of righteous monogamy, putatively necessary to constitute gays and lesbians as respectable civil rights subjects. It runs counter the homonormative impulse to de-gay and de-sex same-gender-loving and/or gender variant folks through tired apparatus of middle-class performance. It not only reads and revises family, but also shows the inextricable connections between projects of sexual, class and racial respectability. In the centerpiece of the section, “Commitments,” Essex Hemphill uses familiar scenes of family holidays to consider the cost of this multiple burden of gay sons, nephews and brothers, smiling “as I serve my duty.” The rituals and rites Essex evokes point out the dissemblance. It is not only the speaker’s desperate embrace of his “unsuspecting aunt” that make his arms “so empty they would break around a lover...,” but his embrace of these commitments to the heteronorm—the established rules of heterosexual performance.

2. Bloods. Please stand for the reading of the gospel.

Honor the magical adhesion of deep open kisses and warm seed that binds us and terrifies us:

For my so-called sins against nature and the race, I gain the burdensome knowledge of carnal secrets. ... It often comforts me... At other moments it is sacred communion, causing me to moan and tremble and cuss as the Holy Ghost fucks me. It is a knowledge of fire and beauty that I will carry beyond the grave. When I
sit in God’s final judgment, I will wager this knowledge against my entrance into the Holy Kingdom. There was no other way for me to know the beauty of Earth except through the sexual love of men, men who were often more terrified than I… Men emasculated in the complicity of not speaking out, rendered mute by the middle-class aspirations of a people trying hard to forget the shame and cruelties of slavery and ghettos.

—Essex Hemphill, Introduction to *Brother to Brother*

Black gay men, longing for a mirror made of flesh, saw themselves—for perhaps the first time—in this literature. But what would we do with these reflections? Cary Alan Johnson’s confession, “Everybody wants to be the boy next door—and have the boy next door. And I’m no exception” in “Hey Brother, What’s Hap’nin’?” illustrates a site that must be interrogated more thoroughly—the seeming apotheosis of the Butch Queen (*The Queen Is Dead? Long Live the Butch [Queen?]!). But, for those whose beat is the boys around the way, with a difference of a journal, an easel, a sewing machine and/or poetry book at home, or a slight lisp, sway, tilt of the head or clue to his tea; there could be no better seduction than that which poured out of these pages (and no better foreplay than poring over them, together). Even those who never had the privilege of hearing some of these writers at GMAD in New York City, Cable’s Reef bar in Oakland, Tracks in Atlanta, the Gay and Lesbian Center in New York City, or in Marlon Riggs’ film *Tongues Untied* can feel the page pulsating. Hear fine-ass Donald Woods’s sex-dripping cadences—perfectly oval “o” of gorgeous full lips reading:

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holy ghost of my heart
grinding my memory
humping my need
[... he then more coquettishly teases]
been waitin...
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[with rising inflection. eyebrow slightly arched.]
...for your lightbulb
to glow for me
[breathing in. breathing out. and you can almost see in your
mind’s eye, his Adam’s apple move under dark brown skin, his
knowing brown almond eyes narrow]
waiting
to exchange hard ass love
calloused affection
[giving you “calloused affection” with tongue meeting hard
palate that makes his lip slightly pout at the end, you are his.
At least I imagined myself to be. The reader/listener is seduced.
Totally in his thrall. Donald ends with]
serve the next line
in your salty metaphors
...
wet me with
the next line
the resounding refrain
of grown men in love10

“Now we think when we fuck.” For those of us who came
of sexual maturity in the late eighties—the In the Life/ Brother
to Brother generation—the “now” is curious. We have never
had the luxury or innocence of a “before” when we didn’t
think… when we fuck, dream of fucking, get ready to fuck …
instead of fucking. That black gay men announced that they
(like to) fuck and “now we think when we fuck” (Hemphill),
at (what at the time was) the height of the AIDS epidemic,
constitutes a profoundly radical contribution to the body of
American literature and (auto)ethnography, virtually
untapped by scholars. That Essex would wager his
“burdensome knowledge of carnal secrets” against entrance
into a heaven proscribed by authority and tradition is a crystal
clear and courageous challenge to religious doctrine, calling
into question adherence to traditions so plainly out of step
with spirituality. What’s more, now when we perform these “autonomous political acts” of desire, love, pleasure and play, we think of black gay poetry and gorgeous prose, like Adrian Stanford’s “In the Darkness, Fuck Me Now.” Witness the bold agency and urgency of this command, which through Stanford’s artistry becomes at once a paean, a toast and a lyric. But all this fucking is not uncomplicated. Walter Rico Burrell, reflecting on received messages of guilt and shame in “The Scarlet Letter, Revisited,” notes that “On one rational, intelligent, commonsense level, I know that the puritanical outcries against homosexuality are wrong. …I know … AIDS is not … a punishment heaped on sinning homosexuals.” Still, given the constant reification of this message of punishment from a vengeful god smiting for various abominations—perhaps more blatantly in 1991 and less finessed than it is today—Burrell cannot help but return: That is, now he thinks after he has fucked:

that nagging suggestion [that] haunts …something intensely evil that is intent not only on taking my very life but taking it in a drawn-out, horrible, long-suffering way, as if to punish me for …commit[ing] some dark, unpardonable …the same thing that was the reason for my divorce. It’s at the root of my estrangement from my son … the very sexual act …¹¹

The titles of the pieces in Brother to Brother’s second and third sections, titles like “Comfort” and “Safe Harbour” and “Hooked for Life,” speak to relationships as a secure place of respite, or just as significantly, to the fact that there is often war within relationships: conflict and violence within the new homes we try to construct.

3. The evidence of being
   What we must do now, more than ever, is nurture one another whenever and wherever possible. … We must
focus our attention around issues of craft and discipline in order to create our very best literature. … look closely at revealing the full extent to which black gay men have always participated in positive and nurturing roles in the structures of family within the African American community. … look closely at intimacy and the constructions of our desire and bring forth from these realms the knowledge that we are capable of loving one another in committed, long-standing, productive relationships. …. We must begin to identify what a black gay sensibility is; identify its esthetic qualities and components; identify specific constructions … and then determine how this sensibility and esthetic relates to and differs from African American literature as a whole.

—Essex Hemphill, Introduction, Brother to Brother

Essex reminds us that “…at the beginning of the 1980s, creating poetry from a black gay experience was a lonely, trying occupation.” While black gay poets and writers still face many trials in terms of critical and popular recognition, relative to straight and/or white peers, their ranks are expanding—meeting the demands of new or expanding media outlets, including slam poetry, blog commentary and the mandate to tell stories yet unheard. What, I wonder, would Essex Hemphill and Joseph Beam have made of this technology? Instead of a stack of Gitanes and a steady stream of Frenchmen, would a blue screen and the speed of the Internet have inspired James Baldwin?

I muse here not to so obviously telegraph my own nostalgia (for something I obviously have not experienced) but rather to point to issues of process, craft and discipline. What from the past must we preserve as we avail ourselves of new technologies and emerging outlets for writing? In cyberspace, a growing list of bloggers fill in spaces between far-flung individuals throughout the globe with news, information, political
commentary, entertainment and confession. Among the most prominent of these, sites of activists Keith Boykin and Jasmyne Cannick have become the “go to” places on the web for black gay and lesbian news and information. Among the emerging black glitterati, young black gay men openly debate (and often unselfconsciously perform) class and education privilege, homophobia, racism, and the role and status of graduate degrees, gym bodies and big dicks, as well as sex play, dating and politics—stretching and developing their critical muscles on a wide variety of personal web logs.

Black gay and bisexual authors and black same-gender-loving themes have reached The New York Times bestseller lists; there are black gay-themed feature films, a cable sitcom and a couple of us have reached the new pinnacle of visibility: The Oprah Winfrey Show. E. Lynn Harris and James Earl Hardy, for example, have brought our themes to audiences wider than many of us could have imagined in 1990 when this anthology was first published. This tradition is still being created. Assotto Saint’s call for 100 Black Gay Poets for his independently published volume launched current outstanding voices in this tradition, including Marvin K. White and Thomas Glave, just two of the progeny of Essex, Joe, Donald, Assotto… Inheritors, like many others, of the oftentimes burdensome tools, gris gris and prescriptions of brothers in this volume, they have exceeded the productivity of their fathers.

Alphonso Morgan’s first novel, Sons, is another example of the aesthetic tradition that uses literary artistry to reveal something new about realities many of us think we know well. Morgan is one of a number of black gay writers who have self-published, perhaps following in the footsteps of Harris, who sold Invisible Life out of his trunk—making it a hit in beauty parlors and small black bookstores before earning lucrative publishing contracts and mainstream success. Should we ask academe to co-sign work that we love and that sustains us? Large publishing companies? And/both? Neither? Recently, we have begun to hear voices from the southern United States,
from rural spaces, in languages other than English and of black experiences outside of the United States and transnationally. “Thus, [now we can say that] we are at the beginning of completing a total picture of the African American experience.”12

And still, what does the relative expansion of outlets for creative and scholarly work of black gay men bode? Whither beyond the long-awaited and hard fought visibility black gay men have only just begun to evidence? Recent events show not only that visibility does not constitute legibility—that is, being seen does not make one understood or appreciated—but also that visibility has unintended consequences. Does “exposure” serve to define and refine black gay aesthetics or politics, or perhaps merely reduce complex realities to entertaining tropes or reflections of the priorities of others? What are the benefits and drawbacks of this move from just a few authors working in collectives or in conversation with one another and responsive to black queer editors, audiences and collective agendas; to writers, pundits, critics, readers and poseurs working at the speed of the Internet—in relative isolation and responsible only to, perhaps, grantors, mainstream publishers, advertisers, tenure and promotion committees, or no one at all other than their own creative will?

And what of the loneliness, depression and shade; some of which is evident in and between the lines of the work in this volume, and some which lives in “extra-textual” stories? What nurturing do we need? Can we turn to one another for loving support in ways we now know so many of the brothers who went before us could not, or did not; some living and dying isolated on island pedestals built by “the community”? And what of those brothers still living and creating. How best to honor them? What organization will, finally, save our lives?13

Brother to Brother: New Writings by Black Gay Men reveals that in order to effect social transformation, we must think, argue and act deeper—that is, beyond our personal comfort,
and conventional spaces—to more fully consider our sets of core values, sets of commitments and unique capacities. This work and the work of black gay and lesbian intellectuals and artists, more widely, evidences a process of critical artistic engagement with ideas and an understanding and valuing of critique—“reading” in a way that can be just as incisive and illuminating as being read over a social misstep; but without the intention of harm. Without the shade that betrays deep unresolved injury, turned on or thrown at another. This is more akin to what several scholars, following Cornel West and bell hooks, have referred to as a “politics of conversion,” which demands historical and cultural depth and personal, spiritual, political connection and commitment. Essex Hemphill calls for the creation of this kind of wide insurgent intellectual tradition in his Introduction to *Brother to Brother* and in other work.

Dwight McBride is certainly correct that “…th[e] critical sensibility called black queer studies is self-consciously in search of a usable past to define and clarify the significance of its arrival onto the scene in its current incarnation.” And there is a prior question: to what future do we want to marshal the tools of the past? Our major theoreticians, poets, essayists, and activists—Audre Lorde, Joseph Beam, Essex Hemphill, Pat Parker, Barbara Smith, Assotto Saint—were [not], for the most part, supported by professional academic status, which legitimates literature as “literature,” but also tends toward normalizing, and perhaps finally rendering urgent voices more easily legible, teachable and therefore more comfortable for folks of privilege to hear (often, in the last week of a course, footnote of a book, or in an uninterrogated epigram). While this volume includes scholarly work by academic theorists Robert Reid-Pharr and Charles Nero, what do we make of the fact that there are now nearly as many black queer academics as there are black queer writers and artists? Black communities do value formal education and even fetishize degrees, but this is not at all a requisite for what I mean by an intellectual
tradition. Rather, Essex Hemphill’s insistence on diligence, honesty and discipline suggests to me the crucial nature of collective processes of creativity, sharing and critique, constitutive of the black radical tradition of aesthetic and intellectual production. It is clear that the new, brilliant work of Black Queer Studies (many of the leading figures represented in the historic *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology*, edited by E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson), located in the queer section of Blackademia, the Colored section of queer theory, and in small pockets of various disciplines, is still inappropriately and inadequately matched to the task of sustaining liberatory black queer praxis.

Essex argues that the creation of a literary tradition is an immediate task, through which “we will create… evidence of being powerful enough to transform the very nature of our existence.”¹⁵ This resonates with Cheryl Clarke’s foundational essay in which she posits homophobia in black communities as “a failure to transform” and throughout this volume, for example, in Essex’s introduction, Joe’s “Making Ourselves from Scratch,” and in Ron Simmons’ erudite reading [for filth] in “Some Thoughts on the Challenges Facing Black Gay Intellectuals”—all of which read, eerily, as current today. Inheritors of the legacy of *Brother to Brother* and *In the Life* must thus imagine and create a movement whose goal is revolution (call it “social transformation” if it makes you more comfortable). It bears repeating and it bears building an intellectual project around—not merely finding our individual voices, but deploying them in ways that empower us and transform our communities and nations.

While various artistic intellectual political projects are carried out within pockets of critical intellectual and artistic resistance and vision throughout the globe, for the most part it is still awaiting a mass movement beyond frameworks of civil rights and homonormativity. The literary and political ethic found within this work demands work, to borrow Audre Lorde’s words, *beyond our convenience* and perhaps *shoddiness*,¹⁶
toward a grace that we not only imagine, but feel and demand and extend, not only between black men, but necessarily with black lesbians, transgender folks, other people of color and across various spaces of coalition and mutual support. How can we not link up our struggles with our sisters? As much as “[still] “new writings by Black gay men,” you hold in your hand an object brought back to us through the labor of black women. Publisher Lisa C. Moore of RedBone Press responded to the fact that the original Alyson publication was out of print by beginning the onerous work of tracking down authors living and transitioned, raising funds and re-editing this volume. Her gift of returning Brother to Brother to new generations of black same-gender-loving men and others was facilitated by the generosity of Joseph Beam’s mother, Mrs. Dorothy Beam, and by the family of Essex Hemphill. Originally a black lesbian press, RedBone has published poet Marvin K. White, and Moore co-edited Spirited: Affirming the Soul and Black Gay/Lesbian Identity with poet G. Winston James. RedBone Press recently collaborated with Other Countries black gay men’s writing workshop to publish Other Countries III, Voices Rising: Celebrating 20 Years of Black Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender Writing, the most recent and now the most complete anthology of black same-gender-loving writing, ever. Carry the Word, the new bibliography co-published by Steven G. Fullwood’s Vintage Entity Press and RedBone, also goes a long way toward ensuring that our words will not be merely “cloistered… in Woodlawn cemetery.”

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.
—Thomas Glave,
Words to Our Now: Imagination and Dissent

4. …Get ready to turn the page…

You hold in your hand an instrument to unravel mysteries of your Black (and) Gay (and) Life. Think of this as a Dream Book guiding you to a big hit. Follow the numbers:

Page 75. When you get tired of buying wedding gifts and making potato salad, and consulting on hem lines and moisturizers.
Page 80. When you need a friend.
When Sister and Brother So and So condemn you to Hell, sing with Edith and David, in your best French accent “no, I regret nothing”: Page 145.
When the Kids try you (and you know they will), remind them “this time all that glitters is gold!”: Page 256.
Page 179. Wards off Amnesia.
Page 92. Is good for what ails you late at night.
There is a balm for you here: Page 199.
When you forget (again): Page 335.
Take the SNAP back from those who try to do us: Page 324.
Wondering whether this man or that one warrants you coming undone: Page 41.
When the workday is long. Take a minute to dance and play and connect: Page 83.

Read in various recombinant pairs. Over and over again in some New Math only we can reckon.
Notes


3. Ibid.

4. See Roderick Ferguson, Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique, p. 110.

5. See bell hooks, Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics.


7. Ibid., pp. 62.


12. Hemphill, Brother to Brother, p. liii


16. See “Uses of the Erotic,” in Audre Lorde’s *Sister Outsider*, “…not to settle for the convenient, the shoddy, the conventionally expected.”


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Acknowledgments

Mrs. Dorothy Beam cannot be overly praised for her willingness to ensure that this anthology would be successfully completed. She has provided an example of strength and faith that could wisely inform other parents of gay men and lesbians. Although the loss of her son could have been a debilitating grief, she deliberately worked to ensure that Joe’s words and vision would not be lost or forgotten.

The experience of working with Barbara Smith has been invaluable beyond praise. Barbara provided me with excellent information regarding the technical aspects of this book, including suggestions of material to research and authors to contact, the proper way to assemble a manuscript of this size and nature, and much positive encouragement. From questions of copyright to questions of copyediting, Barbara never failed to avail herself to answering my queries. I have received an invaluable education from a person I respect not only for her accomplishments with Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, but also for her insistence on integrity and excellence, and her insistence that there be a commitment of faith to one’s work and politics.

Though some men in the black community resented and questioned Barbara’s involvement in the project, I stood by my decision to maintain her input. The number of years of independent literary publishing experience she possesses was a priceless resource to draw from, a resource that is not presently equaled by any black gay man, with the exception of a few who are in the closet and would not have worked on a project such as this. I need not say that Joe respected Barbara’s work and loved her as a dear friend and comrade. Joe was a pro-feminist black gay man, and none of us should forget that in our haste to complain.

For Mrs. Beam, Barbara Smith, and truly for me, Brother to Brother is a labor of love as much as it is a tool for the continuing empowerment of black gay men. But there were others whose input and assistance must be acknowledged and
praised to clearly understand how this book was nurtured by a lot of love and support. *Brother to Brother* is a reality because of the faith and courage of its contributors. I thank all of them. I thank the following individuals and organizations in no particular order: Marlon Riggs, Michelle Parkerson, Wayson Jones, Dottie Green, Frank Broderick (*Au Courant*), Ed Hermance (*Giovanni’s Room*), Mike Hargust, Sun Beam, Rita Addessa (*Philadelphia Lesbian and Gay Task Force*), Jim Bennett (*Lambda Rising Bookstore*), Dr. C.A. Caceres, Jane Troxell and Rose Fennell (*Lambda Book Report*), Donald Woods, Charley Shively (*Gay Community News*), Sharon Farmer, Vernon Rosario, Derrick Thomas (*BLK*), Dr. Thomas Martin, Alan Bell (*BLK*), Isaac Julien, Audre Lorde, Jewelle Gomez, Damballah, Amy Schoulder, Gay Men of African Descent, Black Gay Men United, Unity Inc., Tede Matthews (*Modern Times Bookstore*), Colin Robinson, the Painted Bride Art Center, the Kitchen, Larry Duckette, the Philadelphia Public Library, Jacquie Jones (*Black Film Review*), Smart Place, BJP’s, Eric Gutierrez (*High Performance*), John Cunningham, Dr. J. Brooks Dendy, Sandra Calhoun, Tommi Avicolli (*Philadelphia Gay News*), James Charles Roberts, Arleen Olshan, Assoto Saint, my parents and family, and the many friends and supporters affirmed and inspired by the work of Joseph Beam.

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*Essex Hemphill*

*August 1990*

*Philadelphia*
Introduction

I. Mask maker, mask maker, make me a mask

If I had read a book like *In the Life* when I was fifteen or sixteen, there might have been one less mask for me to put aside later in life.

I approached the swirling vortex of my adolescent sexuality as a wide-eyed, scrawny teenager, intensely feeling the power of a budding sexual drive unchecked by any legitimate information at home or on the streets. I had nothing to guide me except the pointer of my early morning erection, but I was not inclined to run away from home to see where it would lead. I couldn’t shame my family with behavior unbecoming to an eldest son. I had the responsibility of setting an example for my younger siblings, though I would have preferred an older brother to carry out that task, or a father to be at home.

There would have been one less mask for me to create when long ago it became apparent that what I was or what I was becoming—in spite of myself—could be ridiculed, harassed, and even murdered with impunity. The male code of the streets where I grew up made this very clear: Sissies, punks, and faggots were not “cool” with the boys. Come out at your own risk was the prevailing code for boys like myself who knew we were different, but we didn’t dare challenge the prescribed norms regarding sexuality for fear of the consequences we would suffer.

I searched the card catalogue at the local library and discovered there were books about homosexuality in the “adult” section. I wasn’t allowed to check out books from that section because I was only in sixth grade, but I could read them in the library, which I did, avidly, stopping in almost every day after school for several hours, and continuing this practice until I had devoured everything. What was there for me to read in 1969 was in no way affirming of the sexual identity germinating within me. The material regarding homosexuality
considered it to be an illness or an affliction, and at worst, a sin against God and nature. I knew what masturbation was before I learned to masturbate. The books were very informative about the practice, but not very instructional. The books made no references to black men that I can recall, nor were there black case studies for me to examine, and in the few pictures of men identified as homosexual, not one was black.

Nothing in those books said that men could truly love one another. Nothing said that masturbation would be comforting. Nothing celebrated the genius and creativity of homosexual men or even suggested that such men could lead ordinary lives. Nothing encouraged me to love black men—I learned to do that on my own.

When I finished my month-long reading marathon, I put away the last book knowing only that I had homosexual tendencies and desires, but beyond that awareness I didn’t recognize myself in any of the material I had so exhaustively read. If anything, I could have ignorantly concluded that homosexuality was peculiar to white people, and my conclusion would have been supported by the deliberate lack of evidence concerning black men and homosexual desire.

There would have been one less mask to tolerate had I not invested time trying to disinherit myself from the sweet knowledge about myself. I tried to separate my sexuality from my Negritude only to discover, in my particular instance, that they are inextricably woven together. If I was clear about no other identity, I knew, year by year, that I was becoming a “homo.” A black homo. My outward denial consisted of heterosexual dating which served to lower suspicions about my soft-spoken nature. But the girls I dated will tell you I was barely interested in overcoming our mutual virginity.

Had there been the option of reading In the Life when I was a pubescent homosexual, I might have found time to dream of becoming a damn good carpenter, a piano player, a gardener, or a brain surgeon, but instead, a part of my life has been spent making strong, durable masks, and another part has been spent...
removing them, destroying them whenever possible.

Had *In the Life* been there when I was sneaking around the library looking for my reflection, I would have discovered the affirmations lacking for me in the otherwise strong black novels I was also reading. The modern Negro texts of protest and the black writings of the 1960s never acknowledge homosexuals except as negative, tragic, or comedic characters.

Surely it is one kind of pain that a man reckons with when he feels and he knows he is not welcome, wanted, or appreciated in his homeland. But the pain I believe to be most tragic and critical is not the pain of invisibility he endures in his own home, among family and friends. This occurs when he cannot honestly occupy the spaces of family and friendship because he has adopted—out of insecurity, defense, and fear—the mask of the invisible man.

Had there been *In the Life* when I began to have erotic dreams about boys in school, had it been there when I began to steal glances at boys in the showers, I might have spared the girls I pretended to love the difficulty of trying to understand a guy who was merely fence-sitting, waiting for the wind to blow him north or south. I might have spared myself the humiliations of pretense and denial. I might have had the courage to stand up for myself when confronted as a faggot.

I was such a good mask maker. The last one I am now removing was perhaps my most deceptive, my most prized of all. Once it is off my face, I imagine nailing it to the wall like the head of some game, tracked and killed for the sport of it. But this isn’t sport. This is my life—not game. Had there been *In the Life* when I needed a father, a brother, a lover, a friend; had it been there when I needed to say no instead of yes and yes when I knew no was cowardly; had it been there to affirm my compounded identity when I was reading Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* or Richard Wright’s *Native Son*, then perhaps a more whole picture of the black male might have formed in my consciousness. *In the Life* might have mitigated and nurtured my germinating sexual identity, or at the very least I would not
have spent part of my life becoming an expert but useless mask maker.

II. Does your mama know about me? Does she know just what I am?

Throughout the 1980s, many of us grieved the loss of friends, lovers, and relatives who were one moment strong, healthy, and able-bodied, but then in an instant became thin-framed, emaciated, hacking and wheezing, their bodies wracked with horrible pain. Sometimes brave souls would return to the family roost to disclose their sexuality and ask permission to die in familiar surroundings. Too often, families were discovering for the first time that the dear brother, the favorite uncle, the secretive son was a homosexual, a black gay man, and the unfortunate victim of the killer virus, AIDS. Some parents had always known and some had never suspected that their son was a black gay man, a sissy, a queer, a faggot. For some families this shocking discovery and grief expressed itself as shame and anger; it compelled them to disown their flesh and blood, denying dying men the love and support that friends often provided as extended family. In other instances families were very understanding and bravely stood by their brethren through their final days.

Joseph Beam, in his powerful essay, “Brother to Brother: Words from the Heart,” defined home as being larger, more complex and encompassing than one’s living room:

When I speak of home, I mean not only the familial constellation from which I grew, but the entire Black community: the Black press, the Black church, Black academicians, the Black literati, and the Black left. Where is my reflection? I am most often rendered invisible, perceived as a threat to the family, or I am tolerated if I am silent and inconspicuous. I cannot go home as who I am and that hurts me deeply.¹
Beam articulated one of the primary issues black gay men are faced with when our relationships with our families and communities are examined. We cannot afford to be disconnected from these institutions, yet it would seem that we are willing to create and accept dysfunctional roles in them, roles of caricature, silence, and illusion. In truth, we are often forced into these roles to survive. This critical dilemma causes some of us to engage in dishonest relationships with our kin. It can foster apathy between us and the communities of home that we need and that need our presence. The contradictions of “home” are amplified and become more complex when black gay men’s relationships with the white gay community are also examined.

The post-Stonewall white gay community of the 1980s was not seriously concerned with the existence of black gay men except as sexual objects. In media and art the black male was given little representation except as a big, black dick. This aspect of the white gay sensibility is strikingly revealed in the photographs of black males by the late Robert Mapplethorpe. Though his images may be technically and esthetically well composed, his work artistically perpetuates racial stereotypes constructed around sexuality and desire. In many of his images, black males are only shown as parts of the anatomy—genitals, chests, buttocks—close-up and close-cropped to elicit desire. Mapplethorpe’s eye pays special attention to the penis at the expense of showing us the subject’s face, and thus, a whole person. The penis becomes the identity of the black male which is the classic racist stereotype re-created and presented as “art” in the context of a gay vision.

Mapplethorpe’s “Man in a Polyester Suit,” for example, presents a black man without a head, wearing a business suit, his trousers unzipped, and his fat, long penis dangling down, a penis that is not erect. It can be assumed that many viewers who appreciate Mapplethorpe’s work, and who construct sexual fantasies from it, probably wondered first how much larger the penis would become during erection, as opposed to
wondering who the man in the photo is or why his head is missing. What is insulting and endangering to black men is Mapplethorpe’s conscious determination that the faces, the heads, and by extension, the minds and experiences of some of his black subjects are not as important as close-up shots of their cocks.

It is virtually impossible while viewing Mapplethorpe’s photos of black males to avoid confronting issues of objectification. Additionally, black gay men are not immune to the desire elicited by his photos. We, too, are drawn to the inherent eroticism. In “True Confessions: A Discourse on Images of Black Male Sexuality,” Isaac Julien and Kobena Mercer accurately identify this dichotomy when they observe that Mapplethorpe’s images of black males reiterate “the terms of colonial fantasy” and “service the expectations of white desire.” They then ask the most critical question of all: “What do [Mapplethorpe’s images] say to our wants and desires as black gay men?”

It has not fully dawned on white gay men that racist conditioning has rendered many of them no different from their heterosexual brothers in the eyes of black gays and lesbians. Coming out of the closet to confront sexual oppression has not necessarily given white males the motivation or insight to transcend their racist conditioning. This failure (or reluctance) is costing the gay and lesbian community the opportunity to become a powerful force for creating real social changes that reach beyond issues of sexuality. It has fostered much of the distrust that permeates relations between black and white communities. And finally, it erodes the possibility of forming meaningful, powerful coalitions.

When black gay men approached the gay community to participate in the struggle for acceptance and to forge bonds of brotherhood, bonds so loftily proclaimed as the vision of the best gay minds of my generation, we discovered that the beautiful rhetoric was empty. The disparity between words and
actions was as wide as the Atlantic Ocean and deeper than Dante’s hell. There was no gay community for black men to come home to in the 1980s. The community we found was as mythical and distant from the realities of black men as was Oz from Kansas.

At the baths, at certain bars, in bookstores and cruising zones, black men were welcome because these constructions of pleasure allowed the races to mutually explore sexual fantasies and, after all, the black man engaging in such a construction only needed to whip out a penis of almost any size to obtain the rapt attention withheld from him in other social and political structures of the gay community. These sites of pleasure were more tolerant of black men because they enhanced the sexual ambiance, but that same tolerance did not always continue once the sun began to rise.

Open fraternizing at a level suggesting companionship or love between the races was not tolerated in the light of day. Terms such as “dinge queen,” for white men who prefer black men, and “snow queen,” for black men who prefer white men, were created by a gay community that obviously could not be trusted to believe its own rhetoric concerning brotherhood, fellowship, and dignity. Only an entire community’s silence is capable of reinforcing these conditions.

Some of the best minds of my generation would have us believe that AIDS has brought the gay and lesbian community closer and infused it with a more democratic mandate. That is only a partial truth that further underscores the fact that the gay community still operates from a one-eyed, one-gender, one-color perception of “community” that is most likely to recognize blond before black, but seldom the two together.

Some of the best minds of my generation believe AIDS has made the gay community a more responsible social construction, but what AIDS really manages to do is clearly point out how significant are the cultural and economic differences between us; differences so extreme that black men suffer a disproportionate number of AIDS deaths in
communities with very sophisticated gay health care services.

The best gay minds of my generation believe that we speak as one voice and dream one dream, but we are not monolithic. We are not even respectful of each other’s differences. We are a long way from that, Dorothy. I tell you Kansas is closer.

We are communities engaged in a fragile coexistence if we are anything at all. Our most significant coalitions have been created in the realm of sex. What is most clear for black gay men is this: We have to do for ourselves now, and for each other now, what no one has ever done for us. We have to be there for one another and trust less the adhesions of kisses and semen to bind us. Our only sure guarantee of survival is that which we create from our own self-determination. White gay men may only be able to understand and respond to oppression as it relates to their ability to obtain orgasm without intrusion from the church and state. White gay men are only “other” in this society when they choose to come out of the closet. But all black men are treated as “other” regardless of whether we sleep with men or women—our black skin automatically marks us as “other.”

Look around, brothers. There is rampant killing in our communities. Drug addiction and drug trafficking overwhelm us. The blood of young black men runs curbside in a steady flow. The bodies of black infants crave crack, not the warmth of a mother’s love. The nation’s prisons are reservations and shelters for black men. An entire generation of black youths is being destroyed before our eyes. We cannot witness this in silence and apathy and claim our hands are bloodless. We are a wandering tribe that needs to go home before home is gone. We should not continue standing in line to be admitted into spaces that don’t want us there. We cannot continue to exist without clinics, political organizations, human services, and cultural institutions that we create to support, sustain, and affirm us.

Our mothers and fathers are waiting for us. Our sisters and brothers are waiting. Our communities are waiting for us to
come home. They need our love, our talents and skills, and we need theirs. They may not understand everything about us, but they will remain ignorant, misinformed, and lonely for us, and we for them, for as long as we stay away hiding in communities that have never really welcomed us or the gifts we bring.

I ask you brother: Does your mama really know about you? Does she really know what I am? Does she know I want to love her son, care for him, nurture and celebrate him? Do you think she’ll understand? I hope so, because I am coming home. There is no place else to go that will be worth so much effort and love.

III. The evidence of being

At the beginning of the 1980s, creating poetry from a black gay experience was a lonely, trying occupation. No network of black gay writers existed to offer support, critical commentary, or the necessary fellowship and affirmation.

I had read requisite portions of James Baldwin’s works, but I still hungered for voices closer to home to speak to me directly and immediately about the contemporary black gay experience. I wanted reflection. To compensate, I read all I could by gay poets such as C.S. Cavafy, Walt Whitman, Paolo Pasolini, and Jean Genet, but my hunger for self-recognition continued. I began reading lesbian poets such as Audre Lorde, Adrienne Rich, Pat Parker, and Sappho, but my hunger, only somewhat appeased, persisted.

As I approached the mid-1980s, I began to wonder if gay men of African descent existed in literature at all, beyond the works of Baldwin and Bruce Nugent, or the closeted works of writers of the Harlem Renaissance, such as Countee Cullen, Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, Alain Locke, and Wallace Thurman. Baldwin’s voice was post-Harlem Renaissance: eloquent, crafted, impassioned; he created some of the most significant works to be presented by an “acknowledged” black gay man in this century. It is not my intention to overlook his broader significance in the context of African American and
world literature, where works of his are ranked among the very best this century of writers has created. However, in the specific context of black gay literature, Baldwin’s special legacy serves as role model, as source, as inspiration pointing toward the possibility of being and excellence. The legacy he leaves us to draw from is a precious gift for us to hold tight as we persevere.

My search for evidence of things not seen, evidence of black gay experiences on record, evidence of “being” to contradict the pervasive invisibility of black gay men, at times proved futile. I was often frustrated by codes of secrecy, obstructed by pretenses of discretion, or led astray by constructions of silence, constructions fabricated of illusions and perhaps cowardice. But I persevered. I continued to seek affirmation, reflection, and identity. I continued seeking the necessary historical references for my desires.

In terms of my heritage of Negritude, I found an abundance of literary texts to reinforce a positive black cultural identity, but as a black gay man there was, except for Baldwin, little to nurture me. Unbeknownst to me, Adrian Stanford’s *Black and Queer* had been published by the Good Gay Poets of Boston in 1977. I would not be introduced to Stanford’s work until 1985. Joseph Beam owned two copies of Stanford’s *Black and Queer* and gave me one for my collection. I have treasured this gift since receiving it from Joe, who also told me Stanford was murdered in Philadelphia in 1981. In the poem “Yeah Baby,” the late poet tells us:

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i’ve had them roll up in
chauffeured limousines,
sing open the door and beg
“please get in.”

i’ve been approached, followed,
waited for, hung onto
and groped by all those staid
```
white queens that
don’t like colored boys.⁴

For me, the evidence of black gay men creating overt homoerotic poetry begins with that small, powerful book. What I am suggesting is that black gay men have been publishing overt homoerotic verses since 1977, a mere thirteen years as of this writing.

For the homosexuals of the Harlem Renaissance engaged in the creation of literature, it would have been inappropriate to “come out” of whatever closets they had constructed for personal survival. The effort to uplift the race and prove the Negro worthy of respect precluded issues of sexuality, reducing such concerns to the sentiment of the popular urban blues song—“Ain’t Nobody’s Business If I Do.” The defeat of racism was far too important to risk compromising such a struggle by raising issues of homosexuality.

For an individual to have declared himself homosexual, no matter how brilliant he was, would have brought immediate censure from what Zora Neale Hurston wickedly called the “Niggerati,”⁵ the up-and-coming literary, cultural, and intellectual leaders of the Negro community. However, the work of Locke, Cullen, Hughes, and other Harlem Renaissance men of bisexual or homosexual identities is not to be dismissed in the quest for an African American gay tradition simply because it fails to reveal their homosexual desires. The works that these men created are critically important contributions and challenging legacies in the total picture of African American literature and cultural struggle. But because the mission to uplift the race predominated, there is little homoerotic evidence from the Harlem Renaissance except for selections of work by Richard Bruce Nugent. His work was considerably more daring, judged by the standards of his day, than were those of his more closeted Renaissance contemporaries, none of whom dared risk publishing homoerotic literature for fear of falling from grace.
The evidence of Nugent’s daring is best exemplified by his beautiful short story, “Smoke, Lilies and Jade,” considered to be the first work by a black writer to examine homosexual desire. The story appeared in the short-lived and very controversial Fire!! (published November 1926), a journal created by Thurman, Nugent, Hurston, Hughes, and others of their circle. (Over five decades later, “Smoke, Lilies and Jade” appeared in the controversial gay anthology, Black Men/White Men (1983), and a little over six decades later it was part of the narrative script for the film Looking for Langston (1988).) Fire!! was intended to be a black arts quarterly, but only one issue appeared. “The sales of Fire!! were very disappointing,” writes Faith Berry, in the biography, Langston Hughes: Before and Beyond Harlem. Copies of the issues were stored in a cellar in Harlem, but “in an irony like no other, a fire reportedly destroyed them all, leaving the sponsors with a printer’s debt of more than a thousand dollars.”

Fire!! also contained writing by Hughes, Cullen, Hurston, and Arna Bontemps, and artwork by Aaron Douglas, to name but a few of its contributors. In Charles Michael Smith’s “Bruce Nugent: Bohemian of the Harlem Renaissance,” we are told that Fire!! “created a firestorm of protest, particularly from the black bourgeoisie. The critic for the Baltimore Afro-American, for example, wrote acidly: ‘I have just tossed the first issue of Fire!! into the fire!’”

Continuing this journey through African American literature, we find no evidence of black gay men openly participating in the 1960s Black Arts Movement with the exception of Baldwin, and even he was attacked because of his sexuality by Eldridge Cleaver in Soul on Ice, and by writer Ishmael Reed who crudely insulted Baldwin by calling him a “cocksucker,” in an apparent attempt to diminish Baldwin’s brilliance.

The evidence of black gay men that exists from this period is mostly created from the perspective of a black nationalist sensibility in that this literature most often condemns
homosexuality, ridicules gays, lesbians, dykes, faggots, bulldaggers, and homos, and positions homosexuality as a major threat to the black family and black masculinity. Such a sensibility also considered homosexuality to be caused by white racism (or by exposure to white values), and overlooked the possibility of natural variance in the expression of human sexuality.

Perhaps the only “black revolutionary” spokesperson remotely sympathetic to the struggles of homosexuals and women was Huey P. Newton, Supreme Commander of the Black Panther Party. In “A Letter from Huey to the Revolutionary Brothers and Sisters About the Women’s Liberation and Gay Liberation Movements,” Newton urged black men and women to align themselves with these movements in order to form powerful coalitions. He writes:

> Whatever your personal opinion and your insecurities about homosexuality and the various liberation movements among homosexuals and women (and I speak of the homosexuals and woman as oppressed groups), we should try to unite with them in a revolutionary fashion.

> …I don’t remember us ever constituting any value that said that a revolutionary must say offensive things toward homosexuals or that revolutionary would make sure that women do not speak out about their own particular oppression.

> …[T]here is nothing to say that a homosexual can not also be a revolutionary… Quite the contrary, maybe a homosexual could be the most revolutionary. We should be willing to discuss the insecurities that many people have about homosexuality. When I say, “insecurities” I mean the fear that there is some kind of threat to our manhood. I can understand this fear… [B]ut homosexuals are not enemies of the people.\(^\text{12}\)

Aside from Newton and Baldwin, there was no other black
male leadership, self-appointed or otherwise, attempting to see heterosexist oppression has being akin to and stemming from the same source responsible for perpetuating oppressions of race, gender, class, and economics.

Many factors have contributed to this lack of witness, this lack of participation by black gay men in creating literature that reflects our experiences. The long-standing constructions of fear, denial, invisibility, and racism perpetuated much of the silence that has prevailed.

Black gay men can consider the 1980s to have been a critically important decade for our literature. Literary journals, periodicals, and self-published works were sporadically produced and voraciously consumed. The 1980s gave us Blacklight, Habari-Daftari, Yemonja (which later became Blackheart), Black/Out, BLK, Moja: Black and Gay, BGM, the Pyramid Periodical, the Real Read, and a promising selection of self-published chapbooks and portfolios that, taken as a whole, suggests that an important period of fermentation and development in black gay literature has been occurring since the release of Stanford’s Black and Queer. In addition, two significant collections of black gay literature—the ground-breaking In the Life, edited by Joseph Beam and published by Alyson Publications (1986), and the poetry anthology Tongues Untied, published in London by Gay Men’s Press (1987)—served notice that a generation of black gay writers are at work dismantling the silence.

Against stifling odds and breaking rank from historic constructions of repression, black gay men are developing meaningful and significant literary voices through workshops and brotherly encouragement. The most obvious example of this nurturing is the Other Countries Collective based in New York City. Through a process of workshops, collective members critique one another’s writings. The workshops are designed to reinforce and stimulate, affirm and encourage. The collective published its first Other Countries Journal in 1988, and plans to publish others in the ’90s. They also present
public readings, some for audiences of primarily black heterosexuals.

By the close of the 1980s, BLK, a Los Angeles-based black gay news magazine, was consistently publishing, month after month, and was available nationally. This was accomplished under the leadership of its editor and publisher, Alan Bell. The New York-based literary journal the Pyramid Poetry Periodical, founded in 1986 by Roy Gonsalves as a triannual publication, had also achieved the distinction of consistently publishing in its present quarterly format as the Pyramid Periodical, and obtained national distribution under the guidance of editor Charles Pouncy. Self-published chapbooks and volumes of verse were produced by Donald Woods (The Space), Alan Miller (At the Club) Assoto Saint (Stations), Philip Robinson (Secret Passages), Roy Gonsalves (Evening Sunshine), and Lloyd “Vega” Jeffress (Men of Color). The phenomena of black gay men self-publishing, including my own self-published works, Earth Life and Conditions, surely challenges the insidious racism and homophobia that prevail in the offices of mainstream, small press, and university publishing houses. For what other reasons would so many black gay men take on the task? If there is to be evidence of our experiences, we learned by the close of the 1980s that our own self-sufficiency must ensure it, so that future generations of black gay men will have references for their desires.

And finally, perhaps our most compelling literary achievements were documented in two films as the decade came to its close. Isaac Julien’s controversial Looking for Langston, and Marlon Riggs’s documentary Tongues Untied, both splendidly utilized the poetry and writings of black gay men in bold presentations of the black gay experience.

Looking for Langston, which Julien created as a “meditation” on Hughes and the Harlem Renaissance, examines issues of race, sexuality, and the role of the Negro artist during that period. Julien created a beautifully stylized rendering of desire and its many implications. His use of texts
created by black gay men is complemented by the scores “Blues for Langston” and “Beautiful Black Man,” composed and performed by Blackberri, an Oakland-based black gay singer, songwriter and musician. “Beautiful Black Man,” a particularly soul-stirring, jazzy plea for black gay men to love themselves, is superbly performed by Blackberri. Additional music is provided by Wayson Jones, and texts by Hilton Als, Nugent, Hughes, Baldwin, and selections of my own work give the film its poetic voice and conscience.

The film was primarily shot in London, where British-born Julien is based and is a member of Sankofa, a black film and video collective. Unfortunately, the sensuous vision Julien unleashes in his forty-minute black-and-white work was not welcomed in America by the Hughes estate. They legally forced Julien to remove three of Hughes’s poems because they objected to Hughes being presented in a homosexual context. As a result of these legal obstructions, two film versions of Looking for Langston exist. The original, which can be shown all over the world except in the U.S., and the alternate edited version, created to appease the homophobic censors of the estate.

What is ironic about the estate’s efforts to block the film is that selections of Hughes’s poetry (including some used in the film) have appeared in two gay anthologies: Black Men/White Men and Gay and Lesbian Poetry in Our Time. If it was the estate’s intention to prevent Hughes from appearing in a homosexual context, why was permission given to print his work in these anthologies?

In the late fall of 1989, Riggs premiered Tongues Untied, a black gay documentary which takes its name from the black gay poetry anthology. The work is grounded in personal testimony from Riggs about his life as a black gay man. His experiences are validated and elaborated on through the poetry of Craig Harris, Donald Woods, Reginald Jackson, Steve Langley, Alan Miller, myself, and his own narrative writings. His examination of black gay life is the most
affirming document we have yet seen from the film and video community. Riggs, an Oakland-based, Emmy Award-winning documentarian, has created an historic work that captures black gay men in many states of “being.” Tongues Untied is a social and cultural work that brilliantly articulates itself through poetry and personal testimonies of black gay men.

The 1990s promise to be a decade of fruition and continuing significance for black gay literature. Novelists such as Randall Kenan (A Visitation of Spirits) and Melvin Dixon (Trouble the Water) released first works as we neared the close of the ’80s. Larry Duplechan released three novels in the eighties (Eight Days a Week, Blackbird, and Tangled in Blue). Award-winning science-fiction writer Samuel Delany’s autobiography The Motion of Light in Water, and writer Mickey C. Fleming’s About Courage, were also added to the ever-growing pantheon of black gay literature. Other writers are planning to produce self-published collections of verse, more novels are being written, theater collectives are being formed such as Reginald Jackson’s Rainbow Repertory Theater in New York City, and new films and documentaries are being planned and created as this anthology goes to press.

The late 1980s also witnessed the emergence of black gay men’s groups such as Gay Men of African Descent (New York), Adodi (Philadelphia), Unity (Philadelphia), and Black Gay Men United (Oakland). These organizations structure themselves around social, cultural, and political issues. In many instances they provide emotional and spiritual support for their members: workshops covering a broad range of issues; retreats and cultural programming; and lectures by guest speakers on subjects ranging from AIDS and health care to developing personal financial resources. The existence of these groups continues the necessary work of affirming us.

What we must do now, more than ever, is nurture one another whenever and wherever possible. Attend the readings of black gay writers, buy their works, invite them to college campuses and community centers to speak and conduct
workshops, and subscribe to black gay publications created in order that the necessary nurturing can continue.

Much of the evidence that emerged in the 1980s is only the surface of what is yet to be revealed. We must focus our attention around issues of craft and discipline in order to create our very best literature. We must demand this of ourselves. There is a need to look closely at revealing the full extent to which black gay men have always participated in positive and nurturing roles in the structures of family within the African American community. There is a need to look closely at intimacy and the constructions of our desire and bring forth from these realms the knowledge that we are capable of loving one another in committed, long-standing, productive relationships. In our fiction, prose, and poetry there is a need to reveal more of our beauty in all its diversity. We need more honest pictures of ourselves that are not the stereotypical six-foot, dark-skinned man with a big dick.

We must begin to identify what a black gay sensibility is; identify its esthetic qualities and components; identify specific constructions and uses of language suitable for the task of presenting our experiences in the context of literature; and then determine how this sensibility and esthetic relates to and differs from African American literature as a whole.

Ours should be a vision willing to exceed all that attempts to confine and intimidate us. We must be willing to embrace and explore the duality of community that we exist in as black and gay men. We would be wise to develop strong, powerful voices that can range over the entire landscape of human experience and condition.

Perhaps the second Renaissance in African American literature occurred when black women claimed their own voices from the post-sixties, male-dominated realm of the “black experience,” a realm that at times resembled a boxing ring restricting black women to the roles of mere spectators. What black women, especially out black lesbians, bravely did was break the silence surrounding their experiences. No longer
would black men, as the sole interpreters of race and culture, presume to speak for (or ignore) women’s experiences. Black women opened up new dialogues and explored uncharted territories surrounding race, sexuality, gender relations, family, history, and eroticism. In the process, they angered some black male writers who felt they were being culturally castrated and usurped, but out of necessity, black women realized they would have to speak for themselves—and do so honestly. As a result of their courage, black women also inspired many of the black gay men writing today to seek our own voices so we can tell our truths. Thus, we are at the beginning of completing a total picture of the African American experience. Black gay men will no longer exist in a realm of invisibility.

Our immediate task, as black gay men creating our own literary tradition, is to work diligently and to utilize honesty and discipline as our allies. If we commit ourselves to strive for excellence and nothing less, we will create the evidence of being powerful enough to transform the very nature of our existence. And the silence and invisibility that we self-imposed, or often accepted will give way to the realization of just how fierce and necessary we really are. SNAP!

IV. Loyalty—A prelude to coming home

For my so-called sins against nature and the race, I gain the burdensome knowledge of carnal secrets. It rivals rituals of sacrifice and worship, and conjures the same glassy-eyed results—with less bloodshed. A knowledge disquieting and liberating inhabits my soul. It often comforts me, or at times, is miserably intoxicating with requisite hangovers and regrets. At other moments it is sacred communion, causing me to moan and tremble and cuss as the Holy Ghost fucks me. It is a knowledge of fire and beauty that I will carry beyond the grave. When I sit in God’s final judgment, I will wager this knowledge against my entrance into the Holy Kingdom. There was no other way for me to know the beauty of Earth except through the sexual love of men, men who were often more
terrified than I, even as they posed before me, behind flimsy constructions of manhood, mocking me with muscles, erections, and wives.

I discovered any man can be seduced—even if the price is humiliation or death for the seducer. Late nights and desperate hours teach us to approach loneliness unarmed, or we risk provoking it to torture us with endless living sorrows we believe only the dead can endure.

But who are these dead, able to withstand the constant attack of merciless loneliness with its intense weapons, its clever trickery and deceit? Many of them are men like me, born of common stock, ordinary dreamers. Men who vaguely answer to “American,” or exhibit visible apprehension when American is defined and celebrated to their exclusion. Men who more often than not are simply ignored.

We constitute the invisible brothers in our communities, those of us who live “in the life”; the choirboys harboring secrets, the uncle living in an impeccable flat with a roommate who sleeps down the hall when family visits; men of power and humble peasantry, reduced to silence and invisibility for the safety they procure from these constructions. Men emasculated in the complicity of not speaking out, rendered mute by the middle-class aspirations of a people trying hard to forget the shame and cruelties of slavery and ghettos. Through denials and abbreviated histories riddled with omissions, the middle class sets about whitewashing and fixing up the race to impress each other and the racists who don’t give a damn.

I speak for thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands of men who live and die in the shadows of secrets, unable to speak of the love that helps them endure and contribute to the race. Their ordinary kisses, stolen or shared behind facades of heroic achievement, their kisses of sweet spit and loyalty are scrubbed away by the propaganda makers of the race, the “Talented Tenth” who would just as soon have us believe black people can fly, rather than reveal that black men have been longing to kiss one another, and have done so, for centuries.
The black homosexual is hard-pressed to gain audience among his heterosexual brothers; even if he is more talented, he is inhibited by his silence or his admissions. This is what the race had depended on in being able to erase homosexuality from our recorded history. The “chosen” history. But these sacred constructions of silence are futile exercises in denial. We will not go away with our issues of sexuality. We are coming home.

It is not enough to tell us that one was a brilliant poet, scientist, educator, or rebel. Who did he love? It makes a difference. 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.

V. When the silence is exhumed

Joseph Beam died in December of 1988, after beginning to compile material for this book. He would be pleased to know that his bravery is of the same quality that has helped his parents endure their grief. Dorothy and Sun Beam have supported the completion of Brother to Brother with an unyielding encouragement and bravery. Let history show that they kept Joe’s dream alive. Mrs. Beam’s tireless energy assisted in maintaining the communication with contributors that was so necessary as the responsibility for this book changed hands. Mr. Beam frequently went to the post office in Center City to pick up manuscripts. Mrs. Beam would photocopy each one, then mail it to me in Washington, D.C. When I finally realized I would need to finish this anthology in Philadelphia, at the source of its completion, Mr. and Mrs. Beam kindly allowed me to stay at their home where I worked without interruption, except for occasional plates of Mr. Beam’s delicious fried chicken, and conversations with Mrs. Beam about Joe, Brother to Brother, homosexuality, black life, and other topics of interest and concern to us both. Their participation in this project makes it a very special “family affair,” and significant in
the context of black gay men and our relationships to our families. *Brother to Brother* is evidence that we can love, accept, and support one another in our constructions of family. It's an effort that cannot be left out of the survival strategies of the African American community for to do so is to beckon cultural destruction. *Brother to Brother* would not be a reality if it were not for the active involvement of Joe’s parents, particularly the unyielding faith and love of Mrs. Beam.

In continuing the work on the anthology, I entered this project not sure of what I would find. Joe had not left notes to be followed. The work he had begun to receive bore no markings as to his intentions. Ultimately, I selected material from a pool of roughly 140 manuscripts. What is here represents a diverse mixture of personal opinions, testimony, and experiences.

Much of the beauty of the black gay community is in its diversity of expression and coping. Some of us vogue, some are butch, some give buppie, some give girl, some give fever; diva is an aspiration, darling is a friend; and there are the boys who will be boys and the men who will be men no matter how the pants fall. It would be impossible to say there is one type of black gay male for all seasons. We haven’t yet, nor do we need to, become clones.

*Brother to Brother* is a community of voices that would have been disjointed had I not formally sectioned this book into thematic groupings. I have not tried to assemble a politically correct book inasmuch as I know a book of this type is inherently political by merely being assembled and distributed as literature by black gay men. It is to Sasha Alyson’s credit to have continued his commitment to publish this project, but perhaps we will see a day when black gay men will bring forth anthologies and literature published and distributed by companies we have created and own.

There are areas that this anthology, in a formal fashion, does not speak to, such as narratives from older black gay men and black gay couples; spiritual concepts and beliefs; career
experiences; community and political activism; historical and biographical reconstructions; health care issues beyond AIDS; interracial relationships; our relationships with women; and numerous other subjects. The density of the silence surrounding our lives does not make it easy to gain this information. Future anthologies will hopefully structure themselves around specifically addressing these subjects and many others.

What Brother to Brother tells is a story that laughs and cries and sings and celebrates; it’s a quartet of saxophones blowing red-blue squalls; it’s a sextet of a capella voices searching out notes under a smoky light; it’s a conversation intimate friends share for hours. These are truly words mined syllable by syllable from the hearts of black gay men. You’re invited to listen in because you’re family, and these aren’t secrets—not to us, so why should they be secrets to you? Just listen. Your brother is speaking. Yes, that is your father / cousin / uncle / son sitting amongst us; he, too, has a story to tell. I have heard it before. It so gently begins—

“I loved my friend.”

Essex Hemphill
January 1990
Philadelphia

Notes


2. For additional consideration of my charge that Mapplethorpe’s images of black males are primarily images of objectification, his catalog, Black Males (Amsterdam: Galerie Jurka, 1980), contains the following images listed by page number: 9, 15, 18, 19, 37, 39, 45, 47, 48, and 49. The images cited all depict headless men presented as sexual objects. Further justification for my charges can also be found in Mapplethorpe’s The Black Book (New York: St. Martin’s, 1986). The “Man in a Polyester Suit” is specifically cited because
that image of a black male is one of his most well known. It might have been more appropriate to title it “Black Dick in a Polyester Suit,” since the emphasis is hardly on the suit or the man.


