Voices Carry

Other Countries gave shelter to the epidemic's black gay male writers

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In 1988, when Marlon Riggs began working on his landmark film, Tongues Untied, he followed a path that led to Essex Hemphill and Craig G. Harris, whose narrative poems had recently appeared in the thin British volume Black Gay Male. Riggs' Tongues Untied deftly depicts, among much else, Hemphill, Harris and other thriving New York City gay writers, visual artists and performers who composed the black gay expression group, Other Countries, then in its third year.

Black gay men have long congregated in self-defense, and Other Countries followed in this tradition. We came together to cope with racism, to find strength in self-reflection and comfort in one another's arms. But most important, Other Countries was spurred by our desire to give and get support as writers. For once, appreciation of our work would not be filtered through the obvious and superficial differences in race and sexual orientation. These filters provoke critics to ask questions more to satisfy their own curiosity about The Black Male than to nurture his talent—to the point where a fine story about gay love or AIDS is not taken seriously or is rejected for publication because it is "not black enough."

More than a few of Other Countries' founding members struggled with HIV. They did not get black-friendly services at gay organizations or gay-friendly services at black ones. But above all, they were angry and frustrated and frightened that now they were more certain than ever to die without finding an audience for their work.

Harris and Melvin Dixon, both PWAs, were two of the collective's most powerful fiction writers. Both men could preach! Dixon's short story, "The Boy with Beer," appeared in Other Countries' first fiction anthology, In the Life (1986); his potent piece "Red Leaves," the catalyst for his novel, Vanishing Rooms, is included in another anthology, Breaking the Ice, edited by Terry McMillan. The two writers raised issues that had rarely seen print. Vanishing Rooms deals with hushed-up older plagues, such as internalized homophobia, gay rape and homo-bashing, as well as separation from straight women. Harris' In the Life piece, "Cut Off From Among Their People," portrays one man's feelings of isolation in the crowd at his lover's funeral and the community's denial of the respect generally accorded a widower.

But as far as directly addressing the epidemic, both Dixon and Harris mainly chose poetry as their medium. Each spoke of the pain of living with AIDS in poems that appeared in Brother to Brother

(1991). Dixon’s “Aunt Ida Pieces a Quilt” describes not only the devastation a son’s death brings to his older survivors but also the groundwork it lays for another family linked by circumstance, shared orientation and love. Harris’ haunting “Hope Against Hope” recalls the people he loved and shows brothers loving brothers in a beautiful plaintive style of short lines and halting phrases.

By the time Other Countries’ second anthology, Sojourner: Black Gay Voices in the Age of AIDS, appeared in 1993, both men had passed on, leaving legacies of nonfiction recording the horror of the disease and its effect on them and their loved ones. “I’ll Be Somewhere Listening for my Name”—the 1992 address Dixon gave at OutWrite, a conference of gay and lesbian writers, that was later printed in Sojourner—is a lament about the fear of the unknown shared by the living and the dying. Also in Sojourner was Harris’ homage to the poet, activist and cancer survivor Audre Lorde, “I’m Going Out Like a Fucking Meteor,” in which he describes the embarrassment of bodily malfunctions and the joy of completing a simple task when it can no longer be taken for granted.

Why did so few Other Countries writers turn to fiction to bear witness to their experience of the epidemic? Perhaps the suffering and dying of these two decades have been all too real to fictionalize, too close for creative distance. Or perhaps black gay males preach to name our demons—thereby requiring the type of directness and honesty that is impossible to convey in fiction—in order to chase them away.

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