



Memory Language and Lessons

Craig Washington reflects on honoring the stories of long-term survivors.

June 22, 2026 By Craig Washington

I hardly ever hear the word “AIDS” any more, except for in that ever puzzling “full-blown AIDS” (AIDS needs no inflation). We have for the most part retired the term, not only because we have made the condition it names more livable. Those four letters evoked more than an immunity deficiency syndrome. It was the scarlet letter code for contagion, disfiguring sickness, stigma and ultimately death. Despite our radical transformation of the epidemic, the indicting blood stains could never be scrubbed out of those four letters. As Streisand famously warbled “what’s too painful to remember, we simply choose to forget.”

As a nation, we live with undiagnosed PTSD from the wounds our history has inflicted. Our trauma responses to that history are drenched in emotion, body sensation, thought and language. We avoid touching the painful parts, we sanitize the parts that are soaked in shame and omit the parts that don’t fit the story we tell ourselves about what we are. White people rewrite then believe it to see themselves as benevolent saviors. Black people disavow homosexuality as a European practice nowhere to be found throughout pre-colonial Africa. History is constantly revised to valorize hetero white men and footnote Black people, women, trans and all other queer folk. One of the ways the state can further subjugate then eliminate the undesirables is to expel them from the books, films, museums, libraries and schools as they are doing now. What losses do we incur when we allow history to fade or be rewritten along with the language that stored it?

Those who lived through a relentless plague hold complicated gratitude for today’s undetectable viral loads, quarterly injections and primetime HIV med ads with Black and Latino gay men, trans and cis women living their best lives. This hard-won summit shows few visible remnants of the ravages and scant memory of the resistance that got us here. We misread the lack of HIV urgency expressed by younger gay men as apathetic ignorance because they do not appear consumed as we were in our 20s and 30s. Author Eric Rofes boldly asserted in the ’90s that gay men deserve to not remain enveloped in an AIDS crisis centered identity. What did so many agitate, educate, and die for, if not that our progeny would be spared the fate and fears we suffered?

Thirty years ago, I was a member of Second Sunday, a revered gay men’s group in Atlanta. Today I belong to Renaissance ATL, a group that creates special in-person experiences for older Black gay men. Renaissance ATL recently honored Second Sunday founder Dr. Maurice Franklin and original members Leevahn Smith, Madu Ifoma, Dr. Lance T McCready and Dr. Jafari S. Allen at an event called Black Gay Legacy.

As the honorees spoke onstage of the group's origins, I recalled a series of three consecutive monthly meetings held thirty years ago. As a co-chair, I would occasionally open our discussions. At the first meeting, I announced that a member named Ron was very sick and encouraged those that knew him to check on him. The following month, I announced that Ron had died and added that another member was in the hospital, once again urging support for an ailing brother. By the third meeting I had gone to the second member's funeral. I reported that the eulogy casted him as heterosexual and assigned him a more palatable cause of death.

I then noted how many of us would recognize "spots, irregularities, telltale signs"¹ on a friend and pretend not to notice. Our silence was a norm that would not protect us as Audre Lorde cautioned. It was killing us. After I was done, three approached me and disclosed, one after the other. One checked over their shoulder before saying "Thanks Craig. I wanted to tell you, you know, me too."

This was the climate in which Second Sunday flourished in the late 90s as a site where upwards of 150 Black gay men convened month after month to show ourselves that we were responsible for one another. When Dr. Franklin said he started Second Sunday "to save our lives," he was not referring to AIDS as our sole mortal threat. This was no HIV prevention program whose priorities were tethered to funding dollars. We had far more flexibility to address a broad range of our needs.

The honor we give our stories may protect them from evaporating along with the language and customs we shed. Younger generations do not have to suffer our death nor bear our grief to gain wisdom from history's lessons. I am a typical storytelling HIV long-term survivor, and I credit my survival to that purpose. They used to call me Sophia. "Picture it, 1994 Atlanta, Operation Survive."² I live to tell.

1 = Taken from the poem "It Begins" by Adodi Muse—A Gay Negro Ensemble

2 = Operation Survive was a weekend long peer-led HIV education/empowerment program in Atlanta. It was produced by AIDS Survival Project.