The Uncoolness of Grief: An interview with Tiona McClodden about Essex Hemphill, legacy and art

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I was counting T-Cells in the shores of cyberspace and feeling some despair…I have miscegnated and mutated, tolerated and assimilated and yet I remain the same in the eyes of those who would fear and despise me. I stand at the threshold of cyberspace and wonder, is it possible that I am unwelcome here, too? Will I be allowed to construct a virtual reality that empowers me? Can invisible men see their own reflections? Im carrying traumas into cyberspace…

The words of Essex Hemphill (1957–1995) greet visitors to artist and filmmaker Tiona McClodden's online project, "Af.fixing Ceremony: Four Movements for Essex." Written in McClodden's own hand, Hemphill's quote from the 1995, "Black Nations Queer Nations?" conference provided her with what she calls the "permission" from him she needed to take on the ICA Philadelphia Day With(out) Art commissioned project, with Hemphill's digital remains acting as her guide, leading her to real-life encounters with his friends, collaborators, and those he has inspired.

After touching Hemphill's quote, the viewer is met with a red positive sign. Like the quote and all hand written text on the site, it is from McClodden's hand. To begin you must click on "Movement I" where a video portrait of Hemphill using footage from Marlon Riggs' "Tongues Untied" is launched. As McClodden explains, the film is a first point of contact with Hemphill for many. She wants people to enter with a sense of familiarity, with the rest of the four movements working to both intensify and trouble that feeling.

Ritualistic in nature, the four movements of "Af.fixing" are dictated in code by McClodden. There is no jumping ahead, but within some movements there is freedom. Movement II is a collection of 22 written excerpts of Hemphill's work. Viewers are free to roam in this domain, accumulating his words in a sequence of one's own design. This push and pull for control between the artist and the viewer mirrors tensions McClodden feels around the accessibility and politics of the archive and online spaces.

Movement III is a return to video, featuring original audio from 1982 gifted for use exclusively for this project by Grace Cavalieri who can be heard in the fourth movement, highlighting the interconnection between the movements. The video, entitled "The Coolness of Grief" (which

comes from a line in the audio that actually is “The Coolness of Greed” but McClodden kept as is because it echoed an experience of working on the project) is a portrait of Philadelphia-based performer and writer Marcus Borton. The third movement echoes the first movement as they are both video portraits of black gay artists, and then continues from there, with Borton responding through his life in the present to the questions that Hemphill asked in 1995. What is it to be black and queer on the internet is not a question that has gone away.

A black and white photo of Hemphill by Sharon Farmer from 1982 accompanies the deeply personal audio clips of Movement IV. It is here a network of relationships weave through space and time creating a rich and powerful net-force that was and is Hemphill. Icons, friends and collaborators share their recollections in a mix of recent interviews with McClodden and seldom heard archival audio including tape of Dorothy Beam’s 1995 eulogy of Essex.

If you feel knocked out by the end of the four movements, that was by design. In her search for the “realest of the real” in sharing who Hemphill was and what he means now, McClodden was blown away and changed. It is through Hemphill that McClodden has found herself reconciling ideas she has around the legacy of black queer experiences of art, death and survival. It was this experience that lead her, via Hemphill’s publications, to the title of her project. In the second edition of Hemphill’s “Ceremonies”, Dr. Charles Nero works with black feminist literary critic Barbara Christian’s notion that Toni Morrison’s “Beloved” is a fixing ceremony for African Americans to heal from the “psychic wounds” of slavery, so for him, “Ceremonies” is a fixing ceremony for the queer beloved within the AIDS crisis. Not only did this ring true for McClodden, she also wanted to highlight and participate in the conversation between black female and black male thinkers about relevant and urgent creative work.

In the conversation below, McClodden speaks with writer and organizer Theodore (Ted) Kerr about the project, starting first by saying more by what she means by “permission” and then moving to discuss her relationship with the internet, grieving for Hemphill through out the project, the importance of oral history for black people and the role that art and AIDS can play for black artists.

Tiona McClodden: When I do work about people that have passed, I have to figure out how to find permission, something which exists that allows me to begin on their behalf. When I came across the quote that I use on the first page I knew I had found it. I could see that he had already thought about the question, how am I going to be my whole self online? From there it operates on two levels: his voice; and creating a response through his voice. My hand in it is clear, but I had to make sure that what I was doing was in line with some of his thoughts and what already existed.

Ted Kerr: It feels like a collaboration.

TC: It is a conceptual form of Essex and me working together in a powerful way. Spiritual perhaps. That is what happens sometimes when you talk to someone’s people, walk where they walked, learn their intention, get a feel for how they moved and listen for what they heard. Plus the timing was crucial.

TK: How did you first come across Essex?

TC: I read the credits of films if I am taken by something, so around 2003 when I saw “Tongues Untied” by Marlon Riggs I paid attention. And let me just say Marlon is one of my greatest influences I have if we are talking Black queer art legacies. He is there right along side Michelle Parkerson who played a huge part in this project and was featured in my first film. She worked with Essex collaboratively and because of that when she made phone calls to help me, people listened.

But back to “Tongues Untied." For me, nothing has been made that matches it. It is still so fresh. I was blown away by the arrangement of vocalization, the poetry and I am not exactly the biggest fan of spoken word. But there was something so fine about it in the film. It harkens back to the black oral tradition. And then when I looked at the credits and saw this name, Essex Hemphill, I knew I had to look him up. The more I read, the more I realized that it wasn’t just him in the film. That was his shit! He is largely responsible for what I was responding to in the film.

TK: It went from being about the collective to zoning in on one individual who you knew was a force.

TC: Exactly. Documentary is my first form of work. I know how you can get people to come in and interpret work. But this was different. This showed me how much of an interdisciplinary artist Riggs is. He puts people together for pointed artistic execution. These people were artists who have their own practice and in that Essex stood out for me. He has this look. He is very handsome. He had a comfortability, like watching the film I was thinking, how are you even delivering stuff looking so comfortable? And he knew it.

But if I think about his writing, I think I maybe put hands or saw a copy of the second edition of Ceremonies not until 2004. He is rare in terms of accessibility, in that he has taken on this elusive quality.



Movement I Video still, Tiona McClodden, courtesy of the artist

TK: Can we talk about that? Something I like about your work is how it remedies the inaccessibility of Essex while not diminishing that mysticalness. That is really important and has a lot to do with who he was, but also the questions around community, legacy and permission that you bring. Like, how do you find your ancestors when they are hard to find?

TC: Right, or how do you find ancestors when you don't know their names? How do you find images of your ancestors when a name is all you have? Or they are frozen in time, and all you want is to flesh out who they were. Essex exists as an iconic black aesthetic figure, a man within this film. That is why I start with him like that in movement one, so people can relate. Maybe you have read him, referenced him, seen him and then through the 4 movements I want you to re-evaluate your connections. You know who he is, but do you? Do you know his work?

TK: Was it these questions that prompted you to take on the project?

TC: I almost turned this project down. The ICA asked me if I could make a World AIDS day project online. My initial response: I don't do online work. But I had to check myself. Online is a contentious space when you are thinking of intellectual property. It can go crazy and that stuff matters to me. But in the end I had to think about all the ways art gets created and I had to tap into that part of myself that is always asking the question around how to reach people in a way without them having to cross the threshold of a theater, a gallery or a museum.

TK: Or the academy.

TC: Mostly the academy but let's stay out of that! In working on this project it became my mission to obstruct myself. And what that meant was to stay out of formal ideas of the archive. I have a

tough relationship with how we understand archives and how they operate. I respect the idea of the archives, but there is something wrong with how we are doing it that can facilitate the erasure of complex biographical narratives.

And the Essex archive, well first, he doesn't have a formal archive. Wayson has facilitated a Wayson Jones/Essex Hemphill archive based on their collaborative works that is at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. But even then, my challenge was, I am not even going there. I am going to see his people. I want to see what they have to share, what they cared to keep. We have to redefine the archive and our practice in approaching folks with fractured archives.

TK: Right, like get away from the idea that an archive is a library. So like you did, we have to sit with people and build trust, and then, maybe then, they will share that precious photo they have of an old friend in their drawer that they think about all the time but cant bare to look at. And we have to talk together about what that photo means and if it can and should be shared. You know?

TC: And even in that, we have to be mindful of things that are a threat to those objects. Based on conversations I have had, I know that Essex's family had access to things and those items did not get gifted to the places they were supposed to go when he passed. When it comes to black queer archives, we have a better chance of our friends holding our shit than the people who we think should inherit our legacy.

TK: What does it mean to you?

TC: In thinking about how we collect the truest rendering of who a person was, we have to get out of our comfort zones. It does not exactly feel good to cold call someone and ask them about their closest friend from 20 years ago, who died. I had to look face to face with these people, show my intent. So there is all that. And then there is the question of how the web fits into all of this. We have to reimagine what we mean by accessibility and representation, and even source materials. We have to let go of formal ideas, and even the law, because to be honest, I am doing elements of illegal shit here to get things done. And that is the funny thing, these things are accessible! This shit is on google, everything I have is from the internet and deep searches.

But the internet is not enough. We have to talk to people. Oral history is everything for the black queer and survival. Once we stop talking, we don't exist.

TK: Wow. Yes. Thinking of this new project I see so many parallels between you talking with Essex, and the conversation between Vee and Jimmy in your film Bumming Cigarettes.

TC: Something about me has always worked well with older black gay men. Jimmy represents like 20 black queer men I know and in that I tried to tell a story I knew to be true. One thing we know is that so many black women took care of black men in the early days of the AIDS crisis, and still do. But no one is telling that story. And when I say cared for, I mean they moved these men into their homes, or they moved into their homes and made a commitment to be with those men until their last breath. This engagement has always fascinated me. And at the same time, when it comes to

HIV / AIDS, I am erased. Black women are at great risk for HIV and yet as a Black queer woman I am cut out of the conversation. I wanted to put all this into the film. So you have a black queer woman who is erased alongside a black man who is often being held up as the risk factor. There is some parallel shit going on and that is why I thought there needed to be some holding of hands, which is what the film revolves around. I am invested in an intergenerational dialogue; I am completely committed spiritually in it as a practice. But I need to say this, it is not about me being into "old." People think about time as in looking forward and backwards, but not me. I think we have to think about it as looking side to side. The past and the present are working in tandem.

TK: Agreed. That is why I am big on this idea that time is not a line and I think as you know from your project, the internet helps facilitate a fluid notion of time. Do you think the web can be a spiritual tool?

TC: I think it can, but the word spirituality freaks people out. I want folks to feel an experience, a vulnerability around having an epiphany because I think epiphanies are spiritual happenings, they will cause you to change your path and act right, see something different forever. If you choose not to see things different then you are you lying to yourself, every day. So I am interested in facilitating epiphanies and the Internet can be a safe space where you can go and read or see something without the gaze of another. I know the web can create isolation, but it can also facilitate an engagement that transcends that limitation. I am thinking about all the bodies that the non-digital world does not make space for.

One of the first things I found when looking for Essex was an archived email thread from 1995, of all these black gay and queer folks sharing info about his passing. I saw how we process grief in an online thread. Looking at it now, it is clear that it was not just an email chain, it was church. You can see the time stamps, but you can also see people constructing and sharing poems in their grief. These people created a safe space when no one knew what was going on that allowed them to process and begin to mourn. And I have to be honest, I needed to see that for when I had to do my own grieving for Essex.

TK: When did it hit you?

TC: In the middle of the project. I didn't know if I was going to be able to finish it. I got overwhelmed. I had done all my interviews, I had sat with the people, and I was present. Then I had to go through hours of recording, listening to folks who were processing information and articulating certain kinds of pain for the first time. Because no one had asked them these question before. No one said, okay, so tell me what was it like to lose your friend to AIDS? I asked, and I listened to those answers over and over again. I found myself in a cloud of grief. When it comes to the project, to this day I can't even listen to what Dorothy Beam had to say. She represents everything they say we can't have, and yet there she is. She is a black heterosexual mother of a gay son who loves him so much that she went through his papers found out who Essex was and asked him to come finish her son's work. When she eulogized him she asks God to open heaven for Essex who she loved as her son. That shit wrecked me. It was grief.

As close as I get, I know I will never experience what folks dealt with in the '80s and '90s; three-

quarters of the people I had on a list to speak with about Essex were dead. When this hit me I didn't touch the computer for days. It's not like I knew these folks, but I felt the weight of it all. I mean, I was born in 1981. Every year of my life since I was able to know what was going has been associated with the "anniversary" of HIV/AIDS. It has made me more aware of my own mortality coming into the world at the same time that a lot of people were being taken the fuck out.

TK: Right, I get that. I was born in 1979, but that is only one version of the story. People were dying of HIV long before 1981. The first confirmed HIV related death was in 1969, a black teenager in St. Louis by the name of Robert Rayford, a fact confirmed in 1987 when saved tissue from Robert was tested.

TC: Exactly, and that is something deep, how people can shape time. The earliest I knew of someone dying was 1979. I didn't know about this young man.

TK: Robert grew up in a house 8 miles from where Michael Brown was murdered.

TC: Wow, that is something else. If this is something that has been known for a while then we also have to ask the questions around what can artists do to challenge and change how we think about HIV? We have to examine it from our internal perspective. As this 1981 kid I have long been annoyed at the story told to me about AIDS by the government who want to tell me—

TK: Sorry to interrupt, but it is not just the government. It is also the media and culture makers. In all the AIDS Crisis Revisitation films it is the 1981 New York Times article about "a rare cancer"seen in gay men that gets used as the marker of when AIDS starts. You are right, as artists and writers we have to question and push back. A very specific message is being sent when we say AIDS started in 1981: that the lives lost before then don't matter. But to me and I think to you, they do. They tell the story we aren't telling right now.

TC: Media has everything to do with it. I have a frustration in me that comes out of a real place of sanity. It is hard when you are being pushed whiteness in the media but your reality is black, poor, female and southern. I grew up in South Carolina in a city where they quarantined a project because there was a break out of HIV. I am trying to figure out how to reconcile my reality with historical erasure and still be alright. It is too violent, the omission causes great unrest in me so I put that unrest in the art. But it is difficult. And to be honest it is some of my issues with museums and smaller AIDS organizations. The majority of their programming around HIV/AIDS mirrors that of the media. It is mostly white. And I know that is because a lot of black artists don't want to get involved (because they are dealing with their own issues and this shit is heavy) but that is not the artists'problem, that is the problem of the institutions. They need to figure out a way to signal to black artists there is a space and place for them. They need to facilitate the conditions for black folks to come to them, or be interested when approached. There are artists doing work but they are not always seen by curators and organizations. So it is the job of the organization to go out there and look for the whole picture of HIV/AIDS right now and if they can't find these folks, they have to ask why.

TK: True. I worked at Visual AIDS. We had these conversations and changed how we worked, and we were aware that it was just the beginning of the process. Reaching out, having people reach in, is a long term project and it takes systemic change from the staff, the board. There needs to be a real reckoning of who an organization thinks of as their audience and their stakeholders. Organizations need help in making real systemic change.

TC: People inside and outside of organizations need to break form. I had to get uncomfortable and push myself because Essex would always push himself. One of my favorite poems is “Vital Signs”, which is 38 part epic poem in which he says stuff like my “T-cells were not lost to erotic encounters, they were lost to poverty.”He broke form and articulated these profound things about how the disease is a sociopolitical issue and he brought people along to have that conversation. We all need to get into that kind of mindset.

TK: This seems obvious, but does it mean more for you to hear from Essex than say, someone like David Wojnarowicz?

TC: I follow Wojnarowicz’s work, and even with him we see how his work gets robbed of its complexity, simplified to make a case. I followed what happened with “Hide/Seek” exhibition and it was a shame.

But yeah, it means a lot when I hear it from Essex. It meant a lot when I saw Marlon on his deathbed doing his film, allowing us to see his deterioration. It is a mirror, you know? Marlon, Essex, those guys could be my cousins. It is just that real. It goes back to that creating personal epiphanies. I am interested in making work that changes me first. So it is about what am I changed by. I respond to aesthetics, physical things. It is a language I can understand. And I have to be honest about that. People try to say this is about humanity, but you know what, no. To do the work we have to understand we come from our various and specific locations.

TK: Yeah, and I think HIV shows us that. It is about the material reality of our blood and our bodies.

TC: I was careful not to engage with people who are just scholars of Essex’s work. It was about people who actually spent time with the man.

TK: How do you want people to see Essex now?

TC: I want people to see Essex as a whole artist, existing in multitudes, not just as a monolith, or even an icon. He was not afraid, and because of him I am no longer playing games with my work. He was doing stuff that was just beyond. You see people now thinking they are inventing something, but you know what, Essex was there. It is my job to help people see that. I am highlighting Essex on the web because he was already asking the questions about online space. And that is what is so exciting about black queer folks now, they are finding themselves everywhere, including online. I am proud of the activism and art that the black queer community is doing online. If we look side to side, we can see Essex sitting right beside us as we keep going.

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