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# “Somewhere listening for my name”

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# "Somewhere listening for my name": Black Queer Kinship and the Poetry of the HIV/AIDS Pandemic

*Rona Cran**

The HIV/AIDS pandemic as it unfolded in the US induced numerous striking, singular poems, often by Black queer poets. These poems emerged, during the first 15 years of the crisis, in the context of such anthologies as Michael Klein's *Poets for Life: Seventy-Six Poets Respond to AIDS* (1989), Assotto Saint's *The Road Before Us: 100 Black Gay Poets* (1991), Joseph Beam and Essex Hemphill's *Brother to Brother: New Writings by Black Gay Men* (1991), B. Michael Hunter's *Sojourner: Black Gay Voices in the Age of AIDS* (1993), and Miguel Algarin and Bob Holman's *Aloud: Voices from the Nuyorican Poets Cafe* (1994). Two rare instances of full-length volumes published by Black queer poets during the crisis are Hemphill's multi-award–winning collected poetry and prose, *Ceremonies* (1992), and Melvin Dixon's posthumous *Love's Instruments* (1995). Such books are now out of print (with the exception of *Brother to Brother*, reissued by RedBone Press in 2007), the poems contained therein difficult, and sometimes very costly, to access. Despite constituting a significant part of what Martin Duberman identifies as "a second Harlem Renaissance" (32), they have lapsed, to a troubling degree, from the narrative of literary and cultural memory as it pertains to one of the twentieth-century's worst health catastrophes, particularly for people of color.[1]

Yet as this essay illuminates, contemporary Black queer American poets Danez Smith, Jericho Brown, and Pamela Sneed are

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engaged in an informal shared project of recuperation, restoration, and republication of literary losses, highlighting these texts' existence in their own award-winning and globally feted work. In using their writing as a timely vehicle through which to enact forms of literary kinship, mourning, and memorialization that intersect with the HIV/AIDS crisis, extending and exceeding the elegiac form (which itself was seen to "overflow, shatter, reform" as a result of AIDS [Muske 9]), they model ways to transcend what I call the depublication of work by writers including Hemphill, Dixon, Donald Woods, Saint, David Frechette, and Joseph Beam, who did not survive the AIDS pandemic and who wrote in the knowledge that they would not. In engaging with the poetry of Smith, Brown, and Sneed, readers are invited to engage in turn with the work of these "beloved poet hero[es] . . . great Black queer ancestors [who] were taken by the HIV epidemic" ("Danez Smith Reads 'Heartbeats'").

Darius Bost, a scholar working in an adjacent mode of critical recuperation of important lost AIDS texts, argues for the refusal of the notion that "the bereaved and our imagined black/queer subject is always dead or death-bound" (19). For Bost, "the literature and culture that black gay men produced in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s" must be read "as an alternative site of memory that gestures toward black gay *being and becoming*" (16; my italics). He refuses "the interpretation of this period as solely about trauma and loss[,]" instead contending that "black gay men attempted to forge a tradition amid widespread violence, trauma, and loss as a way to make a future possible" (21). Following Bost, this essay argues that the poetry of Smith, Brown, and Sneed revivifies, realizes, and renovates this tradition by "republishing" the forgotten poets of the AIDS crisis, taking the term "republishing" to encompass varying forms of print, performance, allusion, thematic evocation, formal echoes, and citation. In doing so, their poetry enables the "being and becoming" of Black queer writers (not just men), the refusal of the death-bound specter of AIDS in conjunction with the negotiation of the complexities of writing about HIV in the age of so-called undetectability, the collective practice of remembrance and healing through the forging of queer Black literary kinship, and the desire to transform the present by actively navigating the past.

In her 2020 collection *Funeral Diva*, Sneed evokes the "poet, activist, and soldier" Craig Harris (41), who, "at the Gay and Lesbian Community Center on 13th Street, in a poem about/the massive casualties of AIDS and those left behind," asked "Who will care for our caretakers?" (41–42). For Sneed, such a question "still resonates today" as she contemplates the ways in which "poems, songs, and spirits were used to eulogize,/bury dead,/make sense of senseless tragedy" (42). In her poetry, she reveals herself to be the caretaker of

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the poetry of this earlier generation—as do Smith and Brown—working to undo what Dagmawi Woubshet calls "the nation's interdiction on queer/AIDS public mourning" and the "posthumous disposal of queer life" (15). This essay is an effort to answer Harris's question: it is intended, in part, as an act of scholarly caretaking that highlights the stakes involved in a project of preservation such as Sneed's, Smith's, and Brown's. It also understands the earlier generation of Black queer poets as caretakers in and of themselves, in their production of writing that in the context of "the far horizons of grief and rage" (Rich) bears witness, interrogates, explores, argues, memorializes, holds to account, soothes, evokes empathy, documents, offers information, and even saves lives. In this regard, this essay too is imbricated in the tangled endeavor of republication and posthumous illumination, taking as its point of departure Dixon's dying exhortation at the 1992 OutWrite conference in Boston that "the possibility of . . . good health" and "broadness of . . . vision" be marshalled in the service not just of remembrance but also of "the preservation and future" ("I'll Be Somewhere" 203) of the queer and of-color literatures threatened by HIV/AIDS. Dixon—poet, professor, and casualty of the virus—insisted on the vital importance of writing in order to safeguard queer Black survival in the face of "the chilling threat of erasure" (202). Writing in 1987, he emphasized that "the hope against despair lies with our ability—indeed our insistence on creativity. Silence equals death. Voice and self-expression mean regeneration" (Diary). Shortly before his death, he cautioned his Boston audience to "ensure that our literary history is written and passed on to others" before concluding, "I'll be somewhere listening for my name" ("I'll Be Somewhere" 203).

And yet much of his poetry remains relatively unknown among general readers, particularly in contrast with, say, Thom Gunn's or Mark Doty's. His name largely unheard in poetic contexts, Dixon is better known as a literary critic, his work effectively rendered "unpublished" or "depublished" by the falling out of print of those vital texts in which it appeared. But, as Carole Muske asserts in her introduction to *Poets for Life*, "*These* dead will not lie quiet in their graves" (6). To discuss Dixon's poetry, and to speak his name and the names of his contemporaries, then, as Smith, Brown, and Sneed do, is to contribute to an organic, collective, and informally networked endeavor of regeneration and recuperation through the simultaneous archiving and enlivening of US HIV/AIDS poetry. Such a project, in which old writing is enabled to live on in new and poetry written by Black queer poets during the AIDS crisis is rendered variously more accessible to twenty-first–century readers, facilitates a mode of what Ross Chambers terms "textual survival" (9), the possibility for which was both imagined and invoked by

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Dixon and his contemporaries. His work, and that of the other poets discussed here, has not necessarily been destroyed or deliberately removed from circulation, and its previous state of having been published has not been reversed, exactly. Rather, it occupies a liminal space, a canonical limbo, half forgotten yet nonetheless present (we can't always read it, but we know it is there), and forms an active part of the poetry being published today.

## 1. Literary Losses, Literary Revivals: The Depublication and Republication of AIDS Texts

Four decades on from the first reports of what would become known as HIV infection, US culture continues to reckon with AIDS past and present, not least in relation to its recent intersection with the COVID-19 pandemic (explored, for example, in Sneed's poem "A Tale of Two Pandemics": "Those of us who lived through the 1980s early '90s AIDS crisis already knew about the existence of two New Yorks [. . .] People who are LGBTQIA already know there are two Americas" [141]). The most widely accessible cultural materials that preserve the knowledge and experiences of their creators in the context of AIDS—books, films, and artworks that dominate search engine algorithms, are easily available to buy or to stream online, or are the subjects of high profile retrospectives at major galleries or releases in cinemas—tend to have been produced by white, queer, mostly male, mostly middle-class writers and artists, with the same names appearing regularly in cultural reportage (David Wojnarowicz, Larry Kramer, Tony Kushner, Thom Gunn, Keith Haring, Robert Mapplethorpe, Mark Doty, Paul Monette). In other words, the canon of HIV/AIDS literature and culture is predominantly white.

Nevertheless, the existence of a countercanon comprising work produced by queer writers and artists of color, including queer women, is repeatedly gestured to and referenced by both contemporary scholars and poets. But, despite the growing body of excellent work by US scholars and publishers of Black queer theory, including GerShun Avilez, Jafari S. Allen, Bost, Elizabeth Clement, Duberman, Keguro Macharia, Kevin McGruder, Lisa C. Moore, and Woubshet, such a countercanon remains, on the whole, difficult to access.[2] Much as scholars may write about it, such scholarship itself often remains closed off to readers outside the academy, restricted by financial firewalls and institutional logins. Furthermore, whilst the poetry itself is increasingly discussed and cited, it too, in its primary forms, often "languish[es] in the archives, available only to a select few and distant from the public consciousness," as Paul Mendez recently lamented regarding Hemphill's work. Whereas the

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work of Gunn, Doty, Wojnarowicz, and others offers itself up readily to even the most cursory internet search, encountering the names of Hemphill, Dixon, Beam, Saint, or Woods in scholarly or poetic contexts can leave a would-be reader of their work acutely conscious of a cumulative set of literary losses. Thus, readers are left to subsist on poems part-quoted in scholarly texts, old Tumblr accounts, or links, images, and screenshots on Twitter (evidence of a precarious meshwork of recuperative activities). Or readers may need to be satisfied only with contemplating how much they can realistically afford to spend buying an out-of-print edition online; exploring the possibility of trying to access the single UK-based holding of a text via interlibrary loan; and, within academia, considering whether or not an archival visit to the US is affordable or justifiable.[3]

These texts are not unpublished: they are not *not* published, nor are they *not yet* published. They nonetheless evince some of the affective connotations of the idea of the unpublished, from the optimistic, future-oriented, promissory temporal contingency indicated by the word *yet* to the allure of the archive, the feeling of reading something private or hidden, the appeal of the quest for provenance or authentication that accompanies the *not* of publication. The material gestured to in the writing of Smith, Brown, and Sneed (as well as in the work of the scholars listed above) *was* published; it just isn't published *anymore*, and, when it was, it was often in limited, contingent, transient publications with small print runs (primarily because the collectives that published them were themselves destroyed by AIDS), publications now out of print, thus constraining any widespread access. Such work has been, in effect, one way or another, *depublished*.

This condition raises the question of how a process of depublication relates to the variable state of being unpublished. Depublishing indicates a process by which certain voices or texts—usually writing emerging from marginalized communities—find themselves all but erased from literary canons. This can happen through falling out of print, being weeded from libraries (the connotations of *weeded* suggesting undesirability or the state of being in the wrong place), or becoming collectors' items beyond the reach of everyday readers (as much of Hemphill's work is now, especially outside the US). Such erasure is exacerbated by the often-challenging circumstances inflecting efforts to keep texts in print, including difficulties obtaining copyright permission from the estates of the dead. It also includes the deliberate disfranchisement of the vulnerable dead by families (like Hemphill's, as Duberman and Woubshet have discussed) "bent on burying the truths of . . . life and death" (Woubshet 15). When, for example, Lisa C. Moore of RedBone Press decided to republish *In the Life* and *Brother to Brother*, she found that "one-third to one-half of the

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contributors had died, most from AIDS” and that “many of their relatives didn’t realize the importance of saving their words” (“Uncovered”). Depublishing is a way of rendering the published unpublished, only with added baggage, for being out of print carries negative connotations that exceed the unpublished. While there is a kind of possibility or allure inherent to the state of being unpublished, being out of print suggests that a text has had its chance but has lost it. Everyone wants to “discover” something unpublished in the archive, whereas that which has lapsed out of print is redolent of failure or unwantedness; there is a stigma to the out of print, such that it can occupy a troublingly liminal space between the published and the unpublished.

Nonetheless, in both scholarly work and contemporary poetry, the presence of these Black queer figures who died from and had written about living with HIV/AIDS is unmistakable, taking the forms of names named, poems and people quoted, and forms emulated. Their presence holds out the promise of what Michel Foucault called “counter-memory” (8), suggesting the existence of memories that exceed official records. It also gestures to the ways in which critical and creative neglect might be a form of culturally complicit depublication, where to collectively, culturally neglect a text or author is to unwittingly (or otherwise) participate in a process of avoidable negation that runs counter to the opening up of ideas and knowledge through publishing. In the context of the Black queer poetry of the AIDS crisis, such negation risks obscuring the extent to which “mourning and loss are ongoing experiences that do not reside solely in the past” (3), to quote Marika Cifor. This negation also evokes a world in which HIV infection has not gone away and where vulnerability to the disease continues to be disproportionately distributed by race and sexuality. The social function of such a poetics is akin to AIDS archiving: “[C]reating, collecting, preserving, and making accessible political, cultural, and medical knowledge,” without which “knowledge about HIV/AIDS would otherwise be marginalized, suppressed, or forgotten altogether” (4). Even so, as Mark Nowak writes, there is a “long- and well-established literary tradition of erasing social poets and social poetics from literary traditions and canons” (2).

The threat of such erasure aligns with a major line of critical and cultural concern in the context of the HIV/AIDS crisis in the US—namely memory, remembering, memorializing, unremembering, failing to remember, refusing to remember, curating memories, archiving memories, altering memories, and erasing memories—and the ways in which all such acts limit or alter our understanding of the pandemic. There is no official national memorial to US AIDS losses, with hundreds of thousands of deaths “pretended away” (27),

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as Sarah Schulman comments. Collective, grassroots remembering is difficult, too, as Schulman explains: “[I]t’s hard to have collective memory when so many who were ‘there’ are not ‘here’ to say what happened” (135). Mark Bibbins asks in his 2020 poetry collection *13th Balloon*:

> How many thousands
> of stories like yours
> have been told
> and forgotten? (67)

Furthermore, as Christopher Castiglia and Christopher Reed point out, “official memories—in the form of films, education, museum exhibitions, holidays, news reporting, and political speeches—constitute a potent form of forgetting even as they purport to traffic in memory” (2).

This kind of forgetting might include the marginalization of Black queer writers in the white/straight-dominated publishing industry in New York during the 1980s and 1990s. (This marginalization is being increasingly countered in the third decade of the twenty-first century by larger societal, structural moves toward mainstream receptivity of Black queer writing, as well as by efforts within publishing and on prize committees, which are themselves increasingly representative of wider society.) Such forgetting might also include a recent *New York Times Style Magazine* article about a group of collectors gathering so-called “Forgotten Art of the AIDS Era,” featuring well-known, oft-exhibited, primarily white male artists including Wojnarowicz and Derek Jarman (Haramis):

> But memory, as Castiglia and Reed continue, is also a collective practice . . . based not on identity or shared past experience but on a shared yearning (or different yearnings that find satisfaction in the same memory), including the yearning to belong. . . . Looking for a way to care for selves, those engaged in memory creatively transform the present by looking to the past. (26–27)

For Reed and Castiglia, this understanding of memory is “not as transparent or exact recovery but rather as an invitation to share memory narratives” (34). Memories, they aver, “serve the needs of the present, as well as of the past” (69). The poetry of Smith, Brown, and Sneed seeks to engage memory in these ways—that is, as the poets’ relationship to the recovery or recuperation of those Black queer texts and figures associated with the first 15 years of the AIDS crisis that had in various ways lapsed from extant publication. Reanimated in Smith’s, Brown’s, and Sneed’s poetry are the lives and writing of Hemphill, Dixon, and Woods, among others whose

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work now finds new resonance through a shared yearning, creative transformation, and collective cross-temporal poetic practice.

Complexities arise in relation to HIV/AIDS nostalgia, variously understood as a vital force in our contemporary era (in which, in the US, the virus is increasingly undetectable both in bodies and in the wider culture). This force is crucial for maintaining community and caretaking, and sustaining a connection with the past. At the same time, any decontextualized fetishization of the past risks dismantling critical thinking in the present. Deploying Cifor's concept of "vital nostalgia" (1), which "provides a means for self-aware, complex, selective, or strategic retrieval and uses the AIDS past for contemporary utility" (6), I suggest that the poems of Smith, Brown, and Sneed explore "how to live in multiple times and places at once" (29), critically interrogating the present, in order to access and connect with the AIDS past, and vice versa.

Published by major presses with global reach, these three prominent poets are also the recipients of and nominees for the gamut of literary prizes, including the Pulitzer, the Forward Prize, the American Book Award, the National Book Award, and the Lambda Literary Award. Their books are likely to be found in the average high-street bookstore and are also widely available in reasonably priced editions or can be conveniently accessed online. These are also three poets with a personal stake in documenting and representing the HIV/AIDS crisis: Smith and Brown are openly HIV-positive, while Sneed came of age in New York during the early 1990s and was profoundly imbricated in AIDS activism, writing, and care. Each has spoken about the ways that earlier Black queer poets shaped their own identity and sense of calling. In their work—Smith's *Homie* (2020) and *Don't Call Us Dead* (2017), Brown's *The Tradition* (2019), and Sneed's *Funeral Diva*, as well as performances and interviews—each makes reference, in ways varying from direct or reworked citation to formal resonances to naming (there are key differences in their practices of literary kinship and care and in their levels of evocation of the ancestors), to their sense of the "great Black queer ancestors [who] were taken by the HIV epidemic." As a result of the fairly widespread Anglophone availability of their work (even casual readers of poetry or contemporary Black and/or queer writing are quite likely to encounter them), there exists a concomitant increased likelihood that readers will also meet Hemphill, Dixon, Woods, and others in the writings of Smith, Brown, and Sneed.

In other words, these poets are enacting forms of *republication* through queer Black literary kinship in their work, illuminating the existence of and, to some extent, reviving that poetic Renaissance of the 1980s and 1990s, the evidence for which can feel elusive. There

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are crucial differences between living with/writing about AIDS during the 1980s and 1990s and living with/writing about it now; just as "the loss of so many who should have lived into the [twenty-first] century strains all our notions of composition" (Muske 10), so does the survival of so many in the twenty-first century who would have died in the twentieth prompt new questions about poetic forms. Each poet draws attention to this jarring disparity in poems including Smith's "undetectable" and "sometimes i wish i felt the side effects," Brown's "The Virus," and Sneed's "A Tale of Two Pandemics." But beyond these differences, the radical power of Black queer connection is modeled on and updated in the form of a poetic, political kinship that reanimates and preserves queer Black community and reverses literary erasures.[4]

Such a project becomes more complicated in its relation to the radical marginality of the Black queer poetry of the 1980s and 1990s AIDS era. This poetry tended to be produced in the context of Black literary collectives, like Blackheart and Other Countries, and published in anthologies and/or by presses (such as Saint's Galiens Press) established for the specific purpose of amplifying the voices of Black queer writers.[5] Distinctly emphasizing the importance of Black, often queer, literary partnerships, choosing the margin in an understanding of "marginality as position and place of resistance" (hooks 21), such work therefore refuses what José Esteban Muñoz called the "normative protocols of canonization and value" (153), insisting instead on what hooks terms its "position and place of resistance." Hemphill's *Ceremonies* (1992), published by Plume, an imprint of Penguin, without sacrificing its radical mode or attaining mainstream success, occupies an intriguing middle ground, offering a model for navigating the relationship between radically marginal identities and mainstream spaces.

In contrast, the poetry of Smith, Brown, and Sneed reaches global audiences and mainstream spaces. This is on account of being primarily white-partnered and -produced and feted by organizations imbricated in global capital, namely major publishing institutions such as Picador, Penguin Random House, and City Lights Books, as well as awards like the Pulitzer, National Book Award, and Forward Prize. The extent to which the institutional structures around or enabling the critical success of Smith, Brown, and Sneed are in some way antithetical to the late twentieth-century project of queer Black literary survival indicates the nuances and complexities of establishing literary kinship across time and in the context of "complex and ever shifting realms of power relations" (hooks 15). Nonetheless, their work advances Marlon Riggs's awareness of the increasing demands for recognition made on mainstream culture by "those who were different," as "what had been obscure or invisible . . . now

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started to emerge more fully [and] reshaped the vast stream of what we call American culture" (Avena 268). As Smith muses in an interview with the *New York Times Style Magazine*, thinking about the cultural and political significance of the appearance in such a venue of "people like us who make the things we make": "I hope it's not just cute. . . . I hope it's not just being commodified. I hope it's saying something about the necessity of the Black queer mind to imagining a progressive, futuristic America" (Wilbekin).

The question of access to the Black, queer mind of AIDS-era America to some extent persists in its partial insurmountability. Poems can name names and poem titles, can gesture to influence and emulate forms, but on the whole, new poems cannot provide access to the original poems and readers must still make their own searches. Such searches can be at once generative and restrictive: they may be rewarded, but they may also be contingent on financial access and ability to travel. Accessibility proves easier in some cases than others and can rely on intuition and/or a shrewd approach to internet searching (which itself can be delimited by algorithmic influence). Dixon's "Heartbeats," discussed below, is easily discoverable on the Poetry Foundation website. It is also included in Kevin Young's 2020 anthology of African American poetry; Hemphill is represented in the *Norton Anthology of African American Literature* (2014), while work by Beam, Woods, White, Harris, Frechette, Hemphill, Dixon, Riggs, and Saint appears in E. Lynn Harris's *Freedom in This Village: Twenty-Five Years of Black Gay Men's Writing* (2004). Again, this representation is both generative and restrictive: In what contexts might a reader learn about such anthologies and their contents? What might prevent them from doing so? Furthermore, while the access to individual poets provided by an anthology can offer valuable context and further relevant (and unexpected) reading, it is also limited, often isolating poets of color and offering tantalizing partial glimpses into bodies of work that the piecemeal nature of the form cannot sustain, not least in the context of the out-of-print nature of the longer works (such as *Ceremonies*) toward which an enthused reader would naturally move next.

Even so, the nature and context of Smith's, Brown's, and Sneed's interest in the work of the Black queer poets of the 1980s and 1990s may be such that it will lead to *actual* republication and, thus, to the further preservation, in Dixon's words, of "literary heritage by posthumous publications and reprints" ("I'll Be Somewhere" 203). Indeed, this is already happening. In August 2023, Nightboat Books brought out *Sacred Spells: Collected Works* by Assotto Saint in an edition which was blurbed by Sneed and reviewed by Smith. Such republication is not without precedent—after all, some cultural activists found small presses for precisely this purpose (some of

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which later go on to become large presses, like Virago, which came into existence precisely to bring back depublished women writers). Beyond this particular context, such republication has also been the case with Wanda Coleman's *American Sonnets*, a chapbook published in 1994 that fell into obscurity until Terrance Hayes cited Coleman's sonnets as a formative influence on his wildly successful *American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin* (2018). Coleman's poems have consequently been reissued under the title *Heart First into this Ruin: The Complete American Sonnets*, appearing in June 2022 with Black Sparrow Press, and endorsed as "essential" by *Publishers Weekly*. A recent *New York Times Style Magazine* article, titled "The 25 Most Influential Works of Postwar Queer Literature," included not only *Homie* and *The Tradition* but also, significantly, *Ceremonies*, further paving the way for the potential republication of this book. Furthermore, print, as a reader of a draft of this piece suggested, is but one way to keep the work alive: within the academy, in departments of English, Gender and Sexuality, American Studies, and African American Studies, there has been a groundswell of courses and graduate dissertations that include the Black queer writing of the AIDS generation, as well as the work of poets like Smith, Brown, and Sneed.

In other words, the implications of the kind of republishing that Smith, Brown, and Sneed gesture toward—this way of remembering and reminding others of lost texts and writers—are manifold, if complex and unavoidably constrained, and include new readerships; the preservation of stories, legacies, and knowledge; and the mitigation of Black queer literary losses as a result of HIV/AIDS. These poetry collections may not be history books, but they nonetheless offer poetic documentation and expression of Black queer experience during the AIDS pandemic, weaving together the past, the present, and the future. These poets' intertextual writing, thinking, and performance is palimpsestic and is part of a project of spiritual, political, and historical excavation and preservation. In what follows, I outline how Smith, Brown, and Sneed respectively engage with the queer Black HIV/AIDS past. I begin with Smith and proceed through Brown and Sneed in a move that corresponds to the poets discussed, whose work, respectively, deals with its ancestors first somewhat tentatively, with muted forms of reference in Smith's work, then with increasing directness in Brown's, and finally, in Sneed's, through long concatenations of names and directly intertextual moments. A progression from the generally allusive to the directly invocative reifies the ways in which one can discern the voices of the dead more distinctly as one becomes increasingly attentive, their echoes strengthening as the essay proceeds.

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## 2. Danez Smith and Melvin Dixon: "you're here"

Smith's collections *Homie* and *Don't Call Us Dead* are interleaved with subtle encounters with Hemphill, Saint, and Dixon. These primarily take shape through thematic echoes and similarities in style, as Smith reads their poetry to illuminate the experience of living as a Black queer HIV-positive person in the twenty-first century. Different as this context is, it is one enduringly shaped by racism, homophobia, and the stigma associated with the virus. In keeping with notions of patchy access, Smith first encountered their Black queer heroes on Tumblr: growing up in the Midwest, and "living in spaces where there wasn't an abundant Black queer community," they found it "nourishing to go online and feel that abundance of . . . people who I feel I'm walking alongside" (qtd. Wilbekin). Smith's poem "gay cancer," from *Homie*, is indicative of their enmeshment with the earlier work, invoking in its opening line "Melvin, Assanto [*sic*], Essex," offering "a pill for your grave" (60), and concluding, as if in response to Dixon's promise that he would be "somewhere listening for my name,"

> o sweet unc
> who we miss and never knew
> is that you?
> my wrist to my ear
> you're here. (Smith, *Homie* 60)

Dixon is a particular point of reference for Smith, an uncle figure never personally known but nonetheless missed and heard and felt in Smith's very pulse. Smith's poetry offers a sustained contemplation of the juxtaposition between their own good health (Smith's viral load is undetectable, as a number of their poems explore) and Dixon's illness and death. The subject of the "miracle" of Smith's survival thanks to the "pale green pill" that "dissolves and absolves [their] scarlet brand" (*Homie* 53) contrasts with Dixon's ghoulish yet realistic poem "80's Miracle Diet," in which his sardonically committed consumption of an array of dubious remedies is presented in the language of an upmarket menu: "Cocktails of Perrier with a twist of AZT / Bactrim broiled with bacon bits / Egg lipid quiche for brunch" (64). Dixon literalizes and extends Allen Ginsberg's famous line from "Howl": "I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness" (9), describing instead "The most talented minds, the best bodies / of my generation going up in smoke" (Dixon, "80's Miracle Diet" 64). These lines suggest that this is no time for elaborate metaphors; (his generation is literally, rather than metaphorically, "going up in smoke"). In stark contrast, Smith wryly

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comments on the cultural and actual capital that being HIV-positive has brought him:

> that which hasn't killed you yet can pay the rent
> . . . why not make the blood
> a business? . . .
> my blood brings me closer to death
> talking about it has bought me new boots
> a summer's worth of car notes, organic everything. (*Homie* 59)

A poet, novelist, scholar, translator, and leading figure in the East Coast Black queer arts movement, Dixon, who was diagnosed in 1989, contributed three poems to the anthology *Poets for Life*: "Heartbeats," "One by One," and "The 80's Miracle Diet." These poems would later be published in Dixon's posthumous collection *Love's Instruments*, in which, as Woubshet writes, he "tallies the mounting deaths around him and measures the close interface between death and life" (44). The three poems collectively offer a vibrant, imaginative stance on HIV/AIDS as it had unfolded for Black men to that point, including many of his friends, and as it would now begin to evolve for Dixon personally. (He wrote the poems before his diagnosis but after he had begun to suspect he was unwell.) As Woubshet explains, "Dixon figures himself as a double mourner, grieving the deaths of others and his own approaching death" (44) and includes himself in his poems' "roster of the dead" (7). Each poem embodies the notion of an active, cognizant, creative grappling with the circumstances of life and death and emphasizes Dixon's own view that poetic writing—voice, expression, language—was a crucial form of everyday resistance to the "double cremation" that Black queer men faced in their erasure by both white queer and straight Black communities ("I'll Be Somewhere" 203).

Smith's responses to "Heartbeats" best exemplify their varied engagement with Dixon's work. Smith's "sometimes i wish i felt the side effects" and "say it with your whole black mouth," appearing in succession in *Homie*, as well as "it began right here" in *Don't Call Us Dead*, clearly echo and negotiate with Dixon's poem. In marshalling their differences and connections, Smith's poetry collectively delineates the emotional and psychological impact of a process of disembodiment associated with HIV infection. Dixon's dyadic poem, "Heartbeats," structured as a rhythmic sequence of couplets consisting of monosyllabic words simulating a human heartbeat (and intake/outlet of breath) and voicing the poet's "own ailing body" (Woubshet 50), tracks its subject's decline from good health via "safe sex" (106), to increasingly life-altering symptoms, to death,

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while maintaining its rigid structure insofar as Dixon refuses to embody, even as he acknowledges, the chaos of terminal illness:

> Black out. White rooms.
> Head hot. Feet cold.
>
> No work. Eat right.
> CAT scan. Chin up. ("Heartbeats" 62)

Smith's poems adopt a similarly dyadic structure in order to parallel and reflect on the psychic and physiological distance—as well as closeness—between their own relationship with HIV in the twenty-first century and Dixon's in the late 1980s. Smith observes, "they say it's not a death sentence // like it used to be. but it's still life. i will die in this bloodcell" (*Don't Call* 55). Although Dixon's whole, healthy self inexorably deteriorates into struggling body parts ("Thin blood. Sore lungs. / Mouth dry. Mind gone." ["Heartbeats" 68]), Smith lacks "proof" ("no mark but the good news" [*Homie* 33]), lacks the physical markers and bodily evidence of the "toxic angel" in their blood, yet shares Dixon's knowledge of "what it is / to nurse a thing you want to kill // & can't." Where Dixon pleads with his body not to fail him ("Sweet heart. Don't stop." ["Heartbeats" 62]), Smith is able to "love my sweet virus" (*Homie* 33).

Dixon's speaker articulates a survival strategy. Indeed, he tries many strategies, one of which is the instruction-manual form of the poem itself, which indicates the overwhelming amount of advice (often overwhelmingly ineffective) given to people with HIV/AIDS. These strategies include CAT scans and blood tests and doctor's visits, along with more holistic efforts to survive, like motivational thinking ("Hold on" [Dixon, "Heartbeats" 61]) and phone calls home:

> Get mad. Fight back.
> Call home. Rest well.
>
> Don't cry. Take charge.
> No sex. Eat right.

But where the heartbeats in Dixon's poem are distressingly finite—the breaths limited, the progression of his illness inexorable—in Smith's writing the virus is stayed by a "pill" taken "even on the days // i thought i wouldn't survive myself" (*Homie* 34). And unlike with early HIV medications that sometimes proved more toxic

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than the virus itself, there are no side effects: “i wish i knew the nausea,” Smith writes (33). Both poets testify to the unsystematic nature of HIV infection, but Smith also draws on the irony of the nature of their own infection in light of Dixon’s ill luck (“Sweetheart. Safe sex.” [“Heartbeats” 61]), their sense that, in spite of knowing “what could happen,” they “grew the fruit” themselves (*Homie* 34): “i braved the stupidest ocean. a man. / i waded in his stupid waters” (33). Where Dixon’s poem becomes increasingly preoccupied with the fraught act of breathing (“Breathe in. Breathe out. // No air. Breathe in. / Breathe in. No air.” [“Heartbeats” 62]), pointing to pneumocystis pneumonia or Kaposi’s sarcoma in the lungs, Smith, in “say it with your whole black mouth,” emphasizes the sheer privilege of drawing “breath after breath” (*Homie* 35).

In September 2020, Smith read “Heartbeats” at an event organized by the Library of America and the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in celebration of 250 years of African American poetry. The reading was recorded and is available online. As if in an effort to keep Dixon alive through their reading, Smith unsettles the rhythmic regularity of “Heartbeats,” using their breath, pauses, and unexpected emphases, first, to render the scaffold of Dixon’s ostensibly orderly poem uncertain—thereby suggesting that things might not be as inexorable as they seem—and, second, to embody the hope that Dixon’s life and work represents. Dixon’s influence on Smith is clear, not just in their choice (and manner) of reading, but also in their comments that bookend the performance. These comments, which also mention Hemphill and Saint as important influences, gesture to Dixon’s legacy with regard to Smith’s own diagnosis and survival: “This poem of Melvin’s really helped me a lot when I went through my own diagnosis—this is a poem that . . . I still reach towards” (“Danez Smith Reads ‘Heartbeats’”). Not quite the “double mourner,” Smith nonetheless draws on the doubleness the poets share, imitating the two-beat structure of “Heartbeats.” Smith also speaks of Dixon in terms of the archiving and renewal of the past, thinking “about why we return to those archives to recognize that we come from a long history of folks . . . that have figured it out before, in their own contexts . . . and made it through.” Smith concludes, “I’m really proud tonight to be a Black poet,” suggesting that the act of caring for kin across time is one of mutual exchange.

### 3. Jericho Brown: “my job is to add to the story”

Jericho Brown, in *The Tradition* and in interviews, similarly pays tribute—via subtle forms of evocation, direct naming, and intertextuality—to Hemphill, Saint, and members of the Other Countries

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collective. Dedicated to the production, dissemination, and preservation of writing by Black gay men, this collective took shape as a workshop, founded in June 1986 and based at the Lesbian and Gay Community Services Center in New York.[6] One of its key publications was the 1993 issue *Sojourner: Black Gay Voices In the Age of AIDS*, with an introduction by B. Michael Hunter. The issue, Hunter explains, was intended to “house memories, and assist in telling our stories and those of our predecessors” and to correct the delusion, arising from “the glaring absence of a Black Gay face-voice-presence in the national consciousness,” that Black gay men “had somehow been spared this scourge” (xiii). The first openly queer Black male poet to win the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry when he did so in 2020, Brown continues this project in several ways: housing memories, telling stories, and preserving legacies to enable a cohort of Black, queer, HIV-positive artists, including himself, to transcend time, death, and depublication through poetry. “As a black queer poet from the South,” he says, “I think my job is to add to the story, so more of its truth can be told” (qtd. in Glock).

Brown’s cross-temporal kinship takes a different but related form to Smith’s: his work generally echoes rather than cites his predecessors directly, influences he readily discusses in interviews. Sometimes, his poetry achieves this quasipalimpsestic effect by toying with tropes associated with the virus, following Dixon’s wry humor. His poem “Cakewalk,” for example, responds to “The 80’s Miracle Diet” by ironically celebrating HIV: where Dixon frames the virus as a free gift (“Yours free without the asking / Quick delivery via overnight male” [64]), Brown jokes, “My man swears his HIV is better than mine. [. . .] I keep my eyes on his behind, say my HIV is just fine” (70). The comedy here also speaks to another cultural figure whose legacy Brown evokes, filmmaker Marlon Riggs, who explained:

> Like most things in life, the experience of AIDS is wrapped up in contradiction—I think particularly for those of us who are artists. . . . In one sense, to live with the disease, to actually *live* and not simply survive it, means that you’re constantly engaged in some way with it. (Avena 273)

“Cakewalk” and other poems in *The Tradition* explore Riggs’s notion of constant but shifting engagement with the virus. HIV is shown to influence not only Brown’s romantic life but also his understanding of his body as it moves through space, as well as the intersections of the virus with implied historical injustices pertaining to race and sexuality. That is the “story” to which he wishes to add. Readers encounter “the viral geography of an occupied territory” (9)

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in "The Microscopes," for example, whilst in "The Virus" they find themselves addressed, by proxy, by Brown's undetectable infection itself, which "can't kill / The people you touch" (55) but which insists:

> I'm still here
> Just beneath your skin and in
> Each organ
> The way anger dwells in a man
> Who studies the history of his nation.

In these lines, in which the physical qualities and emotional dimensions of his life encounter one another through metaphor, Brown draws parallels between the menacing but controlled presence of the virus in his body and the experience of a Black scholar—himself—reckoning with how his country's largely unchallenged hierarchies of power and property, built on racial subjugation, construct his feelings of enduring anger. An inheritor from Audre Lorde, Brown refuses the "fear of anger" (Lorde 124); his poetry instead registers and navigates the impressions of his affective and formal influences. Riggs's sense of the elision of Black queer experiences, focalized by his feelings of invisibility in 1970s San Francisco, also finds a parallel in Brown's "Token." Finding himself in "this great, gay Mecca," Riggs recalls realizing that he "had no shadow, no substance, no place, no history, no reflection" (*Tongues Untied*). Brown takes up Riggs's experience of queer Black erasure in an act of intertextual solidarity, writing "Let me be / Another invisible, / Used and forgotten and left [. . .] quick and colorless" (58).

Although much of Brown's interest in the literature and culture of the AIDS past is implicit, one poem in *The Tradition*, "After Essex Hemphill," wears its influences directly, more akin to Sneed's homages to the dead, discussed below. This poem not only evokes Hemphill's work but also revives the legacy of a crucial queer space in Washington, DC: Malcolm X Park, an area appropriated for cruising that made manifest Samuel R. Delany's argument that "pleasure and the body are constitutive elements of the social as much as are law and responsibility" (188). In an essay entitled "Without Comment," published in *Ceremonies* (a book Brown describes as "exhilarating and exhausting and scary because this book was telling all my business" [qtd. in Glock]), Hemphill describes the park, officially known as Meridian Hill, as sitting "in the middle of a Black gay ghetto called Homo Heights"; "once glorious, mystical . . . a Black gay cruising ground" that came alive "[a]t dusk," it is now, on account of HIV/AIDS, in addition to a more generalized process of "[d]ecay and decline" (74), "nothing more than a tomb of sorrow" (75).

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In “After Essex Hemphill,” Brown revisits that “tomb of sorrow,” reviving it in lines that articulate the right to love and sexual contact in

> this part
> Of the capital where we
> Say please with our mouths
> Full of each other[.] (51)

The fragility of the space is emphasized—the poem’s protagonists “kneel illegal,” against a tree that “if we push / Too hard, will fall.” And yet, to fail to do so—to push hard—is framed by Brown’s speaker as an act of queer timidity: “if / I don’t push at all, call me / A sissy.” Hemphill and other queer users of the park are evoked as ancestors whose legacy as political rebels aligns, for Brown’s speaker, with that of Malcolm X himself, who is named in the fourth line of the poem (“Illegal like Malcolm X”): these are courageous, joyful predecessors who “seeded the fruit- / Bearing forest” of the park, of queer life, the biblical origin story of trees and temptation bound up in language reframed here in the speaker’s rhymed, rhythmic, alliterative assertion that

> The night
> Is my right. Shouldn’t I
> Eat? Shouldn’t I repeat,
> *It was good*, like God? (51)

In defiantly calling back to Hemphill and Malcolm X Park, Brown resuscitates a poetics of cruising that collapses time and distance. Practitioners of such a poetics include Hart Crane (cruising for Walt Whitman in *The Bridge* [1930]), Ginsberg (also cruising for Whitman, as well as Federico García Lorca, in “A Supermarket in California” [1956]), and Wojnarowicz (cruising for Jean Genet, Vladimir Mayakovsky, and Arthur Rimbaud in his journals and his 1978–1979 *Arthur Rimbaud in New York* series).[7]

Such a practice, as Fiona Anderson writes, enables the fostering of “an active identification with the dead, playing with the distinctions between presence and absence, visibility and invisibility” (118); in this process of “reciprocal exchange . . . of strength . . . of accomplishments” (119), in Ginsberg’s words, “The main thing is communication” (qtd. 119). Brown thus communicates with Hemphill, identifying actively with the dead, exchanging accomplishments, exchanging strength, and highlighting his simultaneous absence and presence as queer Black cultural hero. Significantly, in transporting the spirit of this icon of AIDS past to the present of

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HIV-undetectability, Brown's poetic "erotohistoriography," in Elizabeth Freeman's coinage, resists AIDS nostalgia in its refusal of what Freeman calls "the desire for a fully present past, a restoration of bygone times" (95).

This poem suggests to readers that Hemphill is still out there—hard but not impossible to access, occupying that liminal space between the published and the unpublished, the living and the dead. Brown frames his work in the context of "something much larger than myself" (Murphy). He explains, "One of my jobs as a writer is to show that what I'm doing isn't just for me" and describes what he did on the day he won the Pulitzer: "I wrote down the names of people who weren't here to see me win." These include Rudolph Byrd, a "mentor" who introduced him to figures like Hemphill, Saint, and Riggs. Like the HIV/AIDS poets who shaped his work, Brown writes "in service to the people" (Benka et al. 54), paying forward Byrd's mentorship as he also continues the legacy of the Other Countries Collective, developing, disseminating, and preserving the diverse cultural expressions of Black queer writers (Bost 7).

### 4. Pamela Sneed: "wrap our arms around each other"

Pamela Sneed's elegiac poetic memoir *Funeral Diva*, about her experiences coming of age in New York during the early 1990s, reprises the role she played during that era: a "'funeral diva,' called for / at memorials, readings, wakes and funerals to speak / give testimony and credence to men's lives" (40).[8] Of the three poets discussed here, her work most directly evokes the un- or depublished Black queer voices of the AIDS crisis. Throughout the collection, Sneed repeatedly names the poets and artists whom she knew and lost, including the titles of some of their poems, such as "When My Brother Fell" by Hemphill (Sneed 49). She also quotes several of them directly, the mosaic of their voices emerging from the lines of her poems in fragments. Harris jokes, "Honey, I've got a few bricks in my pocketbook which I'm not afraid /t o throw" (41); "How's Pam?" (46) asks Woods, Sneed's best friend and now a voice in her head, later telling her, near death, "I love you" (56). "Write that story," says Alan Williams (50); "Donald Woods was a / proud Black gay man, he did not die of heart failure. / He died of AIDS. If you agree with me, stand up[,]" screams Saint, "who stood more than 6' 5" in stocking feet, a self-proclaimed diva / with a French Haitian accent used for effect (58).

Notably in *Funeral Diva*, Sneed also places the names of these lesser-known Black queer poets within a frame of reference shared by much more widely recognized Black women writers and activists, many also queer, like Lorde, June Jordan, hooks, Toni Morrison, and

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Octavia Butler. In bringing them together, Sneed broadens the canon both in general terms and in terms of these writers' shared literary-political preoccupations. In doing so, Sneed further illuminates their mutual concerns with questions of cultural memory, storytelling, healing, and survival. Beyond *Funeral Diva*, Sneed also performs these writers' works at public memorial events, like the 2020 reading at The Poetry Project and a tribute to the Other Countries Collective at the Whitney Museum in 2013, where she "*read David Frechette's poem,* 'Je Ne Regrette Rien' / *as well as Essex Hemphill's, 'When My Brother Fell.' / I also read Donald Woods's poem, 'Prescription'*" (59).

*Funeral Diva* is a sustained act of naming those who died. It thus recalls the black prefatory pages of *Sojourner*, entitled "Standing on the Shoulders of Our Ancestors," a five-page list naming the dead in tribute and representing what Woubshet terms "the trope of inventory" characterizing the 1980s' and 1990s' cultural "body of mourning" (3). Indeed, this trope can also be seen in Brown's act of naming "people who weren't here to see" him win the Pulitzer. In a similarly expansive way, Sneed's collection invokes those who died and emphasizes the value of what they wrote and said in an effort to refute her sense that "white men [are] constantly at the helm / to tell our stories" (131). Written decades after the events and experiences recounted, *Funeral Diva* goes beyond elegy in following Riggs's treatment of AIDS as "part of a larger mosaic" that "addresses the other aspects of being alive in our society" (Avena 271), whilst also functioning as a critical poetic narrative of queer Black cultural memory that reestablishes continuity with the HIV/AIDS past. It highlights lost literatures and voices, along with her own culturally elided experiences—those of a Black lesbian writer and carer who "learned more about being an artist in the early '90s than any college education /. . . from little boys with baby faces and death sentences" (Sneed 101).

Having moved to New York "from small town safety" (38), Sneed recalls her interactions with Other Countries. She gravitated toward the group and came to view "each collective member as a brother," "in return" becoming "their sister" (39). One such brother was the poet Woods, the one person at whose funeral she was unable to speak—"part of my family, a lost connection, link, or as they say / the missing piece" (53). "Pivotal to [her] development as a poet" (54), Sneed's love for Woods is instead saved for *Funeral Diva*—"for the keyboard / where you loved us best" (Woods, "For All" 14)—her poetry embodying lines from his poem "For All of Us: Especially Joe." His 1989 "Couch Poem," used as the epigraph to *Sojourner*, urges,

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> Sit and write down your writing
> you can leave micro bytes of your living
> to be deciphered by
> people who loved to love you. (vi)[9]

Woods's exhortation here—to write, live, and be deciphered through acts of reading—finds its embodiment "on the printed page where we loved you back" ("For All" 14) in *Funeral Diva*. There, Sneed's typing of her poems simultaneously illuminates the lives of those she loved whilst laying down for readers her own "micro bytes of . . . living."

Despite the losses, such friendships were deeply formative and long lasting. As Sneed reminds us, "*Those of us who are left from that Black lesbian and gay literary / scene still write*" (60). She reveals her writing to be shaped by both the writing and speech of others, as well as the pivotal role that writing itself played in the struggle to survive HIV/AIDS. She remembers, "As Black gay people we couldn't afford to get arrested so we wrote / performed and sang revolution" (100). For "The only thing that kept us all going were words[,]" we learn, and such words include "Essex Hemphill's / 'When My Brother Fell'" and "words of Audre, / Essex, Pat Parker, and Joe Beam" (49); "Don Reid, Rory Buchanan, Craig Harris, David Frechette, Essex Hemphill /are just a few, there are countless others" (49–50).

Among the "countless others" is poet, editor, activist, and that other "self-proclaimed diva[,]" Saint:

> today I am examining his tactics
> pulling the tools off the shelf
> dusting off the weaponry
> in an exhibit
> because today I need to use what he taught me. (Sneed 130)

Through her language of weaponry and exhibition, Sneed is mobilizing to powerful effect what Cifor terms "the vital potential of nostalgia" (6), deploying it as a "temporal mode that recognizes that forward progression and a clean break with past losses are often impossible, and sometimes undesirable" (28). "*America is imploding / from crimes of the past*" (60), Sneed insists, bringing her reflections about the AIDS past to bear on the present-day US. Her poetic weaponizing of the depublished chroniclers of such crimes serves to make them "more enduringly detectable" (Cifor 188), remaking and subverting established and retrospective narratives about HIV/AIDS that frame the pandemic as a discrete, historical tragedy rather than an ongoing emergency imbricated in what Sneed calls a yet-to-transpire "medical #MeToo" (142).

Sneed maps for her readers the artistic terrain of the era, a terrain that entails the names, poem titles, quotations, and literary synergies

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accenting her text and evinces the existence—the keyboards, the "micro bytes"—of the writers who molded the work we are reading. These written signs affirm the possibility of more thinking, more reading, other stories, other voices, other memories, other ways to "make sense of senseless tragedy," other pasts (and, through these, different futures—the kind we see in the work of Brown and Smith—in which HIV is no longer fatal). In writing and reading through and with the voices of those writers who slipped into a state of depublication in the years following their deaths, in spite of the exhortations of Dixon and others, Sneed aims to revivify them and their ideas, tactics, weapons, and what they have to teach—about poetry, but also about resistance, survival, and Black queer futurity. "I could go on," Sneed writes,

> but my brother Essex Hemphill
> is calling to me
> telling me/us as he did in the crisis so long ago
> telling us to wrap our arms around each other
> and hold tight
> Hold tight
> Gently. (106)

Here she refers to the third part of *Brother to Brother*, Hemphill's edited collection of new writing by Black gay men, which was titled "Hold tight, gently." The sentiment that shapes that particular section of the anthology—one of unconditional love and support in the context of adversity—stretches reciprocally across time in Sneed's work. Just as she holds tight, gently, to the lives and legacies of those poets and friends who shape *Funeral Diva*, so she is also held and guided by them. As the concluding lines of the titular poem explain:

> *This piece took fifteen years to write.*
> *I am tired.*
> *I can feel the hands of Donald, Don Reid, David Frechette,*
> *Rory Buchanan, Bert Hunter, Alan Williams, Audre Lorde,*
> *Pat Parker, Marlon Riggs, Essex Hemphill, and Assotto Saint pushing me*
> *across the finish line*. (Sneed 61)

### 5. Poetic Living

These lines return us to that freighted notion of poetic, scholarly, and interpersonal care and its relation to the publication, and the consequences of depublication, of the poems written during the first 15 years of the AIDS era. Such poems, as Smith, Brown, and

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Sneed make clear, refuse the erasure and reclaim the loss, as, indeed, do their own poems, forming counternarratives and offering an alternative documentary of the lives, literatures, and deaths of Black queer individuals and communities: writing *back*, writing *against*, writing *for*. Doty reflects in correspondence with Deborah Landau on lines from William Carlos Williams's poem "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower" (1955):

> It is difficult
> to get the news from poems
> yet men die miserably every day
> for lack
> of what is found there. (qtd. in Landau 222)

Here, Doty affirms the relevance of Williams's words, writing:

> I believe that "what is found there" might alleviate misery, if not postpone death. . . . If "what is found there" might help us all to re-imagine the disease, and rewrite the repetitive texts of homophobia and fear of otherness, then in fact poetry *might* keep people from dying. Let's hope that whatever contribution we can make is one more shoulder put to the wheel. (qtd. Landau 222)

In putting their queer shoulders to the wheel, Dixon, Hemphill, Woods, Saint, and their contemporaries, followed in the twenty-first century by Smith, Brown, and Sneed, undertake complex, varied, and cross-temporal processes of poetic caretaking: revising, negotiating, reimagining, and making meaning out of narratives about HIV/AIDS; complicating assumptions and stereotypes about the virus and the disease it causes; and offering their own alternative sites of memory and mourning.[10] At the same time, these poets renegotiate and navigate anew the myths that emerged (and continue to emerge) from within, and about, the Black queer communities so disproportionately affected by the pandemic. In participating in the project of what Woubshet calls "looking for the dead *now*" (13–14), their work performs "the political imperative to break the public silence around the mass deaths of gay men and, concurrently, the ethical imperative to inter the dead with certain due burial rites / rights" (13). In this way, their work helps to make the dead visible and legible through these alternative forms of republication.

hooks writes that "language is also a place of struggle" (15). So it is for the poets discussed here, whose forms of struggle and survival continue to take shape in their articulating of HIV/AIDS in the intricate webs of language that make our universe knowable and habitable, even when it isn't. Their writing emphasizes that poetic

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*making*—verbalizing, testifying, documenting in the language of poetry—is a crucial part of endurance and remembrance. So too is the reading, sharing, publishing, and passing on of the poetic records into which the crisis is imprinted, those places of struggle to which readers, both contemporaneously and in the intervening decades, are asked to pay vigilant attention. These are not straightforward elegies because the mass death event that is their focus is not over and because they strain against a form that cannot adequately contain them. Artistic representation, writes Stuart Hall, is "not merely the transmitting of already-existing meaning, but the more active labor of *making things mean*" (64). This living is the labor that Smith's, Brown's, and Sneed's poetry is doing.

## Notes

1. By 1985 around 50% of HIV/AIDS diagnoses were in African American people, reflecting the damaging intersections of racism, poverty, homophobia, and poor health care. In 2016, the Centers for Disease Control estimated that one in two Black men who have sex with men will be diagnosed with HIV: "Half of black gay men and a quarter of Latino gay men projected to be diagnosed within their lifetime." Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Press Release, 23 Feb. 2016.

2. See for example Allen, *There's a Disco Ball Between Us: A Theory of Black Gay Life* (2021); Avilez, "Queer Forms, Black Lives: Melvin Dixon, Assotto Saint, and Artistic Experimentation," in *Black Gay Genius* (2014), pp. 165–71; Clement, "The Stories of AIDS," *American Quarterly*, vol. 69, 2017, pp. 917–33; Gene Jarrett and Thomas Glave, "A Song to Pass on: An Interview with Thomas Glave," *Callaloo*, vol. 23, no. 4 Autumn, 2000, pp. 1227–40; Steven G. Fullwood and Charles Stephens, eds., *Black Gay Genius: Answering Joseph Beam's Call* (2014); Macharia, "Queer Writing, Queer Politics: Working across Difference," *The Cambridge Companion to Queer Studies* (2020), pp. 30–48; Kevin J. Mumford, *Not Straight, Not White: Black Gay Men from the March on Washington to the AIDS Crisis* (2016); Robert F. Reid-Pharr, *Black Gay Man* (2001); and Woubshet, *Calendar of Loss*.

3. At the time of writing, the cheapest available copy of Hemphill's *Ceremonies* costs £121 on Amazon; many booksellers list the text as "unavailable," whilst on AbeBooks it retails at £314.88 plus nearly £40 shipping.

4. See Joseph Beam's epigraph to Hemphill's *Brother to Brother* (1991): "Black men loving Black men is a call to action, an acknowledgment of responsibility"; see also Marlon Riggs's 1989 film, *Tongues Untied*: "Black men loving Black men is the radical act."

5. Bost's *Evidence of Being* deals extensively with these small presses and collectives.

6. The title of this section is quoted from Glock, "Jericho Rising."

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7. See Fiona Anderson, *Cruising the Dead River: David Wojnarowicz and New York's Ruined Waterfront* (2019), p. 97 and pp. 118–19.

8. The title of this section is quoted from Sneed, "Hold Tight," p. 106.

9. Originally published in *The Space* (1989).

10. See Ginsberg, "America," *Howl and Other Poems*, p. 31.

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