

In the Life doesn't suffer from any of the miscalculations which made *Black Men/White Men* difficult for many black gay men to embrace. Through its many themes (black gay churches; the effects of AIDS; seeing white as a standard of beauty; being a black, single, gay parent) and the different styles in which various perspectives are explored (poetry, fiction, song lyrics, multi-media theater), the entire anthology is derived wholly from the experience of black gay men. And without the benefit of a single nude photo.

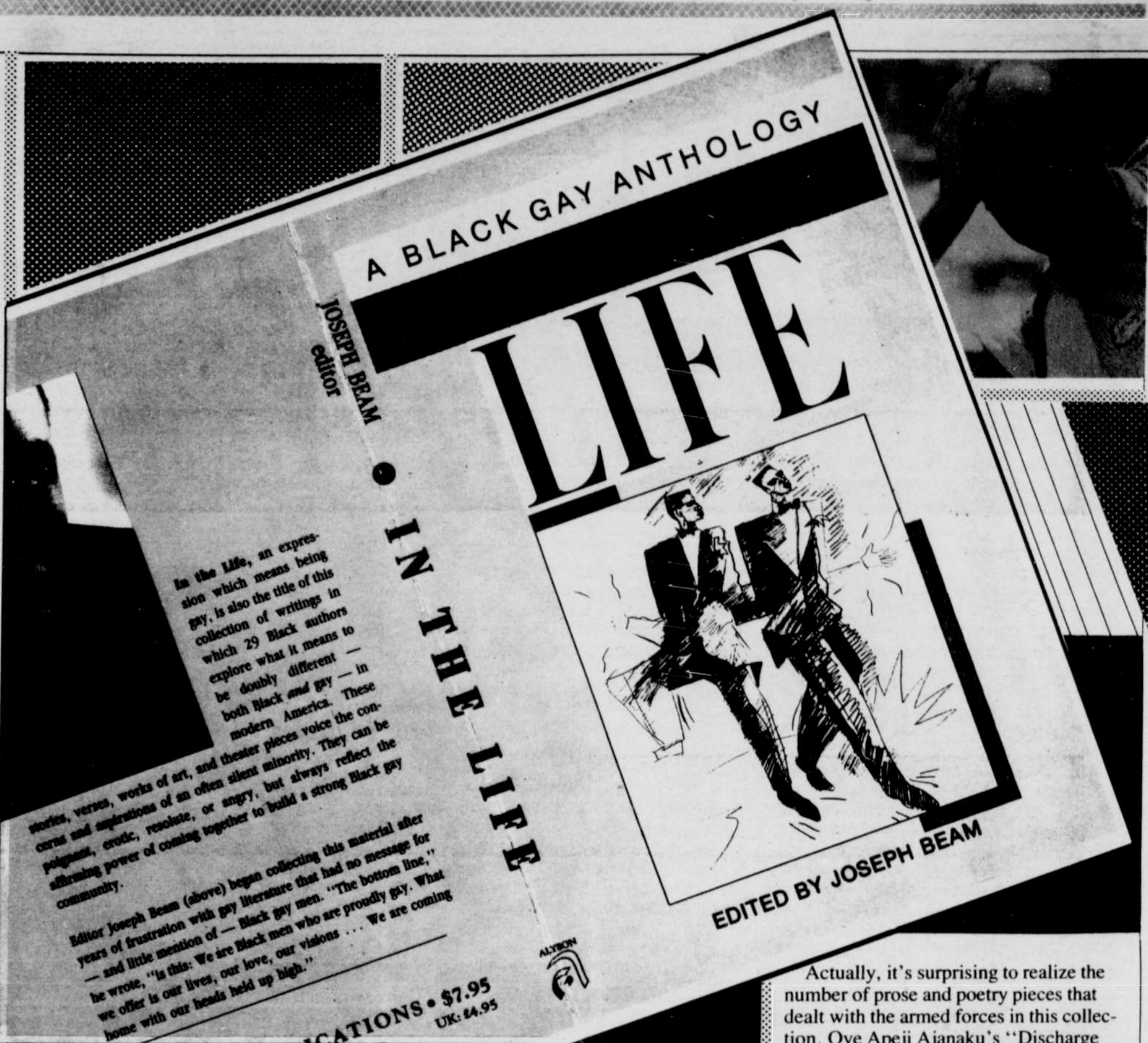
I recently had the opportunity to speak with musician/poet Blackberri (featured in the anthology in an interview by Bay Area writer Bernard Branner), and he expressed delight with the juxtaposition of each piece of writing in relation to the others. What had been deemed especially delightful was the idea of following Reginald Shepherd's "On Not Being White" (which explores one black gay man's struggle to understand the perception of whiteness as an ultimate standard of beauty) with Blackberri's song lyrics to "Beautiful Black Man" (which involves two black men relating to one another's beauty, in a bar).

Shepherd's being black and struggling with issues of obsession manages to touch on some rather universal conflicts. He questions whether or not his desire for a "beautiful man" is a hunger to possess what is commonly seen as the ultimate prize. It seems that many white men and white women sometimes fall into that same syndrome of wanting to possess an extremely beautiful mate as a status symbol. Shepherd's conflict comes from not being able to separate whiteness from his idea of beauty.

Shepherd also comments on the pitfalls of being attracted to someone purely on a physical level, or merely because being white equals being beautiful, in his eyes. He realizes that he is usually more intelligent and interesting than many of the men he desires. "Imagine all my efforts to impress the *beau ideal* with my wit and intelligence could fail because he doesn't understand what I'm talking about." Shepherd also does an unsettling but effective job of conveying the fact that out of the pain he experiences comes "a rage so intense it can kill."

His words express the intensity of his struggle when relating a story about a beautiful white man who ignores him: "I recall hating him for being so handsome and white, so self-assured, so secure in his attractiveness . . . how dare he have such power over me? I recall wanting to see him die slowly and painfully, wanting to see that beautiful face ruined. So I hate him and desire him, fearing him and myself, too, often despising both. So I continue to want him."

Without a doubt it is the impressive variety of themes, within the context of a black male perspective that makes *In the Life* enjoyable reading. Melvin Dixon's "The Boy with the Beer" is a story of a young black man's attempt to come out via his first trip to a gay bar, during which he experiences flashbacks of how he arrived at that point. Gilberto Gerald's "With My Head Held High" is an account of a four-year fight to gain U.S. citizenship as an openly gay man from Trinidad; and the touching "Cut Off From Among Their People" follows a young man through events during the funeral of his deceased lover.



James S. Tinney's scholarly "Why a Black Gay Church?" seems, at first, like a rather dry essay, but the observations he manages to make present a clear case for the need for organizations created for oppressed people. Tinney says, "It was very hard for me, as a gay minister, to come to grips with the fact that much within our communities is, indeed, pathological. It, too, needs to undergo exposure, analysis, ministering and healing. In reality, what makes us as black people, or as gay people, truly human is not our surpassing wisdom, strength or goodness. We do not have to be better than others."

The other standouts included are David Garrett's "Creating Ourselves: An Open Letter," written to Isaac Jackson, managing editor of *Blackheart*, a journal of writings and graphics by black men. The letter tends to ramble, but between writing about not being sure what will accompany his dinner of baked chicken, he touches on his father's acceptance of his son's gayness: ". . . he practices his own heterosexuality with the most exhilarating joy; possibly because of this genuine joy he can be supportive." Garrett also defines his role as an African-American in this country: "We are not one-tenth of some white something." Near the end of his letter he states, "The white people of America have willed themselves ignorant of the black experience, as the white feminist and the white gay movement have willed themselves ignorant of the black feminist and black gay experiences, at a loss to all of us."

The most pleasant surprise about *In the Life* is that the insight and intensity found in the more serious and critical pieces, are also present in most of the lighter and more uplifting selections which celebrate the "togetherness" of black men. "Passion," a story by Sidney Brinkley, seems, on the surface, to be a simple, fairly short account of two men meeting one another for the first time, and ending up in love. But it is written with enough fire within its four pages that it leaves one breathless. Craig G. Harris' "Weekend Plans" must be dubiously hailed as the first published gay "Buppie" (black upwardly-mobile professional) short story.

A lot of the poetry in this anthology successfully presents the erotica that *Black Men/White Men* attempted to convey through photos. Brad Johnson's "Protest Poem" puts a slightly new twist on the cliché "make love, not war":

*the press is preparing
us for a war
soon*

*i would like to become
a soldier and fight
my way to the finest
guerilla i could find*

*lick the musty sweat
from his body
and let him make love
to me*

*warm my ass between his thighs
eroticize the soil
fuck the war.*

Actually, it's surprising to realize the number of prose and poetry pieces that dealt with the armed forces in this collection. Oye Apeji Ajanaku's "Discharge USN '63" is dedicated "to the brothers of the 'African Queen,' the USS F.D. Roosevelt . . ."

Another treat in this anthology is an interview with Bruce Nugent, who was responsible for writing the first published short story about black gay male life in the United States, in 1926, called "Smoke, Lillies and Jade," which appeared in *Black Men/White Men*. The interview gives a fascinating and detailed picture of what it was like living a bohemian existence in New York during the Harlem Renaissance; Nugent also reflects on his association with writer Langston Hughes.

Overall, it is very refreshing to experience the voices of a seldom (if ever) heard segment of the black community and the equally unheard voices of the gay black community. Not only is Joseph Beam to be congratulated on his fine job as editor, but Alyson Publications also deserves to be commended for its part in bringing this fine collection of writing to our bookstores. And, of course, so do the writers who expose their rage, guts, and love.

Ed. note: In the Life was among shipments of thirty-three lesbian and gay titles seized by Canadian customs in a move to intensify censorship of gay and lesbian books and magazines.

The increased censorship is seen by activists as a response to a lawsuit filed by the Glad Day Bookstore in Toronto. The suit is in protest to the Canadian government's new policy prohibiting materials which depict "buggery."

Sasha Alyson, publisher of In the Life, urges letters of protest to: Alan Gottlieb, Canadian Ambassador to the U.S., Canadian Embassy, 1746 Massachusetts Avenue NW, Washington DC 20036, as well as to local Canadian consulates.