

Third annual OutWrite conference

"To not tell the truth of our lives is the worst crime we can put to our writers."

by Jan Nathan Long

The third annual OutWrite conference for lesbian and gay writers was held in Boston on March 20-22, drawing over 1,500 participants and 200 workshop speakers. There was an awareness drawn to the racial and cultural diversity within the lesbian and gay community and our need to address those concerns in our writing.

"When is an ending closure? When does closure become a new beginning? Closure involves the will to remember, to pull disparate threads and put them together," spoke poet Melvin Dixon at the close of the third annual OutWrite conference to a crowd of over 1000.

Dixon was addressing how to deal with death ("I may not be here next year for this conference but I'll be somewhere, listening for my name") as much as he was writing. At OutWrite '92 there were many reminders that lesbian and gay writers needed to work through both.

One way for many of those who spoke was to simply make lists. As the world comes to us like the rapid flipping of cable channels it's no wonder the most lucid reaction is to simply list what is being said, and more importantly, what is not, in the hopes that it will point to something clearer, fuller, less schizophrenic.

Like Alan Bell's initiation of the *calling of the names*: the audience standing one by one to list the names of those who have died. One person saying simply, "Unknown."

Like Mariana Romo-Carmona's list of South American and North American tribes, of people never mentioned in her history class. "And so with this we were taught that some lives were important and others were not," she said as those with indigenous American ancestry performed a blessing ceremony.

Like John Manzone's list of the 11 concentration camps where over 120,000 Japanese-Americans were sent exactly 50 years ago.

Like Leslea Newman's found poems: "Tomatoes," a list of sexually provocative words taken from a seed catalogue; and "Road Signs," a sensual journey through orgasm using only words found on signs (slow, proceed with caution, slippery when wet...).

The opening speeches were on survival, Romo-Carmona beginning with a demand from the audience of writers: "Every lesbian and gay writer is faced with the truth. We cannot pretend not to know. History is never so important except when we have no access to it." She then reviewed a history of indigenous American people from the time of the first European explorers. "If what we are talking about is survival, it has to be for all of us."

Dorothy Allison, the second opening speaker, began with a similar plea: "The world needs to be remade. The world needs more people with large ambitions. The world needs more revolutionaries," Allison said to a packed auditorium opening night. "To not tell the truth of our lives is the worst crime we can put on our writers. I want to talk about the truths in our lives. More than that, I want you to do it. I want you to do more than just survive."

If the message was to write truth, and to write that from the gut, there was also a message to beware of false desires. There was much publisher bashing at the conference, with sessions on how to self publish, and how to create your own 'zine. Rachel Pepper, publisher of 'zines *Cunt* and



PHOTO BY MISH

Essex Hemphill

Queer City, was leery of even mainstream lesbian and gay magazines, such as the *Advocate* and *OUT/LOOK*, as having "a lust for change [which] changed to a lust for profit," stating that only "photocopied acts of terrorism" offer a relief from "the lobotomisation of culture."

Roxie, of *Girljock*, presented a history of her 'zine, and the power of 'zines in the past few years. "If you're upset with [big publications], thanks to desktop publishing and copying, you can make a statement that they can no longer ignore us."

Criticism also turned to one of the conference's sponsors, *OUT/LOOK* magazine, as well as queer publisher Alyson Press, concerning the newly formed Joseph Beam Award. Named after the black gay activist and writer, the awards, sponsored by Alyson Press, were designed to honor any socially active gay or lesbian writer. Controversy arose when the first year's nominations had no writers of color. Six prominent lesbian and gay writers of color formed a caucus and prepared a statement to address this.

Both Alyson and Jeff Escoffier, who selected the nominees, delivered statements including apologies, and what looked to be a major controversy quickly resolved itself primarily because of *Tongues United* co-producer Essex Hemphill's insistence that the caucus concentrate on creating an award that would honor black gay writers.

"I don't want to beat these men," Hemphill said. "We're not an S/M group." The question Hemphill concentrated on instead was, "What are we going to leave the young black gay and lesbian writers when we are gone?"

The award by Alyson was canceled and plans for a Joseph Beam Award, honoring black gay activist writers is currently in progress. The lesson it provided to the mixed audience was more significant: Devote your energy toward a solution rather than a reaction. Perhaps in this light, Dorothy Allison's comments, to write from a place that demands resolution, solution, prove to be a real challenge. Then you put things together, then you arrive at closure.

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