

TRIBUTE

Honoring a tenacious artist

*The death of Essex Hemphill
is a blow to the literary community*

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by Kristine Chatwood

The literary world suffered a major loss last month with the death of poet Essex Hemphill. Hemphill died Nov. 4, in Philadelphia, of AIDS-related complications. He was 38.

Born in Chicago and raised in Washington, D.C., Hemphill was 14 years old when he began writing. "Tablets, journals, those became my confidants," he told columnist Deb Price in a recent interview.

At the same time that he discovered his gift for writing, Hemphill also discovered his sexuality. His life became the story of the coming together of these two selves—the artist and the black gay man. Hemphill told Deb Price: "I started writing about and addressing my homosexuality because it wasn't there in the black text. And I needed something to be there to validate that my experience was real for me."

Hemphill founded the *Nethula Journal of Contemporary Literature* in 1978, and ran the magazine for several years. In the early '80s he formed Cinqué, a poetry-performance group that at various times included Wayson Jones, Larry Duckette and Chi Hughes. The Coffeehouse, a Washington, D.C., gathering spot for black gay artists, provided him with a refuge from the racism of the District and a place to nurture his artistic growth.

When his friend author-activist Joseph Beam died of AIDS-related complications in 1988 while working on the anthology *Brother to Brother: New Writings by Black Gay Men*, Hemphill took over the task of editing the manuscript. The book, published in 1991, won Hemphill the Lambda Award for editing.

In 1992, Penguin published *Ceremonies*. For this collection of poems, prose and expository writing on the black gay experience and urban life in the United States, he was awarded the National Library Association's New Authors in Poetry Award.

He self-published the books *Diamonds in the*

Kitty (1982), *Plums* (1983), *Earth Life* (1985), and *Conditions* (1986). His work has also appeared in *Black Scholar*, *Essence Magazine*, *Painted Bride Quarterly*, *Gargoyle*, *OUTWEEK*, and other publications. His poems are featured in two of Marlon Riggs' films, *Tongues Untied* and

ships, including a PEW Charitable Trust Fellowship in the Arts. In 1993, he was a visiting scholar at the J. Paul Getty Center for the History of Art and Humanities.

Hemphill was uncompromising in his work. In a *Washington Blade* story, his friend Wayson

said, Hemphill's artistic achievements more than justify his tenacity.

Hemphill's impact on black gay men in general and black gay writers in particular is profound. "If it hadn't been for him and for writers such as Stephen Corvin and Joe Beam, who were published and saw success in the mid-1980s, I don't know if I would have had the courage to write a story about black gay men," author E. Lynn Harris told the *Blade*. "He was speaking for a segment of the population that hadn't been heard."

Harris added, "We've lost another great African American gay writer who contributed a lot but could have contributed more, if there had not been this disease and [there had been] more time."

In the same *Blade* story, Larry Duckette said, "He charged and inspired so many people—especially black gay Americans—into appreciating and loving themselves. He had such a talent and was so eloquent in his instructions to us. I think he will always be remembered. All of us changed because of his message."

At the time of his death, Hemphill was working on three projects. The first, *Standing in the Gap*, is a novel about the mother of a gay man with AIDS, who challenges a preacher's condemnation of her son. *Bedside Companions* is a collection of short stories by black gay men. The third project is *The Evidence of Being*, narratives of older black gay men.

Hemphill is survived by his friends; his mother, Mantalene Clark Hemphill of Clinton, Md.; his father, Warren A. Hemphill Sr. of Ft. Washington, Md.; three sisters, Tywan Hemphill and Lois Holmes, both of Washington, D.C., and Sandra Littlejohn of Lawrenceville, Ga.; and one brother, Warren A. Hemphill Jr. of High Point, N.C.

Funeral services were held Nov. 9 at Full Gospel AME Zion Church in Temple Hills, Md.




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—Essex Hemphill


Black Is, Black Ain't, and in the documentary *Looking for Langston*.

Hemphill received several writing fellow-


Jones said that Hemphill constantly pushed for "clarity and honesty of expression in his work." Though some found him to be demanding, Jones



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