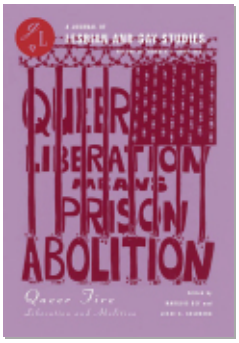
African American Gay Men: Mourning and Artistic Resistance in a Time of Pandemic



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AFRICAN AMERICAN GAY MEN

Mourning and Artistic Resistance in a Time of Pandemic

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Evidence of Being: The Black Gay Cultural Renaissance and the Politics of Violence
Darius Bost
Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019. xi + 181 pp.

In the introduction to his absorbing study of Black gay men's artistry and activism in the seventies, eighties, and nineties, critic Darius Bost expounds upon its title: "By naming this proliferation of black gay cultural production a renaissance, I hope to demonstrate the significance of collectivity to black gay aesthetics, cultural production, and politics, and to black gay men's everyday struggles against the various formations of violence targeting them" (6). Informed by Bost's claim and expanding it to our contemporary cultural moment, I would adduce that the last five to ten years have marked a continuation of the fertile creative decades Bost's study foregrounds. Consider the profusion of works by and about African American gay men in multiple genres: Raoul Peck's Oscar-nominated documentary *I Am Not Your Negro* (2016), scholar/commentator Eddie Glaude's *Begin Again: James Baldwin's America and Its Urgent Lessons for Our Own* (2020), and Barry Jenkins's 2018 acclaimed film adaptation of *If Beale Street Could Talk*—all avouching James Baldwin's inestimable impact on the American consciousness long after his 1987 death; 2020 Pulitzer winners Jericho Brown (poetry) and Michael R. Jackson (drama); the publication of heralded novels by Robert Jones (*The Prophets*) and Bryan Washington (*Memorial*), as well as memoirs by such authors as Rashod Ollison, Darnell Moore, Saeed Jones, and Brian Broome; and perhaps the most monu-

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mental and widely lauded work, Jenkins's Academy Award–garnering film *Moonlight* (2016). We might even include the meteoric rise of recording artist Lil Nas X (Montero Lamar Hill), so unabashedly Black and gay and mainstream that he's graced the stage of SNL. Thus, while the term *renaissance* might seem a bit belabored given its fulsome applications and misapplications (think here of such shibboleths as "respectability politics" or "intersectionality"), it nevertheless seems apposite given the proliferation of Black gay men's voices in so many mediums.

Bost's *Evidence of Being: The Black Gay Cultural Renaissance and the Politics of Violence* is a signal achievement, part of a burgeoning body of African American LGBTQ-centered studies by scholars such as GerShun Avilez, Jeffrey McCune, Kevin Munford, C. Riley Snorton, and Calvin Warren. Concentrating on New York City and Washington, DC, as the twin epicenters of Black gay men's culture in myriad forms, Bost excavates and explores voices and lives that may be foreign to even the most well-versed students of gay African American history. The breadth and scope of Bost's subjects—from African American literature scholar, novelist, and poet Melvin Dixon; the performance troupe "Cinque" and writers for/publishers of *Blacklight* and *Black/Out* magazines; to the NYC-based "Other Countries" writing/performance collective and even a memorial service for a prominent member of this group—explode boundaries separating popular, academic, literary, mainstream, and vernacular cultures and forms. And while the book is grounded in foundational Black LGBTQ scholarship by such seminal thinkers as Marlon Ross, Sharon Holland, Phillip Brian Harper, Robert Reid-Pharr, Cathy Cohen, and E. Patrick Johnson, Bost distinctively builds on it in articulating innovative critical and theoretical methodologies for gay Black men outside the orbit of hegemonic white gay popular and academic spheres, as well as sexually parochial Black institutions.

In the book's introduction, "On Black Gay Being," Bost puts forth his critical/theoretical framework, briefly expounding on the ontological challenges that render Black gay male subjectivity alternatively vexing, perilous, provisional, and elusive. While emphatically distinguishing his scholarly apparatus from Afropessimism, Bost avers that his study "illuminates how black trauma (rooted in slavery and its afterlife) and queer trauma (rooted in homophobia, transphobia, and AIDS) converged during this historical moment to doubly mark the black gay body as a site of social and corporeal death" (4). Contrapuntally, a cavalcade of gay men engaged in manifold artistic expressive endeavors—creative writing, literary scholarship, performance art, and political activism—to assert nuanced iterations of Black gay subjectivity amid multiple assaults on their personhood. As Bost argues, this violence occurred on multiple fronts—primarily but not limited to the state in the

form of abject neglect during the AIDS plague, as well as "pick-up" murders in Washington, DC, and Black heteropatriarchal institutions such as the church and its fervent denunciation of its gay brethren generally and those with AIDS specifically. Given this inimical reality in which same-gender-loving men were buffeted by unrelenting attacks and the trauma left in their wake, Bost ultimately "turn[s] to black gay literature and culture as evidence for reimagining black gay personhood as a site of possibility, imbued with the potential of creating a more livable black gay social life" (4). The introduction also establishes the primary subjects of Bost's critical exploration: Melvin Dixon and his notion of "double cremation," which encapsulates Black gay men's imperceptibility vis-à-vis the dominant Anglocentric queer culture and the coaxial pruning of gayness from the hetero-orthodox African American "family tree"; the network of bars, social clubs, performance spaces, and AIDS organizations in New York and Washington; the writings of the renegade performance artist/poet-essayist/activist Essex Hemphill as well as unpublished works by lesser-known writers; and visual images in the forms of photographs and journal covers. Bost clearly enunciates his methodological modus operandi: "I privilege the archival recovery of authors and texts marginalized in black studies and queer studies that allows for readings of loss and abjection alongside political longing and subjective possibilities" (17).

The first chapter, "The Contradictions of Grief: Violence and Value in *Blacklight* Magazine," probes a flashpoint from the DC Black gay scene in the seventies and eighties: a series of "trick murders" in which gay men were slain by younger men from whom they hoped to procure sex. Conjunctively, Bost explores the varied responses to these crimes by the mainstream press (*Washington Post*), the white gay press (*Washington Blade*), local niche publications such as the Black gay periodical *Blacklight*, and denizens of the relatively insular local Black gay social club scene. Bost mines not only relatively obscure written resources but also accounts from his interviews with such figures as *Blacklight* publisher Sidney Brinkley, the venerable activist Courtney Williams, and other, primarily middle- and upper-class men affiliated with a vibrant if *sub rosa* gay men's social club culture who witnessed firsthand the harrowing events that enveloped and demoralized the community. The conclusions Bost draws are, regrettably, unsurprising—the mainstream press's titillating reporting on the "deviant" Black gay men's demimonde and the attendant hypersexualizing of murder victims and perpetrators; the white gay press's ambivalence given the victims' race. I do take issue with Bost's admonition of Brinkley for his admittedly serrated description of "rough trade" as "usually dirty, foul-mouthed, under-educated, sexually repressed, emotionally immature and angry" (32). Bost extrapolates from this an overarching condemna-

tion of tragic figures such as Ronald Gibson (aka, "Star"), a transvestite sex worker who was shot to death in an area where men solicited sex with "drag queens": "Laying claim to the value of black gay men murdered by hustlers inadvertently participates in the processes of Othering that mark as normative the violence done to drag queen prostitutes like Ronald Gibson/Star. In turn, this devaluation of their [Gibson/Star's] death reflects broader social divisions in the emerging black gay cultural landscape in Washington, DC" (32). While such class-based hierarchies are inevitable in a city as economically disparate as the nation's capital, Bost's reading of Brinkley's denunciation of "rough trade" as somehow analogous to those who would Other and victim-blame sex workers such as Gibson seems incongruous. There is a marked difference between predatory young men who may or may not be sex workers (i.e., "hustlers," "rough trade") preying on perennially imperiled Black gay men (class distinctions notwithstanding) and transvestite sex workers often driven to the streets for economic survival.

Buttressing his analysis of the community's reactions to these crimes and the psychic personal and collective trauma they induced, Bost offers compelling, scrupulous readings of the prolific if underappreciated Hemphill, specifically his elegiac poems on death, grief, and longing. Especially commendable is Bost's discussion of the largely unknown performance ensemble "Cinque," which consisted of Hemphill and dancers/singers Larry Duckette and Wayson Jones (the text includes a rare photo of the group). Bost recuperates and reprints their unpublished poem/performance piece "The Brass Rail," which he then explicates as a "site of ecstasy and fear, of communal eroticism and the shared threat of terror" (43). The study's opening chapter is a microcosm of the entire study: the range of materials explored and included—print journalism, poetry, unpublished work, performance pieces, interviews—makes it a primer for those interested in or unaware of DC's dynamic if underacknowledged Black gay cultural life and times.

Chapter 2, "Loneliness: Black Gay Longing in the Works of Essex Hemphill," continues in the vein of the previous one, dissecting Hemphill's essays and poems as, concurrently, lamentations for Black gay men suffering in the throes of AIDS; odes for a sort of existential loneliness more pronounced for men doubly othered; and declarations for what the poet-activist called a "functioning self," one that reconciles a heretofore fractured self rendered so by racism and homophobia. Bost punctiliously chronicles Hemphill's protracted struggle with two antiphonal but stentorian forces: (1) mainstream white queer culture, for whom Black gay men were either invisible or *hyper-visibly* objectified—the latter reified in photographer Robert Mapplethorpe's disembodied images of faceless Black men's torsos and sex organs, and (2) Hemphill's native racial community, an inhospitable homespace

from which he feels alienated because of its long-standing abjuration of same-sex desire. Bost approaches Hemphill's fraught life and work with sensitivity without becoming maudlin or indulgent. In addition, this chapter contains a brief but engrossing discussion of Hemphill's contemporary Joseph Beam, a journalist and gay rights activist who compiled and edited the landmark volume *In the Life: A Black Gay Anthology* (1986) (Bost's recuperation of Beam dovetails nicely with Kevin Mumford's extensive exploration of him in his 2016 book, *Not Straight, Not White: Black Gay Men from the March on Washington to the AIDS Crisis*). Bost adroitly interlards Hemphill's writing about Beam—whom Hemphill considered "my brother" —with the tragic circumstances of Beam's death and Hemphill's own life and words in theorizing Black gay individual and collective loneliness. Bost trenchantly argues that their mutual personal despair was especially ironic given that both were widely known for their outspoken public stances on gay rights and AIDS. In Bost's estimation, public memorials such as the AIDS quilt could do little to mitigate the multitudinous forces arrayed against Black gay being and beings. His remark about the silence and mystery surrounding Beam's death applies to Hemphill as well: "The public efforts of black gay artists could not always alleviate their individual psychic pain" (58).

Chapter 3, "Postmortem Politics: The Other Countries Collective and Black Gay Mourning," is perhaps the book's most consequential, for its comprehensive and elucidating discussion of a neglected but pioneering Black gay men's writing coterie. With its origins in the "Blackheart" collective in New York City, "Other Countries" was founded by members of the original group in 1986. Bost makes the salient point that such clusters of writers of color remain largely elided in the annals of LGBTQ literary histories, while white collectives such the Violet Quill have been heralded and widely researched. The chapter's historiographic value cannot be understated, evinced in its thorough chronicling and unpacking of the group's evolution from a "new writers' workshop" to a space fostering artistic comradery, social contact, and different forms of intimacy—a welcome alternative to the often alienating and claustrophobic milieu of bars and clubs. While Bost does not gloss over its internecine conflicts, he deftly integrates interviews with former members, psychological and theoretical scholarship on mourning, excerpts from the group's public performances, and writings from its two anthologies (1988, 1993) to create a cogent treatment of Black gay creative culture in the midst of the AIDS pandemic. While its genesis was literary, especially compelling is Bost's discussion of the group's public performances, the venues ranging from esoteric (the Studio Museum in New York) to au currant (Tracks nightclub in Washington). The discussion of the funeral of Other Countries' member Donald Woods exemplifies these men's assertions of

agency in grimly oppressive conditions. Bost quotes his interview with writer Marvin K. White, who attended Woods's memorial service. Woods's family expunged any references to the writer-activist's sexuality and AIDS-related death in a sort of straight-washing in the service of heteronormative "respectability." However, the solemn event metamorphosed into what White deemed "Our Black Gay Stonewall" when another OC member, Assotto Saint, brazenly disrupted the service and proclaimed that Woods was "out, was gay, and had died of AIDS, not a heart attack" (89). Bost provides a nuanced discussion of the politics of public mourning rituals and how institutions such as the Black church and family during the 1980s promulgated "a fictive boundary between black homosexuality and heterosexuality, as well as maintaining the fiction of the black family and the black church as solely heterosexual institutions" (90). While I would not dispute this claim, I think Bost might have better contextualized these execrable fallacies—noting, for instance, that African American institutions by and large often mimic their more powerful white counterparts; thus, politicians and clerics such as Jesse Helms, Jerry Falwell, Sr., and New York's Cardinal John O'Connor were mounting a ruthless assault on homosexuality generally and AIDS victims specifically in the halls of government buildings and in their "sacred, apolitical" edifices. This by no means mitigates the suffering Woods and Hemphill et al. experienced within their home communities, but it does situate lamentable events such as Woods's straight-washing within the larger eighties' context of antigayness, AIDS-phobia, and antiblackness. Still, Bost offers a convincing counter-hermeneutics with respect to Black gay men's creative impulses and productions, public personae, performances, and modes of mourning, remembering, and resisting.

The final chapter concentrates on the diaries and other writings of Melvin Dixon (1950–92), another premature casualty to a pestilence that snuffed out incalculable numbers of Black gay luminaries in so many fields. At once information laden and haunting, this chapter provides a wrenching account of a true renaissance man who recalls artistically ambitious gay forebears Richard Bruce Nugent and James Baldwin. Dixon felt agonizingly that "perhaps I just don't understand how to be human" by virtue of a gay identity that chafed relationships within his biological family (Bost notes that Dixon steadfastly believed that his father never loved him) as well as the larger non-consanguineous African American family; and a Black identity that rendered him subaltern in both the dominant heterocentric Euro-American culture and its smaller but inveterately prejudiced gay counterpart. Despite these multiple levels of abjection, Dixon was inarguably a "black gay genius" (to borrow from the title of a 2014 anthology), Baldwin-esque in his erudition and fluency in multiple expressive forms: literary criticism, poetry, short stories, and novels. While

again employing his considerable close reading skills in using Dixon's fiction as a prism through which to interpret his life, Bost's recuperation and interpretation of Dixon's diary entries is truly enthralling. Like the blues, the pain that Bost channels through these diaries is both personal and collective, apropos given that Dixon witnessed firsthand such tectonic events as the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements, the Women's Movement, Stonewall, and AIDS. Indeed, his brief forty-two-year life, spanning the fifties, sixties, seventies, eighties, and nineties, was lived at the junction of these seismic occurrences. One of the more forceful claims Bost makes in this chapter relates to the disciplinary enterprise of LGBTQ studies, a point that speaks to an enduring deficit in terms of race and scope: "I would include Dixon and other black gay writers among those marginalized by the rise of queer theory" (118). While Bost's scholarship is firmly grounded in queer theory, it is not subsumed by it, nor does he embrace it wholesale and uncritically. In fact, his willingness to engage practitioners who use such academic frameworks to devalue Black gay men whose writings they deem wanting vis-à-vis recondite theories and paradigms is one of the book's many strong suits. The chapter ends with a poignant coda, with Bost situating himself as a personal and professional kindred spirit to the gone-too-soon griot Dixon, reflecting on his own vexed positionality in a world that may be a soupçon less racist and homophobic than the one that menaced Dixon but where "being black and gay" still "registers as a revolutionary act" (126).

Notwithstanding the rare instance where I might have challenged a contention or solicited a bit more contextualizing, *Evidence of Being: The Black Gay Cultural Renaissance and the Politics of Violence* makes a major contribution to the blossoming field of African American LGBTQ studies. In addition to its thoroughly and proficiently executed chapters, the monograph includes an invaluable appendix, composed of "Notable Individuals, Organizations, and Publications," each entry fully annotated. A work that is richly interdisciplinary, *Evidence of Being* is essential reading for students and scholars interested in a fertile era of Black same-gender-loving men writing, performing, and resisting as though their very lives depended on it. I hope that this exceptional study will be the springboard for Bost's next project, perhaps a biography of the oft-neglected Dixon or some other facet of African American LGBTQ culture and history heretofore beyond the radar of mainstream queer studies.

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