CARRY THE WORD

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a bibliography of black LGBTQ books

Compiled by
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Interviews edited by
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Fire & Ink is devoted to increasing the understanding, visibility and awareness of the works of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender writers of African descent and heritage.

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INTRODUCTION

By Reginald Harris

We are what we write; we become what we read.

Writing is not only an act of creation: it is a form of self-creation. We write to discover ourselves and our world, to learn things we did not know we knew. Writing is an act of group creation as well, helping to explore, define, nurture and develop the community that has shaped the author.

One of the impulses behind many works of African-American literature has been this attempt to define ourselves, to discover who we are and not who others say we are, and to let those outside our culture know that we exist, have valuable lives and are more human than those who would deny us freedom would ever grant to us. One of the unfortunate aspects of the lack of understanding and homophobia facing many lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) people of the African diaspora is that very often we have to explain who we are to members of our own communities, to let our own families know that we exist, have valuable lives and are human, and demand the freedom to express all aspects of who we are.

What you hold in your hands is a brief listing of some of these acts of definition and self-creation. Through the multi-voiced, call-and-response choir that is black LGBTQ writing, the song of who we are emerges: brave, vibrant, sexy; at times a little silly, at times self-contradictory; self-aware and proud of our multiple identities; grateful to and sometimes haunted by those who have gone before us, yet valiantly and optimistically looking forward to the future.

Not all the authors in this bibliography are African-American; not all identify as LGBTQ. If the author does self-identify, their work may or may not be as easily defined as “gay” or “queer.” What the bibliography attempts to do is identify work by black LGBTQ writers regardless of content, and point to works we feel are of significant interest to us and those interested in learning more about our community. In keeping with Fire & Ink’s mission to increase the understanding, visibility and awareness of the works of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender peoples and writers of African descent and heritage, you will find in the following pages biographies of our

figures in our past and present, critical commentary on our writers and artists, anthologies which feature the work of our writers in concert with others in their field, as well as individual works by our authors.

Interspersed throughout the bibliography are brief excerpts from interviews where authors speak directly about their work, influences, lives and goals, giving us a valuable window into the lives of working writers.

This is necessarily a work in progress, a living, breathing, expanding organism. There had to be a cut-off point, and the editors know that they have missed writers and titles. They have made an effort to include as many as they could, with particular emphasis on authors who self-published or were published by small presses. Writers and readers are urged to contact the editors to make the next edition of this work more comprehensive.

It is the hope of Fire & Ink that libraries and bookstores will use this bibliography to assist in expanding their collections; that scholars will use it as an aid to their research and curriculum development; and that readers will use it to discover books they may have missed and discover new authors to explore. We believe many of the titles listed here will help members of our family still struggling to define themselves. We are convinced that those looking to understand more about the lives of friends, family, loved ones, neighbors who may be "different" will be enlightened by the works in these pages as well.

Above all, Fire & Ink hopes, perhaps selfishly, that new and established authors and those hoping to be writers will see this work as an opportunity. Despite the number of titles listed here, there remain a great many holes in the group portrait we black LGBTQ writers are creating: not enough biography, autobiography and history; not enough nonfiction and criticism; not enough poetry, fiction or erotica. The field is wide open to us—the number of topics we as people of the African diaspora, we as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) people, we as writers and artists have available for us to explore remains astoundingly vast, an open horizon as wide as our imaginations.

I am because we are. I am because these authors wrote. This is (part of) the ocean I swim in. Jump in: The water's fine.

Recipient of Individual Artist Awards for both poetry and fiction from the Maryland State Arts Council, Reginald Harris is the author of 10 Tongues *(Three Conditions Press), finalist for a Lambda Literary Award and the ForeWord Book of the Year. His work has recently appeared in the* Voices Rising: Celebrating 20 Years of Black Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Writing *and* The Ringing Ear: Black Poets Lean South *anthologies. Co-compiler (with Steven G. Fullwood and Lisa C. Moore) of* Carry the Word: A Bibliography of Black LGBTQ Books, *he is Systems Department Help Desk and Training Manager for the Enoch Pratt Free Library in Baltimore, Md. Harris is a member of the Cave Canem: African-American Poetry Workshop/Retreat family, and board treasurer for Fire & Ink, Inc., an organization devoted to increasing the understanding, visibility and awareness of the works of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender writers of African descent and heritage.*

SUGGESTED BLACK LGBT BOOKS

Aab-Richards, Dirg, et. al. *Tongues Untied*. London: Gay Men's Press, 1987.
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Aarens, Blake C. *Wetting the Appetite.* San Francisco: Suspect Thoughts Press, 2007.
ISBN 0977158241 (erotica)

Ailey, Alvin and A. Peter Bailey. *Revelations: The Autobiography of Alvin Ailey.* Bridgewater, NJ: Baker & Taylor/Replica Books, 1995, 2000.
ISBN 0735100802 (autobiography)

Alayé, Sundiata. *Empty Promises, Private Pain: A Light Out of Darkness.* Washington, DC: Moyo Press, 1999.
ISBN 0967356601 (nonfiction)

Alexander, Denise. *Jada.* Lincoln, NE: iUniverse, 2005.
ISBN 0595356524 (fiction)

Alexis, Renee, Sydney Molare and Fiona Zedde. *Satisfy Me.* New York: Aphrodisia, 2007.
ISBN 0758215657 (erotica)

Allegra, Donna. *Witness to the League of Blond Hip-Hop Dancers.* Los Angeles: Alyson Publications, 2000.
ISBN 1555835503 (short stories)

Allen, boice-Terrel, ed. *Coloring Book: An Eclectic Anthology of Fiction and Poetry by Multicultural Writers.* Pittsburgh: Rattlecat Press, 2003.
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ISBN 0595330223 (poetry)

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ISBN 0374210373 (criticism, memoir)

Als, Hilton. *The Women.* New York: Noonday Press, 1996.
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Amaechi, John. *Man in the Middle.* New York: ESPN Books, 2007.
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Ames, Kevin. *Down Low Secrets: A Story About Black Men Who Have Sex With Other Men.* Lincoln, NE: iUniverse, 2004.
ISBN 0595771483 (fiction)

Anderson, Jervis. *Bayard Rustin: Troubles I've Seen.* Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998.
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Arobateau, Red Jordan. *Ho Stroll I & II: A Black Lesbian Novel.* Oakland, CA: Red Jordan Arobateau, 1994.
ISBN 0970323751 (erotica)

Arobateau, Red Jordan. *Laughter of the Witch: and Other Known Poems.* Oakland, CA: Spirit, 1994.
ISBN 0934172404 (poetry)

Arobateau, Red Jordan. *Lucy and Mickey.* New York: Masquerade/Hard Candy, 1995.
ISBN 1563333112 (erotica)

Arobateau, Red Jordan. *Doing It for the Mistress: Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transexual F*ck Stories, Vol. III.* Oakland, CA: Red Jordan Arobateau, 2000.
ISBN 0970516177 (erotica)

Arobateau, Red Jordan. *The Bars Across Heaven.* Oakland, CA: Red Jordan Arobateau, 1975.
ISBN 0970323700 (fiction)

SAMIYA BASHIR

INTERVIEWED MARCH 2007
By Steven G. Fullwood

Samiya Bashir is the author of *Where the Apple Falls: poems,* editor of *Best Black Women's Erotica 2* and co-editor, with Tony Medina and Quraysh Ali Lansana, of *Role Call: A Generational Anthology of Social & Political Black Literature & Art.* She has also authored two chapbook poetry collections, *Wearing Shorts on the First Day of Spring* and *American Visa.* Bashir is a Cave Canem fellow and a founding organizer of Fire & Ink, a festival for LGBT writers of African descent. www.samiyabashir.com

SGF: *Where are you from, where have you been, and why are you here (in New York)?*
SB: I'm from Ann Arbor, Mich., USA. Midwestern mix-up girl; Somali nomad meets Detroit native. As soon as I got to have say in where I lived and what I did I took it. I've lived from California (L.A. & the Bay) to Chicago to Hot Springs, Ark. I riverstone-skipped through D.C. on my way to landing in New York ten years ago. Why am I here? To do my work. To live and work in an environment that feeds me. I came here to meet the people and experiences that would help me grow. I got to New York ready to take on the world and I did. The world hasn't won quite yet; the battle isn't over and occasionally it even tilts my way.

SGF: *How would you describe your writing? Write it down in iambic pentameter.*

SB:

I.

I hate sonnets; they give me a headache.
All the iambs and rhyme schemes they make me
weak with nausea. These lines they tease and break
my concentration. The time it takes me

to squeeze into its rough-hewn, skin-tight dress
I could have been where I'm going and back
home again. Formulaic wardrobes stress
my slow burning brain cells which clearly lack

the energy to stress my syllables
instead. Writing sonnets? I need a drink
to calm my nerves, make it refillable—
I'll need another if I want to think.

I hate sonnets worse than hothouse flowers.
I have far better ways to waste hours.

II.

I hate myself; I'm always scribbling bunk.
I'm an animal—selfish to the core.
I'm likely to mope about in a funk
eating nothing but junk, sleeping past four

in the afternoon. When finally I wake
you'll wish I'd stayed sleeping. At least that way
you could enter my conscience, try to break
through the fog which blocks every word you say.

Believe me—I want to listen to you!
Can we talk about something vital when
you're through? This very small talk makes me blue.
Buy me a coffin. I'll roll right in.

I hate myself; I'm forgetful and rude
even to poems—the poet obtrudes.

SGF: *What are you working on now?*
SB: I'm currently working on three separate projects—poetry and fiction. In each of these projects I seek a way to slice through the layers of barnacled detritus that is piling up on our collective surfaces. I'm working on stabbing through the leather and the

microfiber, through the labels and the zippers and the snaps, through episode after episode of neo-vaudevillian minstrelsy marketed on every square foot of visible space, through the flesh and the fat and the muscle and the bone, to stick straight into the organs. I'm working on language that can shake loose any of us stuck in an overstimulated stupor into remembering not only how to feel, but how to act both alone and in concert. I'm also working on deciding to quit smoking. I'm working on maximizing my time on airplanes (mission, purpose, destination). I'm working on raising a sweet, willful energetic kitten into proud, diva-hip swinging cathood because, well, that's just something my people do.

SGF: *You are one of the founding members of Fire & Ink. Tell us about the organization.*
SB: Fire & Ink: A Festival for LGBT Writers of African Descent was first held in Chicago in 2002. It was an historic gathering of over 300 LGBT writers and artists of African descent who came together for readings, panels, workshops and fellowship. In addition to its continuing round of regional events in advance of the next national conference, Fire & Ink has also spawned an online community of folks from around the country and around the world. It is an exciting, affirmative, instructive atmosphere for writers — including the legendary, the established and the fledgling — to come together and share and grow our work.

SGF: *Tell me about your writing process. How often do you write?*
SB: I write in bursts. How do you describe a writing process? If it's anything then perhaps it's like breathing for an underwater mammal. I imagine a whale moving through the vastness of ocean, living underwater but breathing air. A great portion of life is spent living it—that's what takes up most of the energy allotted to a body. For the whale, the great portion of life is spent swimming; eating and mating and navigating the waters. In the swim of life, having taken in as much as we can hold, gone as long as we possibly could, maybe we can't even swim another stroke, take another step, without the fear of an absolute failure of the heart, a drowning that will send us slowly sailing to the bottom of the sea. We surface instead, this whale and I. Breathe. Blow. Release all of the oceanworld we've collected in our

travels through the air straight into the sky. Take a breath of its sweetness for ourselves. Get a bit of extra sunlight for warmth and glide back into deep, ready to swim a bit more. Eating. Mating. Navigating. Life.

Now, of course writing is one thing. That's the easy thing. Like breathing it's automatic—you can control it, instill your own rhythm, guide it, stylize it, but you can't not do it. Try to stop breathing and the best we're gonna do is pass out and start all over. Writing is not the difficult part, the difficult part is completing. Shaping. Shaving. Smoothing. Editing. That's the process, but how often? That probably comes in bursts too, but they're bursts I can control. I have more decision-making capacity over the editing and completion. I just must battle that demon clock and find the time where I can.

SGF: *Talk about the genesis of your first book of poetry,* Where the Apple Falls.
SB: *Where the Apple Falls* resides at the intersections between woman/female, both human and environmental, and the concepts to which she is often linked (without her consent): death; rebirth; victim; sexual/perverse. Seasons are crucial: from the birth of Spring through Autumn's final harvest I sought a recasting of the farmer; a reclamation of both fall and redemption, death and (re)birth on her own terms.

SGF: *What next for the Bashir?*
SB: I wish I knew. I'd love to be able to just know what's coming up. It might relax me more. Might not. I'd like to barter for more time. I do know that I want to dig far more deeply into the oft-ignored corners of our shared histories and illuminate voices and stories pressured into silence. I want to create a poetry that shines a light at once gently coaxing from the damp, then demanding insistent illumination upon, images left for dust and abandoned. I want to share stories held deep in the roots of Georgian peach trees, and caught in the shallow breath of Pennsylvania clear cut forests. I hope to pick up a shiny new black pen and create verse as comfortable in the red suede shoes of a 1940s Detroit women's house party as an Oklahoma barn raising or a Memphis mosque. I want to bear witness

to worlds undiscovered or forgotten beneath, above and to the side of this other hammered into our steel-drum heads as "the" world. Or, I might just meet a friend for a drink, and see where the night goes…

Steven G. Fullwood is an archivist for the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in New York City. He founded the Black Gay and Lesbian Archive to aid in the preservation of black lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, same-gender-loving, queer, questioning and in the life history and culture. Fullwood is the author of Funny *(Vintage Entity Press), and a freelance writer whose work has appeared in Africana.com,* Black Issues Book Review*,* Lambda Book Report*, Vibe.com and other publications. He is the board vice president of Fire & Ink.*

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Baldwin, James. *The Devil Finds Work.* New York: Delta, 2000.
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Baldwin, James. *Giovanni's Room.* New York: Delta, 2000.
ISBN 0385334583 (fiction)

Baldwin, James. *Just Above My Head.* New York: Delta, 2000.
ISBN 0385334567 (fiction)

Balfour, Lawrie. *The Evidence of Things Not Said: James Baldwin and the Promise of American Democracy.* Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001.
ISBN 080148698X (nonfiction)

Banks Jr., L. Rollin. *The Dream Without a Name.* Bloomington, IN: Authorhouse, 2005.
ISBN 1420824252 (fiction)

Barbee, Keith. *Exposed.* Pittsburgh: RoseDog Books, 2005.
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Barnard, Ian. *Queer Race: Cultural Interventions in the Racial Politics of Queer Theory.* New York: Peter Lang USA, 2003.
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ISBN 1573441635 (anthology, erotica)

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A FAMILY AFFAIR:

AN INTERVIEW WITH CHERYL BOYCE TAYLOR

By Steven G. Fullwood

Writers who immigrate to other countries often spend time thinking and rethinking about how the worlds they live and dream in conflict or complete one another. Some of them are fortunate; they honor home by remembering, and recognize their contemporary life through acknowledgment. Trinidad-born and Queens-bred **Cheryl Boyce Taylor** is such a writer. A strong presence on the poetry circuit in New York City since the early Eighties, she is the author of two books of poetry, *Raw Air* (1997), and *Night When Moon Follows* (2002). In addition her work has appeared in several anthologies, and she is a well-regarded performer. Boyce Taylor, fifty-two years young, possesses a voice that lays bare the simple yet complex realities of being a Caribbean mother and lesbian who writes to inform, comfort, understand and be understood. What becomes clear in my conversations with Boyce Taylor is her love of story. She delights in language, much like her mother—now a seventy-seven-year-old award-winning storyteller who, still to this day, is called upon to spin yarns. Boyce recalls, "[She] told me stories at bedtime. I think that's where it may have started for me."

Boyce Taylor began honing her craft at the age of eight by writing letters to teachers, family and imaginary friends. "Our teachers always encouraged students to have adventures during school break, and to write stories about them. I loved that! So I always did, but my brother," she says with a laugh, "well, he didn't. Reading and writing was something that really held my attention back then. I clearly remember doing it during summer vacation when life seemed a little dull and dreary."

School also helped Boyce Taylor shape the language she utilizes in her writing. Bored by the work of British writers whose words she describes as "stiff, archaic and rigid," Boyce Taylor was enraptured by the language of her people. "Calypso… offered a less rigid, freer style of writing. I wanted to find a way to capture the speaking voice of my family. Calypso offered room for cursing, gossip, sex talk, lawless, unruly language. I loved it." Boyce Taylor's compassionate

voice is also politically charged. “I write in Trini dialect or patois, to present my people just as they appear in their everyday life, and dialect allows that to happen,” she says. “Now we know how Trini people sound when ‘dey’ mad, when ‘dey’ intimate in ‘dey’ bedroom, when happy/sad. I use Trinidadian dialect in honor of my grandparents who died before I was born. Most of what I know about them is made up, but one thing is for sure: I know how they sounded when they spoke.”

When Boyce Taylor immigrated, alone, to New York in the early 1960s (her mother followed nearly a year later) the seeds of her preoccupations with identity, language and water started taking root. “I was devastated. I didn’t know that I would miss my mother that much,” she says. “I also missed little things that I took for granted, like making ice cream on Sunday, roasting cashew nuts, the dialect, calypso—all of it became so important to me. I knew something was in it that I needed, so I held on for dear life. It was all that I knew.”

Years later writing also came to rescue a twenty-two-year-old mother of one. “[Motherhood] wasn’t what I thought it would be,” she says with a smile. “A little too much work for me!” Again she picked up the pen, and soon after Boyce Taylor began traveling where she found herself immersed, literally, in one of her life-long preoccupations: water. “I didn’t know why I needed to travel to the Caribbean twice a year and get in the water; I just did. My body would be tired, and it called for being submerged in salt water. After that I could go for another nine months.” Water is a reoccurring motif in Boyce Taylor’s work, notably in the multimedia piece “Moon Over River Talking Back,” in which a river complains about being poisoned by humanity, and in her text “Water,” which was commissioned by Jacob’s Pillow with funding by the National Endowment for the Arts for Ronald K. Brown, founder and artistic director of Evidence, a contemporary dance company. Brown was drawn to the richness of Boyce Taylor’s voice, and was determined to work with her. “I began dreaming about water and even when I was awake, water was all over my life. I called Cheryl, and she sent me over ten pages of text within twenty-four hours,” says Brown. Boyce Taylor would recite the text as Brown improvised. “It was a special way to work, and I learn a lot each time we come together,” he says. Currently the two artists are in the research stage of another

collaboration, "Redemption."

Boyce Taylor's contemporaries tend to use similar adjectives when describing her. "Exuberant, curious, sometimes silly, and truly generous," says Donna Lee Weber, writer and longtime friend. "I would describe her as vivacious, alert, at times maternal, full of life, persistent and commandeering," says Pamela Sneed, fellow writer and author of *Imagine Being More Afraid of Freedom Than Slavery*, and of the forthcoming collection of memoirs, essays and stories, "20 Minutes Was Forever."

Indeed for the past three decades Boyce Taylor's work has made a mark, in New York and nationally. Besides tirelessly performing her work at bookstores, colleges, libraries and other venues, in 1994 she represented New York at the National Poetry Slam, and toured as a road poet with the Lollapalooza Music Festival. Most recently she was named poet-in-residence at the Caribbean Literary and Cultural Center at the Brooklyn Public Library. "I hope to infuse the teens and adults that I will be working with with the joy, wonder, excitement and adventure of poetry," she says. "The primary goal of the residency is to reach as wide an audience of teens as possible to expose them to writing and reading poetry, and to produce a publication. Poets House, who partnered with Brooklyn Public, will be watching this program closely as a model to duplicate nationwide."

As for being a lesbian in this position, Boyce Taylor is clear about her primary focus. "Truthfully, being a lesbian has not come up yet. Unfortunately Caribbean folks are still very homophobic," she says. "I am not closeted (Cee, her lover of four years, inspired the love poems in *Night When Moon Follows*), but for me being a Caribbean woman poet is the proudest mantle that I can wear. I do not wear my rainbow flag to work, but I won't ever shy away, or be untruthful whenever the topic or discussion conies up. I am a proud lesbian, but it is not my first identity. Poet is."

And for Boyce Taylor, storytelling is a family affair. In celebration of Mother's Day she will be performing a reading with her son, Phife, who is a member of the hip hop trio, A Tribe Called Quest. Consider that in the fourteen years while she was raising her son Boyce Taylor concurrently built a successful career as a respected writer, and managed to earn a bachelor's from York College in

theater, another from Long Island University in education and a master's degree from Fordham University in social work. And she shows no signs of slowing down. In the months ahead Boyce Taylor is keeping busy with other projects, including finishing a manuscript of poetry called "Where There Are Bones."

Although her projects are numerous, Boyce Taylor's mission remains steadfast. "As a Trinidadian living in America, I live in a world of duality. It is incumbent upon me to represent both, with equal amounts of fairness and justice. Trinidadian dialect for me makes a political statement," she says. "It represents the African griot, or oral tradition. It also represents a departure from the language of the colonizer. My job here is to capture all that has been lost through our first passage, and through migration. That is the ultimate work of my poetry."

Steven G. Fullwood is publisher of Vintage Entity Press.

First published in Lambda Book Report*, February/March 2003. Reprinted with permission of the author. For more information, visit www.cherylboycetaylor.com.*

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SHARON BRIDGFORTH

INTERVIEWED JANUARY 2005, MARCH 2007
By Steven G. Fullwood

Sharon Bridgforth is the Lambda Award-winning author of *the bull-jean stories* and Lambda Award finalist *love conjure/blues,* a performance/novel. The premiere performance of *love conjure/blues* was produced by The University of Texas at Austin's Center for African & African American Studies. Bridgforth is an Alpert Award Nominee in the Arts in Theatre; her work has been presented nationally at venues, including: The Madame Walker Theatre Center—Indianapolis, IN; Walker Art Center—Minneapolis, MN; the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival—Walhalla, MI; and Highways Performance Space—Santa Monica, CA. Bridgforth has received support from the National Endowment for the Arts Commissioning Program; The National Endowment for the Arts/Theatre Communications Group Playwright in Residence Program; and the Rockefeller Foundation Multi-Arts Production Fund Award.

Bridgforth has developed an innovative style of teaching creative writing that she calls Finding Voice. Bridgforth has facilitated the Finding Voice method as part of long-term residency programming for institutions around the country, including The Austin Project (sponsored by The University of Texas at Austin's Center for African & African American Studies); Hamilton College—Clinton, NY; and the Austin Latina/Latino Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Organization (ALLGO)—Austin, TX. Bridgforth is executive producer of the *Finding Voice Radio Show,* funded by the Funding Exchange/The Paul Robeson Fund for Independent Media. www.sharonbridgforth.com

SGF: *Would you give our readers a synopsis of your latest book,* love conjure/blues*?*
SB: In essence *love conjure/blues* is about love/juke joint spirit circle praying sinning carnal ancestral love. It is a jazz piece with a blues beat that considers a range of possibilities of gender expression. Love conjure/blues is a performance novel— a polyrhythmic ritual within which the living the dead the past the future co-exist.

SGF: *Talk about your writing process.*
SB: It is looong. Basically I get a feeling/a haunting first. Usually I can't put words on it for a while. I find a song that fits the feeling and play it over and over until some clarity comes. Once I have a sense of what the piece might be about I read read read/usually autobiographies and reader friendly history books that touch on the subject. Then I have as many conversations as possible on the subject/look at photos if I can/and just pray till the words come. Usually it takes about a year or more for the first real gush of words. Once I have a good first draft it can take up to two years more of really working the piece. After I have the final draft (if it's a novel) Lisa C. Moore (publisher, RedBone Press) works with me some more to help me flush the kinks out/'cause I always gots kinks, baby. Then it's complete. And then/I start the whole process over with a new work.

SGF: *How does writing help heal the world...*
SB:
One Heart at a time. We Heal ourselves first.
We tell ourselves the truth.
We remember things buried.
We unmask/reveal/Dream.

Vulnerability/compassion/precision/and rigor are the tools
and when we truly use them
when we are courageous
writing does what it is supposed to do—it Heals.
Building nurturing extending celebrating humanity/liberation and dignity of all people globally.

SGF: *In 2003, you produced* amniotic/flow*, a spoken word/music CD with your daughter, Sonja Perryman. What was the inspiration behind the project?*
SB: I was an artist-in-residence at ALLGO [an Austin, Texas-based organization] at the time. The (then) artistic director (Ixchel Rosal) asked me which work I wanted the organization to support me in developing. I picked *amniotic/flow*. Daniel Alexander Jones had workshopped *amniotic/flow* with Sonja and I the year before (which

helped us complete the writing and experience it as a staged reading). Sonja felt that it was important that there be a positive document of a relationship between a straight (black) daughter with a lesbian mother and I was interested in exploring what it was like to have my baby gurl all grown up. We adapted the material that we wrote during our work with Daniel and performed a mix of spoken word, songs and monologues. In making the CD we had the opportunity to work with some brilliant collaborator/musicians: Lourdes Perez, Amy L. Van Patten and Camille Rocha.

SGF: *Give us a brief history of ALLGO (Austin, Latina/o Lesbian Gay Bi-sexual Transgender Organization).*
SB: ALLGO is a queer people of color organization founded by Latinas/o's in 1985. ALLGO's programs include: case management for people living with HIV and AIDS; community organizing and civic participation; outreach and education; and a cultural arts season. ALLGO works towards its vision through cultural arts, health and advocacy programming by: supporting artists and artistic expression within our diverse communities; promoting health within a wellness model; mobilizing and building coalitions among groups marginalized by race/ethnicity, gender/gender identity, sexual orientation/sexual identity to enact change. I have worked with ALLGO in many capacities over the years, and currently I serve as the artistic director.

SGF: *How did you get involved with the radio show, "finding voice"?*
SB: I have mentored lots of writers over the years. As a touring artist I've met an incredible number of extremely talented artists. As a result I just wanted the opportunity to document and make accessible some of these voices. Austin is a city wealthy in human resources. There are lots of artists, lots of techie geniuses and lots of activists. A group of us committed to making the radio show happen and the funding exchange: the Paul Robeson Fund for independent media proved the perfect source of support for us.

SGF: *How did you become involved with this project? Who are some of the others artists?*

SB: The Austin Project is the result of the vision of Dr. Joni Jones who is the Associate Director of the Center for African and African American Studies at University of Texas atU.T. Austin. It was her idea to bring folk who identify as artists, scholars and activists together for an intense process/to have them in the room together so to speak and see how they might affect and inform each other's work and vision. Dr. Jones and I have worked together for twelve years; she dramaturged some of my performance pieces and she helped me in the early development of my theatre company (the root wy'mn theatre company) back in the day. However, I think it was because of the mentoring that I have done that she asked me to be the anchor artist for this process. I have developed a method of facilitating creative writing (which I call "finding voice"); I use that facilitation method during the Austin Project. We are going on our third year now. The group expands a bit each year. We meet for ten weeks. Four hours plus a week. It is a life- changing experience each year. Guest artists have been: Laurie Carlos, Robbie McCauley, Daniel Alexander Jones, Carl Hancock Rux, and Helga Davis.

SGF: *Talk about your recent project, the* love conjure/blues *text installation.*
SB: Imagine being in a room… encircled by walls that are screens (made of cloth) with small altars in corners — made of dirt and water and projected images— you are part of a Living story/unfolding with the author present/as Narrator/as participant & Witness with you in a world of projected images and sound that fills the surrounding enfolding breathing Space…

The *love conjure/blues* text installation is a multi media production that includes live narration by the author (me).

love conjure/blues is a performance/novel published by RedBone Press. Jen Simmons/a writer, director and designer whose work lives in the liminal spaces between the convergence of film, live performance, and the web has created and will install the film that is the digital environment that I will narrate live inside of. We are presenting this work in Austin, Texas June 15-June 23, 2007 at the Off Center, and will tour the work after that. For booking and other information go to:

http://loveconjureblues.com or sharon.bridgforth@gmail.com

“In these times of war; deeper listening, remembered history, standing in humanity, self-expression, will save us. I intend this project to provoke transformation. Audiences are asked to step into the world the piece creates and experience the work viscerally/in their bodies as they participate as witnesses. Together we will be in a constant state of being changed by each other live in the piece; which is ultimately about Love.”

—Bridgforth

SGF: *Describe yourself as a conjurer.*
SB: Living breathing praying crying opening feeling writing dancing loving being Living breathing praying crying opening feeling writing dancing loving being Living breathing praying crying opening feeling writing dancing loving being Living breathing praying crying opening feeling writing dancing loving being

SGF

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BRENT DORIAN CARPENTER

INTERVIEWED SEPTEMBER 2005

By Steven G. Fullwood

Brent Dorian Carpenter is the author of *Man of the Cloth, This Time Around, The 21st Century Chronicles of Thugg the Barbarian King* and *Bald Ambition*. He lives and writes in Detroit, Mich. www.bdcbooks.com

SGF: *Talk about your early years on this planet.*
BDC: I was born April 19, 1964 in Detroit. My father, Spencer Carpenter, was an elementary school principal and my mother Carmen was a music teacher, so education was highly valued in my family. I was double-promoted from second grade to third because I was reading on a college level. It's funny how that used to mean something. My parents divorced when I was 13, and that's when the manic-depression started, and has followed me the rest of my life.

SGF: *When did you first start writing? Why science fiction?*
BDC: When I was very young, I was hooked on reading my older bothers' classic Marvel Comics and wanted nothing more than to be a comic book artist. I used to sit up for days and weeks on end making up my own stories and putting them down on paper. I didn't realize it at the time, but I was plotting and writing along with the art. In the early 1990s, I had the opportunity to publish several titles derived from an international super-team I co-created called U.N. Force. It was featured on CNN/Headline News in March 1993, my first fifteen minutes of fame. I soon realized that I was the worst illustrator at my own comic company and made the conscious decision to abandon my art career and focus on writing. Much of the sci-fi elements in my work can be explained simply by stating that I was a huge *Star Wars* freak as a kid (and adult), and those movies had a very dramatic impact on my creative thinking.

SGF: *You recently released two books,* The 21st Century Chronicles of Thugg the Barbarian King *and* Bald Ambition*. Why did you drop*

both books within weeks of each other? How do they complement each other?
BDC: *Bald Ambition* is a compilation of work produced during my three-year stint as a journalist/columnist for a gay newspaper called *Between the Lines* that I had been planning on producing for a couple of years. I am very proud of that groundbreaking work and wanted to publish it myself so the whole world will one day know. It's a legacy thang.

I started writing *Thugg* in May 2004. I found out that my father was sick with lung cancer just a few weeks later and he died after being hospitalized for thirty-three days. That was the first of several horrific calamities I endured while writing *Thugg*. It's truly a miracle that I was able to stay focused and finish it. My father left me some money that I invested into getting both books published. It was a now-or-never scenario—who knows when I would have come across that kind of greens again! Those books are my future and now they are out there forever. Also, now I have four books out, hopefully making me that much more marketable to a major publishing house.

The books are totally unrelated and, if anything, they show two very different writing styles, two different sides of me as a writer. *BA* focuses more on my columnsist/journalism, *Thugg* on me as outrageous fiction writer/narrator.

SGF: *Tell us about* Thugg *and* Bald Ambition*. Give us a synopsis for both books.*
BDC: *Bald Ambition* is a compilation of seventy-five award-winning columns about my being black, gay, HIV+ and bipolar in America;, and forty drawings and bios of black gay historical figures, that I wrote between 2001 and 2004 for *Between the Lines*. Chronologically, it's written third, between *This Time Around* and *Thugg*, although production delays have it coming out last. It also contains six filthy short erotic fantasies called "Verse Perverse," and another series from the paper called "Black Pride Diaries," which simultaneously chronicled my 2002-03 summer book tours as well as the Black Pride movement.

I reproduced my stories about the Adodi Retreat and the Fire & Ink Writers Festival, two events that had an enormous impact on how I more positively view myself as a black gay man and as a writer. I'm really fucked up over the fact that I missed this year's Adodi Retreat and that Fire & Ink 2 has been postponed. I was determined to get to both events.

Thugg is a whirlwind comedy/drama about an ancient African monarch who is discovered frozen in the ice atop Mt. Kilimanjaro. He is transported to an Ivy League university in Massachusetts, where a way is discovered to thaw him and bring him back to life. Thugg is a black man who has never seen buildings, glass, domesticated animals or white people. Cue drama.

The only two African-American members of the faculty are brought in to clean up the white folks' mess—Dr. Quantez Phillips, a psychologist, and his best friend Dr. Ruth Haynes, a linguistics expert. Their unenviable task is to help the 12,000-year-old barbarian learn to navigate our culture of racism, sexism, homophobia, drugs, guns, paparazzi and prisons—and in the course of doing so, they both become embroiled in a very messy sexual relationship with Thugg and wind up duking it out for his brutish affections. It's a ghetto fabulous love story with a sci-fi twist!

SGF: *How does being bi-polar contribute to your creative life, if at all?*
BDC: Are you fucking kidding? I started writing both *Man of the Cloth* (my first) and *Thugg* while I was consumed in a classic state of manic euphoria, and suffered a manic-depressive crash near the end of each one. The first occurred when my lover of seven-and-a-half years Albert left me. I had a nervous breakdown and was diagnosed b-p, resulting in an 18-month writer's block in *Man of the Cloth*. The second crash occurred when my last lover Mark, who inspired me to write *Thugg* as a tribute to him and a testament of my love for him, dumped me on our one-year anniversary. I was and remain devastated beyond words, and had to finish the last eight chapters without him. He was the love of my life. I've never known such an unholy pain in

my life, and as a 15-year HIV survivor, trust me, I know about some pain. I tell people that bipolar disorder is the great double-edged sword. For a creative person, it can be as vital as oxygen. If you're in a relationship, it's poison. But my pain is your entertainment!

SGF

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DOUG COOPER-SPENCER

INTERVIEWED DECEMBER 2005, MARCH 2007

By Steven G. Fullwood

Doug Cooper-Spencer, a Cincinnati-based lecturer and freelance writer, has been a gay rights activist for thirty years. He is the author of *This Place of Men.*
www.dougcooperspencer.com

SGF: *What moves you to write? Talk about your writing process.*
DCS: Fascination and the desire to share it. That's what moves me most to write. Fascination by life keeps me listening and noticing things, even the smallest things. I like walking around and riding public transportation, stuff like that, checking people out. We're so profound, and many of us don't even know it. But it's just those things: conversations I have, overhearing conversations, noticing gestures and slight "quirks" that inform me.

Now, as far as theme or subject, as a black gay man, I mostly write about my world, black and gay, and its confluence with the mores of society and culture, specifically religion (which is mostly culture, anyway). Also, I've always had a strong interest in spirituality. Family ties are interesting too. It's a unit that can promise so much, but at times offer so little. It's all fascinating.

As far as my writing process, I need to be more disciplined. Once I have an interest, whether it's a person or an act, I just kind of hang out with it, you know, let it ferment until it begins to take root. That's when the story begins to really come to me.

I usually start out by taking a character who is at the mercy of an issue, and put her or him in a particular setting. That's when the plot starts. From there I listen to the characters and use my own judgment as to what should happen. Many of the characters aren't even planned but end up having a great impact on the story, like Miss Susie or Antonio in my novel, *This Place of Men*. It's organic. I love it.

I try to write at least one hour every day. Some days I end up spending all my time listening to my story in my head, rather than writing, but that's okay, because the story is moving forward. I keep a digital recorder on my belt for inspired moments. I have a really bad memory.

When I first started writing I used to get caught up in measuring everything as I wrote. You know, syntax, word description, stuff like that. It was a hindrance. I discovered that if I just wrote the damn story, I could clean it up during revision. Revision didn't occur to me back then (laughs). So now I just let it flow. To do otherwise interrupts the characters' voices I hear.

SGF: *Tell us about* This Place of Men*. How did you come up with the idea for the book?*
DCS: *This Place of Men* is the story of two men who were once in love as teens. Their relationship was torn apart by the father and minister of one of the young men and as a result, a tragic circumstance occurs. Twenty years later one of the men returns home to confront all the players that led up to this tragedy. The story follows what happens when he returns and the effect of his return. I came up with the idea from a question that I (and I know many other gay men) get whenever I speak before a non-gay audience: "When did you become gay?" I wanted to show that the nascence of one's homosexuality is just like a heterosexual person's.

SGF: *How does* This Place of Men *fit into the constellation of black LGBT literature?*
DCS: It adds to the exploration of black LGBT love, but it also opens up dialogue about God and homosexuality, personal responsibility and social responsibility. And it's a damn good story with a twist that I bet no one will pick up on.

SGF: *What are you working on right now?*
DCS: I just finished a short story that will appear online in the near future at Amazon Shorts. I had a piece published in *Clik Magazine* in January 2007, and I'll be doing more writing on my site. As far as projects underway, I just finished a short story based on an incident

I'd heard from someone about growing up gay in Jamaica. Also, I'm in the middle of a novel about a family, but that's all I can say right now. It grew out of conversations with a co-worker and her son.

I received so many requests to do a sequel to *This Place of Men*. At first I said I wouldn't do that. I don't know if I want to get caught up in serials. I felt the story of Otis and Terrell was done. Readers have other ideas. I resisted working on a sequel until one night, out of nowhere, Terrell spoke to me. He has a story to tell. I get my best ideas as I'm falling asleep. I can't write if my characters don't inform me, if the story hasn't taken root. It comes off artificial if I do. Now I'm deep into that story, and I've put the other one aside for now. Other than that, I have a lot of half-written stories that I want to turn into projects.

SGF

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RASHID DARDEN

INTERVIEWED JULY 2005

By Steven G. Fullwood

Rashid Darden, a graduate of Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., is the author of the novel *Lazarus* (Old Gold Soul). www.oldgoldsoul.com

SGF: *Describe your life as a youngster growing up in Washington, D.C.*

RD: D.C. was a great place to grow up. Even though we had a pretty screwed up local government and failing school system, and crack hit us pretty hard, there were still lots of opportunities for kids like me to grow and thrive. I had many wonderful teachers who encouraged me and community members and mentors who made sure I didn't fall through the cracks. And of course I had an active mom who made sure I read a lot and kept learning every day of the year.

SGF: *Your bio makes note of the fact that you studied in London and Moscow. How did you get there and what were some of the lessons that you gleaned?*

RD: I got to Moscow through a study abroad program through the D.C. Public Schools, one of the many wonderful programs available to kids in D.C. I stayed there for a month with a host family and kept a journal of my experiences. The experiences we had as black kids in Moscow… I mean, think about the hilarity of ten urban youth in Moscow. We had "Negro Watch 1996" where we'd count how many black people we saw in a day. Those darn South Asians always messed up the tally. At any rate, I loved Russia and learning about a completely different culture in general.

London was simply a study abroad program through Georgetown that focused on Shakespeare, both the text and the performance. I technically stayed in Leicester, which is about an hour from London. I loved that town and I would live there. My experience there wasn't as organic as my Russian experience because we stayed in a dorm with other American kids. It felt like "The Real World" instead of the real world. But I still enjoyed studying Shakespeare in his homeland and

seeing his plays performed in all three theaters in Stratford-upon-Avon.

SGF: *When did you first start writing?*
RD: I've been writing all my life. The first time I received any formal training was when the poet Elaine Magarrell visited my fifth grade class and gave us workshops through the Scholars in the Schools program in D.C. She was so encouraging of all of us, but I remember one instance really vividly. Every week she would type out the poems we submitted and make a mini-anthology for us to have. One week, she made the class as a whole recite a poem I had written as a call and response. I was so excited and humbled at the same time. When that program ended, I was incredibly sad, but determined to keep writing.

SGF: *Your first novel*, Lazarus, *is about a young black male coming to terms with himself. How much of the novel mirrors what you've gone through, and how much is the stuff of imagination? If the novel is more autobiographical, then what made you decide to write fiction instead of a flat out bio?*
RD: I believe that *Lazarus* speaks to every gay black man who has ever come out or wanted to come out. I wouldn't say that the novel mirrors my own experiences—I don't think my own experiences are nearly as exciting as Adrian's! *Lazarus* is definitely not autobiographical. There are themes in *Lazarus* that I felt would be best expressed in fiction. An autobiography of Rashid Darden would not touch on all the things I wanted to discuss through *Lazarus*.

SGF: *We spoke a little bit about your marketing campaign for the book. Share a little bit about your strategy in getting your first book out there.*
RD: Everything I learned about marketing my novel came from *The Self-Publishing Manual* by Dan Poynter and *Guerilla Marketing for Writers*, with certain tweaks based on my own personal strengths, interests, and resources.

SGF: *How has your fraternal community [Alpha Phi Alpha] reacted to you and your work?*
RD: *Lazarus* has been purchased by members of the eight largest

African-American fraternities and sororities. Additionally, members of many fraternities and sororities offer me their moral support.

SGF: *What do you want readers to get from* Lazarus?
RD: First and foremost, I want readers to be aware of the diversity of gay black men. We defy stereotypes. I wanted to provide an alternative to the "Down Low" hysteria. My characters are on journeys to outness. Finally, I want readers to be aware of the problem of hazing in black college fraternities by depicting how one otherwise likable young man gets sucked into situations that alienate him from his friends and loved ones.

SGF

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ORDER OUT OF CHAOS: SAMUEL R. DELANY ON CODES, SCIENCE FICTION AND PHILOSOPHY

Interview by Stefen Styrsky

Stefen Styrsky: You are one of the greats of contemporary science fiction and fantasy (SF, F) literature. You identify as gay. You are also black. Where do the three meet, and more importantly, where do they diverge?

Samuel R. Delany: They touch each other everywhere. But what they don't do is overlap in some totally congruent way. I'm black; I'm gay; I'm a science fiction writer. That is to say, all three have histories, are a part of the history of my life. It's even useful to talk about some parts of those histories apart from the others. At other places, such a separation is hopelessly distorting.

Half my life was spent pre-Stonewall. And in my early science fiction work, the only places I ever tried to deal with homosexuality were in tow short stories, "Aye, and Gomorrah" (1967), and "Time Considered As a Helix of Semi-precious Stones" (1968). Both dealt with it in relatively coded ways. To my surprise, both won Nebula Awards from the SFWA (Science Fiction Writers of America) as best short stories of their respective years.

I've told the story a number of times how, when I was walking back to my seat after accepting my award that evening for "Aye, and Gomorrah," as I passed by his table, while the applause was still going on, the late Isaac Asimov took my arm, pulled me down, and—in an attempt to make a joke to defuse a lot of the very strange feelings that were circulating in the room that evening—whispered, "You know, Chip, we only gave you that award because you're Negro."

As much a joke as it was intended to be, as I've said, all three touch at every point—even at the moment one is accepting the highest honor your professional organization can bestow.

You ask as well how they diverge. I don't think they do. But as you live through different moments in history, certain things are easier, or—often—harder; and, indeed, sometimes certain others just

drop into your lap. Before Stonewall, you know you lived in a world very hostile to the public discussion of homosexuality, so you suppressed. That's the word I'd use rather than diverge. Or, as I said, you wrote about it in code.

I grew up middle-class and black. Some people have never forgiven me for not having been poor and black. But, at least in the 1950s, being middle-class and black was not the same as being middle-class and white. Because I lived in Harlem, I lived directly next door to people who were poor—excruciatingly poor, in some cases. They were my best friends. I played with them daily. They were in and out of my house. I was in and out of their apartments. Generally speaking, white folks at the same socioeconomic level do not live cheek-a-jowl with the very poor in the same way. But when you have ghettos, like Harlem, and the people are just not allowed to live outside them, as was the case in New York in those years, that's what happens. As well as the streets of Harlem and Jack and Jill, I had the Dalton School and the Bronx High School of Science to supply social contact. The social variety I was exposed to is there in a lot of my fiction, both SF and other. Indeed, it informs lots of my nonfiction as well.

SS: If coded literature is no longer necessary in this open world, how has that changed your writing?
SRD: I would say, rather, that certain kinds of codes are no longer necessary. But that only means that we resort to certain others. All writing is coded.

When you write the word "dog," you haven't told—or evoked in the reader's mind—everything about every dog in the world, much less everything about any one particular dog. Only by careful cross-coding can you limit, or, indeed, expand the things you can say about anything.

"The young Rottweiler still had the great paws of puppydom, the energy of adolescence, the eyes I called brown but my friend Adam said were clearly copper." The idea of art is to evoke as much as you can as intensely and economically as possible.

I wouldn't be surprised if, because people are less aware of the codes we're ensnared in, sometimes even less gets said than once was—at least about matters gay. I and two successive lovers of mine

had a good deal to do with raising my daughter to adulthood, but when we would watch TV shows about gay men—and in a couple of cases those were shows about gay men with children—we felt as if we were watching shows about Martians, so little of our own lives seemed reflected in those portraits.

The fact that people like my post-adolescent effusions—*The Fall of the Towers, Babel-17, Nova*—enough to keep them in print is warming. But I nourish a wheedling hope such readers might move on to *Dhalgren,* the stories in *Return to Neverÿon, Triton* and the work that deals with the relative here and now, *Atlantis: Three Tales; Times Square Red, Times Square Blue;* and *The Mad Man.*

SS: I suppose one assumes your gay identity is inextricably linked to your SF/F work because you tend to write about characters who engage in activities that in certain societies are considered immoral (unnatural, illogical), but in other times, places, worlds, are perfectly normal—a position with which most gay people would identify. But this also appears to be a concern in your realistic work as well. *The Mad Man* certainly seems to have this as one concern, *Hogg* as well. Will that understanding aid a reader in their enjoyment of the above two novels? I ask this question because both have often been criticized for their graphic depictions of sexual situations, though I suspect they were written for more reasons than simply an exercise in the scabrous.

SRD: Like *Phallos,* they were written to explore elements in the gay world I saw around me at the time. *Hogg* and *The Mad Man* are, neither of them, science fiction—nor, as *Phallos* is, are they works about historical times. In the first eight or nine of my science fiction novels, there really wasn't anything more than a phrase here or a phrase there specifically for the gay reader. First, they were all written before Stonewall. And while I knew what the word gay meant, it certainly wasn't how I "self-ascribed" as they say. Basically, I used the working-class term "queer."

When I did write things with stuff to assuage my own "gay sensibility," those first things—*Equinox* and *Hogg*—were the results of a ravenous hunger. The meals envisioned were pretty heady and intense: The first took seven years to find a publisher and the second more than twenty. But *Phallos*, like *The Man Man*, is of a more recent

and mellower vintage.

A simple driver behind *Phallos* is the impulse to examine how pleasure integrates into one's ordinary life. Recently I turned 62. Looking back, as one does at this age, I realize I've had three major relationships—all three of them open, starting with thirteen years of heterosexual marriage. I'm not rich by any means. But basically I think of myself as having had a pretty pleasant time. How'd it happen? In the last half-dozen years, people have actually started writing books on how to have successful open relationships—and of course people have been writing about "free love" since the Eighteenth Century. There are some wonderful recent self-help concoctions, like *Ethical Sluts* and *How to Be a Couple and Remain Free* and *The Polyamory Reader.* Having started browsing in these, I realized that I knew a lot about this already. Parts of these books reminded me of things that had become so much second nature, I'd all but forgotten they could be articulated. At a couple of spots, I realized I knew some things even the authors didn't.

A lot of that underlies *Phallos*, especially the final third. I think of *Phallos* as a *jeau d'esprit*—aimed, yes, largely at sexually active gay men.

Now, besides trying to present a good mystery tale, *The Mad Man* is an account of someone who lived an HIV-negative life, as I've managed to do, with lots of sex and relatively little recourse to condoms, through the first two-and-a-half decades of AIDS. At this point, people usually say: "But you're a science fiction writer…" I can only shrug. When people do that, they're looking, I think, for that absolute overlap, again.

SS: On thing that struck me about *The Motion of Light in Water* is how it's the key to *Dhalgren.* Is it too much to suppose that the two are a single work?

SRD: Certainly there are correspondences. But *Dhalgren* is fiction—indeed, science fiction, and science fiction of a rather magical realist slant. *The Motion of Light in Water* is nonfiction. You spend very different kinds of energy on the two. Now and then, similarities between the life and what went into the novels are chronicled in the autobiography—and, yes, when I was writing *Motion*, I thought that might be interesting. Readers are used to biographies of D.H.

Lawrence or Joseph Conrad in which they find the life material behind *Women in Love* or *Heart of Darkness* laid out. Think of the appallingly racist reality behind the chapter in *Women in Love*, in which, in the Oxford pub, Gudrin/Katherine Mansfield (or is it Ursula? I haven't read it in over a decade) goes over and takes the volume of Birkin's/Lawrence's poems from the hands of the "working class" students discussing it, with the line, "These aren't for you," and brings them back to her table, where she and her friends all "have a good laugh." The "working class" students reading Lawrence's poems were actually black African students at Oxford. What exactly was Lawrence doing by suppressing the racial markers when he novelized the incident? Or think of the black African woman in the Congo who saved Conrad's life when, feverish and ill, he was abandoned by the road to die by his white compatriots. He uses the incident in *Heart of Darkness*, but he omits the woman he frequently credited with saving his life when he told the story to his friends. Everyone knows that mystery writer Dashiel Hammett spent time as a Pinkerton guard, which gave him material for his later stories. Anyone who knows anything about mystery writer Andrew Vachss knows of his crusade against child abuse which fuels many of his powerful mysteries. But to see the life material behind [H.G.] Wells' *War of the Worlds* or [Jules] Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* is not so common.

Years ago, when E.M. Forster's *Maurice* was first published posthumously, I remember one person saying, "You know, Forster could have been the gay D.H. Lawrence," to which someone else responded: "Well, then—what was D.H. Lawrence?"

The point is, race, sexuality and genre touch not only all through my work but all through modernism. But it helps sometimes to be able to decode it. So, yes, I gave the reality behind some of my science fiction. I hope some people might enjoy that.

Though a memoir, *The Motion of Light in Water* was initially conceived, nevertheless, as a history, however personal: I wanted to give an account of social changes in some attitudes toward sex and art as I'd observed them between the end of the Fifties and the middle of the Sixties. At mid-century, it was already a sociological truism: With the advent of everything from electricity, air travel, indoor plumbing and antibiotics, to atomic power, washing machines, water-

based house paint, birth control pills, air conditioning and disposable diapers, probably there'd been more social change in the previous fifty years than in the past three hundred. Well, you can make an argument that in the baker's dozen years-plus between the September in which Autherine Lucy walked into Central High School in Little Rock and the weekend of the Stonewall riots in New York City in July of 1969, even more change occurred in the United States than in the previous fifty years! It's a period worth chronicling in some detail.

SS: Besides being depictions of gay characters and gay sex, how did *Hogg* satisfy your gay sensibility?
SRD: Well, *Hogg* is a very angry book. I first drafted it out in San Francisco in the moments just before Stonewall, when I was a very conflicted 27-year-old. Weeks after I finished it, the burgeoning of a concerted and focused Gay Liberation project began to move across the country. The kind of totally annihilative destructive feeling underlying *Hogg*'s vision was no longer a place that could attract my imagination, now that positive channels for those otherwise largely destructive energies and images had opened up.

Stefen Styrsky is a freelance writer living in Washington, D.C. with his partner Michael and their son Richard. His fiction has appeared in The James White Review, Harrington Gay Men's Literary Quarterly *and* Fresh Men 2. *He writes news articles and book reviews for* Gay City News.

Excerpted from an interview first published in Lambda Book Report*, August/September 2004. Reprinted with permission of the author.*

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INSIDE VIEW: AN INTERVIEW WITH ALEXIS DE VEAUX

By Lisa C. Moore

Alexis De Veaux is associate professor of women's studies and chair of its department at the University of Buffalo: she has taught there for twelve years. De Veaux also wears other titles: poet, short fiction writer, essayist, children's book author, playwright, biographer. It is this last that draws the most recent attention: her new work is *Warrior Poet: A Biography of Audre Lorde* (W.W. Norton, April 2004). The book has been years in the making and highly anticipated.

Lisa C. Moore: Did you know Audre Lorde personally or did you approach writing the biography as a fellow artist, or as an academic?
Alexis De Veaux: I did not know Lorde personally and was not a member of any of her intimate circles. I met her and spend some time around her in 1985, when we were both part of a delegation of black women writers who were invited to Cuba to witness aspects of the Cuban Revolution's impact. I don't think I wrote the book as an "academic" although I understood the critical importance of making sure it was well-researched and well-documented. I wrote it as a writer trying to talk about another writer.

LCM: How long did it take you to write it?
ADV: I have been involved with this project ten years come this September [2004].

LCM : Tell me a little about the journey. Why did you decide to write this biography?
ADV: I decided to do it because I thought I could bring something to a new generation's understanding of Lorde as pioneering woman. I was approached (by telephone) by Gloria Joseph—Audre's companion—about the project in September 1994. Lorde's estate was looking for a writer to do the book and there was a sense I would be a good choice. It's my understanding that Lorde's lifelong friend, the poet Adrienne Rich, had been influential in naming me. I thought

about it before I decided to do it. Initially, it was to be a project co-authored by myself and Gloria Joseph, Lorde's companion; after some time we agreed that I should write the biography by myself. The executors of Audre Lorde's estate were exceptionally generous. They gave me sole access to her papers at Spelman College, her unpublished journals and several boxes of audio and video tapes, and other memorable work of Lorde's.

LCM: I saw you on a National Black Arts Festival panel in Atlanta with other biographers of black subjects. The politics of biographies of black women came up; apparently there are very few biographies of black women subjects. (Valerie Boyd's recent biography of Zora Neale Hurston comes to mind.) Do you think it's relevant that a black woman write the story of Audre Lorde? Do you believe your being a black lesbian gives you greater "authority" to write the biography?
ADV: I think it's relevant that a black woman wrote the first authorized biography of Audre Lorde. I don't think that only a black woman could write a good one, though. I don't believe that being a black lesbian gives me greater "authority." That part of me gives me an empathetic perspective. The greatest authority I have in this moment is my authority as a writer–what I've managed to learn from years of living as a writer.

LCM: Over the years you've written and published poetry, fiction, plays, children's books and essays, and you've published a biography of Billie Holiday. Was the writing of *Warrior Poet* different from *Don't Explain*? Did Lorde being an out black lesbian have any impact?
ADV: The writing of *Warrior Poet* was extremely different from writing *Don't Explain*. First of all, I didn't know all that I know now—about writing, myself, black lesbian writers, black women poets, the meanings of freedom—back in the 1980s when *Don't Explain* was published. Secondly, Billie Holiday was long gone when I did that book and I think writing about someone who is only "recently" gone has many more challenges. Also, I didn't do nearly as much research and thinking about Holiday as I did about Lorde. I felt it was very important to be careful with her as a subject, as public icon, as mother of two children, as a teacher and a lover to many. The

fact of Lorde's identity as an out black lesbian really had no impact on the writing; this was well known so I didn't have to negotiate ways of discussing it. What I had to negotiate though was any discussion of the public Lorde (what was known about her) and the private Lorde (what was not publicly known about her) and come to a sense that I didn't have to choose between the two. I had to bring the two together, which I hope I did.

LCM: how do you see *Warrior Poet* contributing to LGBT communities?
ADV: The book both re-imagines American culture (through its treatment of Lorde's "two lives") and serves as an agent of social change. In that way it's consistent with other things I've written; I've always believed that I was working as a change agent whatever I wrote. I think it will contribute to the history of LGBT communities, even as it may not reflect more contemporary debates about identity and identity politics in those communities.

Lisa C. Moore is the editor of does your mama know? An Anthology of Black Lesbian Coming Out Stories *(1997) and co-editor of* Spirited: Affirming the Soul and Black Gay/Lesbian Identity *(2006). She is the publisher of RedBone Press, and board president of Fire & Ink.*

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R. ERICA DOYLE

INTERVIEWED JANUARY 2006

By Ana-Maurine Lara

R. Erica Doyle is a writer of Trinidadian descent who lives in New York City. Her work has appeared in numerous journals and anthologies, including *Best American Poetry, Ploughshares, Callaloo, Bum Rush the Page,* and *Ms. Magazine.* She is the recipient of awards and fellowships from the Hurston/Wright and Astraea Foundations and the New York Foundation for the Arts. Doyle is a fellow of Cave Canem, a workshop and retreat for African-American poets.

AML: *What do you remember when you started using writing as a way to create a world for yourself?*
RED: I guess I can't remember ever not doing that. As soon as I could write I was writing stories, but I would also tell stories. And one of the things my mother says is that I used to make up songs all the time before I could talk. So, when I was little, when I was babbling—maybe seven, eight, nine months—I was singing. Because she would sing to me a lot, she would tell me stories and read to me, so there was tons of oral language around me as well. Because I come from this family culture where people are constantly telling stories about something, and they're jumping up or they're telling a story or they're acting it out everybody's laughing and they're all yelling at each other having an argument but it's okay. You know. So I think I was always singing, but I can't remember not imagining something happening. Sort of like a "what if," but just doing it. Imagining something happening differently, or something extraordinary happening in an ordinary moment. So as soon as I could write I would write stories, so the earliest writing I have of my own is from first grade. And in first grade notebook are half begun stories about—a lot of them were about deer.

AML: *Did you see deer?*
RED: No, I didn't see a live deer, maybe in the zoo. I didn't see a live deer until I was much older, like in high school—wild deer. But I

think *Bambi*—that story—really touched me. And so I would read a lot about deer, and about how they actually do fight and protect their children and do this or the other, whatever, and I knew they were around 'cause we're in New York State and there's tons of deer here, but I never saw them in the wild, but I had a lot of stories about re-writing *Bambi* in first grade. And I had songs. I would make up songs all the time. I'd write plays. I'd put my cousins and my brother in them. 'Cause we had a whole gang of kids in our neighborhood. And so I'd write plays and they'd act out the play in the backyard.

AML: *And of course they would participate!*
RED: Of course. And then I'd have to copy over the script like four times. So I'd copy over the scripts and they'd have the scripts and they'd do the play. I don't remember what they're about. Any of them. But you know, I'd write these plays for them. I'd also read to my cousins and my little brother. 'Cause I had cousins who lived across the street. So I'd read to them. So I was a very literate kid. Very literate. Oral, written. I'd read all the time. I'd sing songs, make up musicals. So I was constantly doing that. Oh—I used to write porn. (Laughter)

AML: *Did you? That's excellent. How did you start writing porn?*
RED: I don't remember. I think there was a thing... the kids in my elementary school, in fifth grade, they'd tell nasty stories. There was this thing to tell nasty stories, "and he put his dick in her pussy" or whatever and so I became fascinated. But at the time, we didn't say "wifey." It was very crude, blockheaded stuff. We had never seen any 'cause this was before cable, so nobody had really seen anything, except for like kind of briefly in those *Kentucky Fried Chicken* movies. There were all these Richard Pryor movies and all these movies with Bill Cosby like *Uptown Saturday Night* or *Shaft*, and so you'd kind of briefly see these things, but I don't know, for whatever reason, in 1970-whatever in my elementary school, people started telling these nasty stories. And so I started writing them. And I became kinda famous for writing these nasty stories, but I wouldn't show them to too many people because I didn't want people to know and I didn't want my parents to find out. So I remember I'd write these little porn things and everyone'd be like, "okay, just read us the

nasty stories."

AML: *I love that you were the porn queen.*
RED: For a moment. I had my moment. I had my little moment.

AML: *It sounds like being a writer is part of the grain of who you are. The way you walk through the world.*
RED: Yeah, I mean it definitely is. It definitely is. I think that there are things about it, part of it is just what I do and then that has implications. There are things that have implications that are often surprising. As I started to go around and read my work to different audiences, I was always surprised at the people who responded. I did this reading during a fundraising kind of season for this gallery, that also had performance in it, and their donors were there. There were all of these wealthy white people who were a lot older and all audiences respond differently, so you read to certain audiences and they're making all kinds of noise and clapping or calling and responding or you read to some audiences and you're like, "Did anyone even hear me?" 'cause they don't clap between poems or whatever, but it's just different ways of listening and showing respect. And I remember after that one, this little old white lady from Birmingham, Ala. was like, "I loved your work so much." And I was like, "Really?" and she was like, "Yes—could you sign my little program?" And she was one of their donors who had come from Alabama, 'cause they're affiliated with the Corcoran Gallery/Museum in D.C. so there are all these far-flung people. And I was like, well, "Do you want what I read tonight? You can have it." And she was like, "Thank you so much." And then she wrote me a letter after.

AML: *So, thinking about the fact that you teach, and also that you write, what does it mean for you to be a writer?*
RED: Ana! I don't know. It's hard. Alright. I think because it's something that I've just done, I never thought... once I met someone who started writing when they were 23, an accomplished person, mind you, and I was just sort of appalled because I was like, "how can you just pick up one day and decide you're going to be a writer? Who starts writing when they're 17? It's far too late." So my process

has been such that I've always written, I've always told stories and definitely the older I've gotten... well, at different points in time I've stuck myself into certain genres and stuck with those for awhile. I started exclusively in fiction, when I was really writing hard, like in high school. And I didn't write poems at all. And then when I was in college I started writing both poetry and fiction and then by the time college was over I was writing exclusively poetry and did so pretty much for the next eight years, so for me it's something that I can't help doing. So I don't really... it's really organic. So, it's hard to say what it means to me or myself as a writer. Like what does that mean? There've been times when I felt like I wasn't the right kind of writer. When I wasn't writing things that I thought people wanted to read. And when I wasn't writing in a style that seemed it was popular or acceptable.

AML: *But you did it anyway?*
RED: Yeah, I just did it anyway because, again, it was part of me. It's like saying, whatever color I am. I can't do anything about that. No matter how I behave or how I speak or what I wear I'm still the same color and so for me my writing voice was like that. It's just something that I can't change. It grows as I grow, but it can't really be manipulated. So, I don't know. It's hard to say.

Ana-Maurine Lara is an AfroDominican American writer and organizer. Her poetry and short fiction has appeared in several literary journals including Tongues Magazine *and* Blithe House Quarterly*, among others. She has received awards from the Puffin Foundation, the Brooklyn Arts Council and PEN Northwest. Lara is the author of* Erzulie's Skirt *(RedBone Press, 2006).*

Excerpted from an interview posted at http://themagicmakers.blogspot.com. Reprinted with permission of the author.

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KENYON FARROW

INTERVIEWED JANUARY 2006

By Steven G. Fullwood

Kenyon Farrow is a 31-year-old writer and activist living in Brooklyn, N.Y. He is the culture editor for *Clamor Magazine,* and his essays have appeared in *Utne Reader, Black Commentator, Left Turn,* BlackAIDS.org, Popandpolitics.com, *Bay Windows, City Limits, The Objector Between the Lines*, and in the anthology *Spirited* (RedBone Press, 2006). Much of Farrow's writing can be found all over the Internet, including "Is Gay Marriage Anti-Black?," "Connecting the Dots: Michael Moore, White Nationalism and the Multi-racial Left" with writer Kil Ja Kim, and "We Real Cool?: On Hip-Hop, Asian-Americans, Black Folks, and Appropriation." As an activist, Farrow served as the Southern Regional Coordinator for Critical Resistance, a prison abolition organization, and continues to work on the national organizing body. He has also served as an adult ally for FIERCE!, a queer youth of color community organizing project in New York City, and with the New York State Black Gay Network. Farrow continues to write, lecture, and organize, and is currently working on his first solo book project. He is working on a master's in journalism with the City University of New York. http://kenyonfarrow.wordpress.com/

SGF: *Talk about the genesis of* Letters from Young Activists*. How did you become involved in the project?*

KF: My co-editor Dan Berger and I met through doing anti-prison organizing with Critical Resistance in the South in November 2003. He had the idea for the project, and had spoken to our third co-editor Chesa Boudin. So the three of us began working immediately, and almost two years to the day, the book was published.

SGF: *How were submission/letters selected for inclusion for the book?*

KF: The process was lightning fast! We sent out a call for submissions through e-mail, blogs, listservs, etc., of any and every political, social, or cultural formation on the Left we could think of.

We also made invitations to activists we knew personally to contribute to the book. Our deadline for submissions was December 1, 2004, and we had a working draft by late March of 2005.

Being three male-bodied people, and two of them white, we worked with an advisory board of women of color activists who really worked very hard with us to shape the political direction of the book, and to point out gaps in diversity of voices and/or issues we were covering. Just to say once again "Thanks," they were Kai Lumumba Barrow, Elizabeth "Betita" Martinez, Yuri Kochiyama, and Gwendolyn "Zoharah" Simmons.

SGF: *Was there a particular bent to the book? In other words, were certain areas of activism that were specifically highlighted because of their current relevance?*
KF: It's interesting because originally, Chapter 7, "Letters on the War on Terror," did not exist. At some point we realized that given that post 9-11 politics shapes so much of the discourse of the Left, and given this war in Iraq, we had to include a chapter that addressed those issues specifically. Although we each have particular issues and/or mMovements that are dear to us, we were really pretty open to whatever came our way.

SGF: *The press for the book says that the authors featured offer a "heartfelt and refreshing approach to today's political landscape." Can you point to letters in the book that exemplify these sentiments?*
KF: Yeah. Mervyn Marcano's "Letter to James Baldwin" is about Rashawn Brazell's murder, the Brooklyn man whose body parts were found in 2005, and whose murderer is still at -large, and the value of black gay men's lives; Tiffany King's "Letter to Iraqi Women in Abu Ghraib" about both black and Iraqi women being deemed "unrapeable" by racist media and policy; and Walidah Imarisha and Not4Prophet's "Letter to Hip-hop" all stand out as letters that really deal with contemporary issues in an interesting and fresh approach.

SGF: *People have often said that Generation X and Generation Y have no "movement" with which to attach themselves to, e.g. the civil rights movement. This comment has always bothered me because it*

presupposes that the CRM ended, or that old ways of organizing are dead, and that since no name has been placed before the word "movement," there is none. What do you think about this type of thinking?

KF: I think it's bullshit. One of the things that Bernardine Dorhn, former Weather Underground member who wrote the preface for *Letters*, says is that the mythical 1960s never happened. That people doing "Movement" work felt just as isolated and powerless then as they do now—even with their marches on Washington and Stonewalls and all that. She also says that more than being a helpful lesson, the myth of the '60s has become a hindrance—meaning GenXers and GenYers are made to feel that their work is insignificant because it'll never be what the "1960s" were—which is mostly now an "idea" to be marketed as kitsch or Hollywood movies that grossly distort everything. I agree with her, and I think this is especially true for black folks, who live with the legacy of the civil rights movement. The "Movement of movements" is talked about as if it's dead, and black folks are now "free." We unfortunately sometimes help perpetuate that myth.

I do think that we, especially black folks, have to be bold and think of new ways of organizing in the black community. My friend and mentor Kai Lumumba Barrow has also said that we are stuck in organizing around a fixed community or neighborhood, but with gentrification, homelessness, foster care and prisons, black people are constantly pushed to and fro, and we have to find new ways of organizing that are not centered around a place or location, per se.

SGF: *How has your work as an activist been bolstered, enhanced, elevated by the publication of* Letters from Young Activists*?*

KF: I realize how much publishing a book means people take you seriously when they didn't before. I get invited to be a part of more conversations now, about things that I have written about long before this book's publication! But I am happy to have the opportunity to do the same thing for many of the contributors. Nilda Laguer's letter about oppression in the movement seems to be a favorite among many people—but women of color in particular, and I am happy to be in a position to give contributors the opportunity to reach a lot of

people, and in many cases, to be taken seriously as a writer or intellectual, when they hadn't been taken seriously before. If you're not in the academy (and even then for many people of color, especially women), you're not seen as having anything to contribute to the "world of ideas."

It's like with the "We Real Cool" piece I wrote about Asians in hip-hop; there were some people who were shocked to learn I was gay, as if a black gay man couldn't possibly have anything to contribute to a conversation that people don't seem to think we should have any relationship to.

But I have also gotten to know several of the contributors who I didn't know before this project. That has been really the best experience.

SGF

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RODERICK FERGUSON

INTERVIEWED FEBRUARY 2005

By Steven G. Fullwood

Roderick Ferguson is associate professor of race and critical theory in the Department of American Studies at University of Minnesota. His research interests include the intersections of race, sexuality, and gender in modern political, economic and cultural formations. Pursuant to those interests, he completed *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (University of Minnesota Press, 2004).

SGF: *Tell us a little bit about yourself (e.g., point of origin, education, places you've lived, taught, etc.)*
RF: I grew up in Manchester, Ga., which is about an hour and a half south of Atlanta, in west central Georgia. I went to Howard University for my bachelor's and did my M.A. and Ph.D. at the University of California, San Diego.

SGF: *What is your relationship to text? Talk about your preoccupations, aims, desires as a theorist.*
RF: My sensibility about texts comes really from fiction writers. I've learned a lot especially from Toni Morrison's observations about being a writer—things like writing the texts that you want to read; using texts to produce new languages; constructing the text as a stage on which to make the familiar strange and the strange familiar. As a theorist, I've tried to transfer literary sensibilities to theoretical contexts.

SGF: *What are the common misconceptions about the theoretical work you do?*
RF: I'm not actually sure about *my* work, in particular. It might be too early to tell or people are good enough not to worry me with distortions. In general, there is often the presumption that people write theory for prestige and status. And many people do. That's never been my approach to theory at all. I only want to do work that somebody can use. Now, I don't claim to make that easy for the

reader. I do mean for the reader to work as hard as I do as a writer. Difficulty is a kind of ethic for me. I'm a secular person who was raised a Baptist, and one of my favorite stories is the one of Jacob who wrestled with the angel and when the angel asked to be let go, Jacob replied, "I won't let go until you bless me." I don't trust easy texts, and I don't write them.

SGF: *Talk about* Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique. *How did this work originate?*
RF: It started out as my dissertation project. It kind of got me through sociology. The dissertation helped me answer questions that sociology—the discipline—refused to pose—questions about how sociology produced certain knowledges about African-American sexuality and culture and how that production had very much to do with the unfolding of capitalism. When I began revising the dissertation into what became *Aberrations*, I did so trying to make it my version of Karl Marx's *Capital* and Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality*. It was my way of "jumping at the sun."

SGF: *As an academic, how do you relate to/interact with the queer of color community?*
RF: In a sense, that "community" is never coherent, always diverse, and constantly in motion. So I've tried to find it where I can. Producing community is always a project, always an effort. I've, of course, encountered queer of color communities as they are produced in the academy, among colleagues and students, because that's the world in which I live. That world is no less legitimate or real than non-academic worlds. I was terribly fortunate to observe the production of one version of queer of color community because of the *Think Again* volume and the essay that I wrote, "Sissies at the Picnic." At the various conferences with *Think Again* panels, I really got a sense of how black queer male communities, in particular, represented complex engagements with HIV/AIDS bureaucracies and with artistic communities that preceded those bureaucracies and now coexist in tension with them. It was a very real education for me, and I appreciate every opportunity I have to bear witness to queer of color communities, whatever forms they take.

SGF: *What are you working on right now?*
RF: Right now I'm working on a book about the university as corporation and the role that race, gender and sexuality play in that. It's a project that was inspired by my entrance into administration and by the ways in which I saw and continue to see how the life of the mind takes a back seat to administrative efforts to make universities more like corporations. You see it in minute instances like faculty and graduate students shaping their projects based on the possibility of funding rather than the possibility of oppositional and dissident interventions. In terms of anti-racist, feminist and queer scholarship, I'm interested in what the university as an administrative machine does to work that comes out of radical genealogies.

SGF: *One thing you cannot do without.*
RF: My personal freedom. Sometimes people who know me think that my need for personal freedom comes from some presumed masculinity on my part. In actuality, it's much more akin to a woman's appreciation of personal freedom. I grew up seeing the women closest to me long for freedom while in really regulatory domestic relationships with men. What my mother, my grandmothers and my aunts passed on to me, ironically and unsuspectingly, was the desire to move away from intimate and homey regulations, and I'm pretty uncompromised in that desire. This is what being queer means for me.

SGF

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STEVEN G. FULLWOOD

September 2006

Steven G. Fullwood is an archivist for the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in New York City. He founded the Black Gay and Lesbian Archive to aid in the preservation of black lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, same-gender-loving, queer, questioning and in the life history and culture. Fullwood is the author of *Funny* (Vintage Entity Press), and a freelance writer whose work has appeared in Africana.com, *Black Issues Book Review, Lambda Book Report,* Vibe.com and other publications. He is the board vice president of Fire & Ink. www.stevengfullwood.org

As an author and cultural critic, I am always pushing myself to do better work. That means I cannot afford to stay in safe spaces for too long because I get antsy and I know I'll end up lying. I grew up trying to protect myself from all things hurting and in the hiding spaces I created, there was an awful fallout. Still feeling the aftershock. One detriment was that hiding impacted my ability to really sympathize and connect to people, much less value their love and support in any meaningful way. My writing is one way to be brave, test things out, see if what I say I believe is something I actually believe.

I started writing seriously in high school as a way to imagine a more useful Steven, one that the world might like and treat better. I set upon conjuring up a more masculine, athletic and emotionally dead Steven. The Real Steven was pretty obstinate and furious with the world. I was the type of kid who would leave his friends sitting on his front porch, tell 'em good night, and close the door. My mom would ask me if my friends were still out there and I would say, "yes, but I am not going back out." She'd go out and tell everyone, "Stevie's in the house for the night, he'll see you tomorrow." This happened a lot in my teens. If things weren't going my way, I left. Fuck 'em all. I was a mess.

One day something happened that changed the way I viewed people, the precocious bunch they are. I had just gotten home from church when my father took me aside." Stevie, do you know that your

so-called friends sat on our back porch and talked about you like a dog," he said. Called me "anti-social," and claimed that I thought that I was better than them. They were half right. I was anti-social because I simply didn't know how to connect with the boys my age besides playing sports. Besides I was too busy trying to hide my erection. The disappointment on his face tore me up. He wasn't upset with them—he was upset with me. I wasn't social. I wasn't hanging out with my friends. So instead of defending me, he sided with some silly boys who he wouldn't give a second thought to except as barometers for his flaming son's behavior. By 16 I was having a hard time adopting the "hang out on the corner and wait for what" paradigm that had ensnared so many of my peers. I knew I was going somewhere, but where? Writing provided some way to navigate the way I saw the world and hoped to be in it. My singing skills lack and I had no patience to learn an instrument, so my rock star plans didn't pan out. I was left with a typewriter.

As founder and publisher at Vintage Entity Press (VEP), it's my goal to publish writing that is inherently brave by exceptional authors, two of which include Cheryl Boyce Taylor and G. Winston James. VEP is fueled by imagination and love and a fierceness to simply speak life and truth and honor and to challenge those things that seek to keep the heart and brain static. It's a labor of love that has helped me realize how vital the written word is, and how it can transform life.

I interviewed Cheryl for *Lambda Book Report* in 2003, and was immediately taken in by her warmth and panoramic view. She writes like a lion and purrs like a kitten. There is such an amazing softness and integrity in her work that you feel cradled and yes, healed. But make no mistake, as Cheryl Clarke, author of *Days of Good Looks* (Carroll & Graf, 2006) once said of Cheryl's work, "she don't tek no mess." I have consulted Cheryl's latest collection, *Convincing the Body*, as a reader in need of healing and her work always lifts me. Always. As for G. Winston James, he misses so little that I am often startled by his rather thin, calm frame. This man should be exploding, arms waving, screaming. *The Damaged Good* is a collection of poems that reveal Glen's real ability to capture nuance and raw emotion without being sappy or sentimental. Both writers are similar in their approach to writing: they are extremely brave. It is an honor

to work with Cheryl and Glen. Both writers and their works enrich my life tremendously. I am grateful.

As an archivist, the work I do with the Black Gay and Lesbian Archive is to collect, preserve and make available to the public the universe of non-heterosexual history and culture of people of African descent. It has taken a Herculean effort to bring this project to completion and it's because of the communities I serve as an information specialist and my dedication to preserve cultures that have been ignored or dismissed up until recently largely because the people who created it have been ignored and dismissed from public discourse. The fact that non-heterosexual black folk here and abroad have created in every media, for the last century, despite the various homophobic and racist environments they live in, is brave. My job is to make sure these artifacts are preserved, so someone can get to these stories, read them and perhaps share them with those who do not know what rich resources lie in the histories of black LGBT people.

An earlier version of this article originally appeared online at www.travismontez.com and www.bravesoulcollective.org.

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THOMAS GLAVE

INTERVIEWED MAY 2006

By Steven G. Fullwood

Author **Thomas Glave**'s *Words to Our Now* is a stunning achievement of the essay personal and political. Glave poetically addresses the effects of racism, sexism and homophobia, while seamlessly connecting these issues to human rights struggles here and abroad. The essays quietly instructs those who seek to transform and empower their lives by showing that a commitment to truth speaking is a way that is necessary for clarity and growth.

SGF: *Talk about the genesis of* Words to Our Now.

TG: I didn't realize that this collection would be a book until a few years ago. I'd written a few essays here and there, but it was only in more recent years – not long after the publication of my short story collection, *Whose Song?* – that I began to think seriously about publishing a book of essays. This desire was fueled partly by the wish to continue experimenting with prose in forms other than fiction, partly by a sense of urgency about political matters that had developed in part out of my activist work in Jamaica and elsewhere.

SGF: *Many of the issues you explore in your fiction are present in your nonfiction as well. How does the essay form allow how you to address homophobia, injustice, etc., differently than in your fiction and poetry?*

TG: In the essays, I as the writer – and, to be sure, the thinker – have to take a stand that I wouldn't necessarily have to take, or even wish to, in writing fiction. Also, in the essays, I found that I really had to say – at least some of the time – "I think this" or "I believe that," in a frankly declarative way that I would never have done in fiction. Doing this forced me to think very clearly, actually often unflinchingly, about just about all of my moral and ethical beliefs.

SGF: *Using the "Clinton-Lewinsky" affair to talk about race, sexuality and gender was thought-provoking and a little frightening. What was your motivation to recount it as nonfiction?*

TG: This essay was particularly challenging and strange – I felt as if

I were piecing together the pieces of a puzzle in order to make sense out of the pieces that nobody was supposed to see or acknowledge. I was motivated to write an essay because I wanted to understand something I didn't understand. That is, I realized soon after asking the question (Would the world have experienced the *Starr Report*'s blaring reporting on the "Clinton-Lewinsky" affair had Lewinsky been a black gay male?) that there was a lot of secret, or coded, or "taboo" information that I didn't know or hadn't thought deeply enough about – things like sexual/power dynamics between black and white men. For example – that I needed to understand in an utterly precise, configuring way in order to better understand why my students had been so shocked when I'd asked the initial question.

SGF: *Talk briefly about your vision for a homophobia-free Jamaica and how you think this can be accomplished.*
TG: I don't envision a homophobia-free Jamaica any more than I envision a racism-free world; in the world in which we live, that is, one of human beings, I just don't think the complete eradication of these prejudices is possible. I also believe that homophobia must exist as the partner of, and in the presence of, sexism and misogyny, which means that until we eliminate those, homophobia will continue – and I do not think that, at least in my lifetime or yours, we, whoever "we" are, will eliminate any of these. But I do think that, in Jamaica, we can aim for a less violent society, one in which people might continue to view homosexuality with disgust and loathing, but will not feel compelled to chop someone up with a machete because of those feelings. That's really what I would like to see: a far less violent world. The important thing is that we all try to do something, not sit back and wait for someone else to do it.

SGF: *Tell us about what led you to write about Steen Fenrich, a 19-year- old black gay male who was killed by his stepfather in Queens, N.Y. six years ago.?*
TG: I wanted to remember him and to ensure that others knew about him and remembered him. His case and life were only among the many, many, many cases and lives like his forgotten and tossed aside, sensationalized for one second in the increasingly tawdry media, then discarded. I also wanted to draw attention to the inequality of remembrance, how so many people remember the tragic death of

someone like Matthew Shepard – whose death was indeed a horror – but how few even knew who Steen Fenrich was. Steen was black and Matthew was white; Steen was not socially privileged and Matthew was. Race and class certainly have something to do with who is remembered, and how well. I wanted to do my part to remember, put back together in memory, Steen. It is, I guess, a kind of altar to him. Young black men, black men, black women, need more of these altars. And there are still so many more people to remember – more, I think, than most of us can possibly deal with.

SGF: *What can readers expect from reading* Words to Our Now*?*
TG: Hopefully a great many things – and, I hope, most of them unexpected.

SGF

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ERNEST HARDY

INTERVIEWED JULY 2006
By Steven G. Fullwood

Ernest Hardy writes about film and music from his home base of Los Angeles. His criticism has appeared in the *LA Weekly*, *the LA Times*, *Vibe*, *The New York Times*, *Rolling Stone*, *the Source*, *Millennium Film Journal*, *Flaunt*, *Request*, *Minneapolis City Pages*, and the reference books *1,001 Movies You Must See Before You Die* and *Classic Material: The Hip-Hop Album Guide*, among others. He's written liner notes for *Chuck D Presents: Louder Than a Bomb*, the box-set *Say It Loud: A Celebration of Black Music in America*, *Curtis Mayfield: Gospel*, and the box-set *Superstars of Seventies Soul*; he is the winner of the 2006 ASCAP-Deems Taylor Award for excellence, honoring his liner notes for the Chet Baker CD, *Career 1952-1988*. A Sundance Fellow and a member of LAFCA (Los Angeles Film Critics Association), he's sat as a juror for the Sundance Film Festival, the San Francisco International Film Festival, the Palm Springs International Short Film Festival and Los Angeles Outfest. He's also co-programmed the FUSION Film Festival in Los Angeles. http://ernesthardy.com

SGF: *Tell us about* Blood Beats: Vol. 1 – Demos, Remixes & Extended Versions.
EH: *Blood Beats* is a collection of selected writings from the past ten years of my career as a film and music critic. I hate the term cultural critic but I've been called that, and I guess it applies. Vol. 1 covers the years 1996-2000 and Vol. 2, which will drop this fall 2007, covers 2001-the present.

I've worked as a critic since I was in college, in the late '80s. By the time of the first piece in Vol. 1 – a Meshell NdegeOcello interview from 1996 – I think I'd finally found my voice. I wasn't consciously trying to develop a style or identity at the start of my career, in part because I didn't know it would be my career. I just fell into it. But the accumulation of personal and professional experiences, the fine-tuning of my own political views and aesthetics, and the synthesis of my various identity markers – black, gay, a precariously lower

middle-class background that has given way to boho poverty, strong Southern roots, childhood vacations and an adolescence spent in Detroit – all fused into a perspective that is very black, very feminist, very leftist and unwaveringly pro gay/lesbian/bi, etc. And I work from the position that blackness is the most expansive, dynamic and universal filter through which to gauge and interpret the world. It just is. It's certainly been the most vital and important cultural well in this country, the source of its heart and soul. You toss faggotry in the mix and fuck it: You have gods.

But the book contains film reviews, music reviews, interviews and assorted think-pieces. The interviews include Les Nubians, Warren Beatty, Björk, Queen Latifah, Ambersunshower, a round-table Q&A with four black women film directors – including Kasi Lemmons, who wrote and directed *Eve's Bayou*, and Gina Prince-Bythewood, who wrote and directed *Love & Basketball* – and two interviews with Meshell NdegeOcello. Film reviews span queer cinema (*Edge of Seventeen, Velvet Goldmine*), French (*Human Resources*) and Russian (*Mother & Son*), as well as assorted documentaries and American indie fare. The essays range from musings on Tupac and House music, to a sprawling article on gay rappers, gay rap fans and modern black gay and lesbian identities as they intersect with, shape and are shaped by hip-hop – but with a historical and cultural backdrop that I think has been largely absent from other articles on the subject.

SGF: *Take us to your scribbling beginnings. Young Ernest, on a front porch somewhere, reading/thinking/being/writing.*
EH: I've written ever since I first learned to write – poems, short stories, everything. As I said earlier, I actually started working as a journalist/critic while I was an undergrad at UCLA, where I was an English lLit major. So, I've been at this for over twenty years. It took me a long time to call myself a writer, which would infuriate my friends. If people asked what I did for a living, I'd say that I reviewed film and music. I wouldn't say I was a writer. My friends thought I was insecure or not "claiming my shit." But I've always made a distinction between being a critic and being a writer. I think people like [*The New York Times* film critic] Manohla Dargis and [legendary Negro cultural critic] Greg Tate are both, but it's a rare fusion.

Criticism as you see it in most newspapers and magazines is definitely a lesser form of writing, as far as I'm concerned. And that's cool. People need something to read while they're eating their lunch in the middle of the day but don't want to commit to anything too deep, or something to peruse while they're taking a shit. And I don't trip if other people put what I do in that category. But still, writing – to me – is a sacred calling. Er'body ain't able.

SGF: *And you are?*
EH: Yes.

SGF: *Expound, please.*
EH: I hate to sound precious or snotty but just filling up a page with words, and even being published, doesn't make you a writer. I've always felt that way, even as a kid. Always was a snob. I mean, there are prodigies who fall to earth seemingly fully formed but they're rare. Most of us have to work at the title. It has to be earned. I hate the nonsensical, idiotic philosophy of "Proclaim or name yourself a [writer/singer/actor] and then you are a [writer/singer/actor, etc.]." That's such bullshit. It's how we end up with tone deaf divas and hack writers. It doveevtails into this weird sense of entitlement that I think pervades American culture, but it's entitlement unattached to work or struggle. It's not earned. I think it's fitting that my book kicks off with a piece from 1996 because that's around the time that I felt I'd finally earned the right to call myself a writer. Of course, not everybody is as slow getting their shit together as I was.

SGF: *What was your childhood "in the word" like?*
EH: I was a solitary, loner type kid. I still really like being by myself more than in a group. I'm just not a very social being. Octavia Butler and J.D. Salinger are my heroes for the way they lived as writers. I'd give anything if I could just write the books and move on, the way some mothers in the animal kingdom will deliver their offspring and then give a quick look back like, "Laterz, yo…" before they bounce. Anyway, I read voraciously from the time I was in kindergarten. By the time I was in junior high school, I was reading my mother's old Jacqueline Susann novels and my uncle's Donald Goines novels, which I pilfered from my grandmother's attic. I guess that combo

makes me a tragic mulatto of some sort. The Mariah Carey of criticism. And I'm just trying to be Sade.

The first piece of literature that just stunned me, burned itself into my consciousness, was James Baldwin's 1951 short story "The Outing," which – as you know – is about the family of a black minister as they prepare for and then get through a Sunday outing with the church. But at its heart is this very lovely, delicately rendered story of sexual awakening between two teen-age black boys. I just remember almost going into shock, reading it. Just the recognition of these boys and their inner lives and struggles. To have this story deliver me out of invisibility. I'd stumbled over it as I was reading this tattered anthology of Negro American short stories that was lying around the house. Huge impact on me. I can't even describe it.

SGF: *Talk about how your background prepared you for a life in the word.*
EH: I've always been drawn to the underdog, even as a kid, even before I could fully articulate or conceptualize my own otherness – although I think I was always, always cognizant of being different. I learned early on that difference costs. Or is that fame? Anyway, I think my writing is definitely rooted in an outsider/underdog sensibility but one where I'm critiquing the status quo, not jonesing to be part of it.

SGF: *What draws you to write criticism?*
EH: A friend of mine sent me this statement in an e-mail after he read my book, and I think he gets it pretty right:

One of the things I like is how forward the description of your "critical center" is [on the book cover]: Melanin-based, feminist, etc…. As if to pre-emptively nullify any assumption of the author's objectivity. This is fortified by an actual picture of you on the cover of the book. Adding to this enjoyable dichotomy: your speech is wrought with the influence of academia and yet discards the scholar's conventional airs of detachment. The people you choose to write about are public figures that privately, prismatically reflect your own interiority, and personal exploration becomes cultural exploration becomes personal exploration…

I actually do know people who talk like that.

SGF: *Talk a little about your writing process.*
EH: Well, to give some context: At this point, and one of the reasons I think my career has sort of stalled in conventional terms or according to the trajectory that would be deemed "successful," I really only write about stuff that hits me heart, mind and soul. I mean, I still cover a fair amount of straight-up bullshit because I have to eat and that's the bulk of what's out there. But the big pieces I do, the stuff where you have to do lots of research and leg work, tend to be centered on music or film that hits me viscerally. And that tends to be work that, in either text or subtext, grapples with issues of race, class, gender, sexuality – how two or more of those items intersect or come into conflict on the popular culture terrain. I'm interested in how people shape themselves either in harmony with the larger culture – meaning they just sort of absorb what they're told about themselves and the world, what it means to be a man, a woman, black, gay, whatever, lies and all, and then act that part – or the ways in which they resist and maybe create an oppositional self or reality. And I'm interested in radicals and revolutions that don't come lined in neon, that don't necessarily announce themselves as such.

Not to sound all airy-fairy, but I do the research that is needed and then just sort of let the factual data and the visceral response fuse within me, drawing on whatever other knowledge I might possess on a host of issues… because I like connecting dots that might not otherwise get connected. I think that's the beauty and strength of being black and gay and working-class rooted, and whatever else I am – and not ashamed of any of it, actually embracing it and seeing the gift in it: You see shit in ways that white gays and lesbians, or straight folk of color (especially hetero men) or financially privileged folk of whatever identity configuration might not.

SGF

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REGINALD HARRIS

INTERVIEWED JANUARY 2005

By Steven G. Fullwood

Recipient of Individual Artist Awards for both poetry and fiction from the Maryland State Arts Council, **Reginald Harris** is in charge of Information Technology Support and public computer training for the Enoch Pratt Free Library. His first book, *10 Tongues* (Three Conditions Press, 2003) was finalist for a Lambda Literary Award and the ForeWord Book of the Year. His work has appeared in numerous literary magazines and anthologies. He is a member of the Cave Canem: African-American Poetry Workshop/Retreat family, and board treasurer for Fire & Ink. http://reggieh.blogspot.com/

SGF: *Tell us about your writing process. When/how/why do you write?*
RH: To be honest, I wish I had more of a formal process in terms of the "when, where, etc." of writing. Sadly I'm pretty much of a slacker, particularly when it comes to first drafts, and would much rather be doing almost anything else than getting that first pass at something down on the page.

I try to block out time in the evenings to work or do something even if it's just sit in a chair and stare. You can imagine how successful that was during the holiday season! But I don't get too upset about missing *a little* butt-in-chair time, because I am usually reading something that gives me ideas, or I encounter something every day that starts something flowing. I'm always writing notes to myself, things to work on later, so that when the time comes to sit down to work I've got all these little slips of paper to pull together and get started from.

I also tend to have a preference for leaving home and going off, usually to a college library, to work on the weekends: I pull a few "inspirational" books off the shelves, sit in a carrel, and pretend to be a grad student. Those are usually the best times for me to work.

SGF: *Your writing's been widely anthologized,* Brown Sugar, Bum Rush the Page, Role Call*, and* Black Silk *and in journals,* 5 AM, African-American Review*, and* The James White Review. *What have you published recently?*
RH: I've been very fortunate to have work appear in a variety of different places. Anthologies are great ways for someone starting out to get their work seen widely, and the "lit mag" and poetry journals are pretty much the life blood of the more "page-oriented" ("page" vs. "stage" as in slam poetry) writing.

The latest place where my work can be found is a poem in the new issue of *Gargoyle* (#48), the huge (each issue is the size of an anthology) Washington, D.C.-based semi-annual journal, and a story in *Best Black Gay Erotica*, edited by Darieck Scott for Cleis Press. The story originally appeared in an issue of *POZ* magazine, and I'm glad to see it find another home. It's a bouquet to friends and family I knew and loved who are no longer with us.

SGF: *You published your first book of poetry,* 10 Tongues*, in 2003. What is your relationship to the book now that you've read from it, toured with it and lived with it for over a year now?*
RH: It is still a strange experience for me to see my name in print anywhere. And to hold an entire book in my hands with my name on it…it's still a little surreal. Having said that, it is a little odd to have this book, and have people have "expectations" based on this previous work for what the next thing I put out will be. It sort of sets a standard, a bar that you either have to meet, or be willing to go off into a different direction from.

Since I can be very critical of my own work, it does surprise me that after all this time I don't dislike anything in *10 Tongues*. I haven't yet had the experience of looking at something in there and saying, "Ugh!" I may claim to be tired of reading some of the poems in there, but I also know I'm not being entirely truthful when I say that (and, just like an actor in a long-running play, it may be "old" to me but it's "new" to the people hearing it for the first time). On the other hand, it's also interesting, and a reflection on the places where I've read, that there are poems in there that I really haven't read very much after

all this time. You have to judge the crowd and the space and decide what will work where and with whom.

SGF: *How do poems come to you?*
RH: They sneak up on me whenever the heck they feel like it. They do not have a set time or place; they just spring up, like some wild animal attacking its prey.

Usually I find myself starting with an image that speaks to me, or to the way certain words fit together with each other, or how they clash. There's something about the movement of the words themselves that really speaks to me, that makes me want to take them for a walk, or, rather, follow them, see where they are going to take me.

SGF: *Besides being a poet, you occasionally publish articles as well. Journalism appears to be a growing interest of yours. What drives you to the page?*
RH: Well, you know I think at a certain point I just got tired of saying, "Someone ought to write about this," or "This is a really great book, someone needs to tell people about it," and decided to do it myself. A number of writers, Toni Morrison comes immediately to mind, have said similar things: They write the books they want to read. They didn't see them on the shelves, no one else seemed to be writing them, so they decided to write them themselves.

I'm not sure if this is cynical or not, but I don't think most people outside our community give a damn about the lives of black gay men (sadly not even enough black gay men give a damn about the lives of black gay men) to suddenly take us up as their cause. No one is going to swing in and save us, or take an interest in our work or what we do. There are a lot of writers, artists, etc. who fall through the cracks because not many people have written about them, or discussed their work. No one is going to do this for us: We have to do it ourselves. We have to create the spaces, texts, avenues for ourselves and stop waiting for someone outside to "discover" us, so we can be the next "flavor of the month" or something, or the new exotic tourist attraction.

SGF: *Finish the sentence. The reason I write is because...*
RH: I feel bad when I don't. Seriously, I feel physically awful when I haven't written something in a while. So I write in order to make myself feel good, to get this urge, compulsion out of me. Because if I didn't I think it would fester and die and I'd be a really terribly sad and unfulfilled person. And who wants that?

SGF

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HERUKHUTI

INTERVIEWED SEPTEMBER 2003

By Steven G. Fullwood

Dr. Herukhuti is the author of *Conjuring Black Funk: Notes on Cultural, Sexuality and Spirituality, Vol. 1*. He is a sociologist, cultural animator, shaman, sexologist and Afrocentric decolonizing queer theorist. He also writes poetry, essays and cultural critique as well as theatrical works.

SGF: *Describe your writing process.*
H: I write from inspiration. I write when I feel inspired, when the inner voice that speaks the content of my writing is most vocal. As a consequence, I tend to write in spurts. I write for a number of reasons and in a number of contexts, nonfiction, fiction, and poetry: articles for academic journals and publications, , research reports,, stage plays,, television show scripts and treatments,, magazine articles,, and my column, "From the Cave," on blackfunk.org. But no matter the genre of the context, I tend to write in spurts, when I can hear what my inner voice wants to communicate.

Once I've laid the foundation with a first draft, I go back to edit and revise. Editing and revising are, for me, part and parcel of the writing process. I'm not seeking perfection in any one particular product. Writing my doctoral dissertation taught me the lesson of accepting imperfection and incompleteness in a finished work. Through my writing, which includes editing and revising, I seek to present a "kind of a truth" for that moment and to reach a certain level of completeness as well as a proximity to perfection that facilitates the enfolding of that "kind of a truth," which may be different than the truth that I hold within me, within a reader.

I don't distinguish between the demands or requirements of my fiction and non-fiction writing. In each case, I am telling a story. Sometimes the focus of the story is just me. Other times the focus of the story is us. But it is all just a story, a story among many stories that are told.

SGF: *How does writing connect with your work as an activist?*
H: Because I have been racialized, gendered, nationalized, sexualized, classified, and embodied in this current society along certain lines of demarcation, my stories and my acts of storytelling are necessarily political and politicized. That's what society does or has done. Its processes of demarcation were created without my consent before I was birthed into this world in this form. My choice in the matter was to choose to be born into this world at this time and in a form that would be demarcated as I have been. As a consequence, I actively and critically engage in the politicization through telling stories that challenge the status quo and offer visions of more socially justice, ecologically harmonious realities as well through forms of storytelling that, in their authenticity and integrity, challenge the responsibilities of being a compliant citizen of the state.

That last part, I'm sure, needs elaboration. The state wants us to fit into boxes that allow for more effective and efficient forms of social control. You are either an academic or an activist. You are either a liberal or a conservative. You are either a researcher or an artist. You are either gay or straight. You are either fully liberated or you are colonized. You are either a scientist or a shaman. You are either masculine or feminine. You either write fiction or nonfiction. You either hate white folks as a black man or you love white folks as a black man. The list goes on and on. I write to disrupt those required dichotomies because I live the transgression of those dichotomies. I'm larger than that. If someone doesn't want to swallow me whole, that's fine, but I want them to realize when they are digesting part of me that I am more than what they have taken in at that moment.

SGF: *You've published work in* Think Again*, in the black queer literary anthology* Ma-Ka*, in the former* Arise *magazine, and on your own web site, Blackfunk.org. Talk about your experiences in seeing your work in print and online, and the responses you've received, thus far.*

H: This is a hard question for me for a couple of reasons. I don't believe that the work is conceptually just mine once it is published. Once a work is published or broadcasted it becomes co-created with an audience that adds their meanings to the work. The work that I

produce and the work that people create when they take in what I've produced will have varying levels of similarity that I can not predict or evaluate. What people read into my work has as much if not more to say about who they are and what they believe then who I am and what I believe.

The other reason for my difficulty with this question is that I am not sure how perceptive (not receptive) I am to receiving responses to my work. I don't believe I receive a lot of feedback or response from my audience. That isn't to say that I am not getting any feedback or responses. I'm saying that it feels as though I get very little. That may be in part a function of the media I've been using more recently to publish my work, my web site Blackfunk.org. We will see how that changes as I begin over the next year to re-engage other outlets.

SGF: *What are you currently working on?*
H: I just finished co-writing a research report about a university's work in Decolonizing and Reconstructing Epistemologies (DRE). I'm finishing the edits to my book, *Conjuring Black Funk: Notes on Culture, Sexuality, and Spirituality, Vol. I*. It is a collection of my essays, interviews, poetry, and other writing since 2000. I am working on a book-length collection of stories of sex encounters by black and Latino men who have sex with men. The book is based upon my research at the HIV Center at Columbia University and will include my commentary. I am also working on a revised version of my dissertation, "Our Bodies, Our Wisdom," for publication to a larger audience. I have several journal articles in the works. And as always, I submit frequent contributions to my column, "From the Cave," on Blackfunk.org.

SGF

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G. WINSTON JAMES

INTERVIEWED DECEMBER 2006

By Steven G. Fullwood

G. Winston James is a Jamaican-born poet, short fiction writer, essayist and editor. He holds an M.F.A. in fiction from Brooklyn College, City University of New York, and is the author of the Lambda Literary Award finalist poetry collections *The Damaged Good* and *Lyric: Poems Along a Broken Road.* A former executive director of Other Countries, James is a founding organizer of Fire & Ink: A Writers Festival for GLBT People of African Descent. James is also co-editor of the historic anthology, *Spirited: Affirming the Soul and Black Gay/Lesbian Identity.*

SGF: *Talk about your relationship to the written word.*
GWJ: Besides the fact that I've often felt alone, I am also a very emotional person. Because of that, I don't always communicate well orally. When I'm angry, for instance, I can barely speak.

For me, the written word has always been a way for me to communicate what is going on inside. A way for me to attempt to be clear about myself, where I am, what I'm doing and how I'm feeling on my particular journey. It's probably safe to say that writing has helped to keep me healthy mentally. It may well have helped to save my life.

Words are like magical instruments to me. They are one of the most effective ways to create art and to tell the truth. I always hope that I am doing both with my work.

SGF: *When did you decide you were a "writer"?*
GWJ: I still don't know that I'm "a writer." I have long stretches during which I cannot write anything at all. I only know that, in the end, I have certain stories to tell. For me, publishing my work is an effort to add my voice to what should be a chorus of voices coming from our black LGBT communities and the larger world.

I don't see myself as a "sophisticated" or overly complex writer. I have a strong interest in having readers be able to access my work and to feel the emotions I am trying to convey. On most days—my good days—I'm just trying to keep it real, and maybe to make even some dark things (the subjects people don't like to talk or write about) sound a tiny bit beautiful.

SGF: *Do you consider yourself a poet first, or simply a writer?*
GWJ: I consider myself to be an individual on a slightly strange journey. I have a facility with language (I believe)—both in writing and in learning new ones. I am someone who believes strongly in communication—"Save the writer, save the world." I like to write. My M.F.A. is in fiction, but I actually write poetry more often.

SGF: *Can you let us in on your writing process?*
GWJ: I write when the spirit moves me. I probably shouldn't say this since it reveals that I'm not a very "professional" writer, but I am at present incapable of forcing my muse to attention.

What happens to me is that I will be riding in a train, or driving in a car, and a first line will come to me—it could be a line of a poem or short story. Sometimes I stop what I'm doing to write down the line, but I've found that to be unnecessary. These lines will not leave me—even if months or years go by.

This is how my work germinates. Sometimes I get many seeds. Other periods, very few. But I've come to feel that I'm not in a rush. The work will come, and when it does, my promise to it is that I will try to make each piece the best it can be. I am manic about revision. Both for fear of embarrassing myself and doing the work an injustice.

SGF: *Talk about your latest book,* The Damaged Good.
GWJ: I feel as if *The Damaged Good* is me taking *Lyric* to a different place. A place where there is somewhat less apology and less sentimentality. There was an effort in *TDG* to be raw in my descriptions of situations.

When I say in one poem "What is the number of them? How many pints of saliva lost…" I'm hoping that there are men who know this

feeling of insatiability and recognize it best when it is not sugarcoated.

There is stuff in *The Damaged Good* about my upbringing, very early sexual awakening with the aid of adult men. There are love poems. Poems about sex, desire and appetites we know we should not entertain in this day and age. There is a lot of humanity (pimples and all) in the collection, but ultimately my message is about becoming "yourself," and being comfortable in that personhood.

Some of the poems may at first read suggest some moral standard I'm attempting to impose, but far from it. I just want us to think about the things we do.

I, for instance, understand myself to be extremely sex positive. I not only accept that, but I can now celebrate it—having come to an understanding of why and how I am the way I am. My caution to myself is, as with physicians—"do no harm."

The collection ends with two poems that talk about possibilities and taking chances. Ultimately, I want each of us to "Chance. Fly."

SGF

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LYNNE D JOHNSON

INTERVIEWED MAY 2006
by Steven G. Fullwood

Lynne d Johnson is the general manager online for *Vibe* and *Spin,* managing marketing, editorial, production, business development and sales operations for the magazines' web sites and mobile properties. She's also editor-at-large for *Mosaic Literary Magazine*, writes music features for PopMatters.com, and has written for a host of magazines, books and web sites including *Vibe, Spin*, Africana.com, the *Source*, *URB*, and *XLR8R*.
www.lynnedjohnson.com

SGF: *Talk about your work as a journalist, editor and blogger.*
LdJ: Whoever knew that being a journalist, editor and blogger would be like being famous. I mean seriously, I've been in the game of journalism for over fifteen years as either a writer or editor, but it wasn't until I became a blogger, or at least had my very own web site that somehow I was moved from the local to the global. That's the power of the Internet, the place where people connect to you for different reasons. Either it's your writing style, or exactly what you're writing about.

Often I find that a journalist can't be a blogger, or a blogger can't be a journalist—the two styles just don't match. But as blogging has been around longer and longer, the two forms of writing are starting to inform one another. I think I was always a blogger at heart; it just wasn't called blogging then.

Blogging is storytelling. And I like to tell stories and let the characters come to life and truly inhabit the story. Blogging is also being able to say a lot with few words. Word economy is something I've always believed in, the best way to say more with less. Of course for me this came because of dramatic writing training, but some people are just natural with that gift.

Today I'm a little annoyed by the blogs that become popularity. And

I say this with not a dose of haterade in my system. The thing is, the gossip rags are taking off. All they do is this photojournalism style blogging—stolen images with one-liners. At first I thought this was creative, but now I wonder. I'm happy that young people are learning to express themselves and are writing, but all the real writers have either stopped blogging, or they've fled to vox to make blogging more personal again. To build relationships again.

Because I've been a writer, editor and journalist, I approached blogging with a seriousness, as an extension of the craft. At least that's how I started out. Now, if and when I do it, it's mainly simply to inform. Information is power. And though sometimes I want to give it up altogether, I just can't. A story or bit of information breaks and I feel the need to share.

SGF: *What is your writing process?*
LdJ: Damn. Hell if I know. It used to be listening to Miles and 'Trane with an ephemeral high from one toke of Brooklyn's best ganja. But actually, I've lost my writing self. She disappeared somewhere between editor and manager and Web 2.0. It's not that I don't think I can write anymore, I just don't. At least not in the way that I'd like to.

If I were writing like I'd like to it would involve spending a significant time alone, jotting notes on index cards in my sleep. Which reminds me, I do wake up in the middle of the night with ideas, and I get stickies or index cards to jot them down. Often it's a line of a poem, an idea about a blog post, or ideas for two book proposals I've been working on forever.

SGF: *What are you working on right now?*
LdJ: Well, at work I'm working on revolutionizing business journalism on the web. Working on revolutionizing the relationship between the publication and its readers. I can't say much more than that, except it's very Web 2.0, and I hope it'll be Web 3.0 as well.

Personally, as I said previously, I'm trying to work on two books. One I've been working on for at least ten years, if not more. I haven't actually written the book. I've just been collecting materials and

jotting down notes, and writing and rewriting proposals for it. I think it's a hard one because though it's a bit cultural criticism, it's also a bit memoir. That's such a big step, putting yourself out there, your life, to be inspected under a glass. But in a way, blogging and then teaching, and then speaking in public, in a way all of these things have prepared me for this. I just have to get very Zen about this one and let go of the fears.

I've had at least two literary agents interested in the title over the years, and still I don't have it together. I gotta give up the ghost, so to speak.

The other book that I'm trying to get the proposal together for is also challenging. Only because it involves a lot of research. There is no formal way to study the subject I'm approaching, because no one has really documented anything on this topic before. I'd probably be the first. So it's going to involve hours of interviews and making connections. One publisher expressed interest in the topic, and it would be a major achievement for my academic career. Perhaps one day I'd be able to turn from being this low level adjunct to a professor of record that some serious program might be enticed to bring on as an endowed or distinguished professor.

Truth is, now that you ask me these questions I realize I have to find that real writer in me again. I'd hate to get to the end of my days, still being aware, and realizing that I hadn't accomplished at least this.

SGF

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WHO DO YOU LOVE?

By Samiya Bashir

Some of Us Did Not Die:
New and selected essays of June Jordan
By June Jordan
Basic Civitas Books
ISBN 0465036929
HB, $26.00, 312 pp.

"[You] cannot draw the line on freedom, you cannot draw the line on equality. And if I am not free and if I am not equally entitled to love and desire both men and women, in other words, if I am not free and if I am not entitled equal to heterosexuals and homosexuals then homosexual men and women have joined with the dominant heterosexual culture in the tyrannical pursuit of E Pluribus Unum and I a bisexual woman committed to cultural pluralism, and therefore to sexual pluralism, can only say, you better watch your back!"

—from "On Bisexuality and Cultural Pluralism," reprinted from *Affirmative Acts* (Anchor, 1998)

In her introduction to the recently published *Some of Us Did Not Die*, **June Jordan** asked, in reference to we who survived the 9/11 bombing: "What shall we do now? How shall we grieve, and cry out loud, and face down despair?" In a world that grows more dangerous by the sound-bitten moment, the loss of June Jordan is incalculable. Her question has become one that we, who have also survived the passing of this great beacon, are left to ask ourselves—and each other.

Jordan's final collection, published posthumously, contains eight fiery new essays, many of which were written for her regular column in *The Progressive*, as well as thirty-two essays selected from her four previous collections: *Affirmative Acts, Technical Difficulties, On Call*, and *Civil Wars*.

Called "our premiere Black woman essayist" by longtime friend and former editor, Nobel Laureate Toni Morrison, Jordan's prolific career spanned four decades and included the publication of twenty-eight books, marking her as one of the most widely published writers in American History. With 1981's *Civil Wars*, Jordan became the first published African-American woman essayist.

Her grasp of the growing Orwellian nature of our shrinking democracy led to an analysis which reached far beyond the proscribed borders of sexual identity, as well as her deconstruction of the modern polarities of sexuality, have been largely ignored by both the mainstream and the lesbian/gay literary political communities. Instead, many continue to propagate the falsehood that she was not "out" enough, that perhaps her work, and her life, were not "queer" enough.

However, Jordan was an avowed bisexual. She furthered, both in her work and her life, the reigning ideal of "out and proud" by tying her sexuality to the larger scheme of her cultural and political ideology. In opposition to the claim that she did not focus intensely enough on her sexual identity, it could be successfully argued that the combination of her work in that area, and her work in nearly every other (while clinging voraciously to her right to define her sexuality as she saw fit) generated, in fact, a far more powerful body of work in furtherance of equality and human rights—regardless of sexuality—than any number of necessarily redundant treatises she could have written demanding human rights on the basis of sexuality alone.

Jordan was indeed a pluralist in early every way. Born of multicultural, Caribbean immigrant parents on a blazing summer day in Harlem in 1936, Jordan loved music, loved laughter, loved, of course, justice. She even loved the work inherent in the struggle for human rights. When she was made concretely aware that this struggle would certainly outlast her, she simply fought harder.

Jordan died on June 14, 2002, just 3 weeks before her 66th birthday. Breast cancer, which she'd been battling valiantly for a decade, finally bested her body. But *Some of Us Did Not Die* is her own final testament, her last word, a shaking fist at both the cancer and the injustice that never succeeded in besting her spirit.

In *Some of Us Did Not Die*, readers find evidence of this indomitable spirit. Jordan tackles contemporary social issues from Israel to Lebanon to Nicaragua, from sex and sexuality to "The Stolen Election" of 2000. In essays like "Requiem for the Champ" and "Hunting for Jews?" Jordan takes on personalities like Mike Tyson, O.J. Simpson, and Buford O. Furrow Jr., the white supremacist who opened fire on a Jewish Community Center in Los Angeles.

The book's title is taken from a poem she read during a 2001 speech at Barnard. In it, Jordan spoke of her battle with breast cancer and about the September 11th terrorist attacks. "The humane secular potential of democracy," said Jordan in her eponymous introduction to the collection, "rests upon the conviction that just because you exist you—male/female/jew/Gentile/Muslim/poor/rich/smart/beautiful/lazy/scientific/artistic/gay/straight/bisexual/Republican—you are equal under the law."

Still, the question continues to be asked: What did her work and thought mean to LGBT people? We may as well ask what a breathless scream means to a newborn, or of what significance is safe shelter to a battered spouse. What does the concept of freedom mean to the concept of humanity?

*

Entreat me not to leave you or to return from following you;

for where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge;
your people shall be my people, and your God my god."
—(Ruth 1:16-17)

In her essay, "Ruth and Naomi, David and Jonathan: One Love," Jordan explores the two enduring biblical stories of homosexual love. "And is it not wonderfully true," she asks, "that Ruth's love for Naomi surpassed her love of men even as David's love of Jonathan surpassed his love of women?" Jordan's essay demands that their love be celebrated with our own.

She goes even further and places such love within the context of her own experience with the love of women not only sexually, but affectionally. It was her female friends, Jordan claims, that came to her aid when she was in the most desperate stages of her fight against

cancer. “This is the love of women,” said Jordan. “This is the love that is saving my life.”

In the essay, “A Couple of Words on Behalf of Sex (Itself),” Jordan moved beyond the ethereal beauty of love in defense of the concrete beauty of sexual experience and desire. In typically humorous style she decried the increasing demonization of sexuality and sexual desire. “I’d been misled,” she says. “All the discussion of heterosexuality and bisexuality and gay and lesbian sexuality, all of that was not about sex! All of that was about issues requiring analysis of hegemonic consciousness and capitalistic patterns of primary affectional engagement. And, meanwhile, sex, itself, had fallen out of favor!”

In “A Couple of Words...” Jordan laments, “Nobody writes love poetry any more.” But Jordan herself was one of the genre’s masters. Adrienne Rich, in her foreword to Jordan’s *Haruko/Love Poems*, referred to Jordan’s ability to capture “moments or ways of being which might make love—in many dimensions—more possible, more revolution-directed.”

*

Jordan’s love poetry was the quintessential political act of a woman who Minnie Bruce Pratt dubbed “Warrior Poet.” In it Jordan lay herself prostrate and held a steady spotlight on her own very human vulnerability, her need for intimacy, for physical touch, for sexual excitement, that moved beyond theory into the passionate playground of the physical.

In a biographical essay on Jordan I wrote a year before her passing I called her “our modern day Sojourner Truth, or own super-hero flying—neither red cape nor invisible airplane necessary, the power of her voice will carry her—from one corner of the world to the next.”

Like many African-American artists before and since, Jordan used her unique ability to create in real time her vision of the world through a variety of means. She received both the Prix de Rome Environmental Design Award and the American Institute of Architecture’s Award for Architectural Design for a joint design proposal for the African Burial Ground discovered in New York City. A widely published poet, Jordan also received numerous literary

honors, from her 1971 National Book Award nomination for her first novel, *His Own Where*, to Rockefeller and NEA fellowships. Her likeness has even been represented on a Ugandan postage stamp.

Jordan pushed the envelope of form, while a lifelong student of its liberating boundaries. She opted for the narrative of the oppressed. At the University of California, Berkeley, where she was a professor of African-American Studies, Jordan founded Poetry for the People in 1991, training undergraduates to take poetry to community groups as a form of political empowerment. The program created a veritable army of passionately informed, politically dedicated, artistically aware disciples. For ten years I have been proud to be one of those disciples.

Like a cat to a scratching post, Jordan continued to claw away at injustice wherever she saw it, until she was absolutely, physically, unable to dig any further. Jordan wrote her poems, essays, letters and inquiries longhand well after everyone else had gone online. But, late in life, she became hooked on the internet. When she was feeling well enough she would log on to keep in touch with current events.

We had a routine during her last few months of chemo, that I borrowed from an old lover. I would send her loving energy in the arms of the wind, let love and light ride the jet stream, and reach her out West, carrying with it the love of all it touched. I would also send her love notes, news items and photos. She would send back notes of love and encouragement, and her specific requests for additional news or information, or simply more information, or simply more photos and more loving energy.

"I have evolved from an observer," she said, "to a victim to an activist passionately formulating methods of resistance against tyranny of any kind." In both her poetry and in essays like "Besting a Worst Case Scenario" and "I Am Seeking an Attitude," Jordan wrote candidly about how her body faced its final opponent: breast cancer. In the weeks before she died her body was almost unrecognizable. Her physical frame, always slight, was like a shadow, but in her eyes was an undeniable brightness, and inquisitiveness, even that old laughter fighting through the pain.

Who do you love?

This has become the quintessential question leading the movement for LGBT equal rights—one for which "correct" and

"incorrect" answers are all too often eagerly provided. For Jordan, the answer to this question could not be singular, whether the issue was the politics of sexuality, or the politics of international human rights.

Jordan's bisexuality extended beyond sexual orientation into a trope for a politics of inclusion, for a love that dare speak the names of many. Despite the repeatedly reinforced political incorrectness of her position, Jordan refused to choose to the exclusion of either an important facet of her being, or a singular aspect of humanity. June Jordan remained determined, until her death, to her dedication to the truth. The evidence of this is apparent throughout *Some of Us Did Not Die*. June Jordan loved us all.

Samiya A. Bashir is co-editor, with Tony Medina and Quraysh Ali Lansana, of Role Call: A Generational Anthology of Social and Political Black Literature & Art *(Third World Press, 2002).*

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ANA-MAURINE LARA

INTERVIEWED MARCH 2007

By Steven G. Fullwood

Ana-Maurine Lara is an AfroDominican American writer and organizer. Her poetry and short fiction has appeared in several literary journals including *Tongues Magazine* and *Blithe House Quarterly,* among others. She has received awards from the Puffin Foundation, the Brooklyn Arts Council and PEN Northwest. She is co-author of bustingbinaries.com: a web site designed to assist in building a community of resistance by addressing the binaries in our social justice movements. Lara's debut novel, *Erzulie's Skirt*, is a tale of love and survival in the Caribbean middle passage. She is currently in Austin, Texas working with The Austin Project, a collective of women writers, scholars and activists of color and their allies creating and performing in the jazz aesthetic. www.zorashorse.com

My name is Ana-Maurine Lara. Maurine is my maternal grandmother's name. My parents were going to name me Sarah. Nothing against the name, but Sarah Lara just isn't as cute as Ana Lara or Ana-Maurine Lara. Thanks Mom. Papi. 'Preciate it.

My life as a writer...hmm... I'm not as disciplined as some. I write best in large chunks of time. Not every day, but when I sit down to write, it's usually for 8 to 12 hours at a time. I know I'm idiosyncratic. I will disconnect from all forms of communication during my writing streaks; I have funny little rituals like having a cup of mate [tea] first thing in the morning, and sipping through the straw all day. So, because I know I write best in large chunks of time, I've been stylizing my life. Yes, a writer's life needs style. I live in Austin, which is both laid back enough that I can sit and stare at trees when I need to and affordable enough that I can work part time and write full time – as opposed to the other way around. After a long day of writing, I'll usually go out dancing or for drinks or to a movie or an art show – something public and social that gets me out of my head a little.

[Dark Room Collective member and *Encyclopedia* co-editor]

Tisa Bryant always says that my writing stints make sense given my aesthetic. My fiction writing really requires me to have a connection to landscape and people and I need time to get in there. And so, every time I start a new piece of work, I have to go to the place where the work is set. Otherwise, it's like icing with no cake. Tasty, but nothing – nada – underneath. So, what this means is setting aside enough time and resources to make the trips possible so that the work can be richer to write and to read. I love to travel almost as much as I love writing, so I try to make my two passions serve each other.

I am very character driven, and I'm also visual. So, an idea will come to me in the form of images. Or a character will come in the form of messages – it's not exactly visceral, but there is something that has enough of a presence to make me notice. Because of this, characters will tell me to write their stories. That becomes long-form fiction. Short-story writing is much more difficult for me as a form, so usually, I get first lines and they'll sit around for awhile and eventually I'll work – really work – to make the story happen. Poetry. Hmm. Poetry kind of does its own thing. When I started being in the world as a writer – meaning, I wasn't just journaling or writing stories and stuffing them into closet corners – I was out as a performance poet. So, poetry is in some ways my first love. Poetic form, poetic cadences, poetic sensibilities inform not just my poetry but also all of my other writing.

My nonfiction writing is usually in the form of critical essays. And that's just getting out all the pent-up ideas from the last ten years of struggling to confront racism in the Dominican Republic. Usually.

Erzulie's Skirt is largely set in post-colonial Santa Domingo (Dominican Republic.) The characters drew me to situate my first novel there. First and foremost the character of Micaela. She was telling me to write the story and I fought with her for three years before putting pen to paper. I didn't want to write the story because at the time a) I didn't think I could and b) I was resistant to writing a story set in the Dominican Republic as a writer living in the U.S. (and Asia for a minute). But, Micaela won out. And then Miriam. And Yealidad. They just put me there.

The characters talked to me. Micaela first talked to me from under the Caribbean Sea. I let them talk themselves out as much as they could. Maybe one day, they'll call me back, but for now, there are a few other characters pushing themselves to the foreground.

On the reception for *Erzulie's Skirt*... I've had a wonderful time, and people have said really incredible, positive things to me. I write because I'm compelled to, so it's nice when that effort is received with recognition, questions or challenges that deepen even my own understanding of the work. I remember at one reading (thanks, KT!) a theorist was asking me all sorts of questions on my use of language. I let her talk for about ten minutes because she knew so much more than me about the subject. And her analysis of the use of language within *Erzulie's Skirt* taught me a ton about how to think about language and identity in new ways within the realm of fiction writing.

There are two things that surprise me. One is that people haven't tripped on the lesbian aspects of the story as much as I thought they might. They've tripped on the spiritual worldview and the Haitian-Dominican conflict. And two, and I do have to thank R. Erica Doyle for teaching me this, I never know who's going to be in the audience. And it always amazes me to see who's there.

I finished the manuscript for the second novel (working title: "Anacaona's Daughter") at the end of 2006, and now I'm in a poetry year. I'm working on a poetry manuscript (working title: "Kohnjehr Woman"), and have started research for my third novel manuscript. Those are my two primary creative projects. I'm also trying to get The Magic Makers Oral History Project actualized, by transcribing interviews I've completed and conducting interviews with other folks who I'm really excited about.

SGF

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AN INTERVIEW WITH ZELDA LOCKHART

By Riggin Waugh

Zelda Lockhart's first novel, *Fifth Born* was published by Atria Books (Simon & Schuster) in August [2002]. Set in rural Mississippi and St. Louis, this book is the story of Odessa Blackburn, a young African-American girl who survives the physical and sexual abuse of her childhood. Lyrical, poignant and powerful, *Fifth Born* explores how secrets can tear families apart and unravel people's lives. Zelda's novella, *The Evolution*, debuted in serial form in USAToday.com's Open Book series in February [2003]. Filled with scaly, claw-bearing humans, dreamlike travels and futuristic technology—and lesbians—this story provides a sharp contrast to *Fifth Born*.
www.zeldalockhart.com

Riggin Waugh: Some say that all first novels are autobiographical. Does that apply to *Fifth Born*?
Zelda Lockhart: Although some of it is autobiographical, I prefer not to ruin the experience of fiction—the rise and fall of drama—for the reader by saying how much or what parts are autobiographical. But I will tell you that different parts of my psyche are in each character, and at some point in the creation of the novel, they all, including Odessa, took on a life of their own.

RW: One of the many things about your novel is how real the narrator's voice is. What was it like to write in the first person as—at least in the first half of the book—such a young person?
ZL: To create the psychology of a young character, stay true to that psychology, but also reveal the story to the adult reader in a way that is very intriguing was quite an arduous task. The hardest part was tapping into the psyche of such a young, little person and then being able to portray the perspective believably. But I love how seemingly simplistic her voice is.

RW: Although *Fifth Born* isn't a lesbian novel per se, the character of Ella Mae is labeled "funny" by family members, and Ella Mae

herself says, "Wasn't nothin I was gonna do with no man that I couldn't do for myself." Can we assume Ella Mae is a lesbian?
ZL: In most families, there is the lesbian relative, if not the lesbian relatives. With Ella Mae, there are all kinds of layers of the family hiding her away, but especially hiding away her lesbianism and keeping her away from her own sister. It's important in the story that Ella Mae begins to acknowledge to Odessa the abuses against her in her childhood from being perceived as sexually different. So I think it's very powerful—Ella Mae seems to be coming out to herself. At any rate, I think the fact that Ella Mae makes reference to being able to take care of herself sexually, with no need or desire for a man, certainly suggests that she has potential as a lesbian. But then there's the debate about sexual identity in the midst of celibacy, and, well, that's a nonfiction theory piece for a grad student out there.

RW: *Fifth Born* has been compared to Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and to Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina.* Do you find the similarities?
ZL: All three novels have very distinct first-person female narrators, young, coming of age, but each tells a story unique and beautifully different in tone and outcome. I do love being compared to two of my favorite writers.

RW: You recently had a serial novella, *The Evolution,* published on USAToday.com. It's a story where the main characters are members of a lesbian family. How did you go about getting that story into mainstream media?
ZL: A *USA Today* editor in Chicago read *Fifth Born*, loved it, and invited me to write a piece for the Open Books section of their online paper. I decided to work on a piece I'd already started, *The Evolution.* I'm happy to say that I didn't even think about the fact that mainstream American might be getting a dose of the unusual. That's the first time I just didn't even think about being a lesbian, like I finally believe that folks ought to just get used to us. I also guess that, through the eyes of a really busy, single, lesbian mom of two, the world just all looks blurry and queer.

RW: You also write poetry, and I know a lot of your poems deal with

ex-lovers and your brother with AIDS who passed away. How does your very autobiographical poetry influence your fiction?
ZL: Once I could learn to write about intense passion and intense pain in my life using the concentrated beauty of poetry, then I could add the ingredient of make-believe and lengthen the thoughts into fiction. The story I just wrote for USAToday.com is an interesting combination of my experiences with lesbian co-parenting and the death of my brother. The conflicts between the two women in the story are largely over their differences in parenting as well as their differences in dealing with death. In past relationships, I've had experience with the coping mechanisms being different for dealing with loss and death. It's one of those rudimentary experiences, and it can cause a wedge between partners.

RW: So, you're now putting the finishing touches on a second full-length novel, "Cold Running Creek." Tell me about that.
ZL: It's a very passionately told story of a Choctaw girl who is captured and sold into slavery near the end of the Civil War. Against a backdrop of voodoo, Mississippi swamp life and American slavery, we get Lilly's mystical and brave journey home.

RW: You're a single lesbian mother of two children. In what ways, if any, do your children fuel your creative process?
ZL: Wow. Well, to have a child is the ultimate creation. They make me laugh and cry, and they remind me of the lessons of life as I try to teach them the things I also need to know. They remind me that I am wise and that I can be a bottomless well of creative energy.

RW: You've done a lot in your life—human resource trainer, editor, grant writer, director of a cultural center, novelist, poet, mother. What's next?
ZL: I also sing, and, well, I'm about to plant and grow food on my land. I've been composting, making dirt. It's fun, and funny, for me that I'm wanting to learn this; it feels very "organic" though. So I guess the next move is filmmaking organic farmer. I also hope to get some visiting writer gigs, so if any of your readers are interested, or if they want to get on my e-mail list for readings in their neighborhood, they can reach me at fifthbornnovel@aol.com.

Riggin Waugh lives in Takoma Park, Md,. and has an M.F.A. in creative writing. Her work has appeared in numerous anthologies, and she is the editor of two books—Dykes with Baggage: The Lighter Side of Lesbians and Therapy *(Alyson Books, 2000) and* Ex-Lover Weird Shit*:* A Collection of Short Fiction, Poetry, and Cartoons by Lesbians and Gay Men *(Two Out of Three Sisters Press, 1995).*

Excerpted from an interview first published in Lambda Book Report, *February/March 2003. Reprinted with permission of the author.*

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MINGUS

INTERVIEWED APRIL 2007
By Steven G. Fullwood

Mingus is a writer and poet living in Brooklyn, N.Y. He has performed at holes in the wall, in a kitchen or two, and a couple of places with admission fees. His forthcoming untitled book of poetry will be published in 2008.

M: I write because I have to. Like a musician, I've found the ability that The One has allowed me to voice. Like a blowhole I can express myself. Others are still trying to find it. I'm afraid that others may never find it, but I have. Lemme try that again. Writing is like having extra appendages: instead of two hands, I have ten. Instead of two legs, I have many, instead of one way out, I have these appendages that create wings, so I'm not stuck on the ground, nor victim to whatever the air brings. That make any sense?

SGF: *Talk about your novel.*
M: I haven't named it yet, but it definitely involves the words "gospel," "enduring," or "nomads." It's about the effects of convenience and how convenience compromises our relationships with one another—*especially*—our relationship with God, and when that is compromised (whether you see God as a being or self) then *all relationships* are compromised. I believe that God, however, is a conscious sentient "It"—God—God being beyond human/animal/plant life and such.

The novel is about love, compassion, forgiveness, anger and walking through the valley of existence into life and how pain is necessary and often a thing that brings us together. It's about commonality and differences, and how important the power of choice is, and how terribly beautiful it is. It's about how though we are all individuals, we all don't strive for authenticity; however, that doesn't absolve those who do of caring, helping and loving those who don't. Example: People who used to be "horrible sinners" can pimp, push,

lie, steal and cheat with an astute cunningness, but when they become Christians, they don't remember certain things and just fall into line when the greatness of God got them through those things. But what good is it when we lose the lessons to become someone's religious automaton? God is more than that, and more than the religious/sanctimonious corporation that people and things can often be. Compassion saves us. It is one of our greatest powers, but it demands sacrifice of self to do so. The book is about forgiveness, forgiving others and importantly forgiving self and the process of how certain characters do it. Each of us is a Gospel, and though we aren't told that often, I plan to!

SGF: *Share a little about your writing process.*
M: I dig through my guts and believe that there are lots of folk who feel what I feel, even if we don't all think the same. I made a decision to put my guts on display: the anger, the hatred, the hope and the "odd" ideas I have about love. Ideas that may seem odd for an adult, but when you're a child it all makes sense before we start becoming indentured to ideas of belonging. That's the process.

SGF: *How is your poetry similar/different/the same as your fiction?*
M: I don't know if there is a difference. The characters in the "fiction" speak "poetically,", or at least they see life like that. Funny, when I read my "poetry," I just never see it as "poetry." I don't rightly know what poetry is, kinda like fiction. Fiction is nonfiction basically, the only difference is you throw a cape or spaceship-ish variable in it and then... voila—fiction. Everything in my "fiction" exists, it's real—even if it all hasn't happened to *me*, however, it's happened., I'm only speaking of it from my hopefully authentic, however limited, view.

There is something very important about all of us, and that thing is history. Our personal history, and how that history exists within society and its history… The thing that makes that history important is that it allows us a measuring gauge…and from that gauge hopefully decisions can be made… And those decisions are glorified best two ways: 1) by learning from them and evolving (hopefully for the better) and…

By being able to pay attention to them and write about them, but not from a black and white perspective, but from the perspective that involves the pain, fear and effort in the acts that make up history.

I can do that. It brings me great pleasure, even in the discomfort of handling the jagged glass that history oft time can be. Especially my own. Language is how we get to one another, and I've been allowed to express that language. It has become necessary, because it to some extent allows me to see myself and change.

SGF: *Tell us a little about your name, "Mingus"?*
M: I knew that I was more than I was being. I knew that I would be more than I am. I was allowed the vision of a gift along with my responsibility to the Lord of all. I could not see what I would look like, but the word "Mingus" honored it.

SGF: *What can readers expect from your work? What themes do you explore?*
M: Melancholy…melancholy is in everything we do. It's in our hope, romance, togetherness and even love. It's the thing that keeps us grounded, especially when we're a part of something that takes us off our feet sometime. Melancholy is a needed ingredient in our living.

We want our loved ones to be able to share that melancholy, more so than having an answer for it. To be able to speak words, live words that keep us from the focus of melancholy becoming depression or some other overwhelming thing. Melancholy is a…gear. A speed. It's one that helps us see the flowers, but allows us also a manageable speed to get where we're going, but not so fast that we neglect the things that are immediately around us, because before we get to where we are going, we have to be a part of where we are—regardless of our hopes and dreams down the road.

SGF

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TRAVIS MONTEZ

INTERVIEWED APRIL 2007
By Steven G. Fullwood

Travis Montez is the author of *Reluctant Poet*, and has also been published in print and online publications such as *Gay City News* and *Lodestar Quarterly.* Most recently, Montez's work has been featured in *Bullets and Butterflies: Queer Spoken Word Poetry*, published by Suspect Thoughts Press. www.travismontez.com

SGF:*Talk to me about the title of your book,* Reluctant Poet.
TM: "Reluctant Poet" was a nickname given to me by Felice Bell and Keith Roach who ran the Nuyorican Poet Café's Friday night slam back when I was first getting into spoken word. They called me that because I had horrible anxiety around sharing my work and would like disappear from the slam scene for weeks or months at a time. Then when I decided to do a book, I procrastinated and procrastinated and procrastinated a little bit more. The manuscript sat by my bed for about two years before I self-published with a different title that I can't even remember now. "Reluctant Poet" describes me then.

SGF: *Your poetry feels very personal. Is there a danger in writing about yourself? Or do I have it wrong? Is this book of poetry all about you?*
TM: There is only one poem in the book that is not about my own direct experience. That is "Over Me." That poem was inspired by the experiences of people around me that touched me so deeply I felt I had to put that in the world. Other than that, all the poems are about my life. Is there a danger in writing about yourself? I don't know. There is certainly risk, but I believe my power as an artist is in my vulnerability.

SGF: *When did you begin writing poetry? How does poetry come to you?*
TM: I have always written and told stories since I learned to read. And I have kept a journal since third grade. I think I began writing

and calling it poetry when I was a senior in high school. I began performing it as spoken word in college.

These days, a lot of poetry comes from my love. I have spent a lot of time running from intimacy, so now poems are inspired by romance, fraternity, family, and hope.

SGF: *What would you like* Reluctant Poet *to say to the world?*
TM: Love is the difference.

SGF: *How does the word inform your life as an artist?*
TM: Language is power. I have a great deal of respect for the word. I am committed to not being lazy with language or words. As an artist I want to put things in the world that inspire people to affirm life and choose love and healing over hate.

SGF

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LISA C. MOORE

INTERVIEWED SEPTEMBER 2003
By Steven G. Fullwood

Lisa C. Moore is the founder and editor of RedBone Press, which publishes work that celebrates the culture of black lesbians and gay men and further promotes understanding between black gays and lesbians and the black mainstream. She is the editor of *does your mama know? An Anthology of Black Lesbian Coming Out Stories* (1997). www.redbonepress.com

SGF: *Talk about the genesis of RedBone Press.*
LCM: RedBone Press started with an idea I had for a book of black lesbian coming out stories. A friend of my younger sister had followed us home from school one day (true story!), all because she'd seen the pink triangle on the bumper of my car. This was in 1995. My sister's friend was just coming out, and thought that we might have some books on the subject. Well, I searched through my library—I really did have one back then—and didn't find that book. I found a couple of stories to show her… and the thought came to me that this book needs to be done. So I set about finding the stories—not thinking that I'd do the book myself (at first).

It took a year and a half to get the stories together; some were reprints from other sources, but most were originally written for *does your mama know?*. During that time I researched publishers to get a feel for whether they'd want to publish the book, and to see how the publishing industry works. At the end of the process, I decided that, contrary to popular opinion, there was indeed a market for this book, and that I could put it out myself—so with the help of a good friend who gave me the money to print it, I did.

RedBone Press arose from that. I had to name my business venture something, and that was it. After the book came out, I discovered that I loved—loved!—all the aspects of publishing, so I hung out my little shingle. It's a one-woman press, publishing one book a year (more or less).

SGF: *Since the publication of does* your mama know?: An Anthology of Black Lesbian Coming Out Stories*, and* the bull-jean stories*, by Sharon Bridgforth, can you gauge their influence on the ever-expanding body of black LGBT literature?*
LCM: You know, I can't gauge it. I do know that *the bull-jean stories* has been adopted for women's studies classes, and some English classes, around the country, and that *does your mama know?* has been used as supplementary text for women's studies and black women's studies classes, too. (Yep, sometimes those are two separate subjects. Go figure.) It's also been a seminal text for the few black LGBT studies classes. Both books have sold thousands of copies and won awards, but that's not a gauge for their influence on others' writing. So I really don't know. I haven't seen too much in the way of *bull-jean* knockoff stories. I do know that our (my and Sharon's) travels around the country have inspired other people to write their own stories, only because they've told us. And I have been acknowledged in other people's books and other published writings, as has Sharon, and that is wonderfully gratifying.

SGF: *What is your dream scenario for RedBone?*
LCM: I'd like for RedBone Press to publish two to three books a year. I'd like to have a poetry imprint, and do a nonfiction book and a fiction book each year. I'd like RedBone Press to pay my rent, so I can stay home and focus on it full time.

SGF: *What can we expect from RedBone in the future?*
LCM: Ooooh… I've been toying with the idea of doing an anthology about butch women. And one on long-term couples, gay and lesbian and trans; a coffee table book of sorts. And a book for black gay youth. And there's some fiction I'd like to see; mystery; history; poetry… but let me get through *Spirited* first. *Spirited* will restart RedBone Press, since I lost all my financial records and equipment in the fire. Let me start with that, and see what comes next.

SGF: *Talk about your upcoming publication.*
LCM: *Spirited: Affirming the Soul and Black Gay/Lesbian Identity* is what I was working on before that unfortunate incident last September called an apartment fire. I was also working feverishly on

Fire & Ink, held last September, so the confluence was … it was something.

Spirited is a book of essays by black gay men and lesbians on religion and spirituality. G. Winston James, my co-editor, and I have picked the book back up during the past two months, since I've finished cleaning up fire-related stuff. The essays have been amazing to read, if only because I've been through my own spiritual journey after the fire. I've learned that many black LGBT folks have been incredibly angry that the mainstream black church has cut them off. And I've learned that black LGBT folks have not let that stop them from being religious and spiritual, through whatever means.

SGF

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INTERVIEW WITH CURÚ NECOS BLOICE

By G. Winston James

Curú Necos Bloice is a poet, short fiction writer and visual artist who was born in the Dominican Republic and raised in the Bronx, N.Y. Currently living and creating in West Harlem, Necos Bloice's aspiration is to capture through his work the Dominican Republic of his childhood.

G. Winston James: What exactly is your background, Curú?
Curú Necos Bloice: I was born in the Dominican Republic in the 1960s. My parents were also born there, in what I would say was a West Indian enclave. It was a small town with just West Indians and English speaking people. My parents were first generation Dominicans—from St. Kitts and, on my mother's side, Antigua. That made me, what they call in the Dominican Republic, a "cocolo," which used to be a derogatory term for West Indians. "Cocolo," is, I think, a corruption of the word "Tortolas." As the legend goes, a lot of the first West Indians to immigrate to the Dominican Republic were from Tortola. There was a mispronunciation of the word and it became something like "cocola." That became the term used for all West Indians. Now, cocolo is just a word that means you are a Dominican of West Indian background.

GWJ: Can you tell me how "cocolos" were distinguished from other Dominicans in daily life?
CNB: Cocolos are pretty distinct. You could see it in the hairstyles that the girls wore. You could see it a lot of times in the way that we dressed. Even my father, who is very assimilated, and had a very strong Dominican identity, wore derbies, which Dominican men would never wear. If a Dominican man wore a hat it would have been a panama hat. But the West Indian Dominicans, the cocolos, a lot of them wore derbies, which is obviously something that they got from the English. There were superficial differences like that, and there were also cultural ones.

Physically, I would say that we were distinguishable. For the most part, cocolos are dark-skinned and black and there's not a lot of questioning of race. I think "cocolo" often became synonymous with "blackness." Where you have more racial identity confusion with Dominicans, Cocolos—regardless of how light they are—usually consider themselves to be black.

GWJ: Where were you educated, when, and in what languages?
CNB: I started my education unofficially: going to backyard schools that at times were taught by West Indian women who had learned Spanish. Sometime English was included in the teachings. Then at seven I entered an official school in the first grade. That was taught in Spanish, with some English—the way that children here might take Spanish. I left the Dominican Republic when I was ten and was placed here for the fourth grade. That was taught in English. I stayed here until my first high school year, and then I went back and did a year of Spanish in the Dominican Republic. After that, I returned here and everything else was taught in English.

GWJ: Can you remember when you first began to dream in English? Do you remember feeling a sense of joy, conflict or loss?
CNB: I remember commenting on having my first dream in English. I must have been around eleven because I had been in the United States for a little bit over a year. I think I was glad that I was dreaming in English. I remember being extremely anxious to learn the language and at times I was afraid that I was never going to learn it.

GWJ: How do you identify today ethnically, culturally, and nationally?
CNB: Now it's much more complicated than when I was a child. When I was a child in the Dominican Republic, I identified as a cocolo. When I came here I became a Dominican because there was no way of explaining cocolo to Americans, and there were no Dominicans around. Then in the Seventies there was an influx of Dominicans and they became part of everyday life here; therefore, I could no longer be just Dominican because there was so much prejudice. I would have to explain my background to Dominicans so I shied away from the Dominican identity. But I couldn't go back to the cocolo identity either because there was still no place for it here

really. The only thing that I'm very clear about is that I'm black and I hold onto that.

GWJ: What language do you feel best expresses the essence of who you are, and what language do you use most often? If those languages are different, what effect do you think this has on your sense of identity?
CNB: The language that I use most often is English. I don't know if Spanish expresses another side of me that English fails to express. Spanish is connected to my emotional side. One of the disadvantages of that is the fact that I've become a much more unemotional person. During the time that I was an emotional, expressive person I did everything in Spanish. Somehow when I lost the Spanish, I lost that side of myself as well. I know that this is true because there are times when I can tap into it once more. The way I respond to Spanish songs and the way I respond to Spanish music is very different to how I respond to the English language.

GWJ: Do you deal with your own sexuality in your work?
CNB: I do. The characters that I deal with—especially male characters—are very close to me. Most of my main characters that are male are homosexuals who have not had a lot of homosexual experiences. They are homosexuals who have had no moral issues with homosexuality, but who still tend to have a lot of difficulties living their lives as homosexuals. For some reason that is inexplicable to them, (that) they've somehow missed the boat and failed to have your average homosexual relationship.

GWJ: Does living in America make it more difficult to maintain the integrity of your work as you perhaps feel pressured to create for an English-speaking audience?
CNB: I did struggle with that while I was writing my longest work that's set in the Dominican Republic. I was pioneering in writing in English about the Dominican Republic and writing about a town and a way of life that would be completely foreign to Americans—more foreign than someplace like China would seem. The Dominican Republic is close, but there are dissimilarities that are not exotic enough even to be known. So how do you explain these things and

keep them authentic still? I finally stopped worrying so much about the American audience, though, and just started writing. Not worrying so much about spotting my work with Spanish words. I feel like New York is the kind of environment where that should be more than acceptable. In a way that's part of my message too: the fact that words from other languages shouldn't scare us in a way that a lot of Americans are really afraid of any word they don't understand that comes from another language. I'm not worrying about that anymore. I feel that it's very important to be familiar with the sound of other languages—even if you don't know what it means. I also think it's important to accept that people can be around you having a conversation without you needing to know exactly what they're saying in order to appreciate the beauty of that other language. Americans in general can't seem to do that.

GWJ: What projects are you working on currently? What stories are you striving to tell?
CNB: I am working on a collection of short stories about women from the Dominican Republic. They're all of West Indian descent in some way or another, or they're mixed. The stories take place in the Dominican Republic as well as in New York City. The stories that I'm trying to tell are stories that confront us with situations that we don't want to be confronted with necessarily. I'm trying to tell stories that challenge people's views of gender, sexuality, race and ethnicity. These are ... the issues that I'm struggling with all the time. I believe that we, as people, take a lot of things for granted about women. We take a lot of things for granted about whiteness and blackness and the aesthetics in connection with those things. My stories question these issues. My aim is to make people question and test the status quo.

G. Winston James is a Jamaican-born poet, short fiction writer, essayist and editor.

Excerpted from an interview first published in Lambda Book Report*, February/March 2003. Reprinted with permission of the author.*

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MICHELLE SEWELL

INTERVIEWED JULY 2006

By Steven G. Fullwood

Michelle Sewell is an award-winning screenwriter, poet and founder of GirlChild Press, which published *Growing Up Girl* in 2006. Throughout her work as a poet and a social worker, she has maintained that there must be a place for women and girls to develop and express their truest selves. With that in mind she has created open mics, workshops and writing circles to foster that "sacred space" environment for women. www.girlchildpress.com

SGF: *Talk about* Growing Up Girl*. How did the idea for the book come about? How would you like the public to receive the book? What has been the response so far?*

MS:A couple of years ago I decided to take a break from the "day job" grind and started teaching writing workshops. For the most part I specialize in screenwriting and poetry workshops. For about a year I taught my poetry workshops primarily in shelters, detention centers, and alternative schools. While teaching these classes I would be exposed to some really talented girl/women writers who were desperate to share their stories and get feedback about their writings. Some how I got it in my head that it would be great to put together a book of their writings so that they could touch a larger audience with their work. At the time I was a starving artist so I did not have the resources to take on the project and print the anthology. A couple years go by and I receive an independent artist grant from Prince George's Arts Council [in Maryland]. This seed money put me in a position to bring the anthology to life.

My premise for the anthology was that every woman was a girl at one point and I wanted to see how our experiences might be different or the same. I learned that girlhood is a period of discovery, danger, transformation, and building a sense of self for all children born a girl. From the submissions I received (which were also international) it did not seem to matter where or when you were born, but simply that you were born a girl that linked the writers' experiences.

The book has done really well. I've sold over five hundred copies at this point. That's pretty good for a book that is basically sold off my web site [www.girlchildpress.com] and shipped out of my little home office. It has been placed at a couple bookstores and more stores are calling as they see how popular it's becoming. Just last week it was named the number one bestseller at Busboys and Poets, a local D.C. bookstore. I was really pleased with that. It beat out books that had been released by major publishers and with more name recognition. It has also been a tremendous tool in a series of roundtable discussions that me and several of the contributors have been involved in. We go to group homes, shelters or wherever folks will have us and we talk to the girls and women there. The contributors read their piece and dialogue just flows from there. This whole experience has surpassed any and all expectations.

SGF: *What drives you to the page?*
MS: At this stage in my life it's something I just have to do. I don't really think about it, I just do it. I consider it a good addiction. I journal every day to mostly get all the anxieties and worries out of my head before I move to my projects. I am often dealing with several writing projects at a time. It helps [that] when you get stuck on one you can move on to another. I love that my job allows me to people watch and listen in on other people's lives (kinda like being in the CIA but not as scandalous).

Ultimately, I like creating. I like the feeling of creating something from nothing—that feels authentic. I haven't encountered anything to date that makes me feel so accomplished.

SGF: *When did you begin writing?*
MS: Because I was an early reader I think I started appreciating the written word at a very young age. Through school I received positive feedback regarding my papers and stories. I think when I was thirteen I started down the road of writing bad teen angst poetry and short stories (those were better). When I went to college my mother was not down with me being an English major (we are Jamaican—that's like taking art appreciation) so I signed on to the sociology program, but I snuck in some writing by being the editor of our school newspaper for a couple of years. As an adult I revisited the art form

of poetry and I'm happy to report the work got better—although it has its share of angst. Regarding my current passion—screenwriting—I came to that only in the last five years. I took a random class at a community college and fell in love. I have been pursuing that pretty aggressively in the last three years and would like to make a career of it.

SGF: *Talk about your relationship to the written word.*
MS: I have great respect for writers. I know that sounds strange since I consider myself one but as I've gotten more serious about the craft I recognize how really hard you have to work to be really good. Sure, there are folks who have natural raw talent, but even that has to be really developed to get to the most brilliant of spaces. I love walking away from a movie or novel and saying, "that was some serious writing." I recently discovered John Irving (I know he has been around for a million years). WOW! I don't know where he goes for those intricate stories but I appreciate the effort.

SGF: *As an editor, talk about some of the challenges in working with a wide variety of writers.*
MS: Besides my stint as the editor for my college newspaper, I've never had to herd writers. In taking on the *Growing Up Girl* project I really learned a lot of new skills. I was dealing with writers of varying ages and skill level. [For] the really young writers I had to figure out what they were ultimately trying to say so I could ask the right question and get them to write more specifically and concretely. With more established writers it was all about *only* 3,000 words! I think once you've been published you think you have rights or something. No, seriously, it was about deciding that you have these many pages to work with and how am I going to craft the best possible product with those limitations. Also time was a huge issue. Because I was working with ninety writers I really had to get organized about tracking down permission agreements, answering multiple you-aren't-trying-to-exploit-my-child questions from parents, and you-aren't-trying-to-exploit-my-work questions from writers who might have had bad experiences in the past. I think you really develop a lot of patience and become super flexible around your own expectations and the expectations of the writers.

SGF:*Tell me about your upcoming film.*
MS: My newest projected is called "Spoiled." It is my first attempt at writing a purely comedic script and directing. We go into production in August. It's a short film that I plan on submitting to the film festival circuit. I wasn't planning on writing this particular piece, but about a year into our relationship my girlfriend informed me that she thought I was spoiled. I have had my fair share of relationships and "spoiled" has never been one of the things I've heard about myself. Loud, drama queen, funny, bossy, too independent, smart, silly, great boobs, and kind *definitely*, but never spoiled. So I decided to create my alter ego (Keisha) on paper and see what she would do. Girl is a trip! Here is the logline: How far will Tuffy Alexander go to please her super high maintenance girlfriend Keisha Greggory? The answer might surprise even the "softest" butch.

SGF

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AUTHENTIC TREASURE

Reviewed by Sterling Houston

The Fabulous Sylvester:
The Legend, the Music, the Seventies in San Francisco
By Joshua Gamson
Henry Holt and Company
ISBN 0-8050-7250-0
HB, $26.00, 306 pp.

Sylvester James, the disco star who broke all the stereotypes of gay entertainment, and crossed racial barriers at will, is the subject of the new biography *The Fabulous Sylvester: the Legend, the Music, the Seventies in San Francisco*. We must be grateful to its author Joshua Gamson for directing our attention to this under-recognized innovator—there has been no one like him before and no one like him since. The term "unique" has become an overused and all but meaningless cliché, but Sylvester is one of the only people I know to whom this adjective truly applies.

But capturing an authentic original is tricky business.

Sometimes this biography is a little to heavy on voluminous detail, and sometimes a little too light on analytical insights. The book describes Sylvester "showing up" on the *Tonight Show* with no remark made on how that important little cultural quantum leap became possible, or what it meant. Gamson is definitely a scholarly social observer, and obviously interviewed countless people in constructing this biography. Nonetheless, *The Fabulous Sylvester* represents an important artist who has been too often dismissed as an amusing period freak show.

The book catalogues the wide range of styles he mastered and made his own (gospel, soul and pop) while he consistently broke the boundaries of what was expected and allowed of black performers in commercial markets. He has been in the past been given too little credit in this area—since all he did was single-handedly reframe the role of gospel and soul in American and world popular culture, and all this through the unlikely venue of a denigrated musical form: disco. His perseverance and endurance (performing endless numbers

of touring concerts, making an endless number of high energy appearances at rallies, marches and celebrations) served him well. The sheer volume of performances he threw himself into broadened the range and color of his palette, allowing him to craft his particular and compelling vocal qualities into an increasingly fine instrument. A skilled pianist, he had a strong left hand and pumping feet, which drove a dance beat that rivaled that of Ray Charles. He experimented with exciting backup singers (from the Pointer Sisters to full gospel choirs) and his audiences grew musically by catching up with him.

And, of course, he looked fabulous. The book describes his costumes, poses and props (he is famed for striding down Castro street with two elegant Russian wolfhounds, animals which he detested as "the dumbest animals ever bred," but which looked so damn good). He had an unerring self-created sense of taste. He made beautiful places to live and beautiful things to wear out of any eccentric mix of gifts and recycled objects. One longs for more photo-documentation to accompany the text, since so much of Sylvester's originality was expressed visually.

Sylvester appeared for a well-documented period with the gender-bending performance troupe the Cockettes, pushing the artistic boundaries of this transgressive but proudly unprofessional group. Physically impressive, he was butch without being macho, and feminine without being effeminate. The confidence and unselfconsciousness with which he presented his androgynous persona gave heart to suppressed black gay men everywhere. Undaunted, he appeared on *Soul Train* dressed in the outfit of a very creative woman.

When he went on television with Joan Rivers, and she asked him how long he had been a drag queen, he replied, "I'm not a drag queen, I'm Sylvester." This was decades before RuPaul made black gender-bending style a mainstream commodity. This self-possession is impressive in itself, but becomes even more so when one realizes that he had no visible role models to draw on (other than perhaps Lena Horne), and that he invented his approach from scratch in the harsh environment of south central Los Angeles.

The haunting, penetrating quality of his vocals on his big hits, "Friendship" (from the early Seventies), "Disco Heat," "I (Who Have Nothing)" and "You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real)" were a revelation

at the time, and still work after all these years. Sylvester James was an authentic undiscovered treasure. We were only allowed to experience the first layer of his gifts since he died too soon for them all to be revealed. *The Fabulous Sylvester* at least peels back that first layer.

Sterling Houston is a prolific, innovative, African-American playwright who has worked with some of the greatest practitioners in modern theater, including Charles Ludlam, Sam Shepard and George C. Wolfe. The San Antonio native is a playwright-in-residence at Jump-Start Performance Company, where his work has received numerous awards. He performed in his youth as the lead singer in the avant-garde group Fleshtones in San Francisco, where he met and befriended Sylvester James.

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Editors' note: Sterling Houston died of AIDS in November 2006 at age 60. For more information about his life, visit www.jump-start.org.and http://www.tobyjohnson.com/sterlinghouston.html.

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A HARLEM RENAISSANCE REMEMBERED

The Collected Writings of Wallace Thurman: A Harlem Renaissance Reader
Edited by Amritjit Singh and Daniel M. Scott III
Rutgers University Press
ISBN 0-8135-3301-5
PB, $30.00, 508 pp.

Reviewed by Reginald Harris

Let me begin with a confession: I have been fascinated by **Wallace Thurman** since first running across mentions of him in histories of the Harlem Renaissance. Described by Langston Hughes as a "strangely brilliant black boy," he has seemed at once everywhere and nowhere, an important figure to his fellow African-American writers during the 1920s, but whose own work, other than two novels, *The Blacker the Berry* and *Infants of the Spring*, had been for the most part forgotten. The facts surrounding his life also seemed almost too outrageous to believe: a black man born in the early Twentieth Century Salt Lake City, Utah? A dark-skinned African-American among the color-conscious realms of Harlem Society? A sharp-tongued H.L. Mencken-influenced reviewer, "who had read everything and whose critical mind could find something wrong with everything he read" (Hughes again). The first African-American senior editor with a white publishing house, living a self-described "erotic, bohemian" lifestyle, responsible for publishing the first work of fiction by a black author to deal openly with homosexual themes, Richard Bruce Nugent's "Smoke, Lilies and Jade" in his journal *Fire!!* A fiction writer who in the roman a clef *Infants of the Spring* skewered Harlem Renaissance friends and foes alike—as well as himself? The co-author of a play, *Harlem*, that ran for ninety-three sold-out performances on Broadway in 1929, before going on a national tour? And all this before his death from tuberculosis in New York's City Hospital at the age of 32—who could not be fascinated and wonder exactly who WAS this guy?

The Collected Writings of Wallace Thurman gloriously answers many of those questions. Editors Amritjit Singh and Daniel M. Scott III have done a remarkable job of research, pouring through archives for original sources to bring together a cornucopia of Thurman's essays, letters, reportage and plays. With the publication of this volume, Wallace Thurman stands ready to take his place as a prescient, far-sighted public intellectual, and one of the most intriguing writers and theorists of early Twentieth Century black America. One of Thurman's consistent themes is the importance of creative independence and individuality, the need for artists and intellectuals to "shake off psychological shackles, deliberately formulate an egoistic philosophy, develop a cosmopolitan perspective, and soar where they may, blaming only themselves if they fail to reach their goal. Individual salvation may prove a more efficacious emancipating agent for his generation and for those following than self-sacrifice and morbid resentment."

Editors Singh and Scott organize *The Collected Writings of Wallace Thurman* by category. In "Essays on Harlem" we see Thurman's reportage and explanations of that neighborhood to white America, as well as watch him reworking similar material for different audiences, always revealing his affection for the area and its people. "Social Essays and Journalism" pulls together a range of "odds and ends" from the history of Christmas and a humorous but critical profile of Utah, to an "Autobiographical Statement" concerning his "checkerboard past." Thurman's letters in the "Correspondence" section ranges from writing-related discussions with his Harlem co-author, William Jourdan Rapp, to asking W.E.B. Du Bois for a job interview and Claude McKay for a contribution to one of Thurman's short-lived literary journals. The flavor of Thurman's personal life comes through in these letters to friends and writers, as he describes his near-constant worries about money—most of the letters to Hughes include a request for cash—or his health problems. A sickly child, he suffered from a variety of medical problems all his life. He also includes his almost encyclopedic reading lists—and this "shocking" piece of advice to a young Dorothy West:

Celibacy is certainly amiable under certain conditions and at

certain times, but sex is, after all, but an expression of bodily hunger, and must be appeased like the hunger of the stomach. Not immoderately of course, for gluttony is always harmful to one's physical and mental organs. But when one is hungry one should eat, and an 18 year fast may bring about chemical disturbances as the 18 day diet brings on acidosis...when the call comes do not wait to decide if this is the man. The man may never materialize or else is halted in his rush to you. And unplucked fruit soon loses its fragrance and rots. Be discreet but be adventurous is a good motto for the literary tribe.

In addition to a few of Thurman's poems (an area where he didn't excel and knew it), and two of his short stories, *The Collected Writings of Wallace Thurman* includes the plays he co-wrote with Rapp (*Harlem*, based on Thurman's short story "Cordelia the Crude," and *Jeremiah the Magnificent*, about a Marcus Garvey-like figure), and excerpts from his novels, *The Blacker the Berry, Infants of the Spring*, and the long unavailable *The Interne*, co-written by Abraham Furman. The editors enrich the book with the brief chronology and biographical/critical essay on Wallace Thurman, and excellent introductory essays for each section.

A major contribution to the *Collected Writings of Wallace Thurman* is to finally bring together the set of biographical sketches and essays on black life in the United States that Thurman hoped to publish under the title *Aunt Hagar's Children*. Writing about Frederick Douglass and Booker T. Washington, racial mixing, communism, Harlem dance styles, and other topics, Thurman hoped to show a wide range of African-American life and history in this work. As editors note in the preface to *Aunt Hagar's Children* the book shows how "contradictory and complex Thurman could be...He is both an exacting realist and a dreamer, a cynic and an optimist, willing to believe in a mass movement and determined to go his own way as an individual." This tightrope walk between individuality and group identity is one racial, ethnic, and sexual minority artists continue to walk, and it is fascinating to read Thurman's take. In some ways he not only echoes his contemporaries, but also foreshadows the thinking of more contemporary African-American writers as well.

Thurman's literary essays and reviews show him at his caustic, skeptical best, wielding sharp comments seasoned with a wicked sense of humor that puts him in a line with other gay wits in history, from Oscar Wilde to *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy's* Carson. He critiques one novel by describing it as "one of those books that everyone should read, speculate upon, discuss, and then forget." Accusing Langston Hughes of being "excessively prolific," Thurman's suggestion that he "needs to learn the use of the blue pencil and the waste paper basket" proves that even friendship couldn't dull the edge of his bite.

We tend to forget that the Harlem Renaissance was also a Revolution. The younger writers of that period were struggling against the notion that their literature should be used solely for "uplift and enlightenment." They wanted to create work that reflected the totality of the African-American community. Their debates over the tone and subject matter of the work of the Harlem Renaissance authors, in fact, often bear a striking resemblance to the battles over rap and hip-hop waged by some in the present-day black community. We forget the "radical" aspect of Harlem in the 1920s because the "insurgents" won, and the winners get to write the histories. But certainly those who remember the armed camps that sprung up around the last gay rights March on Washington, when organizers were accused of excluding the "fringe" elements in order to make the event more palatable to heterosexual middle America will find many of Thurman's comments very familiar:

> Negroes in America feel certain that they must always appear in public butter side up, in order to keep from being trampled in the contemporary onward march. They feel as if they must always exhibit specimens from the college rather than from the pantry. They are in the process of being assimilated, and those elements within the race, which are still too potent for easy assimilation, must be hidden until they no longer exist.

Figures like Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Zora Neale Hurston, and the like are now part of the canon of American Literature—and queer lit as well, since many Harlem Renaissance icons were gay, lesbian, bisexual or at the very least

"unconventional" in their lives and loves. The work of editors Singh and Scott, both professors of English and African-American studies at Rhode Island College, is of a piece of with works like Thomas Wirth's recent volume on Richard Bruce Nugent and A.B. Christa Schwartz's *Gay Voices of the Harlem Renaissance* in bringing that critical movement out of the closet. With *The Collected Writings of Wallace Thurman*, an important missing piece of literary history has been restored.

Lambda Literary Award-nominee Reginald Harris is the author of 10 Tongues: Poems *(Three Conditions Press, 2003) and head of the Information Technology Support Department for the Enoch Pratt Library in Baltimore, Md.*

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TIM'M T. WEST

INTERVIEWED JANUARY 2005
By Steven G. Fullwood

Tim'm T. West is an author/publisher, poet, emcee, scholar and activist who in 1999 co-founded Deep Dickollective (DDC). In 2003, he released a critically acclaimed poetic memoir, *Red Dirt Revival*; in 2005 a chapbook *BARE*; and will release his second full-length book, *Flirting*, in 2007. A cultural critic, he is widely published in academic and literary anthologies, journals and other publications. West lives in Washington, D.C. www.reddirt.biz

SGF:*Talk about your writing process. What is the difference—if there is a difference—between writing rhymes for raps and writing poetry?*
TTW: I am first and foremost a writer. My love for writing began before my teenage years while Hip Hop was emerging as a cultural force in the communities in which I lived. It was deliberate that some of the unguided writing I was doing as a pre-teen, through my love for poets like Langston Hughes and Walt Whitman, would soon begin to take shape as rhymes more aligned with rap music. Spoken word in the '80s hadn't gained the national acclaim that it began to in the '90s, so there was what I produced for the page, and what I rhymed—often "freestyles" with my brothers, or lyricism—never made it past sketchbooks. Still, I saw myself as a poet who experimented with rhyme: poetry was a serious intellectual activity, rap appealed to street sensibility. I rather appreciated the distinction, until it began to feel schizophrenic and I began to be drawn to the more poetic lyricists like De La Soul, Poor Righteous Teachers, Divine Styler.

In terms of process, rap is constricted moreso by rhyme and rhythm. I appreciate the freedom to explore topics in poetry that weren't being authenticated by "street credibility" police. In poetry, you could write about beauty, feelings, personal pain, rather than the overarching systemic oppressions that give rise to both gangsta and conscious forms of Hip Hop. In many ways rapping has influenced my poetic

voice and vice versa. I'm a different poet than I would have been had I not indulged emceeing; and I'm also a different emcee, because I refuse to subscribe to any circumscription of topics based on what's profitable, popular or conforming to any notion of Hip Hop "realness." I'm probably too savage for the canonical poets and too academic for Def Poetry cats.

SGF: *Talk about the Brave Soul Collective, and its objectives.*
TTW: Brave Soul Collective is an arts-activist organization initiated by three black POZ male artists who wanted to produce something contrary to the tropes of "down low" and "homo thug" that had become the fascination of media, and a fascination of black culture insistent on keeping black women victims of the AIDS crisis while vilifying black men who desire men and ignoring our oppression. Too often we were being spoken about, without opportunities to speak for, define, project our own agendas. The media would speak about black men with HIV as a statistical calamity, not as real subjects grappling with the sociopolitical implications of living with a stigmatized dis/ease. As artists, we also believed strongly that the new AIDS activism would not happen without artistic collaboration. We were also clear that addressing AIDS sometimes meant talking more about spirituality, sex, poverty, mental health, etc., than about the disease itself: AIDS, at its worst, is a symptom of so many of these other issues. With www.bravesoulcollective.org, we were able to create a virtual community and "safe space" for black men and women (and others) to begin to talk openly about everything from HIV status to sexual health. At our gatherings, we have noticed that people value seeing virtual conversations embodied by men and women becoming braver to share their stories and experience with others. We've quickly gained a great deal of national and international visibility for just being comfortable identifying as black POZ men and women and our HIV negative allies, more focused on living than dying, more interested in inciting social change than waiting for someone else to act on our behalf. My leadership in Brave Soul Collective is among the things I am most proud of.

SGF: *How does love figure into your work?*
TTW: I accepted in 2005 that I'm a hopeless romantic who has lost

a great deal of hope for love. Perhaps my notions of love and loving are just shifting. I recently thought that I couldn't afford to be "possessed" by anyone, because it would prevent me from loving so many others… not in the selfish playboy way, but as one who genuinely wants to express love (especially) to as many black men as I can as a reflection of my self-love. It needn't be sexual, but I have no room for jealousy in my life. My next relationship will have to reflect that. The page is the place where I get to dream about love—both nostalgically, and in the ways I have yet to experience. I'm as much of a lover as I am a fighter... but yeah… love's a bitch that bites only after she barks.

SGF: *What's new in your life?*
TTW: D.C. is new for me… and being away from Oakland. I've had to develop a different relationship to Deep Dickollective (DDC) and B/GLAM (Black Gay Letters and Arts Movement), who have been really crucial in helping me develop my artist-essence. D.C. is not the arts mecca that the Bay Area is, so it's been all the more inspirational. I host a monthly here in D.C. called "The Front Porch" that is generating a lot of positive buzz. People in D.C. can so easily live in a black gay or black lesbian or black bubble that I try to challenge people to come together across sexuality, gender, race lines. People have been really thankful for a SGL-friendly space that features great artists and innovative work.

SGF: *Deep Dickollective. Are there any plans for a reunion?*
TTW: We never really "broke up." The initial concept was for us to be a global movement of queer black emcees, spoken word artists, soul vocalists… so in many ways, my moving east has helped to actualize this objective. Now we've picked up additional members in the Bay (SoulNubian and Solis), ButtaFlySoul and Baron are holding it down in N.Y.C., and I'm doing my thing in D.C. We even have a member (ManMan) teaching in Taiwan right now, and one at Harvard (Lightskindid). The point is to spread HipHophagotry so profoundly that people can no longer ask stupid questions like: Is Hip Hop ready for gays? That kind of stupid shit is so 1990.

SGF: *How do you feel poetry influences the body, as opposed to fiction or essays?*
TTW: I appreciate the poetic license you get when writing poetry; which is, to a great degree, about form. I like to think of the poem as a way to condense the story into a structure that carries all of the emotional energy, but in far less space. The choice and placement of words, then, becomes all the more important. I'm a good essayist and am trying my hand.

SGF: *What are you working on right now?*
TTW: My second book *Flirting* and a solo rap project, *Blakkboy Blue(s)* are due in June 2007. I've decided to create mechanisms for producing this work and supporting other projects through Red Dirt Publishing and Family Ties Recordings. Performing and lecturing nationally and internationally has kept me busy for some time between my work with Deep Dickollective and solo literary and music projects. I expect to tour summer of 2007 through 2008 with my newer material, while finding more time to complete my first novel, "Motherless," which I expect to shop to a major publishing company.

SGF

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MARVIN K. WHITE

INTERVIEWED MAY 2007

By Steven G. Fullwood

Marvin K. White, author of the Lambda Literary Award-nominated collections of poetry *last rights* and *nothin' ugly fly*, is a poet, performer, playwright, visual artist as well as a community arts organizer. His poetry has been anthologized in *The Road Before Us: 100 Black Gay Poets; My Brothers Keeper; Gents, Bad Boys and Barbarians: New Gay Writing; Things Shaped in Passing; Sojourner: Writing in the Age of AIDS; Bum Rush the Page; Role Call;* and *Think Again,* as well as other local and national publications. A former member of the critically acclaimed Pomo Afro Homos, he has led creative arts and writing workshops from inner city elementary schools to youth centers for runaway kids to black gay youth support groups. White holds a fellowship in the national African-American poetry organization, Cave Canem; sits on the board of Fire & Ink, a national black LGBT writers organization; and is co-founder of B/GLAM (Black Gay Letters and Arts Movement), a Bay Area, Calif., organization whose goal is to preserve, present and incubate black gay artistic expressions. www.marvinkwhite.com

SGF: *When did you start writing?*
MKW: Just recently.

SGF: *Talk about your writing process.*
MKW: I transcribe notes, go back over journals, vacuum up clever word crumbs, search old computer files for snippets of thoughts, ideas, pretty and grittiness, then I try to fashion it into something, writing. The first round of edits are me reading aloud as I write. It keeps the rhythm intact. Then I edit for grammar, spelling, syntax, voice, continuity and clarity.

SGF: *Why writing matters.*
MKW: Writing matters because it is the ultimate contract, one between you and the universe, one between you and "the great writings of life." You write and you have connected with an ancient

urge to record, to preserve, to teach, to pass on a story, a knowledge, a recipe, a way to get help, a way to free, a way to love, to conjure, to pray even.

Writing matters because once you decide how your story goes, how your story ends, you no longer leave it up to this world to try to squeeze the big ol' ness of you into a footnote. You write and it matters because this world has shown that it can get you wrong, diminish you, forget you or just plain lie about you.

Writing matters because you can see it. Unlike the act of breathing, the act of writing the word "breath" makes it tangible, makes it real. You can write to see things that don't make sense to you. Write love, write death, write god, write hope, write rebirth, write despair.

SGF: *The title poem of your new book,* nothin' ugly fly*, contains these beautiful lines: "i bird/ i fly/ nothing that fly/ is ugly/ just wing and air/ nothin' that fly ugly/ just small/ swallowed up by sky and god." Can you tell me how this poem came about?*
MKW: After leaving a relationship that showed me how much pain I would take just to feel love, I wrote this poem to remind myself who I was. I was willingly wing-clipped and I wrote this poem to tell myself what happened and why it happened and I hoped for some enlightenment. I always hope that my poems teach me something about myself. As much as I'm writing stories about other people, current events, history, the poems that show the truth about me, I love. "Nothin' Ugly Fly" reminds me that if I have been given wings, it is to soar. Anything with wings is beautiful, relies on wind and lift and gust and clear shots to heaven and god and universe. I wrote the poem to remind myself that I am beautiful or flying towards it.

SGF: *I know that you were a Pomo Afro Homo. For those who don't know, and/or were too young to remember, please give some background about the group and your tenure with the group.*
MKW: The Pomos were a black gay performance group that told unapologetic stories about the intersections of our lives as gay/black/Americans/men and artists. The group formed in some magical moments of the early Nineties where black gay men and a host of others were starved for stories that reflected their own

existence. When I came into the group they had been around the world twice with two plays. I replaced one of the members (R.I.P—Rest in Pumps—Eric Gupton) and toured for about a year with the group, performing most of Eric's parts and some of my original writing as well. It was a wonderfully strange, scarring and healing experience that shapes my art and organizing efforts to this day.

SGF: *You also initiated/inaugurated/co-founded B/GLAM. Please tell us what B/GLAM is all about.*
MKW: We formed B/GLAM to present, preserve and incubate black gay creative and artistic expression. We have held writing retreats, art festivals and hosted film screenings. We are currently being re-energized by brothers in the communities where we live who are telling us that we need to do more. That they desire places to hear stories about themselves. They want to write and contribute stories by and about themselves. We are creating spaces where people can bring their very unique gifts.

SGF: *What are you currently working on?*
MKW: A new book of prose poetry.

SGF

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MICHAEL WHITLEY: ON WRITING HIS LIFE

INTERVIEWED MARCH 2007

By Steven G. Fullwood

Michael Whitley is the author of *Who Is Sean? A Collection of Stories* which he self-published in April 2005. He studied writing at the University of Houston's undergraduate creative writing department and at Hurston/Wright Writing workshops in Washington, D.C. He lives and works in Washington, D.C.
www.writer17.typepad.com/

SGF: *Why do you write?*
MW: I write to be honest. Sometimes I write to find answers. Mostly I write because I like to tell interesting stories. I like to entertain.

SGF: *When did you begin writing seriously?*
MW: That's a very difficult question to answer. I always cared about the story or poem, so to define it "seriously," I think in terms of financial reward. I won a couple of writing contests back in middle and high school like the McDonald's "What does the dream mean to me, Martin Luther King, Jr." competition in sixth grade. I won a few poetry contests, and the San Antonio Youth Literary Contest for my short story "Fatal Love," which was essentially a gruesome interracial Romeo and Juliet story. I received a few scholarships for writing in college: a Ford Scholarship and an Omega Scholarship. I guess I've always taken my writing seriously; the agony, the structure, but it wasn't until three years ago that I decided it was what I wanted to do with my life.

At first I didn't want to ruin my art. I mostly wrote for myself and I wasn't sure if I could make a living with my stories.

SGF: *Where does the title for your online column, "What It Feels Like," come from?*

MW: In the beginning I wanted to do a series on what it felt to be a gay bartender, the door person, coat checker, stripper, drag queen, stuff like that, hence the title "What It Feels Like." I started with what it felt like to enter a strip contest, but that was as far as I got. I guess it was laziness or the realization that people only really cared about the humor. I figured that if I kept the stories funny, I didn't need a gimmick. I may revisit the idea one day. It was a great idea.

SGF: *Why is it important for you to write autobiographical columns?*
MW: With my weekly comic, I was more interested in the discipline. I believe you are what you do, so the comic becoming more autobiographical was accidental. I had to come up with something every week and what's more interesting than real life?

SGF: *Tell me about the genesis of your book,* Who Is Sean?
MW: I just wanted a book; to be able to type my name in Borders.com and see it come up. As a writer, I wanted existence. I was desperate for it. That was it. That was, and still is, a hard book for me. I needed to let go. It's called, in writing, letting go of your demons. I don't think some demons are ever let go. I did get closer to healing. I no longer feel so alone. I guess *Who Is Sean?* was me facing me. I knew once that book was published and I was out there in the universe, I wouldn't be the same. I wanted that change. I prayed for that change. *Who Is Sean?* did more for me than just book sales; it changed my destiny, identity, my soul. I was no longer another lost soul; I found a home. I found a home in the bookstore or online. I found a home in one hundred thirty-eight pages. *Who Is Sean?* saved my life. I can honestly say that. It gave me purpose. I am now a writer. I didn't have that before.

SGF: *You often use your body in your work, literally and figuratively. Talk about that impulse. What do you hope to gain overall?*
MW: At first, it was a way to get attention. Then I felt like I was prostituting my art. I remember I sold this comic to this guy and the next week he was like, "Sean, I like your picture." I laughed. I told him it was more than just a picture, that there was a funny story behind it. It took me a minute to realize I didn't have to take my clothes off to be a writer. I think it also goes back to my molestation,

how I tried to explain it in the story, "The Reverend Is a Good Man." At first, I didn't think anyone would care about my substance. I figured I'd try to trick them. Funny, when I first decided to become a writer, the first thing I thought was "I'm cute." I figured that sells books. I guess I got into that mentality of seeing a lot of gay books with the hot guy on the cover. And I was already prostituting my life. I didn't think anyone cared about me—just the illusion. It was just like my molestation; it wasn't about my pleasure, it wasn't about what I wanted, I was just a thing, an easy prey, and if I pretended like I liked it, there was no violence. But I didn't like it. What I liked was the power. When I was naked on the cover on most of my comics, it was my false sense of power, but that got quickly killed; that's why by the end of the year the covers changed. People were more interested in the story than the cute underwear I had on that week. It confused me for a second. It challenged me, so my stories become more in-depth and personal. Funny, the first thing I decided, when I wanted to be a writer, was "I'm cute." I forgot about my soul. I forgot I had a soul. That's why we become writers, because of our souls. And I consider myself a "soul writer."

SGF: *Tell me more about why you felt you were prostituting your art.*
MW: When I was the "shirtless" writer, I feared it was becoming more about my nakedness than the writing. And then people would just disrespect me, like buy the comic but stuff the money down my underwear. I didn't care. I was out to sell comics but I knew deep down there had to be a better way. I had disappeared again. But I didn't know of any other way to get attention. I didn't know any other writers. I was some aging party boi. It was hard.

SGF

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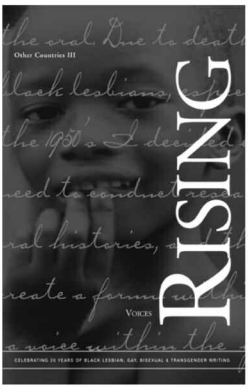

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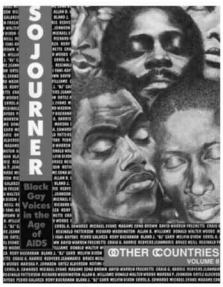

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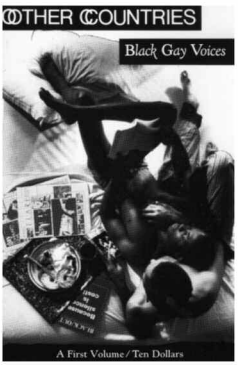

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ABOUT THE COMPILERS/EDITORS

Steven G. Fullwood is an archivist for the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in New York City. He founded the Black Gay and Lesbian Archive to aid in the preservation of black lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, same-gender-loving, queer, questioning and in the life history and culture. Fullwood is the author of *Funny* (Vintage Entity Press), and a freelance writer whose work has appeared in Africana.com, *Black Issues Book Review, Lambda Book Report,* Vibe.com and other publications. He is the board vice president of Fire & Ink.

Recipient of Individual Artist Awards for both poetry and fiction from the Maryland State Arts Council, Reginald Harris is the author of *10 Tongues* (Three Conditions Press), finalist for a Lambda Literary Award and the ForeWord Book of the Year. His work has recently appeared in the *Voices Rising: Celebrating 20 Years of Black Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Writing* and *The Ringing Ear: Black Poets Lean South* anthologies. Harris is Systems Department Help Desk and Training Manager for the Enoch Pratt Free Library in Baltimore, Md. He is a member of the Cave Canem: African-American Poetry Workshop/Retreat family, and board treasurer for Fire & Ink.

Lisa C. Moore is the founder and editor of RedBone Press, which publishes work that celebrates the culture of black lesbians and gay men and further promotes understanding between black gays and lesbians and the black mainstream. Moore is currently in production for *sassy b. gonn: Searching for Black Lesbian Elders,* a video documentary stemming from her master's research in anthropology (University of Texas, 2000). Moore was also lead organizer of the Fire & Ink writers festival for LGBT people of African descent held at the University of Illinois-Chicago in September 2002; she is currently board president of Fire & Ink.

Fire & Ink is devoted to increasing the understanding, visibility and awareness of the works of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender writers of African descent and heritage.