

## Fixing Ceremonies: An Introduction

Charles Nero

Remember me, but ah! forget my fate.

▪ HENRY PURCELL *Dido and Aeneas*, 1689

Sixty Million and more

▪ TONI MORRISON *Beloved*, 1987

In 1991 Essex sent me a photocopy of his forthcoming collection, *Ceremonies*. He asked me to send him feedback but I did not send him anything in writing. I really had only one concern and that was the nagging question about why he chose to name his collected works after the rambunctious essay "Ceremonies." The topics in that unruly essay included intergenerational and interracial homosex, failed teen heterosex, and accusations of faggotry. Because I stood in awe of Essex, I feared that questioning his particular choice of titles might make me seem provincial or, worse, puritanical. My fears were especially acute, since I had just moved from a small town in Florida to take a teaching job in an even smaller town in Maine! As I began writing this introduction, that original question about the title of this collection resurfaced. I thought I might find the answer for it in Essex's papers, but to my horror they were not available at the New York Public Library, which, shortly before he passed, is where he requested them to be placed.<sup>1</sup> Of course, much has happened since 1991 when Essex sent me the photocopy. He passed away in 1995, a mere three years after the initial

publication of *Ceremonies*. The cause of his death—complications from HIV/AIDS—was a fate that has befallen some of our best and brightest black gay critical voices. But the title question remains.

I would like to explore the possibility that Essex chose this title as a deliberate intervention in shaping memory and remembrance. Essex was aware that many people prefer not to talk about homosexuality or AIDS and that those resulting silences are integral to the oppression of queer people. In his essay "Undressing Icons" Essex cogently addressed the connection between silence and oppression in relation to the Langston Hughes estate's hostile reaction to Isaac Julien's rhapsodic film *Looking for Langston*. Julien's 1991 film addressed the homosexual milieu of the Harlem Renaissance and raised questions about Hughes's place in that world. The executor of the Hughes estate twice blocked the showing of the film in the United States, had several poems removed from the film's soundtrack, and required the sound to be turned down on the recitation of some of Hughes's poems. In response to this blatant aversion to any examination of Hughes's poetry in a gay context, Hemphill wrote that the sexuality of black icons is deemed inappropriate for public discussion, and thus, electric fences are erected around these issues, fences of silence, confoundment, and denial. This is done in an attempt to prevent black icons from being undressed to discover whether they were really kings, queens, or ordinary tramps. And these fences are most surely erected to keep the icons "unsullied" by issues of sexuality, and erected to prevent black gays and lesbians from claiming historical affirmations and references for our desires.<sup>2</sup>

Shortly after his own death, efforts began to erase who Essex was and who he had been. At his funeral his mother

testified that one month before he passed Essex had given his life over to Christ. The minister preached a sermon warning against the dangers of alternative lifestyles.<sup>3</sup> These attempts from family and church to deny that Essex was a gay man who had died of a disease intricately linked to homosexuality should not surprise us. The shame that many in our communities feel about homosexuality has helped conceal high HIV infection and mortality rates.

The silences about the extent to which AIDS has wreaked havoc in black communities calls to mind another holocaust in our history—the Middle Passage. The Nobel laureate Toni Morrison commented that there is barely a whisper about this traumatic event in our culture. Her Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *Beloved*—which Morrison dedicated to the “Sixty Million and more” who endured, suffered, and/or died in this holocaust—is an attempt at confronting this horror and the silences about it. In an insightful reading of *Beloved*, the black feminist literary critic Barbara Christian praises Morrison for helping us to confront the Middle Passage. Christian asserts that Morrison’s *Beloved* is a “fixing ceremony” whose purpose “is not merely that of remembrance for the sake of remembrance, but remembrance as the only way to begin the process of healing that psychic wound, which continues to have grave effects on the present.” Christian identifies *Beloved* as part of a project of communal healing helping us to make peace with those “Sixty Million and more” so that “Those whose names we can no longer specifically call know that we have not forgotten them, that they are our ‘Beloved.’”<sup>4</sup>

Christian’s observations about Morrison’s *Beloved* are relevant to *Ceremonies*. Much of *Ceremonies* addresses our queer “beloved” from the life before the AIDS devastation.



Hemphill records what it is and was like to be black, gay, and sexually active, with the skill of an anthropologist, while insisting that we remember this life and the people who lived it.

In "Without Comment," arguably the most well known of his essays, Hemphill evokes a sexualized landscape that was a meeting place for men interested in queer sex with other black men. Many may remember Larry Duckette's brilliant rendering of "Without Comment" in Marlon Riggs's landmark documentary *Tongues Untied*. Duckette recited the story of two men engaged in a vicious and hilarious game of snapping(!) while riding the bus through a black neighborhood in Washington, D.C. One man tells another, "I'm a 45-year-old Black man who enjoys taking dick in his rectum! SNAP! 'I'm not your bitch!' SNAP! 'Your bitch is at home with your kids!' SNAP! SNAP!" Omitted from Duckette's recitation were Hemphill's trenchant description of the area in which the bus ride took place. This ravaged area resembled "brutal knife wounds that have become keloids," wrote Hemphill. Yet, despite its current appearance, Hemphill tells us that ten years ago this place was a "sexual crossroads," a home to nude clubs, movie galleries, and porn shops. "The raunchy Black gay club, the Brass Rail, was bulging out of its jock-strap. Drag queens ruled, B-boys chased giddy government workers, fast-talking hustlers worked the floor, while sugar daddies panted for attention in the shadows."

In the autobiographical title essay "Ceremonies," Hemphill puts us into the morally murky and miry clay when he reveals his initiation into sex at age fourteen with George, a white man who ran a neighborhood butcher shop. Although George is at least thirty years older, Hemphill does not code this relationship as coercive. Hemphill makes it clear to the



reader that at age fourteen he wanted sex. A few months before he began the relationship with George, Hemphill risked the possibility of violence when his adolescent desire led him to the parking lot of a country-and-western bar where he propositioned some of the white male patrons for sex. In his relationship with George, Hemphill describes himself as a willing, even an eager, sexual partner. In writing about this relationship, Hemphill gives voice to adolescent desires for sex. He also rebukes the adults who use religion to silence adolescent desires, commenting that during sex with George he never gave "any thought to the possibility that I might be committing some sin I would be punished for in hell. Hell was all around me in the ghetto of my adolescence." The regret that Hemphill ultimately voices in "Ceremonies" concerns the unspeakability of sex with George. This is especially acute, as Hemphill realizes that he is not the only boy in his neighborhood having sex with George, yet none will speak of their queer desires. Whereas the other boys later cursed George, blackmailed him, or otherwise resented their orgasms with him, Hemphill concludes that what they really resented "was the recognition of their own *homo* sexual desire."

Acknowledging our desires was a prominent theme in Hemphill's work. He spoke against the so-called rules that restrict love. In the poem "Under Certain Circumstances," he directly addresses the dangers of breaking the rules:

I want to court outside the race  
outside the class, outside the attitudes—  
but love is a dangerous word  
in this small town.  
Those who seek it are sometimes found

facedown floating on their beds.  
Those who find it protect it  
or destroy it from within.

Hemphill was an equally stern critic of those who wanted to deny the naturalness of homosexuality and the existence of queerness in black communities. He was especially critical of the homophobia and heterosexism in the work of some black nationalists.

His essay "If Freud Had Been a Neurotic Colored Woman: Reading Dr. Frances Cress Welsing" is one of the most important critiques of the homophobic and heterosexist politics of cultural black nationalism. This political movement witnessed an upsurge of popularity in the mid-1980s. Following this wave the buffoonish Shaharazad Ali garnered much of the attention in the mainstream media. In her notorious 1989 best-seller *The Black Man's Guide to Understanding the Black Woman*, Ali viciously attacked both straight and lesbian black women. Unlike Ali, whose claims could be dismissed or easily refuted as black male chauvinism with a woman's voice<sup>5</sup>, Welsing was among the vanguard of cultural nationalists with impressive academic credentials spouting homo-hatred. This vanguard included Nathan and Julia Hare as well as Molefi Asante. The Hares, both sociologists, had declared in *The Endangered Black Family* that "homosexuality does not promote black family stability and that it historically has been a product largely of the Europeanized society."<sup>6</sup> In *Afrocentricity: The Theory of Social Change*, Molefi Asante called homosexuality a "deviation from Afrocentric thought" and announced that the "outburst" of homosexuality in our communities was a result of "the prison breeding system," which threatened "to distort the relation-



ship between friends.”<sup>7</sup> Asante counseled the black gay man to renounce deviance and to submerge himself into the collective will of the people where he would find “the redemptive power of Afrocentricity to be the magnet which pulls him back to his center.” Scholars like Asante, the Hares, and Welsing found audiences, despite the limitations of publishing with small presses. In fact their publishing choices enhanced their credibility as scholars whose work was deemed too “truthful” for the academic mainstream.<sup>8</sup> Welsing’s perceived ability to tell the truth about racism helped her attract packed houses when she lectured on college campuses.

Hemphill considered Welsing’s work particularly threatening to black gays and lesbians. Welsing, a general and child psychiatrist, belonged to a profession that historically had oppressed queer people. Moreover, Welsing brought a keen awareness of racism to her antipathy toward black queer people. In “If Freud Had Been a Neurotic Colored Woman” Hemphill noted that Welsing “attempts to justify her homophobia and heterosexism precisely by grounding it in an acute understanding of African-American history and an analysis of the psychological effects of centuries of racist oppression and violence.” For Welsing, black homosexuality was a dysfunctional behavioral adaptation to racism. Hemphill noted that precisely what was wrong with this view was that it led to the intellectually fraudulent belief that “racism causes homosexuality” and that “Black liberation will somehow eradicate Black homosexuality.” Hemphill pointed out that Welsing’s reasoning was “flawed, outdated and totally heteroreactionary.” Hemphill quite correctly, I believe, pointed out what attracted some African Americans to Welsing’s theories: “Even among the oppressed there is a disturbing need for a convenient ‘other’ to vent anger against, to blame, to

disparage, to denigrate." Black queer people are that "other" for the likes of Dr. Welsing. However, Hemphill issued a warning to those who make black queer people the "other":

...every time a gay man or a lesbian woman is violently attacked, blood is figuratively on Dr. Welsing's hands as surely as blood is on the hands of the attackers. Her ideas reinforce the belief that gay and lesbian lives are expendable, and her views also provide a clue as to why the Black community has failed to intelligently and coherently address critical, life-threatening issues such as AIDS.

In the epigraph at the beginning of this introduction I cited Queen Dido's lament from Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*, an interracial love story that is arguably the English language's greatest opera. The opera tells the story of the tragic relationship between Queen Dido of Carthage and the Trojan hero Aeneas. Supernatural forces conspire against Aeneas and Dido's happiness. After Aeneas deserts her to found Rome, Dido cries out in her famous lament, "Remember me, but ah! forget my fate." Dido is a highly stylized ideal of Africa before the horrors of the transatlantic slave trade. This rendering of Africa's nobility, but its foreordained suffering, must have resonated with late-seventeenth-century audiences, since Britain at that time assumed a leading role in the heinous African slave trade.

The Dido image has long appealed to black people precisely because of its depiction of a majestic African woman's nobility in the midst of great suffering. The Dido image, I would argue, has been important for diasporic black people. If the Middle Passage is, in Barbara Christian's words, "the



dividing line between being African and African American," then through Dido we identify with a noble preslave trade Africa, but her great suffering foreshadows the Middle Passage. Since the nineteenth century, black people in the diaspora have reinterpreted Western European cultural myths, to fight against the historical amnesia of a hegemonic culture that all but forgets the experience of slavery. Thus, it is noteworthy that so many African-American opera singers have recorded Dido's lament. Marian Anderson's and Leontyne Price's recorded versions of the famous lament are exceptional in this sense. Jessye Norman gives a majestic performance as Queen Dido in an outstanding recording of the opera. Queen Dido also has appealed to black gay men. In his critically acclaimed film *The Attendant* (1993), the black gay British filmmaker Isaac Julien re-creates the scene of abandonment as the end of an imagined S/M relationship between an older black male museum attendant and a younger white male visitor to the museum. In *The Attendant's* opera fantasy scene, Julien reverses the gender roles and has the older black man sing from Dido's point of view. "Abjection," Julien writes, "informs the attendant's new identity as he laments the passing fantasy of his white male visitor and contemplates his own mortality."<sup>9</sup>

The Dido image works its way into Hemphill's work as an idealized African home, offering us relief from an almost unbearable suffering in America. Hemphill described this suffering in a poem like the magnificent "Heavy Breathing" or in the jeremiadic essay "Does Your Mother Know About Me?" In the latter essay, Hemphill wrote:

Look around, brothers. There is rampant killing in  
our communities. Drug addiction and drug traffick-

ing overwhelm us. The blood of young Black men runs curbside in a steady flow. The bodies of Black infants crave crack, not the warmth of a mother's love. The nation's prisons are reservations and shelters for Black men. An entire generation of Black youth is being destroyed before our eyes.

For Hemphill, this suffering required a literal return to our homes and communities where our mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers awaited us. "They need our love, our talents and skills and we need theirs," Hemphill wrote. In that same essay Hemphill cautioned black gay men against immersion in white gay worlds, referring to them as "communities that have never really welcomed us or the gifts we bring." Hemphill also imagined an ancestral home in "Tomb of Sorrow":

I rummage through  
ancestral memories  
in search of the  
original tribes  
that fathered us.  
I want to remember  
the exact practices  
of civility  
we agreed upon.  
I want us to remember  
the nobility of decency.

To recover and "remember" the "exact practices of civility" and "the nobility of decency" are the images of Africa associated with a pre-enslavement ideal such as Queen Dido. I would



also argue that this image of Africa in "Tomb of Sorrow" suggests freedom, dialogue, and desire—ideals frequently absent from some Afrocentric writings.

Essex Charles Hemphill was born in 1957 in Chicago and grew up in Washington, D.C. He died on November 4, 1995, in Philadelphia where he was currently living. He attended the University of Maryland and the University of the District of Columbia. He published two books of poetry, *Earth Life* (1985) and *Conditions* (1986). After Joseph Beam died, Hemphill assumed the editorship of *Brother to Brother: New Writings by Black Gay Men* (1991). Hemphill's work appeared in dozens of magazines and anthologies. He was also an accomplished performance artist. He or his work appeared in the films *Tongues Untied*, *Looking for Langston*, and *Black Is/Black Ain't*. Fellow poet E. Ethelbert Miller noted that Hemphill inspired a generation of younger writers, activists, and scholars to put issues of sexuality front and center in much the same way Audre Lorde did. Miller wrote: "Essex was responsible not simply for opening doors but for rearranging the furniture, telling us how we could be comfortable with our many selves."<sup>10</sup> Joseph Beam remarked that James Baldwin in his sixty-three-year life said "much more than he was supposed to say: twenty-three works published since 1953. Not a bad legacy for someone whom the Republic wished deaf and dumb by age fourteen."<sup>11</sup> To witness the black gay cultural movement that began in the mid-1980s, of which Essex was in the forefront, is living proof of Baldwin's legacy. However, men like Essex Hemphill went further than Baldwin possibly imagined, especially in their coalition work with black feminists and black lesbian feminists. I am reminded just how much Hemphill was indebted to politicized black women when I hear in his work

echoes of Ntozake Shange, Barbara Smith, Audre Lorde, and bell hooks. My faith in the importance of coalition work with black feminist women is renewed after reading a work such as Hazel Carby's *Race Men* (Harvard University Press, 1998) in which Hemphill's poetry provides insights for her powerful deconstruction of a tyrannizing black masculinity. "Not a bad legacy, brother," as Joseph Beam might have said.

#### Notes

1. I assumed that Essex Hemphill's papers were in the New York Public Library, which is where he told me shortly before he died in 1995 that he wanted his papers to be held. I felt confident that the papers would be in NYPL, since I helped arrange a meeting between Essex and the NYPL special collections librarians who were enthusiastic about being the recipients of his papers. My efforts to find Essex's papers in the NYPL's online catalogue proved fruitless. To my dismay, I learned that NYPL had never received his papers and, further, that the special collections librarian's efforts to contact his family for the papers had failed. This state of affairs of Essex's papers saddened and angered me. Essex was one of the most important American poets of the late 20th century and his papers might be lost, or worst, destroyed.
2. Essex Hemphill, "Undressing Icons," *Brother to Brother: New Writings by Black Gay Men*, Essex Hemphill and Joseph Beam, ed. (Boston: Alyson, 1991), 181.
3. Robert F. Reid-Pharr, "Memory and Man: Essex Hemphill, 1957-1995," *Gay Community News*, Vol 24: 3-4, 11.
4. Barbara Christian, "Fixing Methodologies: *Beloved*," *Female Subjects in Black and White: Race, Psychoanalysis, Feminism*, Elizabeth Abel, Barbara Christian, and Helene Moglen, ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 370.
5. It was widely circulated through rumor and the grapevine that Louis Farrakhan or other men in the Nation of Islam had written Ali's tome.
6. Nathan and Julia Hare, *The Endangered Black Family: Coping with the Unisexualization and Coming Extinction of the Black Race* (San Francisco: The Black Think Tank, 1984), 65.
7. Molefi Kete Asante, *Afrocentricity: A Theory of Social Change* (Buffalo, NY: Amulfi, 1980), 65.



8. Their work found an audience despite publishing limitations. When I taught at a small college in upstate New York, the Hares's *The Endangered Black Family* was a required text in a popular sociology course. Asante chaired an acclaimed graduate program in black studies at Temple University, edited the influential *Journal of Black Studies*, and received grants from important foundations. Asante—who may have coined the term Afrocentricity—also popularized the concept in over thirty books that he wrote or edited in less than two decades.
9. Isaac Julien, "Confessions of a Snow Queen: Notes on the Making of *The Attendant*," *Critical Quarterly* 36 (Spring 1994): 121.
10. E. Ethelbert Miller, "Essex Hemphill," *The Washington Post*, 12 November 1995: G02.
11. Joseph Beam, "James Baldwin: Not a Bad Legacy, Brother," *Brother to Brother: New Writings by Black Gay Men*, Essex Hemphill and Joseph Beam ed. (Boston: Alyson, 1991): 186.

# Ceremonies

Prose and Poetry

by Essex Hemphill

Introduction by Charles I. Nero





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