



## Hemphill, Essex (1957-1995)

by Brett Genny Beemyn

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Essex Hemphill in a film still from Marlon Riggs' *Tongues Untied* (1989).

Despite a relatively short literary career, Essex Hemphill became arguably the most critically acclaimed and best known openly gay contemporary African-American poet. Through his writing and editing, he helped break the silence surrounding Black gay experiences and enabled other Black gay men to find their voices.

Born in Chicago, Illinois, on April 16, 1957, he was raised in Southeast Washington, D. C., where he began to write poetry at the age of fourteen. "I started writing about and addressing my homosexuality because it wasn't there in the black text," he remembered. "And I needed something to be there to validate that my experience was real for me."

Hemphill studied English at the University of Maryland, but decided to complete his degree at the University of the District of Columbia. With another student from the University of Maryland, he founded the *Nethula Journal of Contemporary Literature* in 1978, and ran the magazine for several years before leaving to devote more time to writing and presenting his work.

Hemphill believed that poetry should be heard; and he regularly performed his work, often in collaboration with other Washington, D. C. Black lesbian and gay artists. In 1983, he teamed up with Wayson Jones and Larry Duckette to create Cinque, a performance poetry group that combined cutting-edge political verse, vivid imagery about Black gay life, and tightly woven harmonies.

Cinque first performed at the Enik Alley Coffeehouse in Northeast Washington, and quickly developed a loyal local following. Its poetic style gained national attention after the group's work was featured in Marlon Riggs's widely acclaimed films *Tongues Untied* (1991) and *Black Is . . . Black Ain't* (1994). Hemphill's poetry was also included in Isaac Julien's award-winning film *Looking for Langston* (1989).

With few publishers at the time interested in the work of openly gay Black writers, Hemphill self-published his first two poetry collections: *Earth Life* (1985) and *Conditions* (1986). He became more widely known when he contributed to Joseph Beam's groundbreaking *In the Life: A Black Gay Anthology* (1986). Inclusion in anthologies, such as *Tongues Untied* (1987), *Gay and Lesbian Poetry in Our Time* (1988), *The Road Before Us* (1991), and *Hometowns* (1991), increased his renown. Hemphill's work also appeared in *Obsidian*, *Black Scholar*, *Callaloo*, *Painted Bride Quarterly*, *Gay Community News*, *The James White Review*, *Essence*, and many other publications.

As Hemphill writes in "When My Brother Fell," after his close friend Beam died from AIDS in 1988, Hemphill "picked up his weapons." At the time of his death, Beam had been working on a follow-up collection to *In the Life* entitled *Brother to Brother: New Writings by Black Gay Men*. Hemphill moved to Philadelphia, where he lived with the Beam family, to complete the anthology. Published in 1991, *Brother to Brother* won a Lambda Literary Award and garnered widespread critical acclaim.

The following year, Hemphill's *Ceremonies: Prose and Poetry* was published by a major press and won the American Library Association's Gay and Lesbian Book Award in Literature. The poems and essays in

*Ceremonies* provide powerful insights into the constructions of race, gender, and sexuality in the United States. Among the topics addressed are the sexual objectification of Black men in white gay culture, relationships among Black gay men and with non-gay Black men, HIV/AIDS in the Black community, and meanings of family.

In addition to the honors bestowed on his books, Hemphill received four grants from the D. C. Commission on the Arts and Humanities and was awarded a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship in Poetry in 1988, a Pew Charitable Trust Fellowship in the Arts in 1993, and the Emery S. Hetrick Award for community-based activism from the Hetrick-Martin Institute that same year. He was also a visiting scholar at the Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities in Santa Monica, California, in 1993.

After fighting against AIDS for several years, Hemphill died from AIDS-related complications on November 4, 1995 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He was thirty-eight.

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### **About the Author**

Brett Genny Beemyn has written or edited five books in glbtq studies, including *Queer Studies: A Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual Community Anthology* (1996) and *Creating a Place for Ourselves: Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Community Histories* (1997). *The Lives of Transgender People* is in progress. A frequent speaker and writer on transgender campus issues, Beemyn is the director of the Stonewall Center at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst.