

ESSEX HEMPHILL

b. April 16, 1957

d. November 4, 1995

POET AND ACTIVIST

“It is not enough to tell us that one was a brilliant poet, scientist, educator or rebel. Whom did he love? It makes a difference.”

Essex Hemphill was a prominent American poet who wrote about race and identity.

Essex Hemphill was an American poet who wrote about race and identity in the 1980s. He was also an important voice during the AIDS crisis. His work has been described as fiercely political and lyrical.

Born in Chicago and raised in Washington, D.C., Hemphill said that poetry became his refuge against the poverty and “otherness” he experienced as a young black man growing up in the nation’s capital.

After briefly attending the University of Maryland to study journalism, Hemphill became immersed in the Washington art scene and regularly read at open-mic nights and coffeehouses. To showcase his work and that of other modern black artists and writers, he cofounded the Nethula Journal of Contemporary Literature in 1979. In 1982

he cofounded the spoken word group Cinque.

Hemphill began publishing his poetry as chapbooks in 1985, including “Earth Life and Conditions.” In 1986 he received a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts. He gained national attention in 1989, when his work was published in the anthology “In the Life,” an important collection of writing by black gay men.

Hemphill edited the acclaimed 1991 anthology “Brother to Brother: New Writings by Black Gay Men,” for which he won a Lambda Literary Award.

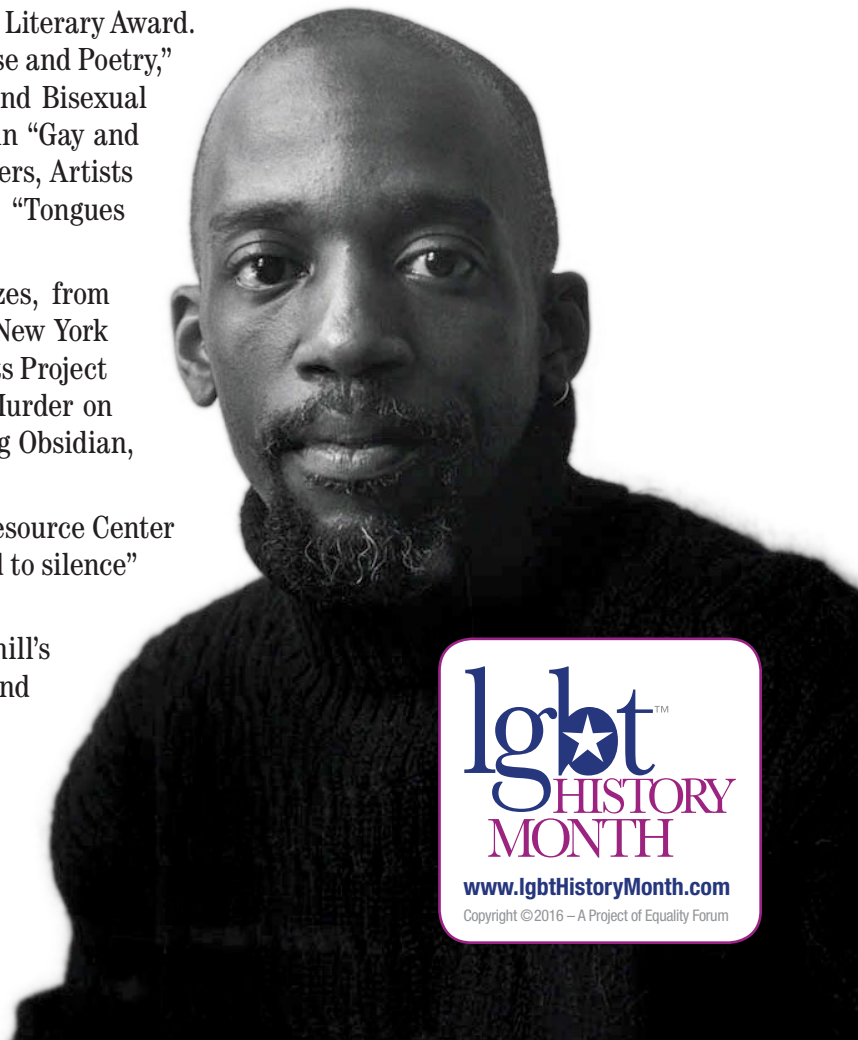
His first full-length poetry collection, “Ceremonies: Prose and Poetry,” won the National Library Association’s Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual New Author Award in 1992. His work is also included in “Gay and Lesbian Poetry in Our Time” and “Life Sentences: Writers, Artists and AIDS,” and in the award-winning documentaries “Tongues Untied” and “Looking for Langston.”

Hemphill has read his poetry to audiences of all sizes, from alternative theaters to the Kennedy Center and from New York to London. He received a grant from the Washington Arts Project to perform an experimental drama of poetry called “Murder on Glass,” and he has contributed to publications including Obsidian, Black Scholar, CALLALOO and Essence.

E. Ethelbert Miller, director of the African American Resource Center at Howard University, said Hemphill’s words “put an end to silence” in the black LGBT community.

“He was mesmerizing,” said Martin Duberman, Hemphill’s biographer. “He had these wonderful sort of alive eyes, and a beautiful speaking voice. It was electric.”

Hemphill died from complications of AIDS in 1995. He wrote about his experience with the disease in his most famous poem, “Vital Signs.” His published and unpublished works are collected at George Washington University’s Gelman Library.



lgbt[™]
HISTORY
MONTH

www.lgbtHistoryMonth.com

Copyright ©2016 – A Project of Equality Forum