

## Black Gay Fire & Ink February 13, 2003

*A distinguished group of gay and lesbian writers of African descent gather, and in the very act of doing so find themselves making a political statement*

**Fire** &

**Ink**

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Fire & Ink: A Writer's Festival  
for GLBT People of African Descent  
Sept. 19-22, 2002  
University of Illinois, Chicago

BY RHONDA SMITH Washington Blade

<http://www.washblade.com/point/020927cover.php3>

FOR ABOUT FOUR years now Lisa C. Moore, the founder of RedBone Press, the only black lesbian publishing house in the

U.S., and a handful of friends in her literary circle have been talking about sponsoring a national conference for gay writers of African descent.

The conversations traditionally unfolded after they left OutWrite, a now-defunct national lesbian and gay writers' conference held in Boston. While OutWrite gatherings would attract as many as 900 gay writers, Moore and a close colleague, poet and writer G. Winston James, said it was a mostly white crowd and issues of concern to many black writers there were often overlooked.

*"At the 1998 conference, a group of people of color, writers, got together and talked about creating what was to be referred to as the Arts Tour 2000. But that did not happen," James recalled this week from his home in New York City. "But Lisa and I continued to have conversations about the need for a conference like OutWrite for black folks."*

Finally, Moore said, *"It just got to be like we really do have enough people we know that we could have our own conference."*

About 200 gay writers, thinkers, teachers, and publishing professionals of African descent gathered in Chicago for three days last week for the first Fire & Ink: A Writers Festival for GLBT People of African Descent. The conference, which included workshops and panel discussions, and various types of spoken word performances, took place Sept. 20-22, at the University of Illinois, Chicago.

Days before the conference, however, a fire in Moore's apartment destroyed much of her property, including material she would

need at the conference. Still, with help from friends and family members, Moore did not deviate from her plans for Fire & Ink.

*"It turned out fabulous,"* she said this week.

Dorothy Randall Gray, a conference organizer and non-fiction writer, echoed Moore.

*"We are looking forward to the next one in 2004,"* she said. "But we are very much in need of funding to deal with the financial challenges that this one presented to us. We've got bills to pay, and we've still got money to raise for the next conference."

Moore said Fire & Ink had a \$70,000 budget and currently has an outstanding balance of \$35,700.

Still, she said it succeeded on all levels by giving black gay writers and other performers a plan to network, learn, and share ideas.

In the Fire & Ink program booklet, organizers included a statement that black gay writers Barbara Smith and Joseph Beam made in March 1988 at the Second National Black Writers Conference at Medgar Evers College in New York.

*"The Harlem Renaissance could not have occurred if it had not been for Black Gay participants, among them: Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, Wallace Thurman, Alain Locke, and R. Bruce Nugent,"* they said. *"Historically, Black Lesbian writers have been less easily identifiable, but recent research has documented that Alice Dunbar Nelson, Angelina Weld Grimke and Lorraine Hansberry are also members of this tradition."* Smith and Beam also said, *"The acknowledgment of our work as Black*

*Lesbian and Gay writers necessitates a major revision of a currently homophobic and inaccurate Black literary history."*

Some of the 20 writers who signed the statement ? Beam, Assotto Saint, Essex Hemphill, Audre Lorde, and Pat Parker ? are no longer alive. But several others showed up last week at Fire & Ink.

Among them were Cheryl Clarke, a longtime author and poet who lives in Jersey City, N.J., Alexis de Veaux, a poet, fiction writer, and educator, and Michelle Parkerson, a writer, filmmaker and performance artist from Washington, D.C.

*"Fire & Ink was quite a witness to those who have come before us ? Bruce Nugent, Zora Neale Hurston and, later, James Baldwin ? those who were willing to go before us with far less than we had,"* said Rev. Shirlene Holmes, a lesbian performance artist, educator and community leader who works as an associate professor in the communications department at Georgia State University. Holmes is perhaps best known for her *"Pride Plays,"* which depict various aspects of black gay life and have been performed nationwide.

*"We are a thousand times more privileged than they were,"* said Holmes, who was one of three *"trailblazers"* who spoke at Fire & Ink Friday. *"What an honor to gather and remember them and to know that writing like theirs is going on all over the country."*

James said Holmes, who spoke along with Cheryl Clarke and Samuel R. Delany, a novelist and English professor at Temple University in Philadelphia, discussed the importance of

*"recognizing our gifts" and using them to help one's community and "bringing youths along as well."*

*"She and Samuel and Cheryl really helped to set the tone for the conference," he said. "It was not just about writing in your room at home but writing for the world and not ignoring youths who come to you seeking guidance."*

FIRE & INK ORGANIZERS said a major focus of the conference was to allow various artists to share their work and to learn from emerging voices that haven't been widely heard.

*"Our focus was on the ways in which people represent our community and making those representations sharper and clearer so we're not being shaped by someone else's vision of us,"* said Reginald Harris, a poet and short story writer in Baltimore who directs the Information and Technology Support Department for Enoch Pratt Free Library.

*"We are setting the tone so we can speak for ourselves,"* said Harris, who is also the Web site manager for the Cave Canem: African-American Poetry Workshop/Retreat and editor of *Kuumba: Poetry Journal for Black People in The Life*.

This, Harris said, is a political act germane to the gay civil rights movement.

*"Anytime someone from a marginalized community says, 'I will define myself and use my skills, arts and talents in the best way I know possible to represent the world,' that's a political act,"* he said.

C.C. Carter, an adjunct professor at Columbia College in Chicago,

who teaches performance poetry workshops, agreed.

*"All literature, from humor to erotica, has its political significance when it's not being shown often enough," she said. "When I walk out on the stage, and I'm facing 7,000 white women and many of them have never seen a black woman perform, that's political."* Carter recently retired from the poetry slam circuit, but not before winning the Fifth Annual Guild Complex Gwendolyn Brooks Open Mic Competition and the Lambda Literary Foundation's First Annual National Slam Competition at the Behind Our Mask conference.

*"I'm very woman-centered and very much into presenting the upside of what it means to be black and female and a full-figured woman and all the other 'isms' that go with that," she said.*

IN ADDITION TO conference workshops on writing books, screenwriting, and magazine publishing, there also were opportunities for performance artists such as Carter to display their skills.

*"So many of the people who don't necessarily regard performance as literary got to see many of us in spoken word, slam and on the performance scene and I think they came away with a different attitude," she said. "There was a new respect and appreciation for all of us and what we do and how we walk in the world with the work that we do."*

To a large extent, issues related to writing dominated discussions at Fire & Ink. James said he and other contemporary black gay writers, such as Reggie Harris in Baltimore and Marvin K. White

in Oakland, Calif., are trying to bridge the gap left by black gay poets such as Hemphill and Beam, whose work gained wide acclaim before their deaths.

Jane Troxell, executive director of the Lambda Literary Foundation, a national non-profit organization that works to advance gay writing, said the forces that sustained the gay and lesbian book boom of the 1980s and 1990s are still very much in play for black authors.

*"Black gay writing has an increasing relevance in today's culture, and it should be fostered and honored," she said. "If you're looking for representations of African-American LGBT people, you most likely will not find them on television or in a movie; you will find them only in books."*

The Lambda Literary Foundation, in Washington, D.C., was one of the sponsors of Fire & Ink. It began sponsoring the Lambda Literary Festival, a bi-annual event, after the OutWrite conference ended.

Before the conference last week, Moore said she wanted to play a role in helping create Fire & Ink because so many writers nationwide are working in isolation.

*"It will be so affirming for them to see other people and know the work that they're doing is valid and crucial to the formation of a lot of people's identities as black gay men and lesbians," she said. "Words give validation and are a very powerful thing. For them to make it to a printed page and be bound and sold, there's power in that."*

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