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Reviews

AIDS Then and Now: A Blood-Drenched Battlefield

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For half a century, historian Martin Duberman has been chronicling Black and LGBT lives and struggles from a radical left perspective. Several of his books, notably his masterful biography of Paul Robeson, have linked anti-racism and sexuality in unexpected and illuminating ways.

Now Duberman has brought his skill as a storyteller and his political insights to bear on a dual biography, of white gay activist/singer Michael Callen and Black gay activist/poet Essex Hemphill. Both Callen and Hemphill fought valiantly against AIDS in the 1980s before dying of it themselves in the mid-1990s.

Hold Tight Gently: Michael Callen, Essex Hemphill and the Battlefield of AIDS is not only one of the most important histories of AIDS activism ever written. It is also a damning indictment of both the Reagan-Bush policies that condemned so many thousands to needless deaths back then, and the criminal indifference still faced by millions of people contending with HIV/AIDS worldwide today.

The blatant homophobia that helped kill Callen and Hemphill 20 years ago has fortunately been blunted over time. But the racism and for-profit medicine that still condemn to death from AIDS disproportionate numbers of African Americans in the United States, and far greater numbers of poor Black people worldwide, remain as murderously virulent as ever. [2]

This is a hard book to read — especially for gay men like me who saw so many friends and comrades die when AIDS in the United States was at its height. Time may have dulled the pain, but Duberman's matter-of-fact but unflinching account tears the wounds open again. At the same time Duberman stirs the rage of those of us who have lost loved ones to AIDS after it supposedly was not such a big problem anymore.

Since the introduction of protease inhibitors in 1995, as Duberman points out, AIDS has become a manageable illness only for those with relatively high incomes, access to adequate care and at least average luck.

Millions of others who live in the wrong countries or aren't linked to the right healthcare systems or whose skins are the wrong color — even in the United States — are still getting sick and dying.

Duberman reminds us that 45% of new AIDS diagnoses in the United States are of Black men who have had sex with men, even though on average they have fewer partners and less unprotected sex than white men. African-American women have AIDS rates comparable to those in Sub-Saharan Africa, and death rates 15 times those of white women. Worldwide, fewer than half of people with AIDS (PWAs) are being treated. (ix-x)

Malign Neglect

The malign neglect of AIDS in the epidemic's crucial early years is largely forgotten today. This makes Duberman's painstaking reconstruction all the more valuable.

Those were years when PWAs who had been denied rooms were dying in hospital corridors. In 1987, fewer than one PWA in ten was alive three years after diagnosis. (126)

Meanwhile rightwinger Pat Buchanan in nationally syndicated articles was calling AIDS “Nature’s retribution,” (73) while fundamentalist preacher Jerry Falwell called for quarantining gay people as “a threat to public safety.” (121)

The impact of such bigotry on public policy was devastating. In 1982 the federal government spent \$10 million in two weeks to investigate seven deaths from Tylenol. (60) Yet year after year the Reagan Administration requested less funding for AIDS than Congress allocated and then failed to spend the money Congress appropriated. The effectiveness of the cheap generic drug Bactrim in preventing death from the AIDS-related pneumonia PCP was known in the early 1980s, yet the Centers for Disease Control waited until 1989 before adopting it as a standard of care. (53)

Meanwhile Reagan’s Justice Department ruled that federal contractors had the right to fire employees they suspected of being HIV-positive. (156)

Of course, the conditions that African-American PWAs faced were even worse. In Washington DC by 1993, 60% of AIDS cases were among Blacks, yet only 20% of funding was earmarked to minority agencies. (84) Blacks and Latinos were also drastically under-represented in drug trials.

Study in Contrasts

The two gay men Duberman chooses as entryways to the story of AIDS and the fight against it form a study in contrasts. They pose very different challenges for a biographer, and give different tones to the sections Duberman devotes to each of them.

Michael Callen, a gay man who grew up in Ohio and went to college in Boston before moving to New York, was open about his life and feelings, almost to a fault. While he had sex with thousands of men, he formed emotionally and erotically intense bonds with a few like-minded people who knew him well and cherished his memory after his death.

These lovers and friends were a rich source of information for Duberman. They make it possible to give details of Callen’s activism, his relationships and the state of his health, almost day by day.

Essex Hemphill, an impressive personality by all accounts, was much more reserved. Born and raised in Washington DC, he lived there most of his life.

He worked closely with the leading lights of the Black gay arts movement of the 1980s — Isaac Julien, Marlon Riggs, Joe Beam — as they were “beginning to put flesh on the bones of ... our black gay identities.” (42) Together they formed a brilliant cultural milieu reminiscent of the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s (which itself had a major gay strand).

Hemphill’s activism was bound up with that of Black feminists like Barbara Smith. But Hemphill shared his whole life with none of these people.

Like Callen, Hemphill came from a devout evangelical Protestant family that had great difficulty with his homosexuality. Unlike Callen (and more characteristic of Black LGBT people), he clung throughout his life to his family ties and community roots, even as he continued to “bear witness” in the face of Black evangelical and nationalist homophobia. (295)

He had an especially intense bond with his mother, who championed and helped with his work; at one point she even stood up in her own church to challenge her pastor's homophobia. But his family too seems to have respected his privacy.

As for his closest sexual partners, Hemphill's ties to them were less long-lasting than Callen's, and sometimes marred by abuse; these men were not much use to Duberman as sources.

Arts and Activism

One of Duberman's best sources of insight into Hemphill's life "and one of the great pleasures of reading Hold Tight Gently" is Hemphill's poetry, which Duberman quotes extensively.

Even Hemphill's earliest poems, some of which Duberman publishes for the first time, are extraordinarily powerful. I sometimes felt as if Hemphill was exposing to me, an anonymous reader, stark realities that he did not necessarily share even with his friends.

Like Hemphill, Callen was as well known for his cultural expression as his activism. In Callen's case it was his singing, above all with the group The Flirtations. The Flirtations sang from the stage at many of the LGBT community's most important events. They got mass national exposure when they appeared in the Hollywood movie Philadelphia.

Duberman wisely chooses not to cite from the Flirtations' lyrics the way he does from Hemphill's poetry, however. While Hemphill pioneered performance practices with his poems, the work could hardly have been more eloquent on stage than it still is on the printed page. By contrast, the charm of Callen's lyrics came in large part from the music and community settings.

Sex and Germs [3]

AIDS of course owed its popular image and its stigma to its association with sex, especially gay sex, from the time "gay cancer" was identified in 1981. Callen, a proud self-proclaimed slut, was clear from the start that this necessarily made the fight against AIDS a fight against sex-negativity and homophobia. The clarity of his insight made him a key figure in the invention of safe sex, through works like his 1983 self-published pamphlet (with two co-authors) *How to Have Sex in an Epidemic*.

Duberman highlights Callen's reliance on the feminist health organizing that preceded him. The safe sex practices Callen advocated, in the teeth of an embarrassed medical establishment, were the most effective tool available to limit the spread of AIDS through the years before there were many useful drugs. Extensive public safe sex campaigns could probably have restricted the epidemic and the death toll to a fraction of their eventual magnitude.

Yet Callen's sexual politics landed him in some messy debates. Much as he insisted that gay men's sexual and emotional bonds with one another could be vital in saving their lives, he ran up against fierce resistance from gays who rejected any link between sex and infection.

The attacks on Callen by other gay radicals seem unbelievable in hindsight. Activist Michael Lynch (who later died of

AIDS) accused men like Callen of “rip[ping] apart the very promiscuous fabric that knits the gay male community together.” (58)

In fact Callen was a frequent champion of gay male sexual practices, defending anal sex (with condoms), oral sex and fistfucking as safe. Even when his AIDS was far advanced, he joined in the Orgy Boy Network, which proclaimed that “every time you attend a party, you are telling those sex- and self-hating idiots that we will do what we want with our bodies.” (251)

Yet sometimes Callen was not sure what was the right position to take. He at first opposed bathhouse closure, then “appalled by the unhealthy conditions and lack of condoms or safe-sex literature in New York’s bathhouses” reluctantly advocated it in New York. Later he regretted that he had ever accepted it. [4]

ACT UP and the Left

Strikingly, Duberman’s history of AIDS activism does not focus on the best-known AIDS activist group of 1980s, ACT UP.

While ACT UP pioneered forms of direct action that would later be taken up by the global justice movement, [5] and transformed the ways drugs were evaluated and approved in the United States, neither Callen nor Hemphill took part in it.

Hemphill gave priority to organizing in the African-American community. While there were Black and Latino activists in ACT UP who did a lot to push radical analysis and practice within it, they had to put up with under-representation, neglect, resistance and veiled racism from the group’s white majority. This was never Hemphill’s choice. He preferred to put his energies into groups like the National Coalition of Black Gays (founded in 1985) and the first Black AIDS Conference (1986).

As for Callen, he established himself early on as a key organizer of PWAs, insisting on their rights to control their own treatment and have a central voice in AIDS policy. He declared that “we are the real experts.” (65)

Again, there were other PWAs who played central roles in ACT UP. But while Callen praised ACT UP, he chose other organizing focuses, such as the national People with AIDS Coalition (founded in 1985). And Callen, an advocate of alliances with women, people of color and the poor, was a persistent critic of the limits of ACT UP’s radicalism.

Telling the stories of two activists who did not work through ACT UP, Duberman does not give a full account of ACT UP’s most radical side. [6] Cathy Cohen, whose book *The Boundaries of Blackness* [7] he cites frequently and admiringly, has described ACT UP New York’s needle exchange and prison projects as examples of “principled transformative coalition work.” [8] ACT UP also worked hard to organize a national march for universal health care “an effort that ultimately failed because trade union and other allies dragged their feet.” [9]

Internationally, ACT UP helped inspire a wave of activism on several continents, including South Africa’s Treatment Action Campaign (TAC). TAC’s two biggest victories “forcing the South African government to provide retrovirals to all HIV-positive South Africans and forcing the World Trade Organization to allow incursions on drug multinationals “intellectual property rights” to produce cheap, generic life-saving medicines” have been the high point of AIDS activism worldwide.

One characteristic that Callen and Hemphill shared with most ACT UP activists, despite their radical politics, was their lack of any association with the organized socialist left. As Callen's and Hemphill's rough contemporary (I was born in 1958, Callen in 1955, Hemphill in 1957), I reflected in reading their story on how unusual my attraction to Marxism made me as a gay radical in the United States in the 1980s.

One clear factor was how rapidly the socialist left was heading downhill as Callen, Hemphill and I reached adulthood. Another was the abysmally low priority that overstretched socialist groups generally gave to lesbian/gay struggles. Those of us who tried to combine socialist and LGBT activism have perpetually contended with the "risk of split personality." [\[10\]](#)

Callen and Hemphill, stretched thin between their gay activism, their artistic work, in Hemphill's case his ties to the Black community, and their struggle to stay alive, were at least spared this additional tension.

Challenge

By the final chapters of *Hold Tight Gently*, I empathized with Callen's feelings in his last years of being "bitter, burnt-out and soul-weary" (222) — a common feeling among AIDS activists as deaths proliferated around them.

As Hemphill wrote in a poem in 1992, "death is rioting, splashing blood about like gasoline." (239) In another poem in 1994, he recorded that as he undressed, "I glanced in to the mirror and was devastated. I was as thin as a sheet of paper." (297)

Duberman's account of the battle with AIDS of his own partner Eli — one of those who beat the odds and survived — makes clear just how desperate and panic-stricken many men were.

Callen died in 1993, Hemphill in 1995, one month before the Food and Drug Administration approved the first protease inhibitor. By the end of *Hold Tight Gently*, the magnitude of their loss seems unfathomable.

Yet as one of Hemphill's friends said at a memorial for him, "[Essex] dared all of us to envision a new community beyond gay and straight, black and white, male and female." (303) The challenge remains.

[Against the Current](#)

[\[1\]](#) Martin Duberman, *Paul Robeson* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988).

[\[2\]](#) I pointed out the increasingly racialized demographics of AIDS in an article in *Against The Current* in 1989 ("The transformation of AIDS: polarization of a movement," ATC 19). Foolishly, I imagined that left-wing AIDS activists would manage in response to build a more radical movement in which people of color would play a greater role. I failed to appreciate how institutionalized and tamed the great majority of AIDS organizations would become, even as they moved to address the global epidemic.

[\[3\]](#) Cindy Patton's *Sex and Germs* (Boston: South End Press, 1985) was, alongside Dennis Altman's *AIDS in The Mind of America* (New York: Anchor, 1986), one of the best early books on the politics of AIDS.

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[4] I argued against bathhouse closure in "Warning Signs from San Francisco," Gay Community News, vol. 11 no. 46, June 9, 1984, reasoning that closure could "perpetuate the climate of despair, guilt and the thrill of the forbidden" and thus "do more to encourage high-risk sex than to stop it."

(5)

[5] See Benjamin Shepard and Ronald Hayduk (eds.), *From ACT UP to the WTO: Urban Protest and Community Building in the Era of Globalization* (London: Verso, 2002).

[6] This history remains to be written in full. One of the major documentaries on ACT UP, "How to Survive an Epidemic," is almost entirely limited to ACT UP New York and mostly to its Treatment Action Committee, the group within ACT UP that Duberman criticizes most. Unfortunately I have not yet been able to see "United in Anger," a documentary that I understand does a better job of showing ACT UP's radicalism.

[7] Cathy Cohen, *The Boundaries of Blackness: AIDS and the Breakdown of Black Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999)

[8] Cathy Cohen, "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?" in E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson (eds.), *Black Queer Studies*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005, 45.

[9] My recollections about this from my New York years (1989-92) were recently confirmed in an email from activist Steve Ault.

[10] Fourth International, [On Lesbian/Gay Liberation](#), point 34 (2003)