



Creating Change Plenary Speech on HIV/AIDS

Filed by: Guest Blogger
February 3, 2009 12:30 PM

Editor's Note: *Kenyon Farrow is an organizer, communications strategist and writer working on issues at the intersection of HIV/AIDS, prisons and homophobia. A current Policy Institute fellow with the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, Farrow is working on a report about the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Black gay and bisexual men in the U.S. This is a copy of his speech from the 2009 Creating Change Conference. Video after the jump.*



In 1991, nearly 18 years ago, I was 15 years old when my mother, who was working 13 hour days, 6 days a week in Cleveland, OH, sat me and my two sisters down in front of the television to watch history.

It was not unusual for her to do such a thing. For, we had been made to watch the Civil Rights Documentary "*Eyes on The Prize*" in its entirety. We also watched "*How the West Was Lost*," the documentary about White American expansion into the "Americas" and the genocide of First Nation peoples--to understand what we perhaps weren't learning in one of the worst school districts in the country.

But that night, in 1991, my mother--after right-wing Senators Jesse Helms and Arlen Specter tried to protect "American Families" from being able to view it public television--sat us in front of the television to watch Marlon Riggs' breakthrough film on black gay men, ***Tongues Untied***.

The film, and the poetry of the men in the film, particularly Essex Hemphill, was for me the example of the possibility of a Black gay life, of an aesthetic, and of a radical, sex-positive, pro-feminist politic. They were, quite literally, the men of my own dreams.

Though they would both make more films, more books, they would both be dead of HIV-related causes by 1995, within one year of each other. And just short of the first anti-retrovirals to hit the market. And half of the people in this room don't even know of the two names that I speak.

Despite their examples as two of many who spent the late 80s and early 1990s literally writing us into the history of the planet while they were being dragged from the face of it, we have largely lost the layered, nuanced, and multi-issue nature of their brilliant work, which very clearly demonstrates the social conditions of Black working class queer life in the context of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Theirs was not a politics of inclusion--but a politics of sexual liberation in a decidedly Black gay context.

These men, and many others who died from HIV or from violence, were not only cultural workers but were in fact movement-minded folk--starting and running organizations, writing and creating, and making political alliances with Black lesbian organizations, other radical third-world people of color artists and organizers.

Their work that gave the public health world, and the mainstream LGBT movement a body of work with which to fashion ideas around the context of HIV/AIDS among Black "men who have sex with men." But instead of looking to that work as insight and inspiration, we have built a public health, Black, and/or LGBT movement response to HIV/AIDS among Black MSM with the decidedly ignorant assumption that we don't know what's going on with Black "men who have sex with men" and that there is no Black queer leadership that currently exists or could not be further nurtured and developed.

STATISTICS

Despite major advances in treating the virus, the HIV/AIDS epidemic seems to be getting worse for people in our community. At the International AIDS Conference, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) stunned the international AIDS community by announcing that the richest nation on earth had over 56,000 new infections in 2006. This revision also included a back-calculation revealing that, for the 15 years from 1991-2006, infection rates were approximately 25-50 percent higher than the long-held 40,000 annual estimate.

Not only have we been undercounting the growth of the epidemic, men who have sex with men (MSM -- that public health category that includes gay and bisexual men, and transgender women) continue to bear the greatest increases in new infections. In 2006, 53 percent of all new infections were among MSM.

More stunning, it found the number of new infections of black MSM ages 13-29 to be the highest of all MSM groups. Even though CDC officials are typically conservative in its public statements, CDC scientists are stating publicly that black MSM are the only group in the U.S. with HIV rates similar to Sub-Saharan African nations, despite similar or lower rates of risky sex or substance abuse than white MSM.

Though transwomen are counted in the "MSM" category, some data has shown Black MTF transwomen have an HIV prevalence rate of 56%.

While black MSM certainly bear the brunt of the virus, gay and bisexual the virus disproportionately impacts men and transgender women of all races.

POLICY

There are many policy changes that we'd like to see, many of which are encompassed in the National AIDS Strategy, and those are likely to happen. So I am going to focus on what we in this room, as activists and organizers in the LGBT movement, need to do.

MOVEMENT

First and foremost, the time where we can pretend that there is no viable, credible or visible Black (or other POC) queer leadership is over. While we certainly need to be developing leaders, leadership per se, is not the problem. We have lost of leaders, but leaders with no base that they're accountable to. Because what little Black LGBT infrastructure that exists, is largely due to HIV/AIDS service delivery, we are able to reach lots of people in our organizations as "clients", but are rarely engaged as potential leaders, organizers or members of our organizations. We need the investment of both progressive philanthropy and LGBT funders to help build the capacity and infrastructure of organizations to move from strict service delivery to doing community organizing, leadership development, and base-building.

Lastly, as long as the White-led mainstream LGBT movement is invested in seeing itself as the only credible leadership or it's organizations the only ones doing "the real work" or having "real impact" we will continue to invisibilize the work that Black and other POC organizations are doing on the ground, in spite of real material obstacles. So every time the gay news media and organizations promote ideas of the gay community vs. the Black community, Black queers will continue to remain invisible, and assumes that Black queer people are not engaging in a battle against homophobia and transphobia in the Black community.

Phrases like the Advocate's recent "**Gay is the New Black**" which has surfaced in stickers and T-shirts in gayborhoods as well, is racist, dangerous, and ignores the reality despite having a Black president, Black people in America continue to suffer a vast array of health, and socio-economic disparities, even when you control for all other factors. Not only that, it also, once again, presumes that to be LGB or T is to be white and usually male.

Just yesterday at this conference, a major figure in the same-sex marriage movement told a young queer person of color that "**there are some people in our community who are fit to lobby, and some who are fit to sing and dance.**"

These kinds of comments are simply disgusting, particularly since many people of color and transgender people in white gay male spaces are only allowed in to do as much. The sad thing is, for too many people of color in this movement, the line between being asked by white-led organizations to lobby, or to sing & dance, is far too thin.

I think a lot about Marlon Riggs, Essex Hemphill, Barbara Smith, Audre Lorde and many others, as artists and organizers and activists who have led the way for me to be able to stand here on this stage, and it seems sad to me that in my work as a writer and here with the Task Force & Queers for Economic Justice, with my comrades in the room and in various movements around the country-- having to make the arguments, they'd been making for decades.

And we can have all of our policy wish lists items and services around HIV met--but without movement building from the grassroots of people most vulnerable to serve as the place where real change happens. And so long as no cure is found we will not see an end to the epidemic and the disproportionate impact it has on people of African descent globally.

I would hope, that after the decades of efforts to make visible the work that Black LGBTQ people are engaged in directly or indirectly related to HIV/AIDS, not another person has to stand here,

decades from now, having to justify or make visible that work, ever again. We are beyond the point of benign ignorance. The bodies in this room, and the graveyards many of us are carrying on our backs, tell a different story.

And so now, should we.