gay community is indicative of deserving this particular virus? How do we make other Black folks see that our primary source of premature death in the form of HIV, is as indicative of Black life as diabetes and police shootings?

While we, in our own lives, are too familiar with the numerous premature deaths from many sources that characterize Black life, we cannot continue to de-emphasize particular forms of social and physical death and suffering, particularly AIDS, of which we as Black gay men continue to bear the brunt. This cannot be the cost of community. Not then, not now.

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Queer Forms, Black Lives: Melvin Dixon, Assotto Saint, and Artistic Experimentation

Joseph Beam’s 1986 edited anthology In the Life represents a valuable collection of writings by and about Black gay male life. A major part of its significance lies in the multifarious perspectives that it offers on the subject. The reader finds discussions of interracial relationships, the vagaries and frustrations of sexual encounters, the challenges to community building, the desire for fatherhood, and the almost overwhelming nature of anti-Black racism. In addition, it is not the case that all of the writers in the volume agree with each other or put forward identical viewpoints. There is no simple understanding of Black gay male life in these pages, and this reality stands as one of the major contributions of the text as a whole. Granting these noteworthy elements, I contend that Beam’s anthology is also significant because of the innovative artistic techniques that the contributors employ. In other words, it is not only important what the writers say, but
also how they say what they say. Focusing on the contributions of Melvin Dixon and Assotto Saint, I demonstrate that the artists in Beam’s collection use experimental techniques as the means for articulating the multi-vocal nature of Black gay male subjectivity, which the content of the volume endeavors to present.

I turn first to Melvin Dixon’s short story “The Boy with Beer.” Dixon’s story is the first work of fiction that appears in In the Life. It follows a young man named Willis who is trying to get up the nerve to go into a club late at night in hopes of making a connection. The story showcases this character’s anxiety, desperation, and especially his loneliness: “He wanted to ask someone, anyone, if he was always to be lonely” (29). This feeling of disconnection pervades Dixon’s story and has led Willis to the door of the club on a Friday night trying to get the courage to walk in by himself. Willis is hesitant to go into the club because doing so would defy his parents’ wishes and expectations. Anxiety about going leads Willis to recall his mother’s voice: “As he walked further inside the bar he thought again of what she would say if she saw him. ‘But she’s far away from me now,’ he thought. ‘Far away.’ But her voice returned to him and his legs went stiff” (24). The thought of this woman, his mother, leads to a loss of control of his body and a feeling of helplessness as the muscles in his legs tighten and his joints lock in place.

More importantly, there is a shift in the presentation of the narrative structure that parallels the loss of control experienced within the story. Dixon shifts from prose paragraphs to italicized dialogue that is reminiscent of a more dramatic form:

- You’re Mama’s little man. That’s what you are.
- Yes Mama.
- Now don’t you look nice?
- I guess so.
- [...]  

- Mama?
- What is it son?
- I don’t feel well.
- You’ll be alright. Reverend Jones preaches a fine sermon. He’ll make you feel real good. (24)

Shifts to this dramatic structuring like this one happen throughout the story, and they signal the movement from Willis’s experiences inside the bar to the character’s thoughts, memories, and induced anxieties. The narrative moves into his mind at these moments. Especially prominent in these sections are his parents’ voices, which generally emphasize inattention, dissatisfaction, and disappointment. Willis’s feeling of sickness (whether physical or emotional) that he describes in saying that he is not “well” create the opportunity for his mother to emphasize the reverend’s ability and the importance of religion rather than to think about her son’s health. Many of the italicized segments are scenes of parental instruction that ultimately feel repressive and restraining, as when his father chastises him for helping his mother to bake a cake. These voices interrupt the storyline and transform the format of the narrative into a semi-hybrid text that features elements of fictional prose and drama. Dixon purposefully sets the sections apart in order to register how they are at odds with the rest of the story. Willis’s desires are set in contradistinction to these commands and negative experiences. It is the interfacing of these multiple voices that create the story and through them Dixon offers a disjointed text. This decision suggests that for Dixon the prose form alone is not a sufficient way to tell Willis’s story or develop his character. The tension between the narrative sections materializes the character’s state of mind and the fact that he has multiple and contrasting desires. The reader is witness to a character overburdened by the voices in his head, and the visual presentation of the text reflects this state.
Dixon does not leave this character anxious and alone. The story ends with Willis meeting a man and beginning a conversation. The story ends with the protagonist's introductory statement "My name is Willis" (34). The reader and the character can only get to this moment of articulation and self-definition by first repeatedly encountering the chastising voices in the italicized sections to the point of being overwhelmed. In fact at several points in the story, italicized statements interrupt every line of the prose paragraphs narrating Willis experience in the bar. Accordingly the self-expression apparent in the last line is presented as emerging out of a struggle that is frustrating and confusing. Here one finds the point of the story; Dixon explores the challenges to claiming one's identity, and the narrative structure demonstrates this idea. In this sense the story itself functions as a "journey into" Willis, but it makes a larger point about the forces that can encroach upon one's sense of self. Part of my argument here is that Dixon's technique allows him to frame Black queer desire and self-expression through the concepts of interruption and disconnection.

Assotto Saint's piece "Risin' to the Love We Need," which is the final inclusion in Beam's anthology, is an ideal complement to Dixon's story because the desire for connection emerges as central and because it also reflects experimentation in terms of the form. The selection in In the Life is the last section of a longer work with the same title. Saint describes both the selection and the complete work as a "multi-media theater piece," meaning that it is a manipulated dramatic work. The central character is Francine, a "narrator, drag-queen, mother-figure" (243). Early on, she explains that as a young boy named "franklin delano robinson" growing up in Montgomery, Alabama, she saw pictures of Josephine Baker "in feathers and them foot-high head dresses [and] knew that's what she wanted to be" (244). Given this description, the encounter with the photographs can be read as a component of her psychosocial development that informed her choices about her gender expression and her decision to cross-dress.

Josephine Baker's gender performance is important here, but the story also emphasizes the entertainer's social activism and parenting as informative. Francine goes on to say that she "came across this picture of Josephine and her rainbow tribe [and] thought how great it was for a black woman who grew up in St. Louis, Missouri, amidst all kinds of racial upheavals, to overcome all those superficial obstacles in our lives and set out to achieve her dream of universal brotherhood" (244). It is this reference to the rainbow tribe that is of importance. Baker did adopt twelve children of different ethnic and national backgrounds (a veritable "rainbow tribe"), and it is precisely this idea of the creation of a family outside of normative kinship structures that obtains here. To the extent that Francine is inspired by Baker's professional life, she is also inspired by her personal life. In effect, Francine, who ran away from home at fifteen, creates her own family by becoming the mother figure and loving mentor to the other characters in the drama: Assotto, Billy, and Miles. Saint's theatrical piece foregrounds the kinds of familial and intimate connections that Dixon's story forestalls. In addition, this move to "mother" these men places emphasis on the creation of alternative networks of affiliation. Toward the end of the piece, Francine explains, "i can understand sexism and i can understand racism because it's all a big misunderstanding...a holding back and there's ecstasy in the sharing / i tell you, there's ecstasy in the sharing" (248). The "sharing" is an opening of one's life to others, and this action is what Francine does with the other characters. The ecstasy is about the pleasure and satisfaction of connection. Accordingly, what the title "Risin' to the love we need" refers to is rising to or meeting the responsibility of providing that love to others.
Much of the play focuses on the act of narrating Francine's life. What the reader/viewer finds in Saint's piece is that Francine cannot and does not tell her story by herself. Saint employs the visual device of projected slides as well as other characters to get this story out, making the play not just a play, but instead a "multi-media" event. As Francine talks about her life to the audience, stage directions say that "slides depicting various scenes are used" throughout the sketch (244). More slides appear later of "Watergate, Vietnam, discos" and the March on Washington. These visual images supplement and enhance the actual story being told. Though separate from the character they become instruments of the storytelling. Moreover, the character Assotto, the artist's namesake and fictionalized self, takes over the narration during the piece: "so since 1976, each new year's eve, Francine stared lighting a candle to mark what she considered to be the most historical event that happened the past year in the progress for better human relations" (246). This shift from Francine to Assotto serves the same purpose as the slide show in the performance. Both of these elements indicate that Francine is unable to tell the story of her life alone. Another way to understand this idea is that Saint is unwilling to make the character's life history available through only one means, even if that means is the character herself. Saint finds that he cannot explain this queer life in only one form. Accordingly, Francine's creation of her alternative family provides her with additional means of expressing herself.

Saint's multi-media piece is one that is multi-vocal. The reader is presented with one person's story, but it arrives from different vantage points and through multiple channels. Francine's story is one that exceeds a singular, one-dimensional telling. The same idea is true for Dixon's short story. The voices that fill Willis's head and interrupt the narrative structure, even at their most hurtful and dismissive, represent the varied and contradictory forces (or voices) that inform queer life. Read together the short story and the experimental theater piece reveal the multi-vocality that is integral to Beam's anthology and that is at the heart of Black queer artistic productions. The artistic techniques I highlight represent attempts to register formally this multi-vocality and posit it as a central concern for Black gay artists. Accordingly, one question emerges as central to both artists: What are the available methods for re-imagining and expressing Black queer existence? In this sense, the artistic choices I draw attention to in Beam's anthology provide a framework for the articulation of a Black gay aesthetic and provide models and strategies for the work of later artists. Dixon and Saint strive to locate viable forms that can communicate effectively their subject positions and do justice to the complexity of their lives and those of other Black gay men.

Works Cited
