

SPEAK MY WORDS, TELL MY TRUTH

a two-act play in poetry and verse
by Lorenz Qatava

optimized for online presentation



character list

Red Man: 40-50 years old African American male
Blue Man: 40-50 year old African American male
Green Man: 30-40 year old African American male
Beige Man: 30-40 year old African American male
Grey Man: 25-40 year old African American male
Purple Man: 25-40 year old African American male
Drummer

Synopsis

The life stories and achievements of five Black Gay writers is presented by five color-coded characters who symbolically represent Langston Hughes, James Baldwin, Essex Hemphill, E. Lynn Harris, and Tarell Alvin McCraney. Their imagined intergenerational dialogue with a young man helps him understand how their works influenced his own life and transformed American culture, race relations and acceptance of homosexuality.

All characters, dialogue and events in this play – even those based on real people – are fictional.

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SPEAK MY WORDS, TELL MY TRUTH

ACT ONE
SCENE ONE

(Six empty high chairs are on stage. House lights go down. A video montage of vintage Black gay photographs plays accompanied by tribal music. When the house lights come up, the six men dressed in the colors associated with their names are sitting on each chair.)

PURPLE MAN:

Speak my words, tell my truth.

RED MAN:

They called me Colored

BLUE MAN:

They called me Negro

GREEN MAN:

They called me Afro-American.

BEIGE MAN:

They called me a Person of Color.

GREY MAN:

They called me a Black American.

PURPLE MAN:

They call me a BIPOC – Black, Indigenous and Person of Color

SPEAK MY WORDS, TELL MY TRUTH

RED MAN:

They called me a homosexual, sometimes just effeminate.

BLUE MAN:

They called me faggot, fairy and queer boy.

GREEN MAN:

They called me honey man, a soft man.

BEIGE MAN:

They called me “on the downlow.”

GREY MAN:

They called me a same-gender loving man.

PURPLE MAN:

They called me a gender non-conforming LGBTQI POC, who is cis-male.

RED MAN:

I call myself a poet, an artist, a dandy.

BLUE MAN:

I call myself an agitator, a philosopher and an intellectual.

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GREEN MAN:

I call myself a performance poet and revolutionary.

BEIGE MAN:

I call myself a romantic – the lover and the be-loved.

GREY MAN:

I call myself a witness and a storyteller.

PURPLE MAN:

I call myselfcomplicated.

RED MAN:

I was born in Joplin Missouri in 1902.

BLUE MAN:

I was born in Harlem in 1924.

GREEN MAN:

I was born in Chicago in 1957.

BEIGE MAN:

I was born in Flint Michigan in 1955.

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GREY MAN:

I was born in Miami in 1980.

PURPLE MAN:

I was born... yesterday.

RED MAN:

I am slender, I am buff.

BLUE MAN:

I am tender, I am rough.

GREEN MAN:

I am a bottom, I am a top.

BEIGE MAN:

I am a criminal, I am a cop.

GREY MAN:

I am wounded, I am a healer.

PURPLE MAN:

I am a prophet, I am a concealer.

SPEAK MY WORDS, TELL MY TRUTH

BEIGE MAN:

Speak my words, tell my truth.

PURPLE MAN:

And we know the power ...

GREEN MAN:

...of our tongues un-tied.

ALL:

We know words!

RED MAN:

Words that can make colored folks' blues visible for examination.

BLUE MAN:

Words that can stir the conscience of a nation.

GREEN MAN:

Words that soothe the pain of a lover dying of AIDS in my arms.

BEIGE MAN:

Words that can beguile you, entice you with my seductive charms.

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GREY MAN:

Words that can show the beauty within and block the hate from without.

PURPLE MAN:

Words that shine a light and words that throw shade, no doubt.

RED MAN:

Words that can make a cock rise to the occasion.

BLUE MAN:

Words that can make you yearn in expectation.

GREEN MAN:

Words spoken, words written and words often ignored.

BEIGE MAN:

Words that rhyme or are set to time, carefully chosen word for word.

GREY MAN:

Words of regret, of hope, of joy, of remembrance.

PURPLE MAN:

Words that turn crude vile epithets into viral eloquence.

ALL:

We are Black Gay Men and we've got words for you!

(Drumming sounds play)

SPEAK MY WORDS, TELL MY TRUTH

RED MAN:

To fling my arms wide
In some place of the sun,
To whirl and to dance
Till the white day is done.
Then rest at cool evening
Beneath a tall tree
While night comes on gently,
Dark like me—
That is my dream!

To fling my arms wide
In the face of the sun,
Dance! Whirl! Whirl!
Till the quick day is done.
Rest at pale evening . . .
A tall, slim tree . . .

Night coming tenderly
Black like me.

They called me “colored” when I published this first poem a hundred years ago in 1921. By that time, I had lived in several Midwestern cities and traveled extensively around the world before I settled into Harlem, Negro Mecca. I wrote *The Negro Speaks of Rivers* a couple of years earlier, when I was only 17, as I traveled by train to Mexico to visit my father, whom I barely knew. He emigrated there to escape racism in this country and wanted me to study engineering. But it was not my passion. I was inspired by the vivid oral histories of my maternal grandmother to write about the lives and struggles of colored folks.

Mine was a persistent and insistent voice for the colored race in the 29 books, 9 plays, numerous articles, short stories and poems that I wrote until my death from prostate cancer in 1967. I was one of the first of my race to earn a living working full time as a poet, writer and lecturer. I became part of a group of talented writers and poets who lived and worked in

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Harlem. I always had pomade in my hair, wore spats on my shoes and had an ascot around my neck.

BLUE MAN:

Right on, right on, brother. You cool cats of the Harlem Renaissance had it going on! You, Claude MacKay, Countee Cullen and Alain Locke. You brought us those beautiful jazz poetry rhymes that bared the souls of our people.

RED MAN:

Many folks just assumed that I was asexual, because I never married and was never seen cavorting with women, but I clearly enjoyed the company of men, especially dark-skinned men in private parties and in the speakeasies of Harlem.

My lyrical poem entitled “To Beauty” was not published until after I died. In it I spoke of the thrill of worshiping at the altar of beauty.

To worship
At the altar of Beauty,
To feel her loveliness and pain,
To thrill
At the wonder of her gorgeous moon
Or the sharp, swift, silver swords
Of falling rain.

You see, in the jazz age “Beauty” was a euphemism for that very personal and private activity shared by homosexuals.

BLUE MAN:

In the thirties and forties, you had your coded language, secret clubs, salons and speakeasies, like the infamous Niggeratti Mansion on 127th Street, where Negro men could meet other men, romance each other, but never hold hands in the sunlight. You infuriated me later in your life with your refusal to acknowledge your sexuality and I publicly said so on many occasions.

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RED MAN:

It's well known that white people flocked to Harlem in the Roaring Twenties to be entertained by colored people in classy jazz clubs like the Cotton Club and the Savoy. It's not so well known that white folks flocked to elaborate drag shows and competitions at the Rockland Palace on 155th Street, where few of the drag ball contestants, performers or patrons were colored men.

BLUE MAN:

My own sexual adventures took place in the integrated bars and downtown clubs of Greenwich Village in the 1940s and 50s. My second novel was about a gay man who found himself longing for love in Paris.

I never hid my homosexuality, how could I? I lived for many years with my Swiss lover in the South of France. My sexuality is all there to see in my biographical novels like *Another Country*, *Just Above My Head* and *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and in many, many writings and essays. But I refused to allow my sexuality to define me. I was busy writing and talking about the Negro condition and Jim Crow and the poison of white supremacy.

RED MAN:

Unfortunately, I was not able to fully express my identity as a lover of other men in my writings. Homosexual acts were illegal and could result in jail time or worse. The powerful Black church declared it as immoral. I had no choice but to remain closeted in order to make a living.

GREEN MAN:

Speak my words, tell my truth.

(Drumming sounds play)

BLUE MAN:

They called me "Negro" when I was a child preacher in the churches of Harlem. I spent a lifetime writing and telling white folks that I am not their Negro. As I grew older, I became increasingly skeptical about religion and embraced an atheist viewpoint on life.

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Just like you and many, many creative and artistic Negroes before me, I went to Paris to express myself freely and to escape the crippling racism of this country, but I could no longer stay abroad as the modern-day civil rights movement grew. America pulled me back. I spoke often to young Martin and Medgar and Malcolm and mourned each of them as they fell, way too soon, to the carefully aimed projectiles of America's peculiar form of racial hatred. They were the great strategists and organizers, but the media repeatedly turned to me for words...articulate, clear candid and passionate words about the Negro condition in America. I wrote articles and essays and I was a frequent talk show guest. I fiercely debated the false intellectual narratives of William F. Buckley and Paul Weiss in defense of my people.

RED MAN:

While you debated with the intellectual classes, I told the simple stories of ordinary working-class people – everyday laborers of all races. One of my most celebrated poems, "Let America Be America Again" examined the unrealized hopes and dreams of the country's lower class, workers and disadvantaged, including poor whites, Native Americans, immigrants and Negroes. I wrote it during the Great Depression while on a train between Ohio and New York, highlighting the discrepancy between the ideals of the American Dream and the harsh realities of American life.

(Drumming sounds play)

GREEN MAN:

They called me "Afro American." It wasn't easy, but we were not some alien Negroid species on this planet who landed in America. We insisted that they honor my ancestors' contributions to this country and our connection to Mother Africa, just like Irish- Italian- and Polish- Americans.

I came out of the south side of Chicago, but I exploded on the scene in Anacostia D.C., Chocolate City! During the turbulent sixties and seventies, my poetry helped Afro American gay men learn to love themselves and to own their bodies.

By the late sixties we had developed a distinctive and enviable culture in urban hubs where we were electrified by break dancing, the music of Sylvester

(sings the lyric: You Make Me Feel, Mi-i-ghty Real!),

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the drag balls, a little home-grown ganja and a fierceness that combined Afro-centric power, gay liberation and the sexual revolution.

I was particularly known as a performance poet and we performed our poetry live wearing kente-cloth dashikis in makeshift coffee houses and nightclubs and even collected them together in books like “Brother to Brother” and “In the Life.” “In the Life” was code that some brothers used to let others know they were gay – kinda like what the white boys called “Friends of Dorothy.” I didn’t need to hear another hungry white boy say “color doesn’t matter to me”...knowing that what he really meant was that it didn’t matter... as long as you were a well-hung top who could satisfy his needs.

BLUE MAN:

He didn’t need to hear about your racial trauma, brother, because he has known the “suffering” of homophobia and he says to you, “ain’t it all the same thing, homie.” Meanwhile, the waiter automatically gives the check to him, assuming that you lack either the sophistication or the means to pay for the meal. Brother, please!

In 1965, when conservative William Buckley asked me sarcastically “how awful it must be for you to have been born Black, impoverished and a homosexual.” I immediately retorted, that, to the contrary, I felt like I hit the jackpot! And I did!

Throughout my life, I refused to be penned down when asked by reporters about my feelings about the so-called homosexual agenda. In a *Village Voice* interview with Richard Goldstein, I told him that sexuality was only part of who we are and not the most indispensable part at that. I told him that I could only talk about my own life and that I loved a few people and they loved me. It had nothing to do with labels.

PURPLE MAN:

Speak my words and tell my truth!

GREEN MAN:

In my friend Marlon Riggs’ groundbreaking film *Tongues Untied*, I made the declaration that “Black men loving Black men is a revolutionary act.” That film was the first time that our big, bold and beautiful lives were shown on screens for a mass audience to see. I argued that homo sex did not constitute a whole life nor did it negate my racial identity. I challenged

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myself and others to integrate all our identities into a functioning self, instead of accepting a dysfunctional existence as the consequence of homosexual desires.

BLUE MAN:

Yes, brother. As a Negro friend once told me, you have to go the way your blood beats. If you don't live the only life you have, you won't live some other life, you won't live any life at all. Go the way your blood beats!

BEIGE MAN:

Speak my words and tell my truth!

GREEN MAN:

When I published the poem *For My Own Protection* in 1992, I wanted Afro American gay men to see their intricate beauty and not need the occasional gaze of a white man to know their own worth. I urgently pleaded for us to start an organization to save our own lives before we were declared as almost extinct, while being pacified by drugs and sex. We needed a consciousness that connected with the exploration of identity that was central to the Black Pride movement that emerged after Dr. King and Malcolm X and so many others were taken away from us.

BEIGE MAN:

Yes, brother, we needed to armor ourselves against hatred coming from homophobic relatives and at the same time build walls against everyday racism.

GREEN MAN:

We could only truly shed that armor in the caring arms of a loving brother.

GREY MAN:

We lost far too many brilliant brothers in their prime during the AIDS epidemic, but I saw myself in the words you left behind and those of Marlon Riggs, Assotto Saint, Randall Kenan, Melvin Dixon and Larry Duckett.

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GREEN MAN:

AIDS devastated our community in the late eighties, as my Afro American brothers fell one by one. It took me too in 1995. HIV and AIDS cast a menacing shadow over our decades-long progress towards sexual liberation and openly affirming same-gender love. My friends and lovers fell to the disease which was a death sentence that silenced many Black gay voices.

The Black church, that had been the bedrock of our collective survival in this country, turned its institutional back to our gay brothers suffering from the disease, often refusing to hold funerals or say the word “AIDS” or any words that provided comfort to our lovers and families. Hating the sin while claiming to love the sinner. We had to create our own ceremonies to remember and bury our dead. We burned incense, we read our poetry as our prayers, we sang the Christian hymns we learned as children, and we desperately chanted the incantations and mantras that might heal us or save us from a cruel, premature and agonizing death. We hugged and held each other so tight, not knowing which of us would be next to fall. Or whether we would have the strength to pick up our brother’s loving weapons beyond the weight of our collective grief to continue the fight for our lives.

My truth is that our attraction to other men made many of our own people believe that we could never be a “credit to the race,” but rather a disgrace with no place at the table of the Negro race. We were somehow short of being a real Black man, whatever that is. We had to be ten times better than any white person just to get ahead and not being “straight” could only double the struggle. Our “imperfect selves” were hidden in the shadows, as Langston said, in the “kitchen when company comes.” Too many of us were condemned by the pastor, left off the team by the coach or were told by our moms or dads to “just stop actin’ like a girl.”

GREY MAN:

We were belittled and bullied and left bleeding and broken in the boy’s bathroom. Taking refuge in the school library or the church choir – anywhere that we could just blend in. In those libraries we found words of hope in the stories of other men and in those choirs we sang words of redemption and joy. We heal those scars with words.

(Drumming sounds play)

SPEAK MY WORDS, TELL MY TRUTH

PURPLE MAN:

We are Black Gay men and we've got words for you! Words.....

RED MAN:

Spoken to dark-skinned brothers on the corner of Harlem streets.

PURPLE MAN:

Words...

BLUE MAN:

Spoken to clueless white lovers on silky white sheets.

PURPLE MAN:

Words...

GREEN MAN:

Spoken to cell mates who insist that it's not rape since I'm gay.

PURPLE MAN:

Words...

GREY MAN:

Spoken to audiences from the stage of an award-winning play.

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PURPLE MAN:

Words...

BEIGE MAN:

Spoken in a coffee house open mike as fingers go “snap.”

PURPLE MAN:

Words...

RED MAN:

Spoken in a poetry slam by brothas who know how to rap.

(Drumming sounds play)

BEIGE MAN:

The transformative Black gay writings of the last quarter of the twentieth century were a call to radical self-love and a plea for survival against homophobia, disease, assimilation and self-doubt.

My novels didn't talk of revolution, but of romance between Black men. I took that raw sexuality out of the shadows and weaved sizzling, passionate romantic fantasies that were not just about what happens between the sheets, but gave insight on how real relationships between men grow and change ...about how successful men who look like me can be tender, complicated, generous, vulnerable and nurturers of lasting relationships. They weren't the tragic figures we saw in the media - pimps, drug dealers, ex-cons or sex addicts - but real people who didn't see themselves as victims or objects, but simply as men who loved men.

GREY MAN:

I hear you my brother and I stand on all your shoulders. I devoured all the writings by you, and Samuel Delaney, Larry Duplechan, James Earl Hardy. I saw myself and possibilities in your pages.

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(Drumming sounds play)

BEIGE MAN:

They called me “African American” when I came out of Flint Michigan. I was the first African American student in my newly-integrated junior high school in Little Rock Arkansas. I guess the world got a clue that I might be gay when I became the first male cheerleader at the University of Arkansas. I was yearbook editor and president of a Black fraternity, where I thought I could safely hide my sexual identity, until one of my Alpha Phi Alpha brothers so innocently asked “If homosexuality is so wrong, why did God make so many?” Hmm.

After graduating, I became a successful IBM corporate executive, but I was miserable. Years of hiding my sexuality, verbal and physical abuse by my stepfather, alcohol dependency and low self-esteem led me to attempt suicide in 1990. The urge to write and to tell my story, our stories saved my life and brought me back. In my autobiography, I wrote about this dark period wondering whether the pain and despair that I felt was because I was a black man living in America or because I was gay man in America or whether it was because America had a problem with both.

I moved to Atlanta, Chocolate City, and started writing about the vibrant community of Black gay men I met there in Adams Point, Midtown, Piedmont.

GREY MAN:

These were traditionally African American neighborhoods created by racist red-lining policies that got “gay-gentrified” in the seventies and eighties, displacing lower- and middle-class African American families.

BEIGE MAN:

Sadly, so. And don’t forget that we were among those moving in - painting our houses bright colors, planting flower boxes and raising rainbow flags.

Tens of thousands of African American gay men from all over the country flocked to Atlanta every Labor Day for the elaborate backyard parties and social events that would eventually become known as Atlanta’s annual Black Gay Pride weekend.

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GREY MAN:

Over thirty U.S. cities held Black Gay Pride celebrations in the eighties. We flocked to DC for Memorial Day and to LA for Independence Day, but Atlanta was the granddaddy of them all. We came together to celebrate our pride in being Black and our pride in being Gay, with marches, prayer breakfasts, festivals, African markets, parties, and symposiums.

BEIGE MAN:

The gay clubs rocked with the poly-racial beats of disco, house and rap. We grooved and grinded and fell in love to the music of Donna Summers, the Communards, Freida Payne and Wham in Black-owned clubs like Bulldogs, the Nickel Bar, Catch One, The Club House and Club Langston. Not only were we comfortable and welcomed there, many of the white-owned clubs deliberately made us unwelcomed, with demeaning identification and selectively-enforced carding policies or dress codes to limit our access. Some boys were able to find love across the strict color lines, but most of us admired and rejoiced in the refinement and beauty of thick lips, broad noses and caramel or dark chocolate skin and our shared proud heritage. This was the world I had to write about. This was my truth.

GREY MAN:

I searched all the pages of all the great gay fiction writers, Lambda Literary Award winners like Maupin, Cunningham, Hollinghurst, Rechy – searching to find just one Black man’s words, one man who looked like me, in their stories and chronicles of gay men’s lives.

BEIGE MAN:

There were none. Neither mainstream publishers, nor the gay publishing houses thought that my words and stories had any commercial appeal, or perhaps they didn’t see any necessity in telling “our” stories. So, I self-published my first novel in 1991 and found my audience by personally hand-delivering them to Black bookstores, barber shops and beauty salons. Each with a card that said “If you like this book, demand that your local bookstore order it.” It worked, and soon the publishers were coming to me. I produced thirteen best-selling romance novels as well as an autobiography.

My series of books about fictional character Raymond Tyler were staples of Oprah’s Book Club. Raymond was a handsome, confident, responsible same-gender-loving African

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American man that most in this country had never seen before. Reading about Raymond's search for love made you want to pour a snifter of brandy and put a sultry Luther song on the stereo cassette player.

(BEIGE MAN *sings softly: Here and now, I promise to love faithfully.*)

In *Invisible Life* Raymond said: "There is something poetic about falling in love. The tingling sensation lingers like the lyrical words of a Langston Hughes poem. There is something romantic about the changing of seasons. A romance reminiscent of an unending summer, or one as fleeting as spring and fall. Whenever I think back on the loves of my life, I am often reminded of the seasons. There are four seasons. I have been in love four times."

The exploits of another fictional character Basil Henderson, a closeted bi-sexual football player, started a national dialogue about brothers on the downlow - men who were either bi-sexual or gay, but refused to be open with their sex partners.

I hope my words helped these men to address their internalized homophobia and to have honest conversations with the women and men in their lives and reduced some of the shame and judgement that has been particularly toxic to African American men.

My voice was stilled by a sudden heart attack in 2009, but I left many, many words behind.

GREY MAN:

Speak my words and tell my truth!

(Drumming sounds play)

They called me "Black" and sometimes, but not often, Black American, when I grew up on the streets of Liberty City of Miami in the 1980s, surrounded by crack houses, shattered lives and low expectations. My own mother struggled with drug addiction and died of AIDS when I was only 22.

As a latch-key kid I grew up on a steady diet of *Fresh Prince* and *Moesha* and *Hanging with Mr. Cooper* which gave me positive images and stories of Black life beyond the Pork and Beans projects of Liberty City. When I came of voting age, we celebrated the miracle of our

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first Black American president, an impossible dream that most of our people never thought we would live to see.

BEIGE MAN:

The gay political establishment demanded that he use his political capital to move the country forward on gay rights and marriage equality. And even though he did that, and more.

GREY MAN:

Even though he softened homophobia and opposition to gay rights in the Black community. Even though he overturned “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell.” Even with all that, black and brown stripes weren’t added to that so-called rainbow flag until we insisted on it in 2018 and 2020, and even then, only on some occasions.

BEIGE MAN:

Were we ever part of their rainbow?

GREY MAN:

I quickly made my way out of Liberty City through scholarships to prep school and into Yale Drama School and apprenticed under the great African American playwright, August Wilson. I was artist-in-residence at the Royal Shakespeare Theater in London. I won a MacArthur Genius Grant which freed me to write plays that told the stories of coming out and asserting yourself to your Black family.

In one of my early plays, *Marcus, The Secret of the Sweet*, I explored a Louisiana young man’s relationship with his history and friends as he discovers his own sexual identity and also that his father shared the same secret identity. It’s funny, although they were a major plot point in my plays, I never had my own “coming out moment.” People just knew I was gay as soon as we met. There was never that dramatic moment when I had to sit everybody down and have a “serious conversation.”

As I became sexually curious, there was little need for gay bars and bathhouses, as the rise of the internet gave my generation instant access to all kinds of gay men for hook-ups and romance. Sadly, far too many online profiles on the apps had specified a preference for “no fats, no fems, no Blacks, no Asians.”

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Fortunately, we gathered at friends' homes every Sunday night back in 2006 and 2007 to see ourselves through the humorous and sexy adventures of the characters on *Noah's Arc*.

BEIGE MAN:

Chance and Eddie were beautiful role models of two Black gay men in a stable relationship, raising a daughter together.

(GREEN MAN enters)

GREEN MAN:

...and I loved watching that sex-pot Ricky, who embraced his sexuality and playfully refused to be monogamous.

(BLUE MAN enters)

BLUE MAN:

...and Noah held everyone together. This ragtag group provided a window into the Black gay circles of friends that were being formed all over the country. Thank you, Patrik Ian-Polk.

GREY MAN:

I wrote numerous plays and screenplays that made it to stage and screen. My autobiographical book *In Moonlight Black Boys Look Blue* became an Oscar winning movie and my play *Choir Boy*, about a teenage boy coming out in an elite Black prep school, won multiple Tony Awards.

(RED MAN Enters)

RED MAN:

I wrote eleven plays and he *(points to Blue Man)* wrote two that were both staged on Broadway, the Great White Way, but none had characters who were homosexual.

BLUE MAN:

Nor were there any in *Raisin in the Sun*, which was written by a Black lesbian who was my dear friend. Gay people and our stories were completely absent in all the plays by August

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Wilson, Charles Gordone, Zora Neale Hurston, Douglas Turner Ward, Pearl Cleage, and Charles Fuller.

GREEN MAN:

Matt Crowley, Harvey Fierstein, Terrence McNally, Larry Kramer, and Stephen Sondheim wrote wonderful award-winning plays about gay life, but Black characters, if there were any, had nothing more than bit parts or token roles. Usually the unthreatening “Magical Negro” coming to the aid of the white protagonist.

BEIGE MAN:

It wasn't until *Kinky Boots* in 2013 that we had a fully-developed lead role on a major stage, but even that told the story of an Afro-British drag queen.

RED MAN:

Our Black American gay lives and struggles were invisible to American theater-goers and on the big screen. We had to wait for the dawn of the twenty-first century to see our first successful out and proud Black Gay playwright, with productions of eight major plays that filled theaters on Broadway and around the country. America needed to hear these stories, my story, our story.

GREY MAN:

My plays and screenplays told the coming out stories of young Black men, like Marcus, Chiron and Pharus, who defied traditional norms of masculinity and who struggled to grow into manhood and into their gay identities with the help of their families, school mates and adopted street families. These boys didn't grow up in environments of comfort and privilege, and their stories were almost never told, but my plays made them visible and audiences paid attention to their lives and heard their words.

In the movie *Moonlight*, a street drug dealer is asked by a young boy “What's a faggot?” and his surprising response is that “A faggot is a word used to make gay people feel bad. You can be gay, but you don't have to let nobody call you a faggot.”

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RED MAN:

The 2020 Pulitzer Prize for drama went to a young Black gay playwright, Michael R. Jackson, who wrote a musical about his experiences as a Black gay man.

BLUE MAN:

Write on, brother, write on. The 2020 Pulitzer Prize for poetry went to a young Black gay poet, Jericho Brown, who wrote eloquent verse about his experiences as a Black gay man.

GREEN MAN, BEIGE MAN, GREY MAN:

Write on, brothers, write on.

PURPLE MAN:

Speak my words and tell my truth. My truth! My truth.....is complicated.

RED MAN:

Complicated by the need to earn a living.

BLUE MAN:

Complicated by the need to prioritize the fight for racial equality.

GREEN MAN:

Complicated by the need to free my mind from the chains of inferiority.

BEIGE MAN:

Complicated by the need to overcome the effects of sex, alcohol, and drugs that leave me numb.

GREY MAN:

Complicated by the need to rise up without resources or role models to help me overcome.

SPEAK MY WORDS, TELL MY TRUTH

PURPLE MAN:

My truth....is complicated.

(The men speak rapidly over each other.)

RED MAN:

Complicated!

BLUE MAN:

Damn Complicated!

GREEN MAN:

So, so complicated!

BEIGE MAN:

Compli-ca-ted!

GREY MAN:

It's complicated, brother.

PURPLE MAN:

Ashay! Speak my words and tell my truth.

BEIGE MAN:

Our truth is elevated, liberating and worth celebrating. A celebration of Black love, of our whole selves and our legacy, beautifully captured in this Louis Vega poem written in 1989.

Respect yourself, my brother,

SPEAK MY WORDS, TELL MY TRUTH

for we are so many wondrous things.

Like a black rose,
you are a rarity to be found.
Our leaves intertwine as I reach out to you
after the release of a gentle rain.

You precious gem,
black pearl that warms the heart,
symbol of ageless wisdom,
I derive strength
from the touch of your hand.

Our lives blend together
like rays of light;
we are men of color,
adorned in shades of tan, red,
beige, black, and brown.

Brothers born from the same earth womb,
Brothers reaching for the same star.
Love me as your equal.
Love me, brother to brother.

ALL MEN:

Ashay!

(Drumming music plays)

END OF ACT ONE

SPEAK MY WORDS, TELL MY TRUTH

ACT TWO

SCENE ONE

(Tribal music plays.)

Stage director reads: The lights come up on Purple Man alone onstage. The other characters are scattered in seats throughout the audience. Each one stands as he speaks and remains standing until all have delivered their line. After GREY MAN speaks, they all sit down)

RED MAN:

I was born in Joplin Missouri in 1902. I died in 1967 in New York.

BLUE MAN:

I was born in Harlem in 1924. I died in 1987 in the South of France.

GREEN MAN:

I was born in Chicago in 1957. I died in 1995 in Philadelphia.

BEIGE MAN:

I was born in Flint Michigan in 1955. I died in 2009 in Los Angeles.

GREY MAN:

I was born in Miami in 1980.

PURPLE MAN:

I am the Black Gay Man of today.

I might call myself gender non-conforming or Bla-queer or a gay man of African descent, or an Adodi brother or just Walter. I might be post-racial and choose no race at all or be called bi-racial or Black-bodied or just Black. I am fierce, I am fabulous, I am in your face and I am living my life in truth, whatever the consequences.

I might be a rapper or a hip-hop artist or a filmmaker.

SPEAK MY WORDS, TELL MY TRUTH

You might call me Lee Daniels or Billy Porter or Jeremy O. Harris or Duane Cramer or RuPaul Charles or Frank Ocean or Keith Boykin or Isaac Julien or Don Lemon or Kehinde Wiley or Karamo Brown.

I can bring my boyfriend to my high school prom or my family reunion and I can wear my Black Lives Matter t-shirt proudly to the nearest gay bar. I can cruise men on Grindr without an “ethnic filter” restricting my choices...or yours. I can win trophies with the softball or hockey team and, if I want to wear a gender-bending tuxedo-ball gown before a worldwide audience at the Academy Awards, just step back and make room on the red carpet.

You now know that when I wrote the R & B hit ballad (*singing*) “Thinkin’ About You,” I was thinking about my boyfriend and that the “Ole Town Road” was traveled by a country/rap singer who is not ashamed to say that he makes love to other men.

A Black Gay man was the chief organizer of the 1963 March on Washington and the first to throw his high heels and get arrested at the Stonewall Rebellion. Two openly-gay Black men under age 35 are making and debating laws that guarantee our freedom as elected members of Congress today – Mondaire Jones and Ritchie Torres. Remember their names!

I am as close as your remote control, streaming my words right now on your television, I am filling the shelves of your local library, I am filling the seats of your regional theaters, I am filling the walls of your museums and public squares.

(Stage Director reads: Each actor rises and speaks as he walks down the aisle and on stage to form a semi-circle behind Purple Man.)

RED MAN:

And you don’t need code words like “Beauty” or “In the Life” to find your tribe.

BLUE MAN:

You don’t need to seek out dark corners of sketchy nightclubs or bathhouses on nameless streets and alleys to quench your thirst.

SPEAK MY WORDS, TELL MY TRUTH

GREEN MAN:

You don't have to bargain away chunks of your identity or history in exchange for being loved unconditionally.

BEIGE MAN:

You don't have to pretend to be straight or thuggish to find a tender embrace.

GREY MAN:

You don't have to hide who you are from family or community to find acceptance and live with dignity.

PURPLE MAN:

Out of oppression and suppression has come this amazing gumbo of hybrid identities that allows us to see and be seen with all the pain of being Black and all the pain of being Gay. We live our lives freely and fully each day with Black joy and with Gay pride. Hallelujah!

RED MAN, BLUE MAN, GREEN MAN, BEIGE MAN and GREY MAN:

(The actors chant softly and increasing in volume)

Nigger! Fagot! Nigger! Faggot!

PURPLE MAN:

Stop! This is my story I am telling. It has nothing to do with you. OK? I didn't interrupt when you were telling your stories.

(Stage Director reads: The actors slowly back away and move off stage)

PURPLE MAN:

Thank you. As I was saying, I am fierce, I am fabulous, I am free. Curr?! My stories are being told at the annual LA and Atlanta Black LGBT Film Festivals with thoughtful, provocative independent shorts, documentaries and full features by brilliant Black gay visionaries like Nathan Hale Williams, David Barclay Moore and Elegance Bratton. You can listen to my words on the *Strange Fruit* podcast on N.P.R. or on *Brothaspeak* on Stitcher.

SPEAK MY WORDS, TELL MY TRUTH

My words are in the powerful poems of Black gay men writing and reciting today. Brothers like Jericho Brown, Danez Smith, Ricki Laurentis, Jubi Arriola-Headley, Justin Phillip-Reed.

RED MAN, BLUE MAN, GREEN MAN, BEIGE MAN and GREY MAN:

(Chanting resumes softly offstage.)

Nigger! Faggot! Nigger! Faggot!

RED MAN:

(Whispered from offstage)

I'm gonna bash your head in, faggot!

PURPLE MAN:

And I will call the police. They have to protect me from your threats, hateful words and deeds. Right?

BLUE MAN:

(Whispered from offstage)

I'm gonna choke the life out of you, nigger!

PURPLE MAN:

Listen, bitch, I will call out the digital armies of social media on you! We will set the internet on fire and shut down servers from coast to coast with tweets and re-tweets. My smartphone is loaded in my hip pocket and I make my monthly donations to the Human Rights Campaign and to Black Lives Matter. I will take to the streets if I need to, with multi-racial legions armed with oversized flags and placards right behind me... but, ah, listen, we need to do brunch afterwards, so we can kiki and post the pics. OK?

(Stage Director reads: Purple Man pulls out a cellphone, takes a picture of the audience and types furiously as he walks off stage. Turning to the audience before his exit.)

Don't forget to "like me" on Facebook, boo.

(Drumming sounds play)

SPEAK MY WORDS, TELL MY TRUTH

*(RED MAN, BLUE MAN, GREEN MAN, BEIGE and GREY
MAN enter)*

RED MAN:

Brotha Langston said, “What happens to a dream deferred? Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun?” I say....

BLUE MAN:

I say, I will not defer my dreams. My moment is now.

Brotha James said, “Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.” I say...

GREEN MAN:

I say, I know the history that has been hidden from me for too long, I live in that truth and I have what it takes to make our world better.

Brotha Essex said, “Black men loving Black men is a revolutionary act.” I say...

BEIGE MAN:

I say, I have an abundance of love for myself, my brothers and others. Loving is no longer an act of rebellion, it is like the air we breathe and the water we drink, it is essential to our survival.

Brotha E. Lynn said, “I was in love for the first time and it was like the sun had dropped down from the sky and kissed me. I say...

GREY MAN:

I say, I feel ya, brother. I feel you when you dance, when you sing, when you cry, when you're feeling unlovable, when you're exhilarated by a brother's touch.

SPEAK MY WORDS, TELL MY TRUTH

Brotha Tarrell said, “A community is only as strong as the stories it tells about itself.” We say...

BLUE MAN, GREEN MAN, BEIGE MAN, GREY MAN:

Speak My Words, Tell My Truth!

(Drumming sounds play)

RED MAN:

A Black gay poet of today, Cyree Jarell Johnson, took a cue from my iconic poem and gave it a new thrust for this new century. In 1925, I implored white folks to see colored folks as their fellow countrymen. My truth was that I wanted to be equal to, not less than. I wrote:

I, too, sing America.
I am the darker brother.
They send me to eat in the kitchen
When company comes,
But I laugh,
And eat well,
And grow strong.
Tomorrow,
I'll be at the table
When company comes.
Nobody'll dare
Say to me,
“Eat in the kitchen,”
Then.

Besides,
They'll see how beautiful I am
And be ashamed—

I, too, am America.

SPEAK MY WORDS, TELL MY TRUTH

GREEN MAN:

In 2016, Cyree flipped the script and wrote this, in part, in *The American Dream Has Always Been Bullshit*:

I too still out here singin' america
i, forgotten, long lost sibling
black sheep but still black
and after all, in exile.
america still got cracks and faults in it
i still sit in the kitchen when company comes
and i will never be beautiful, they did not see.
those who chained you will continue to chain me,
an unbroken line back over the ocean.

My truth is that I am tired of waiting for you to see me, America.

BLUE MAN:

Ah, yes. How beautiful is the impatience of youth and how refreshing the balm of righteous struggle over time. As the great Black lesbian civil rights activist Pauli Murray once said, "I have been enslaved, yet my spirit is unbound. I have been cast aside, but I sparkle in the darkness."

Our truth is that we are the sons and grandsons and great-grandsons of people who did not fully own their own bodies or profit from their own labor....of a people who had to struggle to make sense of the contradictions of this sometimes "foreign" land.

GREY MAN:

A "foreign" land where I was born and where my ancestors added, not just their physical labor, but the beauty of jazz and blues to lift your spirits, the inspiration of soaring oratory calling for equality and justice, spicy soulful foods that excite your taste buds, art and literature that expanded your imagination....and Oprah!

SPEAK MY WORDS, TELL MY TRUTH

GREEN MAN:

Is there anything Oprah can't do?

RED MAN:

Our lineage includes men of all colors, whose vital lifeblood was strangled by their inability to be who they truly were, who were denied their truth, who never got to live the life they were meant to live... hiding their passion behind racks of unworn clothes and bulging suitcases in suffocating closets.

BEIGE MAN:

...and our lineage includes those who broke down or chipped away at the closet doors. We are their sons and grandsons and great grandsons, as well. Their spirits live on in us too.

(Drumming sounds play)

GREEN MAN:

Sometimes I get strength from touching the scars of my love, the gaping, oozing open wounds that linger here (*points to his crotch*), here (*touches his nipple*) and here (*points to his lips*) and here (*points to his brain*).

Some of y'all say today, as they said when I wrote them, that the words I left behind are all too erotic or explicit for mixed company. Their self-imposed closet doors rattled when they heard me talk of "warm seed in your hand" or a "wedding ring around your cock." I simply told the raw truth about loving brother to brother. But I also left tender words of hope and compassion for the mothers of my brothers... and all the others who might love my brothers.

(Soulful flute music plays in the background)

Mother, do you know
I roam alone at night?
I wear colognes,
tight pants, and

SPEAK MY WORDS, TELL MY TRUTH

chains of gold,
as I search
for men willing
to come back
to candlelight.
I'm not scared of these men
though some are killers
of sons like me. I learned
there is no tender mercy
for men of color,
for sons who love men
like me.
Do not feel shame for how I live.
I chose this tribe
of warriors and outlaws.
Do not feel you failed
some test of motherhood.
My life has borne fruit
no woman could have given me
anyway.
If one of these thick-lipped,
wet, black nights
while I'm out walking,
I find freedom in this village.
If I can take it with my tribe
I'll bring you here.
And you will never notice
the absence of rice
and bridesmaids.

GREY MAN:

Yes, yes. Freedom in this village. Ashay!

SPEAK MY WORDS, TELL MY TRUTH

(Stage Director reads: Purple Man enters and joins the other actors in forming a semi-circle to perform the next poem in the style of a fraternity hand dance with stomps and thigh slaps.)

PURPLE MAN:

I am the Black Gay man of today and tomorrow. I am...

RED MAN:

Recognizing and organizing,

BLUE MAN:

Expanding and demanding,

GREEN MAN:

Uprising and revising,

BEIGE MAN:

Writing and inciting,

GREY MAN:

Jiving and archiving,

RED MAN:

Investigating and legislating,

BLUE MAN:

Listening and insisting,

SPEAK MY WORDS, TELL MY TRUTH

GREEN MAN:

Bebopping and hip-hopping,

BEIGE MAN:

Wearing “dreads” and earning creds,

GREY MAN:

Unifying and diversifying,

RED MAN:

Collecting and reflecting,

BLUE MAN:

Updating and re-creating,

GREEN MAN:

Collaborating and elaborating,

GREY MAN:

Not regretting and not forgetting.

PURPLE MAN:

I am.... making a way for a future that includes every part of me and touches every part of you.

SPEAK MY WORDS, TELL MY TRUTH

ALL:

Ashay!

(Stage Director reads: Purple Man slowly moves across the stage and kisses Red Man gently on the cheek and hands him a photo, continuing down the line to give a photo to each man. As each man begins to speak, he holds up the photo of his literary character. Purple Man does not hold up a photo.)

RED MAN:

Langston Hughes. Our legacy....

BLUE MAN:

James Baldwin. ...of excellence

GREEN MAN:

Essex Hemphill. ...in literary and performing arts

BEIGE MAN:

E. Lynn Harris. ...that tell our stories

GREY MAN:

Tarell Alvin McCraney.with honesty and compassion

PURPLE MAN:

...continues. Ashay.

ALL MEN:

We are Black Gay Men and we've got words for you!

(A video montage plays with images of Black Gay literary characters with upbeat tribal music).

END OF PLAY

SPEAK MY WORDS, TELL MY TRUTH

Sources

“Dream Variation” “To Beauty” and “I Too, Sing America” public domain 1921 by Langston Hughes

“Brothers Loving Brothers” copyright ©1986 by Louis Vega

“Invisible Life” copyright © 1991 by E. Lynn Harris

“Prophecy” from *Dark Testament and Other Poems* ©1970 Pauli Murray

“the american dream has always been bullshit” from *Slingshot* copyright ©2016 by Cyree Jarelle Johnson

“In the Life” from *Ceremonies Poetry and Prose* copyright © 1989 by Essex Hemphill.