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In Memoriam: VINCENT WOODARD, 1971 - 2008

Cave Canem Remembers

BOULDER, CO—Cave Canem Foundation, North America’s premier home for Black poetry, remembers **Vincent Maurice Woodard** who died on February 4, 2008 in Denver, Colorado. He was an inaugural Cave Canem fellow, attending the first retreat at Esopus, New York, in 1996. A scholar, writer, activist and remarkable creative soul, Vincent was a poet first, whose quietly incisive and shining spirit infused both his writing and relationships. Poet Reginald Harris, a fellow Cave Canem alum, remembers Vincent as “one of the gentlest – yet fiercest – men I’ve ever met.”

Vincent was born on April 21, 1971 in Tucson, Arizona to Frederick W. and Vera Woodard at Davis-Monthan Air Force Base. His father, a military veteran, preceded him in death. In his childhood, Vincent was a member of First New Life Missionary Baptist Church, where he was baptized and served on the Junior Usher Board. Growing up, Vincent was known as humble, intelligent and inquisitive, with an eagerness to work. He was particularly sensitive to those with disabilities and special needs. His family recalls that in the third grade he met a fellow student on the school bus who could not speak. Vincent took it upon himself to go to the library, check out a book on sign language and teach himself to sign.

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Always a good student, Vincent received commendations for his academic excellence in high school and college. He graduated from the University of Arizona with a bachelor's degree in Interdisciplinary Studies in 1993. Following his college graduation, he spent a year in Lome, Togo, teaching English. He later journeyed to Cuba and Haiti and maintained a strong interest in international travel, especially in relationship to his studies of the African Diaspora.

Much of Vincent's research and writing was grounded in explorations of spiritualities and cultures of the Afro-Atlantic world. At various points, he worked with healers and ritual practitioners of Haitian Vodun and Cuban Lucumí/Santeria often noting connections between these Afro-Caribbean religious and cosmological systems and the indigenous traditions of the African American South in which he was raised.

Vincent earned MA and PhD degrees in American Literature from the University of Texas at Austin in 1996 and 2002, respectively. His scholarship examined the contemporary experiences and insights of same-gender-loving Black men and women in the context of historical traditions of "shape-shifters" and other gender-warrior healers and prophets from African American, Haitian, Cuban, Brazilian and West African mythic traditions. His writings on the spiritual and historical dimensions of Black gay and lesbian realities were widely praised. Some of his published essays include "Just as (Quare) as They Want to Be: A Review of the Black Queer Studies in the Millennium Conference," in *Callaloo*, 23 (2001), and "A Soul Retrieval" in *Think Again*, (New York State Black Gay Network Inc. and AIDS Project Los Angeles, 2003).

In addition to his scholarship, Vincent wrote and performed poetry and dramatic work that was noted for its haunting tones, keen language and an ability to "get up under your skin." There also was a profoundly mystical quality to Vincent's poetry and life. Harris recalls: "...to me [Vincent's] real work was Spiritual. His readings and performances were more like revivals, visitations of the spirits...' Relatively straightforward recitations would suddenly turn into incantations, sermons, divinations. His body and voice would shake as if possessed by the

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words, or the spirit of the words, he was the vessel for. 'Moving' doesn't even come close to the experience of hearing him perform. The man could shake you to your foundations without seeming to break a sweat. Many of us remember him as someone who seemed made more of Light than of Flesh, radiating peace, wisdom and a great deal of strength and courage."

Poet Honorée Fanonnone Jeffers, also an inaugural Cave Canem fellow, echoes Harris' sense of the ritual power of Vincent's presence. In a letter to mutual friends, she wrote: "The bonding rituals that Cave Canem fellows now take for granted were begun by Vincent. We have only to think of the ending ceremonial circle to know this...What we had there, in that monastery, by that river – the Spirit and the Soul – was overwhelmingly because of Vincent."

In 2002, Vincent joined the faculty of the department of English at the University of Colorado at Boulder, where he specialized in 19th- and 20th-century American literature, African American literature, Queer literature and culture, and African Diaspora studies. At a recent memorial, several of his students remarked on the care and attention Vincent gave, not only to their academic work, but to the development of their capacities to be agents of progressive change in the academy and the world.

Shortly before his passing, Vincent completed contract negotiations with New York University Press for the publication of his first book, *The Delectable Negro: Race, Hunger and Homoeroticism in Nineteenth-Century American Culture*. His colleagues at the University of Colorado are collecting Vincent's poetry, journals and other creative writing for preservation.

In December 2007, Vincent became seriously ill and was hospitalized several times before finally passing over into the waiting arms of the ancestors on February 4, 2008. He was accompanied in the final stages of his illness by family and close friends. Vincent leaves to cherish his memory his mother, Vera Woodard, younger brother Cedrick Woodard, maternal grandmother Ethel B. Lewis and a host of other relatives in Texas, Arizona and California.

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Vincent is also deeply mourned and greatly beloved by the Cave Canem community, by colleagues and students from UT Austin and CU Boulder, and by a wide circle of poets, activists, and friends in many parts of the nation and the world.

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