



The New York Public Library
Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture,
Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division

Guide to the

Melvin Dixon papers

1962-1992

Summary

Creator: Dixon, Melvin, 1950-1992

Title: Melvin Dixon papers

Date: 1962-1992

Size: 18 linear feet

Source: Gift, Melvin Dixon Estate, 1993 Gift (1995-1996), Melvin Dixon Estate, 1995 Gift (1995-1996), Melvin Dixon Estate, 1995

Abstract: The Melvin Dixon papers consist primarily of manuscripts, correspondence, notes, and journals reflecting his experiences as a black gay writer. Most of the collection is comprised of manuscript drafts of Dixon's published works "Trouble the Water," "Vanishing Rooms," "Ride Out the Wilderness," "Change of Territory," as well as drafts for incomplete novels and stories, the fiction he called "works in progress," and short stories, poetry and plays, both published and unpublished. In addition, there are drafts and other material for Dixon's translations of "The Collected Poetry by Leopold Sedar Senghor," Genevieve Fabre's "Drumbeats, Masks and Metaphors," and works by the Haitian writer Jacques Roumain. Some essays and academic papers he presented are also included in collection.

Access: Advance notice required.

Preferred citation: Melvin Dixon papers, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library

Creator History

Melvin Dixon, widely praised as a novelist, translator and literary critic, published poetry that portrayed both his interior explorations and world travels. Born in Stamford, Connecticut in 1950, Dixon was graduated from Wesleyan University in 1971 in American Studies, and earned an MA in 1973 and a Ph.D. in 1975 from Boston University.

Both in his published and unpublished writings, Dixon wrote openly about his homosexuality. James Baldwin's influence is seen in Dixon's two novels, "Trouble the Water" (1989, winner of the Nilon Award

for Excellence in Minority Fiction) and "Vanishing Rooms" (1991). In the latter, Dixon wrote about homophobia and racism in New York City's Greenwich Village. His first book of poems, "Change of Territory" (1983) spoke of the historic northward migration of African Americans from the southern United States and the enforced journeys of African slavery. His final volume of poems, "Love's Instruments" (1995) published after his death from an AIDS-related illness in 1992, serves as a tribute to other gay men with this disease. As an active spokesman for gay communities and issues, Dixon integrated the complexities of gay identity and lifestyle into his work while communicating what it meant to be a black man.

As a writer, Dixon embraced both scholarship and creativity. He wrote poems, short stories, novels, essays, critical studies, and translations from French. Seeking his literary heritage, he traveled to the Caribbean, Africa and Europe, researching the Haitian poet and novelist Jacques Roumain, Leopold Senghor, the poet and former president of Senegal, and Richard Wright in Paris. His translations include Roumain's poems, Genevieve Fabre's "Drumbeats, Mass, and Metaphor: Contemporary Afro-American Theatre" (1983), and "The Collected Poetry by Leopold Sedar Senghor" (1991). He also wrote a critical study of African-American literature entitled "Ride Out the Wilderness" (1987).

Dixon was an Assistant Professor at Williams College (1976-1980), and a Professor of English at Queens College of the City University of New York (1980-1992). He also taught at the Graduate Center (CUNY), Fordham University and Columbia University. Dixon received a number of awards and fellowships including a Fulbright lectureship in Senegal (1985-1986). His long-term partner was Richard Horovitz.

Some of the correspondence and other material are written in French.

Scope and Content Note

The Melvin Dixon papers consist primarily of manuscripts, correspondence, notes, and journals reflecting his experiences as a black gay writer. Most of the collection is comprised of manuscript drafts of Dixon's published works "Trouble the Water," "Vanishing Rooms," "Ride Out the Wilderness," "Change of Territory," as well as drafts for incomplete novels and stories, the fiction he called "works in progress," and short stories, poetry and plays, both published and unpublished. In addition, there are drafts and other material for Dixon's translations of "The Collected Poetry by Leopold Sedar Senghor," Genevieve Fabre's "Drumbeats, Masks and Metaphors," and works by the Haitian writer Jacques Roumain. Some essays and academic papers he presented are also included in collection. The personal papers include biographical information and an interview conducted by Charles Rowell (1990). Of particular interest are detailed journals he maintained revealing his innermost thoughts as a black man, a homosexual, a writer, and his attempts to understand his own creative processes. Dixon kept separate journals during his undergraduate years describing his experiences with La Mama Experimental Theatre in New York City, and his journeys to Europe and Senegal, as well as his years in the United States. He also discussed his relationship with friends and colleagues and his battle with AIDS (1969-1991). All of the correspondence is incoming. The personal correspondence is primarily from his friends and a few from his family (1962-1991). The friends with whom he corresponded for many years include Richard Horovitz, his partner, and James L. Grier III. The professional correspondence is from his colleagues in Paris, Senegal and elsewhere, other writers, professors and publishers (1969-1992). Letters discuss his writings, and colleagues' professional activities, acceptances or rejections by publishers, and related matters. Among his correspondents are the writers Michel and Genevieve Fabre, Ronald Fair, Hoyt Fuller, Michael Harper, Gayl Jones, Didier Malaquin, and Robert Stepto. Additionally, there are subject files on African-American authors, and conferences Dixon attended, gay life, and other topics which interested Dixon. College course material contains

syllabi, lecture notes and news clippings. There are also correspondence, proposals, research papers and articles from Harvard University's William E.B. Du Bois Institute for Afro-American Research and an international conference it sponsored in 1990 entitled "History and Memory in Afro-American Culture." Index cards contain notes about black writers and journals, as well as African religious systems, African-American music and slavery.

Key Terms

Subjects

African American authors -- France -- Paris
African American college teachers
African American gays
African American gays -- Intellectual life
African American novelists
African American poets
African Americans -- Relations with Africans
African Americans -- Social life and customs
African Americans in literature
AIDS (Disease) in literature -- United States
American literature -- African American authors
American poetry -- African American authors
Authors, American
Gay couples
Gay men
Gay men -- Conduct of life
Gay men in literature
Gays' writings, American
Homosexuality and literature -- United States
Short stories, American -- African American authors
Travelers' writings

Genre/Physical Characteristic

Diaries
Manuscripts
Scripts

Names

Dixon, Melvin, 1950-1992
Fabre, Genevieve
Fabre, Michel
Fair, Ronald L.
Fuller, Hoyt, 1923-1981
Harper, Michael S., 1938-2016
Jones, Gail
Malaquin, Didier
Morrison, Toni
Stepto, Robert B.