

## Introduction

The list of twentieth-century American poets who happened to be gay or lesbian includes some of the most visionary, masterful writers of the past hundred years. Consider these contenders: W. H. Auden, Elizabeth Bishop, Hart Crane, May Swenson, Frank O'Hara, Allen Ginsberg, Robert Duncan, and James Merrill. Their successors in the twenty-first century include many astonishingly gifted poets, a fact that has made books like this one possible—and imperative.

In any of the several anthologies published that collect gay poets, the table of contents is likely to contain some of the most daring and groundbreaking writers. Some contain both gay and lesbian contemporary poets, like Michael Lassell and Elena Georgiou's *The World in Us: Lesbian and Gay Poetry of the Next Wave* (2001) and J. D. McClatchy's *Love Speaks Its Name* (2001), which gathers a selection of gay and lesbian love poems. Leslea Newman's *My Lover Is a Woman* (1996) collects the work of lesbian poets, and Emma Donoghue's *Poems between Women* (1997) covers four hundred years of the lesbian poetic tradition. Timothy Liu's seminal *Word of Mouth: An Anthology of Gay American Poetry* (2000) traces the gay male tradition from Auden to the current day.

In the face of such an impressive tradition, *Outside the Lines* seeks to document a moment in contemporary poetry by illuminating the craft, concerns, and beliefs exhibited by a richly diverse group of highly accomplished, unique poets who are gay men. It is the first book of its kind, gathering conversations with contemporary gay poets. One may be tempted to argue that the fact that all are gay is simply a happy coincidence. After all, this is ultimately a collection of interviews with

poets who first and foremost insist on producing great art. But to pretend that their sexuality doesn't matter would be to squander an opportunity (one of many this book offers) to learn about how identity shapes a poet's work, as it must.

"It's how being gay affects the poet, not the poem, that interests me," says poet J. D. McClatchy in his interview. It seems to me that many gay poets—whether their sexuality is explicitly part of their work or is one of many aspects of a complex identity—have sought to understand themselves and their world by exploring the intimate relationships between language and desire, language and identity, language and the body. In this way, gay poets push the art of verse forward. Richard Tayson, in a 2004 essay in the *Gay and Lesbian Review—Worldwide*, asserts that queer poets "have not only contributed diversity and the minutely detailed exploration of an entirely different kind of sexual and spiritual union; we have also contributed an enormous body of work to the American poetry canon." A gay poet himself, Tayson states, "We push against walls, cross boundaries, and continually strive not only to document joys and hazards, philosophical quandaries, despairs and rage, but also to provide a vision of what being 'other' is in our culture." Queer poetry has found "a newer understanding of its history and its participation in American poetics," believes gay poet and critic Walter Holland. In the April 2002 issue of *Lambda Book Report*, he notes that gay poetry "greatly expanded the range of the American poetic voice," contending that gay and lesbian poetry "continues to survive, but all the more in the mainstream."

While collected interviews with gay fiction writers have appeared recently in books by Richard Canning and by Philip Gambone, *Outside the Lines* is the first work to focus on poets. It appears that gay poets as such were last included in a book of interviews in 1978, with the publication of *Gay Sunshine Interviews*, two volumes that also include fiction writers and playwrights. Editor Winston Leyland observes in his introduction that the interviews provoke "reflections and insights into the connections between sexuality and artistic creativity as well as in-depth discussions of literary technique." He also notes that the interviews "demonstrate the existence of a definite gay sensibility in the arts," hoping the collection would serve as "a crucial volume for understanding and evaluating" that sensibility.

Since the publication of *Gay Sunshine Interviews*, gay poets have

been making subtle but deliberate changes to the landscape of contemporary American poetry. The heights they have achieved include the recent Pulitzer Prize nominations of Frank Bidart, J. D. McClatchy, and Henri Cole, who are interviewed in this book. Other poets have garnered an equally prestigious array of awards and nominations. A book exploring these poets' impact—through their own voices—is long overdue.

My first interview, which was ultimately the genesis of this book, was with Frank Bidart, one of the most highly respected poets of his generation. I wanted that interview, and those that followed, to address complex formal matters and important aesthetic questions. I sought a *document*, something that would last, that would speak beyond the moment, that would be instructive to more than one kind of poet; a document that didn't concern itself with ego or facile curiosity, that sought knowledge, not trivia. I resolved to avoid asking questions that could just as easily be asked of another poet: what music did he listen to? Did he compose poems in longhand? Did he write gushing love poems as a teenager? Such questions seemed like snooping through someone's bedside diary and could produce an interview that would strike the reader as limited and shallow. And whether by searchlight, spotlight, or microscope (or all three), I was counting on illumination.

Following the interview with Bidart, I turned to other poets whose work intrigues or moves me, compiling interviews with Rafael Campo, Henri Cole, Alfred Corn, Mark Doty, Thom Gunn, Timothy Liu, J. D. McClatchy, Carl Phillips, D. A. Powell, Reginald Shepherd, and David Trinidad—all critically admired, award-winning poets. These are the dozen poets now represented in *Outside the Lines: Talking with Contemporary Gay Poets*.

The two most urgent goals of the interviews are to shed light on the poet's work, including important individual poems, recurring themes, and the poet's overarching "project"; and second, to be instructive to other poets and writers, offering insight into the complicated matters of craft, voice, and larger aesthetic issues.

While the rich range of topics covered in these interviews extends well beyond the intersection of poetics and homosexuality, some of the most striking and important pronouncements by the poets interviewed here concern their sexuality and how being gay affects their poetry.

How the personal shapes the poetic was only the beginning. I learned early that it was essential to focus primarily on questions that would illuminate the writer's *work*: biographical information is of interest only insofar as it informs the poetry. Questions about race and desire are crucial in the interview with African American poet Reginald Shepherd, whose poems about an attraction to a white body are among his most provocative and erotic. Explorations of Timothy Liu's service as a Mormon missionary help shed light on his brazen, irreverent lyrics, in which religion and sexuality merge.

I wanted to ask questions that didn't yield unwieldy aesthetic statements but instead answers that involve the poet's investigation of especially significant poems, memories, and even aspects of his life. I hoped to shape my questions out of the work, actually embedding the poetry directly into questions. What's more, I hoped to bring a sense of each poet's work to the tone of his interview. My conversation with David Trinidad is fun and at times intimate, reflecting some of those same qualities in his work, while the interview with Reginald Shepherd is dense, critical, and rich in allusions, much like his work.

The poets generously discuss not only their work but also their influences, sometimes earlier gay poets. They share thoughts on the poet and society, most notably the pressures of writing in the wake of September 11; they riff on how other art forms, like painting and music, can inspire and educate; they hold forth on topics like desire, mythology, the body, the self, and subjectivity. Nearly all offer their thoughts on formal concerns too, exploring the challenges of the lyric and the long poem, for example, and facing up to struggles with and against traditional forms.

J. D. McClatchy wisely remarks in his interview that he is "less interested in homosexuality as a subject than as a sensibility. Nowhere visible, everywhere apparent." While this book doesn't seek a critical formulation or definition of a "gay sensibility," something remarkable emerges when one examines the similarities and differences among these twelve poets. The echoes and resonances among them include intriguing thematic, aesthetic, and formal connections; it is also apparent when poets are diametrically at odds with one another.

Of the concerns that circulate throughout the book, the notion of

desire and the body is perhaps the most striking. Many of the poets discuss how they imagine eros in their work, how they compare the sexualized male body to the verbal “body” of poetry, or how they struggle with desire on and off the page. Not surprisingly, poet-doctor Rafael Campo holds forth most eloquently on how the beat of the body and the rhythms of sex are crucial to his understanding of poetry.

“Eros is not my friend,” proclaims Reginald Shepherd as he explores his complex relationship to wanting and the “lack” it implies. Mark Doty, a very different poet from Shepherd, sounds a similar note when he confronts “the implacability of wanting” in his discussion of desire. In two of the most interesting segments of his interview, the late Thom Gunn links desire in his poems to the stages of coming out and suggests that most men, straight or gay, “enjoy being considered as sexual objects.”

If there is such a thing as a gay sensibility, notions of lineage must certainly be crucial to mapping it. In *Outside the Lines*, there seems to be collective agreement about those poets who exert the greatest influence: Walt Whitman, Hart Crane, and W. H. Auden are repeatedly mentioned, and T. S. Eliot’s influence makes itself known. Women writers make a strong appearance as well. Both Doty and Cole reveal deep, meaningful kinships to Elizabeth Bishop and her art of observation. Trinidad says that he looks to women writers for “craft and courage,” that their “honesty and vulnerability” helped him as a young poet write openly about his romantic feelings.

Because so many great contemporary poets happen to be gay, some criteria for inclusion in this book were necessary. First, the subject had to be considered a poet foremost. Second, the book needed to be diverse in terms of poetry, viewpoint, geography, personal history, race, religion, and ethnicity. *Outside the Lines* contains formalist masters like Thom Gunn, J. D. McClatchy, and Rafael Campo; poet David Trinidad, who finds a rich song in pop culture; challenging poets like D. A. Powell, Reginald Shepherd, and Timothy Liu, who create dense lyrics of collage or myth; soaring lyric poets like Mark Doty and Henri Cole; Alfred Corn, famous for his deft practice of the long poem; and Frank Bidart and Carl Phillips, singular poets who are difficult to categorize.

I've chosen to focus on a dozen writers who can be seen as representative of three distinct groups: first, some of the most distinguished poets writing today (sadly, the legendary Thom Gunn passed away only months after our interview); second, poets firmly established in their midcareer stride; and third, younger poets who are leading their generation. Choosing among the poets was difficult, and the list of poets who are not in the book is as impressive as the list of poets who are. I can only hope for a sequel that would include poets like John Ashbery, Richard Howard, Edward Field, Dennis Cooper, David Bergman, Cyrus Cassells, Wayne Koestenbaum, Forrest Hamer, Daniel Hall, and Christopher Davis. The book also includes a bibliography of emerging gay male poets who published their first books between 1998 and 2005.

The book's title speaks to its focus, its content, perhaps even its goals. "Outside the lines" generally refers to the concept of going beyond boundaries, and the poets' answers often seem to give body to the very concept of "outside the lines": their ideas about poetry carve out new territory, remake old traditions, strike out in new directions. "Simply to be a poet is to be outside of the mainstream of social discourse, and gayness adds one more dimension of standing at odds to the collective," says Mark Doty in his interview. Gay poets—gay artists in general—are often seen as outsiders, writing "on the margins" or "on the edge." Doty claims that a "degree of perspective" is indeed "the exile's gift." Gay poets push past the margins (literally, in the case of D. A. Powell), often employing themes and even idioms and structures that are not easily contained or explained. Of course, E. M. Forster's famous description of modern Greek poet C. P. Cavafy comes to mind: "at a slight angle to the universe." Angles, margins, edges, lines . . . don't we often find ourselves exploring some version of "outside?"

At book's end, readers may accept or reject the notion of a "gay sensibility," but the unique contribution of each poet, I believe, makes a case for a perspective that is in some way at a slight angle to the universe, outside the lines. And in the process readers will surely learn about these poets' (and their own) thoughts on art's capabilities and ambitions.