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Queer Poetry, Between “As Is” and “As If”

As an African American, gay, and HIV-positive man with an urban, working-class background, the late poet Reginald Shepherd felt that identity categories did him and his work an injustice. “Identity poetics is *boring*, giving back the already known in an endless and endlessly self-righteous confirmation of things as they are,” he wrote in 2003. “It is also constraining, limiting the imaginative options of the very people it seeks to liberate or speak for.”¹ Composing work through the lens of any identity would render him “entirely too visible, the object of scrutiny, labeling, and categorization.”² Instead, he preferred poetry that offered “a venture into the unknown” or “an image of who or what I could be, of what the world itself could be, an image of the ‘as if’ rather than of the ‘as is.’”³ Poetry, for Shepherd and other queer writers, is a subjunctive art of possibility. Instead of merely representing life and humanity as they are known, it imagines them otherwise. Thus, poets labeling their work with any socially determined identity category would detract from their art’s possibilities.

If we date openly queer American poetry back to Walt Whitman’s life-work *Leaves of Grass* (1855–1892, seven editions), we might recognize that Shepherd’s preference for imaginatively pursuing the “as if,” rather than expositing the “as is,” is not unique, or even new, among lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT) poets. Certainly, much of that book-length poem does celebrate same-sex eroticism and intimacies, and Whitman’s homoerotic construction of himself as “the new husband” and “the comrade” for a primarily male audience, as he imagined it, has influenced many LGBT writers.⁴ However, as the Good Gray Bard famously proclaims in “Song of Myself”: “I am large, I contain multitudes.” Instead of being a vehicle for expressing his sexual difference, his poetry is a medium through which otherwise silenced voices speak (“Through me many long dumb voices”) and by which he sympathetically identifies with those persons (“In all people I see myself, none more and not one a barleycorn less”). Thus, even as Whitman acknowledges his strong sense of self (“I know perfectly well my

own egotism”), he ultimately rejects an autonomous or even a self-cohesive identity.⁵ After World War II, the bisexual modernist Muriel Rukeyser noted her affinity for Whitman’s poetics not because he was a gay predecessor who had resolved his identity crises, but instead because he was “able to identify at last with both the people in their contradictions and himself in his.”⁶ Thus, for her, Whitman was “the poet of possibility” who strategically imagined identities as provisional and changing, not static and fixed.⁷ Striving after a “poetry of the future” that would unite a country recently ravaged by the American Civil War, Whitman hoped to restore community by working “to arouse and initiate, more than to define or finish.”⁸ He even desired “races of orbic bards” to proselytize democratic ideals globally.⁹ Consequently, his *Leaves of Grass* implicitly undermines the idea of separating any individual or minority group from the rest of human commonality.

Rukeyser’s contemporary Robert Duncan read Whitman similarly – as “moved by generative urgencies toward the fulfillment of a multitude of latent possibilities.”¹⁰ Duncan acknowledged the homoerotic significance of Whitman’s poetics, yet he also characterized his predecessor’s “seminal” work as *reproductive*: the poems bear the “seeds of sons Whitman never fathered” and, through imagined intercourse with companionate readers and later poets, the poems rear a metaphorical progeny.¹¹ When Duncan delivered this appraisal one year after the 1969 Stonewall riots, his queerly reproductive reading – not heteronormative, yet not exactly gay – shocked many LGBT readers, who expected a prominent homosexual poet’s statement about an important precursor to validate their own nonreproductive desires. However, his reading should not have come as a surprise. Since the 1940s, Duncan had openly proclaimed his homosexuality’s personal significance and disavowed gay coteries, sensibilities, or argot because these characteristics foreclosed his poetry’s universal appeal. His 1944 essay “The Homosexual in Society” notes that every poet must “disown *all* the special groups (nations, churches, sexes, races) that would claim allegiance” in order to demonstrate “a devotion to human freedom, toward the liberation of human love, human conflicts, human aspirations.”¹² Three decades later, Duncan complained in a 1976 interview that “even now the word ‘homosexual’ has not transcended prejudice where you can write about your gay life because it *is* a human life and not a bizarre anomaly; we still invite hatred and bigotry.”¹³ He even claimed, “I don’t see myself as gay at all,” for that identification would tie him and his work to an increasingly codified social minority and market niche.¹⁴ His fellow poet and gay liberation activist John Wieners remarked that such outspokenness led to Duncan unfairly being “put out to sea” and ignored by activists.¹⁵ They could not abide his warning that the closed minority identification denoted by the label “gay”

might impede the “true liberation” of founding a changing, all-inclusive human commonality.¹⁶

Such continually repeated warnings deserve notice at the outset of a chapter about LGBT American poetry. As a *category*, queer poetry is a fiction. Yet, invoking an idea Duncan held dear, we might say that the idea of LGBT poetry is what he called a *fictive certainty*, an imagined possibility treated by art as a foregone truth “to come to the idea of what the world of worlds or the order of orders might be.”¹⁷ Such a critical approach understands the art as providing something more than a window on, or a confession of, present or past queer experience. Rather, queer poetry offers a humanizing, inclusive vision of the world that does not discount queer desire. Much (although not all) queer poetry does not set out only to represent sexual or gender difference; it just happens to do so. The actual character of LGBT poetry, like most other poetics, is that it is future-oriented, invested in imagining and articulating life and its possibilities differently from what is currently known. For those who give themselves over to poetry in their reading and study, it is a resource for liberating their selves and their love, allowing same-sex desire and relationships to be included in, even imagined as a starting place for, new social commonalities. LGBT poets have geared their writing toward such liberating, future-oriented ends while also testifying to, and representing, the fictive certainty of queer experience’s fundamental humanness. That double objective is not without its attendant conflicts. Despite the undesirability of reducing any poetic project to an LGBT moniker, queer poetry’s universal political and ethical viability ultimately depends on the poet’s or the readers’ minority identification; that is, achieving universality paradoxically depends on some form of identity poetics. To realize a transcendent ethic, a poem must deploy representative identity logics to elicit readers’ sympathy, if not empathy. My brief account of a few scenes from queer American poetry’s past is not exhaustive, but the discussed poets exemplify, in different ways, the productive tensions that have arisen between their representations of LGBT identity and their desire to transcend minoritizing categories.

The Dilemma of LGBT Representation during the Harlem Renaissance

About twenty years ago, Gregory Woods announced it was “high time” that poets from the Harlem Renaissance (ca. 1918–1935) “be reappraised by and for gay readers.”¹⁸ He identifies several luminaries – including Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, and Claude McKay – as “gay” and even claims they belonged to “a cohesive gay community.”¹⁹ Like many later critics, Woods unearths same-sex erotic subtexts and explores explicit homoerotic themes

as evidence of gay self-expression. However, we must be careful of such modes of recovering “gay” poetry by uncovering hidden same-sex themes. Such reading strategies risk impoverishing the poetry as well as our understanding of the authors’ lives. As Cullen’s biographer, Charles Molesworth, writes, “centering” an analysis of a poem “in a diffuse but uncontainable homoerotic desire [...] obscures, or at least subordinates, some of the other forms of desire which Cullen [or any queer Harlem Renaissance writer] was seeking to represent.”²⁰ Those “other forms of desire,” Molesworth specifies, might include eroticism associated with familial, social, even spiritual relationships. As is evident in Hughes’s antiracist translations, eroticism and related power dynamics pervade individuals’ relationships even with language.²¹ Desire is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon, wherein various currents intersect and interfere with one another. We ignore that fact if we focus on same-sex desire without acknowledging any other sort, or if we assume that a representation of queer desire presupposes the author’s affiliation with an existing or emergent minority. This is not to say that queer analyses of Harlem Renaissance poetry are impossible, but we should not approach the poems solely through the lens of LGBT-defined identity, community, or desire.

Certainly, several writers associated with the Harlem Renaissance did experience same-sex sexual contacts or transgressive gender identifications. The cultural climate of this predominantly black upper Manhattan neighborhood – with its cabaret and jazz scenes, drag balls, gay and lesbian subcultures, sex workers, and interracial sexual tourism – also supported spaces for LGBT experience. However, much occurred in those settings that conflicted with what many community leaders and artists saw as the Renaissance’s primary aim of generating positive representations of *race*, not sexuality or gender. Identity-based readings of queer Harlem Renaissance poets “by and for gay readers” can lead to what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick calls “a paranoid project of exposure,” which valorously seeks to affirm minority identity as it is known now by searching out and redeeming past experiences of injury, ranging from the silencing of LGBT subjects to homophobic violence.²² Such a critical orientation does have value. For instance, it has spurred the recovery of Angelina Weld Grimké’s mostly unpublished verse by scholars such as Gloria T. (Akasha) Hull. Yet, on close examination, one finds that Grimké’s work often expositis not just lesbian desire but also, contrary to Woods’s claims about LGBT Renaissance writers’ sense of community, feelings of alienation. Perhaps Grimké felt estranged because she contributed to Harlem Renaissance magazines from a distance, not in the city itself. However, she often describes her estrangement in Romantic or existential terms, not social ones. For instance, in “Where Phillis Sleeps,”

death has divided the narrator, “a soul alone,” from her lover, over whose grave she pines.²³ If we were to recover Grimké’s poetry as “lesbian” verse, her often-depressed lyrics would suggest that, historically, black women’s experiences of lesbian desire were doomed to misery and loneliness. Such paranoid conclusions are teleological, for they assume that LGBT readers today are impossibly invulnerable to loneliness, even violence and oppression. Such assumptions also foreclose discoveries of unexpected connections with the past that might provoke readers’ imaginations.

In another poem by Grimké entitled “Life,” desire-related alienation produces an aristocratic attitude. Her narrator stands apart from “the people crawling by” because she “may feel the fierceness of great love / With all its agony and rare delights.” Unlike the masses, she has “lived.”²⁴ Some might judge the poem elitist, willfully disconnected from community. But what if we read Grimké as suggesting empowerment by embracing, not being incapacitated by, the crises attending lesbian desire? She could be read here as challenging our expectations by paradoxically expressing not just an awareness of marginalization but also the subjective *pleasures* of homosexual lovers’ recognition of their difference. The alternative to paranoid reading strategies, Sedgwick theorizes, is a “reparative” mode permitting “hope.”²⁵ She argues that “because the reader has room to realize that the future may be different from the present, it is also possible for her to entertain such profoundly painful, profoundly relieving, ethically crucial possibilities as that the past, in turn, could have happened differently from the way it actually did.”²⁶

Sedgwick does not prescribe what constitutes a reparative project, but Harlem Renaissance poetry offers opportunities for exploring some possibilities. Much like Sedgwick’s paranoid queer reader, the Renaissance’s leadership was invested in countering maligning and socially and politically injurious representations of their racial minority group. Cultural principles such as W. E. B. Du Bois, the leader of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the editor of *The Crisis*, believed that representations of African Americans needed to remediate prevalent racist stereotypes. Among the most problematic misperceptions of black men and women was the erroneous belief that African Americans were hypersexualized, less-than-“civilized” primitives. Aesthetic renderings of black homosexuality – indeed, sexuality in any form – was feared to interfere with positive representations of African American persons and cultures. Yet, patronage systems were suffused with homoeroticism. Gay black cultural leaders, such as the philosopher Alain Locke, and white homosexual literati such as Carl Van Vechten, used “flirtation,” as the critic Marlon Ross describes it, to develop “homoerotic coterie[s] in private.”²⁷ A’Lelia Walker, a lesbian who hosted an important literary salon, also hosted

orgies. She demanded that her guests in both settings tolerate sexual and gender variance.²⁸ The disconnection between the queer historical actuality of the Renaissance and its leadership’s desire to desexualize images of African Americans placed “a burden of representation” on black artists.²⁹ Even when LGBT writers published poetry attesting to their queer experience, the ideological imperative that the Renaissance represent racial, not sexual, inequities led to misprision. Richard Bruce Nugent recalls how his 1925 poem “Shadow” – whose narrator is represented as “A dark shadow in the light” and “Lacking color / Or vivid brightness” – “created a kind of sensation” when it appeared in the magazine *Opportunity* because readers believed it was “a race poem.”³⁰ However, decades later, he claimed that he had used tropes of light and dark in the poem to depict his intersectional experience of marginalization as a gay black man.

Around the time that Nugent’s poem was published, public debate erupted about representative propriety. Several writers took issue with the idea that art should function as cultural propaganda that abides by norms for positive representations of *any* subjects and communities. Langston Hughes was a prominent voice in that controversy. He argued that Du Bois and other leaders exhibited an “urge within the race toward whiteness, the desire to pour racial individuality into the mold of American standardization, and to be as little Negro and as much American as possible.”³¹ Tellingly, he describes assimilation as an “urge” and “desire.” Preserving the artists’ individuality and freedom depends on acknowledging other forms of desire in black populations. Hughes gravitated toward jazz, “the eternal tom-tom beating in the Negro soul,” to express his own desire to “revolt against” standardization and assimilation.³² Much of what is queer about his work from the period is not homosexual per se but instead is related to his poetic pursuit of freedom and a truer representation of his individual experience; that was a different kind of “desire” and “urge” than what the NAACP mandated, and thus it was read as contesting standards of an emergent black heteronormativity. As he wrote in an unpublished essay inscribed to his (gay) patron Carl Van Vechten, “My poems are indelicate. But so is life.”³³

The “indelicate” nature of Hughes’s poetry from the 1920s, especially of early poems such as “Cabaret” and “Harlem Night Club,” might be attributed to his frank treatment of eroticism. However, these poems are not necessarily homosexual. Lines such as “They say a jazz-band’s gay” or “White girls’ eyes / Call gay black boys” do play on the double signification of the word “gay,” but those moments only weakly encode same-sex desire.³⁴ More importantly, these poems explicitly represent a licentiousness and eroticism associated with cabaret culture, where illicit sexuality of all types – heterosexual, interracial, homosexual – flourished, even though

the venues were banned by New York City's anti-vice Comstock Laws and Prohibition's Volstead Act. As a result, the performance studies scholar Shane Vogel argues, even Hughes's seemingly straight cabaret poems evoke a historically actual temporal and spatial zone of queer experience. Hughes figuratively seeks to keep these spaces open by composing his jazz poems in an improvisational style, rather than with the closed forms characteristic of his queer colleagues Cullen or McKay.³⁵

Vogel's reading is reparative, but he still historically inscribes Hughes's work as representative of Harlem LGBT life in the 1920s. He even reads "Café: 3 a.m.," from Hughes's Cold War-era sequence *Montage of a Dream Deferred*, as a "poem out of time," which he wishes had been written three decades earlier because of its subject matter.³⁶ I prefer to push Vogel's reading of Hughes's "anticlousural impulses" and imagine the poet returning to his Renaissance poetry's cabaret themes to reopen those queer spaces and give them new lives, *as if* they still existed.³⁷ "Café: 3 a.m." represents "fairies" trailed by vice cops outside a 1950s iteration of the old Harlem cabaret. Amid McCarthyism's Red- and queer-baiting, Hughes's narrator intercedes, perhaps empowered by remembering past queer freedoms associated with similar sites, and argues against homosexuality's perceived degeneracy: "But God, Nature, / or somebody / made them that way."³⁸ Although he does not go so far as to grant LGBT subjects agency in determining their own identities, he does take a step in that direction by urging readers to acknowledge sexuality's constructed nature, whether by a higher power or "somebody," a human agent. Such constructivism certainly benefits LGBT citizens, but, in the larger context of *Montage*, everyone stands to benefit from this stance. In the volume's headnote, Hughes refers to the book-length sequence as a jazz-inspired "jam session" celebrating "a community in transition."³⁹ African American gays, lesbians, and transgender persons are only a part of that community and its song. Just as "Café: 3 a.m." suggests that LGBT persons' identities are socially constructed, the rest of Hughes's sequence implicitly posits that the identities of the community's other members are similarly subject to open processes of reimagining. Increased inclusivity and a community's transformation begin by recognizing that fact, and everyone living during the Cold War's containment culture desperately needed the poetic lessons that Hughes had learned from past experience at queer sites like this poem's titular café.

Poetry and Early LGBT Activism

After the Second World War, LGBT communities emerged in the United States as identifiable and politicized minorities, rather than collectivities of

similarly “deviant” individuals acting on outlawed desires. During the homophile movement – the first wave of queer American politics in the 1950s and 1960s – poetry was regularly included in nationally circulated activist publications. Such poems were more than representative texts affirming individuals’ identity and desire. They actually helped raise other LGBT individuals’ consciousness that a queer community could exist because others had similar experiences. Self-expression had to be coupled with an impulse to construct, to reimagine one’s social and political world, because minority life, as it was known in later decades, simply did not exist.

The inaugural issue of *The Mattachine Review*, the first U.S. homophile magazine, appeared in 1955. Among stories about antigay legislation and psychiatry’s pathologization of sexual inversion is a poem titled “The Cigarette.”⁴⁰ The author, Donal Norton, contributed journalistic articles to later issues, but his first verse publication relays a personal narrative, even if the byline is probably an assumed name. (Many in the homophile movement assumed pseudonyms to avoid possible repercussions.) Norton’s narrator imagines himself in a “single bed” with another man, sharing a postcoital smoke. The smoldering fag silently says all that must be said, “as our communings are felt, / Without word, without measure.” The lovers, bereft of community, have only private “communings.” Still, their shared cigarette begins a new “universe” – both “compact” and “inclusive,” “more real” than the one their lovemaking “so recently tore a-sunder.” “The Cigarette” imagines how same-sex encounters might not only create a new life for two intimates but also, more romantically, destroy universes. Although aesthetically unremarkable, this self-affirming gay poem also significantly marks a political desire to move away from inherited notions of community. Norton hopes to make history and the world queerly anew by beginning over in the present with himself and his partner.

Like Norton, the San Francisco Renaissance poet Jack Spicer was a member of the Mattachine Society. He became disillusioned with its politics, though, when the organization abandoned the radical vision of its founder, Harry Hay, and instead adopted an assimilationist politics. A decade after leaving the movement, Spicer published his 1962 prose poem “Three Marxist Essays.” As with Norton’s poem, the first part, “Homosexuality and Marxism,” romantically associates same-sex love with ruin; but in Spicer’s poem, the capitalist state, specifically, is destroyed:

Homosexuality is essentially being alone. Which is a fight against the capitalist bosses who do not want us to be alone. Alone we are dangerous.

Our dissatisfaction could ruin America. Our love could ruin the universe if we let it.

If we let our love flower into the true revolution we will be swamped with offers for beds.⁴¹

Despite his narrator's lonesomeness, Spicer, who cultivated local poetic coterries, was aware that poets are not truly "alone." Indeed, they are "dangerous" because poetry necessitates others. Both interlocutors and readers are intimates who help realize a poem's "flower[ing]," its development from a composition written in relative isolation into a shared text serving as the basis for a "true revolution." The dawning of Spicer's new historic epoch, his queer revolution, paradoxically produces a community of loners whose history begins – much like in "The Cigarette" – with the prospect of shared beds and poems. Emphasizing individual autonomy or, at best, lovers' oxymoronic private society, Spicer, like many of his LGBT contemporaries, encounters his own rhetorical limit. Collective politics takes a backseat to the bedroom. Even when the author himself tried to avoid self-expression (Spicer believed that his poems broadcast language like a radio, and he was just the receiver), any potential transformation effected by poetry remains largely personal, limited to the persons of the poet and the reader who intimately engages his work like a lover.

In this New Left era, though, politics were imagined as beginning with the personal, with raising individuals' consciousnesses about oppression. From that knowledge emerged resultant affinities with others who were similarly disenfranchised. Those connections presaged collective empowerment and action. Hence, second-wave feminists' famous slogan: *The personal is political*. Spicer did not live to see gay liberation or lesbian feminism emerge after the 1969 Stonewall riots, but he was aware of the New Left political ethos that informed those later movements. Neither activists nor poets associated with the gay liberation and lesbian feminist movements represented a minority as it is, though. Rather, both sought to define and construct minority identity out of their individual experiences so as to refigure the nation. Literature was crucial to that effort, for it helped consolidate an ethnic group identity that could evolve further. Past poetries offered a sense of shared history and cultural tradition, and contemporary poetry helped articulate changing paradigms of sexual subjectivity. In the early and mid-1970s, gay and lesbian presses published important anthologies – *The Male Muse* (1973), *Angels of the Lyre* (1975), and *Amazon Poetry* (1975) – that included work by activist-poets and sympathetic experimental poets. In *Angels of the Lyre*, the editor, Winston Leyland, also reprinted poets who were personally remiss to identify with the movement, like Robert Duncan. He also included recently deceased gay and bisexual poets, such as Stephen Jonas, Frank O'Hara, and Paul Goodman. The activist-poet William Barber contributed a raw, prosaic narrative about a pick-up in which "our backs

and asses twisted all night / long.”⁴² In striking contrast is surrealist Charles Henri Ford’s baroque elegy mourning the recent passing of Candy Darling, the transgender superstar of Andy Warhol’s Factory:

I saw the fiendish treatment you gave to a young pearl
To identify the opposites of an artificial order a dwarf was sewn to your
abdomen with secret threads
Bereft of origin and change wrapped in wire cloth white hard but malleable
they buried you in the skin of a black deer⁴³

We should read such anthologies as polyvocal, even discordant, collections that provide insight into how poetry offered readers a spectrum of queer possibilities. LGBT life, as read through its poets, encompassed mourning others, expressing one’s fears or desires, celebrating episodes of one’s own sexual liberation, and offering political origin narratives. An anthology’s multiplicity of styles and registers signals poetry’s inability to definitively represent homosexual identity as a single entity; rather, it embodies a universe of options from which readers might choose their preferred means of imagining themselves and constructing their minority.

Gay liberation and lesbian feminist periodical publications also illustrate how poetry was one discourse among several that facilitated a dialogue about what queer identity and community could be, rather than what it supposedly was. The Furies Collective, a Washington, DC–based lesbian separatist group, printed in their newsletter, alongside consciousness-raising articles and announcements of political events, poems that affirmed same-sex desire, protested homophobia and heterosexism, and praised nascent communities. Selections from Judy Grahn’s *Edward the Dyke and Other Poems* were used in such a fashion in the inaugural issue from 1972. Her poem “A History of Lesbianism” narrates how “The subject of lesbianism / is very ordinary” because it consists of caretaking communities of “women-loving-women.”⁴⁴ This poetic definition immediately precedes Charlotte Bunch’s manifesto “Lesbians in Revolt,” with its proclamation that “LESBIANISM IS A POLITICAL CHOICE” and “LESBIANISM IS THE BASIC THREAT TO MALE SUPREMACY.”⁴⁵ Grahn’s characterization of lesbianism as ordinari-ness and Bunch’s theorization of it as choice seem diametrically opposed. Yet the poem and manifesto do not dismiss one another. Published together, these two discursive forms implicitly participate in a dialogue. Each piece does not just represent lesbian identity as the respective author believes it supposedly to be, but instead they actually work cooperatively to form that identity (or plural, identities) and the social spaces that lesbian communities might inhabit.⁴⁶ Identity is provisional and contingent, not essentialist and fixed. When writing of Grahn’s poetry, Adrienne Rich reminds us that

power inheres in “the language we are using and that is using us.”⁴⁷ “Poetry is, among other things, a criticism of language” that springs from a poem’s “magic,” or how “it lets us hear and see our words [and the power relations running through them] in a new dimension.”⁴⁸

The epitome of such “magic” is Black Mountain- and Beat-affiliated poet John Wieners’s 1975 *Behind the State Capitol: Or Cincinnati Pike*, a curious book published by a press affiliated with the Boston Gay Liberation Front. Consisting of a heady mixture of prose vignettes, experimental lyric, and collages of photocopied ephemera, including photos of starlets and Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, newspaper clippings, and gay pornography, Wieners’s book defies easy description. One poem provides a glimpse of the author’s ambitions for this textual *mélange*, though. The narrator longs for a one-hour liaison with an unnamed lover instead of cruising, or perhaps just fantasizing about cruising, “in the downstairs Washington Street subway stop in my / mind.” His writing of this poem enables that possibility, even if only imaginatively. For him, poetry’s purpose is to liberate reality’s potential: “I write poems for little children / and imagine a world, fulfilled in reality.”⁴⁹ Wieners wrote for the “little children” of the emergent LGBT community, whose erotic and sexual fantasies, like his own, connected them to another world, which they labored to actualize in their art, lives, and politics. *Behind the State Capitol* enables that subjunctive imagination to be shared with readers so that they, too, might discover their pleasures and search out new possibilities. LGBT poetry does not extend that other world without also realistically exposing queer persons’ pains and vulnerabilities, including their subjection to language and heteronormative and homophobic institutions. Yet poetry imaginatively supplements those bleak realities, thus making readers conscious of them and ready to transform them. The art’s magic resides in its ability to spur readers to take action, to move toward the possible.

Contemporary Queer Poetics

Gay liberation initiated an identity politics whose legacy is seen in many recent civic and political advances: the Supreme Court ruling that anti-sodomy statutes are unconstitutional with *Lawrence v. Texas* in 2003; the legalization of same-sex marriage in certain states from 2004 onward; the 2010 congressional repeal of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell”; and the Supreme Court overturning of the Defense of Marriage Act in 2013. Perhaps such progressive reforms made it easier for LGBT poets like Reginald Shepherd, with whom we began this chapter, to claim that identity poetics is “boring.” However, it would better serve us to read twenty-first-century queer

American poetry as continuing to exhibit tensions between minority representation and subjunctive transformation that are similar to, although differently articulated from, what I’ve explored in relation to LGBT Harlem Renaissance and gay liberation poetries. Contemporary queer poets are not necessarily “post-identity” writers who reject identity categories. Rather, despite any rhetoric they might use to disavow minority representation, they tend to use LGBT identities as springboards for poetically addressing issues that affect all populations. Indeed, to refer to a form of poetry as “queer,” rather than as “LGBT,” is to acknowledge how its authors challenge rigid and potentially divisive identity logics so as to forge new connections and alliances between communities and groups.⁵⁰

A new paradigm of queer poetry emerged out of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. In the 1980s and 1990s, the crisis revived the failed politically coalitional spirit of the Gay Liberation Front. Alliance was a political and social necessity because people living with AIDS (PLWA) – including the seropositive, loved ones, and caregivers – cut across social, economic, and even geopolitical demographics. Poetry of the epidemic by Eileen Myles, Mark Doty, Essex Hemphill, Aaron Shurin, Thom Gunn, James White, Leland Hickman, and Tim Dlugos signaled rage and upset while also registering the apocalyptic experience of living in a climate where the failure of representation – one’s inability to represent oneself or loved ones, or the representative government’s unwillingness to enact life-saving policies – produced a murderous silence. Minority representation alone was not possible and could not suffice, and, given the climate, perhaps it was not a reliable vehicle for change. Still, these writers struggled to represent their experiences as PLWAs, while also hopefully reaching out to all, firing readers’ imaginations and sympathies and laying the personal groundwork for collective action. Take, for instance, Dlugos’s last poem “D.O.A.” Reflecting on living with AIDS close to the end of his life, he does not regret his affliction. He has come to see his seroconversion not as the consequence of “Lust, addiction” but instead as proof of “a kind of love,” an “Absolute fidelity / to the truth of what I felt.”⁵¹ While cooking dinner for his lover, a quotidian domestic task and another kind of loving act, Dlugos remarks that despite his catalogue of physical symptoms, this is “A day / like any, like no other. Not so bad / for the dead.”⁵² His articulated hope to live and love in the unrepeatable present compels us, later generations of audiences, to follow his lead, no matter our orientations or HIV statuses. To dedicate oneself to one’s principles and feelings – whether they are collectively political or personally sexual – is to live as if those principles and feelings could be the tenets of a personal faith, as if they were not deemed marginal, deviant, or illegal.

No matter the recent gains in public visibility, civil rights, and legal protections, other political objectives remain to be met – including nationwide transgender health care and workplace protections, LGBT naturalization rights, among others. Poetry will continue to be a resource for reimagining the world, one that might originate in LGBT subjects' specific experiences of oppression and marginalization but that ultimately works toward inspiring new coalitions and universal inclusivity. Queer poetry's continuing subjunctive, visionary ethos is best summed up in the late transgender poet kari edwards' *obedience*. Her 2005 book-length poem accounts for "this language plague," linguistic structures that reinforce everyone's social, economic, and cultural disenfranchisement; she attempts to redress that situation and "to cure" our shared affliction by writing as "a body" that struggles to unfix itself from that linguistic disorder.⁵³ Despite the injury she has experienced as a transgender woman, and despite the linguistic traumas to which she subjects her readers in turn via a heavily fragmented and painfully difficult text simulating her own experience, *obedience* concludes in the hopeful, future-oriented Whitmanic spirit noted at the outset of this chapter. Moving through this painful process together, edwards invites us to join her as she renews the struggle, pushing through the pain so as to discover new queer horizons: "let's begin again."⁵⁴

NOTES

- 1 Reginald Shepherd, "The Other's Other: Against Identity Poetry, for Possibility," in *Orpheus in the Bronx: Essays on Identity, Politics, and the Freedom of Poetry* (2003; Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007), 42.
- 2 *Ibid.*, 43.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 42, 43.
- 4 Walt Whitman, "Whoever You Are Holding Me Now in Hand," in *Leaves of Grass and Other Writings*, ed. Michael Moon (1860; New York: W. W. Norton, 2002), 100.
- 5 Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself," in *Leaves of Grass and Other Writings*, ed. Michael Moon (1855; New York: W. W. Norton, 2002), 77, 46, 42, 67.
- 6 Muriel Rukeyser, *The Life of Poetry* (1949; Ashfield, MA: Paris Press, 1996), 77.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 83.
- 8 Walt Whitman, "Poetry To-Day in America," in *Specimen Days and Collect* (1880; New York: Dover, 1995), 294.
- 9 Walt Whitman, "Democratic Vistas," in *Specimen Days and Collect* (1870; New York: Dover, 1995), 241.
- 10 Robert Duncan, "Changing Perspectives in Reading Whitman," in *A Selected Prose*, ed. Robert J. Bertholf (1970; New York: New Directions, 1995), 64.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 84.
- 12 Robert Duncan, "The Homosexual in Society," in *A Selected Prose*, ed. Robert J. Bertholf (1944; New York: New Directions, 1995), 47, emphasis in original.

- 13 Robert Duncan, “A Conversation with Robert Duncan, Part I,” interview by Robert Peters and Paul Trachtenberg, in *A Poet’s Mind: Collected Interviews with Robert Duncan, 1960–1985*, ed. Christopher Wagstaff (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2012), 190, emphasis in original.
- 14 Robert Duncan, “A Conversation with Robert Duncan, Part II,” interview by Robert Peters and Paul Trachtenberg, *Chicago Review* 44, no. 1 (1998): 95.
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