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point of view

The Interview as Cruising Ground

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The Interview as Cruising Ground

by [Christopher Hennessy](#)"Stranger! if you, passing, meet me,
and desire to speak to me,

Why should you not speak to me?

And why should I not speak to you?"

-Walt Whitman

"Thou canst't read nothing but through
appetite"

- Hart Crane



Christopher Hennessy.

Upon the publication of my second collection of interviews, I have been thinking lately of my very first interview with a writer. When I was in graduate school, the first interview I ever did was with an eminent novelist and nonfiction writer who was known to pick up young men after readings. I had also heard a rumor—I can't remember from whom—that this superstar novelist felt interviewers were fair game too. (I should say from the start, I've never told this story in print, and I am omitting names for obvious reasons.)

So as I walked up to the writer's apartment in New York, I was shaking, both from the nerves of interviewing for the first time, and someone so famous, and because I wasn't sure how I would decline if an offer to sleep with him arose. His then-boyfriend met me at the building door, and said, "Oh, you're a cute one." I laughed nervously, took the compliment, and followed him.

Up a few flights, the shaking of hands, small talk, my tape recorder comes out, the 'talk' begins, and two hours later . . . a phenomenal interview. But nothing sexual or even sexy happened. Not even an offer.

I was too excited about the interview to even think about this until weeks later. But I have always wondered: Did the possibility of sex affect the interview? Did it embolden me to ask questions I might not have otherwise? Did the transaction of the interview have anything to do with the currency of desire?

Perhaps most pertinently, what kinds of discoveries are made possible when two gay men confront each other, the acknowledgment of a shared sexual desire lurking there? (None of these questions that I pose alters the seriousness and rigor I bring to the interview process, nor are they meant to imply that all gay men are sexual predators who seize every opportunity to pursue sex, or that sexual secrets are the only discoveries made possible by a shared sexuality, but I would not be a good queer poet if I did not allow playfulness and indeterminacy to enter into the process!)

The Poets of *Our Deep Gossip*

So why do I re-tell this story now? I do so as a way to begin talking about my experience of interviewing writers with whom I share a sexual identity, and in particular to celebrate and highlight the particular experiences of interviewing the eight writers who comprise this second book of interviews, *Our Deep Gossip: Conversations with Gay Writers on Poetry and Desire*.

The writers interviewed in *Our Deep Gossip* are among the most celebrated and innovative poets currently writing.

Since the 1960s, Edward Field (b. 1924) has used his poetry to chronicle life as a gay man. His poetry embraces the highly personal, the pop cultural, and, more recently, the political. The author of 16 books of verse, his latest is *After the Fall* (2007).

John Ashbery (b. 1927) is America's most celebrated living poet. His work is often oblique, associative, playful, and mysterious. He has published over 30 books and has won all of the major poetry awards.

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Pulitzer prize-winning poet, translator, and critic, Richard Howard (b. 1929) is famous for poems "written in other voices" (dramatic monologues and "two-part inventions") as well as for poems about life as a gay man. The author of over a dozen volumes of poetry, he has earned the respect of the literary elite for his technical prowess and virtuoso style.

A master of the collage poem and the prose poem, Aaron Shurin (b. 1947) came of age as a poet of gay liberation and now explores the possibilities of experimentation. Shurin once described himself as "the bastard son of Robert Duncan [who was his mentor] and Frank O'Hara." The author of ten books, his latest collection is *Citizen* (2011).

While primarily known as a writer of dark and transgressive novels centered on an axis of sex and violence, Dennis Cooper (b. 1953) is also a noted poet. He first earned acclaim as a young poet of gay desire in the late 1970s. His most recent book of poetry is *The Weaklings (XL)* (forthcoming).

In his poetry, Cyrus Cassells (b. 1957) demonstrates the links between beauty, trauma, desire, and history. His sensuous and image-rich poetry explores both the horrors of recent history as well as the grace that can follow. In his five books of poetry, including *The Crossed-Out Swastika* (2012), he has shared his life as an African-American gay man.

Perhaps best known for his nonfiction work *The Queen's Throat: Opera, Homosexuality, and the Mystery of Desire* and his biographical fantasias on Andy Warhol and Jackie O, Wayne Koestenbaum (b. 1958) is also a poet who writes about perversity, pleasure, queer desire, and memory. His latest volume of poetry is *Blue Stranger with Mosaic Background* (2012).

The poems of Kazim Ali (b. 1971) explore silence, loss, desire, and spiritual questing. With almost ten titles to his name, including the much-lauded *Bright Felon: Autobiography and Cities* (2009), his most recent collection is *Sky Ward* (2013).

In this reflection on my interviews with these poets, I want to think through something I have long wondered about. How does poetry between gay men serve as a kind of cruising ground in some respects, as a space to learn *about* the nature of (gay) desire—and perhaps more generally as a way to forge actual (sexual?) connections? And what does that mean for gay poetry? What does it teach us about how we make of our sexual identities *lived* realities?

So what were my experiences like interviewing these diverse poets? Three words come to mind immediately: humbling, electrifying, and life changing.

Interviewing and Cruising

The experiences were also suggestive, in many ways, of the idea that we interpret literature through the muscle called eros. As Hart Crane wrote, "Thou canst read nothing but through appetite."

Or in a more purposefully provocative image, I see a comparison between the act of interviewing and that of cruising, hearing Whitman's call, "Stranger! if you, passing, meet me, and desire to speak to me, / Why should you not speak to me?! And why should I not speak to you?"

Before I more fully explain what I mean, let me cite a moment from my interview with Koestenbaum, which sheds lights on what it can mean for two gay men to engage over the topic of art.

That interview can read, at least in some moments, like flirting, or even cruising. There's double-entendre; there's performance; there's even a moment in which we cozy up over one of his books, tracing fingers over line after sexual line of poetry. Koestenbaum at one point offers to give me porn star Max Grand's phone number—for a massage. (To be clear, we are both happily partnered. I'm sketching a metaphor of desire for my own purposes.)

But as much of a tease as this may seem, what the interview dynamic reveals about the poet and his work is much more interesting. Take the moment, for example, in which he explains what he means by his statement that "poetry is pomography." He says, "I am demonstrating to you how tasty I think words are. I'm having sex with words in front of you. I'm playing around with them. I'm getting off. I'm trying to titillate you. There's this magical substance, language, that I'm laying out for you. Then you're going to fondle it."

Suddenly, the relationship between us is made clear, visible, and sexualized. It is all a metaphor and the "you" is also "the reader," but the interview's conditions—the shared time and space of two gay men—create this kind of paradigmatic performative moment.

Similar moments occur when Koestenbaum says, "Let's press our groins together" (talking about how it feels prepubescent to push words together) and "I could lead you on a tour of holes in my work" (on his concept of feeling "invaginated"). This slippage into a need for

a performing partner is made even more complex when he says, seemingly unaware of what we have been talking about or else subtly acknowledging what is happening in the moment, "I feel always on the verge of being shamed away from autobiography and sex talk."

The urgencies, the needs, the sheer desire for collaboration, all engaged and heightened by intercourse of a different kind, become a provocative lens on Koestenbaum's hypersexual and fetishistic poems of Steinian strangeness.

My explanation of this moment in the introduction to the book, which I draw upon here, is part of my effort to theorize the interview as its own unique genre, how it is different from poetry criticism, for example. But as I re-read it now, I think it also speaks to an idea I have come to again and again as I read poetry by gay men and as I have talked with them about their work: writing and reading are akin to sexual experiences.

Some Touchstone Moments

With that in mind, here are some touchstone moments in the interviews in which the conversations and even the process itself seem to be teaching us (or at least me in particular) about the nature of gay desire, how we connect via poetry, and other issues.

In my interview with Edward Field, for example, there is a great deal of discussion of how poets use "intimate experiences," everything from writing about sexual organs to really seeing one's own body. What I distinctly recall about these moments was the complete lack of inhibition, of shame, of nervousness. It was not an atmosphere of exhibitionism, nor did it feel clinical. Rather, there was mutual understanding that, unlike most people, we were gay men and had learned that the "forbidden areas" comprise a space of discovery and of truth-telling.

As we talked about how a poet must not fear anything, especially his own body, the conversation narrowed from the general to the personal, but Field never flinched, and I followed his lead, at one point even offering up a handful of poems about the asshole to counter Field's notion that it was something that had not been written about.

Was this a kind of jockeying to see who knew the most about this particular kind of poem? If so, even then there is a wonderful kind of rapprochement, with Field courteously deferring to me (he's such a mensch!). One of the interview's most touching moments, in my opinion, comes about when the idea of "intimacy" shifts from two men sharing information about the body, to an extremely poignant admission from an older man to a younger.

Field says, "I know a lot of young gay men nowadays are physically quite liberated and go to the gym. But my generation was cowed into submission and it showed in our bodies, which were not beautiful—but in fact we scorned the idea of working on our bodies. What you were, you were, and you were stuck with it. Of course, even if we're made to question our gender from the beginning, and to hate ourselves, there's no reason we shouldn't explore our bodies, get to know ourselves and get to the truth. Our bodies are the guidebook to self-rediscovery. To speak directly to your penis ("Old friend, we've come through . . .") or any other body part reconnects us."

The shame from that earlier generation has been burned off, and we see the proof of it in the very poetry we are talking about; and via the interview we understand, perhaps more deeply than we could via an essay or academic study, that the act of writing has made that possible.

Not all the interviews were as free from nervousness as that one. I remember being quite nervous when talking with Richard Howard; he seemed somehow fatherly to me, perhaps more ready to correct me, to speak forcefully to me. I don't know where that sense came from—the control (of voice, of line, of tone) inherent in his masterful poems perhaps?

Perhaps I was transferring how I felt reading his poems into the space of the interview. In discussing some of his grandfather's books (Howard's apartment is lined with books at every turn), my nerves at one point got the better of me and I referred to his father instead of his grandfather. He responded nonchalantly that he never really had a father.

Several minutes later the issue came up in terms of poetic lineage, and we moved from Crane, to Whitman, to Auden, to Merrill. In talking about Crane, Howard reminded me of something unique about gay poets: that those 'father figures' we push back from are just as important as are the poets we embrace.

Howard said, "I wanted to make it clear in my own work that I was not [Crane] and that I didn't want to be him, that I didn't want to be identified with him in some way, as a Cranian figure, even though I love him and love his work. It's part of not wanting to have certain fathers. He's one of them. God knows he wouldn't have wanted it

either."

I remember wanting to laugh at this last sentence, but knowing I could not—somehow it was a moment of grace meant for both us. I could never have told Howard this in the moment, but the nervousness I felt—prompted by hearing in his poems a "fatherliness"—was the very reason I could never have wanted him as a father figure, despite his brilliance.

In some kind of paradox, what drew me to Howard's work was how far it was from my own ambitions, and this also pushed me away. Looking back, I think that moment in the interview was a moment of truth for both of us, one that was informed by a kind of father-son relationship unique to gay poets (a relationship that is explored by Jim Elledge and David Groff in their recent collection of essays, *Who's Yer Daddy?: Gay Writers Celebrate Their Mentors and Forerunners*).

The interview that was most natural and comfortable was with Aaron Shurin. While all the interviewed writers were absolutely *giving* as interlocutors—kind, frank, and eager—there was something about my talk with Shurin (over Skype no less) that was especially friendly, warm, and even joyous in our connection, at least from my side of the Internet.

I felt like I was talking to an old friend. This comfort opened up a great deal of discussion of the past, as if we were reminiscing about a past relationship. Of course, it was a past I was not privy to but somehow it became something we shared. Perhaps the connection was possible because I had had to study his poetry (so very different from my own) so intimately and thereby knew the journey his poems had gone from the explicitly gay to an incantatory prose poem.

Shurin talked of his relationship as a young man with mentors like Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov, his experiences as a young gay poet in the 1970s, and his involvement with the Good Gay Poets and *Fag Rag*, and more. Through this turn toward the historical, we came to one of the most important questions a gay poet can face, how to write in a "totalizing" way (to use Shurin's term) about one's sexual identity. As he explained the lines from an early poem of his ("I give my life over / to pieces of bodies; by the end / maybe I'll have loved a whole man"), he made a fascinating comment.

"Part of the context in which those poems were being written, at the very, very early beginning of post-Stonewall poetry," he said, "was one in which everybody was [writing about] dicks and ass. I knew that was too easy a solution for my poetry, which does try to stake out a different territory. Even if I thought coming out was initially an erotic act, I knew right away that being gay was going to involve more transformations than just sexual ones."

He added, "There aren't a lot of dicks in my poetry. There are some. There's plenty of 'dick power,' but naming it in that way never seemed very interesting to me. It also seemed like a referential trap: being so invested in sexuality and being so spiritually or high-romantically invested in the body's participation in experience, I want to find a new way to bring all those things forward without naming them in a simplistic way. I think I wanted something more totalizing."

There is much "teaching" in these interviews, but I felt this moment was one in which a very real question—how do we as gay poets transcend our moment?—was given at least one possible answer.

The interviews, of course, hold great insight for readers of any persuasion or sexuality, but I would be lying if I did not admit, at the risk of sounding an essentialist tone, that I think the gay reader might find something beyond, something at times coded to our experiences and at others times something framed to our desires. For example, when Dennis Cooper waxes poetic about the anus as an erotic site, it is not just information I think the gay reader will access. Rather, the very lyrical nature in which Cooper *encounters* this part of the sexuality of many gay men is a part of the meaning the moment creates.

What I loved best about this moment was how open Cooper was. Throughout the interview, he brought my questions to bear directly on his own sense of himself. (For example he admits that in his poetry, unlike his prose, "the emotions are always mine.") At the end of his page-long aria on the ass, he tells me, "The ass is a big area of interest and—[and here he slyly laughs]—study for me." For a writer like Cooper who has such a complex relationship to the narrators of his novels, it was striking to remember that we do incorporate our own unique desires into our work.

I could give examples of how each of the interviews offers up similar experiences: how none other than John Ashbery admits his sexual identity may have influenced his desire to conceal and to play with pronoun usage; how Cyrus Cassells traces the empathy that characterizes his poetic voice to what he learned from being gay and African-American, as well as from losing loved ones to AIDS; how Kazim Ali, who crafts the experience of silence into poetry, purposefully removed the word "gay" from a text to create a complex moment of liberating joy in a book about coming out.

There are many experiences in these interviews in which the gay reader connects with the text as a site of shared knowledge, intimate understanding, and as an opportunity for the kind of self-discovery that the subjects themselves graciously enter into. But if I offered up so many moments, I would not allow readers to experience the eloquence and insight directly from the poets' mouth, which, after all, is central to my project.

Conclusion

I began this essay recalling my first interview with a gay writer. In fact my second interview, a follow-up about a year later with the same famed novelist, this *éminence grise* I spoke of, is also telling.

We met in a restaurant in Boston; he was in town, having given a reading the night before. I had been at the reading and noticed a young man approach him ("you're a cute one," I thought). At the restaurant we sat down for our talk, and the novelist's first words to me were, "Did you see the handsome blond at last night's reading?" I admitted I had. Somehow I knew exactly to whom he was referring.

"I took him back to my hotel room," he said and smiled devilishly. I reveled, too, in the delight he took, living vicariously for just a moment before I set the tape recorder down and set to work. I remember, halfway through the interview, thinking "We sound like two boys playing truth or dare." (Perhaps that is what the interview genre is, a form of truth or dare.)

I can not imagine *any* interview not being colored by such an interaction, especially because what the novelist and I share was made so explicit at the outset. Explicitly stated or not, *all* of the interviews with the poets in my book, I believe, are affected or influenced by the many ways in which gay men encounter each other—intimately, antagonistically, as mirrors of each other's social position and history, or just as old friends. This has been my experience.

I think it is one embedded in the very texture of conversations that so richly, so queerly, and so aptly fit under the title *Our Deep Gossip*. I hope readers encounter this spirit—and become part of it.

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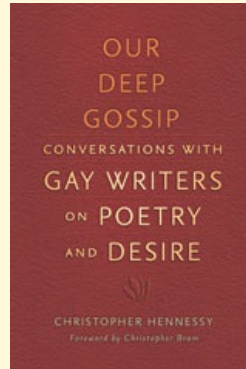
About Christopher Hennessy

Christopher Hennessy is the author of the debut collection of poems, *Love in Idleness*, which was a finalist for the Thom Gunn Award for Gay Poetry. He has also published *Outside the Lines: Talking with Contemporary Gay Poets* (University of Michigan Press). Hennessy earned an MFA from Emerson College and currently is a Ph. D. candidate in English Literature at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst, where he is writing a dissertation on gay poets. He is an associate editor of *The Gay & Lesbian Review-Worldwide* and a contributor to glbtq.com.

Our Deep Gossip: Conversations with Gay Writers on Poetry and Desire is published by the University of Wisconsin Press.

The interviews showcase the complex ways art and life intertwine, as the poets speak about their early lives, the friends and communities that shaped their work, the histories of gay writers before them, how sex and desire connect with artistic production, what coming out means to a writer, and much more.

While the conversations here cover almost every conceivable topic of interest to readers of poetry and poets themselves, the book is an especially important, poignant, far-reaching, and enduring document of what it means to be a gay artist in twentieth- and early twenty-first-century America. The book may be ordered directly from the University of Wisconsin Press, as well as from local bookstores and Amazon.com.



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