



Price, Kenneth M. To Walt Whitman, America [review]

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century U.S. cultural marketplace, writers did not have to choose between being Emily Dickinson or P. T. Barnum; most artists, including Whitman and Lowell, were somewhere between those poles.

Nevertheless, Whitman and his followers constructed an appealing narrative that fixed the two writers in simple roles: Lowell as wealthy and powerful bully, Whitman as poor but brilliant artist. Never mind that the East Coast elite, including Lowell, flocked to Whitman's Lincoln lectures; ignore the fact that Whitman's name was at least as well known as Lowell's—Whitman and his disciples successfully portrayed him as a martyr to his art, with Lowell as a smug Pilate. Pannacker explodes the simple dichotomies that have persisted from Whitman's time to our own and analyzes the complex, often contradictory versions of "Walt Whitman" that proliferated before and after Whitman's death. He understands the desire to seize on one "Whitman" in order to advance a cultural/political agenda, but in the eloquent conclusion to his chapter on Lowell, the longest and best in the book, he argues that Whitman's success may stem from his "ability to elude precise definition; to seem to appeal to all groups (the *avant-garde* and the middlebrow, the elitist and the populist, the nationalist and the cosmopolitan, the heterosexual and the homosexual). It is this protean quality—the capacity for admirers of Whitman to refashion him in their own image . . .—which has kept him the object of interest and speculation for more than a century and a half" (104).

No admirer of Whitman was more fervent or more keenly interested in re-fashioning the poet in his own image than Edward Carpenter. Pannacker's chapter on Carpenter and the other English homosexual disciples is essentially an expansion of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's brief, brilliant, and suggestive essay on Whitman in *Between Men*. However, his extensive research and careful analysis yield some new perspectives. In particular, he shows how Carpenter's relationship with George Merrill, which Sedgwick cites as a model of cross-class bonding, was inescapably enmeshed in British class hierarchies.

Revised Lives concludes with a chapter on photographic images of Poe—a strange coda, particularly considering that Whitman himself was the most photographed author of the nineteenth century. No matter—the book is invaluable to anyone interested in Whitman or in the fluid, complex interactions among writers, readers, and texts in nineteenth-century Anglo-American culture.

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KENNETH M. PRICE. *To Walt Whitman, America*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004. 182 pp.

For Walt Whitman, "America" and "democracy" were convertible terms. For not a few writers after him, "Whitman" and "America" seemed convertible terms, apparently one inspiration for Kenneth Price's title, although the more literal source is a letter sent to Whitman late in his life and addressed quite simply "America." That it reached its destination would not have surprised Malcolm Cowley, who opined in 1923 that, "Before Walt Whitman America hardly existed." "His crudity is an exceeding great stench," wrote Ezra Pound,

as Price reminds us, “but it *is* America.” Since the Vietnam War, the aromatic equation of Whitman with “America” has had even more equivocal consequences. Not a few of those who still treasure the former tend to be rather jaded with the latter, at the very least. And then there are those who are jaded with both; Whitman’s poetry, in the eyes of some critics, is indeed “America” (as ideological fantasm) writ large, and so much the worse for the poet as well as the imperial project he purportedly endorsed. To such critics, Whitman’s famous “inclusiveness” looks more like an all-devouring liberalism that reduces difference to sameness and the entire globe to market penetration. If “democracy” and “capitalism” have become convertible terms, might the great “poet of democracy” be partly to blame? Price’s excellent book does not engage with this sort of critique head-on, but it does so obliquely, by exploring the ways in which the iconic Whitman developed on various fronts, ultimately becoming a medium for reflection on almost every aspect of American culture.

To Walt Whitman, America is a lean and loose-jointed book of six semi-autonomous chapters, themselves rather loose-jointed in some cases, mainly about how Whitman functioned as a touchstone for all sorts of artists in the twentieth century—or, to shift the metaphor, about how he came to so saturate the culture through his diverse followers that his lacy jags can now be found virtually everywhere. Price understandably avoids treating Whitman’s ubiquitous impact on modern poetry, which has been the subject of much prior scholarship. The emphasis is on representative or particularly influential moments of Whitmanian congress with non-poets, particularly with fiction writers in the United States and Great Britain, and finally in cinema. However, the book opens with a chapter on the importance of cross-racial identification to the emergence of *Leaves of Grass*. Unity of purpose and subject matter, or careful articulation of limbs with trunk, seems not to be the author’s major concern—which I intend as a descriptive remark and not a pejorative one.

In recent years, scholars like Martin Klammer and Ed Folsom have increasingly emphasized the importance of slavery and identification with the slave in Whitman’s initial inspiration for *Leaves of Grass*. Price takes up the topic to stress the complexity of Whitman’s acts of identification, which, he argues, should be thought of in terms of the “love and theft” Eric Lott discuss in relation to blackface minstrelsy. Parsing out how the issue of slavery articulates with attitudes to blackness and racial difference in Whitman can be a difficult process, in part because Whitman never quite parsed it out for himself, leaving lots of room for slippage. On the whole, Price gives us a balanced, generally positive view of Whitman’s acts of identification or “appropriation,” chiefly on the basis of Whitman’s differences from other white writers. For example, “He offers one of the first attempts by a white author to narrate through a black voice and provides a compelling illustration of the power of racial crossing in the making of a complex intellectual identity” (17). Acknowledging the poet’s “inability to envision or . . . unwillingness to promote the right of blacks to full citizenship” (18), Price keeps his focus on the poetic manuscripts preceding the 1855 edition, which are indeed remarkable. I must say that Price’s readings occasionally strike me as forced (e.g., was Thomas

Wentworth Higginson referring to homosexuality when he objected to “the mere craving of sex for sex,” “the sheer animal longing of sex for sex,” “the blunt, undisguised attraction of sex to sex” [32]; and is the old farmer with his “clean bearded handsome and tan-faced sons” in “Song of Myself” really a possible case of cross-racial masquerade?), even though I agree with the larger point that the problem of human bondage and enforced racialization at the heart of American slavery necessarily posed central, indeed precipitating challenges to Whitman’s democratic dreamwork. To get at the base of his inspiration, Whitman had to identify with the most enslaved. The cross-racial identifications were incidental to this necessity, historically inescapable and, after all is said and done, rather fleeting. It would not do to excoriate Whitman on these grounds, however, since the problems Whitman faced have yet to be adequately confronted. Most American writers and intellectuals remain unconsciously bound to the basic ideological forms of color-line culture even today, specifically in the automatic equation of race with family, which has had vast psychological as well as social consequences.

In addition to helping Whitman break into his revolutionary approach to poetry, according to Price, Whitman’s cross-racial identification is partly responsible for his bold approach to sexuality. Racialized “identity,” however, may also have posed an intractable contradiction to Whitman’s (in other respects) truly radical democratic project of placing all bodies on an equal plane and the body as such on an equal plane with spirit. It may be worth reflecting on the fact that American slavery depended on subordinating “family” and sexuality to the reproduction of “race,” the linchpin of the whole system of domination. In a society of hereditary racial slavery, the intersectionality of race and sex was thus inescapable.

If Whitman never fully escaped troubling aspects of American racial ideology, like Manhattan itself he did become identified with “mongrelization” and multiethnicity, however. Price’s opening chapter closes by moving from Whitman’s own transracial performances to his iconic affiliation with ethnic mixture and various forms of impurity, including homosexuality, that defenders of genteel culture and Anglocentricity warned against. This turn helps bind the chapter to the concerns that will be taken up in succeeding chapters.

Price next turns to Edith Wharton, whose intensified interest in Whitman coincided with her affair with William Morton Fullerton. Price persuasively demonstrates that she subsequently “strove to redefine her fictional scope—to treat matters more ‘in the round,’ in a way that encompassed the joys and anguish of human sexuality—and she did it by thinking through Whitman” (40). Her attraction to and varying uses of Whitmanian comradeship, Price shows, were pivotal in her career, chiefly because of the way the notion of comradeship affected her shifting attitudes to gender and sexuality. Ultimately, as her relationship with the sexually unrestrained Fullerton faded, she came to understand that the comradeship she had learned to idealize was based in homosocial and homoerotic bonds that excluded women, and her desire to combine love and friendship proved unfulfillable.

The ambiguities of Whitmanian “comradeship” proved full of possibilities, of course, to British men struggling with homosexual desire in a deeply repressive culture; and in his next chapter, “Transatlantic Homoerotic Whitman,”

Price addresses the way British writers attempted to establish a positive homosexual identity with the help of Whitman. Examining the intertwining of love and death in Whitman's homoerotic poetry (particularly "Calamus," of course, but interestingly enough not the original "Live Oak with Moss" manuscript cluster) and the way his ideas were "translated" by John Addington Symonds, Edward Carpenter, D. H. Lawrence, and E. M. Forster, the chapter finishes up with reflections on the recent novel and film, *Love and Death on Long Island* (originally by Gilbert Adair), which returns to Whitman and Forster and reverses the cultural movement across the Atlantic. The discussion of how "Calamus," even in its title, substantially altered central themes of "Live Oak with Moss" is highly illuminating, and Price speculates that the emergence of death as a central concern has mainly to do with the shift from a very private expression to a public one. In working up "Calamus" for publication, according to this argument, "Whitman was drawn almost inevitably into the language of death because of the available discourses on homoerotic love" (58). I find this reasoning questionable. Obviously, at the time of writing "Live Oak" Whitman was working very comfortably (if not "publicly") with a discourse of homoeroticism in which death did not figure. And at the same time that he reworked "Live Oak" into "Calamus," death became a huge theme for him in poems that had no apparent reference to homoeroticism. I still believe, as I did some years ago, that if the central psychological and vocational crisis for Whitman was the crisis of the Union, then the massive blossoming of death in conjunction with love in the 1860 edition is surely connected to despair for the nation of comrades—which also helps explain the strong affinities between "Calamus" and "Drum-Taps" and "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd." Whitman himself said the central import of "Calamus" was political. Recognizing that by "political" he had in mind the fate of democracy in 1859-1860 does not require "sublimating" (as was once thought) the importance of homoeroticism to Whitman's poetry. This is a minor issue, however, in relation to Price's main argument. What is interesting is how the linking of homoeroticism and death got sucked up into so much of the British discourse around male-male love and through their work, such as Lawrence's *Studies in Classic American Literature*, circuited back to the States.

Price's fourth chapter, with case studies of John Dos Passos, Ben Shahn, and Bernard Malamud, discusses how Whitman's legacy became identified with different positions on ethnic and religious diversity in American life, particularly in the middle years of the twentieth century. Battles over Whitman's meanings "interarticulated with battles over the meanings of America" and crossed class as well as aesthetic lines, engaging "all groups from ordinary citizens to political leaders" (89). Price makes an interesting point about how anti-communist and Catholic spokespersons accused Whitman's thought of being "Asiatic." The period discussed here would seem to be the high point of Whitman's identification with political radicalism, insofar as certain powerful elements of the "mainstream" themselves agreed with communists on the danger of Whitmanism to established American society.

Next, in "Passing, Fluidity, and American Identities," we learn of how recent "minority" writers have responded to Whitman, specifically William Least Heat-Moon, Gloria Naylor, and Ishmael Reed. The main, and rather unob-

jectionable, conclusion reached here is that “Whitman’s malleability, explorations of passing, and centrality as an icon have made him irresistible for writers who, in extraordinarily creative ways, reinvent him for their purposes” (107). I don’t know that “passing,” as Price suggests in this chapter, really has much in common with the cosmopolitan practice of adopting artistic inspiration from whatever one finds around one, regardless of its purported “racial” provenance. (The all-too-common presumption otherwise is really a function of the kind of color-line psychology I have mentioned above.) Passing crucially involves not simply the crossing of a social boundary but the active or passive denial of something, a denial that publicly accommodates and affirms the exclusivity of one or another form of identity, whereas the claiming of identity across the supposed hard boundaries of social existence has the opposite effect. Thus it doesn’t seem to me that Whitman’s occasional adoption of a non-white position, alongside many other positions whether of gender or vocation or ethnicity, is quite the same as “passing.” Here there may be presumption, but there is no drama of denial or of “hiding” some aspect of the self, so pivotal to the phenomenon of passing. When Whitman looks within himself and finds a black man, he is letting certain truths of identity out of the closet, not locking them within. The same is true of the black novelist who openly claims a kinship to Whitman, so unlike those whose denials and suppressions are functions of the dependence of color line culture on the racial purification of “descent.”

It is therefore striking that Ishmael Reed, as Price points out, strongly critiques Whitman, essentially identifying him with white liberalism. It is striking because Reed is hardly one to argue for “pure” ethnic or racial traditions, so acknowledging an affinity to Whitman would be no threat to Reed’s sense of racial identity. What is chiefly at play here, I believe, is the fact that Whitman’s iconic connection with “Americanism”—and classical liberalism—put him on the wrong side for many writers in the Vietnam and post-Vietnam era. We see the effects of that shift in scholarship on Whitman itself.

And if Kenneth Price is right, as he seems to be in his final chapter, about the way Hollywood picked up the Whitman icon and circulated it, making him nearly identical with a certain type of tolerant, depoliticizing, mainstream liberalism, then the response of Reed is understandable—which is not to say that it is right. Most valuable of all the portions of this book is Price’s chapter on Whitman and film, which limns the affinities between Whitman’s poetry and that medium; outlines the early-twentieth-century responses to Whitman of Vachel Lindsay (as film theorist), D. W. Griffith, Paul Strand, and Charles Sheeler; and finally discusses the appropriation of Whitman in films during the past sixty years. Although some of what this chapter presents is vaguely familiar, it is all woven together into a highly effective essay that ends up revealing how overwhelmingly Whitman came to be associated with love and sexuality (of all sorts) overcoming repressive force—but generally in a way, within mainstream cinema, that did not probe deeply into the structures subtending the repression. One gets the sense that Whitman has been absorbed to the point of being relatively innocuous, a rather ironic development in view of the mostly recent charges (by the likes of Doris Sommer and Wai-Chee Dimock) against the political meanings of Whitman’s poetry itself as absorber

and ultimately neutralizer of difference. Whitman's iconic identification with "America" may, in other words, have turned into a mixed blessing post-Vietnam, when the problems with "America" as an ideological construct or Žižekian fantasm came to reflect onto "Whitman," the poet par excellence of Americanism. Price does not directly take on that kind of oppositional and perhaps mainly academic image of the poet, but he persuasively demonstrates that the meaning of Whitman's work lies less in a core ideological kernel to be stripped bare by contemporary analysis, than in the uses to which "Walt Whitman" has been put by a vast range of interlocutors drawn to his liminality—a liminality that was inarguably seminal to *Leaves of Grass*.

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