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Blake, David Haven and Michael Robertson, eds. Walt Whitman: Where the Future Becomes Present [review]

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David Haven Blake and Michael Robertson, eds. *Walt Whitman: Where the Future Becomes Present*. The Iowa Whitman Series. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2008. 188 pp.

Walt Whitman: Where the Future Becomes Present began as a symposium on the sesquicentennial anniversary of Walt Whitman's first publication of *Leaves of Grass*, held at the College of New Jersey in 2005, as the editors David Blake and Michael Robertson tell us in their lively and crisp introduction. The range of contributors is impressive, including a number of prestigious and prolific writers on Whitman. Unlike *Leaves of Grass: The Sesquicentennial Essays* (2007), also stemming from a conference during the sesquicentennial year (edited by Susan Belasco, Ed Folsom, and Kenneth Price), these essays do not focus on the 1855 *Leaves of Grass* or, for the most part, on any edition or theme. Instead they provide a cross-section of the type of work now predominating in Whitman studies: manuscript study, publication history, close reading, biographical information, analysis of Whitman's relation to the Civil War, attention to issues of sexuality and homosociality, and reception history—including Whitman's reception outside the U.S. and by writers of color. Here, as elsewhere, the dominant notes are cultural and historical studies of the poet and his publications. The volume contains no critical breakthroughs and only one essay—Wai Chi Dimock's "Epic and Lyric: The Aegean, the Nile, and Whitman"—moves into uncharted territory. On the other hand, every essay is well argued and engages significantly with Whitman's life and work, and many are significantly informative. If you work on Whitman, this is a volume you will want to have. It does not have the blockbuster effect of competing with recently published collections on Whitman—such as *A Companion to Walt Whitman* (at 607 pages) or *Leaves of Grass: The Sesquicentennial Essays* (at 481)—but its 188 pages contribute new voices and notes to the ever larger chorus of work on this author.

The greatest thematic concentration in *Where the Future Becomes Present* occurs around twentieth-century readings of Whitman, in what could loosely be called reception studies. Starting with Benjamin Barber's essay on "Walt Whitman's Song of Democracy" and proceeding through Kirsten Silva Gruesz's "Walt Whitman, Latino Poet," the essays in the last half of the collection present a richly varied sense of responses to Whitman across multiple populations and decades. Barber sees Whitman as emblematic of the swashbuckling, adventurous spirit of early entrepreneurial capitalism prevailing before and after the Civil War. While primarily situating Whitman's ideas among concepts of democracy and capitalism prevalent in the 1870s and 80s, Barber compares Whitman to Ernest Hemingway, Norman Mailer, Toni Morrison, Howard Hughes and other figures emblematic of their moments in U.S. history or who wave the flag of "democracy"—including Bill Gates and George W. Bush. Like John Dewey, Barber writes, Whitman sees democracy not primarily as "a form of government but a way of life." He concludes: "If ever Walt Whitman's spirit might make a difference for an America whose cities truly are global and actually contain multitudes, it is now" (104).

Angela Miller and Ed Folsom follow more familiar paths in exploring Whitman's reception, respectively, in comparison to Herman Melville's recep-

tion and through the poetry of Langston Hughes. In "The Twentieth-Century Artistic Reception of Whitman and Melville," Miller looks at the eras in which Whitman and then Melville were most popular among critics, readers, and artists (especially sculptors like John Storrs and Thomas Roszak) in the United States—for Whitman the 1930s, and for Melville the post-war era beginning in the mid-1940s. This pattern is altogether reasonable, as she argues, given the different way Whitman's charismatic individualism resonated after the rise of European fascist dictators prior to World War II, and given each author's different ideas of space. Folsom continues Miller's and Barber's analysis of Whitman's twentieth-century political resonance through an astute reading of his 1860 *Leaves of Grass* in relation to Langston Hughes's 1959 *Selected Poems*. Whitman concludes his volume with the poem, "So Long"—the phrase that Hughes uses to begin the first poem of his similarly non-chronological, thematically clustered edition of poems. While much has been written about Hughes and Whitman, Folsom brings new light to the subject with the close focus of this essay. Similarly, Kirsten Silva Gruesz provides a new perspective on what she calls the "adaptation" of Whitman by both Latin American and U.S. Latino/a poets, beginning with Whitman's understanding of America's mestizo past as articulated in his commemorative letter written to celebrate the 333rd anniversary of the founding of Santa Fe, and looking at several poets' responses to Whitman in relation to their interpretations of the democratic ethos of the United States.

There is not a weak essay in this volume. At only six pages, James Longenbach's "Whitman and the Idea of Infinity" is the least ambitious—although he provides a marvelous reading of "As I Ebb'd" to demonstrate "the ways in which the material language of poetry, the work of diction and syntax" may indicate "a path between reality and the soul." Wai Chi Dimock also attends to syntax and grammar in looking at the pronominal patterns of Whitman's poetry, in the service of a dramatic claim that Whitman's basic poetic form is indebted to both ancient Egypt and ancient Greece. First establishing that Whitman was familiar from an early age with Greek epic (especially *The Iliad*) and the Egyptian hieroglyphs and lyric tradition, Dimock argues that Whitman merges Afro-Asian with Western traditions through theme, metaphor, and his characteristic deployment of a present-tense "I" speaking directly to an (often future) "you," thereby also merging lyric and epic traditions.

Kenneth Price's and Meredith McGill's essays extend their previous published work. McGill returns to a familar topic for her, intellectual property and the culture of reprinting in the mid-nineteenth-century, to point out that, as a journalist, Whitman also frequently reprinted others' work. Moreover, she argues, Whitman often retreats from an asserted authorial presence himself—in the 1856 *Leaves of Grass*, for instance, both through publication of anonymous reviews and through comparative withholding or delay of an authorial "I." Price writes about "the Challenges of Editing Whitman" from his experience as co-director (with Folsom) of the *Walt Whitman Archive*. Using manuscripts, close examination of a cluster of seventeen poems published in 1860 under the heading "Debris," and a fabulous photograph of the elderly Whitman sitting among chaotic piles of paper, Price muses that Whitman frequently

embeds important statements in parentheses or under titles like "Debris" and "Leaves-Droppings," and that Whitman associated debris generally, as well as death in particular, with spiritual transcendence.

War also recurs as a point of interest in these essays—perhaps because so many authors weave current cultural concerns into their observations. The only essay on the Civil War, Michael Warner's "Civil War Religion and Whitman's *Drum-Taps*" dedicates itself to both *Drum-Taps*'s publication history and the question of what the war meant to Whitman. For instance, Warner points out that Whitman advertised several poems published in the "Sequel to Drum-Taps" before *Drum-Taps* itself was printed—proving, for example, that "Reconciliation" was written before April 1865 rather than after Lincoln's assassination. *Drum-Taps*, as Warner argues, provides not a historical record but a sense of the divinity of collective agency, marginalizing actual historical events while immersing the reader alternately in a sense of temporal unknowing and a religious timelessness of nature and desire.

While no essay summarizes the multiple strands of the collection, the volume appropriately opens with David Lehman's "The Visionary Whitman"—a misleading title for his extended reflection on Whitman as a master of coded reference, creating a self (Walt—not Walter—Whitman) and a United States that are both "creations in a continual process of becoming." This creation is energized by repeated deflection of the motivating force of the poems, which Lehman sees as a determination to defeat death that is simultaneously a "bundling of love and death" in veiled reference to homosexuality. The volume's opening with this essay provides grounding for Warner's and Dimock's later attention to the homosocial eroticism of troops in war, and to Folsom's reading of the phrase "so long!" as a deferral of desire that would later resonate with the work of Langston Hughes.

One might quibble about the order of essays in this volume, or wish for an introduction that is more ambitious in addressing the question of where Whitman studies find themselves 150 years after the first publication of *Leaves of Grass*, but these would be mere quibbles. Blake and Robertson have edited a fine collection of essays—each denser, more nuanced, and more stimulating than I have been able to indicate here.

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GEORGE HANDLEY. *New World Poetics: Nature and the Adamic Imagination of Whitman, Neruda, and Walcott*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007. xii + 442 pp.

"Something startles me where I thought I was safest," the speaker of Walt Whitman's poem best known as "This Compost" tells us. A lover of nature, the poem's persona is suddenly made aware, by "something," of the immense power of the earth to purify and renew itself. George Handley's *New World Poetics* attempts to startle its readers in a similar way—with the sophisticated, reciprocal dynamics of engagement between nature and the poets Whitman,