



Handley, George. New World Poetics: Nature and the Adamic Imagination of Whitman, Neruda, and Walcott [review]

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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,

Pablo Neruda, and Derek Walcott. In an ambitious book that ranges across temporal, spatial, and linguistic boundaries, Handley argues for a New World poetics that emphasizes the strangeness of humans in their environment and the regenerative power of ecopoetics. This is not a poetry by the American Adam, but a “postlapsarian” one, adamic with a small *a*, expressing awe “before the wonders of a New World whose beauty has survived or has even, paradoxically, been nurtured by the wreckage of colonialism” (2).

Ecocriticism is a relatively new field with deep roots. Its methods, motivations, and conclusions vary widely, but its practitioners are for the most part inspired by a sense that humans are not living in a way responsible to the interconnectedness of all things. Handley’s approach, in the broad context of ecocriticism, is a conservative one: his argument takes the form of literary analysis (informed by colonial history) and his conception of nature as something man is *in* but not completely *of* (owing to his power of contemplation) is close to the mainstream of critical thought. But Handley confesses that the occasion for *New World Poetics* arises from the increasing evidence that it is not the sustainability of the environment that is at risk, but the sustainability of human life. His book shares less with the trans-species thinking of writers like Michael Pollan or Michel Serres (who argue that there is no “environment” *per se*), than the ecocriticism of (on the American literary side) Aldo Leopold, M. Jimmie Killingsworth, and Lawrence Buell and (on the hispanophone critical side) Alain Sicard’s important work on Neruda’s poetics. Linking the realms of ecology and human contemplation, Handley argues that poetry offers a particularly elegant technology for shaping human consciousness towards a more healthy relationship with nature.

Handley’s analytical focus, then, is on that “something” Whitman refers to in “This Compost.” What exactly is it that connects us with nature, that speaks to us, when we are presumably part of nature itself? Is what we call nature a fantastic projection of human desire for the new and pristine, or something that frames even that desire? Are the toxins—or the poems—we produce “natural” because humans are “natural,” or is there a difference? Handley suggests that these are foundational questions for some New World poets. The New World’s history of displacement, dispossession, and violence haunt its poetry about nature; for Handley, New World poetics gets its energy from what he describes as a constitutive tension between this historical fact and the way the poets he treats understand poetry as fundamentally “an expression of a self-conscious desire for wholeness, not a pretension to mimeticism or historical recuperation” (47). Handley offers a comparative analysis, rather than a rigidly historical treatment, in showing that Whitman, Neruda, and Walcott all rise “to a similar challenge of exploring the meaning of human community within the context of an emergent conception of a biocentric cosmos” (11). These poets cannot simply dissolve themselves into nature, nor can they laud it as a primeval origin, because the natural world of the Americas has been spectacularly altered and has, Handley insists, lost much of its indigenous history (both human and other-than-human). To varying degrees both within and between the oeuvres of these three poets, “nature’s opaque and deep history,” Handley says, “serves as an untellable repository for the transnational

history of the New World and its shared colonial violence” (6).

Whitman’s work, for all its Adamic curiosity and telluric transcendentalism, reads as profoundly ambivalent in this light. Handley reveals a set of contradictions about Whitman’s poetics of the environment, but also an evolution over the course of Whitman’s career, moving “between the extremes of hegemonic globalization and cross-cultural and ecological solidarity” (128). While Whitman was influenced by both natural science and transcendental spirituality, he let neither dominate his depictions of nature and the poet as a mediator between the human and other-than-human worlds. Though he was taken, particularly early on, by Hegel’s dialectics of nature and a vision of an ultimate synthesis that would give meaning to existence, Whitman resisted the temptation to reduce the challenge of describing death, violence, or natural phenomena to such a synthesis and, for the most part, avoided the pathetic fallacy.

What Whitman had trouble resisting was a boosterism that based the progress of the United States on the destruction of the environment. “Song of the Redwood-Tree” and “Song of the Broad-Axe” are important for Handley’s reading; while acknowledging the costs of the expansionist vision in these poems, Handley urges us to consider Aldo Leopold’s understanding of such destruction as not inherently bad, but redeemable through contemplation: thinking about the costs of such destruction in each act of modifying nature would inhibit excessive and non-reciprocal modifications of the natural world. For Whitman, after all, the redwoods have souls. In readings of “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking,” the Civil War poems, and “This Compost,” Handley argues that at its best Whitman’s poetry “is not a translation of nature’s meaning or of history’s truths but a rhetoric that acknowledges the appropriateness of both remaining opaque to human understanding” (141). In his poetry human bonding depends upon an “encounter with the otherness of nature,” but to maintain a sense of that otherness his works often laud death, silence, and questioning (160). This amounts to what Handley, drawing on Sicard, calls a “poetics of oblivion” that appealed to poets outside of the U.S. despite a nationalism in Whitman’s poetry that might have wholly turned off readers across borders (as it did in a few cases).

Neruda, for example, was famously fascinated with and influenced by Whitman, but Handley’s eco-poetic focus reveals significant departures from Whitman’s understanding of nature and the poet. There are a few moments of longing for Eden in Neruda’s poetry. But Handley argues that for the most part, instead of “imagining a New World transformation and improvement upon the Old World’s Muse, as Whitman does in ‘Song of the Exposition,’ Neruda calls for a kind of ecological deference and respect for the perpetually dynamic motions of nature that are so unlike the stillness of immured memories of civilization” (196). Still, like Whitman, “his adamic imagination urges him to cross social and political borders, like Temuco’s widespread rain, and speak to the voiceless poor,” particularly in *Canto General*, which is the focus of an extended analysis (179). Neruda’s interest in such border-crossing poetics led him to a political career and to socialism; a quite different trajectory from Whitman’s. But as Handley deftly demonstrates, the driving question at both

a poetic and a personal political level became, as Neruda put it in one poem, “[¿]Qué puedo hacer para restituir / lo que no robé? [What can I do to give back / what I never stole?]” (214).

Walcott’s poetry emphasizes the mediation of both nature and history by representation, and the way such mediation complicates any simple notions either of transcendence or of nostalgia for Eden. “Walcott’s New World poetics,” Handley argues, “renders ironic whatever prophetic rhetoric is available to him, since the distinction between commemoration and mourning is so attenuated” in a land that, from Walcott’s perspective, retains so few signs of its indigenous past and so many of a history of transplantation and violence (301). The last chapters of Handley’s book range through Walcott’s poetry, prose, and interviews (including interviews conducted by Handley himself), building a sensitive reading of Walcott’s attitudes toward the environment. Walcott grew up on the island of St. Lucia, experiencing overwhelming natural beauty and a history of slavery and racial conflict, and lamenting the eradication of indigenous culture. In his writings about Robinson Crusoe, his autobiographical poetry such as *Another Life*, and the mixed-media *Tiepolo’s Hound*, Walcott emphasizes how history “is buried by New World nature,” arguing that the generative choice is not to reject nature in a search for history but to create “a poetics of oblivion that simultaneously acknowledges history’s absence and praises natural beauty” (309).

It is as much what these poets don’t share as what they do that shapes Handley’s analysis. Handley confronts the localness of these poets’ work no less than its cosmopolitanism, situating their depictions of nature in their early experiences of local landscapes in Chile, coastal North America, and the Caribbean. And while the economies and social consequences of colonies and plantations link these poets, the literary marketplaces in which they worked and their responses to those marketplaces were different in ways that, as Handley demonstrates, shaped both poetic form and content. Whitman emerges as an influence in direct and indirect ways on both Neruda and Walcott; Handley’s depiction of the relationships among the three poets’ work at the level of thematics and in the broad literary context of the last century and a half of hemispheric American poetry writing is illuminating. No less useful is his depiction of the politics of the academy with respect to the study of poetry within and across both linguistic and national boundaries.

Some readers may have reservations about where Handley’s study itself fits into these politics, however. The “poetics of inclusiveness” couldn’t be expected to be complete, of course, but there are some notable exclusions. Gender and sexuality—big issues with these poets, and always significant when speaking across Anglo-Hispanophone cultural spheres—are de-emphasized. The question of the book’s choice to focus only on male poets is dismissed early in the book in a not entirely convincing way (4-5). Though historical discussions of science’s influence on Whitman and Neruda have an important role in the book, contemporary science (even popular approaches to it like Michael Pollan’s or E. O. Wilson’s) is completely bracketed. The notion of “toxicity” is important at the end of *New World Poetics*, both as the worst example of man’s destructive power and as a metaphor for colonial violence’s

effect through history. But recent studies of toxicity, parasites, viruses, and other imagined destroyers by molecular and environmental biologists feature complex debates about the scale and angle of vision at which such damaging agents are defined.

Most strikingly, the “disappearance” of the indigenous past that so activates all three poets is only weakly challenged. It is certainly important to recognize the degree to which Native pasts have been obscured by colonial history (or the ongoing colonial project, in the United States’ reservation system). But a poetics of inclusiveness would surely ask what Natives think of the landscape, especially given that indigenous populations, despite this time of toxicity, are on the rise. From Keith Basso’s *Wisdom Sits in Places* to studies of Andean khipus that suggest landscape is structurally significant for Inca recording systems to the Nez Perce tribe’s ecological “stewardship” model of the reservation, indigenous engagements with ecology and representation, past and present, complicate the broad picture of New World environmental poetics. Handley explains that he focuses on Whitman, Neruda, and Walcott because they are pillars of the literary world and, presumably, an argument about them will be more likely to draw attention to ecopoetics. Yet some Native critics might argue that there is a fine line between acknowledging what past approaches (colonial or canonical) have erased and perpetuating that erasure.

Ultimately, however, *New World Poetics* is a good book because it will start conversations about these issues. It healthily values provocation over definitiveness. “In the context of diaspora and racial mixture,” writes Handley, “seeking historical rootedness in the landscape may lead to perpetual nostalgia, either for the original colonial land, which is marked by monuments and other colonial signs of ‘civilization,’ or for the ‘Eden’ of alternative exotic soils, such as Europe or Africa. In either case, colonial history leads us away from our contemporary place” (287). Though he doesn’t emphasize it, whole industries are founded on these attitudes today, and Handley’s de-centering of them is one of the achievements of *New World Poetics*. Criticism’s role is to startle us out of such reading practices; Handley’s is a welcome plea for political readings of poetry, a comparative critical methodology, and, more broadly, scholarship that holds itself as responsible to ecology as to the academy.

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