



Whitley, Edward. American Bards: Walt Whitman and Other Unlikely Candidates for National Poet [review]

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REVIEWS

EDWARD WHITLEY. *American Bards: Walt Whitman and Other Unlikely Candidates for National Poet*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010. xvi + 248 pp.

In 1855 Walt Whitman famously claimed that “American bards shall be marked for generosity and affection and for encouraging competitors [. . .] hungry for equals night and day.” In his new study, *American Bards: Walt Whitman and Other Unlikely Candidates for National Poet*, Edward Whitley seeks to literalize this sentiment by entwining Whitman’s own poetic project with those of three other antebellum poets who, like Whitman himself, characterized themselves as “social outsider[s] who audaciously [claim] to be the nation’s representative bard”: James M. Whitfield, African-American activist, separatist, and abolitionist; Eliza R. Snow, Mormon pioneer, women’s leader, and “high-priestess” of her faith; and John Rollin Ridge, Cherokee Indian, journalist, and sometime champion of Native American rights. Whitley brings these figures together, in his words, not only to raise “the specter of even more poets from the period who are waiting to be rediscovered or introduced into the discussion [of antebellum American literature] anew,” but also to expose the curious way in which each of these poets seems “caught up in [articulating] a complex set of loyalties . . . to communities both smaller and larger than the nation itself,” loyalties that he ultimately believes prompt a reconsideration of “what it [means] to call Whitman an American bard.”

In this regard, Whitley’s study does not disappoint, as the first chapter itself makes clear. Contrasting the nationalist aspirations and work of James M. Whitfield, a black barber-poet from New Hampshire, with those of Walt Whitman, this chapter investigates the way “both poets came to realize that the dysfunctional character of multiracial America was an issue that had to be addressed by anyone who took up the challenge” to “re-create the nation as a poetic text” and serve as a representative bard of the nation. Whitley recounts previous critical narratives that argue for Whitman seeking to overcome deeply-rooted racial prejudices through poetic catalogs that “reinforced the idea that it was possible to contain such disparate populations as slaves and slavemasters into a single, unified nation,” before contrasting this with the provocative way in which Whitfield, in his 1853 *America and Other Poems*, essentially highlights the contradictions that Whitman seeks to meld and incorporate. Whitfield did this by contrasting two Americas, an “exuberantly celebrated (white) America” that “commemorates U.S. independence” from Britain “on the Fourth of July,” “celebrates the beauty” of the national landscape, and marvels at “a racist politician’s oratorical prowess,” with a “dismal (black) America” that “reels in horror at human suffering,” “celebrates the end of the British slave trade on the First of August,” and laments “a black poet’s inability to access the power of language.”

Whitley suggests that understanding such differences helps account for the disparate sources of authority that each poet turns to in order to claim the right to speak as a representative American bard. For Whitman, the incorporative impulse that characterizes his catalogs extends to the point where “he internalizes the entire expanse of the nation” (or, as Whitman himself said in 1871, “I inhale great draughts of space, / The east and the west are mine, and the north and the south are mine”), and in the process presents “the (white) poet’s body . . . as a conduit for the national identity that lies latent in continental geography.” Thus, as Whitley characterizes it, Whitman is granted his authority to speak from the now-incorporated national landscape itself. For Whitfield, however, the historical relationship of enslaved black bodies to the landscape spawns a different sense of things. Echoing the thinking of his friend and fellow emigrationist Martin Delany, Whitfield forwarded the notion that it was these very same enslaved black bodies that had created and ensured the existence of America as a “free” nation by physically and materially building up that nation, a fact which prompts Whitfield to construct a poetry, as Whitley puts it, that “functions on the . . . logic . . . that African Americans do not *extract* national identity from geography, they *invest* geography with identity.” As such, in Whitfield’s formulation, black Americans not only carry the seminal essence of “America” within them but by virtue of this fact are far more qualified to speak as America’s bards than their white counterparts are. Such thinking, Whitley suggests, draws Whitfield into a state of conflict where his loyalty to the larger nation clashes with his loyalty to both a black sub-national community that he feels better embodies “America,” and, somewhat surprisingly, to groups of “ethnic European insurgents”—such as the Maygars—whose “European vassalage” he “equate[s] [with] African American slavery.” Whitfield, Whitley argues, ultimately uses his poetry to urge both ethnic Europeans and black Americans to “find refuge and solidarity in the national subcultures they belong to as well as an international coalition of similarly denationalized peoples.” The recognition of Whitfield’s competing loyalties to sub-national, national, and larger-than-national communities spurs Whitley to re-examine Whitman’s own poetic nationalism for evidence of a similar conflict, something he finds in “Poem of Salutation” (1856), later titled “Salut au Monde!” In a reading of this poem that seems both fresh and revelatory when seen in light of the preceding investigation of Whitfield’s poetry, Whitley charts how Whitman sees a common tie “between the ‘wage slavery’ of working-class whites and the chattel slavery of African Americans” that connects them “equally with [all] ‘the menials of the earth.’” This connection between Whitman and these “menials,” Whitley argues, resonates with a sense of conflicting allegiance similar to that experienced by Whitfield, raising into view what appears as an analogous tension between Whitman’s loyalty to the nation and his concomitant sense of loyalty to “national subgroups, and an international coalition of oppressed populations.”

The recognition that Whitman’s nationalist sentiments are continually complicated by his sense of connectedness and loyalty to sub-national and larger-than-national groups also informs the work of the second chapter, where Whitley turns his attention to the way in which both Walt Whitman and Eliza R. Snow, “the high-priestess and poet general” of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (the Mormons), sought to “be the poet of a new Ameri-

can religion,” and by virtue of this, the representative poet of the nation itself. Whitley begins this chapter by positing a joint recognition on the part of both poets that “to be the representative bards of new American religions involved a negotiation with the sacred past that necessarily redefined their relationship with biblical history.” According to Whitley, for Whitman this amounts to a desire to “break completely with a sacred history that he deemed to have limited usefulness for the modern era,” while at the same time poetically honoring that history in “tribute to the religious heritage of the world.” Whitley sees these ideas expressed in “Song of Myself” when Whitman both honors previous religious thinking as well as characterizes it as the fodder from which to grow a new religion—or, at least, religious sensibility—when proclaiming, “My faith is the greatest of faiths and the least of faiths, / Enclosing worship ancient and modern and all between ancient and modern.”

If Whitman’s poetry asserts, as Whitley interprets it, a need to recognize the heritage of but nevertheless conduct a break from the “sacred past,” then the opposite may be said to be the case for Snow, who attempts to negotiate America’s relationship to “sacred history” by poetically proclaiming and prophesying “the restitution of all things” from that sacred past—including the existence of modern prophets and eventually even the social practice of polygamy. Poetically championing the “restitution” of a “sacred history” that included practices far outside the mainstream of contemporary American religious and social practice obviously placed Snow in a difficult position with respect to a broader national culture that found her thinking (and Mormon thought generally) on these issues to be problematic, to put it mildly. As Whitley frames it, Snow navigated this tension in poems such as “Time and Change” by characterizing Mormon religious thought and practice as a matter of religious freedom, and Mormons as defenders of this national ideal—a fact which left her “poised to make the case that the Latter-day Saints are exemplary citizens rather than [deservedly] national outcasts,” and as such should provide the nation with its “national bard.” In characterizing her fellow Latter-day Saints in this way, Snow was not only asking, in Whitley’s words, “that the Mormons be recognized as a representative national population,” but she was, in fact, claiming the Mormons as “Columbia’s noblest children” as they seemingly embodied an understanding and a commitment to (religious) freedom that the rest of the nation rejected. In his analysis, Whitley shows how such a view heightened Snow’s sense of loyalty to both a sub-national Mormon community located in the deserts of Utah and a growing larger-than-national community of Mormon converts that were joining the church throughout the world, complicating her loyalty to a nation she felt had turned its back on principles that defined it.

Curiously enough, Whitley finds a corollary for what he suggests is Snow’s ambiguous and conflicted loyalty to the United States in Whitman’s “Passage to India,” which, in light of the analysis of Snow’s work, begins to appear as Whitman’s articulation of “a sense of uncertainty about the role that the United States would play in the global spiritual awakening Whitman [both] prophesied” and tried to facilitate through his “new American bible,” *Leaves of Grass*. As Whitley characterizes it, “Passage to India” represents Whitman’s prophecy of “a spiritual rejuvenation of the globe that involved people from across the world,” a rejuvenation made possible by the completion of a transcontinental railroad

that was responsible, in Whitman's words, for realizing Columbus's dream of "Tying the Eastern to the Western sea" and so "Europe and Asia." But, as Whitley asserts, "by calling America the realization of Columbus's dream to link the East and West, Whitman turns the United States into a stop on a larger journey"; the nation "alternately appears as and then disappears from the center of the world." Thus, like Snow, Whitman's "nationalist" poetic tendencies and his loyalty to the nation are complicated by his expectation of a "spiritual convergence of people from across the globe" that he prophetically, and perhaps anxiously, anticipates. In Whitley's estimation, a comparative view of these poets allows us see how "both Snow and Whitman alternated between a belief in the American mission that bordered on zealotry and a skepticism regarding U.S. prominence in the world that bordered on treason," as well as how both poets negotiated and embraced "a tension between the nation itself and potentially denationalizing forces both within and beyond national boundaries."

Whitley's third chapter examines the way in which Whitman and John Rollin Ridge poetically "experimented with strategies for unifying Euro-American and Native American cultures in ways that would allow them to serve as the representative voice of the nation." An integral part of both poets' strategies, Whitley attests, was a committed "invest[ment] in the idea that the United States could be remade in the image of a 'white aboriginal,'" a "real faith that a blending of Euro-American and Native American cultures would transform both the nation and the world." Whitley depicts Whitman as embracing the "sense that an American bard should not only write about Indians but also in some way *become* an Indian." Such a Whitman would not only write "poem[s] of the aborigines" that included "every principal aboriginal trait, and name," but also "wild and untamed—half savage" poems that, for Whitley, "attempted to resurrect the Indian into the persona of the white aboriginal" and in the process "hybridize the office of American bard."

While Whitman sought to unify Euro- and Native American cultures by essentially positioning himself as a kind of "poet-chief . . . presid[ing] over an indigenized national identity," Ridge, "a mixed race Anglo-Cherokee," did so by poetically anticipating "'a universal amalgamation of the races' [that] positioned him . . . to be the poet of a . . . radically conceived 'half-breed' nation." Living in 1840s-and-1850s gold-rush California "where the convergence of disparate cultures fulfilled [Ridge's] vision of cultural amalgamation," Ridge wrote and publically presented poetry, like "Hail to the Plow!," that revels in "the 'strange compounds' of the state's international population" and ultimately depicts "the Golden State as a local culture existing separately and distinctly from the larger nation . . . a node in a network of global forces." As such, "the California of Ridge's imagination" and poetry, a geographic and poetic space that seems "at once local and global," becomes, as Whitley characterizes it, "a compelling alternative to the American nation." The chapter ends with Whitley comparing Ridge's California (a space "whose blending of white and Native elements heralded a new internationalism") to Whitman's "Mannahatta" (a place which Whitley sees Whitman treating as "a global city that had remained faithful to its indigenous heritage"), characterizing both as spaces "where the fusion of white and Native influences opened the [respective locales] to the larger world." In Whitley's estimation, the conceptualization of these spaces as social, if not in

some sense physical, “island geographies” nevertheless peopled by individuals of diverse cultures (and races) “allowed both poets to imagine a place where national identity would be diffused first by a union of white and Native elements and then by the world at large,” potentially diffusing the nation—and perhaps the notion of a “nation”—into something increasingly more cosmopolitan.

In his final chapter, Whitley draws upon the implications of the previous chapters to challenge the “prevailing assumption . . . that, prior to the Civil War, Whitman viewed the office of national bard rather narrowly, believing that his sole responsibility was to write lyric poems about distinctive features of the United States” and to replace this critical narrative with one in which Whitman experiences and articulates “a complex set of affiliations that put national allegiance into tension with deeply felt loyalties both to subcultures within the United States and to communities beyond national borders.” In this chapter, Whitley explicates this argument largely through a reading of “A Broadway Pageant,” in which he contrasts Whitman’s feelings of solidarity with “the crowd” of local working-class New Yorkers both to his feelings of pride for being a citizen of the American nation and to his feelings of belonging to a larger-than-national community that is summoned into existence by the arrival of the Japanese envoy commemorated in the poem—a sense of conflicting loyalties that, Whitley claims, not only pervades Whitman’s otherwise “nationalist” poetry, but gives birth to the unique poetic character of the “Walt Whitman” we meet in *Leaves of Grass*, “one of the roughs” of the local New York breed and a “kosmos” or cosmopolitan citizen of the world.

Whitley’s investigation of the way in which these poets articulate “a set of tensions between global, local and national influences” as opposed to “any sort of straightforward and unproblematic nationalism” not only charts the surprising similarities that mark the verse of four otherwise disparate nineteenth-century writers, it also recovers a body of neglected work in the process (a considerably laudable feat by itself). It also successfully complicates Whitman’s poetic nationalism to such a degree that scholars writing about Whitman’s nationalist tendencies will now, following Whitley, need to take a more nuanced approach. Still, there are elements of the work that bear additional scrutiny. For example, while Whitley performs much of this work by employing a model that charts what he describes as competing “tensions” between multiple loyalties and allegiances, his readings nevertheless suggest the possibility that what made “America” attractive to an otherwise diverse group of nineteenth-century individuals was the way in which they felt at liberty to conceptualize the nation as a social and political sphere that, at its ideal, made allowance for, and maybe even encouraged, multiple allegiances. This competitive model, it should be noted, is one admittedly suggested by Whitman (who describes himself as “encouraging competitors”), but I see little in Whitley’s actual readings to suggest that these multiple allegiances necessarily vie with one another for some type of prominence instead of operating, as I believe Whitley’s readings nevertheless suggest they do, more symbiotically, with one set of loyalties simultaneously energizing and being energized by another. Additionally, Whitley’s final chapter, which focuses on “A Broadway Pageant” to engage the question of Whitman’s own nationalism, relies heavily on readings of the *Calamus* poems in order to explain how Whitman conceptualized homosocial and homosexual relationships

as the catalyst for bonding groups of men together in national, sub-national, and larger-than-national communities. This *Calamus*-derived model makes Whitman appear strangely uninterested in including women in the different communities he claims allegiance to in “A Broadway Pageant”—despite the fact that the poem’s depictions of the sub-national “crowd” he “merge[s]” with and the larger-than-national “pageant” he joins are never characterized as solely male. Still, these shortcomings do not significantly undermine the considerable contribution that this book makes in not only recovering the work of otherwise neglected nineteenth-century writers, but in expanding our understanding of the complex nature of the “nationalism” championed by Whitman and the “equals” that he hungered for. As such, this book is sure to influence scholarly discussions of Whitman’s nationalism, and nineteenth-century nationalism more generally, for years to come.

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ALAN BOTSFORD. *Walt Whitman of Cosmic Folklore*. Spokane, Washington: Sage Hill Press, 2010. 294 pp.

Emerson famously said that *Leaves of Grass* resembled “a mixture of the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *New York Herald*”; so Alan Botsford, one of Whitman’s “poets to come,” combines in *Walt Whitman of Cosmic Folklore* poetry, criticism, dialogues, myths and folktales, hip-hop rhymes, and postmodern surfaces interwoven with the wit and wisdom of Whitman’s visionary embrace of the reader. Botsford is an American poet living in Japan, the author of two poetry collections, *A Book of Shadows* (2003) and *mamaist: learning a new language* (2002), and an Associate Professor of American Literature at Kanto Gakuin University in Yokohama, where he co-edits *Poetry Kanto*, Japan’s leading bilingual poetry journal.

Books about Whitman written by contemporary poets often make for satisfying reading, and Botsford’s book is no exception, for Walt Whitman as poetic progenitor stands as the great exception to Harold Bloom’s thesis on the “anxiety of influence.” From the late Eliot to Langston Hughes, Allen Ginsberg, and C.K. Williams, poets are enabled rather than intimidated by Whitman’s looming presence. Spencer may have sought to “over-go Oriosto,” and Blake wrestled famously with Milton’s angel, but what would it mean to “overgo” Walt Whitman? What would such a poetry look like?

Befitting its precursor, *Walt Whitman of Cosmic Folklore* is a unique book. In many ways it recalls the Whitman imagined by the early disciples, such as Richard Maurice Bucke and Edward Carpenter. Here, Whitman speaks as a spiritual teacher, poet, and guide, aligned less with the then newly-minted spiritual movements of the nineteenth century than with those popular today in the West, such as Zen Buddhism and Jungian-inflected anthropology and psychology popularized by mythologists like Joseph Campbell and psychologists like James Hillman. This spiritual focus offers a refreshing read, for, as I have argued elsewhere, Whitman saw himself first and foremost as a spiritual and religious poet.