



Wilson, Ivy G., ed., *Whitman Noir: Black America and the Good Gray Poet*

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rists to reflect on Whitman as a political writer, *A Political Companion to Walt Whitman* provides a rich and compelling view of Whitman's political insight and teaching, his shortcomings in relation to race, slavery, and women, and his enduring radicalism as a democratic visionary who shared many of the concerns of contemporary political theory. As Seery rightly observes in his superb introduction: "it is, in fact, a great time for political theorists and their students to read in and around Whitman. Many of our contemporary concerns seem to be echoic of Whitman's stirrings: democracy's discontents and aspirations, America's boundaries; nationalism, transnationalism, post-colonialism, and globalization; individualism versus aggregation; identity versus difference; gender, sexuality, race, and class concerns; civic religion; war; postmetaphysics; the pluralized subject; cultural politics. In many ways, political theorists in America have already been working for quite some time on manifold Whitmanesque themes, and it may be time to draw explicit attention to that unrhymed legacy" (4).

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IVY G. WILSON, ed. *Whitman Noir: Black America and the Good Gray Poet*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2014. xx + 210 pp.

Halfway through Ivy G. Wilson's *Whitman Noir: Black America and the Good Gray Poet*, Christopher Freeburg writes: "Whitman was a racist, and he did subscribe to white supremacist ideas and attitudes" (90). Freeburg's assessment here intuits, I think, the contradiction that sometimes complicates this necessary and often thrilling collection of essays. For many, Whitman remains *the* democratic poet of America, and so confusion easily abounds when Whitman's racist politics are unearthed. This is a pertinent issue that cropped up last year at Northwestern University—where Wilson works—when M.A. music student Timothy McNair protested the vaunting of Whitman as a democrat by refusing to perform a musical setting of his poetry, which led to a failing course grade. Instead of definitively sorting out Whitman's attitudes toward Afro Americans, *Whitman Noir* productively engages his conflicted inheritance, paying homage to an underappreciated and longstanding tradition of black authors embracing rather than rejecting Whitman's poetry. Natasha Trethewey exemplifies this collection's wide-ranging engagement with Whitman on race when she writes, "From where I stand, it's easy to feel the kinds of contradictions evident in Whitman's work, those things he revealed both intentionally and inadvertently" (171). Indeed, Whitman's specters of blackness, and our own haunting by his white supremacy, offer another valence to the *noir* of this collection's title, all the more striking for its understatement.

Whitman Noir is divided into two parts, the first comprised of scholarly essays on the relation of Whitman to blackness and of subsequent black writers to Whitman by—aside from Wilson and Freeburg—Ed Folsom, Amina Gautier, Matt Sandler, and Jacob Wilkenfeld. The second part of the book reprints previously published personal and political reflections on Whitman

by Trethewey and June Jordan, as well as publishes for the first time short pieces by Rowan Ricardo Phillips (on García Lorca and Whitman) and George Hutchinson (on visiting Whitman's home and grave in Camden). C. L. R. James, Paul Laurence Dunbar, Langston Hughes, Ralph Ellison, Martin Delany, James Weldon Johnson, and Yusef Komunyakaa, along with many of the book's own contributors, provide testament to the diverse ways black writers have invoked Whitman. This is a reckoning that is consistently laudatory and skeptical, if not downright aghast, of Whitman. One can appreciate, for instance, Jordan's deep alienation from her New Critical schooling while being confounded by her lament over "the peculiar North American vendetta against Walt Whitman"—which, thankfully, seems dated today (157). It is hard not to love, though, her earnest and playful pronouncement: "Listen to this white father; he is so weird" (158).

The first three essays of this collection—by Folsom, Gautier, and Sandler—are the most striking. Folsom shows how Whitman's temporary persona as the "mash'd fireman" in "Song of Myself" is based upon—both historically and in the poet's drafts—a black fireman (unmentioned in the published poem) for whom white faces become visible: "White and beautiful are the faces around me, the heads are bared of their fire-caps" (5). Whitman, we learn, erases blackness in legible ways, inscribing through the development of his corpus the formative presence as well as the increasing absence of slaves and freedmen. In the following essay, Gautier mines Whitman's 1842 temperance novel *Franklin Evans, or The Inebriate* with dogged singularity, emerging with the sterling conclusion that Evans' storied self-possession is only won through his ownership of Louis—the brother of the creole slave Margaret to whom Evans is briefly married. "Whitman shows," writes Gautier, "that Evans' own self-mastership is ultimately dependent upon his ownership of Louis" (47). Whitman thereby unravels the *intemperance is slavery* metaphor that animated the Washingtonian temperance reformers of the time, showing how temperance here literally means mastery over another. This is an important excavation of Whitman's seldom-read novel.

Matt Sandler's essay on Whitman in New Orleans is, by my lights, the crowning gem of this collection. Sandler reflects on the auction block passage in the poem we have come to know as "I Sing the Body Electric," that "the slave must be denuded so that his humanity can be made apparent," echoing from another angle Gautier's argument that Evans' own humanity can only be confirmed through owning another's (67). Sandler strikingly pairs Whitman's prose feuilletons of New Orleans street life with Walter Benjamin's suggestion that "botanizing on the asphalt" composes this genre (62). Through fascinating elucidations of carnival, zombies, and both European and Caribbean predecessors in Whitman's verse, New Orleans itself becomes the ultimate Whitmanian collage, dialectically marrying social subjection and suggestive, furtive, liberations: "Surrounded by absolute bondage, the city provided some of its black residents with an extravagant, seemingly metaphysical liberty" (65). It is here, we are left convinced, that Whitman caught scent of the same liberty in 1848 that flowered in 1855 with *Leaves of Grass*.

Perhaps Whitman's own weirdness, as Jordan has it, is responsible for some of the confusions that crop up when reading across this book's essays. Trethewey notes in an aside that Whitman "did not believe blacks capable of exercising the vote" (169), whereas Folsom offers Whitman's own words: "As to general suffrage, after all, since we have gone so far, the more general it is the better. I favor the widest opening of the doors. Let the ventilation and area be wide enough, and all is safe" (26). Folsom explains, though, how this passage was itself erased from *Democratic Vistas* only to be published in the "Notes Left Over" section of *Collect*. Timothy McNair (the Northwestern student mentioned earlier) based his assessment of Whitman on a conflicting passage on enfranchisement: "As if we had not strained the voting and digestive caliber of American Democracy to the utmost for the last fifty years with the millions of ignorant foreigners, we have now infused a powerful percentage of blacks, with about as much intellect and calibre (in the mass) as so many baboons." *Whitman Noir* does not include this latter passage, nor does it mention McNair's protest, which was suppressed by his music professor, as well as the music school dean.

Do we know what Whitman definitively thought of black enfranchisement? Whitman was not definitive but conflicted in many of his views, and two people reading different essays in this volume might emerge with contradictory impressions concerning Whitman's pronouncement on the same issue. This is mostly likely due to the eclecticism of this collection, which seeks—laudably—to bring to the fore black authors' engagement with Whitman. Yet part of our confusion stems, I suspect, from a persistent wish among scholars in particular that Whitman not be the white supremacist he was. As Freeburg muses in reference to the reconstruction era: "Given Whitman's concerns during a time of rampant violence against the black male body, I find it odd that Whitman did not address the vast dynamic changes occurring in race relations between blacks and whites" (87). But isn't such erasure in part what white supremacy means? *Whitman Noir* might have been even more comprehensive if Wilson had addressed directly our wish for what Whitman should have been.

This book's essays on Whitman and race truly shine when they signal how Whitman's white supremacist politics could be entwined with his conception of human liberation, which Sandler rightly considers "metaphysical": metaphysically human, that is, rather than concretely concerned with (black) human rights. I was disappointed therefore not to find any mention of Whitman's 1856 pamphlet *The Eighteenth Presidency!*, which, while unpublished in his lifetime, provides a fascinating drafting of his attitudes toward the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law. Here Whitman opposes the law not because of his identification with runaway slaves, he tells us, but because of its redundancy to the organic compact of the U.S. Constitution. He implores that escaped slaves "must" be delivered back to their owners, and that slavery should be opposed "on account of the whites, and [...] abolished for their sake." As Peter Coviello has shown, Whitman's white supremacy was, in its way, utopian—the content of his broadly Jacksonian democratic politics. Whitman and his fellow Free Soilers felt that whites should be free from blacks and slavery just as they should be free from the degradations of wage labor. Theirs was a popu-

list racism, which shouldn't be so unfamiliar to us today. While Whitman's attitude toward Black Americans cannot simply be reduced to these politics, understanding the logic of Free Soilers goes a long way toward explaining the nature of his white supremacy.

Finally, *Whitman Noir* includes a useful annotated selected bibliography of writings dealing with Whitman and blackness. One essay that stands out in this final list is Folsom's seminal "Ethiopia and Lucifer: Whitman, Race, and Poetics before the Civil War and After" (2000). Indeed, several of the pieces in this collection—including Folsom's own—appear to rotate in the orbit of that earlier essay. The authoritative manner in which it dealt with Whitman on race has laid, along with Martin Klammer's *Whitman, Slavery, and the Emergence of Leaves of Grass* (1995), the groundwork for the first half of *Whitman Noir*. Readers can also find here the paper trail of Langston Hughes's deep appreciation of Whitman's poetry, and his early (1953) defense of Whitman's art against accusations of racism.

Whitman Noir serves as a welcome rejoinder to McNair's plea that "we have an honest discussion about the relevance" of Whitman's racism to his poetry. For better or worse, this collection remains at times as contradictory as Walt was, its strength of eclecticism also being its weakness. For me one of this book's great pleasures was in being led outside of it to read poets like Komunyakaa and Dunbar for the first time. For any reader under-versed in the African American literary tradition, Wilson provides a constellation of authors offering an expansive sense of how Whitman is, indeed, our American poet. These essays at their best lay further stepping-stones toward "the authentic New World vision" Jordan herself discovered, weirdly and commonly enough, through reading Whitman (157).

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WESLEY RAABE, ed. "walter dear": *The Letters from Louisa Van Velsor Whitman to Her Son Walt*. *The Walt Whitman Archive*, ed. Ed Folsom and Kenneth M. Price. whitmanarchive.org, 2014.

The Walt Whitman Archive now offers the most comprehensive representation of Louisa Van Velsor Whitman's life and thought to date. As if anticipating the question "In what ways does Louisa Van Velsor's life merit careful critical attention?," Wesley Raabe, the editor of Louisa's letters to Walt recently published on the *Archive*, answers in his long and illuminating introductory essay: "The full range of her letters exert their own gravity: they move the center of orbit in family correspondence from Walt to his mother, they highlight her wide range of social interactions and her verbal inventiveness in spite of the grating burden of financial dependence, they illuminate some familiar phrases in Walt's poetry and correspondence, and they may invite scholars to reconsider the impetus for Walt's first post-Civil War revision of *Leaves of Grass*." Raabe goes on to propose that another merit of Louisa's letters "is that they are a rare extended record of the life of a working-class woman during