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To Walt Whitman, America

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Review

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Price, Kenneth M. *To Walt Whitman, America*. University of North Carolina Press, \$19.95 softcover ISBN 807855189

Community of individuals

Whitman embodied America

Walt Whitman is one of the foundational figures in American culture. His basic intellectual dilemma, which he grappled with in his life and poetry, was the still unanswered question of how to give a genuine sense of community to an individualistic, egalitarian democracy, as George Fredrickson has noted. If you follow the beat of your own drum, and repudiate external authority, how can you also be part of an organic community? For Whitman, comradeship became the core spirit of a democratic culture; it took the form of egalitarian friendship, a social manifestation of democratic ideals.

Despite his ideal of comradeship, Whitman fell short, in both his life and poetry, of egalitarian democracy. He spoke primarily for and to white working men, though in his poetry he came much closer to achieving equality with others. Poetry transformed him into a protean self who could cross and collapse racial and gender boundaries. The core spirit of democratic culture was thus not only comradeship, but the poetic form. As a result, his writings and poetic self became far more significant than his life and historical self, to the degree that his poetry has become one of the most influential forms of protest literature in the 20th century. Words mattered more than action for Whitman and his readers.

Kenneth Price explores in rich detail the legacy of Whitman's vision of comradeship. He notes that Whitman has had a greater impact on cultures worldwide than any writer since Shakespeare. The book's title, **To Walt Whitman, America**, suggests something of this impact; it stems from a letter sent to Whitman from abroad, with an address that said merely Walt Whitman, America, as if to suggest not only that Whitman was famous, but that he was

America--embodied America--a view later held by Ezra Pound and Malcolm Cowley, among others. Whitman of course was pleased to receive the letter.

Price is one of the preeminent scholars of Whitman, and **To Walt Whitman** reflects his extraordinary knowledge. In a series of case studies, ranging from well-known writers and artists to filmmakers, Price leads us on a journey of Whitman's influence in America from the Civil War to the present, which is far more sweeping than you would have imagined. Like the war itself, Whitman continues to shape Americans' self-conceptions, and for this reason alone, the book should be required reading for anyone interested in the Civil War era. It is one of those rare cognac books: sparse yet rich and subtle, one to savor and spend time with and not consume too quickly. There are surprises on almost every page. Who would have guessed, for instance, that D.W. Griffith, creator of the stunningly successful and deeply racist *Birth of a Nation* (1915), so admired Whitman that he said he would rather have written one page of *Leaves of Grass* than to have made all the movies for which he received world acclaim. And in *Intolerance* (1916) Griffith sought to adapt Whitman's epic poetry to film. Like *Leaves of Grass*, *Intolerance* emphasizes the grittiness of life and eternal rebirth; and the central thread linking the disparate stories in the film is a recurring scene of Lillian Gish rocking a cradle, drawn from Whitman's *Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking*. Price is especially good at exploring the contradiction of one of the 20th century's more notable racist filmmakers borrowing from a 19th century champion of democratic equality.

There are numerous other surprises as well. Edith Wharton, an elite among elites who memorialized the leisure class of which she was part, drew heavily on Whitman in her life and art. The photographer and painter Ben Shahn, as well as the novelist and historian John Dos Passos, also borrowed heavily from Whitman's notion of comradeship. Bernard Malamud identified Whitman's poetry with the plight of German-Jewish refugees on the eve of World War II. And William Least Heat Moon, Ishml Reed, and Gloria Naylor saw Whitman as a kindred spirit; all of them shared a deep interest in racial passing and its implications, whether from black-to-white and Indian-to-white, or white-to-black (and Indian). After reading this book, you will want to run out and watch *Intolerance*, *Sophie's Choice* (1982), *Bull Durham* (1988), and *Love and Death on Long Island* (1997), films that depend on Whitman for their vision of comradeship and society.

Given the book's immense scope, there are understandably a few oddities. The broad and diverse school of Whitman that Price develops overlooks, perhaps necessarily, how changing memories and influences of Whitman may have reflected changing conceptions of democracy. The children of Whitman all seem to embrace a similar conception of comradeship as the core spirit of democratic culture, regardless of when they lived. More curiously, while Price shows how Whitman subverted or collapsed class and racial boundaries, the Whitmanian sexual self seems more fixed than protean. For Price, Whitman is solidly homosexual rather than a bisexual being who blurs sexual boundaries. In his otherwise brilliant chapter on Wharton, he casts Wharton as heterosexual, her lover (William Morton Fullerton) as bisexual, and Whitman as homosexual, with little wiggle room between these categories. But these oddities do nothing to deflate this immensely rewarding and important book.

John Stauffer is the author of The Black Hearts of Men: Radical Abolitionists and the Transformation of Race (2002), which won the Frederick Douglass Book Prize and was the Lincoln Prize runner-up. He is Professor of English and the History of American Civilization Program at Harvard University, and is completing a new book, By the Love of Comrades: American Interracial Friendships, History and Myth. He can be reached at stauffer@fas.harvard.edu.