Book Review
To Walt Whitman, America **by Kenneth M. Price**
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Price has also generously made the entire text available online via *The Walt Whitman Archive*

Kenneth M. Price is the Hillegass Professor of American Literature at the University of Nebraska—Lincoln. He is the author of *Whitman and Tradition: The Poet in His Century* (Yale, 1990); editor of *Walt Whitman: The Contemporary Reviews* (Cambridge, 1996); co-editor of *Dear Brother Walt: The Letters of Thomas Jefferson Whitman* (Kent State, 1984); and co-editor with Ed Folsom of *Re-Scripting Walt Whitman: An Introduction to His Life and Work* (Blackwell, 2005). He is an editor—with Susan Belasco and Ed Folsom—of the recent book, *Leaves of Grass: The Sesquicentennial Essays* (Nebraska, 2007), a collection of papers from a conference on Whitman held at the University of Nebraska in 2005. Also, Price is co-director with Folsom of *The Walt Whitman Archive*.

To Walt Whitman, America (2004) is a collection of six thematically-linked essays that chart Whitman's reception among several communities of readers. The clusters of readers reflect the emphasis on race, gender, and sexuality (and to a much lesser extent, class) that has characterized literary and cultural studies since the publication of his most influential book.

Price's *Whitman and Tradition* helped to begin the trend of examining Whitman as a self-conscious shaper of his image, and he called attention to establishment and growth of Whitman's reputation in the years immediately after his death, when Victorianism was giving way to modernism. *To Walt Whitman, America* begins where Price's last book left off, with Whitman being celebrated in George Santayana's "The Genteel Tradition in American Philosophy" (1911) and *The Last Puritan* (1935). In such works, Whitman's marginality becomes a basis for his canonization as "the only one truly American" (33). In that sense, Walt Whitman *is* America

because he embodies everyone who was once excluded. On those terms, Whitman should be the exemplary poet of a multicultural America.

But not everyone is willing to accept Whitman as their heroic spiritual grandfather, at least not without serious reservations. In the last couple decades it has become increasingly difficult to believe that Whitman can encompass all of America; his vision of synthesis is, for some, a beautiful dream, for others, it is a form of coercion—rank with the stench of racism, sexism, imperialism, and capitalism—erasing difference and containing all within a nostalgic vision of America that restores an imagined cultural homogeneity.

Price doesn't mount a direct refutation of such claims, but he does show the adaptability of Whitman to a variety of communities, showing clearly how the poet cannot be dismissed as a mystical front-man for sanctimonious white liberals. If Whitman "asked readers to accede to his version of America," Price writes, "it was also with the belief that these very readers and writers, paradoxically, must revise him as they strive to realize themselves and remake America" (8). Price emphasizes the flexibility of Whitman's image, how the poet was constructed and reconstructed by a variety of interpretive communities, particularly fiction writers, artists, and filmmakers. "Whitman is so central to practices and formulations of American culture, past and present," Price writes, "that we may use his life, work, ideas, and influence to examine major patterns in our culture over the last 150 years" (5).

And yet, *To Walt Whitman, America* does not wholly accept the fragmentation of a national culture and its literary history. Price stresses the complementarity of *unum* with *pluribus* in Whitman's vision for America. As he puts it, "Whitman was not interested in developing multiple cultures in the United States but instead in helping to realize *one* culture, a complex yet unified and distinctive people" (8). In the end, however, there is no definitive Whitman, nor should there be one. There is only a collection of "Whitmans" constructed and

reconstructed by clusters of readers in the same way that national identity renews itself over time. The center holds—it contains multitudes—by its capacity to accommodate difference and tolerate ambiguity.

The first chapter, "Whitman in Blackface" (9-36), examines "how Whitman crafted a poetic identity on the color line, interstitially, between racial identities" (6). Price makes a case for Whitman's liminality, which helps to account for his usability by a wide range of readerly communities: Whitman is often simultaneously in and out of anybody's game. Moreover, Price argues, Whitman may be regarded as having affinities with African-Americans on the basis of marginality stemming from his class, regional origin, sexual identity, and as the target of censorship. Price asserts that Whitman's critics made him—like Toni Morrison's Bill Clinton—into what might be called an honorary African-American: "They made him, as it were, black" (10).

Whitman's Bowery B'hoy persona, for example, suggested racial contamination—"association with immigrant groups, moral degeneracy, and working-class culture" (29). Price notes the presence of blackface minstrelsy in the working-class culture of Whitman's youth and suggests that his poetic voice may be, in part, an appropriation of that cultural form: he "worked in a way somewhat akin to a blackface performer as he disrupted genteel expectations and crossed gender and racial lines" (30). Such a pose—combined with Whitman's celebration of street culture—was calculated to offend the prevailing genteel literary sensibilities of New England (with a few notable exceptions, such as Emerson). Literary elites generally regarded Whitman as un-American rather than as the self-proclaimed "American Bard," and that unites Whitman with America's diverse future rather than its more homogenous past.

Perhaps it is a rhetorical stretch to associate Whitman with the predicament of African-Americans: no one was going to lynch Whitman in the Draft Riots (although his sexual orientation may have made him the target of mob violence if we accept one controversial account). But Price clearly presents Whitman not as a smug white liberal, but as someone who understood marginality from his own experiences and who eventually came to place those experiences—combined with a desire to be part of America—at the center of his poetic project. In one of the most important sections of the book, Price shows that Whitman's manuscripts—in this case the recently recovered "Talbot Wilson" notebook—reveal how the poet was tinkering with some radical notions for his era. Whitman humanizes his African-American subjects, and he shows considerable hostility towards slaveholders: at one point Whitman calls for their reproductive degeneration, perhaps expressing an awareness of the sexual violence inherent in slavery. Price also gives some evidence that Whitman considered portraying African-Americans as agents in their own liberation rather than as solipsistic projections of his own poetic ego, and, in the process, Whitman "offers one of the first attempts by a white author to narrate through a black voice and provides a compelling illustration of the power of racial crossing in the making of a complex intellectual identity" (17).

Whitman saw slavery as a contradiction in a nation dedicated to freedom—his grass grows "among black folks as among white"—but he was not quite willing to believe in racial or ethnic equality. Price acknowledges Whitman's tendency to "exalt noble black people in the distant past and distant future" instead of the present (18). "Whitman's blind spot," he writes, "was in his inability to envision or his unwillingness to promote the right of blacks to full citizenship" (18). In that sense, Whitman's racial views reflect the rhetorical strategies of middle-class abolitionists, who emphasized human sympathy—rather than human equality—as a means of overcoming racial hatred. If such a project is to be denounced, then, Price argues later

in the book, one can equally take issue with Frederick Douglass, who rallied white listeners against slavery using all the strategies of then-fashionable sentimentalism.

The first chapter—somewhat eclectic in its organization—also offers an innovative re-reading of the famous image by Alfred Jacob Miller, *The Trapper's Bride* (1837), noting that Whitman does not render the image exactly in his poem; in "Song of Myself," the trapper's " hand rested on his rifle . . . . the other hand held firmly the wrist of the red girl" (26). The firm, coercive grasp is not in Miller's image, suggesting Whitman's complex understanding of the violence of American continental domination. It is an important detail gleaned from comparative visual and textual close reading that relates well to the more extensive work recently undertaken by Ed Folsom, Ruth Bohan, and others on the visual record with regard to Whitman.

In this chapter, Price also revisits a portion of a notable essay he published in *American Literature*: "Thomas Wentworth Higginson, William Sloane Kennedy, and the Question of Whitman," (73 [September 2001]: 497-524.) In his examination of the Whitman-Higginson relationship, Price presents the colonel as a representative of the increasingly reactionary conservatism of New England in the post-bellum era. Higginson may have been among those who succeeded at getting *Leaves* banned in Boston. It shows that Whitman had enemies, although Price does not address the degree to which Whitman publicized the disdain of literary and cultural elites. Their opposition was an essential part of Whitman's project; and he courted their rejection with more energy than they devoted to bestowing it. And, of course, Whitman finally became famous—and lionized by many elites, including Andrew Carnegie—in the years following the Boston banning: it was a *succes de scandale.* In effect, Price appears to accept the narrative created by Whitman and his disciples because it affiliates the poet with the downtrodden and marginalized.

The essay concludes with affirmation of the unifying power of Whitman's poetry. Price includes a mural by Sidney Goodman from inner-city Philadelphia showing an African-American boy with upraised fist with a quote from Whitman. And Whitman is linked with the improvisational verse of Mohammed Ali (notably in the context of Harvard, seemingly closing the gaps constructed on the basis of race, class, and region). Price concludes, "African American commentators continue to find Whitman to be a provocative and useful resource in the ongoing search for something more complicated and satisfying than separation, a unified rather than a universalist culture" (36).

"Whitman in Blackface" is the most provocative essay in *To Walt Whitman, America*. However, Price's effort to put race at the center of *Leaves*—while strong as a refutation of the reductive view of Whitman (represented in this study by Peter Erickson and Ishmael Reed)—probably overstates the degree to which Whitman was associated with African-Americans and was the victim of a conservative literary culture. Whitman was proud of his ties to old-stock America; he was not unambiguously on the side of the immigrants, as shown by his opinions about Irish Catholics; and, of course, he was tinged by racist attitudes like many people who sincerely care about African-Americans. Whitman was never an abolitionist; his primary concern was white American workers: the people Whitman really knew and with whom he mostly identified, even as a national poet who could recognize the paradox of slavery in supposedly free country. Price is, of course, aware of those issues; in the introduction to the book, he writes that Whitman's "primary allegiance was to a particular segment of the population, white working men" (5). But Price's major argument in this essay is important and well-taken: it is a defense of a poet who transcended many of the limitations of his time and cultural background with regard to race, particularly at the time he was developing the

foundational ideas of *Leaves of Grass*. Whitman is not perfect, but he cannot be dismissed because he did not unambiguously mirror the beliefs of our time.

In the second chapter, "Edith Wharton and the Problem of Whitmanian Comradeship" (37-55), Price turns to issues of gender and sexuality. The essay draws on an earlier publication, "The Mediating 'Whitman': Edith Wharton, Morton Fullerton, and the Problem of Comradeship" (*Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 36 [Winter 1994], 380-402.) The essay continues the narrative of Whitman's growing reputation among the early modernists, making a strong case for the centrality of Whitman in Wharton's novels and some aspects of her life, particularly her relationship with William Morton Fullerton between 1908 and 1911. Price's key point here is that "Some members of the old blue-blood families also saw reason to identify with Whitman and his work" (37), an observation that seems to complicate the previous essay. By the beginning of the twentieth century, Whitman's reputation was being moved forward by younger cultural elites who were in rebellion against the strictures of Victorian life, particularly with regard to gender roles and sexual behavior. "The poet could serve as an autobiographical mask," for Wharton, Price writes, "*because* he was so different from her (in terms of class, gender, and preferred genre) yet crucially like her in being marginalized in a patriarchal, homophobic society" (47). Wharton, like Whitman, occupied a conflicted social space. She was situated between "the rigid mores of New England" and "the only slightly more tolerant ways of New York, and the relatively relaxed and open life of Paris" (41). Preferring sexually ambiguous men (by the standards of the time), she projected Whitman's qualities on Fullerton. And Whitman aided her thinking of male-female relations a potentially equal partnership, the "woman-as-comrade," so Whitman enabled her to "reconceptualize traditional hierarchical roles" (44).

Wharton's encounter with Whitman seems to have given her license for an extra-marital affair with Fullerton to whom she wrote more than 300 letters and about whom she kept a "love diary." At that time, Wharton even turned from prose to erotically charged poetry, and she started an unfinished biography of Whitman. Wharton had hoped Whitman "would bring to relations between men and women a new equality and depth of feeling" (47). But Fullerton could not live up to that ideal expressed in Whitman's poetry (not even Whitman could, as Anne Gilchrist found). Fullerton had many other lovers, including men and women; he took Wharton seriously as an intellectual, but he would not live up to her desire for physical commitment. And, in reaction, Wharton "played the self-sacrificing and self-effacing mother " and portrayed herself as a "romantic heroine" (45). The rhetoric of comradeship ultimately excluded women like Wharton. Once Wharton's initial enthusiasm for Whitman faded, along with her affair with Fullerton, Whitman continued to affect her depiction of sexuality in her novels, as Price shows in deft examinations of *The Custom of the Country* (1920), *A Son at the Front* (1923), *The Spark* (1924), *The Gods Arrive* (1932), and *A Backward Glance* (1934).

Price concludes, "Whatever her frustrations with comradeship, it was finally a term and a concept too critical for her to abandon. A marriage might be temporary, but comradeship, she asserts with a final romantic flourish, is eternal" (55). But it seems too that Price's implicit claim is bolder than his concluding observations about Wharton, since Whitman—as interpreted by Fullerton, among others—is animating a range of sexual activities and identities that are more problematic for stable social relations than the homo-hetero binaries to which Whitman is more commonly appropriated. Wharton's "Whitman gradually metamorphosed into an exclusionary Whitman," apparently because he could not be used to sustain exclusively heterosexual relationships of the kind Wharton seems to have wanted with Fullerton. Wharton wanted liberation from patriarchal marriage; she did not have anything like a modern queer sensibility

that Whitman seems to have represented to some other early admirers, such as those covered in the next chapter.

The third chapter, "Transatlantic Homoerotic Whitman" (56-69), addresses Whitman's reception among a cluster of English admirers: John Addington Symonds, Edward Carpenter, D.H. Lawrence, E.M. Forster, and Gilbert Adair, showing how they, like others, "appropriated Whitman for their own purposes" (56), in particular, to "establish a positive homosexual identity" (56). Price begins with a consideration of the "Calamus" poems, especially the expansion of the "Live Oak, with Moss" sequence, which originally did not contain any meditations on death mingled with its homoerotic elements. In the transition from private to public writing, Whitman seems to have drawn on the tradition of male-male affection in elegy and been influenced by religious linkage of sexual sin and death. It was this association of death and homosexuality to which several key British admirers responded because, Price argues, "at some level they felt themselves invisible, unrecognized, and, as it were, dead" (67).

Price sees a divide in English Whitmanites: "Two main groups existed, one (represented by Symonds) that trusted male-male love when it was spiritualized and the other (represented by Carpenter) ready to realize male affection in the flesh and to promote political change as part of a larger social program addressing cultural inequities" (60). Carpenter had radical plans for sexual transgression as a social force; his ideas attracted the positive attention of D.H. Lawrence and impacted the Whitman section of Lawrence's *Studies in Classic American Literature*, which exists in three forms: the 1919 draft, the periodical version of 1921, and book version of 1923. Each version is decreasingly frank, as Lawrence's discussion of comradeship becomes soldierly rather than erotic. In the final version, Lawrence makes the connection between homosexuality and death that Whitman explored in "Calamus"; he memorably calls Whitman's poems "fat tomb-plants, great rank grave-yard growths" (65). Lawrence seems to have moved away from

the radicalism of Carpenter towards the "spiritualizing homosexual apologists" (65). Price concludes that Lawrence was anxious about the influence of Whitman on his work; like Wharton, he is unable to come to terms with the radical implications of Whitman for sexual identity. In the end, Lawrence adopts a more conflicted view of Whitman, "both admiring and condemning him" (65). (The subject of Lawrence is taken up again more recently by M. Wynn Thomas in "Lawrence's Whitman," *Transatlantic Connections: Whitman U. S., Whitman U. K.*, Iowa, 2005, 193-225.) As a counterpoint, Price turns to E.M. Forster's *Maurice,* which was based on his experience at Millthorpe, where Carpenter lived with George Merrill. Unlike Lawrence's final comments on Whitman, Forster's work dramatizes both the spiritual and physical sides of homosexuality and favors the latter, viewing the connection between death and homosexuality as imposed from outside by the culture.

The chapter concludes with a summary and consideration of the film version of Gilbert Adair's *Love and Death on Long Island* (1990), directed by Richard Kwietniowski (1997), which "dramatizes and reverses the cultural movement across the Atlantic" (56). The film pulls together themes of homosexuality, spiritualized sexuality, and death, for example, in a scene involving the invocation of Whitman at a funeral, recalling the elegiac tone of "Live Oak." And yet the film ends on an incongruous optimistic note, which, according to Price, "speaks to the optimism and resiliency and capacity for joy within a post-Stonewall gay culture living under siege" (69).

The fourth chapter, "Xenophobia, Religious Intolerance, and Whitman's Storybook Democracy" (70-89), expands an earlier piece, "Whitman, Dos Passos, and 'Our Storybook Democracy'" in *Walt Whitman: The Centennial Essays* (Iowa, 1994, 217-225). Price shows how the novelist John Dos Passos and the muralist Ben Shahn used Whitman as a democratic symbol, to elevate the worker and to counter fascism. In the 1930s, Whitman's legacy was increasingly

associated with “immigration, religious and ethnic diversity, and the nature of Americanism” (70). Whitman was, of course, “an icon for American Leftists,” but, ironically, some regarded him as being as American as Plymouth Rock (71). Despite his Harvard education (or, perhaps, because of it), Dos Passos identified with the impoverished and excluded. Whitman represented freedom, and the poet is invoked in all of Dos Passos’ major works. For Price, Dos Passos was essentially a nostalgic, his “analysis is ultimately more mythic than historical, resting on a view of an idyllic golden age reminiscent of Whitman’s yearnings for primal purity in ‘Passage to India’” (75). Price turns to Ben Shahn, a social realist painter admired by Dos Passos. Shahn’s *Resources for America* murals for the Bronx General Post Office include Whitman preaching to the workers. Though Shahn experienced anti-Semitism in a time when Charles E. Coughlin rallied Catholics to hate Jews, he chose to identify with the working classes more than to maintain solidarity based on religion. Like Whitman, Shahn’s mural was censored, but the experience stiffened his spine in subsequent projects. And Price concludes with a consideration of Bernard Malamud’s “The German Refugee” (1963), showing how it responds to Whitman’s notions of brotherhood in a post-Holocaust context. The work involves a Jewish character named Oskar, who is writing about Whitman out of admiration for his sense of brotherhood. But Oskar abandons his wife—thinking wrongly that she is an anti-Semite; she dies at the hands of the Germans. Oscar kills himself in remorse. Price argues, “I would not agree with those who see Malamud in this story rejecting Whitman completely” because the idea of love is not negated by the tragic themes of the work. “If we think of *Leaves of Grass* as a living document accruing meanings that evolve with time and changing readers, the book was altered but not negated by the Holocaust” (89). Through the varying perspectives of writers and artists, Price uses the examples in this chapter to underline the varied ways in which “Whitman’s twentieth-century meanings were interarticulated with battles over the meaning of America” (89). Whitman’s

"comments on various groups of people are not altogether favorable nor altogether consistent, but the inclusivity, and tolerance, and nonhierarchical thrust of *Leaves of Grass* is unmistakable," Price concludes (89).

The next chapter, "Passing, Fluidity, and American Identities" (90-107), describes how William Least Heat-Moon, Gloria Naylor, and Ishmael Reed turn to Whitman to "define American identity and to imagine an inclusive society," though Reed takes a negative view of the poet's methods (90). The chapter focuses on the theme of racial hybridity and passing, adding new complications to the constructions of racial identity proposed in the first chapter. In *Blue Highways* (1983), for example, Heat-Moon adopts a Native-America persona, something for which he was criticized because he is not enrolled in the Osage Nation and for his problematic identification with Black Elk, whose authenticity is regarded as suspect. Price rejects such criticisms as informed by essentialism; he finds it "less useful and less possible to reach definitive conclusions about individuals than it is to interrogate the grounds of debate and the debate itself" (94). To that end, he turns to Gloria Naylor's *Linden Hills*, a novel about a gay man passing as straight, which is "suggestive about *why* Whitman has been so enabling for a multiethnic array of writers and *how* they have responded" (98). Price makes telling connections between Naylor's characters and Whitman's own attempts to pass in some contexts. According to Price, Heat-Moon and Naylor embrace the fluidity of identity, and, like Whitman, "attempt to balance the multi-racial resources that support and energize their work" (102).

On the other hand, Price's summary and analysis of Ishmael Reed's *Flight to Canada* (1976), while also about the complexities of having "tangled lineage," presents a writer who does not find Whitman liberating at all. Reed sees through Whitman's rough pose and radical politics, regarding him as the very type of a privileged aesthete whom the poet claimed to disdain: one finds him at a White House party sniffing a lily. For Reed, Whitman's fantasy of universal

identification is an expression of white privilege and a desire to restore a time where there wasn't so much difference around. Whitman's desire to pose as a white liberal helper of the racial underclass shows his inherent racism. Reed does not see Whitman as liberating but enslaving; he makes people into "things." Price defends Whitman by invoking Frederick Douglass: "Whitman's effort at sympathetic identification with the runaway slave, presumptuous and impossible though it may be to some critics, is precisely what Douglass asked of his white audience" (106). Unfortunately, in this context, it seems like an inadequate defense of Whitman, given that Douglass *was* a slave, and that he was forced by his abolitionist handlers in the early stages of his career to play a role for his white, presumably liberal audience. Price clearly disagrees with Reed—who represents a critical perspective that this book challenges—but he offers no explicit final judgment. "Whitman's malleability, explorations of passing, and centrality as an icon have made him irresistible for writers, who, in extraordinarily creative ways, reinvent him for their purposes" (107). Clearly, Price regards those purposes as profoundly myopic if they attempt to reduce Whitman to a spokesman for hypocritical liberalism among white elites.

The last chapter, "Whitman at the Movies" (108-138), is the most groundbreaking essay in the book in terms of the materials it covers. (An earlier version of the essay appeared as "Walt Whitman at the Movies: Cultural Memory and the Politics of Desire" in *Whitman East and West* (Iowa, 2002, 36-70). In this essay, Price examines the use of Whitman in films (excluding documentaries), beginning with D.W. Griffith's *Intolerance* and early American avant-garde films up to the recent past, showing how Whitman is "crucial for mediating our culture's understanding of same-sex love" (8). Though Whitman did not live long enough to see the Nickelodeon, earlier scholars have noted how *Leaves of Grass* has affinities with cinematic technique: the montage, for example, as used by Sergei Eisenstein. But Price starts by calling

attention, briefly, to the overlap between Whitman's later years in Camden and the development of film technology and techniques in nearby Philadelphia, where the University of Pennsylvania hosted the photographic motion studies of Eadweard Muybridge and his friend Thomas Eakins. Price goes on to note how Whitman was a "self-created star" and a visual celebrity—a subject taken up even more recently by David Haven Blake in *Walt Whitman and the Culture of American Celebrity* (Yale, 2006)—and considers how Whitman's "blending of seeming opposites—intimacy and publicity—is analogous to one of the most powerful effects of film" (112).

Price then describes a series of films in which Whitman figures. The most fascinating of these is surely *The Carpenter* (1913), which is, apparently, no longer extant (though some stills have survived). It was based on William D. O'Connor's short story in which Whitman unites a family torn asunder by the Civil War in a way, notes Prices, that recalls Van Wyck Brooks' use of Whitman in *America's Coming of Age* (1915), showing how the literary and filmic cultures were speaking to each other even in the earliest years of the silent era. After directing the controversial film, *The Birth of A Nation* (1915), Whitman-admirer D.W. Griffith, directed a four-part epic called *Intolerance* (1916), with each sequence linked by an enigmatic image of Lillian Gish rocking a cradle with intertitles drawn from "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking." Another major film from the silent era is Charles Sheeler and Paul Strand's *Manhatta* (1921), an avant-garde film documenting an area of the city with scenes linked by titles of Whitman's poems. The essay moves to films after the silent era, beginning with King Vidor's *Street Scene* (1931), which uses love plots to weave together the stories of several families of different ethnicities and religions. In the early years of film, Price observes, Whitman is used to break down barriers between people; much as he was a signifier of membership in a transatlantic homosexual community in earlier decades, Whitman in films became a "shorthand for signaling

passages across borders of class, religion, and geography" (120). In *Now, Voyager* (1941), for example, Whitman promises the female protagonist release from the sexual repression of her proper Boston upbringing (presumably in the orbit of T.W. Higginson).

The next section, "Representing Whitman in Reagan's America," notes a dramatic upswing in Whitman's filmic appearances. Since the 1980s, Whitman has been referenced in at least eighteen movies, typically as "a poet of love" in a heterosexual sense. But in this decade, filmmakers also begin to use "Whitman as a relatively unthreatening entryway into consideration of same-sex love" (125). In the subsequent discussion, Price moves "from least direct to most direct, from the homosocial to the homosexual, though not necessarily from the least to the most artful or honest" (126). He describes *Down by Law* (1986) and, more notably, *Dead Poets Society* (1988), which steadfastly denies the homoerotic implication of Whitman's poetry amid the realities of a boarding school for boys. Price also strongly criticizes *Beautiful Dreamers* (1991), which features Rip Torn as Whitman visiting Richard M. Bucke's Asylum in Canada. The film makes Bucke into a sunny, open-minded progressive when he was, as Price observes, "a steadfast enforcer of sexual norms" (129). The film does deal with the attachment between Bucke and Whitman, but it ultimately transforms Whitman into the muse of heterosexual marriage (and, Price observes, an affirmer of the masculine gaze at women). It comes as no surprise that the film ends with the asylum reformed through the magic combination of Whitmanic love and baseball. *Sophie's Choice* (1982) and *Bull Durham* (1988) are described by Price as "Much more honest and emotionally convincing" (130). The latter, for example, "probes the complexity or erotic desire and explores the unstable boundary between homosexual and homoerotic relations" (134). A few even more recent films embrace Whitman as a gay icon, including *The Incredibly True Adventures of Two Girls in Love* (1995) and *Love and Death on Long Island* (1997), which Price analyzes in chapter three as dealing complexly with issues of

age, class, nationality, and sexuality. Many films have neutralized Whitman as a poet of love overcoming all social repression, but Price makes it clear that "Whitman's meanings are not limited to a particular type of sexuality." In the end, "Whitman" remains capacious enough to be usable by filmmakers as readily as by novelists, painters, and poets.

To Walt Whitman, America is an eclectic book that shows the increasing richness and variety of Whitman studies. It brings together more than a decade of reflections on somewhat disparate subjects, all, nevertheless, united by the theme of Whitman's ability to animate and enrich the work of several interpretive communities. It successfully defends Whitman from the charge that he was simply an advocate for the interests of one group over another. It contains important analyses of the emergence and development of Whitman's poetry grounded in the manuscripts that Price knows so well as editor of the *Walt Whitman Archive*. It also suggests possibilities for new projects on, for example, Whitman recordings, Whitman documentaries, Whitman in material culture, Whitman in the schoolroom, along with the geography of Whitman's reception on the level of individual cities.

Price is right to equate "Whitman" with America, given the way the poet has mirrored the aspirations and fears of generations of Americans, as this book so clearly shows. We can no longer believe in a unified Whitman, but we can enjoy charting the various "Whitmans" that have emerged and will continue to emerge. To hold such a position is not to advocate for the Balkanization of American literature and culture; instead, Price favors "a less atomistic and essentialist goal" based on "fluid and cross-culturally enriched identities" (10). In that sense, Price's construction of Whitman is one that continues to speak to a nation that struggles with questions of inclusion and exclusion, freedom and coercion, and cohesion and dissent.