



Cohen, Matt. Whitman's Drift: Imagining Literary Distribution [review]

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REVIEWS



MATT COHEN. *Whitman's Drift: Imagining Literary Distribution*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2017. xviii + 269 pp.

Matt Cohen's *Whitman's Drift: Imagining Literary Distribution* is an innovative study of Walt Whitman's late career, one that shifts attention away from the poet himself to take up the question of how and where his poetry and his reputation circulated in the post-Civil War period. In chapters that are thematically and polemically linked but sharply different in their areas of focus, Cohen tracks the uptake of Whitman's poetry among working-class readers, the untimely circulation of his texts through unauthorized editions and translations, the extension of Whitman's reputation in areas of the country thought to be most impervious to his address—the South and Indian Country—and the new conditions of Whitman's transmission on the Internet. Meticulously researched and argued, Cohen's book is a significant contribution to Whitman studies, joining the work of scholars such as Martin T. Buinicki, M. Wynn Thomas, and Luke Mancuso in taking the late career seriously. Like these critics, Cohen shows how Whitman revised his poetic vision in the rapidly changing postwar environment, but his book is distinctive in moving beyond the saturating significance of the war to explore the poet's relationship to his growing reputation and the literary possibilities opened up by the consolidation of national markets.

The book's greatest impact, however, may turn out to be methodological. Book historians have long argued that literary critics need to look beyond the author to take into account the many intermediary figures who make literary culture possible—most obviously publishers, editors, reviewers, translators, booksellers, and librarians, but also those laborers involved in the production and circulation of literary works, including compositors, printers, book binders, wholesalers, cartmen, smugglers, and traveling salesmen. Literary critics have struggled to open up the vast middle ground of book distribution for analysis, gravitating instead to the

poles of production and reception—socialized versions of the author-reader dyad—where individual agency and cultural impact are more easily gauged. Cohen’s choice to focus on distribution, then, is a bold one. His choice of “drift” as the animating concept for his study represents a radical attempt to rethink authorial agency under the sign of distribution—that is, to approach literary culture without minimizing or erasing the middle stages required for the transmission of texts, the reliance of literary reputations on numerous other hands, and the perplexing temporalities produced by the staggered, uneven, and recursive relays between and among them.

As Cohen points out, “drift” was a significant term for Whitman, who used it to evoke random motion, haphazard aggregation, and stubborn remainder in major poems such as “As I Ebb’d With the Ocean of Life” as well in the cluster of poems gathered under the title “Sea-Drift” in the 1881 edition. Cohen calls on the association of “drift” with waywardness to describe processes of textual circulation that are not under the control or the direct superintendence of authors. For instance, in his first chapter, which asks whether and how Whitman’s poetic address to working-class readers reached laborers themselves, Cohen discusses a persistent disagreement between Whitman and his acolyte, Horace Traubel, who advocated a William Morris-inspired return to craft printing as a form of resistance to industrialized mass culture. But Whitman preferred cheap books that were widely available to expensive ones, even those that inscribed socialist values in their processes of production. Although studious of his image and a ceaseless marketer of his works, Whitman liked to give his books away and to imagine “the comparatively uncoordinated and unforced drift of his works through the literary marketplace” (45). “Drift” does a better job of capturing Whitman’s complex desire to cede control over circulation than the subtitle’s “distribution,” which suggests apportionment and dispersal from a source or center. Drift’s cognates in criticism and theory indicate the elusive territory Cohen stakes out in this book. The Situationists’ “*dérive*” was a technique for engaging the built environment and questioning the ideologies that were sedimented there; drift, by contrast, suggests directionless movement across an

uncertain geography. Michael Moon's focus on "dissemination" in his landmark study *Disseminating Whitman* (1990) explored the relationship of Whitman's radical body politics to his constant revision of *Leaves of Grass*, charting the poet's changing ideas about embodiment across the sequence of editions. Cohen, by contrast, is less interested in what Whitman meant than in understanding what Whitman meant to others, invoking the sense of drift as "intention, roughly or weakly signaled" (12).

A key scene for Cohen in understanding how Whitman reached working class readers is Whitman's delivery of the occasional poem "After All, Not to Create Only" at the 1871 Industrial Exposition in New York City. Cohen notes that the poem circulated in multiple forms and formats—as performance, as a pamphlet, in newspaper reports, and in critiques and parodies—all before being repurposed for the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia and incorporated into *Leaves of Grass* as "Song of the Exposition" in 1881. Cohen describes how the poet transformed the poem in the process of revision, making it "abstractly occasional" (59) so that it would apply to any such gathering, but his attention is mostly drawn to Whitman's claims about the original scene of reception, his interest in a crowd of manual labors gathered at the edges of the hall. Though skeptical about Whitman's reverential assertion that there were "five or six hundred partially-hushed work-men, carpenters, machinists and the like" (60) who overheard the performance, Cohen argues that, like the newspaper reviews of the event, this too is an important "distribution scene" (61), one that charts the drift of Whitman's reputation whether or not these workers cared to listen or could even hear the poem over the ambient noise of the fair. These workers may never read a word of Whitman's poetry, but Cohen argues that the poet's very appearance onstage in workers' garb would have enabled those assembled there to catch his drift.

The textual and performance history of "After All Not to Create Only" captures a number of aspects of Whitman's late career that most interest Cohen: the peculiar combination of accident and purposiveness favored by the poet; the simultaneous circulation of multiple versions of his poetry, a history that has been eclipsed

by previous critics' emphasis on the monolith of *Leaves of Grass*; and the staggered temporality of circulation that characterizes Whitman's popular reputation, a phenomenon that cannot be captured by the linear progression of editions. A key exhibit in Cohen's attempt to liberate criticism from its reliance on the sequence of editions of *Leaves of Grass* is the reappearance in the early 1880s of an unauthorized reprint of the 1860 edition, printed by Richard Worthington from the stereotype plates that were sold off in the bankruptcy of publisher Thayer and Eldridge. Cohen is fascinated by the way in which this book escapes the attention of both bibliographers and critics. It doesn't involve a resetting of type so, strictly speaking, it's not an edition, and Whitman's acceptance of a lump-sum payment from Worthington places the work in a gray area between piracy and legitimate publishing (Whitman delightfully calls the books "languid surreptitious copies" [85], transposing onto the books themselves qualities that fail to convey only censure). Cohen argues that the reappearance of an affordably priced 1860 edition may have spurred the sales of the authorized 1881 edition, helping to spread Whitman's reputation just as a new and improved edition was hot off the press. But the circulation in the 1880s of the 1860 edition poses a challenge to criticism that can't be solved simply by tinkering with timelines. In an interpretive experiment that recalls Jorge Luis Borges' hilarious burlesque of literary criticism "Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*," Cohen explores what it may have meant to have encountered Whitman's exuberant antebellum nationalism in the context of Reconstruction-era conflict, particularly given the absence of an accounting of the war in the 1860 *Leaves of Grass*. In "Pierre Menard," Borges offers parallel readings of identical lines from *Don Quixote*, first under the assumption that the text was written in the early seventeenth century, then as it was recomposed, or "arrived at" by his fictional modernist aesthete. Borges notes wryly that "the contrast in style is . . . vivid": "The archaic style of Menard—quite foreign, after all—suffers from a certain affectation. Not so that of his forerunner, who handles with ease the current Spanish of his time" (see *Labyrinths: Selected Stories & Other Writings*, ed. Donald A. Yates and James East Irby [1964], 43). Cohen's rereading of the 1860 edition as an 1880s text

similarly emphasizes how even formalist literary criticism is supported by assumptions about history, assumptions that are undermined by the disorderly circulation of Whitman's texts, the presence at any one time of multiple, competing versions of *Leaves of Grass*.

Cohen's book concludes with an account of the dissemination of Whitman's texts on *The Walt Whitman Archive* (whitmanarchive.org), for which he has edited the digital edition of Horace Traubel's *With Walt Whitman in Camden* as well as a vast collection of Whitman's own marginalia and annotations. While this chapter seeks to extend the concept of distribution-as-drift to the present day, the recoverable, mappable traces of global internet access, and the simultaneity suggested by the internet's timeless, constant availability seem sharply different from the uneven circulation of Whitman's poetry in books, pamphlets, and newspapers across a rapidly changing geographical terrain. Where the internet seems to make the most difference to a literary history of circulation is in critics' newfound access to digitized newspapers, which permit the tracking of an author's reputation at a local level and invite us to venture beyond the precincts of the book, whether we search and read these papers digitally or in print. Some of Cohen's most remarkable discoveries and haunting readings stem from his tracking of Whitman's post-war reputation in local contexts—in the *Long Islander*, the newspaper Whitman founded in 1838, and in the *Guntersville Democrat*, the home-town newspaper of an ardent Alabama devotee of Whitman's work, a formerly slave-owning, ex-Confederate soldier who recited Whitman's poetry at county fairs and named one of his ten children after the poet. Cohen's exploration of the extension of Whitman's reputation in the South and in Indian Country is a tour de force of argument; it also showcases his innovative combination of digital and conventional research. While one suspects that Cohen's editorial close reading of Traubel's remarkable, 9-volume record of Whitman's meandering daily conversations is the source of many of the discoveries that animate *Whitman's Drift*, Cohen consults a remarkable range of resources in pursuit of the outer edges of the circulation of the poet's work and reputation: Whitman's daybooks and correspon-

dence, trade journals, Supreme Court cases, local newspapers and their exchange lists, historical maps, and contemporary historical markers. Cohen's account of who was reading Whitman, how they understood him, and how Whitman himself grappled with evidence of the uncontrolled circulation of his work will surprise even seasoned Whitman scholars. His archival ingenuity ought to give a new generation of critics the tools to think and write about the relatively uncharted space between author and reader, production and reception.

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LINDSAY TUGGLE. *The Afterlives of Specimens: Science, Mourning, and Whitman's Civil War*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2017. xiv + 254 pp.

There are a host of scholars whose monographs have considered either Whitman's literary relationship to medical science or to grief and mourning practices with an especial focus on the Civil War. One thinks, perhaps, of M. Wynn Thomas's *The Lunar Light of Whitman's Poetry* (1987), Greg Eiselein's *Literature and Humanitarian Reform in the Civil War Era* (1996), Robert Leigh Davis's *Whitman and the Romance of Medicine* (1997), Harold Aspiz's *So Long! Walt Whitman's Poetry of Death* (2004), Mitchell Breitweiser's *National Melancholy: Mourning and Opportunity in Classic American Literature* (2007), Max Cavitch's *American Elegy: The Poetry of Mourning from the Puritans to Whitman* (2007), and Adam Bradford's *Communities of Death: Whitman, Poe, and the American Culture of Mourning* (2014). None of these, however, has sought to bring together the ways that Whitman's mourning of the lost soldiers of the Civil War is navigated through discourses both poetic and medical to anywhere near the degree that Lindsay Tuggle does in *The Afterlives of Specimens*. She has sought to triangulate Whitman's experience of and response to the war