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*The Works of James M. Whitfield: America and Other Writings
by a Nineteenth Century African American Poet* by James M.
Whitfield (review)

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lection's clarion call and the subsequent work of Sharon Holland, Rinaldo Walcott, Dwight McBride, and others, much work remains to bring nuance to conversations about the inherent quareness of blackness—almost always framed as the representational opposite of white heterosexuality, intellect, and supremacy—*because* of the long-standing homosexual implications of the term. This review aims to situate African American poetics as the locus for the alternative epistemes awaiting scholars who engage blackness through this lens of “the quare.”

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This complete collection of Whitfield’s extant writing makes a strong case for expanding the attention scholars of African American literature have so far paid him. Levine and Wilson take some worthwhile editorial risks to fill out their picture of Whitfield’s career, following recent trends in nineteenth-century American studies that emphasize the complexities of print culture and national identity. Readers of poetry will appreciate the inclusion of both Whitfield’s only complete volume of verse and his later occasional and periodical pieces, while more historicist scholars will find much of interest in his prose, which largely concerns the colonization movement.

Levine and Wilson include the entire 1854 pamphlet *Arguments, Pro and Con, on the Call for a National Emigration Convention*, which contains not only Whitfield’s letters to *Frederick Douglass’s Paper* in favor, but also short pieces by Douglass and William J. Watkins opposing. Flouting more conventional author-centric standards of textual editing, this decision thus affords a much more richly detailed picture of the debate. Whitfield’s support of this movement was not unique among his contemporaries, even the poets. George Moses Horton, for instance, fantasized of immigrating to Liberia from the late 1820s and finally managed to do so after the end of the Civil War. Whitfield entered the conversation at a later moment than Horton, and joined Martin Delany (on whom Levine has done extensive work elsewhere) in favoring the idea of emigration to the Caribbean or Latin America. Scholars working on the national limits of American studies and American identity have found colonization schemes useful sites for thinking through period attitudes towards imagined community, and these materials represent a useful repository for this kind of inquiry. For instance, the back-and-forth between Whitfield and Watkins over the “*proximity*” of black-nationalist thinkers and their conventions “*to those of our brethren who are in bonds*” illuminates perceived connections between the fates of enslaved and free blacks

via print and oratorical culture (132). Levine and Wilson frame these issues with attentive sophistication, and fill in crucial historical details. Their decision to build the last part of the book around Whitfield's later years in California also draws on contemporary critical preoccupations with nineteenth-century US geo-political imaginaries, and their biographical researches indicate that Whitfield transferred his hopes for free black community (if not proper nationalism) to the American West.

The pamphlet largely consists of a series of bravura performances by Whitfield, and Watkins begins each of his responses by complaining about the "interminable prolixity" of the poet's prose (141). Twentieth-century critics who downgraded Whitfield for the Victorian syntactic elaborations of his verse have ignored the political dimension it takes in these debates, and one hopes that the editors' decision to include this material will complicate later assessments. Whitfield's work ably toggles between Romantic vision and political rhetoric. Partly following the lead of Edward Whitley's reading of Whitfield in *American Bards: Walt Whitman and Other Unlikely Candidates for National Poet* (2010), Levine and Wilson compare him to Whitman several times. Like the good gray poet, Whitfield aspired to a kind of bardic nationalism and absorbed the contradictions of his moment. After all, his great poetic achievement comes in the form of an account of the fate of Black people in America, even as he vociferously advocated their emigration.

The fault that Watkins finds in Whitfield's prose, its "prolixity," actually comprises the virtues of his writing throughout the volume. At its most energetic and involving, Whitfield's syntax elaborates his conceits in serial subordinate clauses. In "How Long," he surveys the crimes of the slaveholders' republic, making comparisons to other forms of historical oppression:

Here might the cunning Jesuit learn—
 Though skilled in subtle sophistry,
 And trained to persevere in stern,
 Unsympathizing cruelty,
 And call that good, which, right or wrong,
 Will tend to make his order strong—
 He here might learn from those who stand
 High in the gospel ministry,
 The very magnates of the land
 In evangelical piety,
 That conscience must not only bend
 To every thing the Church decrees,
 But it must also condescend,
 When drunken politicians please
 To place their own inhuman acts
 Above the "higher law" of God,
 And on the hunted victim's tracks
 Cheer the malignant fiends of blood;
 To help the man-thief bind the chain
 Upon his Christian brother's limb,
 And bear to Slavery's hell again

The bound and suffering child of Him
 Who died upon the cross, to save
 Alike, the master and the slave (59–60).

This elaborate poetic sentence mimics the casuistry of slavery's more liberal apologists, and draws both religious and political justifications into the scope of its critique. He contrasts the American ideal of a separation between church and state with the notoriously scholastic Jesuits, who helped administer Spanish and Portuguese empires in Latin America and who participated in the violence of the Inquisition. The rich paradoxes of seventeenth-century writing that F. O. Matthiessen famously located as a key influence on American Renaissance writers thus also appears in the texture of Whitfield's poetic argument.

The editors note Whitfield's use of the tetrameter from his first volume to his late periodical verse from his years in California. With this line, his work rings of hymnal meter, but in longer pieces he strikes towards more grandiose, epic tones—like Longfellow or Tennyson. This attempt to bridge the increasingly distinct modes of lyric and epic writing has specific implications for African American literature. Whitfield's verse anticipates the preoccupation with the orality that would come to characterize the tradition. His most oft-cited lines, the opening of the title poem "America" travesty Samuel Francis Smith's popular patriotic song:

America, it is to thee,
 Thou boasted land of liberty,—
 It is to thee I raise my song,
 Thou land of blood, and crime, and wrong (41).

The poem's materials are resolutely public, but Whitfield's premise, that slavery perverts the ideals of the republic, needs the protections of private lyric individualism in the days of violent anti-abolitionist sentiment. In the context of John Stuart Mill's theory of lyric poetry as "overheard" and his endorsement of Wordsworth's poetic "emotion recollected in tranquility," these lines take a strange slant. Who could, after all, speak Whitfield's rich poetic sentences spontaneously? How do they correspond to a nascent Black public sphere? That Whitfield sold this sometimes deeply ironic and sharp-tongued volume from his barbershop or in his travels proves his bravery and the range of nineteenth-century public sentiment.

Whitfield never attempts to represent African American vernacular speech directly, but consistently works through figures of voice with political implications. In "Lines on the Death of John Quincy Adams," he writes:

Eloquence did his heart inspire,
 And from his lips in glory blazed,
 Till nations caught the glowing fire,
 And senates trembled as they praised! (48)

Following Shelley, Whitfield figures Adams as a Romantic Prometheus, promulgating the fire of liberty for the sake of humanity. Daniel Webster plays the role opposite Adams; in

“The Arch Apostate,” Whitfield depicts the great orator brought low by his endorsement of the Compromise of 1850, “now prostrate, groveling in the dust” (67). Elsewhere, the problem of language in general appears fundamental to the religious justification of the slave system: “How long, oh Lord! shall such vile deeds be acted in thy holy name[?]” (63). In a curious turn, the idea of the name projected across history also appears in Whitfield’s treatment of black subjects. The ode “To Cinque,” the leader of the Amistad rebellion, focuses on its subject’s survival in writing: “Thy name shall stand on history’s leaf, / Amid the mighty and the brave: / Thy name shall shine, a glorious light . . .” (49). In each of these cases, Whitfield works through problems at the intersection of orality and literature that would go on, later in the nineteenth century, to contextualize the emergence of the vernacular as the cardinal value in African American literature.

Whitfield’s work, and its representation in this generous volume, begs an expanded conception of Black Romanticism. Whitfield’s advocacy in both prose and verse adds a voice to the revolutionary period then ending that substantially broadens the historical picture. In addition to consistently measuring America of the 1850s against colonial and early republican ideals of freedom, he refers to contemporary European revolutions, connecting Webster’s early work with the struggle for Greek Independence, and elsewhere compares abolition to the Hungarian Revolution. Whitfield consistently contextualizes these transformations in the language of Romantic cosmology: “boundless space” and “glittering spheres” appear as frames for his ideas of American freedom (75, 78). Like Whitman, he also several times imagines his poetic persona taking flight over vast expanses. Whitfield constructs himself as a genius in the sense held up recently by Keith Leonard: an individual whose energy and creativity enlarges the possibilities of his race. However, like Poe, this responsibility weighed heavily on him, and more than a few lyrics mention his “burning” or “throbbing brain” (91, 70). Levine and Wilson have finally given us an opportunity to survey Whitfield’s accomplishments in their full and contradictory complexity.

—Matt Sandler

McDonald, Kathlene. *Feminism, the Left, and Postwar Literary Culture*. Jackson: U of Mississippi P, 2012.

Resurrecting the voices of the obscured and censored, and revealing the Leftist proclivities of revered authors, Kathlene McDonald’s *Feminism, the Left, and Postwar Literary Culture* documents the contributions of a Left feminist perspective to “the history and culture of the American Left, the history of feminism in the United States, and US women’s literary history” (8). McDonald’s book exceeds the specificity of her argument: “that women writers drew on the rhetoric of antifascism to critique the cultural and ideological aspects of women’s oppression,” offering a comprehensive and expansive overview of “the largely neglected story” of the feminist Left and the literature it produced during the postwar period (6). McDonald’s work recovers the voices erased by McCarthy-era censorship and illustrates the contributions of African American female artists and activists to Leftist debates, as early critics of intersecting axes of oppression.