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## Nolan, James. Poet-Chief: The Native American Poetics of Walt Whitman and Pablo Neruda [review]

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smallest thing of earth" (136). He practices his lifelong habit of journalizing about his own work in the third person, mentioning at one point the "author of the lately-published novel of 'Franklin Evans'" (164). He objects to the "mean vice of parading private letters" in public (335), a strategy he would himself find irresistible in later years when it came to promoting his own work with the famous letter from Emerson. We see him practicing some rhetorical tactics that he would ultimately abandon in his poems, such as the sharp-edged irony of "Hurrah for Hanging!" (300-01). Other ideas had staying power, such as the conviction that greatness must bear the stamp of public acceptance, which he would assert in the 1855 Preface to *Leaves of Grass*, anticipated in an 1846 editorial criticizing Daniel Webster: "whatever may be a man's abstract talent, if he have not the *hearts of the people*, if he have not patriotism, if he prefer a reputation among diplomatists, and the good of foreign courts, to the wide dear love of his common country-men—the glory of the proudest office is but a shame, and all his gain is loss" (327).

This volume suggests that Whitman had a clearly definable career. He began as a teacher, and in that role, enjoyed the feel of imparting knowledge and wisdom and sharing his observations with others. In newspaper work, he saw the opportunity to extend his voice to the masses. His early newspaper work builds directly upon his experiences as a teacher. The first series of features he wrote for the Long-Island papers was titled "Sun-Down Papers . . . From the Desk of a Schoolmaster." In the *Aurora*, he argued that "the penny press is the same as the common schools among seminaries of education. They carry light and knowledge in among those who most need it" (74). In a *Daily Eagle* editorial on the responsibilities of the news editor, he wrote, "There are numerous reforms that have yet to be pressed upon the world. People are to be schooled, in opposition perhaps to their long established ways of thought" (392). This desire to bring "light and knowledge" to the world takes on an almost religious fervor, as it does later in his poems, complete with allusions to the Bible: "In politics, too, the field of improvement is wide enough yet; the harvest is large, waiting to be reaped—and each paper, however humble, may do good in the ranks" (392). No less than Whitman the poet, Whitman the journalist understood the power of the word to transform individual consciousness and thereby reweave the social fabric. He made an impressive career attempting to master that power and put it to work in the public domain.

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JAMES NOLAN. *Poet-Chief: The Native American Poetics of Walt Whitman and Pablo Neruda*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1994. 270 pp.

Informed by anthropology, linguistics, ethnopoetics, and comparative literature, James Nolan offers a nuanced comparative study of two of America's most influential poets: Walt Whitman (U.S.) and Pablo Neruda (Chile). Although separated by a century and by half a hemisphere, by different languages and cultures, the two poets, Nolan shows us, can be linked fruitfully through a

consideration of their shared Nativist/Americanist (spanning North America and Latin America) visions and oral poetics. Focusing primarily on *Leaves of Grass* (1855) and *Canto General* (1950), Nolan argues for an inclusive American “voice” arising from the indigenous Americas, rather than from Europe.

In a brief introduction, Nolan outlines his eclectic critical approach and clarifies vocabulary. In addition, he articulates his rationale for a comparative study of North American and Latin American poetry (via Whitman and Neruda) in which he considers the poets’ individual struggles to create an “American poetry” arising from an American Indian poetics that links North and South. In Chapter 1, Nolan outlines European and Nativist poetic traditions, aligning Whitman and Neruda with the latter. Chapter 2 offers a detailed historical and cultural context for understanding the distinctive European American relationship to the American Indian (the dominant metaphor in North America has been “erasure” associated with “invisibility,” “guilt,” “sadness,” “loss,” while in Latin America it is “rape” linked to “mixed progeny,” “poverty,” “corruption,” “anger,” “vengeance,” and “revolutionary hope”). Chapter 3 introduces the title of the book—the “poet-chief,” Whitman’s self-appellation that Nolan associates with the American Indian “shaman”—“a namer, singer, word-conjurer, storyteller, spirit-guardian, tribal-unifier, healer, and psychic voyager: the individual apart who represents the whole” (62). Considering both Whitman and Neruda as “poet-chiefs,” Nolan presents close readings of their oral poetics in which vision is converted into song. Cautioning readers not to confuse the two, Nolan carefully distinguishes the historical poets from their famous poetic personae in Chapter 4. Both Whitman and Neruda were “not impersonating shamans,” but were “shamanlike” in their poems, he concludes. While Whitman focused on sexuality, Neruda foregrounded politics; both, working as “tribal unifiers,” insisted on a vision of shared comradeship, of physical and political union. Chapter 5 details what Nolan calls the poets’ ritual journeys (in “The Sleepers” and “Alturas de Macchu Picchu”) that initiate the poets into taking on “shamanic personae.” Finally, each poet arrives at a vision of unity (each aligned to their geo-political association with American Indians): Whitman’s philosophical-poetic journey leads to a “renewal of innocence” in a personal state of oceanic oneness, while Neruda’s more overtly political journey results in a “restoration of power” in a people united in revolutionary struggle (211). “Whitman’s resolution,” Nolan concludes, “is a lullaby for sleeping children, Neruda’s a war cry preparing the gathered tribe for battle” (212). Finally, in a brief epilogue, Nolan points out the ongoing “defeat” of indigenous peoples and the need, more than ever, for the American Indian poetics of Whitman and Neruda.

Tracking “two lines of familial descent” in American poetry—the European father (the “paternal cosmopolitan” style of the modernists) and the Indian mother (the “maternal native” voices of Whitman and Neruda)—Nolan’s central claim is that both poets wrote in the maternal mode. Recognizing this formula as a continuum, rather than a binary opposition, Nolan acknowledges that most American poetry is “the product of both traditions” (29), but he places Whitman and Neruda in clearly Nativist modes. Although they did not write about American Indian experiences explicitly nor use native themes directly, both Whitman and Neruda projected native voices and used tribal, oral

poetics. The poets solved the persistent problems of how to formulate a distinctly “American” identity and write a uniquely “American” literature, Nolan suggests, in assuming a native voice, the voice of the tribal “word-sender” or “poet-chief” who brings individuals together as he constructs/narrates the history of the people. Nolan presents stunningly detailed analyses of the oral stylistics of both poets: their uses of repetition, direct address, spells, prayers, songs, antiphony, parallel construction, and enumerative and associative organization. More importantly, he shows how Whitman and Neruda took on indigenous perspectives—a sense of “tribal community”—in the process of developing an American identity that simultaneously encompassed the individual and the collective. “Both poet-chiefs,” claims Nolan, “adopted techniques that correspond to those of the American Indian song-poets, as singers, namers, and storytellers” (121).

Less convincing as evidence of their native perspectives is the claim that Whitman and Neruda take on “shamanic personae” and undergo “shamanic journeys” (184)—not because they do not speak as literary-political prophets and send their poetic personae on spiritual quests. They do, of course. But Nolan’s attribution of this to American Indians (when Whitman and Neruda had little direct knowledge of native people or cultures) is suspect. Also such a spiritual journey motif is not limited to the peoples of the Native Americas, but is found globally (the basic pattern outlined by Joseph Campbell and others as part of a recurrent monomyth). Nolan’s richly detailed close readings of “The Sleepers” and “Alturas de Macchu Picchu” are part of the treasure trove of this book and do not need to be pinned to an American Indian notion of ritual journey to be appreciated. Nolan acknowledges that Whitman’s and Neruda’s “relatively unconscious shamanistics poetics” developed out of the “quite conscious savagism of North American Transcendentalism and Latin American Marxism” (43), part of the recurrent American struggle to imagine a legitimate place in this stolen hemisphere.

While Nolan is erudite and his readings detailed, he might just as well have argued that Whitman and Neruda adapted a generalized orality—not necessarily derived from, modeled after, or intuited from an indigenous American oral, tribal poetics—in their poems. Whitman’s well documented interest in oratory and opera, for instance, could account in part for his use of an oral poetics. Similarly, the influences of Romantic poets, Eastern religion, and European philosophers like Hegel certainly contribute to his sense of unity in diversity. With his reliance on ethnopoetics (Rothenberg, Tedlock) that itself tends to generalize culturally specific American Indian oral practices and systems of knowledge, Nolan’s claims for the American Indian influence on Whitman and Neruda remain underdeveloped. Far more compelling is Nolan’s examination of Whitman’s direct influence on Neruda who claimed that he “learned more from Walt Whitman than from Cervantes” (13), his lushly detailed historical contextualizations, and his brilliantly sensitive close readings of the poems.

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