



Matt Cohen. *Whitman's Drift: Imagining Literary Distribution*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2017. xvi, 269p., ill. ISBN 9781609384760. US\$ 65.00

Published as part of the University of Iowa Press's impressive Whitman Series (edited by Ed Folsom), Matt Cohen's *Whitman's Drift* investigates not only the multitudinous ways by which Walt Whitman distributed his work, but also how the great nineteenth-century poet *imagined* that distribution. By performing this innovative intellectual maneuver, Cohen is able to take his analysis beyond the realm of Whitman and his poetics and open up new questions about the role of distribution in print culture studies and literary studies more generally. As such, *Whitman's Drift* breaks new ground in multiple directions, helping to refine our understanding of Whitman's relationship with the literal and metaphorical transmission of his work while also identifying distribution as an understudied component of what Robert Darnton and other book historians call "the communications circuit."

One of the greatest strengths of Cohen's book comes from his ability to situate Whitman in contexts that students of nineteenth-century American literature might find surprising or unusual. In particular, *Whitman's Drift's* third chapter, "Translating the Untranslatable," examines Whitman's manipulation of international print networks to help increase his reputation (and sales) in the United States. Readers of Whitman have been conditioned to think of him as the quintessential American poet, who sounds his barbaric yawp across the North American landscape. But Cohen shows us another side of Whitman, arguing that his participation in non-American literary marketplaces enables us "to reconfigure American literature not as a special property of the United States, but rather as a dependent, emergent, and contested phenomenon" (105). This ambitious and provocative revision of the very definition of American literature is what Cohen's emphasis on distribution and imagination vis-à-vis Whitman does at its best.

Of special interest to this reviewer, who teaches at a rural liberal arts institution in the American South, is Cohen's discussion of how Whitman's work was distributed and received below the Mason-Dixon line. The South is present throughout Whitman's work - the yearning



for renewal and reconstruction after the Civil War found in the poems of *Drum-Taps* comes immediately to mind – but not much scholarly work has endeavored to examine Whitman's Southern imaginings and connections. Thanks to *Whitman's Drift's* fourth chapter, "Whitman in Unexpected Places," this important and fertile component of Whitman's poetics receives its just due, with Cohen discovering that Whitman was read in the South "with a passion equal to that of any of Whitman's" Northern readers (154).

Whitman's Drift is an incredible contribution to Whitman studies and book history, so it is strange that the book begins not with Whitman but with an anecdote about Louisa May Alcott. While this may be a gesture toward Cohen's larger goal of using the concept of drift to question our assumptions about American literature and its print culture histories, it has the effect of placing the reader on uncertain critical footing at the onset of the book. Cohen would have been better off beginning the book with the passage from "Starting from Paumanok" found on page six, which includes the perfect example of what Cohen has in mind when he creates the theoretical framework that drives *Whitman's Drift's* argument. Nevertheless, Cohen's book stands out amid the bevy of recent Whitman criticism for its ingenious methodology and focus on distribution.

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