

**WHITMAN'S QUEER CHILDREN:
AMERICA'S HOMOSEXUAL EPICS**

Catherine A. Davies

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Long regarded as a repository of mythic quests, divine interventions, Manichean battles and other derring-do, the epic poem underwent a severe transformation in modern times. The stuff it was made of became the stuff of ordinary, everyday life. Telling “the tale of the tribe”, which Ezra Pound saw as the goal of the modern verse epic, no longer meant fixating and extolling some foundational past, but accommodating also the complexities of the present and the personal (1970: 194). In due course, ostracized homosexual writers assimilated the epic mode to their own needs and ends. This assimilation elicits Catherine Davies’s analysis, in *Whitman’s Queer Children*, of several modernist and postmodern epic poems that look at the US ‘tribe’ through queer lenses.

Queering epic poetry is a worthwhile provocation. Indeed, most Western epics do not only celebrate larger-than-life characters and situations; they also instill a set of heteronormative values (embodied by exemplary macho types like Odysseus or *El Cid*) that still permeate the institutional homophobia of contemporary nation-states. In the United States, Walt Whitman’s outsider —yet central— status as a queer member of the American polis as well as his omniseual bravado in *Leaves of Grass* anoint him as the key precursor of the homosexual epic. Thus, Davies charts a useful genealogy between Whitman and four twentieth-century poets: Hart Crane, Allen Ginsberg, James Merrill and John Ashbery. Like their Good Gray predecessor, these poets strove “not only to liberate the homosexual from

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the Wildean role of outsider, stranger and martyr, but also to place him at the very centre of America, as citizen and spokesperson” (2012: 24).

What follows in this volume does not map out an anxiety of influence between Whitman and his “children” as much as an influential anxiety passed down by the American bard to those homosexual poets who, to borrow a line from Langston Hughes, too, sing America. Whitman himself was not unaffected by this anxiety, as he struggled to reconcile his outcast “barbaric yawp” with his democratic credentials to absorb his fellow citizens “en masse” (2002: 709, 679). Each of the poets examined in *Whitman’s Queer Children* inherits this ambivalent embrace of US nationhood, although in myriad ways. As Davies conveniently explains, these poets interpret the Whitmanian call differently due to “the ideological constraints of being a homosexual subject at different points in American history” (2012: 32). Indeed, ranging from Crane’s coy homosexuality in *The Bridge* to Ginsberg’s scatological self-disclosures, from Merrill’s anxiety about his non-reproductive liaisons to Ashbery’s postmodern refusal “to let his sexual identity define his writing” (182), Davies’s subject matter is far more capacious and gnarled than the orderly genealogical tree the book initially suggests.

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Davies’s ambitious scope and historicization prove to be the volume’s biggest virtues as well as its main flaws. On the positive side, sparks fly between different chapters. Such is the powerful friction that Davies produces in the comparative interstices between poems as diverse in form and content as *The Bridge*, *Howl*, *The Changing Light at Sandover* and *Flow Chart*. The poets behind these titles configure a homosexual collective that—at times unconsciously, other times quite willingly—polemicized against each other about the most optimal means of queering the American epic. On that note, and probably because Crane’s individual conflict exemplifies the larger contending forces at play in the book, Davies’s chapter on *The Bridge* outshines the rest. In Davies’s words, “Crane set out to write a poem that would give expression to the modern industrial age”; nonetheless, as she solidly demonstrates, it was in “passages of homoerotic primitivism, that the poet could imagine himself at the very heart of the American myth” (76). With this elegant and cogent statement, Davies keys Crane’s dilemma to Whitman’s struggles to situate homoeroticism at the heart of American life.

Given Whitman’s centrality, devoting a single chapter to him would have helped Davies (and us) organize the several affinities and dissonances between these homosexual poets and their respective appropriations of Whitman’s personal/national epic. Davies contends that, thanks to *Leaves of Grass*, “[t]he American epic differs from those of the European tradition by being about prospective nation-building, rather than retrospective celebration of the founding of an Empire” (43). Helpful as they are, these insights into Whitman’s prophetic queer

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vision of America (cf. 26, 52-53, 108) need more room to breathe and acquire full persuasive force. Instead, they randomly crop up in sections about other poets, poets whose redefinitions of *Leaves of Grass*' sexual politics easily escape us if we lack a proper examination of their antecedent. Regrouping her observations about Whitman before jumping on to his twentieth-century disciples would have allowed Davies to present her case more clearly. It would have been additionally helpful to have condensed each chapter's excessive number of subsections into a more cohesive, reader-friendly structure.

As a consequence of not doing so, some chapters lack the forceful connections at work in the analysis of Crane. The ones on Ginsberg and Ashbery, for instance, read at times like a literature review, too derivative to offer anything beyond a comparative summary of previous criticism. Embedded in Davies's efforts here lies an unasked question: in what stage(s) of the literary process —composition, publication, reception, canonization, etc— does a poem become 'epic'? Eschewing this important question leads to another drawback, as Davies pays too much attention to the original reception of these queer epics. Furthermore, she alternates this info with digressive biographical data about the poems' composition. Consequently, we are left wondering what exactly makes these poems epic: is it the authorial intention behind them or their ulterior cultural impact? Overall, Davies's fidgety combination of close-reading, reception studies and biographical criticism scatters her analysis, advancing her argument as a cavalcade of personal correspondence, original reviews, and contemporary criticism.

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On a related note, how much can the formal and thematic boundaries of the epic poem be strained? Is it possible that, rather than turning the epic poem on its head, some of these poets simply do away with it altogether? Such a possibility emerges in full force in the Merrill chapter, as Davies herself acknowledges that "Merrill's literary affiliations certainly lie more with Proust, as illustrated by his claim that 'psychological action' has dethroned the epic" (142). This dethronement of the epic raises questions about Davies's choice of Merrill in the first place, since she could have devoted a chapter to other queer poets like Essex Hemphill. The issue of representativeness is not to be taken lightly in a study whose author shows an acute preoccupation with the vexed "representability" of the traditional epic poet, a category denied to homosexual poets on the grounds of their "outsider status" (1). Yet, Davies's own "representative" sample congregates five white male homosexual poets, a gesture that forces the critic to exclude too much and too many. Of course, any scholar has to delimit his or her field of inquiry for practical purposes, and, although Davies warns us that she aims for a "representative selection" rather than for "an encyclopaedic approach" (13), the criteria governing her selection leads to a suspiciously neat and convenient chapter organization.

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In addition to this imposed framework, the book's most confusing move is its muddled use of the 'queer' category. Davies assures us in the introduction that she "has rejected the term 'queer' as both too inclusive of various homo-, bi-, trans-, inter- and asexual communities, and as having too many socio-political connotations" to be contained in one single monograph (6). Nonetheless, Davies's adherence to the term in key places like the book's title contradicts her initial rejection. In my opinion, the subversive task of queering the American epic holds too much promise to be cast aside. Such an embrace would put Davies more in conversation with recent queer theory, since there are critical omissions here like Lee Edelman's *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, which tackles the same angst about queer subjects and their non-reproductive culture that Merrill seems to experience in *The Changing Light at Sandover*.

Even if its contribution to queer studies and studies of twentieth-century Anglo-American poetry might fall slightly short of its intended goal, *Whitman's Queer Children* provides a useful, pedagogically sensitive toolbox for undergraduate and graduate students getting started in these fields. Advanced researchers will find Davies's bits on Whitman and Crane provocative enough to take them up in their own projects. As for the rest of the book, its shortcomings hint at important, productive gaps to be filled and negotiated by future research.

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Notes

¹. According to Judith Butler, "to queer" something entails a double task: it inquires into the historical "formation of homosexualities" in a given domain and it

tests the "deformative and misappropriative power" of the term "queer" once it has been reappropriated by the community it was meant to subjugate (1993: 21).

Works Cited

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