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## REFERENCES

London and New York: Continuum, 2012. Pp. 232 ISBN: 9781441192622

Redressing a dearth of book-length work on queer American epic poetry, Catherine Davies's *Whitman's Queer Children: America's Homosexual Epic* examines modernist and postmodern confessional and epic poetry through a queer approach, drawing from Foucault's and his queer intellectual descendants' – Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Leo Bersani, Jonathan Dollimore, Lee Edelman, Alan Sinfield, to name a few – readings of sex, power and knowledge. In the study, Davies aims to demonstrate the essentiality of bringing together a queer perspective and the American poetic cannon. Davies's study focuses on five poems from four gay male American poets: Hart Crane, Allen Ginsberg, James Merrill, and John Ashbery. Davies establishes a clear genealogy between Walt Whitman and these twentieth-century poets, arguing that as Whitman himself, these four poets strove "not only to liberate the homosexual from the Wildean role of outsider, stranger and martyr, but also to place him at the very centre of America, as citizen and spokesperson" (24). For Davies, this is Whitman's legacy. Crane, Ginsberg, Merrill and Ashbery, all employed the

Whitmanian confessional and epic forms to engage with identity and sexuality discourses, thus confronting American restrictive identity politics and bringing homosexuality into American mainstream discourse.

Davies's primary objective, rather than examining the emergence of the queer epic genre as part of a linear historiography, is to examine each writer's individual negotiation with both Whitman's legacy and America's evolving national identity, thus "unravelling the anxious relationship between the homosexual and his American home" (197). Through this primary objective, Davies defends the circumscribed structure of the study, as she dedicates a chapter to each author, their specific historical time periods, and respective epic poems, and simultaneously contributes to the literary history of homosexuality as represented in the American poetic cannon.

Davies analysis follows Bertolt Brecht's definition of "epic," not focusing on the poems narrative form, but on their social and political ideology. In the first chapter, Davies focuses on Hart Crane's *The Bridge* (1930), arguing that by employing the epic mode, Crane both asserts the authority of the homosexual experience as part of America's cultural formation and simultaneously challenges the heteronormative position of this poetic mode. In Chapter 2, Davies examines Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* (1956) and *The Fall of America* (1972), which constitute according to Davies two works that challenge America's heteronormative narrative. In Chapter 3, Davies analyses James Merrill's *The Changing Light at Sandover* (1982), focusing on its survivalist dimension in the face of queer non-reproductive culture. In the fourth and last chapter, Davies addresses John Ashbery's *Flow Chart* (1991), examining the author's heightened awareness of identity.

Overall, the study's ambitious scope and historicization prove to be simultaneously valuable and problematic. On the positive side, when approaching these poems comparatively and addressing the connections between each other and Whitman, Davies offers the most interesting and engaging discussions in the study, successfully problematizing what constitutes queer American epic poetry. The inclusion of a chapter dedicated to Whitman would have perhaps supported these connections. Additionally, the constant alternation between analysis, bibliographical information and reception notes troubles not only the comparative analysis, but also the

close reading of the selected poems. Regarding the theoretical approach adopted, an enterprise such as queering American epic poetry would have required further consistency, namely in the terminology employed. The contradictory use of the term “queer” throughout the study illustrates this issue. In the introduction, Davies states 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” (6), however the term is interchangeably used throughout the book without further clarification.

On balance, Catherine Davies’s *Whitman’s Queer Children* convincingly argues for the importance of examining American epic poetry from a queer perspective and provides a useful resource for students on the field and those interested in 20th-century American poetry. Despite its limitations, Davies’s carefully researched and well-written book provides a biography of the four poets, a cultural history of times of great change, and a queer reclaiming of American epic poetry.

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