



Political Poetry as Discourse: Rereading John Greenleaf Whittier, Ebenezer Elliott, and Hiphopology

By Angela Michele Leonard

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Political Poetry as Discourse examines the works of the political poets John Greenleaf Whittier and Ebenezer Elliott, drawing comparisons to contemporary hip hoppers who take their words from local newspapers and other discursive sources that they read, hear, and observe. Local presses and news vehicles stand as cultural material forms that supply poets with words, particularly words that congeal into patterns of language, allowing the creation of a poetic discourse. As readers of these poets apply techniques and theories of discourse analysis, they reveal how poets borrow, lift, hijack, or resituate words from one or more different genres to use as tools of political change. Leonard engages with the critical toolboxes of content analysis, semiosis, and deconstruction to demonstrate how to critically investigate and interrogate the images, sounds and words not just of politically engaged poets, but also of any disseminator of culture and news.

Moving beyond theory into praxis, this book becomes a model of its own transgressive premise by thinking, analyzing, writing, and teaching against the grain. Its focus on language as unbounded discourse makes this book a relevant and insightful demonstration in democratic pedagogy and in teaching for transformation.

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- Sales Rank: #7968994 in Books
- Published on: 2009-12-23
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 9.42" h x 1.12" w x 6.39" l, 1.50 pounds
- Binding: Hardcover
- 374 pages

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Editorial Review

Review

Angela Leonard's *Political Poetry as Discourse* confronts the past for the purposes of the present with an account of the discourse networks which political poetry engages and seeks to reconfigure. Leonard analyzes the poetry of Ebenezer Elliott (the English Corn Law Rhymer) and John Greenleaf Whittier (the American abolitionist) to identify the semiotic dynamics that created a class position for the working poor of nineteenth-century England and that ignored differences among black Americans and amalgamated them under the category of slave in nineteenth-century America. Drawing on Elliott and Whittier's examples for subverting established codes, Leonard advocates teaching that analyzes hip-hop and embraces service learning to help students identify and transform their society. This is a work of seriously engaged scholarship. (Frances Ferguson, Johns Hopkins University)

Angela Leonard has written a new sort of book that combines a sophisticated analysis of nineteenth century protest literature in Britain and the United States with a method for making it meaningful to students today. She examines the language used by anti-Corn Law writer Ebenezer Elliott and anti-slavery poet John Greenleaf Whittier in contrast to two more conservative newspapers that dealt with the same themes. She then applies her textual method to the hip-hop lyrics of contemporary rap artists to locate them as worthy followers of radical writers who transformed language as a tool in their struggle to transform society. Using the present to understand the past reverses the usual formula, but then Leonard herself is engaged in creatively subverting, and thereby enhancing, both our knowledge of the texts she studies and our ability to make them live again for a generation that can be empowered by learning it has powerful allies in history. (William A. Pencak, professor of history and Jewish studies at Penn State University)

About the Author

Angela Michele Leonard is tenured professor of history at Loyola College in Maryland

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