

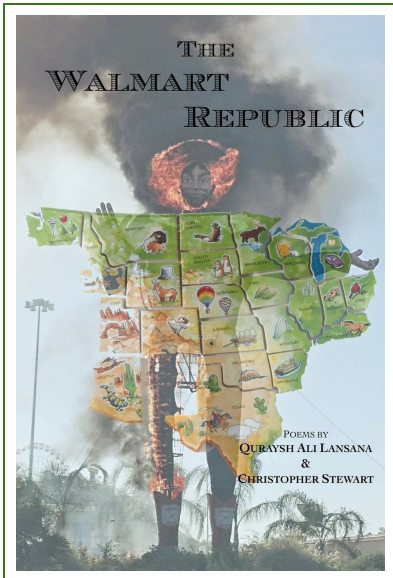
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15 July 2014

Review: The Walmart Republic by Quraysh Ali Lansana and Christopher Stewart



Elizabeth Kate Switaj, Contributing Editor

Review of *The Walmart Republic* Quraysh Ali Lansana and Christopher Stewart

Mongrel Empire Press, 2014
Trade Paperback, 89 pages
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The Walmart Republic: a land where chain megastores not only crush smaller shops but also take on a civic role: town hall, meeting place—shopping as public entertainment and engagement. *The Walmart Republic* is the America that Quraysh Ali Lansana and Christopher Stewart's poetry crosses, telling the stories of their separate journeys from the Bible Belt to Chicago, yet these poems do not mock the landscape or its inhabitants in the manner of *People of Walmart*. Instead, empathy underwrites and counterpoints absurdity, even as the stories of a black man and a white man build, through contrasts and points of connection, a novelistic view of the U.S. in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

In these poems, characters who often might be treated as stereotypical figures of fun are given dignity. In "The Suit," Mrs. Kim, a dry cleaner, has the "mildly awkward, cheerful voice of someone / who learned English later in life." Her deviations from standard English stand not as jokes but simply as examples of her speech. She is given the final lines of the poem, and her use of present tense instead of past does not detract from her kindness in giving an elderly gentleman who needs a suit cleaned for his wife's funeral free service: "And no price for you, Mr. Lewis," she says. / "You already pay." Her non-standard English, along with "... her body / crooked from years over a stitching machine," stands for the difficulties she has faced as an immigrant; its appearance in her final line reflects that her ability to empathize comes from her connecting her own difficulties to others'. She is not noble despite her status as a later learner of English but because of it.

She is not absurd, but sometimes the situations in these poems are. To play empathy against absurdity requires combining a broad outlook with a closer view. The book's second poem, "Jamestown, NY," brings together the personal tragedy of a failing marriage with the social calamity of a town's loss of its economic mainstay. The absurdity comes from the volume of what that industry once produced:

... over 500 tons of couches
and e-z sleep recliners were loaded everyday, bound
for sturdy, middle class neighborhoods in places
where most things remained constant.

To imagine the scene accurately, the reader must ask the odd question of how many couches there are to a ton. That the unchanging middle class neighborhoods once needed to absorb so much newly created furniture every day points to the strangeness of a consumer culture, yet the loss of an industry dedicated to supporting this culture is economically devastating:

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There are plenty of vacancies, most of
the business having left with the last of the furniture
factories, only him in an empty hotel room
with pay per view movies and plenty of clean ashtrays.

"He" has come to the Holiday Inn, following a separation, and the connection of the impending divorce with the economic downturn in the town is underscored by the place the second line quoted above break. One spouse will leave the other with the last of the furniture; the businesses, as the next line reveals, have left the town with empty buildings in place of factories.

Even as the strangeness of the world *The Walmart Republic* plays against the empathetic rendering of its inhabitants, so too do the divergent voices of Stewart and Lansana contrast. At first, the two authors' poems are separated, with Stewart claiming authorship of the first section and Lansana of the second, the distinction made clear by authorial initials at the bottom of each poem and by Lansana's use of all lower-case letters (except in certain stylistically distinct poems in section five), often employed by African-American poets as a deliberate departure from Anglocentric standard English. Here is one of the places where Stewart's and Lansana's uses of language play against each other. While Stewart can respect speakers of non-standard English (as in "The Suit"), he does so as an observer; for Lansana, it is as part of the communities to which he belongs.

Another striking difference between the first two sections is the differing lengths of the poems. In section one, the shortest poem has twelve lines, and the lines often run margin to margin. In section two, the longest poem has twelve lines, and they never meet the right-hand limit. The poems of the first section teem with lyric detail: "corrosion up the masonry walls, / floor joists buckling with the burden of hidden moisture" ("For Water"), "the last filigree of new sunlight is lost in a /canopy of birch and wild oak" ("Outside in the Middle"). On the other hand, the second part's poems stick to tighter, abstract, and occasionally meaningfully ambiguous statements:

i harbor reasons
to kill. pain, history
& blood . . . ("Bible Belted: Faith")

As readers, we do not know if the history here is personal or social, though references to the "the dawes act" and "tulsa race riot" later in "Bible Belted: Found Two" emphasize the latter. As an African American man growing up in in post-Civil Rights Movement but not post-racist America, Lansana would have both kinds of reasons for rage—and for keeping his lines spare. It is as though, given the history of racism in America, Lansana cannot as easily trust the potentially white reader with the details of his life and communities. In this context, it is significant that the longest poem of part two comes last and begins "there are at least twenty-seven / white people i love. i counted" ("Bible Belted: Math") and that the poems in the later sections, in which poems by both authors appear mixed together, do not show a dramatic distinction in length. By thinking about the white people who are worthy of trust, the speaker of Lansana's poems comes to decide that the readers have at least the potential to be added

The contrasts between the two poets and their lives are heightened by the inclusion of one piece from each with the same title: "Will Rogers Turnpike." For Stewart, the turnpike hosts nightmares and driving faster only makes them more intense:

She chokes me for awhile,
whispering in a rayon voice that I never had it like this.

Two burly, farting truckers laugh at me,
picking the okra from their teeth as they shit in the
dingy caverns of suppressed homosexuality.

Stewart is only too aware of how far the path of his life has taken him out of the world of truckers and truck-stop waitresses: "her 'beef, real food for real people' thighs wrapped / around my vegetarian throat." His voluntary dietary limitation stands in for all the choices he has made that have turned their world into a nightmare for him. On the other hand, Lansana, by birth, could never have belonged:

what are you, mexican? the kind cracker
asks at truck stop amazed to learn
of duet between nelly and tim mcgraw

Instead, he identifies with the turnpike's landscape: "these roads my veins dry red / clay body."

These differences in identity, like the spaces between absurd situations and sympathetic characters, do not create discord in *The Walmart Republic*. Instead, Quraysh Ali Lansana and Christopher Stewart have created harmonic chords from their different lives and voices. The harmony reveals what remains, if not of uncomplicated beauty, than at least of humanity that has not entirely fled an America dominated by commercial interest.

Leslie L. Nielsen 10:25 AM



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Bob fortune July 17, 2014 at 4:03 PM

The authors of *Walmart Republic* have managed to create harmony amongst the various characters in the book. They have different and unique identities but remain amalgamated to each other due to various reasons. The poems in the book are heart rendering and force the reader to contemplate and think. Quraysh Ali Lansana and Christopher Stewart have given a voice and identity to different characters striving for survival in the American Society.

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