WALT WHITMAN IN CONTEXT

Walt Whitman is a poet of contexts. His poetic practice was one of observing, absorbing, and then reflecting the world around him. Walt Whitman in Context provides brief, provocative explorations of thirty-eight different contexts – geographic, literary, cultural, and political – through which to engage Whitman’s life and work. Written by distinguished scholars of Whitman and nineteenth-century American literature and culture, this collection synthesizes scholarly and historical sources and brings together new readings and original research.

Joanna Levin is Associate Professor and Chair of the English Department at Chapman University. She is the author of Bohemia in America, 1858–1920 (2010) and coeditor, with Edward Whitley, of Whitman among the Bohemians (2014).

Edward Whitley is Associate Professor in the English Department at Lehigh University. He is the author of American Bards: Walt Whitman and Other Unlikely Candidates for National Poet (2010) and coeditor, with Joanna Levin, of Whitman among the Bohemians (2014).
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16.2 Title page of the 1860 edition of *Leaves of Grass*. Courtesy of Kenneth M. Price and the *Walt Whitman Archive* (whitmanarchive.org).


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32.2 Portrait of Walt Whitman from the 1860 edition of *Leaves of Grass*. Courtesy of Kenneth M. Price and the *Walt Whitman Archive* (whitmanarchive.org).
Notes on Contributors


STEPHANIE M. BLALOCK is Digital Humanities Librarian in the Digital Scholarship and Publishing Studio at the University of Iowa Libraries. She is an associate editor of *The Vault at Pfaff’s*, an associate editor of the *Walt Whitman Archive*, and coeditor of a digital edition of Whitman’s fiction for the *Archive*. She is the author of *Go to Pfaff’s: The History of a Restaurant and Lager Beer Saloon* (2014), and her research focuses on Whitman’s fiction.


ADAM BRADFORD is Associate Professor of English at Florida Atlantic University where he researches and teaches nineteenth-century American literature. His research relating to Whitman has appeared in *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review, Mickle Street Review,* and *Sentimentalism in Nineteenth-Century America: Literary and Cultural Practices* (2013). He is also the author of *Communities of Death: Whitman, Poe, and the American Culture of Mourning* (2014).
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MATT COHEN teaches at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln. He is a contributing editor at the Walt Whitman Archive and the author of Whitman’s Drift: Imagining Literary Distribution (2017).


PETER COVIELLO is Professor of English at the University of Illinois–Chicago, specializing in American literature and queer studies. He is the editor of Walt Whitman’s Memoranda During the War (2004) and the author, most recently, of Tomorrow’s Parties: Sex and the Untimely in Nineteenth-Century America (2013), a finalist for a 2014 Lambda Literary Award in LGBT Studies.

EDWARD S. CUTLER is the Donald R. & Jean S. Marshall Professor of Humanities at Brigham Young University and the author of Recovering the New: Transatlantic Roots of Modernism (2003). He has published articles on Whitman in the Walt Whitman Quarterly Review and American Literary Realism. He is currently completing a monograph on Whitman and romantic philosophy.

JESSICA DESPAIN is Associate Professor of English at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville (SIUE) and codirects SIUE’s IRIS Center for the Digital Humanities. She is the author of Nineteenth-Century Transatlantic Reprinting and the Embodied Book (2014) and the lead editor of The Wide, Wide World Digital Edition, an exploration of the more than 170 reprints of Susan Warner’s bestselling nineteenth-century
Notes on Contributors

novel. She has published articles on transatlantic studies, book history, and the digital humanities.

David O. Dowling is Associate Professor and Director of Undergraduate Studies at the University of Iowa School of Journalism and Mass Communication where he specializes in publishing industries and the culture of media production. The author of six books including Emerson’s Protégés: Mentoring and Marketing Transcendentalism’s Future (2014), his articles have appeared in such journals as Convergence, Genre: Forms of Discourse and Culture, Leviathan: A Journal of Melville Studies, Digital Humanities Quarterly, and American Journalism.

Leslie Elizabeth Eckel is Associate Professor of English at Suffolk University in Boston. She is the author of Atlantic Citizens: Nineteenth-Century American Writers at Work in the World (2013), and editor, with Clare Frances Elliott, of The Edinburgh Companion to Literary Studies (2016). Her current book project focuses on utopian networks in the long nineteenth century.

Paul Erickson is the Director of the Programs in Arts, Humanities, and Culture and in American Institutions, Society, and the Public Good at the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. From 2007 to 2016 he was the Director of Academic Programs at the American Antiquarian Society. He has written widely on the history of the book and popular antebellum print culture.

Ed Folsom is the Roy J. Carver Professor of English at The University of Iowa, the editor of the Walt Whitman Quarterly Review, codirector of the online Whitman Archive, and editor of the Whitman Series at the University of Iowa Press. He is the author or editor of numerous books and essays on Whitman and other American writers. He has been awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship and multiple grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Christine Gerhardt is Professor of American Studies at the University of Bamberg, Germany. She is the author of A Place for Humility: Whitman, Dickinson, and the Natural World (2014) and of a monograph on the Reconstruction period in American novels, Rituale des Scheiterns: Die Reconstruction-Periode im amerikanischen Roman (2002). She edited the Handbook of the American Novel of the Nineteenth Century (2018), coedited Religion in the United States (2011), and has published essays on
Notes on Contributors

Whitman, Dickinson, contemporary American poetry, and ecocriticism in various journals.

Nicole Gray is Research Assistant Professor in the English Department at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln and an associate editor of the Walt Whitman Archive. She has coedited a range of documents for the Whitman Archive including Franklin Evans, Whitman’s short fiction, and Spanish translations of “Poets to Come.” Her articles on American literature and book history have appeared in Rhetoric Society Quarterly, Nineteenth-Century Literature, The Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America, and PMLA.

Jay Grossman teaches eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American literature and culture, the history of the book, and the history of sexuality at Northwestern University. He is the author of Reconstituting the American Renaissance: Emerson, Whitman, and the Politics of Representation (2003) and is at work on a cultural biography of the literary scholar and political activist F. O. Matthiessen.

Walter Grünzweig teaches American Studies at TU Dortmund University, Germany. A native of Graz, Austria, he received his BA in English at Ohio University and his MA in English, American, and German literatures at Karl-Franzens-Universität-Graz. His research focuses on the international Whitman, Emerson’s cultural criticism, and international education. In 2010 he received the national prize for excellence in university teaching awarded by the German Rectors Conference. He has taught in Berlin, Binghamton (New York), Dakar, Dresden, Graz, Iowa City, Izmir, Klagenfurt, Maribor, Rome, and Trieste.


Kerry Larson is Professor of English at the University of Michigan. He is the author of Whitman’s Drama of Consensus (1988) and Imagining Equality in Nineteenth-Century American Literature (2008). He has also edited The Cambridge Companion to Nineteenth-Century American
Notes on Contributors

Poetry (2011) and is currently at work on a book on poetry written in the United States between the American Revolution and the Civil War.

Joanna Levin is Associate Professor and Chair of the English Department at Chapman University. She is the author of Bohemia in America, 1858–1920 (2010) and coeditor, with Edward Whitley, of Whitman among the Bohemians (2014).

Jerome Loving is Distinguished Professor Emeritus of English at Texas A&M University–College Station. A recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship and grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities, Loving is the author of numerous books and articles including Walt Whitman: The Song of Himself (1999), as well as biographies of Theodore Dreiser and Mark Twain. His Jack and Norman: A State-Raised Convict and the Legacy of Norman Mailer’s “The Executioner’s Song” (2017) is part literary criticism, part social commentary, and part true-crime story.

Stephen John Mack is Associate Teaching Professor at the University of Southern California where he teaches classes in advanced writing specializing in the law, political discourse, and social sciences. His research interests include nineteenth-century American literature, democratic theory and culture, and digital literacy. He is the author of The Pragmatic Whitman: Reimagining American Democracy (2002) as well as numerous articles on Whitman.

Matt Miller is Assistant Professor of English at Yeshiva University in Manhattan where he teaches nineteenth- and twentieth-century American literature and creative writing. He is the author of Collage of Myself: Walt Whitman and the Making of Leaves of Grass (2010) and is currently completing a manuscript relating Whitman to some surprising twentieth-century influences, including Gertrude Stein and George Oppen.

Maire Mullins is Professor of English at Pepperdine University. She has recently completed a digital humanities project titled The Selected Letters of Hannah Whitman Heyde, available on the website Scholarly Editing: The Annual of the Association for Documentary Editing (2016). Her essays on Whitman have appeared in A Companion to Walt Whitman (2006), Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature, the Walt Whitman Quarterly Review, The Walt Whitman Encyclopedia (1998), and The Tohoku Journal of
Notes on Contributors

American Studies (Sendai, Japan), Renascence, and The American Transcendental Quarterly.


SASCHE POHLMANN is Associate Professor in American Literary History at Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich, Germany. He is the author of Future-Founding Poetry: Topographies of Beginnings from Whitman to the Twenty-First Century (2015) and has written essays on Whitman’s poetry and prose, as well as on their relation to Washington, DC, Mark Z. Danielewski’s novel Only Revolutions, Cascadian Black Metal, and the video game Everything.

KENNETH M. PRICE is the Hillegass University Professor and codirects the Center for Digital Research at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln. Since 1995 Price has codirected the Walt Whitman Archive. He is the author of To Walt Whitman, America (2004) and coauthor, with Ed Folsom, of Re-Scripting Walt Whitman (2005). A recipient of a Digital Innovation Award from the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS), he edited, with Ray Siemens, Literary Studies in the Digital Age: An Evolving Anthology (2013).


RACHEL RUBINSTEIN is Associate Professor of American Literature and Jewish Studies at Hampshire College. She is the author of Members of the Tribe: Native America in the Jewish Imagination (2010). Her current project examines sites of translation, immigration, racial formation, and nationalism across the Americas.
Notes on Contributors


REGINA SCHÖBER is Assistant Professor at the American Studies Department of Mannheim University, Germany. Her current book project, Networks and Emerging Knowledge in American Literature and Culture, examines the network as an epistemological paradigm in American literature and culture from the nineteenth to the twenty-first century. She is coeditor of the special issue Network Theory and American Culture of Amerikastudien (with Ulfried Reichardt and Heike Schäfer, 2015), of the special issue Data Fiction: Naturalism, Narrative, Numbers of Studies in American Naturalism (with James Dorson, 2017), as well as of the essay collection The Failed Individual: Amid Exclusion, Resistance, and the Pleasure of Non-Conformity (with Katharina Motyl, 2017).

CARMEN TRAMMELL SKAGGS is Associate Professor of English and Associate Dean for Academic Support at Kennesaw State University. She is the author of Overtones of Opera in American Literature from Whitman to Wharton (2010).

JASON STACY is Associate Professor of History at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. He is the author of Walt Whitman’s Multitudes: Labor Reform and Persona in Whitman’s Journalism and the First Leaves of Grass, 1840–1855 (2008), editor of Leaves of Grass 1860: The 150th Anniversary Facsimile Edition (2009), and coeditor, with Douglas Noverr, of Walt Whitman’s Selected Journalism (2015). He has published articles on Walt Whitman in the Mickle Street Review and the Walt Whitman Quarterly Review. He is also a contributing editor to the Walt Whitman Archive where he helps edit Whitman’s journalism.

LINDSAY TUGGLE is a Research Associate with the Writing and Society Research Center at Western Sydney University, where she also teaches literature. She is the author of The Afterlives of Specimens: Medicine, Mourning, and Whitman’s Civil War (2017) and a collection of poetry, Calenture (2018). She has been a fellow at the Library of Congress, the Mütter Museum and Historical Medical Library, and the Australian Academy of the Humanities.
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WILLIAM T. WALTER is President of the Walt Whitman Birthplace Association (WWBA). He began serving on the Board of Directors of the WWBA in the 1980s and was the point monitor during the construction of the Interpretative Center in the 1990s. He holds a PhD in physics from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He has been an associate research professor at the Polytechnic Institute of Brooklyn and was involved in the early development of lasers.

EDWARD WHITLEY is Associate Professor of English at Lehigh University and Director of the Mellon Digital Humanities Initiative. He is the author of American Bards: Walt Whitman and Other Unlikely Candidates for National Poet (2010). He is coeditor, with Joanna Levin, of Whitman among the Bohemians (2014) and codirector, with Robert Weidman, of The Vault at Pfaff’s: An Archive of Art and Literature by the Bohemians of Antebellum New York.

IVY G. WILSON is Associate Professor of English and Art, Theory, and Practice and Director of the Program in American Studies at Northwestern University. He teaches courses on the comparative literatures of the black diaspora and US literary studies with a particular focus on African American culture. He has published a number of books on nineteenth-century American literary studies, including Specters of Democracy: Blackness and the Aesthetics of Politics (2011) and, more recently, the essay collection Unsettled States (2014) with Dana Luciano.

Preface

Walt Whitman is a poet of contexts. Toward the end of his life, Whitman reflected on the cultural and historical contexts that had been at his elbow as he composed the six major editions of his magnum opus, *Leaves of Grass*, between 1855 and 1881. “My Book and I – what a period we have presumed to span!” he wrote. “Those thirty years from 1850 to ’80 – and America in them! Proud, proud indeed may we be, if we have cull’d enough of that period in its own spirit to worthily waft a few live breaths of it to the future!” (LG, 565). But rather than take all the credit himself for having captured the zeitgeist of the United States during the decades before, during, and after the Civil War, Whitman instead claimed that “first-class literature does not shine by any luminosity of its own; nor do its poems. They grow of circumstances, and are evolutionary. The actual living light is always curiously from elsewhere” (LG, 565). It should come as a shock to readers familiar with Whitman that the same poet who anonymously reviewed his own work and tirelessly promoted his personal brand would insist that what shone through most powerfully in his poetry was not necessarily his own efforts, but rather the “living light” of his cultural “circumstances.” From the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, however, Whitman had defined his poetic practice as a process of absorbing and reflecting back the “luminosity” of the world around him. A great poet should “flood himself with the immediate age as with vast oceanic tides” he wrote in the Preface to the 1855 edition, maintaining that the poet should be “himself the age transfigured” (LG55, xi).

One of the poems from this first edition – an untitled work that eventually bore the name “There Was a Child Went Forth” – illustrates this principle through the figure of an endlessly curious child whose engagement with the world feels very much like the “transfigured” poet Whitman described in his Preface:

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There was a child went forth every day,
And the first object he looked upon and received with wonder or pity
or love or dread, that object he became,
And that object became part of him for the day or a certain part of the
day . . . or for many years or stretching cycles of years.
The early lilacs became part of this child,
And grass, and white and red morningglories, and white and red
clover, and the song of the phœbe-bird,
[. . .]
The streets themselves, and the facades of houses . . . . the goods in the
windows,
Vehicles . . teams . . the tiered wharves, and the huge crossing at the
ferries;
The village and the highland seen from afar at sunset . . . . the river
between. (LG55, 90–91)

The poem includes an extensive catalog of the people, places, and things
that the child enthusiastically embraces in the course of his journey, all
linked together by the idiosyncratic ellipses Whitman used throughout
the 1855 Leaves of Grass. The poem closes, “These became part of that
child who went forth every day, and who now goes and will always go
forth every day, / And these become of him or her that peruses them
now” (LG55, 91). With this parting comment that anyone who
“peruses” his poetry becomes part of a collective poetic experience,
Whitman confirms that his poems come most spectacularly to life
when taken in context – both the contexts of their original composition
and the multiple contexts of their reception throughout time and space.
As such, our goal with Walt Whitman in Context has been to explore the
poetry, fiction, notebooks, journalism, government records, and non-
fiction prose of one the world’s great writers through brief and provo-
cative essays that place Whitman within the geographic, literary, cul-
tural, and political contexts of his life. It is worth noting that the
present volume is not Contexts for Walt Whitman; that is, it is not a
primer on the history and culture of the nineteenth-century United
States. Rather, Walt Whitman in Context provides readings, interpreta-
tions, and explorations of Whitman in the many contexts through
which he charted his life and wrote his texts.

There is a longstanding tradition in Whitman scholarship to contextua-
lize the poet and his work according to the places he lived, the art and
literature he experienced, the cultural and political upheavals he witnessed,
and the legacy he created. Some of the foundational texts in Whitman
scholarship have taken this approach, from Roger Asselineau’s The
Evolution of Walt Whitman (1954), which took seriously the idea that each new edition of Leaves of Grass represented a discrete iteration of Whitman’s ongoing response to the world around him, to Betsy Erkkila’s Whitman the Political Poet (1989), which follows Whitman’s life and work through the major political events of the century. Similarly, when Joseph Jay Rubin published The Historic Whitman in 1973, he offered a template for the deep archival research that scholars could perform as they sought out the long cultural foregrounds of Whitman’s texts; this methodology has since been mastered by Ed Folsom in works of scholarship such as Walt Whitman’s Native Representations (1994) and Kenneth M. Price in To Walt Whitman, America (2004), among other publications. In Calamus Lovers: Walt Whitman’s Working-Class Camerados (1987), Charley Shively made a compelling argument for the poet’s homosexuality through close attention to contextual documents (specifically, Whitman’s correspondence with male lovers) as well as to broader historical trends and the poems themselves. Similarly, Sherry Ceniza’s Walt Whitman and Nineteenth-Century Women Reformers (1998) and the essays in Ivy G. Wilson’s Whitman Noir: Black America and the Good Gray Poet (2014) engage with Whitman’s work from within the contexts of gender and race, respectively.

Walt Whitman in Context builds upon this tradition in Whitman scholarship with thirty-eight short essays divided into four major parts: Locations; Literary and Artistic Contexts; Cultural and Political Contexts; and Reception and Legacy. For a poet who wrote about every corner of the globe and virtually every state in the Union, Whitman spent most of his life in relatively few places: Long Island; Brooklyn and Manhattan; New Orleans; Camden, NJ, and neighboring Philadelphia; and Washington, DC. After leaving his birthplace and childhood home on Long Island (as described in Chapter 1 by William T. Walter) Whitman lived in cities that experienced tremendous growth and development during the tenure of his residence, giving him the opportunity to witness firsthand both the rapid industrialization of the United States and the emergence of a truly global economy. Wherever Whitman lived he sought out like-minded men and women with whom he could discuss art, politics, and culture – from the journalists and bohemians of antebellum New York to the artists of post-Civil War Philadelphia (Chapters 2 and 3 by Karen Karbiener and William Pannapacker). These creative communities nurtured Whitman’s development as a writer and exposed him to new ideas, practices, and opportunities. The time that Whitman spent south of the Mason–Dixon line – as a young reporter in New Orleans or as an aid in the hospitals of Civil War Washington – had a similarly transformative effect on him, both in his
understanding of the fractured nation that he would seek to heal through his poetry and in his sense of the diverse geography and population of the United States (see Chapter 4 on Washington, DC by Kenneth M. Price and Chapter 5 on the American South by Matt Cohen).

The second part of Walt Whitman in Context focuses on the literary and artistic contexts of Whitman’s life. First as a journalist and then as a poet, Whitman became an expert at absorbing the literary and artistic developments of his time. While working for a variety of newspapers in Brooklyn, Long Island, New Orleans, and Manhattan – as Jason Stacy details in Chapter 9 – Whitman was regularly assigned to write about new fiction, poetry, music, art, theater, and public lectures. He made no effort to hide the impact that such art forms made on his own work but rather celebrated their presence in Leaves of Grass, which includes poems written in the declamatory style of public oratory (Chapter 10 by Leslie Elizabeth Eckel) and the aria-and-recitative form of the opera (Chapter 11 by Carmen Trammell Skaggs), along with poems that channel the visual spectacle of early photography (Chapter 13 by Ruth L. Bohan) and the explicit sexuality of nineteenth-century erotica (Chapter 14 by Paul Erickson). In addition to his appreciation for the artistic culture of the nineteenth century, Whitman was also intimately familiar with the workings of the publishing industry both in the United States and abroad: chapters by Nicole Gray on “Bookmaking” (Chapter 16), David O. Dowling on “The Literary Marketplace” (Chapter 17), and Jessica DeSpain on “Transatlantic Book Distribution” (Chapter 18) situate Whitman within a world that he had experienced not only as a writer, but also as a printer, book reviewer, and newspaper editor.

Whitman’s early careers as journalist and printer shaped his understanding of the media forms through which the nineteenth century’s culture of print would receive him. Chapters by Ingrid I. Satelmajer on “Periodical Poetry” and Stephanie M. Blalock on “Periodical Fiction” (Chapters 7 and 8), explore how periodical publication made literature an integral part of the social life of the nineteenth-century United States. Such trends made Whitman acutely aware of the culture of performance and celebrity that was escalating throughout the United States (see Chapter 12 by David Haven Blake) and how popular poets, such as Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, approached their verse forms with an eye toward readers’ expectations (see Chapter 6 by Michael C. Cohen). Despite his almost complete immersion in nineteenth-century print culture, however, Whitman also understood the distinctive capabilities of the manuscript
The chapters in part three explore a range of cultural and political movements that found their way into Whitman’s oeuvre. Whitman lived through a transformative period in US history. The defining moment in his personal life, as well as the life of his nation, was unquestionably the Civil War, the aftermath of which led Whitman to move away from his public persona as “one of the roughs” and to present himself instead as the United States’ “good gray poet,” a grandfatherly figure dedicated to healing the wounds of a mourning nation, as described in Chapter 27 on the “Civil War” by Peter Coviello, Chapter 28 on “Reconstruction” by Martin T. Buinicki, and Chapter 29 on “Death and Mourning” by Adam Bradford. The war and its aftermath, as these essays demonstrate, also served to expand Whitman’s understanding of race, sexuality, and the body politic. The questions that preoccupied Whitman during the antebellum years followed the poet through the crucible of the Civil War, resulting in increasingly complex meditations on the relationship between art and politics—a relationship that, as Kerry Larson argues in Chapter 24, puts Whitman very much at home with the major political philosophers of the past two centuries. Whitman wrote about slavery (see Chapter 30 by Ivy G. Wilson), labor and the rights of working people (Chapter 32 by Jerome Loving), the treatment of Native Americans during the era of Indian Removal, and the United States’ relationship to (and involvement in) the imperial ventures of European powers (see Chapter 31 on “Native American and Immigrant Cultures” by Rachel Rubinstein and Chapter 25 on “Imperialism and Globalization” by Walter Grünzweig).

Whitman kept himself abreast of developments in the natural sciences (see Chapter 34 on “The Natural World” by Christine Gerhardt and Chapter 35 on “Science and Medicine” by Lindsay Tuggle) and he was a curious student of both philosophy and religion (Chapters 20 and 26 by Stephen John Mack and Brian Yother), with German romanticism capturing his attention in a particularly transformative way (see Chapter 33 by Edward S. Cutler). And while the Transcendentalist authors of New England may have been the United States’ most direct descendants of Kantian metaphysics (see Chapter 19 by Regina Schober), Whitman felt more at home among the ideologically inconsistent bohemian writers and artists of antebellum New York City than he did among the sages of Boston and Concord (Chapter 21 by Joanna Levin and Edward Whitley). The bohemians’ relationship with changing attitudes toward gender and sexuality were also more in line with Whitman’s own. Maire Mullins
demonstrates in Chapter 22 how Whitman toyed with gender norms in both his life and his writings, and Jay Grossman’s discussion of sexuality in Chapter 23 places Whitman’s capacious understanding of sexual desire alongside nineteenth-century discourses surrounding sexual activity – discourses that Whitman himself helped to shape in ways that not only contributed to twentieth-century definitions of sexual identity, but that also continue to inform sexual politics in the twenty-first.

The final group of essays on “Reception and Legacy” demonstrates just how transformative a figure Whitman has been – and continues to be – within both national and global contexts. Chapter 36 by Michael Robertson focuses on those readers of Whitman whose devotion to both the man and his poems would better be described as discipleship than readership; while Sascha Pöhlmann’s account of Whitman’s influence on US culture and Ed Folsom’s description of Whitman’s impact on writers across the globe (Chapters 37 and 38) point us toward an ongoing feedback loop, wherein Whitman’s legacy in the present also reshapes our understanding of his nineteenth-century past and the contexts that appear most relevant and ready for exploration.

Finally, we note that this collection of essays is dedicated to the directors and project staff of the Walt Whitman Archive. For over twenty years the Whitman Archive has been an indispensable resource for scholars, teachers, and students. The contributors to this volume express our heartfelt gratitude to Ed, Ken, and the many staff members who have logged countless hours into creating Whitman’s online home.
Abbreviations


xxvi List of Abbreviations


