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).

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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:

> 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 nonfiction prose of one the world's great writers through brief and provocative essays that place Whitman within the geographic, literary, cultural, 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, interpretations, 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 contextualize 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

form, as Matt Miller describes in Chapter 15 on "Notebooks and Manuscripts."

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 Yothers), 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

Corr.	*The Correspondence*, vols. 1–6, ed. Edwin Haviland Miller (New York, NY: New York University Press, 1961–77); vol. 7, ed. Ted Genoways (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 2004).
Journ.	*The Journalism*, 2 vols., eds. Herbert Bergman, Douglas A. Noverr, and Edward J. Recchia (New York, NY: Peter Lang, 1998–2003).
LG	*Leaves of Grass, Comprehensive Reader's Edition*, eds. Harold W. Blodgett and Sculley Bradley (New York, NY: New York University Press, 1965).
LG55	*Leaves of Grass* (Brooklyn, NY, 1855). Available in facsimile as *Leaves of Grass: A Facsimile of the First Edition* (San Francisco, CA: Chandler, 1968) and as a digital edition on the *Walt Whitman Archive.*
LG56	*Leave of Grass* (Brooklyn, NY: Fowler & Wells, 1856). Available in facsimile as *Leaves of Grass: Facsimile of the 1856 Edition* (Norwood, PA: Norwood Editions, 1976), *Leaves of Grass: 1856 Facsimile Edition* (Ann Arbor, MI: Microfilm International, 1980), and as a digital edition on the *Walt Whitman Archive.*
LG60	*Leaves of Grass* (Boston, MA: Thayer and Eldridge, 1860–61). Available in facsimile as *Leaves of Grass: Facsimile Edition of the 1860 Text* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1961), *Leaves of Grass, 1860: The 150th Anniversary Facsimile Edition*, ed. Jason Stacy (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 2009), and as a digital edition on the *Walt Whitman Archive.*
Loving	Jerome Loving, *Walt Whitman: The Song of Himself* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999).

NUPM	*Notebooks and Unpublished Prose Manuscripts*, 6 vols., ed. Edward F. Grier (New York, NY: New York University Press, 1984).
PW	*Prose Works, 1892*, 2 vols., ed. Floyd Stovall (New York, NY: New York University Press, 1963–64).
Reynolds	David S. Reynolds, *Walt Whitman's America: A Cultural Biography* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1996).
WWA	The *Walt Whitman Archive,* eds. Ed Folsom and Kenneth M. Price, www.whitmanarchive.org.
WWC	Horace Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, vol. 1 (Boston, MA: Small, Maynard, 1906); vols. 2–3 (New York, NY: Rowman and Littlefield, 1961); vol. 4 (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1953); vols. 5–7 (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1964–92); vols. 8–9 (Oregon House, CA: W. L. Bentley, 1996). Available as a digital edition on the *Walt Whitman Archive.*