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Introduction

Matt Cohen

A New Whitman

"AMERICA does not repel the past," Walt Whitman announced at the start of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* in 1855: "is not so impatient as has been supposed that the slough still sticks to opinions and manners and literature while the life which served its requirements has passed into the new life of the new forms."[1] To approach a collection of essays on *The New Whitman Studies* is to begin with the dynamic of novelty and inheritance that Whitman himself fashioned into an influential poetic architecture. As digital storage and transmission platforms enable another "new life" of forms, the question of the next phase of Whitman's work becomes urgent, central as it is to the American imagination and the imagination of America. And as poets, journalists, and scholarly humanists interrogate their roles in public culture in times of crisis, turning to new theories (or no theories) and reaching out for broader audiences, the newspaperman-turned-radical poet looms large as a figure through whom we might once again contemplate our own habits, professions, and beliefs.

Whitman would surely remind us that the rise of a violent and immoral plutocratic conservatism to national dominance in the United States – on the eve of the celebration of his 200th birthday in 2019 – is a return, rather than an advent. "For history is long, long, long," Whitman wrote in *Democratic Vistas*. "Shift and turn the combinations of the statement as we may, the problem of the future of America is in certain respects as dark as it is vast . . . Democracy grows rankly up the thickest, noxious, deadliest plants and fruits of all – brings worse and worse invaders – needs newer, larger, stronger, keener compensations and compellers."[2] The "political passion and struggle" evident in this statement grounded the poet's work,

[1] Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (Brooklyn: 1855), iii.
[2] Walt Whitman, "Democratic Vistas," *Complete Prose Works* (Boston: Small, Maynard, 1907), 246–47.

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as Betsy Erkkila insisted when her study *Whitman: The Political Poet* initiated a powerful strain of Whitman criticism.[3] That passion is visceral in poems like the heavily ironic "Respondez!" that jeremiadically call for Americans to reckon with their manipulation by bad leaders. "Let the eminence of meanness, treachery, sarcasm, hate, greed, indecency, impotence, lust, be taken for granted above all!" Whitman chanted. "Let writers, judges, governments, households, religions, philosophies, take such for granted above all!"[4] Whitman's attention to presidents, in particular, resounds across centuries – not just in his paeans to Lincoln, "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" and "O Captain! My Captain!," but in volatile eviscerations such as "The Eighteenth Presidency!":[5]

> The sixteenth and seventeenth terms of the American Presidency have shown that the villainy and shallowness of great rulers are just as eligible to These States as to any foreign despotism, kingdom, or empire – there is not a bit of difference. History is to record these two Presidencies as so far our topmost warning and shame. Never were publicly displayed more deformed, mediocre, snivelling, unreliable, false-hearted men! Never were These States so insulted, and attempted to be betrayed! All the main purposes for which the government was established are openly denied. The perfect equality of slavery with freedom is flauntingly preached in the North – nay, the superiority of slavery ... The President eats dirt and excrement for his daily meals, likes it, and tries to force it on The States. The cushions of the Presidency are nothing but filth and blood.[6]

Famously, Whitman imagined the young masculinity of America as the antidote to misrule, camerados everywhere rising to leadership on the strength of fellow-feelings and democratic oats. Will Americans "inland and seaboard ... surely awake," and will Whitman's young men save the United States in its current democratic crisis?[7] In its next one? The salvation wrought by the sacrifices of the Civil War, which began a few years after the poet wrote "The Eighteenth Presidency!," rearranged but did not resolve the fundamental racial tensions and economic inequalities that led to this scatological depiction of national leadership.

[3] Betsy Erkkila, *Whitman: The Political Poet* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 6.
[4] Walt Whitman, "Respondez!" *Leaves of Grass* (New York: W. E. Chapin & Co., Printers, 1867), 281.
[5] See Nathan Faries, "Whitman and the Presidency," *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 22: 4 (Spring 2005), 157–78.
[6] Walt Whitman, *Complete Poetry and Collected Prose*, ed. Justin Kaplan (New York: Library of America, 1982), 1310.
[7] Walt Whitman, "To the States, To Identify the 16th, 17th, or 18th Presidentiad," *Leaves of Grass* (Boston: Thayer and Eldridge, 1860), 401; on what she terms Whitman's "homosexual republic," see Betsy Erkkila, "Walt Whitman and the Homosexual Republic," *Walt Whitman: The Centennial Essays*, ed. Ed Folsom (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1994), 153–71.

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That putting such questions to the Good Gray Poet seems natural, even necessary, exemplifies how Whitman has remained ever-new, and ever-renewing, for American literature and literary criticism since the mid-nineteenth century. Whitman has been among the most analyzed of American writers since his *Leaves of Grass* first appeared. A study of the Modern Language Association's bibliography reveals that Poe, Whitman, and Emerson were, of the major American writers, the top three cited during the 1930s; after F. O. Matthiessen's *American Renaissance* was published, Whitman became the most cited, reigning through the 1940s, and has never since been far from the lead.[8] But Whitman is also one of the most frequently discussed American writers outside of academic publications. There are more than 16,000 entries in the Whitman Archive's comprehensive bibliographic database of writings about Whitman. As Ed Folsom, scholar and editor of the *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review*, observes later in this volume, such a mass of prose is potentially stultifying, at least for young scholars needing to carve out individuality in a shrinking job market.

One means by which this volume attempts to keep Whitman new, then, is by including essays on new topics or literary-critical emergences, ones that do not take Whitman's canonicity for granted. But more fundamentally, we have taken to heart Whitman's insistence that it is the "poets to come" who matter most. Several of the critics invited to contribute to this book have not published about Whitman before, or have not published much on him. I wanted to know if Whitman still has relevance for *literary studies* – not just for "American literature" as a certain kind of story, but for how we think about literature, even how we read it, and how we criticize it. In an age of political chaos and rapidly shifting centers of power; of constant communication at vast distances; of distraction; of environmental catastrophe and resurgent racism and xenophobia, do we still speak with and through, or back to, Whitman in the same ways – or have things changed? The voices newly addressing Whitman here offer both skepticism and optimism about the habits and conventional stances of Whitman criticism, and it is refreshing.

But as Folsom also points out, unheralded discoveries about Whitman's life and work have pressured even industry insiders to make it new. Ted Genoways's discovery that the frontispiece of the 1855 *Leaves of Grass* at

[8] Maurice Lee, "Poe by the Numbers: Odd Man Out?", *Poe and the Remapping of Antebellum Print Culture*, ed. J. Gerald Kennedy and Jerome McGann (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2012), 227–44.

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some point underwent alteration – to enhance the bulge in the poet's pants, no less – underscored the axial quality of sexuality both as a political thematics in Whitman's work and as a dimension of his self-fashioning in public. Kenneth M. Price's explorations in the holdings of the National Archives and Records Administration revealed thousands of documents that Whitman produced as a scribe for the US government in the 1860s and 1870s. These documents have only begun to be coordinated with Whitman's writings during the time, to paint a fuller picture of his life in Washington and the effect of working as a secretary on his approach to poetry and prose. Price's discoveries were published at the Walt Whitman Archive, the scholarly digital collection of everything Whitman. This digitization effort has not only accelerated Whitman scholarship, but, in its quest to obtain scans of Whitman documents far and wide, continually uncovers little-known texts, including letters, photographs, reviews, interviews, ephemera, and marginalia written by the poet. The Archive has always been freely accessible, and now the mainstay of Whitman scholarship, the *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review*, is open-access.

The increasing accessibility of nineteenth-century newsprint and the integration of bibliographical resources for the study of literary figures like Whitman has helped make possible other startling discoveries. As a result, we have learned that Whitman was an even more prolific and persistent writer of prose than had previously been thought. Two long works, one the self-help series "Manly Health and Training," and the other a novel, *Life and Adventures of Jack Engle*, were recently discovered, to international fanfare. As their recoverer Zachary Turpin points out – strengthening a point long ago urged by Ezra Greenspan – such works contradict our sense that Whitman left the popular prose world behind to become an avant-garde poet like a butterfly leaving its chrysalis.[9] Published in 1858, three years after the debut of *Leaves of Grass*, "Manly Health and Training" shows Whitman trying to transform the bodies and minds of American men not through poetry but everyday prose. It and *Jack Engle* give us, too, a glimpse into a period that is notoriously little-documented in the poet's life. (From the year the novel was published, 1852, only one piece of Whitman's correspondence is known to survive.) Still other documents suggest the

[9] Zachary Turpin, "Introduction to Walt Whitman's 'Life and Adventures of Jack Engle,'" *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 34: 3 (2017), 225–61; Zachary Turpin, "Introduction to Walt Whitman's 'Manly Health and Training,'" *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 33: 3 (2016), 147–83; Ezra Greenspan, *Walt Whitman and the American Reader* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990). "Manly Health and Training" appeared under the byline "Mose Velsor," while *Life and Adventures of Jack Engle* was published anonymously.

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kind of projecting Whitman was doing at this time. A massive geography scrapbook of Whitman's, held by Ohio Wesleyan University, begins with a note that seems to suggest that in the mid-1850s, when the scrapbook was compiled, Whitman may have been working on a textbook: "In 'History & Geography of the World,'" Whitman instructs himself, "introduce every where lists of persons the great persons of every age and land." It's possible that the work Whitman was imagining here was as loosely conceived in terms of genre as it seems *Leaves of Grass* had been – collaged into being out of annotations, prose, and poetry drafts, as Matt Miller has argued.[10] But in light of Turpin's discoveries, it seems at least possible that Whitman, whose *Leaves of Grass* had yet to become a commercial success, may have been trying to tap into the lucrative textbook market.

And when we turn to that icon of American literature, the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, it turns out we have until recently had little idea how radical, in fact, it was and is. This newly apparent radicalism has less to do with its assuredly political aims and effects than with the way it speaks to the very processes by which the text itself was constructed. Inspired by Genoways's discovery of the "enhanced crotch" frontispiece variation, Folsom's group at the University of Iowa conducted a census of all known copies of the 1855 *Leaves*. Printed on a hand press, this text underwent a series of revisions – some accidental, some intentional – during the book's production. The sheets featuring the different versions of the text were then gathered and bound, but not systematically, mixing later and earlier states of the sheets (and the frontispiece) more or less indiscriminately. As a result, it is possible that *no two copies of the 1855 edition today are identical*; that we cannot precisely refer to *the* 1855 *Leaves of Grass* as such. A material emblem of its own declaration not to repel the past, the 1855 *Leaves* edition marks an epoch in literature's embodiment: Written in and for a rapidly industrializing and homogenizing world of print, it nonetheless features a textual instability that seems more medieval than modern.

New Politics, New Literatures

It is here that we begin to see the potential of today's work on Whitman to speak more broadly to transformations in the study of literature. The inextricability of form from politics in Whitman's poetry, and the way in which the critical work of his prose hangs over both of these as a way of

[10] Matt Miller, *Collage of Myself: Walt Whitman and the Making of Leaves of Grass* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2010).

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understanding them, informs the selection of the three major groupings of essays in this collection. The chapters in Part I focus on aesthetics and politics; in Part II on materialist approaches to studying Whitman; and in the final part on the critical imagination. There is both overlap among the essays with respect to these three categories of concern and substantial critical disagreement among them with respect to the conclusions to be drawn about Whitman's work from considering it in their light.

The political difficulty is this: Although Whitman's work spoke to the kinds of crises of national ethics and policy discussed above, in many ways his views were hamstrung by a racialist, progressivist vision that subordinated equality to unity, perhaps particularly in the wake of the Civil War. Indigenous America was a persistent blind spot for the poet of poets to come, since he seems to have understood the displacement of American Indians as necessary to the establishment of the workingman's United States he envisioned. Whitman, as he insisted in *Democratic Vistas*, would "not gloss over the appalling dangers of universal *suffrage* in the United States."[11] When we consider these facts in the framework of today's larger critical movements, which increasingly understand the analysis of discourses of race, ethnicity, sexuality, age, ability, religion, and other identity matrices to be the fabric out of which aesthetic analysis must be woven, Whitman's linking of radical democratic tendencies with stylistic innovation begins to lose its gravitas. Black pessimism, decolonial Indigenous studies, and postcolonial feminism, just to name a few generative critical formations, each yield a Whitman about whom there are serious doubts. Moreover, we get a Whitman whose very political radicalism, whose commitment to an expanded self and a deconstruction of the identity categories of his time, seems to have been as much a fertilizer of the seeds of today's retrograde categories as the queer liberator or the poet of slaves. For better and worse, Whitman's centrality to the US imagination carries forward his work's fracturing of some norms and its dependence upon others.

It's easy enough to blame Whitman for not transcending certain myopias of his time, when he was so good at challenging others. But if it is judgment we seek, the evidence for it does not begin and end with what Whitman did, or thought, or wrote. "Whitman's influence," Price and Folsom remind us, "is due to his literary qualities as well as his standing as a political prophet."[12] The poet's reception, regarded from

[11] Walt Whitman, *Democratic Vistas and Other Papers* (London: Walter Scott, 1888), 2–3.
[12] Ed Folsom and Kenneth M. Price, *Re-Scripting Walt Whitman: An Introduction to His Life and Work* (London: Blackwell, 2005), 129.

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a distance of space and time, has produced a kaleidoscopic "Walt Whitman," inspiring political movements and literature on almost all parts of the ideological spectrum.[13] Ivy Wilson suggests one recuperative approach when he describes African-American poets not reflecting but refracting both Whitman's formal innovations and his political attitudes through the lens of a now-long tradition of previous writers' engagements with the poet, from José Martí to Langston Hughes to Allen Ginsberg. "Looking back at Whitman" for these writers, Wilson suggests, yields a figure who "can no longer be seen as white but has to be understood as Whitman noir."[14]

Other ways of thinking aesthesis and politics together through Whitman are suggested in the essays included here. Mark Rifkin, writing about Whitman's work's relationship to the ongoing colonization of Native Americans, argues that "Whitman's writing helps illuminate . . . non-native perceptual dynamics and the ways they normalize the terms and contours of non-native governance." But it does so, he suggests, in a way that puts the liberatory uses of Whitman for queer-friendly, environmentalist, antiracist, and antisexist purposes at odds with those of Indigenists and others working in decolonial modes. On the one hand, we need the Whitman of the progressive critical and artistic paradigms. But Indigenists remind us that it is as hard to imagine Whitman as uncolonial as it is to imagine him as undemocratic, and that should be a troubling yoking for anyone working in Whitman studies – or on American literature, understood as an extension of the naturalness of the United States as a country and concept, more broadly. We can be certain that Whitman would not be joining the protestors of oil pipelines in the Plains today; he spent most of his life wary of radical actions. But would he – *could he* – see among the water protectors at Standing Rock the same heroic figures he saw in Osceola or Red Jacket? As Justine Murison's essay points out, Whitman can also be found manipulating these perceptual dynamics in relation to sexuality, along the same axis that links personal impression to public effect. The reproductive fervor of the "Enfans d'Adam" cluster in the 1860 *Leaves*, Murison argues, provoked panicked responses because it

[13] See Walter Grünzweig, "'For America – For All the Earth': Walt Whitman as an International(ist) Poet," *Breaking Bounds: Whitman and American Cultural Studies*, ed. Betsy Erkkila and Jay Grossman (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 238–50; and more recently, Caterina Bernardini, "Transnational Networks and the Italian Reinvention of Walt Whitman, 1870–1930," PhD Diss, University of Nebraska–Lincoln (2017).

[14] Ivy Wilson, "Looking with a Queer Smile: Walt Whitman's Gaze and Black America," *Whitman Noir: Black America and the Good Gray Poet*, ed. Ivy Wilson (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2014), xvii.

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suggested a female sexuality outside of the institutions of marriage and domesticity; however, many wives and mothers are depicted elsewhere in Whitman's work. Sexual identity did not yet have the public coherence as a form of identification that it would later assume; Whitman's poems in "Calamus" and "Enfans d'Adam" (later "Children of Adam") challenged readers' senses of the relationships between public and private identities and feelings.

The essays by Thoren Opitz, Tim Robbins, and Caterina Bernardini and Kenneth Price take up different conceptions of the political than those of Murison and Rifkin. For Opitz, Whitman's global ambitions were evidenced early in the career of *Leaves of Grass*, as the poet amplified his global reception (real and imagined) to the ends of crafting a kind of international brand for himself. Rather than emerging later in his career – say, in the wake of his widely circulated complaint in 1876 about being ignored in his own country but appreciated abroad – Whitman's innovation of an international persona began early and linked his liberatory vision to a brazenly capitalistic marketing plan.[15] Robbins, on the other hand, turns to the uptake of Whitman by professional sociologists who appreciated him less for his universality than for the unusualness of the insights he offered about the human condition in one passage in *Leaves of Grass*. When Whitman wrote that he thought he "could turn and live with animals," he laid the groundwork for a complex set of discussions among later sociologists about the objective study of the human species – including a perhaps surprising harmony with the followers of Herbert Spencer. In the light of these essays, Whitman appears at the origin points of both a new form of celebrity management and one of the most consequential disciplines emerging from his time.

For the most part, the 1855 edition of *Leaves* has been considered in form and substance a prophetic utterance, even by strenuous critics of Whitman's politics. The lament has been that he seems to have backed off from it. If anything, the new Whitman studies has produced most significantly an old Whitman. The period that he envisioned in 1860 as "the estuary that enlarges and spreads itself grandly as it pours in the great sea" has been contentious among scholars, labeled as a decline into political conservatism and a retreat from experimentalism.[16] In their essay, Bernardini and Price remind us that the supposedly conservative 1891–92

[15] See Robert J. Scholnick, "The Selling of the 'Author's Edition': Whitman, O'Connor, and the *West Jersey Press* Affair," *Walt Whitman Review* 23 (1977), 3–23.
[16] Walt Whitman, "To Old Age," *Leaves of Grass* (1860), 402. See Anton Vander Zee, "Late Whitman: Critical Pasts, Critical Futures," *RALS: Resources for American Literary Study* 40 (2018).

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edition of *Leaves* was in fact what vectored Whitman into the modernist aesthetic. Far from wearing the bottoms of his trousers rolled, Whitman continued to experiment with prosody and the structure of his *Leaves* – a point that Folsom, in the chapter concluding this volume, argues by other means and to other ends.

To Get at the Meanings of Poems

If controversy about Whitman's politics has seldom flagged, his cachet in the domain of materialist approaches to literary studies has been on the rise. What better way, perhaps, to answer the challenge of a poet who explicitly asks his readers, "Have you practis'd so long to learn to read? / Have you felt so proud to get at the meaning of poems?" Here – and some scholars have argued, precisely as a means for critics to avoid discussing politics – Whitman is surging in his reputation as a writer with unusual sensitivity to the fluctuations of the literary marketplace, attentiveness to the materials through which his poetry and prose met the world, and habits of breaking down the distinctions among spoken word, manuscript, and print. In this, too, what seems Whitman's novelty may be a resurgent visibility, brought on by the arrival of digital media and networked circulation, reshaping the landscape of representation much as did the explosion of print driven by the steam engine and mass literacy. For those working in creative fields today and thinking about the complex ways in which texts do or can be made to move through the world, Whitman's tendency not just to exploit the materials but to make them both thematically and semiotically integral to his productions is an inspiration. But even early on, Whitman's followers were picking up on his manipulations not just of the textual content but of the typography and bookmaking design elements as they changed across the editions of *Leaves of Grass*. They perceived that Whitman was an aesthete in these matters and understood material textual features as being coproducers with the text of the sensation of *Leaves*, not just its sense. Those who reproduced his work in the decades following the poet's passing, in their turn, often reshaped his meanings by casting his work in different contexts or physical manifestations.

All this is to say that we are experiencing an efflorescence of modes of *reading* Whitman's work, from computational-analytical approaches to reception studies to book studies. Many of the recent startling insights into what most scholars would have argued was the best-known book in American literature benefitted from the procedures of bibliography and book history. Materialist approaches to literary study inspired by the work

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of D. F. McKenzie, Jerome McGann, and others, have been claimed to be among the latest "surface reading" methodologies, approaches that rely less on intense close reading and more on a range of techniques designed to suss out how a book functioned (or could have functioned) for readers of the past.[17] In a related development, posthumanist, object-focused, and eco-critical schools of reading have decentered human subjectivity and agency, looking at literature as a participant in what has come to be called "the Anthropocene," the era of human impact on the earth. The essays in Part II of this volume engage these critical conversations, while putting them into dialogue with adjacent analytical strategies to show both in new lights.

Jay Grossman's analysis of Whitman's and Margaret Sanger's work in the context of the socialist sexology of the cheap pamphlets coming out of the Haldeman-Julius publishing house in the 1910s and 1920s suggests ways of scaling reading from the intimate to the sociological to bring surprising historical contradictions into view. Whitman's poetry, as reprinted in one of the Haldeman-Julius pamphlets, is framed by advertisements for Sanger's sex-ed work and for the publishing company's socialist weekly, *Appeal to Reason*. Grossman observes that Whitman, in this context, functions contradictorily. "Sanger's normalization of sex as 'naturally' heterosexual," he observes, "clashes against the homosocial brotherhood of worker-comrades that the *Appeal to Reason* version of Whitman is re-circulating to new audiences at the same time." In other words, if rematerializing Whitman means giving his work new meanings, those acts of textual "reproduction" induce dissonances, not just across time but at the same time. Grossman's essay suggests that scholars working on the history of books might reflect that their materialist methodology has yet fully to implement a more distributed or networked conception of how a book's meaning is generated – a conception that might resist the hetero-normative version of sexuality's history by suggesting a plurality of meanings operating in a field of potentiality animated by both literary and material form.

Erica Fretwell's essay on Whitman and the nineteenth-century sensorium effects a similar shift, bridging from the centrality of the senses to Whitman's poetic persona to a series of contests over the capacities or valences of human bodies as differentiated by race, sex, gender, and

[17] On "surface reading" as an alternative to "symptomatic" (meaning psychological or political) readings of texts, see Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, "Surface Reading: An Introduction," *Representations* 108: 1 (2009), 1–21; and an elaboration on the category of descriptive criticism in Sharon Marcus, Heather Love, and Stephen Best, "Building a Better Description," *Representations* 135: 1 (2016), 1–21.

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