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## Walt Whitman: Twentieth-century Mass Media Appearances

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# Twentieth-century Mass Media Appearances

*Andrew Jewell and Kenneth M. Price*

Readers of the May 2004 issue of *O: The Oprah Magazine* could hardly miss two bold fuchsia-colored pages made from especially firm stock. These pages are perforated and feature quotations that readers could tear out and make into postcard-sized objects. All the quotations concern the body, and readers are instructed to “post these cards on a mirror to remind yourself to rejoice – daily and non-fault-findingly – in the power, glory, and potential of your beautiful physical self.” The quotations come from Aimee Mullins, Naomi Shihab Nye, and, finally, Walt Whitman – “If anything is sacred the human body is sacred.” Ironically, the fuchsia pages are lodged between an advertisement to wake up to Atkins and join “the low-carb revolution” and another advertisement for Zelnorm, a medicine for treating “abdominal pain, bloating, and constipation.” (Celebration of the body exists here in uneasy relationship to anxieties about the body, worries deepened by advertising and by the desire to sell products.) When we find Whitman in *O: The Oprah Magazine*, we know that he has been appropriated by the media that support our consumer-oriented society.

Mass media, the various means of communication designed to reach a large portion of the public, include but are not limited to film, radio, television, advertising, popular music, the internet, newspapers, and magazines. Whitman’s appearances in mass media have not been studied much, though they deserve attention because the evolving uses of his image and words can illuminate important aspects of his cultural afterlife. Until the 1960s, Whitman was invoked with surprising frequency as an icon of high literary stature. Advertisers in particular relied on his fame – not on his challenges to orthodox thinking and ordinary social arrangements – to sell a host of products that used him, paradoxically, to bolster the respectability of everything from containers to insurance to whiskey. As the twentieth century progressed, however, the use of Whitman’s image began to change. Writers of teleplays, magazines, and music began to evoke Whitman with more complexity, ambiguity, and playfulness. No longer was he simply a symbol of cultural authority; instead, he often signaled irreverence and daring, and he became an iconic presence in widespread ef-

forts to push mass media beyond traditional limits of decorum. The change over the last half-century is underscored by the difference between the confident stride and dignified look of Whitman as depicted in an advertisement for the John Hancock Insurance Company in 1952 and the animated television character Homer Simpson bellowing “Leaves of Grass, my ass!” in 1995.

In discussing the evolution of Whitman’s image in the mass media from his lifetime to the present, we analyze a representative sampling of his varied popular culture appearances. Certain emphases are worth noting: we have chosen not to focus on Whitman’s appearances in film so as to avoid duplicating Kenneth M. Price’s recent chapter “Whitman at the Movies” in *To Walt Whitman, America* (2004), and we have also not analyzed Whitman’s impact on classical and jazz music (which is discussed elsewhere in this volume) but have instead focused on forms of music that have more consistently reached a wide popular audience. Our selective treatment of Whitman images in mass media highlights the recent proliferation of images that are often ironic, funny, and rich with sexual overtones.

### **Starting from Camden: The Walt Whitman Hotel and the Whitman Stamp**

During the first half-century after his death Whitman’s image and words were frequently used as away to lend credibility to institutions and products, whether or not there was any real relationship with the writer. A good example of an authentic connection to the poet (and his community) can be found in the Walt Whitman Hotel in Camden, New Jersey. The hotel, which opened in 1925 and remained in business for approximately 50 years (it was demolished in the 1980s), was in fact built and owned by the community. According to an article in the *Camden Courier-Post* of July 5, 1926, even the name was based on a “majority of letters received after suggestions for a name were asked through the columns of the Courier” (*Camden Courier-Post* 1926). The hotel was a project of the Greater Camden Movement, a civic group that had been effective in raising funds to support American soldiers during World War I. Following the war, the group’s plan was to boost the local economy by building a bridge between Camden and Philadelphia (eventually named the Walt Whitman Bridge). The article cited above explains that the hotel aimed to become a center for Whitman art. “Paintings of the poet, portraits and murals depicting his varied interests in life have been installed in various of the public rooms, and more are being added.” The hotel generated ephemera such as postcards and matchbooks to spread its name while also promoting itself on towels, plates, and other matter along with placing advertisements in mass media outlets, especially newspapers.

In 1940, Whitman’s connection to his final home in New Jersey was also fittingly stressed when the United States Postal Service unveiled first in Camden a Whitman postage stamp as part of its series of stamps called “Famous Americans.” The Postal Service selected five individuals for each of its seven categories: “Authors,” “Poets,”

“Educators,” “Scientists,” “Composers,” “Artists,” and “Inventors.” Whitman, along with Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, John Greenleaf Whittier, James Russell Lowell, and James Whitcomb Riley, was selected as one of five famous American poets. Whitman’s inclusion in this group may be surprising to modern readers since he is seldom grouped with the popular “Fireside Poets” or with the dialect poetry of Riley. But it is consistent with other representations of Whitman in the mass media of the 1940s – he was included precisely because of what the series highlights, his fame. His revolutionary poetic agenda is barely suggested; instead, he, like the more conservative “Famous American” poets in this series, is presented on the stamp with a traditional head and shoulders portrait. The only distinction is that unlike all the other portraits of writers in the series, Whitman is wearing a hat. A wide variety of first-day covers exist, postmarked “Camden, New Jersey, February 20, 1940.” The idea of a Whitman stamp emanating from Camden is especially appropriate because Whitman often served as a one-man distribution center, mailing out copies of the 1876 *Leaves of Grass*, for example, one at a time, as the orders came in.

### Advertising

Early in the twentieth century, the Camden Grocers Exchange apparently offered an assortment of Walt Whitman products. Kenneth Price owns a Walt Whitman coffee tin that bears an advertisement urging brand name loyalty: “Ask your grocer for Walt Whitman products.” Whitman’s image and name were also invoked elsewhere in the US and UK to peddle cigarettes, cigars, pencils, ice cream, and drug treatments for medical ailments in the early twentieth century and to sell coffee in both the early and late twentieth century. Whitman’s image was reproduced commercially to persuade consumers to associate products with his work and legacy. Occasionally this was fitting; one company advertised a printing press using Whitman’s name and likeness. Given the poet’s notoriety (both in his own time and in continuing controversies about his work and its meaning in the twentieth century), it is intriguing that advertisers blithely used Whitman as an innocuous famous figure. The Whitman represented is the writer who will unsettle the fewest possible people in the marketplace. For example, an Old Crow whiskey advertisement, distributed in 1962, used a gift to the poet in 1891 to claim Whitman as one of its “famous customers” and to depict a life wildly at odds with Whitman’s actual circumstances. The ad offered a stylized, well-groomed but still recognizable image of Whitman seated at his desk in a neat, orderly room filled with books and portraits of himself. With him is an attractive maid who serves him from the complimentary bottle of Old Crow whiskey he received in the mail. The ad presents Whitman’s life as filled with the adornments of the wealthy elite. To dignify its product, Old Crow depicts a Whitman who never existed, constructing the poet as refined, orderly, and discriminating in his taste for spirits. Old Crow projects conventional signs of the culturally elite onto a poet who had fashioned himself in opposition to ordinary affluence. In truth, Whitman lived in his final years in a modest house awash

in an extraordinary chaos of papers. (Ironically, Whitman wrote a temperance novel, *Franklin Evans*, early in his career, and several of his early writings deplore the “livid faces of drunkards.” Not an excessive drinker himself at any time of his life, Whitman favored beer during his bohemian days at Pfaff’s in the late 1850s, and Burgundy and champagne in his final years.) Here advertising severs Whitman’s name and image from his life and poetic agenda in order to reduce him to a generic famous dead poet.

In the 1990s, Borders Bookshop Espresso Bar in Minnetonka, Minnesota, cleverly altered the famous photograph of Whitman with a cardboard butterfly perched on his fingertip in such a way as to substitute a cup of coffee for the butterfly, thus creating an image that shows Whitman holding up and deeply contemplating what can only be a satisfying cup of coffee. The wit of the image depends of course on our being aware of the advertiser’s sleight-of-hand. As in representations of Whitman earlier in the century, he has currency here as a “famous poet,” he lends a certain high culture appeal to a business, and his image gratifies those sufficiently in the know to appreciate the joke. At the same time, coffee houses in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have taken pains to give themselves the air of bohemia and the veneer of literary sophistication. Whitman, who is increasingly understood as a poet of love and freethinking, helps in creating this atmosphere. The positive feelings generally directed toward Whitman in American culture no doubt encouraged Starbucks, too, to include, on one of their coffee cards (to be used in lieu of cash), a Whitman quotation about America being “not merely a nation, but a teeming nation of nations.” Presumably Starbucks hoped that would help teeming nations line up to order more venti lattes.

## Humor

At the same time as the Old Crow whiskey advertisement appeared, Whitman was beginning to be represented in other forms of media in ways that were less reverential. In January 1962, *Mad Magazine* published “Inspirational Poems by, for and about the Nation’s Building Men,” one of which spoofs the lamentations of “O Captain! My Captain!”:

O Builder! My Builder! Our dreadful house is done,  
 There’s devastation in your wake, it looks just like Bull Run;  
 The toilets leak, the closets creak, the basement’s filled with water,  
 We’re killing termites by the score, come back and watch the slaughter;  
 But O heart! Heart! Heart!  
 O the bleeding drops of red,  
 My dreams of joy and pleasure lie  
 Fallen cold and dead. (*Mad Magazine* 1962: 20)

This parody exemplifies anew attitude toward Whitman that begins to emerge in mass media. Rather than using the image of the poet to give cultural legitimacy, the referenc-

es highlight the oddity, irony, and asymmetry caused by the distance between mid-nineteenth-century and mid-twentieth-century American culture. The “O Captain” parody distances itself from Whitman by locating humor in the incongruity between the poet’s heroic vision of Abraham Lincoln and mundane details of mid-twentieth-century life. Whitman’s expression of sorrow at the loss of Lincoln becomes part of the humor when the focus changes to leaking toilets and termite problems, and when the Civil War – Bull Run in particular – becomes a metaphor for sloppy contractors. *Mad Magazine*, consistently irreverent about virtually every topic since its inception in 1952, would parody “O Captain! My Captain!” several times (see *Mad* issues for April 1959, September 1967, and March 1983). The recognizable rhythms and elevated emotionalism of the poem apparently provided an irresistible target.

### Music

In contrast to *Mad*’s lampooning of Whitman, Joan Baez invoked Whitman for political uplift. One of the foremost folk musicians of the 1960s, Baez included a reading from Whitman on her 1967 concept album *Baptism*. The album, which the liner notes explain “was conceived as a means of ‘saying something’ through a synthesis of poetry and music,” joins a section of Whitman’s “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d” (titled “I Saw the Vision of Armies” on the album) with works by James Joyce, William Blake, John Donne, Arthur Rimbaud, e. e. cummings, and Countee Cullen, among others. Baez, a peace activist, evokes Whitman in much the way he was evoked by socialists and communists earlier in the century (Michael Gold, for example, claimed that Whitman “rose from the grave to march with us”). Baez sees Whitman as the “most uniquely American of great poets” who possessed “visions of world human brotherhood” (Baez [1967] 2003).

These two different versions of Whitman in the mass media of the 1960s – ironic and playful on the one hand, idealistic and reverent on the other – foretell the media’s continuing complex relationship with Whitman throughout the last decades of the twentieth century. Treatments of Whitman provide a way to gauge the type of stories popular culture was telling about US history in this time period. In popular music, for example, Whitman’s name and work continued to be evoked in multiple ways. Irish singer and songwriter Van Morrison’s 1983 album *Inarticulate Speech of the Heart* contains a track entitled “Rave On, John Donne.” The song, in which Morrison sings about the persistence and influence of literature (“Rave on words on printed page”), mentions Whitman along with John Donne, William Butler Yeats, Omar Khayam, and Kahlil Gibran, and specifically envisions Whitman as “nose down in wet grass,” filling his senses with “nature’s bright green shady path.” Morrison’s lyric pays homage to *Leaves of Grass* when he mentions Whitman in a catalogue of famous writers. Morrison chooses to invoke him specifically as a nature poet and includes him with a group that “raves on” “through the industrial revolution, Impericism [sic], atomic and nuclear age” (Morrison 1983). The poet’s

ability to find spirit in nature is for Morrison a sign that Whitman speaks across time periods. Morrison's evocation of Whitman is reminiscent of Baez in attitude if not in the details. Both songwriters venerate Whitman as a truth-teller. Perhaps less directly than Baez, Morrison, too, turns Whitman to political purposes, portraying his poetry as an implicit condemnation of the destructive tendencies of contemporary life.

In 1992 Lindsey Buckingham, a member of the popular band Fleetwood Mac, directly connected his own artistic growth with Whitman's by titling a solo album *Out of the Cradle*. In addition to using a title virtually identical to one of Whitman's, Buckingham fills his album art with, among other things, old photographs of himself as a young boy with guitars and a "collage poem" taken directly from Whitman's "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking." The "collage poem" consists of nine handwritten lines from the first line group in Whitman's poem. The poem, combined with pictures of Buckingham learning to play the guitar, works to connect the musician's own artistic "awakening" to Whitman's. Though Buckingham's album employs Whitman to underscore his serious artistic aims, there is also a playfulness present. The handwritten poem, which begins with Whitman's first line, "Out of the cradle endlessly rocking," is flanked by two large photographs: on the left is a young boy playing a guitar and singing, on the right is the adult Buckingham playing a guitar and singing. In other words, Buckingham puns, he has been "endlessly rocking" throughout his life. As painful as that pun is – at least he didn't title the album "Endlessly Rocking" – it is made subtly, and demonstrates the more complex relationship songwriters are beginning to have with Whitman. Rather than just venerating him as a great poet, Buckingham uses humor in his Whitman references.

Perhaps the best known (and most enigmatic) use of Whitman in popular music in the last decade is the song "Walt Whitman's Niece" on the 1998 album *Mermaid Avenue*. The album has several major musical contributors: the lyrics were all written by Woody Guthrie in 1946, and the music was composed and performed by Billy Bragg and Wilco. As the opening track on the album, "Walt Whitman's Niece" is raucous, irreverent, and sexually charged in a way that other evocations of Whitman have not been. The lyrics tell a story about two men, one of them a "seaman," who walk up to a "big old building" and meet "two girls," go into their "big long room" with a "deep blue rug," where one girl "took down a book of poems" and reads as the narrator lays his head down in her lap. After that, the "seaman buddy and girl moved off" and "there I was, / All night long, laying and listening and forgetting the poems." "My girl had told us that she was a niece of Walt Whitman," the narrator says, "but not which niece, / And it takes a night and a girl and book of this kind / A long long time to find its way back" (Bragg and Wilco 1998).

The use of Whitman in "Walt Whitman's Niece," then, is quite different than the political and spiritual uses made by Baez and Morrison. There is an air of gleeful nonsense about the entire song. Bryan K. Garman, who focuses on the leftist politics that connects the poet to Guthrie and others in the folk-singing tradition, calls the song "unremarkable" (Garman 2000: 191), but it is significant when seen as part of the broader pattern of Whitman references in mass media. In most forms



of popular culture up until the time Guthrie wrote his lyrics, “Whitman” had been associated with profundity and spiritual truth; here, however, the reference adds to the depth and complexity of the sexually suggestive content. Whitman has meant so many different things to people as a poet of love and eroticism that a cryptic invocation of his name in an amorous context raises a host of possibilities. In sharp contrast to “Walt Whitman’s Niece” is another song on *Mermaid Avenue* called “Ingrid Bergman.” It is another fantasy involving a more directly expressed tryst with a celebrity. By writing a song about Whitman’s niece, Guthrie, famous for his heterosexual appetites, can imagine a Whitman-mediated sexual encounter while remaining within a heterosexual frame.

“Walt Whitman’s Niece,” released in 1998, evoked an eroticized image of Whitman that was increasingly common in the mass media of the late twentieth century. In *To Walt Whitman, America*, Price has documented the way Whitman’s poetry, image, and name have often been used as love currency. He notes that after 1980 Whitman has the most cultural resonance in cinema as the poet of love, and references to him and his work are often used by filmmakers to tell a story of desire and romance. Whitman is used by characters who are trying to woo a partner, by lovers affirming their relationship, by characters exploring same-sex love and so on. The Billy Bragg and Wilco performance of “Walt Whitman’s Niece” is part of this mass media conception of Whitman as a poet of love and desire.

One other pop music reference to Whitman from the late 1990s relies on a similar understanding of Whitman. Ben Lee’s song, “Portable Walt Whitman,” released on the sound track to the Australian film, *Blackrock*, features amusing lyrics about the narrator’s unrequited desire for an anonymous woman who is “so damn pretty she should be against the law.” The song’s narrator claims “I’d give my left lung to be hers for one night” and “she breaks my heart every time that she smiles,” but the only mention of Whitman is in the title. The precise relevance of the title is unclear: does it refer to the Viking Press’s *Portable Walt Whitman*? Is it a personal, intentionally obscure reference? Is “Walt Whitman” meant to be symbolic of the narrator’s fickle, or “portable,” emotional and sexual desire (the woman he longs for he has just seen “walking down the street”)? Whatever the title’s meaning may be, Ben Lee clearly understands that Whitman resonates in the culture as a poet of love.

## Television

Regrettably, Whitman’s first television performance, like his first adaptation in film, *The Carpenter*, appears to be lost. Fred Ziv, a pioneer in television syndication, once planned to use Arthur Fitz-Richard’s adaptation of the Whitman story “One Wicked Impulse” for his series “Favorite Story TV.” Kenneth Price has in his collection a copy of script number 72B, the final master script dated May 17, 1954, of “One Wicked Impulse.” (Records concerning “Favorite Story TV” are spotty, and it is unclear if the



Whitman episode actually ran.) This story may have come to Ziv's attention not because he was studying Whitman's lesser-known texts, but because *Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine* had published "One Wicked Impulse!" as #122 in January 1954. The TV script borrows Whitman's title and gives the name Mr. Covert to a major character, but in other respects the stories differ markedly from one another. This seems to be an example of invoking Whitman just to gain the power of his name. There is, however, a rough similarity in the premises of the two stories: a man causes the death of another, and both in effect ask the question: what can redeem him?

Like "Favorite Story TV," Fox's *The Simpsons* invoked Whitman primarily for the power of his name. In the "Mother Simpson" episode (first aired November 19, 1995), Homer goes to the Springfield Hall of Records to straighten out one of his son Bart's pranks, which has convinced the record keepers that Homer is dead. In his confrontation with the bureaucrat, Homer becomes involved in a debate over whether Homer's mother is dead. He believes that she is because he can point to her grave marker at the top of the cemetery hill. However, Homer takes the bureaucrat's suggestion and decides to inspect more closely. When he moves the foliage to reveal not his mother's name but that of Walt Whitman, he cries out: "Walt Whitman?! Aargh! Damn you, Walt Whitman! [kicking grave] I! Hate! you! Walt! Freaking! Whitman! 'Leaves of Grass,' my ass!" Frivolous, light-hearted, earthy, crass – it is hard to know exactly how to characterize Homer's declaration. What does seem clear, though, is that American culture has developed an easy familiarity with Whitman. Alvaro Cardona-Hine once remarked of Whitman, "He has the careless and forgiving odor of someone who will let you live" (Cardona-Hine 1998: 371). Poets, artists, advertisers, and others speak about Whitman with little of the reserve and formality that characterizes the treatment of other revered figures in our cultural past. To borrow Gary Schmidgall's description of Horace Traubel's relationship to Whitman, American culture is "intimate with Walt."

Like *The Simpsons*, other television programs, including *ER*, *Six Feet Under*, *Twilight Zone*, and *Law & Order*, turned to Whitman when treating death. The *ER* episode "Sleepless in Chicago" (NBC, first aired February 23, 1995) features a scene in which John Carter, Chief Resident, brings several books to a dying patient, a former high school English teacher, Mr. Klein, who brusquely rejects an unspecified book by Melville and one other unnamed text before grabbing the Whitman book. Later, Carter reads to him from "Passage to India":

O soul thou pleasest me, I thee,  
 Sailing these seas or on the hills, or waking in the night,  
 Thoughts, silent thoughts, of Time and Space and Death, like waters flowing,  
 Bear me indeed as through the regions infinite,  
 Whose air I breathe, whose ripples hear, lave me all over,  
 Bathe me O God in thee, mounting to thee,  
 I and my soul to range in range of thee.  
 O Thou transcendent,  
 Nameless, the fibre and the breath.

The show implies that Whitman (famous for his own work in the Civil War hospitals), knew better than other writers everything from hospital settings to eternity.

One episode of the HBO series *Six Feet Under*, “The Plan” (first aired March 17, 2002), features a plot involving the death of Michael John Pipher, whose wife is psychic. At a service for her husband, the wife asks that a man read from “Michael’s favorite poet, Walt Whitman.” The passage is from section 6 of the final version of “Song of Myself”:

What do you think has become of the young and old men?  
 And what do you think has become of the women and children?  
 They are alive and well somewhere,  
 The smallest sprout shows there is really no death.

The facial expression of the bereaved wife indicates that she is pleased and consoled by these lines. She also takes them quite literally because she believes she is still able to communicate with her husband. Indeed psychic connection with the dead is an ongoing motif here, since both funeral director brothers communicate with their dead father during the episode.

One of the earliest uses of Whitman in television also touched on the theme of death in an adaptation of Ray Bradbury’s story “I Sing the Body Electric.” This episode of CBS’s *Twilight Zone* (first aired May 18, 1962) features some unhappy children whose mother has apparently died. The boy in the story, however, reads from a magazine called *Modern Science* something called “I Sing the Body Electric,” an advertisement for an electronic data-processing system in the shape of a woman. In a touch that seems reminiscent of Whitman’s catalogue of body parts in his poem “I Sing the Body Electric,” clients are able to select eyes, ears, arms, hair, and so on. The beleaguered family is able to select bits and pieces, put them down a chute, and compile as needed a grandmother. Whitman’s poem is also directly quoted once: “The armies of those I love engirth me and I engirth them.” This grandmother-robot, who possesses more-than-human powers and can fly a kite when the kids don’t have string, appears to die when she throws herself in front of a van to push Anne, one of the children, out of harm’s way. Anne, who had remained aloof, now embraces the grandmother-robot tearfully. It turns out, however, that Anne need not have worried because, as the grandmother-robot explains, it is her job to live (and love) forever. In this episode, Whitman’s poem celebrating the natural body is ironically used in a narrative about machines replacing humans in order to provide more permanent love. Our only hope, this version of “I Sing the Body Electric” suggests, is to program love and generosity into robots that do not have the weaknesses – chief among them mortality – that plague humankind.

Whitman appears in a more grim context in an episode of NBC’s *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*, “A Single Life” (first aired September 27, 1999). In this episode, a young woman, Susan Sodarsky, has died from a fall from a highrise. The case ultimately involves her psychiatrist, a television anchorman, and her own father who had

sexually abused her. At the beginning of the show, when Detective Benson and the regular New York City police start to squabble over whether or not this is a routine case (and thus over who has jurisdiction), Benson says sarcastically about the imagined suspect, “Oh yeah, he read her a little Walt Whitman; they made hot passionate love; and, right before he fell asleep, he threw her out the window – excuse me – through the window.” We later find out that the victim was in fact a suicide, who has been driven to it by abuse from her father. She is hard to track, with few friends or relatives. The key to unlocking the case is finding a Sylvia Plath book, 20 years overdue, from Paterson High School that shows that she has changed her name and identity to flee her father. The invocation of Whitman raises the possibility of a tender and compassionate love in contrast to the abuse that destroyed the victim’s life. The Whitmanian life-affirmation is also sharply at odds with the suicidal Plath and the victim at the heart of this story.

Whitman’s connection to love and eroticism is pursued in many other television programs as well. In some cases, as in an episode of NBC’s situation comedy *Friends* entitled “The One at the Fertility Clinic” (first aired May 1, 2003), Whitman serves both as famous icon and poet of love. In this episode, Joey, the dimwitted but lovable friend, is dating a woman named Charlie, who is a professor at New York University. Charlie suggests that they enjoy some highbrow entertainment – listening to a string quartet, going to the Met (Joey mistakenly thinks she means seeing the Mets play baseball), or seeing an exhibit of Walt Whitman letters at the New York Public Library. This brief mention of Whitman relies on him as a symbol of refinement and sophistication, and, because the reference occurs in the context of planning a date, he also is the poet of *eros*.

Controversies over Whitman’s sexual proclivities appear not only in critical writing but on television as well. The episode of CBS’s *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman* entitled “The Body Electric” (first aired April 5, 1997) is a treatment of Whitman and gay issues. This series, though set in the nineteenth century, regularly addressed late twentieth-century issues. In this particular episode, Whitman has traveled to Colorado Springs where he is initially greeted as a poet and a minor celebrity. Only gradually through euphemisms is it intimated that Whitman “prefers the company of men.” Even Dr. Quinn panics when her young adopted son, Brian, goes off alone with the poet to interview him for the town newspaper. Eventually Dr. Quinn’s moral crisis is resolved when, contrary to her worst fears, she discovers Whitman innocently having a discussion with her boy. The story closes with calm restored to the community but with the poet looking on saddened at the intolerance he has seen. This episode has been called the prime-time outing of Walt Whitman (Henderson 1999: 69).

Television references to Whitman have increased significantly since the early 1990s. Consistent with references to Whitman in popular music, television has treated Whitman as an iconic famous writer, as a person who embodies controversial sexuality, or as the poet of love and eroticism. An episode of CBS’s *Northern Exposure*, “Brains, Know-How and Native Intelligence” (first aired on July 19, 1990) opens

with the philosophical disc jockey, Chris, reading Walt Whitman over the airwaves and reflecting on the book that “completely and irrevocably changed my life.” He had come upon the book while stealing a car with another 15 year old in West Virginia. (A similar account is given in the December 14, 1992 episode entitled “Crime and Punishment.”) When he spends time in jail, the jailer tells him that Whitman’s homoerotic impulses were not acceptable in a place of correction. Chris’s further reflections on Whitman indicate that he is now remorseful about the “queers I had previously kicked around.” In his role as disc jockey, he reads lines first from “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d” and then “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking.” Maurice Minnifield (who owns the radio station) pulls him from the mike by his hair and throws him through a plate glass window. The controversy over Whitman’s sexuality piques the public interest. The small library in Cicely, Alaska now has a three-month waiting list for its only Whitman book.

Another *Northern Exposure* episode emphasizes an additional familiar aspect of Whitman’s reputation – the poet as democratic bard. In “Democracy In America” (first aired on February 24, 1992), the long-time mayor, Holling Van Coeur, is surprised to learn that he faces a significant challenge from his friend Edna Hancock, who is angered that he has forgotten to act on her request to install a stop sign near her house. The election prompts Chris’s patriotic reflections on the radio, and he quotes Whitman several times to assert that the genius of the United States is to be found in the common people. “I feel at one with Whitman, shepherd of the great unwashed, O ‘Democracy! Near at hand to you a throat is now inflating itself and joyfully singing.” Wacky and entertaining, the program drops references to Thoreau, Jefferson, Lincoln, and de Tocqueville along with Whitman, yet does so with a light touch that avoids being ponderous or pedantic. The Whitman who emerges is the democratic bard, the sexual iconoclast, the godfather of freethinking.

### Mass-distributed Paperbacks

If television sometimes reduced Whitman to a one-dimensional message, another form, the mass-distributed paperback edition, lent itself readily to more complex depictions of Whitman. The many commercial paperback editions of Whitman’s writings produced from the time of the first paperback printing in his lifetime of the so-called Deathbed edition (preceding the hardback first issue) to the innumerable modern commercial Whitman editions are too numerous to detail and analyze here. Two notable cases in free or nearly free distribution of Whitman materials should be recorded, however, both because they are important experiments in book publishing and because they anticipate the internet in their capacity to distribute very widely free or nearly free content. We have in mind the Little Blue Book series of Emanuel Haldeman-Julius, based in Girard, Kansas, and the World War II Armed Services Editions (ASEs), overseen by the Library Section, a division of the Morale Branch in the US War Department.

Haldeman-Julius sold a huge number of books: his series ran to almost 2,000 numbered items and sold at least 300 million copies, perhaps as many as 500 million. Flourishing primarily in the inter-war years, Haldeman-Julius managed to make money selling books at 10 cents apiece, later 5 cents apiece, and, occasionally, at his rock bottom price of 2.5 cents apiece (a limited time offer made in 1942). Harry Golden recognized the singular accomplishment of Haldeman-Julius: “No other publisher will ever create so wide a reading audience” (Golden 1960: 7). The Haldeman-Julius books were a fascinating mix of types: literary classics, self-help books, atheist and socialist polemics, and what he called “sexology.” The audience for the Little Blue Books was primarily working class. These books were especially popular in small towns and rural areas in the US, but they were read in the entire English-speaking world.

The Little Blue Books include quite a variety of Whitman items. There are three different versions of #73: *Walt Whitman's Poems*, *Poems of Walt Whitman*, and *Best Poems of Walt Whitman*. Other Whitman volumes include # 299 *Prose Nature Notes* and #351 *Memories of President Lincoln*. There was also a critical volume: #529 Emily Hamblen's *Walt Whitman: Bard of the West*. For the purposes of this essay, we will focus most of our remarks on two states of Little Blue Book #73. In the first version of #73, Whitman is presented as a writer of short lyrics. This is a volume that favors very short Whitman poems, often of three lines or less. Although the Little Blue Book is only 3.5 by 5 inches, a single page (40) has five poems on it: “Hast Never Come to Thee an Hour,” “Thought” [of Equality], “To Old Age,” “Locations and Times,” and “Offerings.” The longest poem included in the book is “I Sing the Body Electric.” *Walt Whitman's Poems* lacks a copyright notice, date of publication, table of contents, and introduction.

*Poems of Walt Whitman* (a new version of #73) is a different type of volume. It advertises itself as “Edited, with Introduction and Notes, by Nelson Antrim Crawford” and is copyrighted 1924 by the Haldeman-Julius company (though probably the only thing they could legitimately copyright was Crawford's contributions). It has features that the first version of #73 lacks: a table of contents, introduction, and extended excerpts from Whitman's longer poems. Without noting the fact, this volume of Whitman's poetry relies on the rarely reprinted 1872 version of *Leaves* (possibly because of copyright reasons). Thus we get assorted sections of the poem “Walt Whitman” rather than, as it was later called, “Song of Myself.” This book presents the full range of Whitman's work and offers a fairly routine sampling. In addition to the “Walt Whitman” poem, Crawford offers “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking,” “Come up from the Fields Father,” and many short lyrics including a variety of “Calamus” poems. He mentions in his introduction “comradship between persons of the same sex,” but he veers away from any serious consideration of the issue: “The erotic implications of the latter form a problem for the psychologist more than for the literary critic” (p. 19).

In his conversations with Horace Traubel, Whitman once entertained an idea that seems eerily to predict the Little Blue Books. Traubel says:

We discussed the point – why not some time issue an edition of L. of G. in small vols, for pocket wear and tear? Song of Myself, Children of Adam, &c. &c., in separate books? W. believed in it. “It has long been my ambition to bring out an edition of Leaves of Grass with margins cut close, paper cover: some book rid of the usual cumbersome features. . . . It is a theory to be seriously considered: now it is perhaps too late: but others may one day think of it – act on it.” (Traubel 1914: 258-9)

The Armed Services Editions, narrower in scope and more confined in duration than the Little Blue Books, was also an eye-opening venture and has rightly been called the largest book give away in history (Brucoli 1984: 26). This publishing experiment paved the way, after the war, for the mass-market paperback movement. For the Armed Services Edition, the audience was US soldiers stationed overseas. Many of these soldiers had not been enticed by reading before, but now they found themselves with time on their hands and little entertainment. The Armed Services Editions came about when the Library Section decided by 1942 that American soldiers needed a new type of book to replace hardbacks. They needed books light in weight, compact enough for a GI’s pocket, appealing to varied readers, and cheap to produce. Fortunately, the rotary presses used for large circulation magazines were available between issues. This fact made possible the Armed Services Editions, produced as softcover books in landscape rather than the usual portrait format (i.e., the books are wider than they are tall).

The Council on Books in Wartime wanted the full support of the publishing community. So the Council insisted – even to those who volunteered to forego royalties – that one cent would be paid to the author and publisher of each book. Given that press runs were of over 100,000 copies or more, this had significance. These were huge press runs for writers and publishers used to much smaller circulation figures. Some publishers worried that these volumes would flood the market after the war, but these paperbacks were designed, if not exactly to self-destruct, at least not to last. The series published classics, contemporary literature, biographies, humor, and mysteries. Despite wartime circumstances, few ASE books were censored. Reaction to them by the soldiers was extremely favorable. They tended to be read primarily behind the front lines, though just before the Normandy invasion there was mass distribution to the troops, with one copy of an Armed Services Edition handed to each soldier upon boarding the invasion barge (Cole 1984: 9).

*A Wartime Whitman* was edited by Major William A. Aiken. In Aiken’s introduction, Whitman is presented as a poet who champions the American way of life, the very thing being defended in the war, according to the introduction. Interestingly, the introduction goes to some pains to make Whitman’s comradely love safe for the troops. In fact, Whitman becomes, in some ways, a suggestive heterosexual poet through strategic quoting of the poem ultimately entitled “Faces.” Aiken writes, “Many will respond to the instant urge of Whitman’s woman as she stands by the picket fence and calls to her ‘limber-hipped’ man.” The introduction raises – in order to dismiss – the



question of homosexuality: “The gulf between a man’s love of woman and the love he bears his fellow man is clearer to most Americans than it may sometimes seem in Whitman’s works; yet the soldier whose buddy lies dying in a foxhole at his side will understand this identification in the mind of the poet more readily than will the literary critic, with his passion for pathology, by the fireside at home” (p. 9).

Compared to the Haldeman-Julius Little Blue Books, *A Wartime Whitman* is marked by a more obvious editorial intrusiveness. In *A Wartime Whitman*, the poet’s work is categorized into seven sections. The groupings are: “America Singing,” “A Poet’s World,” “A Poet’s Love,” “Pioneers,” “War,” “Aftermath,” and “Toward the Future.” Not surprisingly, there is a whole section on war, generally emphasizing the common soldier, and including the sea battle from “Song of Myself.” *A Wartime Whitman* asserts that its text is taken from Emory Holloway’s Inclusive Edition of *Leaves of Grass* copyrighted by Doubleday, Doran, and Co., but then proceeds to reconfigure the poetry, providing names for groups of poems that have no authority in anything Whitman wrote or that Holloway edited. For example, Aiken retitled sections of “Song of Myself” as if they were separate poems.

There was even a wartime biography of Whitman issued through the Armed Services Editions – Henry Seidel Canby’s *Walt Whitman an American: A Study in Biography*. As the front cover proclaimed, “This Is The Complete Book – Not A Digest.” The back cover indicates why the Council thought the book might appeal to men at war:

Rubicund and tumultuously bearded, egotistical, publicity-mad, idolized by his friends, slandered or ignored by his contemporaries, Walt Whitman, the man who put sex back on to the printed page, was the problem child of American literature. But he was also the prophet and seer of democracy; a poet who made articulate the American dream and the American faith, and who created a new literary style to express himself and his country in poetry.

The Little Blue Books and the Armed Services Editions, two publishing efforts that yielded pocket Whitmans, were series with contrasting purposes that were driven by different political ideologies. Yet they shared a fundamental desire to expand the reading audience and underscored the value of education. And both experiments spread word of Whitman to large new audiences.

### Whitman Online and in the Academy

Walt Whitman’s presence in this newest form of mass media is rich and varied. Like the creators of other media representations that we’ve discussed, website designers employ Whitman’s image and work toward a variety of ends, some startling and some unsurprising. The worldwide web, featuring interlinking and intralinking information, offers a deluge of content to users, often sinking Whitman’s presence in a sea of details about other topics. “I too am but a trail of drift and debris,” as



Whitman wrote in “As I Ebb’d with the Ocean of Life,” and the web gives the line new resonance. With a few major exceptions, Whitman’s web presence can be sorted into a handful of categories: sites that provide interpretations of Whitman’s life and work, sites that provide brief, encyclopedia-like entries on Whitman and other major cultural figures (these often include transcriptions of selected poems), sites that use Whitman’s fame to draw in tourists, and sites that narrowly define Whitman’s identity (the “spiritual” Whitman, the “gay” Whitman, the “democratic” Whitman) in order to promote an explicit agenda.

Like other mass media representations of Whitman, web representations range from celebratory to audaciously irreverent. In the first category are sites like the creation of Mitchell Santine Gould (2004a). Gould’s site, dedicated to the 150th anniversary of the first publication of *Leaves of Grass* in 1855, offers a visually rich interpretation of Whitman’s book, focusing on Quakers, homosexual love, sailors, women, and spiritualism. Gould’s presentation, though whimsical, borders on the worshipful, as he presents several artist’s renderings of Whitman: as a muscular, patriotic superhero; as a cap-wearing, smiling, trim old ballplayer in the main banner; and as a determined, shouting voice of the people in the logo for the sponsoring company, “General Picture.”

Among the more irreverent Whitman sites is the animated “video” for the techno-pop song, “Walt Whitman.” This animation, part of a site created by performance artist My Robot Friend, features moving text; pulsating, flying images of Whitman; old photographs of nude boys; and suggestive lyrics about Whitman’s sexual experiences (including a sexually charged reading of Whitman’s line from “Salut au Monde!” “What widens within you, Walt Whitman?”). The song (and its accompanying visualizations by Adam Shecter) demonstrates that Whitman’s representation in movies, television, and music – as poet of love and sex – is also on the internet where it comes to users, for better and worse, with few if any of the filtering devices that commonly tame other forms of mass media. In fact, the song and animation by My Robot Friend is among the most explicit sexual readings of Whitman in all of early-twenty-first century mass media. The animation begins with a cartoon of a nude Whitman, and the big nostrils, foolish grin, and deformed-looking genitals convey the tone of the entire piece: My Robot Friend understands Whitman as a playful cultural figure, one whose image is deeply intertwined with sexuality and can gleefully accommodate irony and humor.

With the advent of the web, scholars, too, are making use of mass media to spread Whitman’s work and are experiencing for the first time the power of having direct access to mass media. The *Walt Whitman Archive* (Folsom and Price 1995–) is a case in point. The *Whitman Archive* serves as a vast teaching and scholarly resource that sets out to make all of Whitman’s writings freely accessible to scholars, students, and general readers. It meets the same needs addressed in the familiar multivolume scholarly edition, while also addressing needs that go well beyond the capacity of a print edition. And unlike scholarly print editions of the past, the *Whitman Archive* can have more than a specialized audience, can approach the ideal of bringing together popular and schol-

arly audiences in a way that seems fitting for Whitman who once said (at the end of the Preface to the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*) that the “proof of a poet is that his Country absorbs him as affectionately as he has absorbed it.” The *Whitman Archive* currently includes teaching materials, a substantial biography of the poet, all 130 photographs of Whitman (with full annotations), searchable finding guides to manuscripts, a regularly updated annotated bibliography of scholarship since 1975, a growing body of critical work, and a great deal of contextual material, both encyclopedia entries about various topics relating to Whitman and selected writings by Whitman’s associates. After 10 years of work by a fairly extensive team, the *Archive* has accomplished about one-fourth of the total work it has outlined, an indication of how prolific Whitman was and how extensive are the materials relevant to scholarship about him.

The *Whitman Archive* delivers digital images of the original source material to its users so that they can witness Whitman’s process of composition, and so that they can do their own transcriptions of manuscripts, if they wish, and challenge the editors’ interpretations of hard-to-decipher passages. Making the source material available enables teachers to demonstrate that a poet like Whitman achieved his often majestic phrasing not through a magical process that led to the perfectly etched final products appearing, say, in an anthology. Instead his most memorable phrasing emerged only after multiple drafts, innumerable false starts and bungled lines. His pasted over, heavily deleted and interlineated manuscripts bear witness that, for all his praise of spontaneity, his best writing was achieved through laborious and often brilliant revision. There is a democratization at work as the *Archive* opens locked rare book rooms to students and the interested public. Whitman was trained as a printer and was fascinated by book design. The *Archive* provides high quality images not only of his manuscripts but also of his printed pages, allowing users to examine his choices as to typeface, layout, margins, and ornamentation and to consider how these textual features contributed to his meanings.

This essay has moved from advertising and television to scholarly treatments of Whitman and finds both popular and scholarly approaches very common now in mass media representations of Whitman. In addition to the web, there is one further form that we don’t usually think of as a mass medium: the college and university. As Gerald Graff has written, “Though academic humanists have too often been reluctant to recognize the fact, the university’s growth into an institution servicing great masses of people necessarily turns it into an agency of cultural popularization. It is even fair to call today’s university a form of popular culture, in competition with journalism and other media as an alternative interpretation of experience” (Graff 1992: 352). There isn’t space to attempt to delineate and categorize the great range of Whitman-related work that has occurred in university and college classrooms, and in the scholarship emerging from the academy as a whole. Suffice it to say that we have witnessed the growth of a vast amount of critical, biographical, historical, and bibliographical information. Since 1990, over 120 books and well over 1,100 articles have been published about Whitman, his work, and his relationship to American history, American culture,

and cultures around the world. That explosion of work in the academy has underwritten, in a rough and ready way at least, the flowering of interest in Whitman in recent film, television, music, and other forms of popular expression.

Meanwhile references to Whitman and his work continue to multiply both in the academy and seemingly everywhere else: in celebrity interviews (Julia Roberts's claim that Whitman was her crucial reading in high school), in odd bids for associated fame and profundity (the explanation of the creator of *Gumby* that he made *Gumby* green because that was the color of *Leaves of Grass*), in the assertion that *Leaves* is one of the hippest books of all time (Leland 2004), and in a private gift that gained mass publicity (President Clinton's present to Monica Lewinsky of a copy of *Leaves*). Both the scholarly and the popular culture interest in Whitman may have at its base the appeal that undergirded a recent PBS advertisement (November 2004). The very brief ad celebrates a guy who built a baseball park for kids with cancer after hearing Walt Whitman (perhaps on Ken Burns's baseball series) say that it is a great game and that it will "repair our losses." PBS concludes the ad with the tag line, "Be more inspired."

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