

## **MORBID INFERENCES: WHITMAN, WIKIPEDIA, AND THE DEBATE OVER THE POET'S SEXUALITY**

Jason Stacy, Cory Blad, and Rob Veleva  
SOUTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY EDWARDSVILLE, MANHATTAN COLLEGE

### **Abstract**

The ascendancy of identity as an effective political mobilization strategy has opened significant opportunities for group definition (or redefinition) of previously accepted information and knowledge claims. The emergence of “identity politics” in this postindustrial era is but one of several reflective conditions, but certainly one that is imminently helpful in understanding the “reopening” of debate on Whitman’s sexual orientation. In order to gain control over definitions it becomes necessary to rhetorically politicize the authority of scholars and the primacy of existing professional knowledge. The struggle over historicity, facilitated by the expansion of telecommunications technologies and online collaboration, has created a substantial opportunity to challenge seemingly “settled” knowledge and expand debate beyond academic boundaries while either appealing to academic authority, or dismissing claims of academic objectivity whenever rhetorically convenient. The decline of traditional authority structures and the opening of discursive opportunities creates a field in which academic expertise becomes increasingly contested for politico-personal ends, especially on a quasi-authoritative, semi-anonymous, open-access forum like Wikipedia. Whitman’s “multitudes,” coupled with his notoriety and claims to be the nation’s poet, make him a rich battleground over American sexual politics.

“[T]his part of his personality is often omitted when his works are presented in the classroom.”  
–“Morn,” “Walt Whitman,” Wikipedia

“Walt Whitman was an old bastard.”  
–“Tatii Marion,” “Walt Whitman,” Wikipedia

A colleague of ours bemoaning a lack of popular respect for historical knowledge, once commented “everyone in a bar thinks they know more about history than I do.” Hyperbole aside, he made an interesting point: The understanding or acceptance of historical knowledge (or historical “fact”) is relational and often dependent on the worldview or agenda of those making said determination. The question of what is factual or evidenced is often subsumed through the process of conforming past events to support a contemporary condition or social project. This is certainly not a new phenomenon as efforts to shape historical memory and narrative are ancient; however, the traditional efforts have centered on authoritative figures/groups and largely supported strategic efforts to legitimate existing power over constituent populations. How might this process of historical legitimation change in a social world of diffused or increasingly fragmented social authority?

This essay examines the resurgent debate over Walt Whitman’s sexual orientation that recently occurred on the popular contributor-based online encyclopedia Wikipedia. While historical interest and debate concerning Whitman’s sexuality was once prevalent among interested historians, as shown below, the issue is understood to have been relatively “settled.” On Wikipedia, which aspires to present expertly established consensus (or at least the agreed-upon parameters of scholarly disagreement) through an open-access, openly-edited online medium, the issue quickly became unsettled as collaborative contributors ferociously contended the sexual orientation of a man who died in 1892. This instance begs broader questions regarding the democratization of knowledge in an open-access, electronic medium:

What conditions lead to the “reopening” of debate that has generally reached consensus among scholars? And how does an open medium and quasi-academic forum like Wikipedia negotiate this reopening?

This particular case is instructive for two primary reasons. First, the mechanisms of knowledge production, dissemination, and contribution have proliferated with the expansion of new media and Internet technologies. The effect of these technologies on either social or political authority has been exhaustively recognized (see Ayers 1999; Castells 2000; Schechter 2008; Strange 1996) and we do not purport to add to this broad debate. This specific case in point does provide a means of illustrating how knowledge production – specifically, the facility of questioning accepted historical knowledge – is affected by the expansion of such technologies. Secondly, the case raises questions about the production of historical knowledge, itself. As these technologies democratize the chronicling and popular integration of historical knowledge, questions surrounding the objectivity of such knowledge will continue to pose problems. As we will show, one of the primary factors contributing to the Whitman sexuality “controversy” was the ambiguity of the settled historical debate. Ambiguity, of course, is problematic when knowledge is applied to a specific goal, agenda, or purpose; however, this ambiguity – if necessitated by historical evidence – is not problematic from a social scientific perspective. Thus, there emerges a methodological disconnect concerning the *purpose* of historical knowledge.

With respect to the former, and specifically the question of diffusing authority structures, we can turn to the contention that changes in dominant authoritative structures have opened increased opportunities for subjective interpretation and the declining efficacy of “official” metanarratives (Habermas 1989). Two primary causal mechanisms seem to dominate this process. First, many scholars point to substantial political and economic changes emerging from the crisis years of the 1970s as motivating deeper shifts in institutional authority. This perspective on the decline of the state represents a “top-down” attack on the metanarrative in which shifts in (global) political economic conditions precipitate the “diffusion” of authority (Catterberg and Moreno 2006; Habermas 2001; Yúdice 2003). In essence, the adaptations of state political economic authority to an emerging neoliberal reality had a detrimental effect on state legitimate authority (see Habermas 1975; O’Connor 1973) – as states seemed less able to adequately address social and economic hardships, populations withdrew legitimating support. Couple this with developing neoliberal attacks on state authority and you have a situation where constituent populations are (a) experiencing fewer benefits of state authoritative support and (b) discouraged from supporting the maintenance of traditional state political economic authority. The “crisis of legitimacy” did not diffuse social authority, but to argue that the rise of identity-centric political authority and anti-statism (or market fundamentalism), for instance, are not causally linked to this period would be inaccurate.

Second, advances in telecommunications and computer technologies have increasingly liberated the production, dissemination, and consumption of information and allowed for a greater democratization of knowledge claims. This informational perspective is more of a “bottom-up” evisceration of the metanarrative (Castells 2004; Held 1995, 124). Put another way, the acceptance of singular (often-state generated) historical narratives become less and less efficacious as constituent groups are able (and structurally encouraged) to contribute to competing narratives or reconstructions of existing narratives. It is in this process that we can better contextualize the re-emergent debate on Wikipedia over Whitman’s sexual orientation as well as the reopening of and battles over countless other meaning-laden historical artifacts.

While identification of a large-scale shift in social dynamics was noted in the 1960s, the connection between these legitimacy crises of the state and the opening of political and cultural opportunities was boosted with Alain Touraine’s concept of *historicity*. Specifically, his argument that historicity – or a society’s “capacity to produce its own social and cultural field” (Touraine 1977, 16) – is an increasingly contested field due to advanced capitalist transition into a so-called “postindustrial society.” Put simply, as societies move from industrial to knowledge/service economies, the authority to define and disseminate information becomes increasingly important and contested. As Buechler succinctly states: “The conflict over the control of historicity in postindustrial society thereby involves a battle over who will program the programmed society, with managers/technocrats and consumers/clients comprising the dominant social classes and social movements” (2000, 6-7).

Historicity, then, is important here as a field of contention – as political power is increasingly tied to the definition of information, mobilization of groups based on affiliation to various definitions becomes increasingly important. For Touraine, it is *identity* that becomes the primary mobilization mechanism, which requires an “appeal to the past” (1977, 385) in order to organize identity in any collective form. History informs identity construction and broad definitional authority over historical knowledge can influence the maintenance of collective identity. In this sense, social movements become identity-centric in their attempts to control the very definition of their collective identity. This emphasis on collective identity partially informed new social movement theories (see Laclau and Mouffe 2001; Melucci 1996; Mouffe 1984) that diverged from Touraine’s initial approach, but maintained the emphasis on identity and information as a primary arena of social contention.

The ascendancy of identity as an effective political mobilization strategy has, in fact, opened significant opportunities for group definition (or redefinition) of previously accepted information and knowledge claims. The emergence of “identity politics” in this postindustrial era is but one of several reflective conditions, but certainly one that is imminently helpful in understanding the “reopening” of debate on Whitman’s sexual orientation. If identity is at least influenced by a connection to historical knowledge, then it stands to reason that the management of historical knowledge also becomes a politicized endeavor – not for the purposes of intellectual exploration, but for the mobilization of respective collective identities.

Ironically, historical knowledge is powerful due to perceptions of objectivity that are commonly linked to claims of some sort of historical “truth.” These perceptions (however incorrect) enable the legitimation of mobilization and actions of any group capable of demonstrating a connection between movement and historical “fact.” The issue of diffusion becomes particularly salient as the contemporary era has seen an increase in groups competing to (a) claim historical legitimacy, and (b) the authority to control the resulting narrative of notable historical figures, events, and other artifacts. Put simply, if a group is able to monopolize definitional authority over a respectively important historical artifact or actor, that group is then able to claim broader legitimation: National Hero X was sympathetic to Issue Y; therefore, the movement embracing Issue Y is central to respective national identity. In order to gain control over definitions it becomes necessary to rhetorically politicize the authority of scholars and the primacy of existing professional knowledge.

The struggle over historicity, facilitated by the expansion of telecommunications technologies and online collaboration, has created a substantial opportunity to challenge seemingly “settled” knowledge and expand debate beyond academic boundaries while either appealing to academic authority, or dismissing claims of academic objectivity whenever rhetorically convenient. In Touraine’s words: “This is a task made all the more difficult by the fact that the closer one comes to the struggles and movements that animate the field of historicity, the deeper the collective actors dig themselves into their ideologies and the more determined they are to impose their values” (1977, 11). The diffusion of social authority structures and the opening of discursive opportunities creates a field in which academic expertise becomes viewed as one of potentially many “perspectives,” especially on a quasi-authoritative, semi-anonymous, open-access forum like Wikipedia. The question of evidence and objectivity may be relevant, but perhaps less so with respect to ambiguous findings. Whitman’s “multitudes,” coupled with his notoriety and claims to be the nation’s poet, make him a rich battleground over American sexual politics.

### **The 20<sup>th</sup> Century Academic Debate over Whitman’s Sexuality**

Walt Whitman helped establish the parameters for the scholarly debates over his sexuality. Born in the period where the intense religiosity of the Second Great Awakening gave rise by midcentury to movements as diverse as Mormonism, prison reform, temperance, and revivalism, and raised in the urban Northeast, which saw the growth of the urban sex trade and, by the 1850s, a kind of early bohemianism exemplified by the circle of sexual liberationists, Fourierists, and radicals who formed a loose community around Henry Clapp, Whitman’s milieu made for a complicated mix of the typical and radical in *Leaves of Grass* (Lause 2009; see also Aspiz 2006; Killingsworth 1989; Loving 2000; 1999; Reynolds 1995). The 1860 edition, for example, celebrated women as mothers, wives and daughters, thereby securing their

place within the republic through their gender-dependent position in the nuclear family; while at the same time, Whitman shocked many of his readers with his candid descriptions of sex itself:

Limitless limpid jets of love hot and enormous,  
quivering jelly of love, white-blow and delirious  
juice,  
Bridegroom-night of love, working surely and softly  
Into the prostrate dawn, (Whitman 2009, 295)

Though the poet's homoerotic verse raised fewer negative reactions from contemporary reviewers than his more conventionally heteroerotic verse,<sup>1</sup> critics and admirers later read in Whitman's "Calamus" cluster a frank celebration of homoerotic love,

I heard the hissing rustle of the liquid and sands,  
as directed to me, whispering to congratulate me,  
For the one I love most lay sleeping by me under the  
same cover in the cool night,  
In the stillness, in the autumn moonbeams, his face  
was inclined to ward me,  
And his arm lay lightly around my breast – And that  
night I was happy. (Whitman 2009, 358)

and an anguished struggle with an emerging conscious homosexuality,

Sullen and summering hours! (I am ashamed—but it  
Is useless – I am what I am;)  
Hours of my torment – I wonder if other men ever  
Have the like, out of the like feelings? (Whitman 2009, 355)

The British literary critic, John Addington Symonds, was one of the first to seek confirmation of the poet's homosexuality. According to Jerome Loving, Symonds first encountered Whitman's poetry while a student at Cambridge and, later, claimed that the 1860 edition of *Leaves* became his "Bible." Between 1871 and 1890, Symonds steadily established a correspondence with the poet and incrementally broached the subject of the poet's homoeroticism, finally inquiring whether the Calamus cluster offered "the possible intrusion of those semisexual emotions & actions which no doubt occur between men?" (Loving 1999, 253-256). Whitman infamously denied the implication in what one critic called "forceful but ambiguous" terms (Killingsworth 1989, 167):

That the calamus part ever allow'd the possibility of such construction as mention'd is terrible –  
I am fain to hope the pages themselves are not to be even mention'd for such gratuitous and quite  
at the time undream'd & unreck'd possibility of morbid inferences – wh' are disavow'd by me &  
seem damnable.... Tho' always unmarried I have had previous six children, two are dead – One  
living southern grandchild, fine boy, who writes to me occasionally. Circumstances connected  
with their benefit and fortune have separated me from intimate relations. (Whitman 1980, 47)

Symonds (1893, 77 quoted in Loving 1999, 256) seemed to accept the answer ("Your phrases...set the matter as straight as can be..."), yet Whitman's homoerotic poetry and his seemingly contradictory

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<sup>1</sup> A notable exception was Rufus Wilmot Griswold's review from the *Criterion* of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* where he criticized Whitman's "'*Peccatum illud horribile, inter Christianos non nominandu*'" (That horrible sin not to be mentioned among Christians)," quoted in Loving (1999, 185).

statements to Symmonds created a dynamic space for future speculation and debate. While in the poet's gender-segregated America, where identity adhered only loosely to varieties of sexual preference, male physical affection was a common and accepted public occurrence and proved less socially problematic than open physical affection between men and women (Katz 2001; see also Stacy 2009, xvi), as sexual identity became widely recognized with the advent of the binary sexual typology of the twentieth century, the concept of biologically static and normative sexual identities raised debates that pitted the poet's claims of universalism against the modern bifurcation of sexuality into the heterosexual and homosexual, and oftentimes, into the "normal" and "inverse." This modern clash between the Poet of Democracy and the Poet of Manly Love, a dichotomy the poet himself would perhaps have found inexplicable and absurd, raised questions of pressing interest to twentieth century scholars of the American Renaissance: What did Whitman mean by manly attachment? Was Whitman a homosexual? And if so, did the poet's homosexuality undermine claims to be the poet of all (Champagne, 2008; Sedgwick, 1985; Erkkila, Grossman, 1996)?

### **The Either/Or Proposition**

Emory Holloway, one of Whitman's first scholarly biographers, was also one of the first scholars to wrestle with Whitman's sexuality.<sup>2</sup> After finding a manuscript for the poem "Once I Passed through a Populous City," which appeared in the heteroerotic "Children of Adam" cluster of *Leaves of Grass*, Holloway discovered that the poet's lover in the original version was a man, though many references to male lovers appeared throughout the homoerotic "Calamus" cluster. Faced with the dilemma of what to do in his biography of the poet, *Whitman: An Interpretation in Narrative* (1926), especially since this information seemed to undermine his core argument that "Whitman was no stranger to women..." and that his three-month sojourn in New Orleans in 1848 established that "[a]ll the evidence points to New Orleans as the place where he learned what can be taught by romantic passion," Holloway spent the next forty years seeking to find tangible evidence of Whitman's heterosexuality (1926, 63-64; see also Miller 1998; Holloway 1960, 11-12). This quest culminated in *Free and Lonesome Heart: The Secret of Walt Whitman* (1960), which claimed to settle the issue by revealing Whitman's "secret:" the grave of John Whitman Wilder, who died in 1911 at the age of forty-two, and proved to be, according to Holloway, "one of the six illegitimate children whom the poet confessed to have fathered" (Holloway 1960, 144). Holloway's tortured arguments (and specious discovery) marked a common strain among scholars who denied or downplayed Whitman's gayness: their interpretation rested upon an assumption that homosexuality ran counter to Whitman's universalism because homosexuality proved a derivation from the norm. Whitman had to be *either* the poet of democracy *or* a homosexual. In Holloway's case, an imaginary illegitimate child burnished the poet's democratic *bona fides* (see Erkkila, 1989).

Newton Arvin, in his biography *Whitman* (1938), likewise struggled with Whitman's sexuality in a fashion that forced the either/or proposition regarding the poet's sexuality and his universalism. Most of Arvin's critique centered around Whitman's working-class sensibilities and the ways in which the poet did not live up to his materialist inclinations. However, Arvin reserved much of his final chapter for a discussion of the "highly personal language" that made up the "Calamus" cluster and Whitman's claim that "the special meaning of...*Calamus*...resides in its Political significance" (1938, 273). According to Arvin, Whitman's claims of the political nature of "Calamus" were attacked by critics after his death, especially Mark Van Doren, who argued that Whitman's sexuality undermined his political relevance.<sup>3</sup> Instead of denying or downplaying Whitman's homosexuality as Holloway had, Arvin affirmed that the poet's sexuality "cannot be denied by any informed or candid reader of the 'Calamus' poems....", but, to counter Van Doren, Arvin argued that "the history of literature is eloquent of what splendid fruits may be

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<sup>2</sup> Though Bliss Perry had done so in *Walt Whitman: His Life and Work* (1906) and concluded, regarding Whitman's claims to paternity, that the poet's "life was stainless as far as sexual relations were concerned," and Edward Carpenter, in *Some Friends of Walt Whitman: A Study in Sex-Psychology* (1924), carefully avoided the issue of homoeroticism. See Kaplan 1989, 80-88, quote from 84.

<sup>3</sup> "No society can be made out of him [Whitman]. We could not be like him if we would. He has revealed himself to us, and that is all," Van Doren quoted in Arvin 1938, 273-274.

grown in such bitter and unlikely soil” and that Whitman, “unlike the vast majority of inverts, . . . chose to translate and sublimate his strange, anomalous emotional experience into a political, a constructive, a democratic program” that bred “warm fraternal emotions . . . among average men” (ibid., 274-277). This argument allowed Arvin to embrace Whitman’s homosexuality while upholding the binary sexual typology of the early twentieth century; the poet was an “invert”<sup>4</sup> whose sexuality, proved “anomalous” and “strange.” However, the poet’s “inversion” became universally applicable to the fraternalism it demanded between “average men.” Echoing Arvin only a few years later, Henry Seidel Canby, in *Walt Whitman: an American* (1943), offered that “science as well as common sense can be used to sum up this discussion” since “such men [as Whitman] are very common, especially among strong creative types,” but that Whitman’s eroticism never proved of the “vulgar” variety. For Canby, though Whitman’s homoeroticism proved “not representative of his democratic man”; it was “sublimated into a fatherly love of innumerable ‘sons’” and therefore turned to universalist ends<sup>5</sup>. In sum: the “bitter” soil of Whitman’s sexuality bore the “splendid” fruit of his ideology.

By mid-century, biographers of Whitman became circumspect in their language and characterization of Whitman’s sexuality. The edges of the proposition that the poet was either a homosexual or a universalist softened to the extent that scholars sought to embrace a kind of Whitmanian universalism that allowed the poet’s sexuality to be the *means* to his democratic vision; echoing Arvin (1938) and Seidal Canby (1943), sexual pathology, properly controlled, became a key to Whitman’s universalism. Gay Wilson Allen’s *The Solitary Singer* (1967) accepted the poet’s “homoeroticism,” but hedged on whether the poet engaged in homosexual relationships: “whatever the psychologist may think of this abnormally strong affections of the two men for each other . . . actual perversion seem[s] unlikely.” Echoing contemporary psychological theory, the poet’s “struggle for self-control and self-understanding” inspired the poet’s “profoundest insights into human nature, such as love as the solvent of all social evils” (Wilson Allen 1967, 424). Likewise, for James Miller, author of *A Critical Guide to Leaves of Grass*, (1957), Whitman’s homoeroticism was not “unwholesome” and a purely sexual reading proved merely “superficial . . .” Accordingly, “the love celebrated in ‘Calamus’ had a genuinely personal—and pure—meaning for Whitman . . . that he advocated for a serious social end—democracy” (Miller 1957, 57 & 78). Similarly, Floyd Stovall, in *The Long Foreground of Leaves of Grass* (1974), argued “Calamus” expressed “a love which is not animal but spiritual . . .” (ibid., 191). Likewise, Justin Kaplan, in *Walt Whitman: a Life* (1980), echoing Gay Wilson Allen, adopted the term homoerotic, but subsumed Whitman’s homosexuality under the theory of the “subject-homoerotic” where Whitman’s homosexuality was analyzed into a nostalgic beginning for the all-embracing bard of *Leaves of Grass*, “[t]here is . . . no true love-object—at least initially. Such men love boys as a way of loving the boy in themselves and themselves in the boy . . .” (85-86, quoting Edgar Z. Friedenberg).

The attempt by critics at midcentury to spiritualize or psychoanalyze away the poet’s homosexuality into abstract categories sought to distract attention from the sheer homosexualism of Whitman’s images, like the phallus of the calamus root or the hero of the Greek myth of homosexual longing from which the plant takes its name.<sup>6</sup> These interpretations also conveniently overlooked in “Calamus” the poet’s frank melding of the spiritual and physical throughout the rest of *Leaves of Grass*; in this regard, midcentury critics sought to engage Whitman’s sexuality while still accepting the premise that homosexuality undermined the poet’s universalist claims. Whitman could only be a “self-control[led]” homosexual (Wilson Allen 1967), a “social” homosexual (Miller 1957), a “spiritual” homosexual (Stovall 1974), or “subject-erotic” homosexual (Kaplan, 1980) and still be the poet who celebrated American democracy.

<sup>4</sup> Arvin here is probably echoing Havelock Ellis (1901).

<sup>5</sup> According to Justin Kaplan, Henry Seidel Canby, in *Walt Whitman, An American*, offered a Whitman who, in the midst of the Second World War, became a “democratic poet-prophet . . . for the generation fighting a war against totalitarianism” (Kaplan 1984, 85). Seidel, himself, rejects that the “I . . . was actively homosexual . . . . He was . . . with reference to his affairs with women, a conspicuous man” (Seidel Canby 1943, 199-200).

<sup>6</sup> In Greek mythology two youths, Calamus (Kalamos) and his lover, Karpos, swam the Meander River. When Karpos drowned, Kalamos, in his grief, drowned himself and was transformed into a reed, which sounded of his lamentations when the wind blew through it (Stacy 2009, 477).

This modification of the early proposition that Whitman was *either* a homosexual *or* the poet of democracy provided the rhetoric for explaining away Whitman's homoeroticism in defense of his democratic idealism, but did little in the way of explaining the explicit celebration of both in "Calamus." It was not until the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that the poet could be both gay and democratic.

### **Calamus Unbound in the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century**

Drawing upon the linguistic turn to discursive analysis in the humanities and the incorporation of New Historicist readings of Whitman, critics in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century broke with the either/or proposition between Whitman's sexuality and his universalism by carefully situating both within the poet's historical context and thereby reviving Whitman's claim to their mutual conduciveness. Robert K. Martin, in *The Homosexual Tradition in American Poetry* (1979), claimed Whitman "communicate[d] his homosexuality" throughout *Leaves of Grass*, but critics had willingly not "take[n] Whitman at his word;" this "record of lies, half truths, and distortions is so shameful as to amount to a deliberate attempt to alter reality to suit a particular view of normality" (Martin 1979, 3). "Calamus," the heart of *Leaves*, according to Martin, gave shape to Whitman's theory of "adhesive" love between men, thereby making a "book of self-proclamation and self-definition" (ibid., 51-52). Echoing this sentiment, M. Jimmie Killingsworth, in *Whitman's Poetry of the Body: Sexuality, Politics, and the Text* (1989), claimed that by 1860, "Whitman developed a language and the rudiments of a psychology by which homosexuals could be brought to self-awareness and by which same-sex friendship could be the basis for political action" (97); this constituted a kind of "prehistoric" homosexual identity by which the poet "helped to invent gayness" (Killingsworth 2000, 122; see also Fone 1992, 115-205).

By situating Whitman's sexuality within the discursive matrix of his historical context, critics were better able to analyze his political universalism in a fashion that further undermined the either/or proposition of earlier critics. For example, Michael Moon, in *Disseminating Whitman* (1991), saw in "Calamus" the means by which Whitman revised "patriarchal formations" with "far-reaching and revisionary politics" grounded in a reaction against the "gender-polarizing code of sexual practices" which "domesticize[d] sexuality" in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century (158-159). In this same vein, Jay Grossman interpreted Whitman's denial of Symmonds' reading of "semisexual emotions" between men in "Calamus" to be the poet's reluctance to be identified by the "new medical model's privatization of male-male relations...its displacement out of public and profoundly republican...action, and its creation as a[n]...opposite of privatized heterosexual relations" (1990, 201-219). For Moon and Grossman, Whitman's homoeroticism and republicanism, contra the either/or proposition of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, proved to be the mutually conducive ingredients that made *Leaves of Grass* both intensely political and universally personal (Champagne 2008, 650-661, Sedgwick 1985, 201-219; Erkkila 1989, 155-190; Erkkila 1996, 62-83).

### **Whitman on Wikipedia**

When put in the hands of the general public – the barstool scholars referred to earlier – these subtleties in the discussion of Whitman's sexuality fade away. These are the people who often edit Wikipedia. The project has become one of the internet's top ten most-visited web sites, with nearly 400 million visitors per month.<sup>7</sup> Generally speaking, the volunteer editors of individual pages are not necessarily subject matter experts. Under the veil of digital anonymity, editors to the Walt Whitman article can come from any number of backgrounds and any level of educational accomplishment. The article on Walt Whitman ranks in the top 3,500 most-viewed articles – impressive, considering there are some 3.5 million articles.<sup>8</sup> This high traffic draws a substantial mix of legitimate edits and a type of edit referred to as vandalism—the plague of the "anyone can edit" policy. On April 26, 2010, for example, a

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<sup>7</sup> All statistics are from Wikipedia or Wiki Meta pages, including the article on Wikipedia at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia> (as of February 10, 2011)

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user named “Tatii Marion” added the phrase, “Walt Whitman was an old bastard.”<sup>9</sup> It was removed within two minutes.

The legitimacy of other edits is more difficult to discern. On September 3, 2010, a user edited the article to reflect that Whitman had a pedophilic relationship with Bill Duckett,<sup>10</sup> a teenager who boarded with the poet in Camden. Though a possible relationship between Duckett and Whitman already existed in the article, credited using various sources, this editor was the first to call Whitman a pedophile. That wording was removed, reinserted, and removed again in the next day. That editor was Hopenpop69, a longtime contributor to Wikipedia, who most often works on music-related articles, usually punk or rock, and may not know the complexities of Walt Whitman studies – or the complex arguments on his Wikipedia page over his sexuality.

The Walt Whitman article on Wikipedia is, in fact, one of the oldest on the project. Its original version dates to November 2001, about 10 months after the web site was launched. That version, about 1,300 bytes, said nothing about his sexuality. It was not until August 2003 that a user named “Morn” added a section discussing homosexual themes in Whitman’s poetry as a possible reflection of his personal life. That section kept the question of Whitman’s sexuality ambiguous and noted that, in the 1970s, he became a “poster child” for gay liberation. The editor also charged that, despite clear evidence that Whitman engaged in homosexual sex, that information is purposely suppressed: “this part of his personality is often omitted when his works are presented in the classroom.”<sup>11</sup> The editor offered no footnotes for these claims and this information does not exist in the current incarnation of the article.

Several built-in policies for content on Wikipedia allow for some quality control over integrity of information. In the early stages of Wikipedia, full policies were not yet cemented, and the earliest articles were akin to personal essays, with several users collaborating on a personal interpretation of the subject matter. Because the articles were so personal, they often reflected the interest of those particular editors. For example, “Morn,” the user who added the section discussing Whitman’s sexual themes, notes on his user profile that he is “interested in LGBT issues.” The majority of his more recent edits, however, are related to rabbits. As “anyone can edit” Wikipedia, subject matter expertise is not required for any editor.

To understand the impact of Wikipedia on the more general debate on Whitman’s sexuality, consider the success of the project itself. Now almost universally, or at least popularly, recognized as a destination for general reference information, studies have shown that Wikipedia’s accuracy is often similar to printed encyclopedias like Britannica, though more easily accessible (Giles 2005, 900-901). Part of this success comes from the development of guidelines for content and for behavior of editors. Those same self-policing methods not only limit the potential debate over Whitman’s sexuality but also allow for exploitation of the “anyone can edit” trademark of the project. Major arguments over Whitman’s sexuality on Wikipedia did not erupt in full until 2006 and 2007. By then, several Wikipedia policies were in effect which would influence the debate. Most importantly, personal essays like that initiated by “Morn” in 2003 were now called “original research” (WP:OR) – the term refers to conclusions which are made by Wikipedia editors rather than from information published elsewhere – and explicitly banned from the project:

Wikipedia does not publish original research. The term "original research" refers to material – such as facts, allegations, ideas, and stories – not already published by reliable sources. It also refers to any analysis or synthesis of published material to advance a position not advanced by the sources.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> See edit at

[http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Walt\\_Whitman&action=historysubmit&diff=358541209&oldid=358528806](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Walt_Whitman&action=historysubmit&diff=358541209&oldid=358528806)

<sup>10</sup> User: Hopenpop6969, September 3, 2010. See edit at

[http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Walt\\_Whitman&action=historysubmit&diff=382626902&oldid=381844108](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Walt_Whitman&action=historysubmit&diff=382626902&oldid=381844108)

<sup>11</sup> See this version at [http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Walt\\_Whitman&oldid=1582945](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Walt_Whitman&oldid=1582945)

<sup>12</sup> See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:OR>



Essentially, this policy dictates that articles of any quality must represent the general scholarship on that subject and, to prove it, all information must be footnoted to a source published by a reputable organization. Other relevant policies dictate that information be verifiable (WP:V) using published works that qualify as “reliable sources” (WP:RS) – and which sources are considered “reliable” are also regulated. For example, a Wikipedia editor sourced information on Whitman’s sexuality to his professor at the University of California at Davis,<sup>13</sup> likely information heard in a classroom setting. Though this professor is, presumably, very knowledgeable, he does not qualify as a valid source for Wikipedia.

Theoretically, policies also imply that editors get a broad understanding of what scholarship already exists in reliable, published sources on a topic before making substantial edits to a page. This allows editors to follow the policy demanding a neutral point of view (WP:NPOV): “Editors must write articles from a *neutral point of view*, representing all significant views fairly, proportionately, and without bias.” All these policies are self-policed by fellow editors who, in theory, come together for “communal consensus” (WP:CONS) to create the perfect article. Opportunity for consensus usually comes in the form of discussion pages created for every article, including Walt Whitman. The most difficult aspect of both the policy on consensus and that of neutral point of view is reflecting the general understanding of a topic in the scholarly community. To determine Whitman’s sexuality, then, a user (or several users) of Wikipedia should have already done substantial research in various published sources. The most readily available sources are mainstream biographies, which remain the major source for the current version of the article. The problem in identifying Whitman’s sexual preferences actually reflects the ambiguity in those sources.

In his biography, Jerome Loving remained noncommittal; though he notes that Whitman “required from his earliest adult years the company of young men,” he later questions “if indeed Whitman was a homosexual” (Loving 1999, 47). Later still, he refers to an affair Whitman held with someone in the 1840s, asking rhetorically if it was with a man or a woman. “There is no clear documentary evidence for either claim,” he inconclusively concludes (*ibid.*, 85). David Reynolds, in his book *Walt Whitman’s America: A Cultural Biography* (1995), recounts accusations and scandals over Whitman’s sexuality but is quick to note most of the evidence comes from oral history decades later – presumably a questionable source. Though he admits “a certain persuasiveness,” he notes that the evidence for this lies only in one account decades later based on oral history; no documentary evidence supports the story (Reynolds 1995, 70-72). These books, then, serve as the main sources utilized by amateur editors in the creation of the Wikipedia article. They, like two other biographies used as sources on the page, lack the most important line needed: “Walt Whitman was gay.”

This ambiguity led to the debate on the digital world of Wikipedia, where the question on Whitman’s sexuality remains unsettled. Ultimately, the majority of quality content on Wikipedia is contributed by a limited number of editors. Though hundreds of edits are made every hour, half of those edits are made by only 0.7% of all users; in other words, content contribution comes from scores of single-time editors and a small number of dedicated editors (Sunstein 2006, 152). “Recognized quality” articles are stamped with either “Good Article” or “Featured Article” status – distinctions agreed upon through a peer review process. Beginning shortly after Christmas in 2007, under the username “Midnightdready,” one of the authors of this paper began a concerted effort to prepare the Walt Whitman article for the peer review process. During that time, and shortly after its eventual recognition as “Good Article,” the debate on Whitman’s sexuality came to the forefront.

At the beginning of this effort, Whitman’s sexuality was explained in a sentence: “Whitman’s romantic and sexual attraction towards other men is not disputed.” Even so, it continued, “whether or not Whitman had sexual relationships with men has been the subject of some critical disagreement.” That general statement, added on October 31, 2005, did not include a footnote or source.<sup>14</sup> The edit can be traced to a professor of English at Stephen F. Austin State University in Texas who wrote a solicited review of a collection edited by Gary Schmidgall of the writings of Horace Traubel, an early biographer

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<sup>13</sup> See this version at [http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Walt\\_Whitman&oldid=80752153](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Walt_Whitman&oldid=80752153)

<sup>14</sup> This statement was added on October 31, 2005 by an unregistered editor who only made three edits in his Wikipedia “career.”

of Whitman. Schmidgall also authored *Walt Whitman: A Gay Life* (1997) a book which documents Whitman's relationship with various men. The statement in the article that "Whitman's romantic and sexual attraction towards other men is not disputed" remained unchallenged – though the section which included it was "tagged" with a neutrality concern for over a year and a half. On June 13, 2007, user "SatyrTN" added a reference for that statement using [glbtq.com](http://www.glbtc.com/), a site self-identified as "the world's largest encyclopedia of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer culture."<sup>15</sup> The editor also identified himself as gay on his user page.<sup>16</sup>

Reflecting the ambiguity in biographies like that by Reynolds, the article used the phrase: "Though he is usually labeled as homosexual or bisexual, it is unclear if Whitman had a sexual relationship with another man."<sup>17</sup> Using this phrasing, the article was acknowledged as "Good Article," with final approval by a long-term Wikipedia user known for working on literature-related articles, particularly Shakespeare.<sup>18</sup> The debate began in earnest shortly after. A month later, for example, an editor accused the article of downplaying Whitman's "vast experience with men" while overemphasizing speculation about his heterosexual relations with women. The editor noted that, in part, the difficulty comes from the non-existence of the term "homosexual" during Whitman's lifetime. In his frustration, the editor noted: "What puzzles me is why this should be controversial to anyone any more. Why would anyone want to suppress or ignore all that evidence?"<sup>19</sup> In responding, Midnight dreary noted a couple things: first, that his "evidence" was not supported by providing "reliable sources," per Wikipedia policy, and, secondly, that our personal opinions were irrelevant because of the requirement for a "neutral point of view."

Similar arguments were repeatedly made throughout 2008 and 2009, sometimes in edit summaries addressed to other editors but more often on the article's discussion page. In June 2008, for example, a user, who referred to his own homosexuality, questioned what he termed "Unwarranted Agnosticism about Whitman's Sex Life:"

Among skeptics, there is a well-known saying that "extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence," but claims of the commonplace have a much lower standard of proof... [I]f I tell you that my dog can catch a frisbee in his mouth, you may take my word for it -- because although most dogs don't know how to catch frisbees, a significant minority of dogs have learned to do it with great skill.

[The article] gives the impression that *Walt Whitman enjoyed tongue-kissing other men and stimulating their penises to mutual orgasm* is an "extraordinary claim" similar to *Martians built the pyramids at Giza*. And thus, in the absence of photographic evidence or written confirmation from Whitman himself, we are compelled to remain agnostic on the matter... This method Sounds [*sic*] very nearly as stupid as: "Though some associates of Bill and Hillary Clinton have claimed that their dog 'Buddy' knew how to catch a frisbee, there is no conclusive proof of Buddy's alleged frisbee-catching performances."<sup>20</sup>

Most users argued that Whitman should be identified categorically as homosexual or bisexual; few argued that he was exclusively heterosexual. Yet, the evidence put forward for either point of view was almost exclusively anecdotal: editors would recount a story they had heard or read and conclude that Whitman must have been homosexual. Midnightdreary frequently reminded people that our own conclusions are

<sup>15</sup> See home page at <http://www.glbtc.com/>

<sup>16</sup> User: SatyrTN, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User:SatyrTN> (as of February 10, 2011)

<sup>17</sup> Wikipedia, "Walt Whitman," January 23, 2008, [http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Walt\\_Whitman&oldid=186396819](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Walt_Whitman&oldid=186396819)

<sup>18</sup> User: Wrad, February 13, 2008. See HYPERLINK "[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Walt\\_Whitman/Archive\\_1](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Walt_Whitman/Archive_1)" \l

"GA\_review"[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Walt\\_Whitman/Archive\\_1#GA\\_revie](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Walt_Whitman/Archive_1#GA_revie)

<sup>19</sup> User:EdgarCarpenter, March 27, 2008. See

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Walt\\_Whitman/Archive\\_1#Whitman\\_and\\_sexuality](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Walt_Whitman/Archive_1#Whitman_and_sexuality)

<sup>20</sup> User:Throbert McGee, June 8, 2008. See

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Walt\\_Whitman/Archive\\_1#Unwarranted\\_Agnosticism\\_about\\_Whitman's\\_Sex\\_Life?](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Walt_Whitman/Archive_1#Unwarranted_Agnosticism_about_Whitman's_Sex_Life?)

irrelevant and, in attempts at avoiding argument, never publicly offered a personal opinion of the question. One editor went so far as to say that a picture of Whitman was enough evidence:

A significant *[sic]* percentage of homosexual men (women) have a subtly feminine (masculine) appearance. (Think of Richard Simmons or Ellen Degeneres.) If I had never heard of Walt Whitman, and someone showed me the engraving that appears in the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, I would have said "That man is homosexual."<sup>21</sup>

Even if this argument was valid, policy requires that a reliable published source other than a Wikipedia editor make the argument. Some argued, however, against the use of published sources, suggesting that scholars or teachers attempted to suppress the information – though none offered the source of their alleged intimate knowledge of academic discussions on the poet's sexual life. One editor demanded, "the Whitman article really needs to throw a monkey wrench into the academic 'works' that deny the truth about Whitman's sexuality."<sup>22</sup> A Wikipedia policy, however, does not allow that argument: WP:NOTTRUTH states that Wikipedia is not about "truth" but "verifiability." The only actionable suggestion in this case was to use Gary Schmidgall's biography of Whitman,<sup>23</sup> a book which describes Whitman's homosexual relationships. Wikipedia, however, keeps that source from being too authoritative for one important reason: so many other sources remain inconclusive enough that a single source adamantly claiming Whitman's sexuality comes across as a "fringe theory" – and there's a Wikipedia policy for that, too (WP:FRINGE).<sup>24</sup> Even Schmidgall acknowledges the difficulty in his stated aim to focus on the "obvious... reality of [Whitman's] sexuality": Whitman himself did not make it obvious. According to Schmidgall, "the poet became much more wary, devious, and, as several friends said he was expert at being, suddenly granite-faced and forbidding" (1997, xiii).

Ultimately, the Wikipedia article on Walt Whitman does not say outright that he was homosexual in its current iteration. It accepts the possibility, nonetheless, and inventories relationships with men, including Peter Doyle and Bill Duckett. It quotes Oscar Wilde, who concluded that he had "no doubt" about the elder writer's sexual preference (McKenna 2003, 33). It also acknowledges that some biographers believe he never acted on his desire for men (Loving 1999, 19). It even explains Whitman's own claims about affairs with women (Reynolds 1995, 490), including actress Ellen Grey (Callow 1992, 378), who, it has been recently confirmed, was a cross-dressing man (Genoways 2009, 154-156), and that he fathered six children (while also noting the lack of evidence for the claim) (Loving 1999, 123). Perhaps Jerome Loving said it best in his biography: "...the discussion of Whitman's sexual orientation will probably continue in spite of whatever evidence emerges" (ibid., 19). Whitman himself said, "I do not tell the usual facts, proved by records and documents... you will never understand me" (Schmidgall 1997, xiii). The Wikipedia debate of Whitman's sexuality, then, is just as inclusive, contradictory or evasive as previous sources.

## Conclusions

So it has come to this – unprecedented technological developments and communicative capacities, not to mention innumerable hours of intellectual exercise, all to debate the sexual orientation of a poet who died in 1892. The very reemergence of the debate is an invaluable illustration of how historical knowledge has become more readily contestable. According to most scholars, Whitman's sexual

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<sup>21</sup> User:WilliamSommerwerck, September 7, 2008. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Walt\\_Whitman/Archive\\_1#Unwarranted\\_Agnosticism\\_about\\_Whitman's\\_Sex\\_Life?](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Walt_Whitman/Archive_1#Unwarranted_Agnosticism_about_Whitman's_Sex_Life?)

<sup>22</sup> User:WilliamSommerwerck, September 7, 2008. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Walt\\_Whitman/Archive\\_1#Unwarranted\\_Agnosticism\\_about\\_Whitman's\\_Sex\\_Life?](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Walt_Whitman/Archive_1#Unwarranted_Agnosticism_about_Whitman's_Sex_Life?)

<sup>23</sup> User:Englehart, August 5, 2008. See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Walt\\_Whitman/Archive\\_1#Unwarranted\\_Agnosticism\\_about\\_Whitman's\\_Sex\\_Life?](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Walt_Whitman/Archive_1#Unwarranted_Agnosticism_about_Whitman's_Sex_Life?)

<sup>24</sup> Though Schmidgall was the only source offered by editors in this particular discussion, other works which address Whitman's sexuality directly include Hershel Parker's essay "The Real 'Live Oak, with Moss': Straight Talk about Whitman's 'Gay Manifesto'" (1996) and Michael Robertson's *Worshipping Walt: The Whitman Disciples* (2010), for example.

orientation has been settled in a particularly ambiguous way, albeit within the context of contemporary sexual typology. Whitman's protestations of definition alone provide a foundation for this ambiguity, which critics eventually embraced as an authentic description. But public contributors to the Whitman Wikipedia page appear significantly less satisfied with ambiguous definitions. In this case, the resurgence of debate on the discussion page is focused on somehow "resolving" Whitman's sexuality.

This "re-opening" process is motivated (in large part) by the ambiguity of the "settled" historical debate. Professional historians are beholden to evidence in the attempt to identify causal relationships. If the data support an ambiguous conclusion, then that is the appropriate historical conclusion – ambiguity is not an issue given methodological rigor. Politically, however, ambiguous historical conclusions are useless. Historical artifacts and figures are only politically efficacious in accordance with mobilized cultural political platforms. Ambiguity underscores a sense of openness or universality that is impossible to integrate into a political rhetoric that requires partisan definition. While this is true of politics in general, the contemporary importance of culture in political legitimation processes means that ambiguity is not only an anathema to political ideologies, but increasingly to cultural and historical artifacts as well.

Regardless of the distaste postmodern theories leave in the mouths of many, few would disagree that culture and identity have become increasingly viable as political mobilization strategies in the contemporary era (whether we call this a "postmodern" era or not). Issues formerly locked out of larger national political metanarratives (inclusive of most race, gender, and sexual orientation related grievances) become increasingly viable as the authoritative structures reinforcing their hegemony declined. While "identity politics" is the common categorical label applied to this political mobilization, we can view the efficacy of cultural politics more broadly. For instance, one can reasonably conclude that resurgent contention over the sexuality of a long dead American icon is inexorably connected to the emergent power of the "gay rights"<sup>25</sup> movement. That is, if a member or supporter of this identity-based socio-political movement desired to point out the lasting contribution to American culture of gay Americans – it might stand to reason that including such a prominent literary figure would lend significant credence to such a position.

However, the converse is also true. As culture and identity become increasingly politicized, issues become increasingly bifurcated as a means to mobilize support and political power. As a once disenfranchised group becomes increasingly powerful, competing groups seek to both stem the perceived loss of their own authoritative power and limit the rise of any competing group. In this way, the politicization of sexual orientation motivates one side to articulate support in all sectors and motivates their competitors to refute such claims. Historical knowledge has long been associated with contemporary political and social authoritative justification; as the general public becomes more integrated into the process of creating and revising such knowledge, political opportunities to articulate support for respective positions becomes more prevalent.

While the case in point is certainly not overly contentious, it is reflective of these larger trends. The management of knowledge and marshaling support for one's position becomes increasingly central to the manufacture of authority. New technologies such as Wikiscanner, a program designed to track and identify edits made to Wikipedia, has illustrated the importance placed on the management of knowledge produced through public collaboration and discourse. Evidence of corporations, politicians, and governmental institutions such as the Central Intelligence Agency have been cited as substantial editors of their own (and others') Wikipedia pages (see Borland 2007; Hafner 2007). While immediate public relations initiatives and efforts to limit criticism/negative disclosures can be understood as wholly pragmatic, we must recognize that the resurgent public debate examined here is a reflection of the same pragmatic motivations. Ambiguity, in this context, is unsatisfactory because it limits political efficacy – one cannot claim figures, ideas, or other historical artifacts to justify any respective political position if concrete conclusions cannot be identified. The political utility of knowledge *requires* a static definition;

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<sup>25</sup> Of course, "gay rights" is a brutally general description of the multifaceted issues, concerns, and organizations association with issues of sexual orientation. For the sake of expediency, we are using the popular conceptualization of a broadly termed movement; however, would like to reiterate the diversity within this, and all other, identity-based movement(s).

this helps to explain why the settled ambiguity of a scholarly debate can (or perhaps, *must*) be reopened and contested publically in a space like Wikipedia.

Significantly, and perhaps ironically, Wikipedia's evolving editorial codes have resulted in a Whitman page that, while curtailing open accessibility, or at least free-form contributions, generally reflects the nuance and complexity of the scholarly consensus regarding Whitman's sexuality. In this regard, Wikipedia has instituted something like the professional standards to which all scholars are subject: peer review, citations, and at least an affected tone of neutrality. Contrary to its democratic origins, Wikipedia has, at least in this case, tamed the mass into producing a good encyclopedia entry. As of the writing of this article, the Walt Whitman page on Wikipedia is closed to contributions. And so one is left to wonder which direction Whitman, suspicious of the expert and friend of the common, is rolling in his grave.

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