

Walt Whitman's *New Orleans: Sidewalk Sketches & Newspaper Rambles*, ed. Stefan Schöberlein (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2022), 224 pp.

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The facts are simple enough: at the age of 28, Walt Whitman went with his brother down to New Orleans to work at a newspaper. They stayed for the spring of 1848, and then returned to New York. Even as the trip unfolded, however, Whitman had begun to romanticize and mythologize his experience. In his later writing, he had occasion to liberally revise and lavishly polish his memories of those decisive months. Consequently, his biographers and critics have puzzled over the meaning of the trip. His claim, in answer to queries about his homoeroticism, that he had fathered an illegitimate child down South, has long been deemed implausible. How inspiring was his contact with New Orleans's Latinized culture—its Spanish, French, and Catholic histories? What vantage on sexuality and embodiment had New Orleans provided the young poet? How did he feel about New Orleans's strategic position in the system of Southern slavery? Did he develop an appreciation for its richly elaborated Black culture?

Stefan Schöberlein's new edition of Whitman's writing from and about New Orleans reopens these questions, with a good deal of new material and a judiciously light citational apparatus. Schöberlein festoons the text with images—engravings from period print publications, maps, daguerreotypes, and paintings—informative and mood-setting. The contents include entries from Whitman's diaries, his brother's correspondence, a transcribed manuscript draft of the Calamus poems, and a late-life reflection on the trip, alongside a much more comprehensive selection of material from the *New Orleans Crescent* than has previously been collected. The handy and handsome volume makes for a pleasant read, a bit like a carefully curated narrative scrapbook of a trip down to New Orleans with Walt. No doubt it will grace the front tables of tourist-friendly French Quarter bookshops.

Schöberlein's editorial choices provide a model of compromise between the concerns of researchers and those of the tourist-reader. The volume makes an interesting case for nineteenth-century studies of print culture as public scholarship. The presentation here sets the scene of day-to-day life in antebellum New Orleans rather thrillingly. A former editor of *The Walt Whitman Archive*, Schöberlein has conceived the book with a kind of hypertextual sophistication. Perhaps because of its pitch to a public audience, or out of an abundance of editorial caution, Schöberlein tends to summarize rather than weigh in on the scholarly disputes that this episode of Whitman's life has yielded or might yet yield. For instance, he writes in the Introduction that the inclusion of more extensive unsigned material from the *Crescent* was justified by a "computational stylometric

<https://doi.org/10.1093/alh/ajad173>

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approach,” with no further explanation (xiii). These demurrals mean that the volume’s intellectual stakes, beyond Whitmaniac completism, are left rather open to speculation.

From the perspective of the twenty-first century, several aspects of the story of Whitman’s time in New Orleans reward careful attention. There are of course the knotted problems of race, slavery, gender, and sexuality which have been orienting concerns for Whitman studies more generally over the past several decades. The categories of embodied identity, in the process of violent formation through the mid-nineteenth century, always look slippery from Whitman’s perspective, and especially through the fish-eyed lens of New Orleans.

Whitman’s most explicit comments on New Orleans have less to do with its role in the economy of slavery and more to do with its pivotal role in westward expansion. His diary from the trip down makes excited note of the growth of US industry: “The country through which the Ohio runs is one of the most productive countries—and one of the most buying and selling—in the world” (7). He indicates no interest in slavery’s role in the development of these interior trade routes. Reflecting on the trip decades later in an 1887 letter to the *New Orleans Picayune*, Whitman recalls the city’s victorious mood after the recently concluded US intervention in Mexico: “From the situation of the country, the city of New Orleans had been our channel and *entrepot* for everything, going and returning” (106).

The territorial ambitions of the slaveholding class have become the object of scholarly interest in a number of recent books. Walter Johnson’s *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (2013) makes clear how the plantation system functioned as a land-management scheme, and how Southern planters in the Mississippi Valley saw themselves as settler-colonists. Whitman’s boosterism echoed the period rhetoric which sought to position New Orleans as a mercantile capital; he also followed polite conventions of euphemistic reticence about the physical violence of slavery. He had been involved in the antislavery politics of the Free Soil party before and after his trip down south, but he kept mum on the subject in the pages of the *Crescent*. The roles of the city as a slave market, of slavery as a labor regime, and of enslaved people as the most valuable asset in the Southern economy make no explicit appearance here.

Decades ago, Quentin Anderson referred to Whitman as a paradigmatic example of “the imperial self.” The trip to New Orleans was a key episode in what Whitman himself called the “long foreground” of his poetic development. Geopolitical critique of US empire and abolitionist argument against slavery were not the dominant notes of the experience. The bulk of Whitman’s writing for the *Crescent* belongs to the genre of the feuilleton—light sketches of urban scenes—rather than what we might now call hard

news. This form of writing familiarized readers with the social types of city life; in a metaphor Whitman would have appreciated, Walter Benjamin called it “botanizing on the asphalt”: making of everyday taxonomies of the flora and fauna of the rapidly growing metropolis. Whitman especially focused on the city’s hustlers, such as Peter Funk, Esq., the low-level auctioneer; Daggerdaw Bowieknife, the disgraced lawman; and John Jinglebrain, the dandy. Between these caricatures, Whitman describes the joyous crowds at celebrations of the Lenten season. Despite the young poet’s apparent commitments to temperance and physical culture movements, New Orleans seems to have made him more honestly alive to the pleasures of the flesh: “The fact is, that in this goodly city, we can go through the whole alphabet of enjoyment, and, as they say in the West, ‘not miss a letter from A to Izzard’” (13).

Historians, following the lead of Black feminism, have rendered more explicitly how the sinful pleasures of cities like New Orleans fueled the circulation and reproduction of enslaved labor, especially after the abolition of the trans-Atlantic slave trade in 1807. Jessica Marie Johnson’s *Wicked Flesh: Black Women, Intimacy, and Freedom in the Atlantic World* (2020) demonstrates how the sexual culture of New Orleans (like certain parts of the Caribbean and West Africa) afforded Black women elusive forms of liberation. In his only description of a Black character for the *Crescent*, Whitman describes one “Miss Dusky Grisette,” who “sells her flowers, and barter[s] off sweet looks for sweeter money” (30). The sketch merely hints at the race of its subject, and takes a knowing, dandiacal distance from the city’s informal sexual economy. It is a considerably more sympathetic depiction than the “Creole” woman of Virginia who abets the main character’s ruination in Whitman’s earlier temperance novel *Franklin Evans, or The Inebriate* (1842). At the same time, Dusky Grisette marks several absences. Free Black people, the enslaved, working-class women, and sex workers would all figure prominently in Whitman’s later articulations of radical liberalism and likewise in the cultural imagination of New Orleans. And yet they make very limited impression in this volume.

New Orleans never fulfilled its promise as a global city, at least in the economic sense. The rail system displaced steamboats as the dominant transportation infrastructure on the continent, and the city’s position on the Mississippi came to matter less than its promoters hoped. Instead, it became subject to destructive cycles of development, expropriation, and disastrous neglect, most recently and spectacularly exemplified by the destruction of Hurricane Katrina. In his characteristic optimism, Whitman does not anticipate these disappointments, but from the vantage of the 2020s, the fate of New Orleans might look as much like national prophecy as Whitman’s Hegelian bluster. While his reasons for leaving the city have always been murky, he was concerned about the health of his brother, who did not take well to the subtropical climate. Kathryn Olivarius’s *Necropolis: Disease, Power, and Capitalism in the Cotton Kingdom* (2022), shows how New

Orleans had to accommodate its economic rhythms to periodic outbreaks of yellow fever. Here too the young Whitman missed an opportunity for prophetic vision; it is another rare, but compelling, failure of vision.