

A cultural echo: Walt Whitman and America today

On the 125th anniversary of Walt Whitman's death, Barnaby Smith, with assistance from Whitman expert **Lindsay Tuggle**, examines what the great poet might mean to Americans today, and how he might represent a source of hope and solace for those struggling to adjust to the reality of a Trump presidency.

At sunset on March 26, 1892, Walt Whitman died peacefully at his home in Camden, New Jersey at the age of seventy-two, as a result of complications stemming from pneumonia. That day in early spring brought to an end one of America's great literary lives, albeit one with its fair share of inconsistencies, controversies and even some troubling views – all characteristics of a poet whose most famous line arguably remains the ubiquitous 'I am large, I contain multitudes' from 'Song of Myself', part of his visionary collection, *Leaves of Grass*.

Whitman's poetry has spent decades and decades at the heart of school curricula and academic study, and for some he is indisputably the most influential and celebrated poet in the American canon. Our particular juncture in history then – as American culture seems decisively splintered and, many feel, has succumbed to false, empty rhetoric and fear-mongering – seems a good time to gauge just how large a presence Whitman and his work holds in the United States in 2017. After all, his poems (and journalism) advocated love, companionship, kindness, democracy, science, spirituality and communion with the natural world. Moreover he also offered, as Lindsay Tuggle puts it, 'an ecologically and spiritually unified alternative to evangelical Christianity'.

Tuggle is a literary scholar at Sydney University specialising in Whitman. Her book, *The Afterlives of Specimens: Science and Mourning in Whitman's America*, will be published later this year. Tuggle, who is a dual-national of both Australia and the United States and has lived for long stints in both countries, was in Philadelphia on a research trip when approached by *northerly* about participating in this article. She was in the country as Donald Trump was inaugurated as president of the land in which she was born and grew up. How Whitman's legacy and values can be nurtured and sustained in mainstream culture in a nation governed by such a figure, and following such a dispiriting election tussle with Hillary Clinton, may be difficult to see.

'I think of it more as a haunting than a presence,' writes Tuggle via email in answer to the question of whether Whitman is relevant in American life today. 'A ghost is ever-present, yes, but also transient, elusively partial. Whitman is a trace, rather than a legacy these days. He is a ghost in the dark machine of the twenty-first century zeitgeist. He is literally inscribed into the cultural landscape at strange retail attractions such as the Walt Whitman Mall in New York or the Walt Whitman Rest Area on the New Jersey Turnpike.

Whitman is [also] a recurring figure in pop culture: *Leaves of Grass* plays a climactic role in the capitalist dystopia *Breaking Bad*, whose anti-hero is also named Walt.

'I have found that *Leaves of Grass* endures as a cultural echo, capturing something of the sense of American possibility, that inchoate feeling of purpose and longing that has haunted the national consciousness. In its wake, the disillusionment of contemporary America is startlingly fluorescent and bleak.

'To envision Whitman's ideal alongside Trump's late-capitalist reality is to experience an historical vertigo, a fall from the transcendently erotic to the hyper-violent and virtually (un)real.'

This grim summation need not signify, however, that Whitman's example and ideals have been overwhelmed and become extinct. If we look at Whitman's life, as opposed to just his work, we see a man who worked amid and against extreme political turmoil, who can to some extent be seen as an inspiring figure whose expression flourished in resistance to wider injustices and political turbulence.

The first edition of *Leaves of Grass* was published in 1855, and as Tuggle explains, the 1850s were marked by 'systemic political corruption' at all government levels, defined by graft, patronage and vote-buying that Tuggle compares with 'the current assaults on the rights of immigrants, women, African Americans, Native Americans and LGBT communities'. Whitman also lived and wrote in the wake of the disturbing Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, which legally enforced the repatriation of runaway slaves and criminalised 'harbouring, concealing or rescuing' an enslaved individual. Again, Tuggle draws a comparison with today's 'rapidly escalating policy of deporting so-called illegal aliens living and working in the United States'.

Tuggle makes the point that, while large sections of society may be engulfed in gloom as the Trump presidency unfolds, if something as life-affirming and sensuous as *Leaves of Grass* can emerge from similarly chaotic times, maybe today's malaise can give rise to something similarly hopeful, in whatever shape or form.

'On my good days,' says Tuggle, 'I think that if Whitman could conjure *Leaves of Grass* in the face of a nation divided along lines of race, class, gender and geography, then perhaps we can continue to hope that America is not a failed state.

'On the other, pessimistic hand, I feel that, despite Whitman's optimistic vision of America, "out of hopeful green stuff woven", precious little has changed since reconstruction. I suspect the truth lies somewhere in the middle, as is usually the case.

'I find solace in Whitman's prolific literary output and his resilience in the face of criticism, most of all in his refusal to be silenced by either personal tragedy or political tyranny.'

An obvious but difficult question must be, then, how does today's poet or novelist, or indeed journalist or non-fiction author, go about channelling the spirit of Whitman in creating a potent spirit of openness, progressive thinking and compassion? Tuggle herself is a widely published poet whose work has been recognised by various major awards, with her first collection set for publication in 2018. She believes that while the optimism inherent in Whitman's work remains a source of philosophical and spiritual nourishment for new generations, 'it is not Whitman's optimism, but his rage and resistance that we must strive to emulate'.

She adds, 'I think it would be naïve, perhaps even unethical, to act as if America can still be seen through Whitman's "hopeful" green-tinged lens. Having said that, I feel a sense of urgency to write and read as a form of

protest. I think we have a responsibility not to turn away from the dangers inherent in the escalating Western tendencies (also manifesting in Europe, and here in Australia) toward xenophobia and isolationism.

'We have to resist the urge to numb out, to escape reality through any of the plethora of soma-like substances and screens at our fingertips. We have to fight the impulse to recalibrate our collective reality and normalise this dangerous administration. Whitman gets overlooked as a political agitator and protest poet, but inhabited those genres too.'

Idolising Whitman as America's poetic-political benchmark is, however, not without its problems. In a well-documented news story from 2013, a graduate student at Northwestern University refused to participate in a music class where he was required to perform Whitman's writings put to music because he regarded the poet as 'one of the most historically racist poets of U.S. history'. Indeed, plenty of modern commentary has also homed in on this troubling part of his legacy.

Tuggle writes that, depressingly, Whitman's 'empathetic persona is unrecognisable alongside documents in his private correspondence that express nothing short of scientific racism'. She adds that he 'subscribed to nineteenth-century theories of racial superiority that are appalling to contemporary readers'.

The difficult question of whether one can enjoy and appreciate an artist's work in the face of their inexcusable views or behaviour need not be ventured into here. For Tuggle though, Whitman's racial views represent a paradox that cannot be reconciled, an irredeemable stain on his memory, yet not one that overpowers his overarching influence or importance.

'It is a manifestation of cognitive dissonance that those of us who look too closely for too long at revered writers must inevitably come to terms with. But for me, ethically, it cannot be a reconciliation. We revere our beloveds despite their flaws, and we choose to see their grace as, at least partially, eclipsing their darkness. The same can be said of certain documents in Abraham Lincoln's archive, where it is equally shattering. I think racism taints the legacy, in both cases, but does not erase it.'

For now at least, perhaps *Leaves of Grass* should be seen in splendid isolation divorced from the more repellent opinions of its creator, as some of us look towards the poet to restore our faith in America and for a blueprint for protest and resistance. Taken on its own merits, the collection offers a doctrine of fellowship, communion, sensuality, empathy and grace. Tuggle says she often turns to a passage from the preface to the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* on the occasions when, she says, 'history writes itself in blood and bone':

This is what you shall do: Love the earth and sun and the animals, despise riches, give alms to everyone that asks, stand up for the stupid and crazy, devote your income and labour to others, hate tyrants, argue not concerning God, have patience and indulgence toward the people, take off your hat to nothing known or unknown or to any man or number of men, go freely with powerful uneducated persons and with the young and with the mothers of families, read these leaves in the open air every season of every year of your life, re-examine all you have been told at school or church or in any book, dismiss whatever insults your own soul, and your very flesh shall be a great poem and have the richest fluency not only in its words but in the silent lines of its lips and face and between the lashes of your eyes and in every motion and joint of your body.