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Kenneth M. Price’s *Whitman in Washington* comes at a time when the poet is under intensive scrutiny, surrounding the marking of the bicentennial of his birth in 2019. With that milestone came not just celebration of his literary achievements—his status as national poet—but a renewed probing of his attitudes and statements—both private and public—about African Americans, in accord with a general racial reckoning (Black Lives Matter) across the US.

Against that backdrop, this book admirably insists on being heard. In it, Price works to untangle Whitman’s complex, often contradictory, racial attitudes, showing through close readings and rich cultural and aesthetic contextualization how his views of African Americans during slavery changed once emancipation occurred, how he was able to support the freeing of slaves but balked at the consequences of such freedom, in particular as it extended to civil rights.

But even as the crucial matter of race threads through the book, it is by no means the only issue or paradox that Price confronts. Chapter by chapter, we get a careful rereading of some of Whitman’s most puzzling and often misunderstood writings produced during the ten years he was living and working in Washington city, from 1863 to 1873—what amounts to a very considerable and wide-ranging amount of work. With an impressive thoroughness, he reveals the dynamics of the city itself during those years (shifting demographics, war hospitals, a ballooning federal bureaucracy) and how they directly impact Whitman’s evolving sense of himself as an artist; in other words, it isn’t just that his writing and thinking occurred when it did, but that it occurred then and there, in the first emancipated city. Price manages to bring Washington vividly alive as he maps Whitman’s personal and professional enactments in it.

Early on, Price parses a draft piece of journalism Whitman wrote in 1863 that sets his stage: he meticulously reads what is only a short paragraph to show how Whitman sees Black women and children in Washington through a stereotypical lens, refusing to take seriously or see sympathetically the “grouping” he portrays, a grouping reliant on conventions of genre paintings of the period. There is no compassionate gaze as there is with white soldiers; he remains detached and distanced from the scene. As evidenced here, one of the great strengths of the book is how the author frames his subject both in terms of historical and cultural events and in terms of mode and genre (the over 30 illustrations—including reproductions of drawings from popular magazines of the day,
photos, paintings, and scribal and other material artifacts—are greatly enriching); another is that he illuminates often neglected, but, as it turns out, quite consequential, fragments of Whitman’s writing, refusing to regard only polished and published documents as worthy of critical attention.

But after Price reveals Whitman’s failure of imagination in that draft sketch, he later turns to one of the few poems Whitman writes about a Black subject, “Ethiopia Saluting the Colors,” giving a robust account of its breaking away from stereotypes, reading it, too, against other artistic representations of the period. In this case, Price holds up a poem that usually is seen as expressing Whitman’s dim racial views and finds, compellingly, that it achieves a level of appreciation for the agency of the old African American woman absent in most popular depictions of that same figure. For Price, the poem is a rare example of Whitman’s more sympathetic vision. Price often comes back to the fundamental tension that Whitman’s view of African Americans was different during slavery than it was after emancipation, and that his unease with the consequences of freedom, including its threat to white labor, prompted him mostly to avoid direct treatment of African Americans in his poetry and prose. It is a loud silence.

But, again, this is not a book only about race. Each one of the chapters seeks to unravel a knot in our understanding of Whitman as a complex, often paradoxical, and sometimes failed, poet and cultural critic. One chapter addresses Whitman’s self-reference as “missionary” in his hospital work in the city (including writing letters on behalf of wounded soldiers to their families), a label that would seem odd in light of his own lack of religiosity; the chapter dives deeply into the history of the US Christian Commission, with which Whitman was associated, and explains why Whitman would have been in league with it, and where and why he would separate from it. Another chapter wrestles with a prevailing critical view that Whitman’s war writings engage the pastoral mode in order to soften or evade somehow the actual violence of the war itself, to reassert a traditional status quo. Price goes carefully through Memoranda during the War (1875) and several war poems in Drum-Taps (1865) and its Sequel (1865-6) to show how indeed Whitman’s pastoralism is not pat, insofar as he is often disrupting pastoral convention. In this chapter, race also comes to the fore, as Whitman is seen as alert to the ways in which landscape is racialized, through “ambiguous” landscapes that “highlight moral uncertainties and quandaries,” thus upending a Virgilian pastoral (88).

Price’s ground-breaking penultimate chapter expresses how Whitman’s time as a government clerk, while usually diminished as relatively unimportant in his life, was crucial to Whitman’s sense of comradeship (with other white male government employees) and authorship. This chapter grows out of Price’s own headline-grabbing work of about ten years ago where he identified at the Library of Congress over 3,000
scribal documents attributable to Whitman as copyist in various government offices, mostly the Attorney General’s Office. It was in one of these government offices—the Bureau of Indian Affairs—that Whitman made extensive revisions to the 1860 edition of the just-published *Leaves of Grass*, what amounts to (as the author argues) an important shadow edition (called the “Blue Book”) of the ever-evolving *Leaves of Grass* project, an edition that plays down sexuality as it plays up the war (it was this book that got him fired from that same office for its supposed immorality). As Price speculates, the government’s stress on probity during these years may well have been the reason to mark for deletion in the Blue Book a number of the homoerotic “Calamus” poems. Tracking the word “pensiveness” in the Blue Book and elsewhere in his writings, the author uncovers not only these moments of self-censorship but the precariousness of Whitman’s “faith in the future” of the postwar nation that his wariness about the use of the word indexes (145).

Price persuasively claims that Whitman’s experiences as a clerk—the “decorum” of office work—had a significant effect on him. Working against the idea that Whitman’s nonliterary scribal work was merely mechanical and “non-consequential,” “writing that somehow left no mark either on the writer or the world” (124), he makes the case that such collaborative work as Whitman was involved in was generative, affirming him as a “networked creator” both professionally and poetically. Indeed, this scribal practice of writing on behalf of (i.e., in the voice of) others led to certain hallmark elements of his late style, including his increasing use of personae and parentheses (122). Throughout, Price overturns and complicates fixed beliefs in Whitman studies, but also successfully models an attention to a range of documents typically excluded from scholarly inquiry. As he writes, referring to his own critical practice, “The juxtaposition of Whitman’s scribal documents and the Blue Book can be illuminating for literary studies generally because of the way they have been read (or more accurately not read)” (127).

Finally, Price remains clear-eyed about Whitman’s successes and failures, particularly his failures to imagine a multiracial democracy. Whitman’s misgivings about radical reconstruction, and, worse, his ill will toward African Americans, some of which made it into his published work (though Price does not quote perhaps the most incendiary remark about African Americans Whitman made in print and then erased in future publications of the same piece), limited his vision. His time in the Attorney General’s Office dealing with issues like the rise of the Ku Klux Klan (and the government’s efforts to beat it back) might have yielded a different response—a response other than silence. Ultimately, there are a lot of “could have”s and missed opportunities in Whitman’s attitudes toward race, Price concludes. The virtue of *Whitman in Washington* is that it keeps tensions in place, and plumbs paradox, palpably wrestling with the legacy of
Whitman in the moment and calling us to our own reckoning of him and his work for the future.