Toward an Embodied Poetics in Appraisal

Walt Whitman in the US National Archives

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ABSTRACT In this article, I argue that a set of 19th-century documents written by the poet Walt Whitman on behalf of the US attorney general's office and other government entities raises important questions for archival appraisal and description. These documents demonstrate that the creator of archival documents was frequently a corporate entity, involving many different actors, from authors to copyists to scribes. Peeling back the layers of creation can reveal the often-overlooked role of clerks and other minor figures in government agencies as well as forms of value that do not explicitly relate to the function of documents within the mission of the larger institution. Drawing on concepts of the records continuum and the archival multiverse, I propose an approach to appraisal that attends to an *embodied poetics* of records by focusing on human actions and interactions as important factors in the production and preservation of archival materials. Such an approach can help us to better perceive and describe bodies that speak in the archives in unexpected ways, sometimes through or as the voices of power.

1 My thanks to Jamie Lee and Ken Price for their comments and suggestions on drafts of this essay. Thanks also to the anonymous reviewers for their helpful feedback.

RÉSUMÉ Dans cet article, j'avance qu'un ensemble de documents écrits au XIXe siècle par le poète Walt Whitman au nom du bureau du Procureur général des ÉU et d'autres entités gouvernementales soulève des questions importantes au sujet de l'évaluation et la description archivistiques. Ces documents démontrent que le créateur de documents d'archives était souvent une entité corporative, impliquant de nombreux acteurs, des auteurs, aux copistes aux transcripteurs. En retirant les couches de création, on peut révéler le travail souvent passé sous silence des commis et autres figures mineures dans les organismes gouvernementaux, ainsi que des sortes de valeurs qui ne sont pas strictement liées aux fonctions des documents dans le mandat de l'institution de façon globale. Puisant dans les concepts de *records continuum* et de multivers archivistiques, je propose une approche à l'évaluation qui supporte l'incarnation poétique des documents en mettant l'accent sur les actions et les interactions humaines en tant que facteurs importants dans la production et la préservation de matériaux archivistiques. Une telle approche peut nous aider à mieux appréhender et décrire les corpus qui s'expriment d'une façon inattendue dans les archives, par le biais de ou en tant que voix du pouvoir.

What think you I take my pen in hand to record?
The battle-ship, perfect-model'd, majestic, that I saw pass the offing to-day under full sail?
The splendors of the past day? or the splendor of the night that envelops me?
Or the vaunted glory and growth of the great city spread around me? – no;
But merely of two simple men I saw to-day on the pier in the midst of the crowd, parting the parting of dear friends,
The one to remain hung on the other's neck and passionately kiss'd him,
While the one to depart tightly prest the one to remain in his arms.[2]

In 2008, scholars discovered that a set of documents in the United States National Archives were in the handwriting of the poet Walt Whitman.[3] Generated by Whitman during a stint as a clerk in the attorney general's office from 1865 to 1873, these documents were written on behalf of several US attorneys general and a number of other government figures. They address many topics confronting the country after the Civil War, from civil rights violations to war crimes and pardons, state laws, and government appointments. Some of the documents are signed by Whitman or include his initials, but the vast majority are identifiable only because they are written in his handwriting. In most cases, it is unclear what role – if any – Whitman had in composing the content.

In this article, I argue that these documents raise an important set of questions for archival appraisal and description. They demonstrate that the creator of archival documents was frequently a corporate entity, involving many different actors, from authors to copyists to scribes. Peeling back the layers of creation can reveal the often-overlooked role of clerks and other minor figures in government agencies as well as forms of value that do not explicitly relate to the function of documents within the mission of the larger institution.

2 Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (Philadelphia: David McKay, 1891–2), 110.

3 The existence of some letters in Whitman's hand had been noted in a 1943 *PMLA* article. See Dixon Wecter, "Walt Whitman as Civil Servant," *Publications of the Modern Language Association* 58, no. 4 (1943): 1094–1109. For a discussion of the recent search for documents in Whitman's handwriting in the National Archives, see Kenneth M. Price, "'Whitman, Walt, Clerk': The Poet Was a Seer of Democracy and Bureaucracy," *Prologue Magazine* 43, no. 4 (2011), accessed April 25, 2019, https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2011/winter/whitman.html.

Crucial to the understanding and valuation of these documents is a recognition of Whitman as an embodied participant in their creation. To understand these documents requires thinking about Whitman as a *hand* – about how he is embodied through handwriting as a writer but not necessarily as an author. Scholars have suggested that the role of Whitman as a functionary or a medium for administrators in the office cannot be separated from his role as creator not just of these documents but also of some of the most influential poetry in the country.[4] We have yet to fully explore how the topics Whitman wrote about as a clerk influenced his writing, but having access to both the documents and contextualization of their production opens the door to analyses of this kind.

These documents are useful for thinking about appraisal in part because they suggest some of the limitations of the functional analysis that has informed both macroappraisal and documentation strategy. A top-down, functional approach might well assess the information in these documents as valuable because they are records of the US attorney general's office, but it is unlikely that such an approach would weigh the potential significance of one of the several clerks working in the office and making copies of the letters.

Is there another terminology of value within which these documents might be seen and understood? Approaches that emphasize the complexity and significance of provenance invite fuller explorations of the structure of labour in departments that generate records. Expanding from a simple matter of institutional or individual origin, provenance has increasingly begun to refer to the rich contextual histories of archival materials, from their creation to their use and ongoing curation.[5] Archival theories that explore the multi-dimensional contexts of records in space and time, like the records continuum model developed in Australia, also offer ways to think about the many hands and different stages involved in the creation of these records. Studies of embodied performance, enactment, and behaviour in the archives offer other complementary ways of thinking about them.

What can a poet as 19th-century record-producer teach us about present-day appraisal methods? What can current conversations about appraisal and record-keeping teach us about how to think about this set of documents? In the lines that form the epigraph to this article, Whitman speaks of the poet as recorder, creating

4 Price, "'Whitman, Walt, Clerk.'"

5 Tom Nesmith, "Principle of Provenance," in *Encyclopedia of Archival Science*, ed. Luciana Duranti and Patricia C. Franks (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 284–87.

archives of emotion and of everyday intimacies and actions as much as of grand scenes and sweeping histories. Appraisal that attends to an *embodied poetics* of records perceives the layers of physical, historically specific actions involved in recordkeeping and invokes the broader world of (often imaginative) expression and inscription within which such actions can be interpreted. Such an approach prompts archivists and poetry critics alike to consider the pen in the hand of the poet-clerk, seeing a bridge between these roles in the form of recordkeeping as an activity that instantiates people and the many relationships among people as well as institutions, agencies, and the forms of power that they represent.

Review of the Literature: Evolving Approaches to Archival Appraisal

Surveys of appraisal have tracked the various approaches that have developed, many in dialogue with one another, in different contexts in the West over the course of the past century.[6] Early 20th-century appraisal methods assigned representatives of the creating entity the work of determining which records were disposable and which had enduring value.[7] Faced with an exponential increase in records at midcentury in the United States, Theodore Schellenberg asserted a role for archivists in the work of appraisal and proposed a framework of value that could be used to determine which records should become archival. The categories of "evidential" and "informational" values combine considerations about the purposes of documents within the originating organization and their potential future value as historical and legal evidence.[8] The legacy of both of these approaches can be seen in various permutations of selection and appraisal in archival work today.

More recent directions in archival appraisal have emphasized strategy. An influential set of approaches involves a functional analysis, or an initial assessment by the archivist or a series of archivists of the key functions and goals

6 See Terry Cook, "What Is Past Is Prologue: A History of Archival Ideas Since 1898, and the Future Paradigm Shift," *Archivaria* 43 (Spring 1997): 17–63; and Anne J. Gilliland, "Archival Appraisal: Practising on Shifting Sands," in *Archives and Recordkeeping: Theory into Practice*, ed. Caroline Brown (London: Facet Publishing, 2014), 31–62.

7 Hilary Jenkinson, *A Manual of Archive Administration* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1922).

8 Theodore R. Schellenberg, *Modern Archives: Principles and Techniques* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956; Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1996), 139. Citation refers to the SAA edition.

of an organization. This assessment is then used to evaluate which groups of records most effectively document the organization's most significant functions. Macroappraisal and documentation strategy both draw on this approach.[9] Documentation strategy and the Canadian total archives approach go further to suggest that the archivist must also work collaboratively to evaluate the total cultural and informational landscape, ensuring that it is represented as completely as possible by the records that are to be preserved.

As postmodern and postcustodial questions about both the record as a construct and the history-telling to which it gave rise have emerged, the archivist's role in documenting society has become an increasingly important matter of critical concern. Recordkeeping paradigms like the records continuum, which attempts to map records in their full historical, temporal, spatial, and cultural complexity, have reflected changes in the ways records and their place in the world are being imagined.[10] Calls to reinvent appraisal have emphasized the "human dimension of archives" and have noted the active responsibility of archivists to develop appraisal methods that attend to this dimension as well as their obligation to represent broader institutional structures and functions.[11] Some scholars have begun to redefine fundamental concepts in ways that acknowledge multiple cultural perspectives and worldviews.[12] Others have begun to employ methods of reading that look to the edges and the absences within archives for evidence of underrepresented and disadvantaged populations.[13] Scholars from a range of

9 See Terry Cook, "Macro-appraisal and Functional Analysis: Documenting Governance Rather than Government," *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 25, no. 1 (2004): 5–18; and Helen Samuels, "Who Controls the Past," *American Archivist* 49, no. 2 (1986): 109–124.

10 See Frank Upward, "Structuring the Records Continuum – Part One: Postcustodial Principles and Properties," *Archives and Manuscripts* 24, no. 2 (1996): 268–85; and Sue McKemmish, "Placing Records Continuum Theory and Practice," *Archival Science* 1, no. 4 (2001): 333–59.

11 Kate Cumming and Anne Picot, "Reinventing Appraisal," *Archives and Manuscripts* 42, no. 2 (2014): 133–45.

12 See, for instance, Kimberly Christen and Jane Anderson, "Toward Slow Archives," *Archival Science* 19, no. 2 (2019): 87–116; Shannon Faulkhead, Livia Iacovino, Sue McKemmish, and Kirsten Thorpe, "Australian Indigenous Knowledge and the Archives: Embracing Multiple Ways of Knowing and Keeping," *Archives and Manuscripts* 38, no. 1 (2010): 27–50; Allison Boucher Krebs, "Native America's Twenty-First-Century Right to Know," *Archival Science* 12, no. 2 (2012): 173–90; and Kimberly D. Anderson, "The Footprint and the Stepping Foot: Archival Records, Evidence, and Time," *Archival Science* 13, no. 4 (2013): 349–71.

13 For three examples of this kind of work, see Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009); Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (2008): 1–14; and Michelle Caswell, "Dusting for Fingerprints: Introducing Feminist Standpoint Appraisal," *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 3, no. 1 (2019): 1–36.

disciplinary backgrounds have argued that embodiment, behaviour, and affect are significant aspects of records and archives for both creators and users.[14]

"Unlike bibliographic selection," Anne Gilliland has written, "archival appraisal prioritizes context rather than content."[15] Context is prioritized in the form of provenance and in the sense of a record as a reflection or instantiation of an act that can be interpreted within the larger functions and priorities of an organization. Context has also taken on a wider purview in recent approaches to appraisal, including the evaluation of records within the contexts of human societies and their constituent groups. To some extent, the history of appraisal has reflected a shift in focus from archival artifacts and the organizations they represent to the human interactions with those objects that happen over time. The recentring of the human has made many things visible that previously were obscured: archivists as active, political agents in the ongoing re-creation of history; community members as sources of knowledge and archival value; scholars and visitors to archives as human beings with emotional and physiological responses to archival materials.

Combined with theoretical discourses that raise questions about subjectivity and authorship, evolving approaches to archival description and arrangement in 21st-century electronic environments have also prompted productive questions about basic archival concepts. Susan Brown and John Simpson, for instance, have explored the implications for the Semantic Web of the case of "Michael Field," a pseudonym for two 19th-century female authors.[16] Like Paul Conway and Kimberly Christen, they reveal some of the shortcomings of extant data models for fully representing the complexity of human involvement in the production of and access to archival materials.[17] The records continuum has also

14 See Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003); Jamie A. Lee, "Be/longing in the Archival Body: Eros and the 'Endearing' Value of Material Lives," *Archival Science* 16, no. 1 (2016): 33–51; and Marika Cifor, "Affecting Relations: Introducing Affect Theory to Archival Discourse," *Archival Science* 16, no. 1 (2016): 7–31.

15 Gilliland, "Archival Appraisal," 31.

16 Susan Brown and John Simpson, "The Curious Identity of Michael Field and Its Implications for Humanities Research with the Semantic Web," in *Proceedings, 2013 IEEE International Conference on Big Data* (Santa Clara, CA: IEEE, October 2013), accessed 25 April 2019, https://doi.org/10.1109/BigData.2013.6691674.

17 Paul Conway, "Digital Transformations and the Archival Nature of Surrogates," *Archival Science* 15, no. 1 (2015): 51–69; Kimberly Christen, "Opening Archives: Respectful Repatriation," *American Archivist* 74, no. 1 (2011): 185–210.

been reimagined to account for more nuanced forms of agency, with "co-create" proposed as a replacement label for the "create" dimension.[18]

The documents discussed in this article resonate with several of these areas of inquiry. They raise questions about forms of archival value beyond organizations and across disciplinary divisions. They suggest the shortcomings of any simple interpretation of the role of "creator" in relation to archival materials. They pinpoint one particular occasion of embodied presence in the creation of 19th-century records on behalf of the US government. But they also point to the way postcustodial approaches and electronic environments are enabling a reimagination of context as a dynamic mode of access. Archival documents and their surrogates can now be presented in multiple contexts. Classic archival priorities of provenance and original order can be maintained and described and also reconfigured to make archival materials newly relevant in contexts other than those of their production. This multiplicity is a product of the electronic era, to some extent, and yet it might provoke us to reimagine the constraints of our own visions and interpretations of the historical contexts in which archival materials were produced.

The Evidence: Walt Whitman's Scribal Documents

> *Here's to the workaday government clerk,*
> *Who does to the government's credit his work;*
> *Trudging each day a monotonous track,*
> *Forward and backward and forward and back;*
> *Pegging away at the ancient routine, –*
> *(Much is accomplished where little is seen);*
> *Arduous labor and technical work, –*
> *Here's to the workaday government clerk!*[19]

In the final years of the American Civil War, Walt Whitman began a job as a clerk, which would take him into various government offices in Washington,

18 Joanne Evans, Sue McKemmish, and Greg Rolan, "Critical Approaches to Archiving and Recordkeeping in the Continuum," *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 1, no. 2 (2017): 1–38.

19 Charles Gordon Rogers, *Government Clerks: A Book of Ballads* (New York: Andrew H. Kellogg, 1902), 1.

DC. He had set out for the nation's capital in late 1862 after his brother George, a soldier in the Union army, was wounded in battle. He stayed on during the war years, visiting injured soldiers at hospitals and working part-time in the army paymaster's office. In 1865, he met Peter Doyle, a horsecar conductor and former Confederate soldier, beginning a long and close relationship that scholars have called a "romantic friendship."[20] Whitman also had a larger network of friends in Washington, including William Douglas O'Connor, who worked as a treasury clerk and whose evening salons Whitman regularly attended.

Archival documents trace Whitman's progress as a government employee. After leaving the paymaster's office, with O'Connor's help, he was appointed to a first-class clerkship with the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Department of the Interior, via a letter dated January 24, 1865. He was promoted to a second-class clerkship on May 11, 1865. He was then fired from the Bureau of Indian Affairs on June 30, 1865, after James Harlan, Secretary of the Interior, found a copy of *Leaves of Grass* in Whitman's desk. By several accounts horrified by what he considered an obscene book, Harlan dismissed Whitman from his post. After friends in Washington intervened, Whitman was next appointed as a clerk by the Office of the Attorney General, where he worked for the next several years. In 1872, he transferred to the Office of the Solicitor of the Treasury. In 1873, Whitman had a series of strokes, from which he never fully recovered, and after leaving for Camden, NJ, and working for a brief period by proxy, he was let go from his clerk position via a letter dated June 30, 1874.[21]

During this time, Whitman generated thousands of handwritten contributions to the government records, ranging from letters and copies of letters written on behalf of attorneys general to annotations of documents for recordkeeping purposes and to materials signed in his own name dealing with his employment in the various agencies for which he worked.

He also used the resources of the government offices to further his creative work. His personal correspondence describes nights spent at the office, where he enjoyed heat and the use of office lamps. He received mail at the attorney general's office and wrote personal correspondence and poetry and prose notes on attorney general stationery.

20 Martin G. Murray, "Washington, D.C. [1863–1873]," in *Walt Whitman: An Encyclopedia*, ed. J.R. LeMaster and Donald D. Kummings (New York: Garland Publishing, 1998), accessed December 2, 2019, https://whitmanarchive.org/criticism/current/encyclopedia/entry_66.html.

21 Wecter, "Walt Whitman as Civil Servant," 1104–9.

As a clerk, Whitman participated in a 19th-century urban professional activity shared by many other young men. Scholars have explored the unique social worlds within which both government and business clerks moved. Focusing on 19th-century business or merchant clerks in particular, Thomas Augst has argued that their stories "have remained largely invisible because of the anonymity of the lives they concern and the obscurity of the handwritten manuscripts" in which they are often chronicled.[22] But Augst goes on to suggest that the lives of these clerks are significant for many reasons – not least because their approach to moral life and self-improvement is part of the story of the development of a middle class in the US in the 19th and 20th centuries.

The ambitions and activities of government clerks differed from those of merchant clerks, and Augst's focus is the US antebellum period rather than the Civil War and Reconstruction periods, when Whitman was working as a government clerk. But the vision Augst describes of a class of clerks is not so far removed from the reality of some clerks in government offices, particularly when it comes to the question of the archival materials they generated. The 1870 US census lists 8,672 total clerks in government offices at that time, the vast majority of whom were male and between the ages of 16 and 59.[23] Clerks performed a range of duties in government offices, depending on class and department. By his own accounts, Whitman did not seem to mind his work as a clerk, and he expressed admiration for government clerks generally in a conversation years later with his friend Horace Traubel: "I refer to the average clerks, the obscure crowd, who after all run the government. . . . I found the clerks mainly earnest, mainly honest, anxious to do the right thing – very hard working, very attentive."[24]

Many of the records written in Whitman's handwriting are now filed as Department of Justice records at the National Archives, though that department did not exist when Whitman began his employment.[25] A preliminary

22 Thomas Augst, *The Clerk's Tale: Young Men and Moral Life in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 2.

23 The total number listed under "Clerks in Government Offices" is 8,672, with 7,729 males and 943 females. Of these clerks 33 were listed as between the ages of 10 and 15; 8,364 were between the ages of 16 and 59; and 275 were age 60 or over. "Table XXIX (Persons in Each Occupation, with Age and Sex, and Nativity: The United States)," in *The Statistics of the Population of the United States*, compiled by Francis A. Walker (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1872), 704.

24 Horace Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden* (Boston: Small, Maynard, 1906), 148.

25 Although the Office of the Attorney General had been in existence in the US since 1789, the Department of Justice (containing the Office of Solicitor of the Treasury) was not created until 1870. For more information, see

identification of the handwriting by Whitman scholars was bolstered by the fact that the documents were consistent with Whitman's dates of employment in the attorney general's office and by the initials "W.W.," which appear in a marginal annotation on one document.

Dedicated recordkeeping began at the US attorney general's office around 1818, in tandem with an effort by then–Attorney General William Wirt to obtain a fixed appropriation to hire clerks to help with the organization and maintenance of files.[26] While Whitman was employed in the office, it included 10 clerks of various classes.[27] Many of the documents written in Whitman's hand are fair copies of outgoing letters sent on behalf of attorneys general, acting attorneys general, assistants, and chief clerks. The copies of the letters are written into large ledger volumes called letter-books. Whitman's hand is also occasionally visible in subject annotations in the margins of both the copies he made and copies written by others.

"Imagining a firm wall dividing Whitman's creative life and his life as a clerk is misleading," literary scholar Kenneth M. Price has argued. "During his Washington years, Whitman's literary and clerical lives regularly occurred in the same physical locations and no doubt in related emotional and psychological circumstances."[28] As Price points out, Whitman's meditations in his prose volume *Democratic Vistas*, published in 1871, speak to many of the same subjects he wrote about as a clerk. He wrote explicitly about his time in the Bureau of Indian Affairs and at the attorney general's office in short pieces that appeared in his 1888 book *November Boughs*. Whitman also continued to write and publish prolifically during his time as a clerk. Martin Murray has calculated that "during his Washington years, Whitman published nearly a hundred new poems."[29]

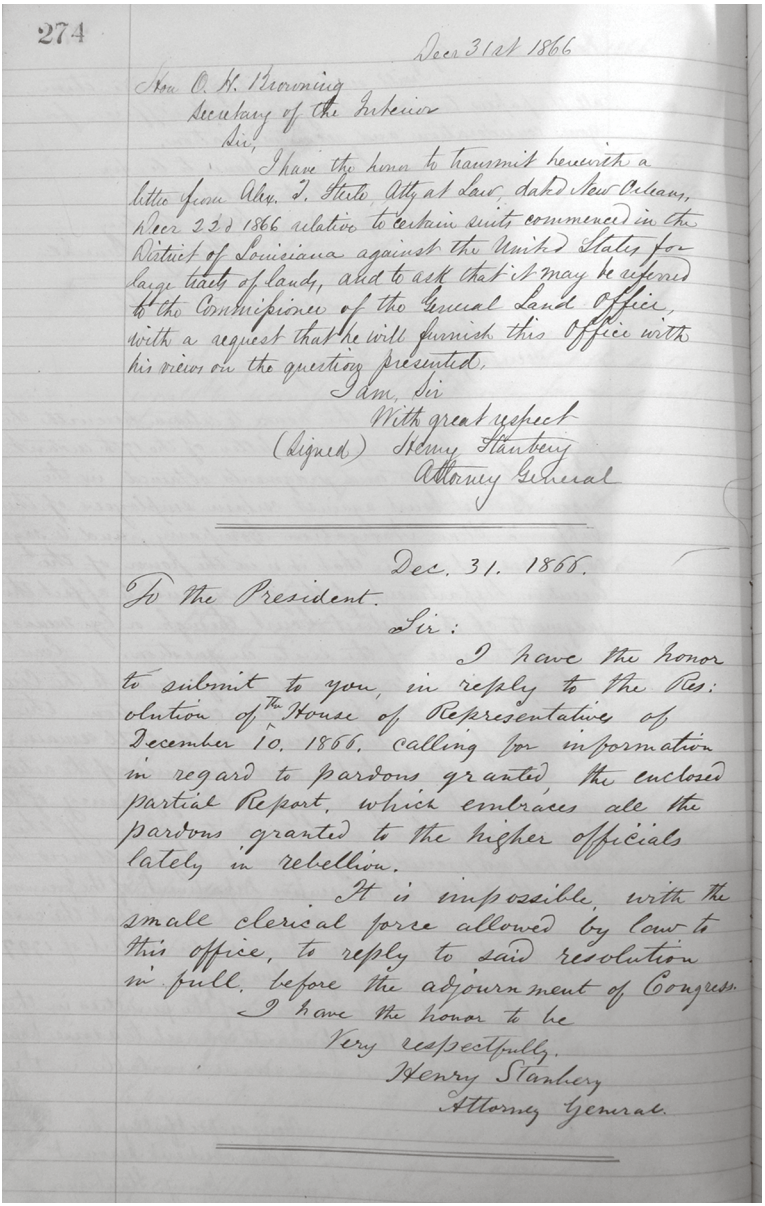
Claude H. Van Tyne and Waldo G. Leland, *Guide to the Archives of the Government of the United States in Washington*, 2nd ed. (Washington: Carnegie Institution, 1907).

26 Van Tyne and Leland, *Guide to the Archives*, 137–38.

27 Appropriations for the attorney general's office in 1869 accounted for salaries including "law clerk, and chief clerk, two clerks of class four, two clerks of class three, one clerk of class one" as well as three additional clerks listed separately. US Congress, *An Act Making Appropriations for the Legislative, Executive, and Judicial Expenses of the Government for the Year Ending the Thirtieth of June, Eighteen Hundred and Seventy*, 1869, 40th Cong., 3d sess., Ch. 121, 300–301, accessed April 30, 2019, https://www.loc.gov/law/help/statutes-at-large/40th-congress/session-3/c40s3ch121.pdf.

28 Price, "'Whitman, Walt, Clerk.'"

29 Murray, "Washington, D.C."



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Dec 31st 1866

Hon O. H. Browning
Secretary of the Interior
Sir,

I have the honor to transmit herewith a letter from Abm. J. Steele, Atty at Law, dated New Orleans, Decr 22d 1866 relative to certain suits commenced in the District of Louisiana against the United States for large tracts of lands, and to ask that it may be referred to the Commissioner of the Genral Land Office, with a request that he will furnish this Office with his views on the questions presented.

I am, Sir
With great respect
(Signed) Henry Stanbery
Attorney General

Dec. 31. 1866.

To the President.

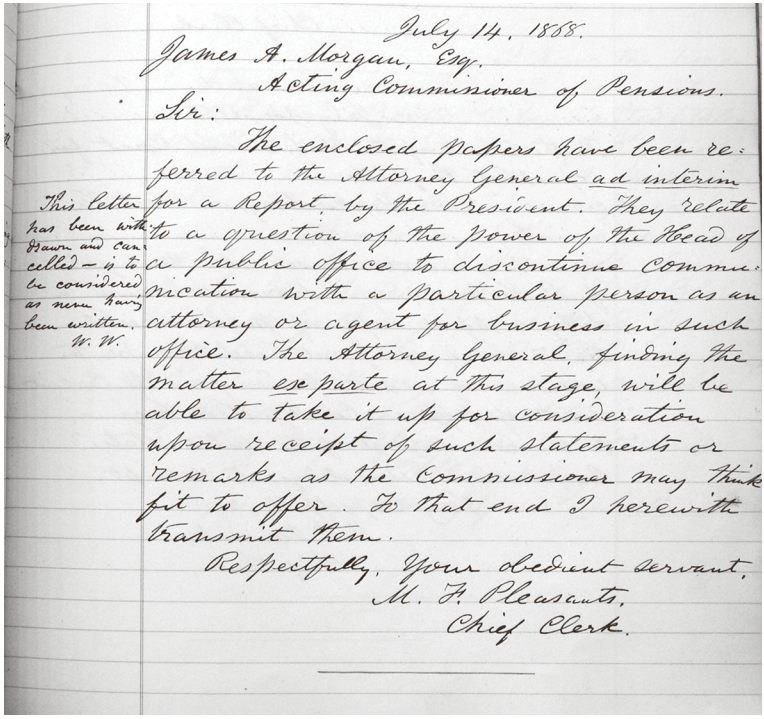
Sir:

I have the honor to submit to you, in reply to the Resolution of the House of Representatives of December 10. 1866, calling for information in regard to pardons granted, the enclosed partial Report, which embraces all the pardons granted to the higher officials lately in rebellion.

It is impossible, with the small clerical force allowed by law to this office, to reply to said resolution in full, before the adjournment of Congress.

I have the honor to be
Very respectfully,
Henry Stanbery
Attorney General.

FIGURE 1 *Letter-book page featuring a copy of a letter from Attorney General Henry Stanbery to President Andrew Johnson, December 31, 1866, in Walt Whitman's handwriting.*
Source: National Records and Archives Administration. Image courtesy of the Walt Whitman Archive, https://whitmanarchive.org.



July 14, 1868.

James A. Morgan, Esq.
Acting Commissioner of Pensions.

Sir:

The enclosed papers have been referred to the Attorney General ad interim for a Report by the President. They relate to a question of the power of the Head of a public office to discontinue communication with a particular person as an attorney or agent for business in such office. The Attorney General, finding the matter ex parte at this stage, will be able to take it up for consideration upon receipt of such statements or remarks as the Commissioner may think fit to offer. To that end I herewith transmit them.

Respectfully, Your obedient servant,
M. F. Pleasants,
Chief Clerk.

This letter has been withdrawn and cancelled – is to be considered as never having been written.
W. W.

FIGURE 2 *Copy of a letter from Chief Clerk M. F. Pleasants to James A. Morgan, Acting Pension Commissioner, written in Whitman's hand. A note in the left margin, initialled "W.W.," reads "This letter has been withdrawn and cancelled – is to be considered as never having been written." Source: National Records and Archives Administration, General Records of the Department of Justice. Image courtesy of the Walt Whitman Archive, https://whitmanarchive.org.*

These intersections between Whitman's government work and his literary work form a central part of his life in Washington, and they are one reason why the scribal documents are of interest to scholars of Whitman's life and works. For literary studies, these documents are also significant because of recent theoretical and critical work questioning the apparently unitary, isolated, and self-evident nature of authorship. The postmodern turn has produced a focus on authorship as a social phenomenon. There is some commonality between this kind of rethinking and the work to reimagine records. In both cases, authors and records are implicated in a much broader world of expression, labour, and

material production. This conceptual work has underwritten changes in analytical practice in many disciplines, but the evidentiary kinship of document-based study and assessment suggests that an understanding of the value and the nature of records and their producers must work across disciplinary lines.

In 1996, Frank Upward wrote that "much of the 'modern' archival thinking in the United States and to a lesser extent in Australia . . . is based on such 'divisions' as those between archives and records, archives and manuscripts, government and non-government records, information and records, or current records and historical records."[30] Whitman's scribal documents raise compelling reasons to think about records across disciplines and beyond divisions, after the fashion of more holistic approaches like total archives. Many modern authors and artists, particularly in the United States, have held professional positions in government or other industries.[31] As a result, there is a substantial body of archival material that bridges the divide between archives and special collections. A richer view of the significance of both artistic production and records can emerge out of an assessment that recognizes the value of each in relation both to the other and to a broader world of lived and documented historical experience.

Toward an Embodied Poetics in Appraisal

Models like the records continuum imagine records beyond function, beyond even information. Summoning the full range and complexity not just of the circumstances of the creation of records but also of the ongoing curation and assessment of their value, these models begin to grapple with what scholars have described as the "archival multiverse."[32] In this multiverse, records are much

30 Upward, "Structuring the Records Continuum," 274.

31 Such overlap is not limited to either the US or the modern era. A recent dissertation has explored the documents the late medieval poet Thomas Hoccleve produced when he worked as a government clerk: see Helen Killick, "Thomas Hoccleve as Poet and Clerk" (PhD dissertation, University of York, 2010). See also Andrew James Johnston, *Clerks and Courtiers: Chaucer, Late Middle English Literature and the State Formation Process* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag C. Winter, 2001). Summoning injudicious acts of archival destruction in history, Jenkinson points to a case involving Shakespeare, in which "the court was merely interested in the (not very important) deposition; it did not know what an interest posterity would have in the deponent." Jenkinson, *A Manual of Archive Administration*, 118.

32 Evans et al., "Critical Approaches to Archiving and Recordkeeping in the Continuum," 1–38; Anne J. Gilliland and Sue McKemmish, "Archival and Recordkeeping Research: Past, Present and Future," in *Research Methods:*

more than containers. They are instruments of human activity – residue and re-animations of embodied action in the world. As a result, any method that proposes to evaluate records must incorporate not just contextual research and functional analysis but also imagination. Archivists are challenged to create an evidentiary framework out of which they can try to imagine the entire dimensional world in which the record was created and with reference to which it can be understood.

Of what are Whitman's scribal documents evidence? What is it, that is to say, that is archived by documents like these? In some ways, Whitman's role in the creation of many of these documents is liminal, in that it functions between the speaker and the hearer, somewhere just alongside the saying and the being said. The documents were a "discovery" in the sense that Whitman's presence sprang into view, suddenly, somewhat unexpectedly, and to the delight of scholars looking for traces of his presence in government agencies. But, of course, the documents were there all along, catalogued and described and preserved for study and analysis of their content and their ability to represent the actions of the attorney general's office in the Reconstruction period.

The question of why to save things is also a question of how to read things. One story that could be told about the context of a document signed by Andrew Johnson, US President, on July 17, 1865, has to do with war, amnesty, and the effort by a Confederate woman, Lizinka C. Ewell, to pursue restoration of her property in Nashville, Tennessee.[33]

To some extent, this document is a way for the dead to speak – a record of legal action at the contentious intersection of national, regional, and individual histories in the 19th-century US. It involves the proclamation of amnesty by Lincoln and the directive, less than a month before his assassination, applying it to Ewell's case; Johnson's formalization of the terms of amnesty for Ewell, in an

Information, Systems, and Contexts, ed. Kirsty Williamson and Graeme Johanson (Prahan, VIC: Tilde Publishing, 2013), 79–112; Anne J. Gilliland, Sue McKemmish, and Andrew J. Lau, *Research in the Archival Multiverse* (Clayton, VIC: Monash University Publishing, 2017).

33 In a controversial reconciliation effort, Abraham Lincoln issued a Proclamation of Amnesty and Reconstruction, in December 1863, which provided for the restoration of property and pardons for "persons who have, directly or by implication, participated in the existing rebellion" if they took an oath of loyalty to the United States. After Lincoln's assassination, Johnson issued a second Amnesty Proclamation, in May 1865. For an extended account of the story behind this July 1865 document copied by Whitman, including a description of Lizinka C. Ewell's acquaintance with and appeal to Johnson, which preceded it, see Harriot S. Turner, "Recollections of Andrew Johnson," *Harper's Magazine*, January 1910, 168–76.

order issued in the context of a longer acquaintance with her in Nashville; and a record of Ewell's oath-taking and of the reinstatement of her property rights. The document thus is significant as evidence of the fraught political and legal act of property negotiation between North and South in the wake of the American Civil War, at a moment when property was actively being redefined to exclude the sale of human bodies for profit.[34] But the document is also evidence of the act of writing – the work of copying – and insofar as that is true, it archives the work of recordkeeping itself. And it is here, caught in the nearly invisible act of archival recordkeeping, that we find Walt Whitman, American poet.

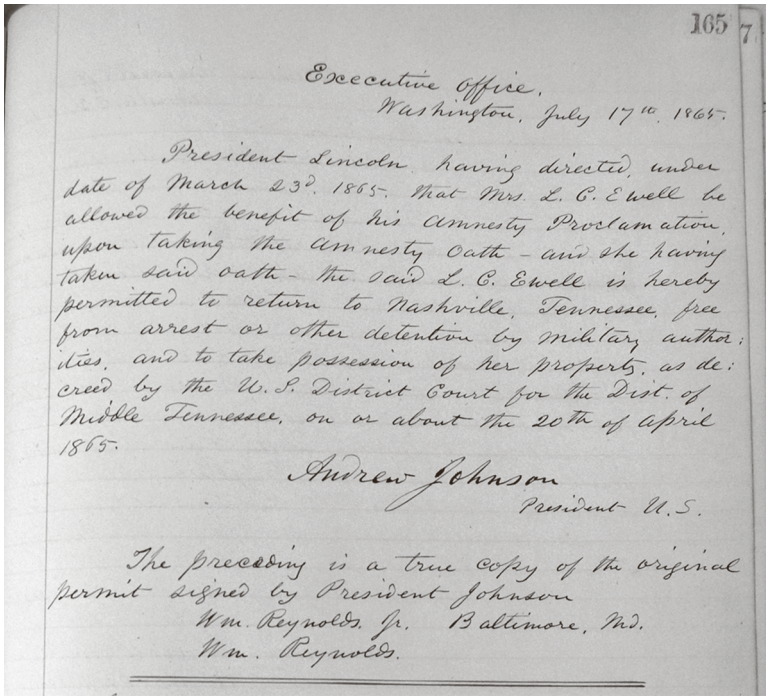
Whitman's reflections on his work as a clerk help to illuminate another story that could be told about the context of this document. In a set of memoranda dated August and September 1865 and later published in *November Boughs* (1888), Whitman described the crowds who visited the attorney general's office to make special applications for pardons, as stipulated in Johnson's Amnesty Proclamation:

> The suite of rooms here is fill'd with southerners, standing in squads, or streaming in and out, some talking with the Pardon Clerk, some waiting to see the Attorney General, others discussing in low tones among themselves. All are mainly anxious about their pardons. . . . I see streams of the $20,000 men, (and some women,) every day. I talk now and then with them, and learn much that is interesting and significant.[35]

The historical and material contexts of this letter suggest the degree to which its production occurred within a larger world of embodied action, from the poet-clerk

34 Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, freeing under federal law millions of slaves in states that had rebelled against the Union, took effect in January 1863. The 13th Amendment to the US Constitution, outlawing slavery in the country, was ratified in December 1865.

35 Walt Whitman, *Complete Prose Works* (Philadelphia: David McKay, 1892), 441–42. The "$20,000 men" is a reference to an exception in Johnson's proclamation requiring that "persons who have voluntarily participated in said rebellion, and the estimated value of whoso [*sic*] taxable property is over twenty thousand dollars," make special application to the president for pardon. "President Johnson's Amnesty Proclamation," *New York Times*, May 30, 1865, https://www.nytimes.com/1865/05/30/archives/president-johnsons-amnesty-proclamation-restoration-to-rights-of.html. For further discussion of this exception and Whitman's memoranda, see Ed Folsom, "Whitman's Manuscript Draft of 'Small Memoranda,'" *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 26, no. 2 (2008): 122–23.



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Executive Office,
Washington, July 17th. 1865.

President Lincoln having directed, under date of March 23d. 1865. that Mrs. L. C. Ewell be allowed the benefit of his Amnesty Proclamation, upon taking the Amnesty Oath - and she having taken said oath - the said L. C. Ewell is hereby permitted to return to Nashville, Tennessee, free from arrest or other detention by military authorities, and to take possession of her property, as decreed by the U. S. District Court for the Dist. of Middle Tennessee, on or about the 20th of April 1865.

Andrew Johnson
President U. S.

The preceding is a true copy of the original permit signed by President Johnson
Wm. Reynolds, Jr. Baltimore, Md.
Wm. Reynolds.

FIGURE 3 *Copy of a document signed by Andrew Johnson, written in Whitman's hand.*
Source: National Records and Archives Administration.
Image courtesy of the Walt Whitman Archive, https://whitmanarchive.org.

copying in rooms filled with amnesty-seeking white Southerners to the freed slaves whose physical well-being and rights to their own persons were actively impacted by the legal documents being written.

With the revelation of the act of recordkeeping incarnated in the document, Whitman also becomes representative. He writes (and in this case, we cannot use "speaks" as the figure of expression) for a legion of clerks, scribes, copyists, and administrative figures whose names were not always recorded but whose acts survive in the records, if only we can manage to see them. There are many silences in the archives, but maybe we are looking too hard for sound. Maybe we should be looking as well for actions, for bodies that speak in unexpected ways, sometimes through or as the voices of power.

"We need to go into the archive," writes historian Kathryn Burns, "deeply into the conditions of its making."[36] Documents with complex relationships to human agency span geographies, languages, and historical eras. Burns discusses *escribanos* or notaries in colonial Peru, where (as also in Whitman's time and space) the legal documents being produced were colonial instruments – expressions and enactments of violence against Indigenous lives and knowledge systems. In some sense, this call still fits into the goals of functional analysis, conceived broadly. If we are to understand the function of power as it is evinced in the documents and other artifacts that make up institutional archives, crucial to that effort is understanding the conditions under which they were produced and the people who worked to produce them.

I propose at least four ways of thinking about the form value takes in relation to Whitman's scribal documents:

1 They have evidentiary and historical value as records of the functions and actions of the US attorney general's office in the Reconstruction period.

2 They have literary value as documents written by Whitman that might be able to tell us something we did not know about the life and works of an important American poet.

3 They have historical value as evidence of recordkeeping practices and the labour of clerks in the US government in the 19th century.

4 They have political value as evidence of the embodied presence of a queer poet in the government office primarily responsible for enforcing hegemony, in the form of legal and punitive action, in the 19th-century US.

The first, content-focused value statement is one that would probably constitute a point of agreement for most appraisers. The copies represent a record of the agency's outgoing correspondence. They were made explicitly for the purpose of keeping records of the agency's actions. If we were limited to this rationale, however, it would not necessarily matter which copy of a letter was kept.

36 Kathryn Burns, *Into the Archive: Writing and Power in Colonial Peru* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 4.

The second and third articulations of value are more complicated, in part because they depend on thinking about the process by which the copies were produced as well as the content of the records themselves. They are also complicated because, to some extent, they represent competing values. On the one hand, the documents could be said to be particularly noteworthy because they were written by an exceptional writer, now one of America's most famous poets. On the other hand, the documents are noteworthy because they represent precisely the opposite: an "obscure" group of clerks, whose names are rarely to be found on the documents they helped to create. Recognizing Whitman's role in the creation of these documents causes the world of clerks to become briefly visible; suggesting that the documents written by Whitman are particularly worth keeping because Whitman is exceptional, however, causes that world to disappear again.

The fourth approach to value asks us to consider some of the implications of thinking more about the hands that wrote documents like these. In the content of the documents and the actions of the attorney general's office, we can see at work the enforcement of law in the United States. In the handwriting of the documents, we can see the act of a body and a mind often in rebellion against those laws and the hegemonic norms they represented – against heteronormativity and the kinds of "moral" standards that got Whitman dismissed from his first job as a clerk. The poems in *Leaves of Grass* were considered transgressive by many 19th-century critics because of their frank talk about sex and the body as well as their dismissal of mainstream religious practices.

"Justice is not settled by legislators and laws – it is in the Soul,"[37] wrote the man who also wrote the records of laws as they were communicated, enacted, and enforced by the US attorney general's office. The descriptive line "Walt Whitman (creator) wrote this" could apply to both the printed line of poetry and the scribal documents. But what we mean by "creator" and "wrote" proves to be ambiguous – and understanding some of the complexity of what we mean by "Walt Whitman," as clerk and as poet, requires exploring that ambiguity. These documents unsettle simple definitions. They challenge boundaries between disciplines, creative roles, acts, and records and between creative, personal, and professional lives. Recognizing this challenge suggests that there is utility in

37 Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (Washington, DC: 1871), 251.

building some assessment of the people involved in the material production of archival materials into the work of evaluating those materials.

It is always going to be easier to find reasons for keeping documents than for getting rid of them. Why are these documents any more than an unusual case, of little importance for generalization or large-scale archival practice? How can any appraisal policy maintain its coherence or its usefulness in the face of a million such edge cases, each with its own evidence of the potential value of a particular set of documents when it comes to better representing one set of people or another?

Recognizing the labour of clerks in documents that help to provide evidence of their lives need not necessarily mean keeping every copy of every document. It may mean taking the time to do additional research about labour structures, recordkeeping and inscription practices, and department employees. A supplementary option could be to initiate collaborations with literary, historical, and media scholars of the period, whose specializations may yield clues about documents that would not necessarily emerge out of more general research into their institutional significance. This kind of effort is not unprecedented for appraisal projects.[38]

Conclusion

Thinking of the repertoire invoked by Whitman's handwriting in the Department of Justice records does not just point backward. The discovery that the documents were in Whitman's hand produced a flurry of news releases and scholarly articles. It also led to the digitization of the documents as part of the Walt Whitman Archive, a digital editorial project devoted to collecting scans of documents associated with Whitman and making them available online, often

38 In the case of the appraisal of FBI files, for instance, James Gregory Bradsher has written that "five hundred letters were sent out to university and college history departments, presidents of every major historical organization, and many individual scholars and journalists, soliciting suggestions for the names of persons, organizations, and events the FBI might have investigated that the respondents believed were important enough to warrant retention if any case files had been created." "The FBI Records Appraisal," *Archival Issues* 25, no. 1/2 (2000): 111. Cross-institutional and interdisciplinary collaboration has also formed a central component of total archives and documentation strategy approaches: see Terry Cook, "'We Are What We Keep; We Keep What We Are': Archival Appraisal Past, Present, and Future," *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 32, no. 2 (2011): 173–89.

with accompanying transcriptions and descriptions of their relationships to Whitman's life and works.[39]

Readers of Whitman's scribal documents can now access them in the US National Archives – in physical form and in the "original" context of their creation (adjacent to other copies in the hands of other, nameless men and occasionally women, in the letter-books that form part of the records now associated with the Department of Justice) – or they can access digital scans of them in the Whitman Archive, in the hagiographic context of the life and works of a single individual. The distance between these two contexts seems vast, in certain ways, but the records continuum would suggest it is also an enactment of the archive, its ongoing evolution in time and space, and its transdisciplinary relevance.

The scribal documents speak to major events and figures in history as well as to the more obscure lives and actions of clerks. In this, they are reminiscent of the contrast Whitman describes in the poem that forms the epigraph to this article: between the splendour and glory and growth of great cities and the quiet, physical displays of affection between "two simple men." As the poet, meditating on his own prioritization of what to record, in effect records both the thing he takes his pen in hand to note and the thing he dismisses, so the appraisal decisions of archivists are not decisions at all, in some ways. The act of preserving any document preserves more than it would seem: evidence not just of offices and functions but of lives and people, of jobs and obsessions, of joys and affections, and even of poetry.

Considering appraisal in terms of an embodied poetics involves recognizing the many kinds of activities that can constitute authorship and records creation. It provides a conceptual orientation, or a method of thinking about archival records, that can act as a reminder of the limitations of a too-strict focus on institutional functionality. Perhaps more importantly, however, these documents suggest that embodied actions, individual stories, and imaginative acts are always embedded within institutional functionality, and that the latter cannot ultimately be fully understood without reference to the former. This may be a lesson that allows for better understanding of both the documents of the past and the role of the archivist in curating, selecting, and describing records. Like Whitman working as government scribe, the archivist is an embodied human often working in an institutional context. A number of recent articles have

39 Ed Folsom and Kenneth M. Price, eds., Walt Whitman Archive, https://whitmanarchive.org.

pointed to the subjectivity of the archivist as an important and underrepresented dimension of archival work.[40] Another consequence of considering embodied poetics in appraisal may be a continuation of this effort to increase the visibility of the work and subjectivity of the archivist – expressing and understanding the embodied poetics of the finding aid as well as the record.

Electronic records may mean that archivists of the future will think of appraisal as a thing of the past, but the difficult work of articulating the value of archival materials remains central to a variety of activities, from acquisition and preservation to arrangement, description, and indexing.[41] The records continuum builds in space for the ongoing activity of archiving and editing: the pluralization of records through forms of remediation and recontextualization that have diversified in the 21st century. Today's archival world may be increasingly postcustodial and postmodern, but we should be careful to remember that this does not necessarily mean it is or should be post-human. Evidence of unexpected bodies in the archives, like Whitman acting as a government functionary and clerk, reminds us of this in constructive ways.

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40 See, for example, Michelle Light and Tom Hyry, "Colophons and Annotations: New Directions for the Finding Aid," *American Archivist* 65, no. 2 (2002): 216–30.

41 Gilliland, "Archival Appraisal," 33.