Lause, Mark A. The Antebellum Crisis & America's First Bohemians, and Joanna Levin, Bohemia in America, 1858-1920 [review]

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MARK A. LAUSE. *The Antebellum Crisis & America's First Bohemians*. Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2009. x + 181 pp.

JOANNA LEVIN. *Bohemia in America, 1858-1920*. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010. viii + 469 pp.

These recent books by Joanna Levin and Mark Lause promise not only to fill critical gaps within, but also to significantly revise narratives of American literary history that have ignored American Bohemianism or portrayed it merely as what Levin calls "a feeble imitation of a more vital European phenomenon." Even though Levin's and Lause's projects differ considerably in focus and methodology, each scholar convincingly argues for the importance of Bohemia and Bohemianism in the United States. In doing so, both Levin and Lause effectively demonstrate that the vibrant presence of Bohemia and the men and women who fashioned and lived *la vie bohème* were at the very heart of nineteenth-century American literature and culture.

Levin's *Bohemia in America* is ambitious and broad in scope; in this extensively researched book, she traces the history of American Bohemia and its numerous geographies over a period of approximately sixty years. Her study moves chronologically from the men and women that both she and Lause acknowledge as "America's first Bohemians"—a group of journalists, artists, and actors that borrowed the idea of *la vie bohème* from France and began meeting in New York in 1858—to the rise of "the most legendary of American Bohemias," Greenwich village, a place that would become synonymous with political activism and sexual revolution during the twentieth century. Drawing on cultural studies and, more specifically, on the methods of cultural geography, Levin "investigates the many textual and geographic spaces in which Bohemia was conjured." By examining Bohemia as it appeared in periodicals, memoirs, and the writings of Walt Whitman, Theodore Dreiser, and Willa Cather, among others, Levin shows that "Bohemia" and "Bohemian" are not essentialist terms, but rather show how the myriad imaginings of these concepts have and continue to enable significant kinds of cultural work. According to Levin, one of the most important types of cultural work that Bohemia performed during this period was to "chart and test the boundaries of bourgeois life." Levin's attention to class differences, especially her analysis of the Bohemian/Bourgeois divide is one of the strongest elements of her book. She carefully unpacks the categories of "Bohemian" and "Bourgeois," revealing that while the two are opposing terms, they are also mutually constitutive. Levin's efforts to complicate this familiar opposition, combined with her attempts to reconstruct "what Bohemia meant in a variety of literary and social contexts," render Bohemia as a fluid, mobile concept—often a third term—that challenges dominant ideologies and confounds class, gender, and racial binaries, as well as categories of space and place like "nature, region, and landscape. . . and even 'America' itself." For Levin, then, Bohemia is "always portable and shape-shifting," and she concludes that the many imaginings and re-imaginings of Bohemia in America reveal both the complexity of this countercultural phenomenon and its significance to nineteenth- and twentieth-century American literature and history.

Whereas Levin is primarily concerned with the numerous representations and expansive geographies of American Bohemia, Mark A. Lause has a much narrower focus and, as a result, his is a concise and informative study of the development of American bohemianism within the contexts of antebellum politics, reform movements, and aesthetic discourses. Lause locates the nation's first "self-conscious 'bohemian circles'" in the social, cultural, and political milieu of mid-nineteenth-century New York and traces their origins to Henry Clapp, a writer, newspaper editor, and ardent abolitionist. According to Lause, Clapp left his native Massachusetts behind and traveled to London and Paris in the late 1840s and early 1850s, frequenting the cities' eating houses and cafes, where he observed and "embrac[ed] the bohemian life" he encountered there. Lause explains that, following Clapp's time in Europe, he returned to New York with "newly honed European sensibilities." In search of coffee and conversation, Clapp entered Charles Pfaff's Restaurant and Lager Beer Saloon, a basement dining establishment and bar-room on Broadway near Bleecker Street. Drawing on biographical information about Pfaff's patrons available at Lehigh University's online archive *The Vault at Pfaff's*, Lause reveals that Clapp adapted European salon culture to the American saloon, where he convened an impressive group of unconventional thinkers, writers, artists, actors, and musicians—a circle of men and women who, like Clapp, advocated land and labor reform, abolition, Fourierism, and free love, among other radical movements. Together, Clapp and his colleagues formed the first self-described set of American bohemians, creating what Lause refers to as a "utopia on Broadway," or an early counterculture where radicalism and cultural innovativeness thrived, thereby transforming Pfaff's into an "exotic world . . . beneath the familiar streets of the city."

Lause not only brings Clapp and his coterie of bohemians to the forefront of his study, but he also convincingly argues that American bohemianism itself came into being "alongside the political crisis that created a new Republican Party." However, Lause contends that as the nation drew closer to Civil War, Republicans lost the allegiance of a number of bohemians. As Lause puts it, "by 1858-1860 the bohemians contributed to the emergence of Republicanism less directly and even more warily" as they became increasingly disaffected with politics. In fact, in the aftermath of the debates over Kansas and the death of John Brown, Lause shows that Clapp and his circle doubted the "ability" of the system of "electoral politics to solve the crisis" and address the issues of slavery and land and labor reform. Lause concludes that even though the first bohemian circles became "a direct casualty of the Civil War"—dissolving as the nation continued toward a resolution of the very antebellum crisis that had contributed to the rise of bohemianism in the first place—Clapp and his followers had a "tremendous" but far too "often neglected" impact on American cultural history.

It is important to note that both Levin and Lause address Walt Whitman's participation in Henry Clapp's circle of American Bohemians at Pfaff's. For Whitman scholars, the highlight of Levin's volume is her first chapter, "The 'Vault at Pfaff's': Whitman, Bohemia and the *Saturday Press*." Here Levin, much like Lause, suggests that, for Whitman and the rest of Clapp's coterie of Bohemians, Pfaff's "aided in the fantasy of escape from bourgeois America"

in part because its patrons descended into the German restaurant and beer cellar to celebrate a French-inspired Bohemianism, thereby leaving New York's streets and the city itself behind them. She makes the astute observation that Whitman's own fantasy of escape at Pfaff's may have been foreshadowed in his temperance fiction because, in those stories, he was already exploring "the world of New York nightlife, a world scandalously removed from bourgeois ideals of domestic security". Levin turns to Whitman's unpublished poem "The Two Vaults"—which mentions Pfaff's by name and poses the beer cellar's lively, underground Bohemia as a "vital antithesis" to the city's dominant culture— to introduce her readers to the American Bohemians that Whitman would have encountered there. Even though Levin dates Whitman's composition of "The Two Vaults" to 1860—rather than to 1861-1862, the years suggested by both *The Vault at Pfaff's* online archive and Ted Genoways, the author of a recent book on the poet's Pfaffian years—her close reading of the poem is the most illuminating to date, providing considerable evidence in support of her argument that as a Bohemian space, Pfaff's could be and, indeed, was seen, at least by Whitman, as an "interstitial space" within and without the national marketplace and the New York cityscape. Levin not only dedicates considerable space in her opening chapter to considering Whitman's impressions of Pfaff's, but she also examines the vision of Bohemianism articulated by Henry Clapp's coterie within the pages of the *Saturday Press*—a short-lived newspaper that Clapp edited—as well as the paper's emphasis on women's rights. While she does not analyze Whitman's own poetic contributions to the *Saturday Press*, her work brings to the forefront the paper's role in describing and fashioning the Bohemia that the poet became a part of, and, in doing so, points out new contexts within which to read Whitman's literary production before, during, and after his Pfaffian years.

The most important and informative aspects of Lause's book are his analysis of Whitman's complex relationship with Henry Clapp and his research on Clapp's role in the formation of the first American Bohemia. Lause presents the most detailed biographical portrait of Clapp to date, an account that offers a fresh perspective on the connections between the King of Bohemia (Clapp) and the poet, who earned the nickname "Prince of Bohemians" at Pfaff's. Lause's "Utopia on Broadway," a chapter dedicated to Pfaff's bohemian coterie, and his analysis of the *Saturday Press* will be of particular interest to Whitman scholars. Much like Levin's work, Lause's research on the Pfaffian writers, artists, and actors that contributed to the paper promises to shed light on Whitman's place in the literary and social circles the poet joined at the beer cellar. His examination of the *Saturday Press* as the voice of New York bohemianism and a record of the radical views of Clapp's circle will provide new and exciting lenses through which to examine the numerous works by and about Whitman that appeared in the paper. At the same time, Lause's efforts to place New York bohemianism, particularly Clapp's coterie, into a transatlantic context raises questions about the ways in which the cosmopolitan and internationally-influenced environment at Pfaff's shaped Whitman's vision for America in the poems of the 1860 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, the radical and controversial volume he would have been preparing for publication when he encountered Clapp and his followers.

Although Lause's book is a useful analysis of the nation's first self-styled bohemians, he leaves readers wondering whether these unconventional thinkers talked to or interacted with other social circles with whom they may have shared the space of Pfaff's beer cellar, namely the workmen and stage drivers like Fred Vaughan who may have visited the bar-room with Whitman or the physicians from nearby hospitals that sometimes joined the poet for drinks. Because Lause's focus is Henry Clapp, Whitman's own experiences at Pfaff's are acknowledged but do not receive extended treatment, even though the poet is pictured shaking hands with a young William Dean Howell's on the book's cover. On a similar note, since Levin covers so many manifestations of Bohemia in America, she manages to explicate "The Two Vaults," Whitman's poem about Pfaff's and its Bohemian community, without clearly articulating the significance of the beer cellar and Whitman's own Bohemianism for his life in New York or for the 1860 edition of *Leaves of Grass*. For scholars looking for a history of Bohemia—a cultural and geographical map of its American manifestations following its importation from France—Levin's work will be an invaluable resource. But scholars seeking more detailed descriptions and analyses of Whitman's relationship to the first American bohemians and his participation in the group's conversations and activities at Pfaff's should still consult Christine Stansell's essay "Whitman at Pfaff's: Commercial Culture, Literary Life, and New York Bohemia at Mid-Century" (*WWQR*, Winter 1993) and Ted Genoways's recent book, *Walt Whitman and the Civil War: America's Poet during the Lost Years of 1860-1862* (2009), both of which offer in-depth considerations of Whitman's time at the beer cellar. Finally, for those trying to place Whitman's 1860 edition of *Leaves* in a transatlantic context, those exploring the personal friendship and the professional relationship between Whitman and Clapp, or those simply seeking a succinct, useful history of the social and political climate that facilitated American bohemianism, Lause's well-researched volume will prove a fascinating and enlightening study.

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