



WALT WHITMAN, A GREAT GRAY CONTRADICTION: RE-CONSIDERING THE POET'S RACIAL ATTITUDES

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"If someday a tourist notices, among the ruins of New York City, a copy of Leaves of Grass, and stops and picks it up and reads some lines in it, she will be able to say to herself: 'How very American! If he and his country had not existed, it would have been impossible to imagine them.'"

– Randall Jerrell

In his famous poem, "I Hear America Singing," Walt Whitman's speaker celebrates the American proletariat. His free-flowing prose vibrates with joyful admiration for this majority class of people whose daily labor constitutes the backbone of society. The workers' "carols" are "varied" to symbolize the distinct jobs they have, but as a class they are nonetheless united through the unambiguous metaphor of singing. From the carpenter singing "as he measures his plank or beam," to the shoemaker "singing as he sits on his bench," and finally to the "delicious singing" of domestic laborers like "the young wife at work," the poetry here is simple and straightforward. (Whitman 1955) Through this simplicity, Whitman harmonizes and glorifies the relentless spirit that drives the American work ethic. As such, he captures an idealized vision of America that coincides with the populist creed of a "government of the people, by the people, and for the people," which would be uttered by Abraham Lincoln in the Gettysburg Address three years after Whitman's 1860 poem was published. (Lincoln 1863) Indeed, the contemporariness of Whitman's spirit exudes a nation-building sentimentality, which is prevalent throughout his poetry.

Walt Whitman was born today, May 31st, 1819, and over the last century his legacy as voice of exuberant American nationalism has been firmly cemented in the academy and popular culture alike. As David S. Wallace states, "To think Walt Whitman is to



think the idea of America: its grand plans and its failures, its achievements and its atrocities.” (Wallace 2019) Poems such as “I Hear America Singing,” “America,” and “Songs of Myself,” which are taken from his famous 1855 work *Leaves of Grass*, express Whitman’s status as a poet of American democracy. Whitman’s free verse played in tune with the cadence of a working-class people, echoed with a deep fascination for all things “universal and eternal” (Wallace 2019), and used the power of impersonal address to blur the line between poet and reader. Within literary discourses, tradition has mythologized the individual as the Great Gray Poet, a man who has poetically unified the workers of his nation through song, traced the outline of his country as an epicenter of the “strong, ample, fair,” and has made democracy synonymous with “Freedom, Law, and Love.” (Whitman 1855) These refrains help readers to understand nineteenth-century America and paint a picture of Whitman as a paternal, nationalist poet.

Recent revelations of Whitman’s personal politics, however, have come to the fore and inevitably unravel a discordance between this mythical persona and his real beliefs. Timothy McNair, a Black student from Northwestern who in 2013 failed a chorale class and risked graduation due to his refusal to perform a racist Howard Hanson piece that was inspired by “Song of Democracy,” is a prime example for why Whitman should be reevaluated, both in his prevailing and resistant views. (Porter 2019) Today, as Whitman’s poetry and work maintains canonical authority in the education system—and at a time when Critical Race Theory is being challenged by right-wing conservatives (Pincus 2022)—we would be remiss not to reckon with the more complicated elements of his legacy, and how its paradoxes regarding race force us to reevaluate his canonical status.

In his 1858 editorial written in the *Brooklyn Daily Times*, Whitman writes about the Constitution of Oregon, which since its enactment in 1847, prohibited Black people, either slave or free, from entering or residing in the state. His writing reveals a surprising contradiction that challenges the democratic ideals of his poetry, and where race is considered, completely undermines his previous calls for equality like those in his poem “America.” Ken Peeples Jr. quotes Whitman contentious language, which outright questions the possibility of equality between white and Black people and proceeds to argue against the biological or “natural” likelihood of their fair coexistence:

Nature has set an impassable seal against it. Besides, is not America for the Whites? And is it not better so? As long as the Blacks remain here how can they become anything like an independent and heroic race? There is no chance for it. (Peeples 1974, 25)



Whitman's vision of America is decidedly not multicultural, in addition to being obscenely racist. The praise for "varied carols" does not extend across racial lines. Instead, Whitman expounds a deterministic naturalism when he imagines social unity: it can only be attained by the racial homogeneity of the given society. Hence, Whitman invokes a version of the back-to-Africa movement: Black people must form their own society in order to be "an independent and heroic race." (Peeples 1974, 25) But what is even more pressing is Whitman's understanding of America as belonging to white groups and his insistence that it is more optimal for having been so. He invalidates the possibility that Black groups can achieve empowerment in America and thereby justifies the necessity of their separation. Whitman's following paragraph, though it validates their means of a human identity, continues to show a bias for the removing Black individuals from the territory, and thus disqualifies their aptitude for deserving equal rights to their white counterparts. He states:

Yet we believe there is enough material in the colored race if they were in some secure and ample part of the earth, where they would have a chance to develop themselves, to gradually form a race, a nation that would take no mean rank among the peoples of the world. They would have the good will of all the civilized powers, and they would be compelled to look upon themselves as freemen, capable, self-reliant—mighty. Of course, all this, or anything toward it, can never be attained by the Blacks here in America. (Peeples 1974, 25-26)

Whitman's racism is folded into his 'love' for humanity—a questionable love at most—since it is tainted by his racist sentiment. His language portends that Black people are as human as anyone else, but he uses their need to become independent and heroic as justification for why they should leave. Whitman believes that Black Americans are capable of self-reliance, just not in America, especially while white people—Whitman's true Americans—exist alongside them. The poet isolates Black people and determines that although their civil value and aptitude are real, they are not as real as those of white people. Whitman, therefore, creates a fundamental disjuncture between the two groups even as he attempts to validate a universal human capability. Even though Whitman's editorial advocates for the rights of Black people as a racial group, and, as Ken Peeples, Jr. writes, accepts "their humanity as another race of people in the context of world civilizations," there is something unsettling about Whitman's evaluations that is simultaneously pro-American and anti-democratic. (Peeples 26, 1974) Whitman's core belief in the symmetry between national and racial qualities is fundamentally racist. His views on race are not problematic due to some staggering disregard for the human condition; they are problematic in their active advocacy for racial stratification, and by extension, an evasion of resistance against a system that establishes the oppressive laws in the first place.



In Whitman's *Democratic Vistas*, he writes a passage that was later deleted by him in later versions (Mack 2011, 212), but nonetheless is indicative of racial attitudes that should inevitably give readers pause. Whitman discusses the question of enfranchising immigrants, arguing that it would harm the democratic process. He writes, "As if we had not strained the voting and digestive caliber of American Democracy to the utmost for the last fifty years with the millions of ignorant foreigners." (Mack 2011, 212) Whitman here establishes that the value of American vote has been sullied by the inclusion of un-American (non-white) peoples. He continues this racist line by claiming that "...we have now infused a powerful percentage of blacks, with about as much intellect and caliber (in the mass) as so many baboons." (Mack 2011, 212) By lamenting the significant inclusion of Black voters, he demonstrates anxiety for the threat they pose to white American power. Moreover, the racist language in which Whitman compares Black people to baboons falls in line with a horrifically long-standing history of global anti-Blackness. Whitman's words confirm the extent of his racist thinking, and while the poet himself made the conscientious decision to delete these words from his text, his decision was one that was used solely to protect his reputation should future scorn arise from his abominable claims.

A pressing and relevant tension exists between Whitman as mythic American poet and Whitman as a political persona. Perhaps one way to make sense of this contradiction is to release the desire to approach these emerging revelations and contentions against Whitman as 'this' or 'that': Do we completely castigate the poet, and thus intellectually and morally discredit his text? Do we continue to canonize his work or let it fall to the literary wayside? If exonerators of Whitman are true in their general notion that this nation's 'Father of Free Verse' and his work are historical artifacts, perhaps these contradictions between poet and persona can lead us to understand why American literature and Whitman have been historically considered synonymous, but how Whitman's work ironically opposes democracy itself. Indeed, Whitman's poetry and editorials together support a type of fundamental Americanism that begs the question of who, exactly, democracy is for in the first place. At a time when human rights activists and democratic communities alike agree with the conviction that inclusivity at all means the inclusion of all minority groups (transgender, Black, Brown, Indigenous) within the socio-cultural politic, Whitman's fancy humanist-adjacent calls for democracy become too grandiose to make for any real social change, and thereby should urge a collective reexamination of what it means to be an American. Then again, perhaps we can reconcile the conflict of teaching Whitman's aesthetically and historically significant poetry, which adheres to nationalist and colonialist fancies, through a push for the literary world to understand the racial and political attitudes that produced the image of a man whose work is inconsistent with these progressive projects of structural change.



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