

Walt Whitman and Race

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Walt Whitman has been regarded as an innovative poet for a variety of reasons. His free verse style broke down traditional boundaries of conventional verse. His treatment of the body and of sex shocked many people in his day. But Whitman was, in the 1850s, consumed by the coming of the Civil War. It was in the midst of the crisis that Whitman wrote some of the most egalitarian and profound verse relating to African Americans. These selections, mainly originating from poems published in the original 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, came to be regarded later as "...unlike anything Whitman-or anyone, for that matter-had ever written."¹

These poems, from "Song of Myself" to "The Sleepers," inspired later minority poets like Langston Hughes and June Jordan. Indeed, he is regarded as the poetic forebear of non-Western poets around the world.² However, when one looks beyond Whitman's mid-1850s poetry and examines his prose writing and letters throughout the rest of his life, one finds a far different Walt Whitman. The Whitman from his prose writing seems to share the standard racial prejudices of his day. So how can we make sense of a person who writes, "I am the hounded slave...I wince at the bite of the dogs"³ in his poetry, but also writes of African Americans that they have "as much intellect and caliber (in the mass) as so many baboons?"⁴ This question has been tackled by some scholars, but the answer lies in the political and social climate in which he was writing. It is my view that Walt Whitman's poetic lines pertaining to race were motivated by a desire to bind the nation together. However, his vision of a united republic left no room for African Americans. His poetic writings that are justly hailed for their open and inclusive portrayal of African Americans were a product of a specific set of social and political

¹ Martin Klammer, *Whitman, Slavery, and the Emergence of "Leaves of Grass"* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 115.

² George Hutchinson and David Drews, "Racial Attitudes," From J.R. LeMaster and Donald D. Kummings, eds. *Walt Whitman: An Encyclopedia* (New York, NY: Garland Publishing, 1998) .
http://www.whitmanarchive.org/criticism/current/encyclopedia/entry_44.html.

³ Justin Kaplan, *Whitman: Poetry and Prose* (New York, NY: Literary Classics of the United States, 1996), 65.

⁴ David S. Reynolds, *Walt Whitman's America: A Cultural Biography* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1996), 470.

circumstances that existed in the mid-1850s, but when that confluence of events dissipated, so did the egalitarian vision; for Walt Whitman therefore, these beautiful lines are the exception rather than the rule.

This paper will try to cover the writings and beliefs of Walt Whitman from his early life through the Reconstruction Era, placing them within the context of the political events of the day. The evolution of his writing, especially his poetry in the 1850s, will be examined. Quotes are taken from original sources where possible. These include Whitman's own poetry, prose, and letters. Contemporary reviews of Whitman's works are also consulted. A discussion of some significant secondary authors will be included as well.

It is difficult for scholars today to ascertain Whitman's thoughts on slavery and race during his childhood because records are scarce. David Reynolds and Justin Kaplan disagree on this topic. On the one hand, Reynolds guesses that the presence of an African American community in Brooklyn in the 1820s and his friendship with an ex-slave named Mose "suggest an openness to African-American culture," and that he did not become conservative with regard to race until later in life.⁵ On the other hand, Justin Kaplan thinks the roots of Whitman's nagging conservatism on race actually have its roots in his childhood. He points out that those free blacks he might have seen in Brooklyn during his childhood worked odd jobs or were beggars, hardly those Whitman would have found endearing. Kaplan goes on to make note of the sixth US Census, which erroneously reported that "the incidence of insanity and idiocy among free blacks was some ten times higher than it was among slaves." That likely influenced his opinion.⁶ Considering how taken Whitman was later in life with ideas like phrenology, it is easy to see how Whitman could have been taken in by such an "official" report. Moreover, it is an

⁵ David S. Reynolds, "Politics and Poetry: *Leaves of Grass* and the Social Crisis of the 1850s," in *The Cambridge Companion to Walt Whitman*, ed. Ezra Grenspan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 72.

⁶ Justin Kaplan, *Walt Whitman: A Life* (New York: NY, Simon and Schuster, 1980), 132.

easier assumption to say that his childhood beliefs are in line with most of the rest of his life than an exception, especially when one considers the fact that both his father and his mother's families owned slaves.⁷

When one moves forward to his professional life, where written records are more available, a pattern emerges. His beliefs seem to be heavily influenced by the political situation of the country at the time of his writing. His "attitudes toward slavery and abolitionism can best be understood by tracing the development of his thinking in the context of the national debate over slavery from the mid-1840s until the Civil War."⁸ One of his earliest major writings (and his most popular) was the 1842 temperance novel called *Franklin Evans*. Although the book's main topic was the dangers of alcohol, it did contain glimpses into Whitman's views on African Americans. Martin Klammer pointed out that it was common for pro-slavery writers to have a protagonist begin the story holding anti-slavery views, only to later "convert" to a pro-slavery position. It is just such a conversion that Whitman's protagonist Franklin underwent. "...but I cannot help pausing a moment to say that Bourne, as he saw with his own eyes, and judged with his own judgment, became convinced of the fallacy of many of those assertions which are brought against slavery in the South...they (slaves) would be far more unhappy, if possessed of freedom. He saw them well taken care of..."⁹ In this line, one sees echoes of the sixth US Census report cited earlier. Though there is no way to prove conclusively, it is possible that the report inspired this particular line.

Whitman's conservatism on the race issue was influenced by the rise, during the 1830s and early 1840s of the Abolition Movement. Whitman may have been turned off by the radical

⁷Klammer, *Whitman, Slavery, and the Emergence...*, 23.

⁸ Martin Klammer, "Slavery and Abolitionism," in *Walt Whitman: An Encyclopedia* eds. J.R. LeMaster and Donald D. Kummings (New York: Garland Publishing, 1998).

⁹ Klammer, *Whitman, Slavery, and the Emergence...*, 14, 10.

nature of the abolitionist rhetoric, which at times saw the U.S. Constitution as an evil compact (Indeed, William Lloyd Garrison burned a copy of the Constitution in 1844). Abolitionists were intellectual descendants of Puritan tradition of collective responsibility for moral wrongdoing, and saw that the souls of African Americans and whites were equal in the eyes of God. They therefore favored immediate abolitionism.¹⁰ Whitman likely saw these attacks as extreme and dangerous. He would later write in the unpublished essay “The Eighteenth Presidency” that “A corner-stone of the organic compacts of America is that a State is perfect mistress over itself,” denying any Federal right to interfere with slavery within the states.¹¹

However, events in the United States in the early to mid-1850s pushed Whitman, and the North more generally, into a more anti-slavery direction. It should be noted here that abolitionism and anti-slavery are not the same thing. Abolitionists saw slavery as a moral sin and sought an immediate end to the institution. The anti-slavery movement was far broader, included those who objected to slavery for a variety of reasons, not necessarily moral, and generally favored an approach that sought to halt the expansion of slavery. In effect, they wanted to divorce the Federal Government from slavery by banning it wherever the Federal Government had authority to do so, and thus free the government from the power of southern slaveholders.¹²

Significant events brought the issue of slavery to the national forefront and led to this anti-slavery movement in the North. The first was the so-called Wilmot Proviso, which was an amendment to an 1846 appropriations bill that stated that “...neither slavery nor involuntary servitude shall ever exist in any part of said territory...” acquired from Mexico as a result of the

¹⁰ James McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (Oxford, NY: Oxford University Press, 1988), 8.

¹¹ Kaplan, *Whitman, Poetry and Prose*, 1334.

¹² Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party Before the Civil War* (Oxford, NY: Oxford University Press, 1970), 80.

Mexican War. This issue fractured the nation along sectional, rather than party lines.¹³ The conflict eventually led to the Compromise of 1850 and the ultimate defeat of the Wilmot Proviso.

Walt Whitman, as a result of these debates, shifts from his formerly pro-slavery position to an anti-slavery one. However, he does not have the well-being of African Americans in mind, putting him at odds with abolitionists. His main concern in his editorials during this period was defending the rights of *white laborers* as opposed to those of the privileged slaveholding class. In fact, he goes so far as to use slaves as a point of derogatory comparison. “He repeatedly warns that white laborers might be ‘put down to an equality with slaves...’”¹⁴ This overarching concern for the sanctity of white labor, though it may seem hypocritical today, was mainstream in the North, where a belief in Free Labor, the idea that work was the source of all value (as opposed to the ownership of slaves), was the rule. However, as Eric Foner pointed out, “...free labor was defined, in part, by boundaries, lines of exclusion understood as arising from the natural order of things and therefore not really seen as exclusions at all.”¹⁵ Connected with this was a belief in Free Soil, which said that western lands should be left open for free *white* settlement, and therefore closed to slavery. The concern was with the future of white prosperity, and not for slaves themselves. Whitman then, was not alone in his odd coexistence of racism and anti-slavery.

These events, especially the proposed Fugitive Slave Law, which became part of the Compromise of 1850, led Whitman to publish four poems that were, “...angry, agitated poems, erupting with rebellious ideas and occasionally straining beyond normal rhythms toward free verse.” To take an example: “Things have come to a pretty pass,\ When a trifle small as this,\ Moving and bartering nigger slaves,\ can open an abyss\...With it we’ll stab young Freedom,\

¹³ McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom...*, 52-54.

¹⁴ Klammer, *Whitman, Slavery, and the Emergence...*, 36, 38.

¹⁵ Foner, *Free Soil...*, xxvi-xxvii.

And do it in disguise;\ Speak soft, ye wily dough-faces-That term is “compromise.” Here two things jump out. First, there was no sympathy for the fugitive slaves themselves (the “nigger slaves”); the emphasis was on “young Freedom,” meaning free government and liberty generally (for whites), and the danger posed to it by what he saw as unlawful federal authority. Secondly, his target for attack was not the South, but northern “dough-faces,” meaning those northern politicians who conceded to the demands of southern slave owners, who sold their principles down the river in favor of “compromise.”¹⁶

The defeat of the Wilmot Proviso and the passage of the Compromise of 1850, especially the hated Fugitive Slave Act, demoralized Whitman, who published little for the next four years.¹⁷ But another confluence of events exploded on the nation, which created the circumstances that would push Whitman to an even more radical place, and lead to his most eloquent and poignant verse relating to African Americans. First, Harriet Beecher Stowe published *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in 1852. This book sold 300,000 copies within one year and two million within a decade, meaning it is the best-selling book of all time in the U.S. in terms of proportion to population.¹⁸ Its effect on politics is impossible to gauge, but what it did do, for Whitman, was open the door for portraying slaves in a more sympathetic light.

The second major event was the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act in May of 1854. This bill effectively repealed the Missouri Compromise of 1820 by allowing for the possibility of slavery in the Kansas and Nebraska territories, areas where slavery had been hitherto banned. “Even more important than the fugitive slave issue in arousing northern militancy was the Kansas-Nebraska Act...this new law may have been the most important single event pushing the nation toward civil war.” Unfolding literally at the same time was the Anthony Burns Affair.

¹⁶ Reynolds, *Walt Whitman’s America*, 127-128.

¹⁷ Klammer, *Whitman, Slavery and the Emergence...*, 60.

¹⁸ McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 88-89.

Burns, an escaped slave, was apprehended in Boston and sent under escort of U.S. marines, cavalry, and artillery to be sent back into slavery. These events enraged many northerners to the point where they would be more receptive to a more egalitarian portrayal of African Americans. This event so moved Whitman that he composed “A Boston Ballad” which, like his 1850 poems, focuses on liberty for whites and not freedom for the fugitives themselves.¹⁹

It was in this highly charged political atmosphere that Whitman unleashed his first edition of *Leaves of Grass* upon American readers. It was unlike anything else that he had written before in a number of ways, including his portrayal of African Americans. Not only did Whitman jettison his early pro-slavery rhetoric, but even his exclusive preoccupation with white labor and settlement seems to have taken a back seat. This was the result not only of the political climate, but also of Whitman’s more mature view of himself as a poet. He concluded the preface of *Leaves of Grass* with the line “The proof of the poet is that his country absorbs him as affectionately as he has absorbed it.”²⁰ He saw it as his duty as a poet to bring the country together. In order for Whitman to absorb his country and unite it, he needed to address the key issues of his day, namely slavery, its expansion, and the Fugitive Slave Law. But what did he mean by “his country?” Did this nation include African Americans? As we will see, judging from the poems themselves, it might at first seem so.

Whitman did not take long to introduce the first African American into his opening poem, later to be titled “Song of Myself.” In the stanza beginning “The runaway slave came to my house and stopped outside...” the universal “I” so omnipresent in his verse accepts, houses, and cares for a fugitive slave. The fugitive has “a sweaty body and bruised feet” upon his arrival, and is given “coarse clean clothes.” Whitman then described, “putting plasters on the galls of his

¹⁹ Klammer, *Whitman, Slavery, and the Emergence...*, 105-106.

²⁰ Kaplan, *Whitman: Poetry and Prose*, 26.

neck and ankles.” The fugitive stayed a week before leaving north, but the last line of the section is “I had him sit next me at table...my firelock leaned in the corner.”²¹ Here, Whitman portrayed himself as the symbolic defender of the fugitive, in a clear echo of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and Anthony Burns. Significantly, he sat at the same table as the fugitive. It is inconceivable that Whitman would publish such lines even five years earlier, but still, there is an element of helplessness to the fugitive. He was passive, and Whitman, the “I” was the active protagonist.²²

Whitman would move in “Song of Myself” in an even more radical direction. One common theme in Whitman’s poetry was the beauty of the human body, and he included a description of an African American drayman among the “beautiful bodies.” “The Negro holds firmly the reins of his four horses...” we are told. “His blue shirt exposes his ample neck and breast and loosens\ over his hipband\...The sun falls on his crispy hair and moustache...falls\ on the black of his polish’d and perfect limbs,\ I behold the picturesque giant and love him...and I do\ not stop there,\ I go with him also.”²³ In this extraordinary passage, Whitman included this anonymous African American in the human family. He “loves” him, and described him in terms that conjured up images of marble statues of a Greek deity. The desired effect here, unlike his pre-*Leaves of Grass* writings, was to sympathize with African Americans. The last lines were most moving. He did not stop with simply admiring him, he *went with him*, as if to say, “I’m with this man; he’s my friend.”

Martin Klammer also pointed out that another shift takes place in this scene. Instead of being a passive receiver of the heroic actions of the “I,” as in the first example, the roles have been reversed. Now, it is the black man who “...has power over himself and his

²¹ *Ibid.*, 35-36.

²² Klammer, *Whitman, Slavery and the Emergence...*, 123.

²³ Kaplan, *Whitman: Poetry and Prose*, 37.

circumstances.”²⁴ By contrast, the narrator was passive and was relegated to viewing the action from the sidelines.

As ground-breaking as that passage was, Whitman’s most radical passage of “Song of Myself” was still to come. He writes “I am the hounded slave...I wince at the bite of the dogs\...I clutch the rails of the fence...my gore dribs thinned\ with the ooze of my skin,\ ...The riders spur their unwilling horses, and haul close,\ They taunt my dizzy ears...they beat me violently over the head with their whip-stocks.”²⁵ Here, it seemed that Whitman was referencing, like the first example, a fugitive slave. He was “hounded” and chased by dogs and men on horseback. He appeared badly wounded, taunted, and “beaten over the head.” As vivid and sympathy-inducing as this passage may be, it embodied Whitman’s final and most extreme shift in the poem:

Whitman *became* the fugitive slave. It would appear that Whitman had come full circle. Whereas he once wrote a temperance novel laced with pro-slavery rhetoric and later condemned the Compromise of 1850 and the Kansas-Nebraska Act as violations of *white* liberty, he now seemed to include African Americans in the human family. Once again though, he was focusing on a *fugitive slave*, making the obvious connection to the salient political issues of the day.

Whitman’s treatment of African Americans in the original *Leaves of Grass* was not confined to “Song of Myself.” In a famous passage from what would become “I Sing the Body Electric,” Whitman addresses a slave auction. In the passage beginning with the line “A slave at auction,” Whitman described a man (and then a woman) at auction, something he may very well have witnessed himself during his sort time working for the *New Orleans Crescent* years before. Whitman saw the auctioning off of human property as an offence against what he saw as the sacredness of the human body. “Whatever the bids of the bidders,” he said, “they cannot be high

²⁴ Klammer, *Whitman, Slavery and the Emergence*, 125.

²⁵ Kaplan, *Whitman: Poetry and Prose*, 65

enough\ for him.” In other words, there is not price high enough-the human body. Even a black one is priceless. He described the slave’s his brain as “allbaffling,” which is to say it was a kind of divine mystery-the sacred center of the physical body itself. It was autonomous; it had control of the body, but we know not its inner workings.

“Exquisite senses, lifelit eyes, pluck, volition” the auctioned person contains. He had all the tools of the human body, in other words, including “volition”-he had his own will. Whitman hammered home this idea with the line “Within there runs his blood...the same old blood...the same red running blood;\ There swells and jets his heart...There all passions and\ desires..all reachings and aspirations;\ Do you think they are not there because they are not expressed in parlors and lecture-rooms?”²⁶ Whitman wanted the reader to acknowledge that this auctioned person was a human, with the “same red, running blood” as anyone else. Moreover, his heart, both the literal bodily organ as well as the figurative seat of passions and emotions, was present in him as well. Finally, he said that all of this is true, even if the educated political elites refuse to acknowledge the slaves or their humanity.

The final major, though somewhat veiled, reference to African Americans in the original *Leaves of Grass* came from “The Sleepers.” In it he says, “Now Lucifer was not dead..or if he was I am his sorrowful and terrible heir;” Usually, Lucifer was seen as a negative character, and one at first thinks he was referring to slavery as an institution or to slaveholders, but he then adds, “I have been wronged...I am oppressed...I hate\ him that oppresses me,\ I will either destroy him, or he shall release me.” He was, in these lines, saying that Lucifer is the slave (or slaves in general), because he says “I am oppressed.” He used this metaphor to present a kind of ominous warning, that if the wrongs done to the slaves were not alleviated, if the oppression did not stop and he was not freed, there would be a cataclysmic event that would result in the destruction of

²⁶ Ibid., 123.

either the slaves or the nation. He carried this dream sequence further, echoing the slave auction sequence from “Song of Myself”: “How he informs against my brother and sister and takes pay\ for their blood,\ how he laughs when I look down the bend after the\ steamboat that carries away my woman.” Here Whitman used one of the most powerful weapons in the *abolitionist* arsenal. As James McPherson pointed out, “This breakup of families was the largest chink in the armor of slavery’s defenders. Abolitionists thrust their swords through the chink.”²⁷ Considering the high regard Whitman had for families and child-rearing, it is no wonder that Whitman grabbed hold of this theme and exploit it.

Though later generations of readers would recognize this egalitarian message in Whitman’s poetry, this theme in *Leaves of Grass* seems surprisingly to have gone largely unnoticed in Whitman’s day. It may be that the above passages are, as Klammer said, “...unlike anything Whitman-or anyone, for that matter-had ever written” (see note 1), but contemporary reviewers did not find anything ground-breaking about his verse about African Americans. There are two reasons for this notable absence. First, in a post-*Uncle Tom’s Cabin* country, Whitman’s writing may not have seemed all that radical. It is easy with hindsight to recognize the subtle shifts and meanings in Whitman’s writing, but it did not strike those living at the time as all that unusual. Others expressed sympathy with slaves, especially fugitives, but to express sympathy for fugitives did not necessarily mean that the author favored outright abolition (though it did serve abolitionists’ ends),²⁸ something that Whitman never came out explicitly in favor of before the Civil War.

The second, and most important reason, lies in the fact that Whitman might have “buried the story,” so to speak. Contemporaries were so overwhelmingly concerned with other issues

²⁷ McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 38.

²⁸ Matthew Warshauer, *Connecticut and the American Civil War: Slavery, Sacrifice, and Survival* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2011), 33.

with Whitman's work, that they may have completely missed the passages on race and slavery. A perusal of contemporary reviews reveals that critics of the original 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass* as well as subsequent editions, were preoccupied with the alleged "obscenity" contained within his poetry as well as the style of the poetry itself, even going so far as to question whether *Leaves of Grass* actually qualified as poetry.

To take one representative example, an anonymous reviewer from *The New York Daily Times* in November 1856 says "We fear much, Mr. Walt Whitman, that the time is not yet come for the nakedness of purity. We are not yet virtuous enough to be able to read your poetry aloud to our children and our wives. What might be pastoral simplicity five hundred years hence, would perhaps be stigmatized as the coarsest indecency now, and - we regret to think that you have spoken too soon."²⁹ The reviewer here understood what Whitman's intentions were, but added that the nation was not ready for such frank talk about the body and sexuality. One even more explicit example was from *Frank Leslie's* in December 1856. "We shall not aid in extending the sale of this intensely vulgar, nay, absolutely beastly book, by telling our readers where it may be purchased...the author should be sent to a lunatic asylum..."³⁰ The author here seemed to say that its supposed "vulgar" language essentially disqualified the book from having any redeeming value. Conspicuously absent from these reviews were any mention of African Americans or their place in Whitman's work.

Another offense some took was with his style and choice of words. Charles Eliot Norton wrote in September 1855 in *Putnam's Monthly* that "The writer's scorn for the wonted usages of

²⁹ [Anonymous] "Leaves of Grass," *The New York Daily Times*, November 13, 1856, 2, <http://www.whitmanarchive.org/criticism/reviews/leaves1856/anc.00032.html>

³⁰ [Anonymous], "[Review of *Leaves of Grass* (1855)], *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, December 20, 1856, 42, <http://www.whitmanarchive.org/criticism/reviews/leaves1855/anc.00030.html>

good writing; extends to the vocabulary he adopts; words usually banished from polite society are here employed without reserve and with perfect indifference to their effect on the reader's mind; and not only is the book one not to be read aloud to a mixed audience, but the introduction of terms, never before heard or seen, and of slang expressions, often renders an otherwise striking passage altogether laughable.”³¹ Here the offense taken to material that is inappropriate for ladies or children (A.K.A. a “mixed audience”) is apparent, but a condemnation of word choice, specifically his use of slang terms is as well. Again however, there was no mention, either for or against, Whitman’s portrayal of African Americans.

It was not just the negative reviews that disregard Whitman’s poetry about slavery and blacks. An anonymous writer writes in *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle* in September 1855 that he was impressed with Whitman’s “free utterance” and “untrammelled spirit without the slightest regard to established models or fixed standards of taste.”³² Here, what the previous reviewer saw as a negative-his “free utterance” of slang and “untrammelled spirit” that allowed him to discuss topics without care for “fixed standards of taste”-was in fact a positive. He seemed however, to be referring specifically to Whitman’s use of language and/or his discussion of sex, and not his treatment of slavery or race.

In reviews of subsequent editions of *Leaves of Grass*, which also contained the poems quoted above, the same notable absence of any mention of Whitman’s treatment of African Americans was conspicuous. Even in 1860, with the nation on the doorstep of a catastrophic conflict over slavery, reviewers took little notice, and critics continued to dwell on the same

³¹ Charles Eliot Norton, [Review of *Leaves of Grass* (1855)], *Putnam’s Monthly: A Magazine of Literature, Science, and Arts* 6, September 1855, 321-323. <http://www.whitmanarchive.org/criticism/reviews/leaves1855/anc.00011.html>

³² [Anonymous], “Leaves of Grass’-An Estraordinary Book,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle* 15, September 15, 1855, 2. <http://www.whitmanarchive.org/criticism/reviews/leaves1855/anc.00012.html>

issues. “The author seems to exult in being as indecent, obscene, and profane as possible,”³³ said one anonymous author in *The Saturday Press* in September 1860. This trend continued once again with positive reviewers as well, as this writer said in June 1860: “We think that few writers of our day, if any, whether in prose or verse, have so seized hold of the *spirit* of things—no matter what, where found, or intertwined with whatever associations—as this one before us.”³⁴ He praised Whitman for his boldness in capturing the essence, or “spirit” of things, which may include African Americans, or the salient issues of slavery and its expansion for which the 1860 presidential campaign were then being waged, but he did not say so.

In December 1860, in the wake of Lincoln’s victory and on the very eve of South Carolina’s secession from the Union, the singular example of a contemporary reviewer recognizing Whitman’s treatment of African Americans emerged. “And now we have another 'sensation' book—an anti-slavery affair—one of the brood spawned by 'Uncle Tom.' It is called 'Harrington'; but it ought to be styled, 'A Glorification of Wendell Phillips, William Lloyd Garrison, Theodore Parker, C. Burleigh and other gentlemen of their peculiar way of thinking.’”³⁵ Here, the unknown author lumped Whitman in the same category as William Lloyd Garrison and other prominent abolitionists (something Whitman himself may have taken umbrage with). He also recognized it as a “descendant” of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. The writer did not seem to mean this connection as a positive. This was the only example of a contemporary reviewer who recognized

³³ [Anonymous], “Leaves of Grass,” *The Saturday Press*, September 15, 1860, (unknown), <http://www.whitmanarchive.org/criticism/reviews/leaves1860/anc.00243.html>

³⁴ [Anonymous], [Review of *Leaves of Grass* (1860)], *Boston Banner of Light* 7, June 2, 1860, 4, <http://www.whitmanarchive.org/criticism/reviews/leaves1860/anc.00037.html>

³⁵ [Anonymous], “[Review of *Leaves of Grass* (1860)],” *Boston Wide World*, December 8, 1860, (unknown), <http://www.whitmanarchive.org/criticism/reviews/leaves1860/anc.00051.html>

what Whitman was saying about race and slavery, and its publication date on the doorstep of Civil War likely played a role in that.

Martin Klammer argued that, “Whitman’s thinking about African Americans and slavery...is, in fact, essential to the development of *Leaves of Grass*.” Further he stated, “Whitman’s passionate rhetoric about African Americans developed from a unique and perhaps unrepeatable coalescing of historical and discursive forces...”³⁶ I believe Klammer was correct in his assertion that the original *Leaves of Grass* was an outgrowth of specific historical circumstances, but it overstated slavery’s importance to the development of Whitman’s poetry. Whitman’s writing contained many overlapping themes, of which African Americans are one (the human body, mentioned earlier, is another prominent example), and it would be wrong to assign too much importance to one theme.

Klammer focused on Whitman’s evolving views on slavery and race until 1855, but he had much less to say about how Whitman’s views evolved after the original *Leaves of Grass*. How did Whitman’s opinions change from the late 1850s on? If Whitman had an inclusive vision of America that included African Americans in 1855, he quickly retreated from this view. In 1856 he wrote an unpublished essay entitled “The Eighteenth Presidency.” This would seem to mark a return to his Free Soil/Free Labor roots. “The national tendency toward populating the territories full of free work-people...a tendency vital to the life and thrift of the masses of citizens, is violently put back under the feet of slavery...” Here, Whitman’s main concern was halting of the *spread* of slavery because the *institution* was contrary to his Free Labor/Free Soil ideology. He saw the issue in stark political terms, and condemned the nation’s leadership in language that left little wonder as to why the essay wasn’t published. “The President eats dirt and

³⁶ Klammer, *Whitman, Slavery and the Emergence*, 3, 163.

excrement for his daily meals, likes it, and tries to force it on the states.”³⁷ The overwhelmingly political nature of this essay, as well as its writing so closely after *Leaves of Grass* and under the same circumstances, suggests that he may have had a political motive in mind with his poetry as well.

Absent from this essay is the concern for the well-being of the slaves themselves, either fugitive or still in bondage. In fact, he stated later in the essay, “But not one square mile of continental territory shall henceforward be given to slavery, *to slaves*, or to the masters of slaves—not one square foot”³⁸ (emphasis added). Whitman suggested that the land in the west should be closed only to the institution of slavery, but to *the slaves themselves*, meaning African Americans, leaving it open to white settlement.

Whitman did openly publish his opinion on abolitionism and slavery during the late 1850s, once again a different picture of Whitman emerged than the one that appears in *Leaves of Grass*. Whitman wrote in May 1857 about an abolition convention in New York. He said that “We have no hesitation in saying that we consider the doom of slavery as sealed; it may spread towards the Gulf of Mexico; it may last awhile in the islands there—but it will certainly, before a hundred years have rolled on, become extinct in everyone of the United States.”³⁹ What Whitman said here is that, while abolition and opposition to slavery’s extension “are great ideas,” there was no pressing need to put into practice either one of them. This was a complete retreat from the portrayals of African Americans in his poetry just two years earlier. Astoundingly, he went on in the same article to state, “...it should be remembered that the institution of slavery is not at

³⁷ Kaplan, *Whitman, Poetry and Prose*, 1334.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 1347.

³⁹ Emory Holloway and Vernolian Schwartz eds., *I Sit and Look Out: Editorials from the Brooklyn Daily Times, by Walt Whitman* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1932), 87.

all without its redeeming points...”⁴⁰ Here, he went as far as to apologize for and defend slavery, albeit in a vague way.

A year later, Whitman commented in another editorial on an Oregon law that prohibited blacks, either slave or free, from entering the state, and he asked the question, “Who believes that the Whites and Blacks can ever amalgamate in America? Or who wishes it to happen? 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 of it.”⁴¹ Here he flatly contradicted his own poetic voice.

Whereas Whitman in 1855 included African Americans in the American family, he said in 1858 that there is no way that whites and blacks could coexist in the same country, and believed that blacks should move somewhere “...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...Of course all this, or anything toward it, can never be attained by the Blacks here in America.”⁴² Instead of including blacks in the human/American family, Whitman sought to banish them to some other land for their own good, he thought. He did say that there was the *potential* in them to become a great nation, but he could not bring himself to believe that they could help *America* become great. The racial sympathy Whitman expressed in his poetry apparently had limits.

When the Civil War arrived, Whitman had very little to say about slavery, emancipation, or African Americans, and what he did have to say was not complementary. In 1862, Whitman went to Washington, D.C. and volunteered in military hospitals dressing wounds, comforting the sick and wounded, procuring items for the benefit of soldiers, and writing letters to family

⁴⁰ Ibid., 87-88.

⁴¹ Ibid., 90.

⁴² Ibid., 90.

members. His published writings from the war, collected and included into *Specimen Days*, contain virtually no reference to slaves, contraband (blacks who fled slavery and were put to work for the Union), or black soldiers. He did mention black soldiers and a contraband camp in a letter to his mother dated July 7, 1863. "...the niggers have their first Washington reg't encamped..." Whitman informed his mother, "...they make a good show, are often seen in the streets of Washington in squads-since they have begun to carry arms, the secesh here & in Georgetown...are not insulting them as formerly."⁴³ His description of African Americans as "niggers" placed Whitman in the mainstream of racial attitudes of his day.

More striking in its racial attitudes was his description of his visit to a contraband hospital. "I went once or twice to the Contraband Camp, to the Hospital, &c.-but I could not bring myself to go again-when I meet black men or boys among my own hospitals, I use them kindly, give them something &c.-I believe I told you that I do the same to the wounded rebels, too-but as there is a limit to one's sinews & endurance & sympathies, &c."⁴⁴ Here Whitman admitted that he acted in a kindly manner towards the contrabands merely out of politeness, but he could not bear to go back, because apparently, he did not really sympathize with them, and he could not tolerate them. Significantly, he found it necessary to note that he did "...the same to the wounded rebels." It is hard to believe that this is the same person who in 1855 wrote such beautiful lines about the beauty of the black drayman with the team of horses.

Whitman's postwar attitude towards race was much the same as his wartime writings. In an essay quoted by David Reynolds on the question of African American suffrage, Whitman comes off as nativist and racist. "As if we had not strained the voting and digestive caliber of American Democracy to the utmost for the last fifty years with millions of ignorant foreigners,

⁴³ Edwin Haviland Miller ed., *Whitman: The Correspondence, 1842-1867*, v.i (New York, NY: New York University Press, 1961), 115.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 115.

we have now infused a powerful percentage of blacks, with about as much intellect and caliber (in the mass) as so many baboons.”⁴⁵ Not only were African Americans not part of the human family, according to Whitman, but they were compared to actual *non-human* species. He even seemed to degrade the white immigrants that had moved into the country in the antebellum years.

In another letter to his mother, this time in 1868 while Whitman was still in Washington, he described local African Americans celebrating the election of their candidate as mayor. He said they were “...yelling and gesticulating like madmen-it was quite comical, yet very disgusting & alarming in some respects-They were very insolent, & altogether it was a strange sight-they looked like so many wild brutes let loose...”⁴⁶

Later in Whitman’s life, in 1875, he worried that there were too many blacks being elected in southern states. He described the situation in the South as an “insult to the present,” and explained why : “the black domination, but little more above the beasts-viewed as a temporary, deserv’d punishment for their [that is, Southern whites’] Slavery and Secession sins, may perhaps be admissible; but as a permanency of course is not to be consider’d for a moment.”⁴⁷ If Whitman saw blacks as equal members of the American family, he would have no problem with their voting or holding office, but he thought both were only good for “punishing” the South, which in and of itself was insulting. This negative view of Reconstruction and positive view of white, Democratic “redemption” of Southern states echoes Lost Cause southern ideology that was being formulated at that time.

Whitman went on to express the white/black dichotomy in stark terms. “I do not wish to say one word and will not say one word against the blacks-but the blacks can never be to me

⁴⁵ Whitman quoted in Reynolds, *Walt Whitman’s America*, 470.

⁴⁶ Edwin Haviland Miller ed., *Whitman: The Correspondence, 1842-1867*, v.ii (New York, NY: New York University Press, 1961), 35.

⁴⁷ Peter Coviello ed., *Walt Whitman, Memoranda During the War* (Oxford, NY: Oxford University Press, 2004), 126.

what the whites are...The whites are my brothers and I love them.”⁴⁸ Whitman’s friend Horace Traubel also quoted Whitman on the subject. “I know enough of Southern affairs, have associated enough with Southern people to feel convinced that if I lived South, I should side with the Southern whites.”⁴⁹ He loved whites, even white southerners who seceded and rebelled against the Union he loved so dearly, but he could not bring himself to identify with blacks, even those who DID fight for the Union and carried out the duties of democratic citizenship.

This view of race eventually led to his estrangement with his good friend, William O’Connor in August of 1872. He had an argument one evening with O’Connor over the issue of African American suffrage. The argument became so heated that O’Connor, who supported black suffrage, felt betrayed and hurt. All attempts to reconcile the two through intermediaries subsequently failed.⁵⁰

Whitman’s post-war conservatism can best be understood, like evolution of his prewar beliefs, in the context of the political and social climate of the late 1860s and 1870s. David Blight argued that in the postwar period there was an ideological battle over the meaning and legacy of the Civil War. On the one hand, you had the reconciliationist view, which held that the causes of the Civil War should be forgotten in favor of reconciling the previously hostile sections. The second was a white-supremacist vision that wanted to preserve as much of the old antebellum order as possible through terror and violence. These two joined together to dominate the country, and “delivered the country a segregated memory of its Civil War on Southern terms...” The last was the emancipationist memory of the Civil War, which “...embodies African Americans’ complex remembrance of their won freedom, in the politics of radical

⁴⁸ Whitman quoted in David S. Reynolds, *Walt Whitman’s America: A Cultural Biography* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1996), 471.

⁴⁹ Whitman quoted in *Ibid.*, 493.

⁵⁰ Kaplan, *Walt Whitman: A Life*, 344.

Reconstruction, and in the conceptions of the war as a reinvention of the republic and the liberation of blacks to citizenship and Constitutional equality.” Fundamentally, according to Blight, the nation, and the North in particular, had to choose between two paths: would they heal the nation, or would they try to do justice for African Americans. The nation would choose healing.⁵¹

Walt Whitman’s writings fit in with the reconciliationist view of the Civil War. This view forgot about slavery and race as root causes of the conflict, and instead focused on the soldiers and battles of the war. The reconciliationists focused on the *what*, and forgot about the *why*. In *Specimen Days*, first published in 1881, Whitman said, “And so good-bye to the war. I know not how it may have been, or may be, to others-to me the main interest I found (and still on recollection find,) in the rank and file of the armies, both sides, and in those specimens amid the hospitals, and even the dead on the field.”⁵² Whitman found meaning in the war in the lives and suffering of soldiers *on both sides* (though apparently not black soldiers, judging by his quotes earlier), and not in any specific cause or result of the war. As Blight said “Whitman could mix reality with nostalgia like no other writer; in so doing, he built and illuminated the literary avenue to reunion.”⁵³ In other words, Whitman may just have fulfilled his role as a poet: to bind the nation together in the wake of a national calamity. Unfortunately, he once again left no room for black Americans in his vision.

In his postwar poem “Reconciliation,” (included in his collection of war poems, *Drum Taps*, published in 1865) Whitman vividly illustrated this move towards bringing together white northerners and southerners. He wrote “for my enemy is dead, a man divine as myself is dead,\ I

⁵¹ David Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War and American Memory* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2001), 2-3.

⁵² Kaplan, *Whitman, Poetry and Prose*, 802

⁵³ Blight, *Race and Reunion*, 20.

look where he lies white-faced and still in the coffin-I draw near,\ Bend down and touch lightly with my lips the white face in\ the coffin.”⁵⁴ David Blight probably put it best when he described the social and political implications of Whitman’s “Reconciliation.” It may seem like a touching gesture towards bringing together old enemies, but Blight found a deep irony. “...in the shared divinity-a virtual kinship-of all the ‘white faced’ dead brothers rested that ‘beautiful’ idea of *reconciliation*, as well as the ultimate betrayal of the dark-faced folk whom the dead had shared in liberating.”⁵⁵

A definite pattern emerged throughout Whitman’s life. He viewed slavery in the 1850s as a threat to northern, white ideas of Free Labor and Free Soil, and he was weighed down by his own baggage of racial prejudice. During and after the war, this racial prejudice and his overarching mission as a poet to bind the nation together led him to be the first major proponent of reconciliation. In this, he ultimately succeeded. But this leaves a lingering question. How does Whitman’s egalitarian poetry in *Leaves of Grass* square with what he said elsewhere? There are several theories to explain this. Justin Kaplan argued that “...it is clear...that in fact Whitman’s attitudes about African Americans and slavery did change in the years immediately after the publication of *Leaves of Grass*.”⁵⁶ The implication here was that Whitman DID in fact undergo a genuine conversion and therefore the forward looking Whitman we saw in the 1855 *Leaves of Grass* truly represented the real Walt Whitman, at least at that time. What was difficult for him to explain, however, was how and why Whitman executed such a dramatic, and sudden, about-face in the late 1850s.

Other critics, for various reasons, have argued that Whitman’s vision was never truly egalitarian. Justin Kaplan said that for Whitman, the Civil War “had not been about slavery at

⁵⁴ Kaplan, *Whitman, Poetry and Prose*, 453.

⁵⁵ Blight, *Race and Reunion*, 23.

⁵⁶ Klammer, 160.

all, never about slavery, he was to say over and over again, but about democracy and union...⁵⁷

In a similar vein, David S. Reynolds argued that “He was not able, however, to rise above the prevailing racial prejudices of his day, and he was temperamentally unequipped to ponder the legal and political ramifications of emancipation.”⁵⁸ This view explained his many quotes before and after 1855, but it does not explain those passages about African Americans in “Song of Myself” and others. He seemed to rise above racial prejudice in those poems. A third commentator, Charles Glicksberg, said in the 1940s that what Whitman lacked was a complete view of what democracy was. “What Whitman strangely overlooked was that the Negro was a native son of the United States and that democracy was not complete until he was granted equality of rights before the law.”⁵⁹ However, the Walt Whitman of the 1855 *Leaves of Grass* seemed to include African Americans in his democratic vision.

Jerome Loving’s view was a little different. “Because Whitman was a “free-soiler” instead of an abolitionist, his attitudes towards slavery and toward blacks were still (and remained throughout his life) two different subjects. Whereas he was appalled by the concept of slavery, he was described by friends during and after the Civil War as less than enthusiastic about freed slaves’ chances of contributing to America.” Loving simply argued that Whitman’s views are in line with mainstream northern Free Soil ideology. This does not, however, account for the rhetoric in his 1855 poetry.⁶⁰ Your average, racist free soil northerner would not have portrayed African Americans as Whitman did in *Leaves of Grass*.

So did Whitman experience a humanitarian epiphany in 1855 as a result of historical circumstance (as Kaplan argues) only to execute a dramatic retreat from it shortly after, or was

⁵⁷ Kaplan, *Walt Whitman: A Life*, 300.

⁵⁸ Reynolds, *Walt Whitman’s America*, 470.

⁵⁹ Glicksberg, Charles I., “Walt Whitman and the Negro,” *Phylon* (1940-1956) 14, no.4 (4th Qtr. 1948): 331.

⁶⁰ Jerome Loving, *Walt Whitman: Song of Himself*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999), 128.

his personal vision always incomplete or faulty, as others have argued. The answer lies somewhere in between. It is true that Whitman did not have room in his view of America and democracy for the *full-participation* of African Americans. He, at various times, supported colonizing slaves, supported exclusion laws, came out against black suffrage, disparaged black legislators, and condemned slavery as bad for white people. It is difficult to believe that for a brief period he was a totally different person. But why did he write about the “hounded slave” and the “man at auction”? The answer lies, once again, in the political context of that specific time. Walt Whitman’s writing in 1855 were politically motivated. The poetry was meant to use emotion, and perhaps hyperbole, to influence the reader’s opinion to an anti-slavery position. With the Fugitive Slave Law, Kansas-Nebraska Act, and Anthony Burns as salient issues, Whitman thought this emotional appeal would be the best and most practical method to use. The passages did not constitute a call for outright abolitionism and black equality, though he never retreated back to the pro-slavery apologetics of his *Anthony Burns* days. Later on in the 1850s, with Civil War seemingly more and more possible, he backpedaled from the rhetoric. In the postwar era, with slavery no longer a salient issue, he was outright hostile to black suffrage and disparaged them on several occasions

This may seem rather cynical, but there is a positive. Whitman was viewed very positively by later African American writers. Langston Hughes wrote that “it (the “I” of Whitman’s poetry) is the cosmic “I” of all peoples who seek freedom, decency, and dignity, friendship and equality between individuals and races all over the world.”⁶¹ Later, June Jordan said that Whitman was “the one white father who shares the systematic disadvantages of his

⁶¹ Langston Hughes, “The Ceaseless Rings of Walt Whitman,” in *Walt Whitman: The Measure of his Song*, eds. Jim Perlman, Ed Folsom, and Dan Campion (Duluth, MN: Holy Cow! Press, 1998), 187.

heterogeneous offspring...”⁶² What this showed is that Whitman may have succeeded in his goal of seeing that his country “absorbs him as affectionately as he has absorbed it,” though not in the manner he would have originally intended. It may have been politically motivated in 1855, brought about by salient issues of that specific time, but those issues brought out of Whitman poetry that would inspire others later to work for a more inclusive form of democracy that even Whitman himself had not anticipated.

⁶² June Jordan, “For the Sake of a People’s Poetry: Walt Whitman and the Rest of Us,” in *Walt Whitman: The Measure of his Song*, eds. Jim Perlman, Ed Folsom, and Dan Campion (Duluth, MN: Holy Cow! Press, 1998), 411.

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