

NINETEENTH CENTURY GENDER STUDIES

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Talking Back to Walt Whitman Using a Queer of Color Framework, VoiceThreads, and Virtual Walking Tours

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There seems to be a more or less tacit agreement among literary scholars that, because American literature has been clearly the preserve of white male views, genius, and power, those views, genius, and power are without relationship to and removed from the overwhelming presence of black people in the United States. (Morrison 5)

<1>As a queer, white, cisgender, male Whitman scholar, this quotation from Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark* (1992) speaks to how I am still in the act of confronting and critiquing Whitman's contradictory stance as the "Poet of Democracy."⁽¹⁾ I recognize that, for far too long, Whitman's inheritance of America's white supremacist history has been overlooked or swept under the rug by many white Whitman scholars. During Whitman's bicentennial in May 2019, poet Harmony Holiday was interviewed by New York Public Radio (WNYC) to address why readers "need to be honest about his [Whitman's] racism." Holiday emphatically stated that there needs to be "a new level of honesty" when people read Whitman's poetry knowing that he once did call Black Americans "baboons" (Holiday). Rather than reaching for the argument that Whitman was a white writer "of his time," what needs to happen is, "like the opposite of cancellation culture," his metaphorical literary statue should be chipped away at (Holiday). To dismantle Whitman's contradictory vision of democracy, listening to Morrison and Holiday is a good place to begin.

<2>In Summer 2020, I learned that I would be teaching an upper-division English major course, "Whitman's Multitudes," in the Fall that required intensive writing and rhetorical analysis. The only parameter was that the course had to focus on a specific genre of literature. While living in a pandemic that has brought to light, for many white Americans, the US's insidious web of systemic racism (police brutality, health inequities, mass incarceration, and education disparities), I found myself questioning what democracy means in this country at this moment.⁽²⁾ Whitman, as the famous "Poet of Democracy," seemed to offer an opportunity to explore this question. I could not center my course on Whitman as the voice of all Americans; instead, I organized the course around the following question: Why is Whitman, in America, thought of as the poet of democracy? I hoped that this critical question would allow my students

to feel comfortable openly debating Whitman's poetry and prose without the fear that I, a Whitman scholar, saw him as a heroic literary figure. I spent the rest of the summer figuring out how to approach Whitman's racial and social politics while addressing his identity as a queer white writer.

<3>I relied heavily on bell hooks's idea of transgressive pedagogy when thinking through how to analyze the intersectionality of Whitman as a queer white man. As hooks writes in *Teaching to Transgress* (1994), "The unwillingness to approach teaching from a standpoint that includes awareness of race, sex, and class is often rooted in the fear that classrooms will be uncontrollable, that emotions and passions will not be contained" (39). As an openly queer teacher, whenever I approach Whitman, both in the classroom and in my scholarship, I foreground his identity as a queer male poet. But, before the pandemic, I had not examined Whitman's whiteness. For my Fall 2020 "Whitman's Multitudes" course, I realized it was essential to emphasize his identity as a *white* queer male poet too. By positioning my gender, sexuality, and racial identity in relation to Whitman's as expressed in his work and my own scholarship and pedagogical approach, I cultivated a space of shared vulnerability focused on questioning assumptions. Thus in Fall 2020, as the pandemic and the Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests continued, I approached teaching Whitman as an opportunity for my students and for myself to explain the present via Whitman's past. By incorporating VoiceThreads (a tool I will explain below) to allow students to build a discussion-based community at a distance, virtual tours to metaphorically get them outside of their houses, and a Queer of Color framework to create a critically grounded foundation for analysis, my students were able to question and talk back to Whitman's queer white male vision of democracy.

Openings: Unacknowledged History

<4>In July 2020, while in the midst of preparing my course, I was invited by the Whitman Birthplace on Long Island to offer a virtual tour of Whitman's West Hills, a tour I had already led in person in 2019. To address Whitman's relationship to his Long Island home, I knew that I had to center Whitman's settler colonial history, which I hadn't done in the 2019 iteration. I was inspired to reimagine my approach by the confluence of the BLM movement and my own reading of hooks, who writes, "I celebrate teaching that enables transgressions—a movement against and beyond boundaries. It is that movement which makes education the practice of freedom" (12). Following hooks's lead, I opened my tour of Whitman's Birthplace by confronting his family's participation in the slave trade. In 1889, Whitman told his biographer Horace Traubel that "We [settler families] all kept slaves then on Long Island"; Whitman further acknowledged that his family cemetery in West Hills includes unmarked graves of the people his family enslaved (Traubel, 28 Aug. 1889). This quotation serves as an entry into questions surrounding Whitman's vision of democracy. Specifically, what do readers make of Whitman as the "Poet of Democracy" in 2020-21?

<4>Bringing Queer of Color scholarship to bear on Whitman's vision of democracy makes Whitman's inheritance of a white nationalist perspective clearer.⁽³⁾ I employed this strategy so my students and I could dismantle the notion of "democracy" that Whitman espouses. In both my virtual tours and in my "Whitman's Multitudes" course, I introduced Whitman's settler colonial history and his contradictory views on race by using his own statements.⁽⁴⁾ How can Whitman

write positively in 1860's "Salut au Monde!" about the "divine soul'd African" while in 1888, he says to Traubel that "The n—r, like the Injun, will be eliminated: it is the law of races, history, what-not: always so far inexorable—always to be" (Traubel, 8 Sept. 1888)? This statement is a clear act of linguistic violence that targets both Black Americans and Native Americans. Though Traubel pushes back against Whitman's Darwinian racism, Whitman reiterates his position, saying that it may sound Darwinian but "'it sounds like me too'" (8 Sept. 1888).

<5>Recognizing Whitman's racism not only illuminates his own prejudiced belief system but also deconstructs the influence of his white settler colonial history. I use this exchange between Whitman and Traubel as an opening for my students to critique how Whitman reinscribes the systemic oppression of Black Americans while being lauded as the "Poet of Democracy" by contemporaries. After its 1867 publication, Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* (the fourth edition) was celebrated by an anonymous reviewer as not only personifying democracy but having the breath and "spirit of Democracy" found in every line of verse ("Walt Whitman, the American"). However, Ed Folsom's scholarship on Whitman and democracy challenges this personification by questioning the prevailing trend that characterizes Whitman as America's democratic poet. In the classroom, I follow Folsom's critical lead in using Whitman's own words to turn a "skeptical eye on American culture" and by extension, Whitman ("Democracy").

VoiceThread: Facilitating Conversation at a Distance

<6>In "Democracy for Who?", a module in my "Whitman's Multitudes" course, students get to talk back (in a literal sense) to Whitman and debate his vision of American democracy using VoiceThread, an asynchronous audiovisual discussion board. At my institution, Stony Brook University, VoiceThread is integrated into Blackboard (our learning management system). I spent the first week of the semester teaching my students how to sign up for an account, which is free, and how to create their own posts and comment on those posted by myself and their classmates. After introducing the critical close reading skills needed to interpret Whitman's poetry and prose, I invited my students to read a selection of poetry by Langston Hughes, Allen Ginsberg, and June Jordan to examine how each writer both appreciates and critiques Whitman's poetry.(5) I used the following questions to structure and scaffold our VoiceThread conversation: What happens when we allow Whitman to define himself as a democratic poet? How does applying a Queer of Color critique to Whitman's democratic poetics unsettle the white settler colonial perspective expressed in his poetry?

<7>To address how Whitman defines himself as a democratic poet, my first VoiceThread assignment began with the publication history of and Whitman's vision of democracy in the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*.(6) I started with the "Preface" because it introduces students to Whitman's urgent message that, in order for Americans to understand their present, they must first understand their past: "AMERICA does not repel the past or what it has produced under its forms" (5). After close reading this passage in my VoiceThread prompt, each student was tasked to explain why Whitman chooses to personify America. Starting with this question gave me the opportunity to assess my students' familiarity with the concept of personification as it applies to literary analysis while building towards a critique of Whitman's national and cultural vision of democracy. In the seemingly disconnected space of the online classroom, I got to hear my

students' voices as they shared the following observations: "He wanted to take poets off of their privileged pedestals," and "his poetry is for different types of Americans."

<8>In the next VoiceThread module, "Whitman's 1855 *Leaves of Grass*," we read his poems "The Sleepers" and "I Sing the Body Electric" through a Queer of Color lens, beginning with Lavelle Porter's urgent call for "talking back to Whitman" ("Should Walt Whitman"). First, I asked students to perform a close reading of Paul H. Outka's "Whitman and Race ('He's Queer, He's Unclear, Get Used to It')" (2002), and then we took up Outka's desire to face Whitman's "explicit . . . racist . . . attitudes that pervade much of his journalism [which] seem deeply at odds with the egalitarian spirit of his poetry . . . and the deeply sympathetic and admiring verse portraits of African Americans he creates" (295). While my students, before reading Outka, believed Whitman was, as one student stated, "trying to relate to the common everyday working class white American," their responses to Outka's essay captured their understanding of what other students identified as "dehumanizing language" (like calling Black Americans "it") and "Whitman's privilege as a white male."

<9>Next, students read Porter's article "Should Walt Whitman Be #Cancelled?" (2019) and listened to Holiday's WNYC interview "Walt Whitman Turns 200, So It's Time to Be Honest About His Racism" in preparation for discussing how to engage with a well-respected poet who also espoused racist ideology. These writers build on Outka's argument that twenty-first-century readers need to have an honest, frank, and sometimes uncomfortable conversation about Whitman's contradictory vision of democracy. As Porter explains, "there is no better place to look for nuanced critical engagement with Whitman's complicated legacy than in the work of black intellectuals who have talked back to Whitman" ("Should Walt Whitman"). But before having my students engage with Black writers (like Baldwin and Hughes) who talk back to Whitman, I asked them to express their thoughts on how a Queer of Color critique, when applied to Whitman's poetry, reveals the racial inequalities present in Whitman's family and literary inheritance of white settler colonialism. One student explain in a VoiceThread that "He [Porter] uses very kind language to soften the blow of Whitman's racist ideology" and continued, explaining that Whitman's depiction of "a slave auction" (in "Song of Myself") still does not excuse Whitman's calling Black Americans "baboons" and referring to them as "it" in his poetry. Another student connected Whitman's racist language back to Outka's argument, suggesting that, "as a queer outsider, Whitman stood in solidarity with the Black American community" but that does not automatically make him "an ally to abolitionism and equality for Black Americans."

<10>The second half of my "Whitman's 1855 *Leaves of Grass*" VoiceThread built on our Queer of Color framework by asking students to turn to an example of contemporary American protest music. I chose The Chicks' "March March" since it was released on June 25, 2020, a month after the murder of George Floyd. The music video features video footage of both the March 2018 March for Our Lives protest in Washington, D.C., and Summer 2020 BLM protests in Minneapolis, New York City, and Washington, D.C. After viewing the video, I posed the following question: How do both the lyrics and visuals in "March March" speak to racial and social inequalities in America in 2020? Then, I directed my students' attention to the lyric "Tell the ol' boys in the white bread lobby / What they can and can't do with their bodies," since it is here that The Chicks identify the toxic white male ego personified by the former president

("March March"). Then, we turned back to Whitman's "The Sleepers" and "I Sing the Body Electric." In the US, the pandemic has brought to light the need for white privilege to be discussed and dismantled, and the visceral images of systemic racism in "March March" works to counter white nationalist ideology. The benefit of VoiceThread for emergency remote teaching has been that it facilitates conversation, building a sense of community as my students literally hear each other and myself. At the same time, it allows them to focus their energy on application of analytical skills by enabling them to quickly create a verbal reply instead of posting to a more traditional discussion board.

<11>By the time I introduced queer poets of color who talk back to Whitman, specifically Hughes and Baldwin, my students had applied a Queer of Color critique to Whitman's poetry, exemplifying hooks's assertion "that 'whiteness' be studied, understood, discussed—so that everyone learns that affirmation of multiculturalism, and an unbiased inclusive perspective, can and should be present whether or not people of color are present" (43). For example, when my students engaged with Hughes's "I, Too" (1925), they closely read how Hughes inserts a queer Black voice into Whitman's white male vision of democracy. This reenvisioning occurs when Hughes alludes to Whitman's "I Hear America Singing" (1860) and his speaker states "I, too, sing America. / I am the darker brother. / They send me to eat in the kitchen / When company comes, / But I laugh, / And eat well, / And grow strong" (1-7). Students were prepared to read Hughes and Baldwin from a perspective that decentered whiteness, returning them to the question first posed in the "Democracy for Who?" VoiceThread: Who is being spoken to in Whitman's vision of democracy?

Regional Context: A Virtual Walking Tour of Whitman's Birthplace

<12>To answer this question, I had my students consider two virtual walking tours (in both West Hills and Huntington, New York) that I did for the Walt Whitman Birthplace. Both tours provide biographical history on Whitman's life on Long Island while also digging into the ever-present specter of white settler colonialism on the island. During a pandemic, when many people have expressed feeling confined and trapped, incorporating these tours helped provide freedom for my students to visualize the importance of these places for Whitman's poetry without traveling. The virtual tours allow for more accessibility since both tours include terrain that is inaccessible (especially when climbing up Jayne's Hill). I use the tours as a pedagogical tool so my students can grapple with how white settlers of Long Island considered Whitman a democratic poet while contending with the Whitman family's participation in the enslavement of Black Americans and in Native American genocide.(7)

<13>In 2019, the Whitman Birthplace invited me to lead my first guided walking tour with the goal of explaining the importance of West Hills to Whitman's poetics. Because the tour was open to the public, the group I led was diverse in regards to professions and the areas of New York State from which they hailed. I chose a selection of Whitman's poetry and prose to help illuminate Whitman's poetic connection to Long Island.(8) The route begins on Chichester Road, among Whitman's ancestral homes,(9) where I stop occasionally to provide historic context about each spot on the tour, immersing participants in the relationship between Whitman's history and poetry. Then, I eventually lead the group up to Jayne's Hill.

<14>When I offered this tour for the first time, I drew upon Karen Karbiener's "Starting from Paumanok: A Tour of Old Whitmanland" (2019), which features historical commentary on each tour spot.⁽¹⁰⁾ Karbiener's article is an essential resource to remind the group that Whitman's family history in West Hills dates back to 1668 when Joseph Whitman, at a town meeting, was granted ten or twelve acres of land (Karbiener). By the time Whitman was born in 1819, the Whitmans owned a section of West Hills so large (several hundred acres) that it is demarcated as "Whitmansdale" on maps from that period (Karbiener).

<15>However, there is a gap in the histories of Whitman's farming family that I had been drawing upon: none discuss the local West Hills and Huntington farming families who stole land from the local Matinecock tribes, nor the families' reliance on the labor of enslaved peoples. I did not fill these gaps in on my initial 2019 tour, but when I gave my virtual tour on July 5, 2020, during the pandemic and BLM protests, I knew I had to address this white settler colonial violence. The Town of Huntington's municipal website explains that "the native population [the Matinecocks] settled near the waterfront in Cold Spring Harbor, Huntington, Centerport and Crab Meadow," but when they came in contact with "seventeenth-century European explorers and traders" they were introduced to diseases to which they had no immunity ("The Early Years"). The website continues, "By the time Europeans arrived to settle in the Huntington area in the middle of the seventeenth century, the native population had been decimated" ("The Early Years"). The passive construction here is interesting as it completely obscures the subjects responsible for that decimation, and Joseph Whitman (Walt's great-great-great grandfather) was among those Europeans whose arrival was catastrophic for the native inhabitants of Long Island.

<16>The seventeenth-century Europeans who arrived in Huntington also brought with them enslaved people whose labor helped them to cultivate the rich lands they settled upon. It would not be until 1799 that the New York State Legislature would pass an act to gradually abolish slave labor on Long Island ("The Early Years"). During the 2019 tour, when I arrived with the group to the top of Jayne's Hill and read aloud the speaker's descriptive image of the Long Island Sound full of "copious commerce, steamers, sails" and the Atlantic Ocean's "mighty hulls dark-gliding in the distance," European oppression of the Matinecocks and Black community lingered unacknowledged ("Paumanok" 3, 5-6). When I addressed this history during my virtual tour of Jayne's Hill in 2020, the landscape Whitman described looked quite different: as I panned the camera to take in the vistas of land and sea, the dispossessed and enslaved peoples who had helped to cultivate and develop this landscape came to the fore.

<17>Since this tour coincided with Indigenous Peoples' Day and would occur during my "Whitman's Multitudes" course, I had an opportunity to unite my desire to provide a more inclusive historical context with my pedagogical goal of engaging my students in critically questioning, or talking back to, Whitman and his notion of democracy. Roxane Dunbar-Ortiz, author of *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States* (2014), foregrounds that "the history of the United States is a history of settler colonialism—the founding of a state based on the ideology of white supremacy, the widespread practice of African slavery, and a policy of genocide and land theft" (2). In my Jayne's Hill Guided Virtual Tour, I approached this history of settler colonialism when I reached the top of Jayne's Hill and read aloud Whitman's poem "Paumanok," asking why he uses the Algonquin word "Paumanok" to refer to Long Island. Throughout the poem, Whitman uses the word to mythologize Long Island but in order to do this

he commits an act of linguistic violence by erasing the history and lives of the Algonquin people who lived there before.

<18>In both virtual tours, I referenced Page Smith's *Tragic Encounter: The People's History of Native Americans* (2015) and Evan Pritchard's *Native New Yorkers: The Legacy of the Algonquin People of New York* (2002) to characterize the history of the Algonquin people on Long Island that Whitman erases in his poem. I quoted Pritchard's etymological history of "Paumanok," rooted in the Renneiu language that means "land of tributes," which refers to "Long Island's role as a main source for the quohog and conch shells used in the manufacture of sewan or wampum, often used to pay tribute or taxes to another tribe. The people of Paumanok often had to pay tribute to the militarily superior people [the White settlers] of the mainland" (Pritchard 305). Such meditations on the meaning of place in "Paumanok" open my virtual Whitman walking tour in West Hills as I invite participants to question why Whitman is so fascinated with the sense of place in his poetry. When responding to this question, my students expressed why actually seeing Whitman's ancestral homes helped them better understand his white settler colonial inheritance. They explained that seeing me standing at the top of Jayne's Hill allowed for feelings of awe at the natural landscape, but also anxiety related to the Native Americans who were forced out of the area to make way for Whitman's myth of "Paumanok."

Talking Back to Whitman

<19>Putting Whitman in conversation with Hughes and Baldwin next helped students to think about his identity as a queer white poet and to consider how that informs his poetic vision of America.⁽¹¹⁾ From Hughes's poetic insertion of a queer Black poetic voice in "I, Too" (1925) to Baldwin's opening of *Giovanni's Room* (1956) with a quotation from Whitman's "Song of Myself," both authors break through Whitman's democratic vision that excludes them. In the Spring 2020 *Victorian Studies* special issue ("Undisciplining Victorian Studies"), Nasser Mufti cites Hughes when asking why so many Victorian literature journals are featuring race-focused special issues. Mufti's critique illuminates how these special issues are responding to "The unravelling of the myth of postracialism in the United States and the increasing spotlight on police violence towards African Americans and the Black Lives Matter movement" (393). Interestingly, it is Mufti's acknowledgement of "the unravelling of American liberalism" that my students pointed out when concluding the VoiceThreads (393).

<19>After completing the "Democracy for Who?" VoiceThread, several students responded that analyzing Baldwin's and Hughes's decisions to allude to Whitman in their work—while inserting their queer Black poetic voices—illuminated how American democracy has always been in crisis. Although learning in physical isolation, my students were more honest and frank when offering criticism of the America Whitman was idolizing. Engaging in uncomfortable discussions at a distance allowed for my students to feel safe to share how, on one hand, a reader of Whitman can thoroughly enjoy his lines of verse while, on the other hand, recognizing his racist statements. During a global pandemic that is laying bare America's white nationalist roots, my decision to apply a Queer of Color critique to Whitman's poetry offers students a model for how to query who is privileged in Whitman's vision of democracy and Whitman himself as the unquestionable "Poet of Democracy."

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Notes

(1)The critical provenance of Whitman as the “Poet of Democracy” begins with the anonymously authored 1869 article “Walt Whitman, the American Poet of Democracy,” which categorized Whitman as America’s Democratic poet (written for the *Australian Journal*). After Whitman’s death in 1892, the critic John Burroughs solidified this critical tradition in his memorial essay “The Poet of Democracy.”(△)

(2)See Camp and Tamene et al. for a discussion of how the pandemic has accelerated systemic racism in America.(△)

(3)For my theoretical foundation of the intersection between Whitman’s Whiteness and Queerness, see Carter, Somerville, and Wilson.(△)

(4)See Drews and Hutchinson or the Whitman Archive for a collection of his quotations.(△)

(5)I introduce this discussion during Module 11 and 12 on my “Whitman’s Multitudes” syllabus (see [Appendix 1](#)). (△)

(6) For an example of a VoiceThread discussion of Whitman’s vision of democracy see Rimby, “Intro. To Whitman’s Multitudes,” and for an example of a VoiceThread discussion on applying a Queer of Color lens to Whitman’s poetry see Rimby, “Whitman’s 1855 *Leaves of Grass*.”(△)

(7)For further information on the Whitman’s family’s legacy of slavery and Native American genocide, see Traubel(August 28, 1889). For research on slavery in America, see Sinha.(△)

(8)The poems I used were “Starting from Paumanok” (excerpts, 1867) and “Paumanok” (1888), and the prose texts were excerpts of “Letters from a Travelling Bachelor” (1849) and *Specimen Days* (1882).(△)

(9)These include (in order of the tour) the homes of Jesse Whitman, Joseph Whitman, and Nathaniel Whitman.(△)

(10)See Karbiener.(△)

(11)For a queer Whitman theoretical foundation, see Erkkila; Schmidgall; *Live Oak, with Moss*; and Champagne.(△)

Appendix 1: Whitman's Multitudes Syllabus

[PDF](#) | [DOC](#)

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