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RACE, SLAVERY, AND EVASION: WHITMAN  
AND MELVILLE'S CHANGING  
PERSPECTIVES AND THEIR GLANCING  
POETIC TREATMENT OF THE CORE CIVIL  
WAR ISSUE

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RACE, SLAVERY, AND EVASION: WHITMAN AND MELVILLE'S CHANGING  
PERSPECTIVES AND THEIR GLANCING POETIC TREATMENT OF THE CORE CIVIL  
WAR ISSUE

by

Said Hail Fallaha

A THESIS

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RACE, SLAVERY, AND EVASION: WHITMAN AND MELVILLE'S CHANGING  
PERSPECTIVES AND THEIR GLANCING POETIC TREATMENT OF THE CORE CIVIL  
WAR ISSUE

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University of Nebraska, 2018

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Abstract: Whitman and Melville's poetry about the Civil War is almost completely silent when it comes to slavery. Both writers depict a newly emancipated person in their poems about the Civil War, but they seem to do so almost as an afterthought. Both Whitman's "Ethiopia Saluting the Colors" and Melville's "Formerly a Slave" represent an elderly African American woman. These poems stand alone in their representation of an African American. Peter J. Bellis argues that both writers were concerned with how to negotiate national emotions and policies by the end of the war and these "emotions" and "policies" were vital to understanding liberation. The subject of liberated slaves was an emotional issue because people feared that there were not enough jobs and that African Americans would get the scarce positions because they would presumably work for less pay. Bellis believes that Whitman and Melville were hesitant to address liberated slaves, but "Ethiopia" and "Formerly a Slave" indicate that Whitman and Melville each depicted a liberated slave on at least one occasion. Why did these writers who were in so many ways bold and forward-thinking do little to address slavery and African Americans? What motivated them to include these rare poems treating African Americans in their poetry collections?

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Critics often compare Walt Whitman and Herman Melville because both are major American writers who were born in New York two months apart in 1819 and both lived into the 1890's. They are almost perfect contemporaries. Betsy Erkkila offers a political reading of both writers in "Melville, Whitman, and the Tribulations of Democracy," arguing that they shared similar political beliefs. Both were against slavery or at least the spread of slavery depending on when we are viewing their political beliefs. For example, Whitman's and Melville's political beliefs changed throughout the late 1840's and the 1850's. Both were influenced by family and certain events that happened in their youth that sparked political discussion. Erkkila writes: "The decade of the thirties was marked by an increasingly militant resistance to both federal power and the inhumane social conditions of slavery, capitalist industry, westward expansion, and patriarchal dominance" (251). Nat Turner led his famous slave revolt in the 1830's and various Native American Nations, including the Seminoles, revolted against military campaigns to relocate them. They were both twenty years old by the end of the 1830's and both had encountered some of the effects of Manifest Destiny and the institution of slavery.

These issues gained national attention through this period. Whitman and Melville were both aware of the national debates and continued to develop their thoughts on slavery and oppressed peoples. The famous Compromise of 1850 included the Fugitive Slave Act, requiring runaway slaves to be returned to their owners. The Kansas-Nebraska Act further fractured the nation and John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry was an indication that one northerner was willing to murder to achieve the liberation of slaves. All these events that preceded the war had to do with the containment or spread of slavery. Curiously, Whitman and Melville's poetry about the Civil War is almost completely silent when it comes to slavery. Both writers depict a newly

emancipated person in their poems about the Civil War, but they seem to do so almost as an afterthought. Both Whitman's "Ethiopia Saluting the Colors" and Melville's "Formerly a Slave" represent an elderly African American woman. These poems stand alone in their representation of an African American. Peter J. Bellis argues that both writers were concerned with how to negotiate national emotions and policies by the end of the war and these "emotions" and "policies" were vital to understanding liberation. The subject of liberated slaves was an emotional issue because people feared that there were not enough jobs and that African Americans would get the scarce positions because they would presumably work for less pay. Bellis believes that Whitman and Melville were hesitant to address liberated slaves, but "Ethiopia" and "Formerly a Slave" indicate that Whitman and Melville each depicted a liberated slave on at least one occasion. Why did these writers who were in so many ways bold and forward-thinking do little to address slavery and African Americans? What motivated them to include these rare poems treating African Americans in their poetry collections? To answer these questions we need to consider how they engaged debates on slavery before the Civil War .

Scholars have frequently compared Walt Whitman's *Drum-Taps* (1865) and his *Sequel to Drum-Taps* (1865-6) with Herman Melville's *Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War* (1866). *Drum-Taps* has received much more scholarly attention than *Battle-Pieces*. John P. McWilliams Jr. considered the two works of poetry in 1971, focusing on the poetic choices of each writer. McWilliams noted that Whitman wrote poems that were mostly non-specific with regard to any soldier or battle while Melville relied on particular battles and dates to represent the war. McWilliams' work is important because it highlights this distinct difference between the two writers and their poetic techniques. Whitman and Melville employed different techniques but their goals in representing the war were remarkably similar. Unfortunately, McWilliams' article

is still one of only a handful of substantial comparisons of the two Civil War volumes of poetry. His article is succinct and not much more than fifteen hundred words. Since then there have been several scholars who treat both collections.

In 2014, Paul Wright, a life-long Melville scholar, commented about his excitement that at a Melville and Whitman conference in Washington *Battle-Pieces* was elevated through comparison with *Drum-Taps*. He writes: “The text that I focused on in those far-off days of the last century was *Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War*, which was something of a neglected orphan . . . Imagine my delight, then to come to a conference populated with . . . scholars who were taking seriously the Melville of Civil War poems” (161). Scholars who have examined these two poetry collections have offered insights such as their views on each writer’s treatment of the Civil War. Analyzing these texts in tandem is relatively new with the exception of the groundbreaking work by McWilliams.

More recently, Bellis along with Christopher Sten and Tyler Hoffman have published further comparisons in *Leviathan*. Sten and Hoffman offered “Herman Melville and Walt Whitman Write the Civil War: An Introduction” where they also stress the new nature of this comparison. In Bellis' article “Reconciliation as Sequel and Supplement: *Drum-Taps* and *Battle-Pieces*,” he considers why Whitman and Melville had to add something to their existing war poetry. Bellis argues that both Whitman and Melville felt that their collections were incomplete. He wrote that Whitman “turned” in his sequel “outward from the poet’s consciousness into the physical space of the nation and away from wartime into the future” (82). Bellis also wrote how Melville was thinking about the future of the country: for Melville “the conflict has returned as well, transposed from warfare into politics” (87). Both Whitman’s *Sequel to Drum-Taps* and

Melville's *Supplement* were added because of their thoughts about the future of the country. The war was over but the problems about how to go about rebuilding and reconstruction had just begun in 1865. Whitman wanted to promote magnanimity towards the south. Melville wanted there to be great care given to the policy of Reconstruction in the south. Whitman and Melville were both concerned with what problems the country would face and with how the country would adapt to the civil equality of African Americans. The question of the potential social equality of African Americans was a contentious, deeply vexed matter.

Whitman's political views partly emerge from his family history. Erkkila notes that Whitman's family had "deep roots in the Revolution and democratic party politics in the Age of Jackson" (253). All of Whitman's family on his father's side supported the rebellion of 1776. Whitman's father, Walter Whitman Sr. "was a free thinker and a radical Tom Paine democrat who subscribed to the *Free Inquirer* (253). Whitman's family encouraged his belief in freedom and the spread of democracy. The health of democracy was important to the Whitmans because they hoped to see the spread of free labor. Martin Klammer describes Whitman's early thoughts on the spread of democracy in his work *Whitman, Slavery, and the Emergence of Leaves of Grass* (1995). He wrote: "Whitman's early life, especially since his writing on slavery in the late 1840's is largely driven by his insistence on opportunity for the working classes" (13). Whitman's father was a devout believer in the advancement of labor because he did not want to struggle financially. Walter Whitman had to move "his family from home to home and began working for wages" (Klammer 13) which meant he could not be an artisan who sold works from his craft. Walter Whitman Sr. was a carpenter who could no longer make a living as one. Westward expansion meant more opportunities for labor and the spread of slavery would thwart opportunities for artisans. Whitman thought of the institution of slavery as a competitive force



threatening to undermine the Northern Labor Movement. Whitman's primary concern about the spread of slavery was likely less about slavery itself and more about the negative impact it could have on Euro-American labor. Whitman's early view of slavery shifted gradually through the 1830's, 1840's, and 1850's.

Whitman's opinion of slavery before the Civil War was related to his strong belief in the importance of keeping the country united. Erkkila, in *Whitman the Political Poet* (1989), illuminates how Whitman's political beliefs undergird his poetry. Whitman thought slavery skewed the nature of the United States. He understood America as a united nation of individuals, yet slavery disrupted the notion of individual agency. Erkkila writes: "Whitman's poet participates in the act of national creation by carrying on the revolutionary task of transferring power from the government to the individual" (49). Whitman saw the revolution as being about political agency and about individuals taking power from a monarchy. He refused to believe that Americans could properly be subjects. Slaves were deprived of individual power, and so Whitman viewed slavery as a violation and contradiction of the American endeavor.

Erkkila quoted an editorial of Whitman's from 1846, in which he wrote that slavery was "a disgrace and blot on the character of our Republic, and our boasted humanity!" (Whitman 45). Whitman wrote many passages like this one. His arguments are based on his understanding of the founding principles of the American nation. He tended to overlook the involvement in slavery of Thomas Jefferson and other founding fathers.

Whitman's views differed from abolitionists who wanted an immediate end to slavery. Erkkila wrote about how Whitman "believed that emancipation should come from below and not from above, from the people of the southern states and not from the national government" (47). Giving states the power to choose was thought by Whitman and still by many to be foundational.

Whitman was wary of any federal action against slavery because, like many, he believed the Constitution all but prohibited its abolition. Whitman believed in an organic nation that was able to conform to the nation's "identity" without federal laws. Americans should be able to understand that slavery is not consistent with freedom or liberty. They should view slavery as undemocratic and therefore should naturally stop practicing it. Whitman trusted that the nation would eventually rid itself of slavery through a greater understanding and realization of the nation's core principles.

Betsy Erkkila details Whitman's views on slavery by examining his journalism and poetry and linking his texts to historical events. She indicates how he was a supporter of the Wilmot Proviso of 1848, a proposed ban on the extension of slavery in lands acquired from Mexico in the Mexican-American war, and how this might prove that his real concern was with "the cause of white labor rather than black slavery" (Erkkila 46). Whitman defended the Wilmot Proviso as editor of the Brooklyn *Daily Eagle*; in fact, "the *Eagle* was the first of the New York dailies" to support it (Erkkila 45). His argument for the proviso is powerful. Whitman wrote in his article titled "Shall they Be Slave or Free?": "The mighty power of this Republic . . . shall be used to root deeper and spread wider an institution which Washington, Jefferson, Madison, and all the old fathers of our freedom, anxiously, and avowedly from the bottom of their hearts, sought the extinction of, and considered inconsistent with other institutions of the land" (quoted in Erkkila 45-46). Whitman also wrote: "'that all men are created free and equal,' should be as true in fact as self-evident in theory" (quoted in Erkkila 46). Some of Whitman's support for the proviso is based on an objection to people being slaves, an objection that differs from his defenses of white labor. In other articles, however, Whitman does focus on how the rich slave owners would make it difficult for free labor to exist (Erkkila).

Several occurrences influenced Whitman. He was such an ardent supporter of the proviso that it probably caused his dismissal from the *Eagle*. After having been fired, Whitman took a job in New Orleans where he witnessed slave auctions, an experience treated in his later poetry. After working in New Orleans, Whitman returned to New York and became a member of the Free Soil movement and started to: “identify with the Abolitionist position” (Erkkila 53). Whitman’s objections to slavery became more abolitionist-based. During the very late 1840’s and 1850’s, Whitman moved away from journalism and started writing poetry. When the 1850 Compromise was being introduced Whitman reacted by writing a striking poem about the northern “doughfaces” who were backing down from southern pressure to insure the continuation of slavery. Whitman wrote sharp indictments of northerners who were willing to compromise. Parts of these poems and lines would later end up in *Leaves of Grass*.

Whitman wanted to use another medium to help readers understand the value of freedom. He turned to poetry after he came to doubt the efficacy of his journalism and popular fiction. His poetry embodied a sense of freedom because of its free verse and its rethinking of conventional norms. Whitman questioned these norms in 1855 in a poem that would be later titled “I Sing the Body Electric:”

Do you know so much that you call the slave or the dullface ignorant?

Do you suppose you have a right to a good sight . . . and he or she has no

right to a sight?

Do you think matter has cohered together from its diffused float, and the soil is on

the surface and water runs and vegetation sprouts for you . . . and not for

him and her? (Whitman, 81)

Prior to these questions, Whitman was discussing lineage in the poem and romanticizing the process of men and women begetting children in an ongoing process that provides a type of immortality. The poem, in part, glorifies the spread of humanity through time. Whitman celebrates the human capacity to give birth. Readers receive three freeing concepts in this passage. We have free verse itself; the celebration of self and the body; and questions that erode a foundational pro-slavery argument. Through these questions, Whitman equalizes the different races on the earth. These questions prompt his readers to reflect on the enslavement of people and frame the issue in the context of egotism and inheritance. The question “Do you know so much that you call the slave or the dullface ignorant?” points to a potential reader with an overinflated sense of self-worth. The question “Do you think matter has cohered together from its diffused float, and the soil is on the surface and water runs and vegetation sprouts for you?” also attacks self-centeredness and arrogance. The slaves have also “inherited” the earth and the vegetation and water exists for all equally.

These questions precede probably the most quoted passage of the poem in which Whitman steps in as auctioneer during a slave auction:

A slave at auction!

I help the auctioneer . . . the sloven does not half know his business.

Gentlemen look on this curious creature,

Whatever the bids of the bidders they cannot be high enough for him,

For him the globe lay preparing quintillions of years without one animal or plant,

For him the revolving cycles truly and steadily rolled.

In that head the allbaffling brain,

In it and below it the making of the attributes of heroes.

Examine these limbs, red black or white . . . they are very cunning in tendon and nerve;  
They shall be stript that you may see them.

Exquisite senses, lifelit eyes, pluck, volition,  
Flakes of breastmuscle, pliant backbone and neck, flesh not flabby, goodsized arms and  
legs,  
And wonders within there yet.

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? (Whitman, 81-82)

Whitman perverts the roll of a slave auctioneer by not trying to sell a man into slavery but by selling the slave as a human being who is a cosmic product. Whitman celebrates the body here as well which shows the humanity that the slave has. This is an extravagant and creative way to discuss slavery and differs sharply from Whitman's earlier political poems of "dough faces." These poems were addressed directly to politicians in order to try and stop the spread of slavery. Whitman also addresses a larger audience of northern and southern Euro-Americans. The poet represents slaves directly and demands that their humanity be recognized. The 1855 poem is not about northerners talking about what to do with slavery in reference to labour but about the extraordinary capacity of slaves, including their "allbaffling brain[s]."

Whitman was no doubt influenced by the slave auctions he saw in New Orleans. It changed his thinking about slavery and made him concerned with more than just labor or the unity of the states. Moving away from journalism and toward free verse, along with witnessing a slave auction, were steps in his development. Whitman continually reconsidered his position on slavery.

Many scholars have tracked Whitman's treatment of race including Ed Folsom who has written two works on Whitman and race. "Erasing Race: The Lost Black Presence in Whitman's Manuscripts" details how Whitman often revised race out of his writings. At first, *Leaves of Grass* represented Whitman's radical beliefs. He quotes Whitman's famous lines from a notebook that contributed to "Song of Myself:" "I am the poet of the slaves and of the masters of slaves / . . . I go with the slaves of the earth equally with the masters / And I will stand between the masters and the slaves" (7). Whitman wants to occupy the space "between" the masters and slaves and wishes to unite the races. Folsom writes: "Whitman . . . probes for a voice that reconciles the dichotomies, one inclusive enough to speak for slave and slave master--or that negotiates the distance between the two" (7). Whitman's "probing voice" becomes muffled by the time of the Civil War.

Whitman silenced his radicalism in order to help preserve the Union. Whitman had witnessed the violence of the Civil War by being an attentive visitor to wounded soldiers during the Civil War. He knew that the violence would be practically indelible and he wanted to be very careful with his writings not to disturb the wounded country with radicalism. Paradoxically, Whitman both imagined and failed to imagine racial equality during or after the Civil War.

Folsom wrote:

Whitman was imagining, gathering evidence for, and occasionally inscribing a stunning new vision of a radically healed nation, a vision that we can now glean only through his erasures and discarded writings. His disillusionment with postwar America became so intense, his fear of black equality eventually trumping his hopes for a transformed nation (24).

Whitman ultimately failed to depict what a “radically” healed nation might look like. “Equality” was a tense issue at the end of the war. Certain political groups were blaming “black equality” for the violence that had gripped the nation. Others were worried about the job markets being saturated by the influx of new workers. As noted previously, from an early age, Whitman prioritized white labor and worried that slavery could effect that labor. The issue changed, of course, with the coming of freedom: now blacks and whites regularly competed for some of the same jobs. Erkkila argues that Whitman toned down his radicalism because he did not want to rally opposing viewpoints and did not want his more extreme statements to be linked to the violent war.

“Ethiopia Saluting the Colors” fits this pattern since the elderly black woman is a nonthreatening figure. Folsom discusses this poem at length in his “Lucifer and Ethiopia: Whitman, Race, and Poetics before the Civil War and After.” Interestingly, the contrasting character of “Lucifer” (an enraged slave who must endure seeing his wife sold down the rivers) is erased from “The Sleepers” when Whitman cut this passage out of later printings of *Leaves of Grass*. In the post-war years Whitman developed old woman who appears in “Ethiopia Saluting the

Colors,” a poem he adds to "Drum-Taps" giving the cluster its only direct and unmistakable treatment of an African American character. Folsom called “Ethiopia Saluting the Colors” an

“odd poem” (53) and noted the “embarrassed silence” of scholarship on this poem. Whitman mostly revised slaves out of his poetry, but he included this poem in the "Bathed in War's Perfume" section of *Leaves of Grass* (1871). He later moved it to the “Drum-Taps” section of *Leaves* in 1881. Folsom offers some clues as to why this poem would appear in the collection in “Drum-Taps.” He writes that “Ethiopia” is a formulaic poem much like “O Captain! My Captain!” Folsom speculates that Whitman wrote in patterned verse to help him through the death of Lincoln. “The repetitive stability and predictability of conventional form sustained Whitman through the initial phases of difficult times” (54) writes Folsom. Formal poetry served to distance him from reality. Whitman put aside his mission as a free verse poet who writes liberating and long poetic lines so that he could write something more accessible. Folsom argues that “Ethiopia” is written as a formal poem because it is dealing with a troubling issue.

Whitman never went on to write a free verse counterpart of “Ethiopia” as he did with “O Captain!” He represented the death of Lincoln in “When Lilacs last in the Dooryard Bloom’d,” but he purposely tried to limit his representations of slave issues. He kept “Ethiopia” intact and finally moved the poem into *Drum-Taps* by 1881. If Folsom is right, then its formal verse had a therapeutic effect much like “O Captain!” and the formal verse gave Whitman a comfortable genre to write about slavery. Also, enough time had passed for Whitman to add in “Ethiopia” by 1881 because the war had ended 15 years prior and thus tensions were not as high. Folsom wrote that “‘Ethiopia Saluting the Colors’ would become a key element in his radical poetic reconstruction, for eventually he would incorporate it into his final (1881) version of ‘DrumTaps,’ thus inserting a volatile issue--the role of blacks in America’s future” (55). Whitman added “Ethiopia” because he must have felt that his collection was missing something. Bellis argues that Whitman added a *Sequel* because reconstruction and Lincoln’s death were



missing in the collection. Whitman also places “Ethiopia” in the collection because he knew his project of representing the war would be incomplete without representing slavery or emancipation of the slave. Whitman knew that slavery was at the root of the war and that he needed to represent it for the sake of his poetic goal.

Melville had a trajectory similar to Whitman’s and has also been accused of silencing his radical opinions over slavery and colonization. Melville’s views were also influenced by his family. Like Whitman, his family had deep ties to the American Revolution. Erkkila writes that “Melville’s paternal grandfather, Thomas Melvill, was a member of the Boston Tea Party; and his maternal grandfather, General Peter Gansevoort, had successfully defended Fort Stanwix against British and Indian attack during the Revolution” (253). Melville’s family history is rooted in American freedom and the spread of democracy. His grandfather Gansevoort supported the annexation of Texas and western expansion and believed in Manifest Destiny. Melville eventually criticized such expansions outright.

Unlike Whitman, Melville never had a career as a journalist. Melville was certainly influenced by periodicals but he also saw the effects of colonialism by being a whaler. Erkkila writes: “experiences in England, the South Pacific, and South America enabled him to see firsthand the dehumanizing global effects of the spread of capitalist industrialism and European and American imperialism” (255). This marks a clear difference between Whitman and Melville. Whitman thought of expansion as a growth of liberty. Whitman was, of course, against the brutality of imperialism but he thought that expansion could be a tool to advance civilization. “Whitman was more sanguine in his vision of westward expansion as part of a universal democratic advance toward liberation from the tyrannical orders of the past” (255) Erkkila

writes. Whitman looked at expansion as a liberating action. He believed America offered a means of throwing off old tyrannies and providing individuals more freedom.

Melville could never believe in the good intentions of expansion after his experiences abroad. Melville's outlook on American expansion is clearly represented in his first autobiographical novel *Typee*. In the novel, he is taken hostage in the south sea by the Typee people. He gets acquainted with their way of life and is worried about eventual colonization. "The Anglo-Saxon have extirpated Paganism from the greater part of the North American continent; but with it they have likewise extirpated the greater portion of the Red race" (188) writes Melville. He understood that colonization had dreadful consequences. He understood that native peoples could die from the introduction of multiple diseases and could die over disagreements with colonists. Furthermore, Melville questioned what colonization achieved for native peoples. He argues that the introduction of the "Anglo Saxon" does not help natives to have a full stomach. Melville writes: "The famished wretches are cut off in this manner from their natural supplies, they are told by their benefactors to work and earn their support by the sweat of their brows" (188). Melville argues here that native people already have a cultivation system that sustains the population but colonizers will ruin such a system and the native people will have to work hard for food that, earlier, had been easily accessible to them.

Whitman and Melville have different views on the expansion of American democracy. Whitman perceived it as a hopeful expansion of freedom while Melville could not espouse that ideal because of his experience. Whitman's original position as a Unionist was based on his belief that the spread and unity of American Democracy was an important concept that the Union should preserve [this point has been adequately made earlier so it seems redundant to be saying it

again here]. Melville like Whitman was a Unionist because he believed in stopping the spread of slavery but Melville did not have a grand view of expansion like Whitman.

Melville was anti-slavery before the Civil War like Whitman. Many scholars like Susan M. Ryan argue that Melville experienced something close to slavery. As a sailor, he was basically an indentured slave who was forced to work for little pay, starved, and had little freedom. Melville's reason for ditching his ship in the south sea is because he could not endure being an indentured slave upon a whaling ship any longer. In *Typee*, his captain was tyrannical and would not turn the ship towards land even though the sailor's rations were gone. Sailors on these voyages were also made up of many different races and ethnicities. Melville was acquainted with people from different places in the world and who grew up in different cultures. Melville's experience as a sailor had influenced his particular outlook on the effects of colonization and the wrongs of enslaving a race.

As with Whitman, we can also track Melville's political beliefs by the journals in which he published. Whitman was a journalist and poet who wrote articles supporting the Wilmot Proviso and other anti-slavery articles. Melville wrote fiction for *Putnam's Monthly*. Sheila Post-Lauria details the connection Melville had to the periodical: "*Putnam's Monthly* started in 1853 as a critical commentary upon the times . . . the publisher, George Palmer Putnam, the chief editor, Charles F. Briggs, and the contributors were closely linked to the anti-slavery movement" (2-3). Melville published a good portion of his later and shorter fiction in *Putnam's Monthly* because his work was often critical of the political status quo. Post-Lauria specifically references "Benito Cereno," a story about the aftermath of a slave takeover of a ship. Melville was one of those writers who "undermine racial stereotypes" by portraying "people of color as human beings imbued with both civilized and what travelers referred to as 'native' or 'barbaric'"

qualities” (6). “Benito Cereno” does portray people of color as having civilized qualities such as manners and cunning. They can also be driven to barbaric acts as his story makes vividly clear.

Melville is often described as highlighting “ambiguity.” It is not always clear if people of color in Melville’s writings are to be viewed as decent and civilized or barbaric and uncivilized because they often seem to possess all of those qualities. Susan M. Ryan discusses Melville’s depictions of racially ambiguous characters in her article “Misgivings: Melville, Race, and the Ambiguities of Benevolence.” Ryan argues that in *The Confidence Man* one of Melville’s conmen is an African American beggar, but the beggar may only be passing as black in order to receive more money. The conflict for the other characters in the novel is that they do not want to give a white man the same charity as they would to a “black man.” Characters are also shocked that a white man would pass as an African American. The other characters are disturbed at such a notion. Ryan explains that Melville depicts these characters as disturbed because he likes to “play with the notions of overturning established social hierarchies” (692). Melville understood that social hierarchies were not solid and could be disturbed. Melville did not humanize slaves through a strong poetic argument but wanted to show the instability of social hierarchies in his fiction.

Whitman and Melville both were outspokenly anti-slavery before the Civil War but both quieted their radical writings during the Civil War. Whitman and Melville both did so because they recognized the tension that the issue could and did create. Melville may not have matched Whitman's passionate attachment to the Union but he certainly feared the foundational beliefs of the Confederacy. Brian Yothers specifies Melville’s Unionist alignment in his article “Melville’s Reconstructions: ‘The Swamp Angel,’ ‘Formerly a Slave,’ and the Moorish Maid in ‘Lee in the

Capitol.” Yothers writes: “The essence of the Southern cause, Melville makes clear, is the ‘systematic degradation of man,’ a system of racial bigotry that destroys the oppressed physically and the oppressor morally” (65). Melville sided with the North because he had a strong view that slavery was destructive for blacks and whites alike.

Melville’s muffling of his treatment of race can be puzzling, though like Whitman, he was aware of the tension that the topic of race could create. Both Melville and Whitman understood the violence of the war—Whitman through direct experience in the Civil War hospitals and Melville primarily by reading periodicals. Melville’s “Supplement” hints at why he curbed his commentary. He explained that he did not wish to contribute to a “bitterness which every sensible American must wish at an end” (263). Later in the “Supplement,” he writes “Let us be Christians toward our fellow-whites, as well as philanthropists toward the blacks, our fellow-men” (268). Melville strives to be even handed toward northerners and southerners and blacks and whites, even though his remarks here and elsewhere betray a patronizing attitude toward blacks (he elsewhere says that “The blacks, in their infant pupilage to freedom, appeal to the sympathies of every humane mind”). Like Whitman, Melville is concerned with the future of the country and quiets his radical dealings with race to avoid friction and divisiveness.

Melville’s poem “Formerly a Slave” is an anomaly like Whitman’s “Ethiopia Saluting the Colors.” This poem is consistent with his quieting of racial topics in that the muted tone and generalized language of the poem lack edge in Melville’s treatment of the peculiar institution. Melville seems to project for this woman and her people into the very distant future. Melville might have added this poem to the collection because he recognized the fundamental connection between the war itself and racial slavery. Leaving out a representation of slavery or emancipation would be an obvious omission. Also, there might be some therapeutic distance from the topic for

Melville. Whitman distanced himself from a sensitive topic by writing “Ethiopia” as a formal poem. Melville might be distancing himself from the topic since “Formerly a Slave” is an ekphrastic poem. Melville is not writing about a real former slave but a painting of one. He is interpreting a painting done by Elihu Vedder that is also titled “Formerly a Slave.” These two poems have a striking similarity: both poets write about an elderly woman who has just become free. Out of all the ways in which a poet could depict a slave, both Melville and Whitman choose to represent the issue of newly freed people as an elderly woman. This image is a very sentimental image meant to evoke gentle emotions from the reader. The image of an elderly woman is not threatening and should not anger anyone.

Whitman has a history of writing about African American women. Martin Klammer wrote about Whitman’s depictions of African Americans in 1830-40, and he describes Whitman’s depictions of men first. Whitman had some fairly blunt words when it came to particular African American men. Klammer quoted from Whitman’s article “A Walk about Town” in which Whitman complained about how he saw a man mistreat a mule “Wished I owned the negro; wouldn’t treat him as he treated the mule, but make him a present of a cowskin, and make him whip himself” (57). Importantly, Whitman might just be in a moment of passion because he saw mistreatment of an innocent animal. Significantly, Whitman does not want to whip the man himself but have that man do it to himself. I would argue that Whitman’s desire to own that person was only predicated on wanting to correct that person’s etiquette which is only a momentary desire like when adults wish that misbehaving children were theirs to punish. Whitman might be just as mad if another person had mistreated the mule but he would not have the institution of slavery as an available agent for revenge fantasy. However, Whitman is overlooking the fact that the man has probably been mistreated by a multitude of people and

could have been mistreating the mule because he has a schedule that is enforced by others who mistreat him for being late.

Klammer quoted that highly disturbing passage to juxtapose how Whitman wrote about African American men with how he wrote about women. Whitman depicts African American men in favorable terms in the 1855 *Leaves of Grass*, but he was also capable of articulating more unsettling attitudes and beliefs about African American men. Interestingly, however, Whitman's accounts of African American women are more consistently positive. He wrote about the beauty of mixed-race women in New Orleans: “women with splendid bodies--no bustles, no corsets, no enormities of any sort: large, luminous, rich eyes: face a rich olive: habits indolent, yet not lazy as we define laziness North: fascinating, magnetic, sexual, ignorant, illiterate: always more than pretty—'pretty' is too weak a word” (58). Whitman had been writing about the sexuality of enslaved and free mixed-race women since *Franklin Evans* (1842). He also arguably diminishes these women by praising the good cup of coffee they make, thereby emphasizing the service they can provide to men.

The way in which Whitman writes about slave women is altered by the time he writes “I Sing the Body Electric.” He found another way to discuss slave women that is connected to sexuality which is motherhood. Whitman wrote: “Her daughter or their daughters’ daughters . . . who knows who shall mate with them? / Who knows through the centuries what heroes may come for them? / In them and of them natal love . . . in them the divine mystery . . . the same old beautiful mystery.” (Whitman). Whitman also discusses the future generations of a slave man in “I Sing the Body Electric” as we have seen.

Intriguingly, sexuality and motherhood are omitted from “Ethiopia Saluting the Colors.” The women in “Saluting the Colors” is described by the speaker, one of Sherman's soldiers, as

ugly: “hardly human, / With your woolly- white and turban’d head, and bare boney feet.”

Readers can tell that the soldier does not have a good way to interact with the woman because he does not understand her experiences and why standing by the road would be worth her time. He questions why she is at the roadside. She lacks the beauty that might have led the soldier to a more generous and understanding assessment.

Melville also wrote about women and sexuality. Elizabeth Schultz and Haskell Springer argue that he did so in order to give his readers a different perspective in their book *Melville & Women*. Pacific Island women were sometimes stigmatized for being unruly with their sexuality but they also spurred fascination as when traders going to islands found local women showing sailors all their tattoos. Schultz and Springer quote from Max Radiguet who was a secretary to the etat-major general on a lead frigate: “She saw nothing wrong with showing us with pride a splendid bundle (or flowering) of invention, a veritable masterpiece of inlays which covered her loins” (167). Instances like this created the impression that Pacific Island women had “unrestrained sexuality.” Melville praised these women’s sexuality and urged readers to view them in a different light.

His sexual praise was often accompanied by empowerment. Schultz and Springer argue that Melville cared about empowered women because he grew up around many women and he was influenced by some prominent women figures. They write: “Living for many years in New York City, Melville . . . would have seen the nineteenth century’s great women performers as well as become familiar with their roles. He admired the works of Madame de Stael and was personally acquainted with several prominent women writers including Catharine Maria Sedgwick . . . and Alice and Phoebe Cary” (4). Schultz and Springer added that “the arguments for women’s equality made by his bold contemporaries . . . are not directly reflected in his



writings, but in them he reveals a consciousness of powerful and self-actualized individual women as well as of women's sexuality, of women's disempowerment, and of working women's lives" (4). There is some evidence in his biography that he was invested in portraying women's issues. This might be surprising since Melville is thought to be an example of hyper-masculinity, has few main women characters, and may well have physically abused his wife. Clearly, there is complexity in Melville's relationship to women and in his writing about women.

*Typee* gives readers an example of women's equality and sexuality paired together. Tommo (Melville) while "trapped" in the land of the *Typee* is enjoying himself by bathing with women. He writes about "remember[ing] upon one occasion plunging in among a parcel of these river nymphs" (132). Tommo is describing flirtatious actions while he is bathing with some women. He talks about how they were grabbing him all over and toying with him by dunking him under the water. This of course is sexualized. However later in the passage he describes them as: "virtuous and intelligent" (133). After that experience, Tommo wants the women to return, and he wants to visit with a woman named Fayaway in particular. However, it is against the *Typee* tradition to allow women into the water while men are in canoes. Tommo despised this sexist condition and made his position clear to the *Typee* men: "But to this procedure I was averse; I not only wanted the canoe to stay where it was, but I wanted the beautiful Fayaway to get into it, and paddle with me about the lake"(133). Tommo is motivated to speak for equality here because he wants the company of a beautiful and intelligent women. He goes to Mehevi (one of the chiefs) to express his concern: "I could not understand why a woman should not have as much right to enter a canoe as a man" (134). Tommo describes their discussion as long and theological. Tommo was successful: "Fayaway's dispensation from this portion of the taboo was at length procured. Such an event I believe never before had occurred" (134). This moment is

pretty triumphant if Fayaway was one of the only women to get into a canoe. Tommo argued for more equality and received more equality. To readers, Tommo stipulated that women's sexuality and intelligence were good reasons for them to be socially equal to men.

As Whitman did with "Ethiopia," Melville in "Formerly a Slave" avoids any hint of sexualized exoticism. However, Melville is not doing something completely new with this poem. Melville often described the "disempowerment" of women. Schultz and Springer note that "Melville creates embellished versions of historical figures, establishing through his portraits of the queen the political and cultural condition of the Pacific islands he visits. These figures make visible the damage done by would-be 'civilizers'" (163). These queens were empowered and exercised influence over men until they were undermined by the "would-be 'civilizers.'" "Formerly a Slave" depicts the visible damage. First, Melville describes what he sees in the painting of the woman, the damage done by slavery: "The sufferance of her race is shown," (1). In the painting the horror of slavery is visible even in her expression. Motherhood rather than sexuality becomes the focus in "Formerly a Slave": "Her children's children they shall know / The good withheld from her" (3). Melville is not using motherhood as a platform for equality like Whitman but he uses the old woman's motherhood to relieve tension.

The age of these women helps them to be non-threatening physically and politically. Melville finishes the first stanza in "Formerly a Slave:" "The sufferance of her race is shown And retrospect of life / Which now too late deliverance dawns upon; yet is she not at strife" (1-2). This elderly woman's deliverance is too late. She will not have decades ahead to enjoy her new freedom but she is nonetheless shows no bitterness towards her oppressors: "yet she is not a strife." She will not be taking part in Reconstruction. Only her children will utilize their new freedom: "Her children's children they shall know / The good withheld from her" (3). Melville

expresses confidence that justice and equality will come for African American, though not quickly. Elderly women and grandchildren are both non-threatening because neither raises the challenge of a fully-empowered black presence in a multi-racial current moment. Instead the implications of emancipation are deferred for another generation. Presciently, Melville saw that freedom would not be fully enjoyed by emancipated seniors and that the war would not change the discriminatory nature of the country. Emancipation did not signify equality for Melville.

The elderly woman Whitman depicts is also non-threatening for reasons that go beyond her age. She is non-threatening because she is marveling at the white soldiers that are passing by. She is not inhabiting the side of the road with any duplicitous or evil intent. Instead, she is “Saluting the Colors” in a respectful gesture of allegiance or acceptance as a new subject of those colors. The elderly woman can be viewed as submitting to the soldiers that are walking by.

She is also non-threatening because of the cultural distance between her and the soldier she interacts with in the poem. The soldier does not understand the significance of the army's actions in relation to elderly women. Union soldiers fought for a variety reasons and many had mixed feelings at best about the liberation of slaves. Through its dramatization of the interaction between the soldier-speaker and the elderly woman, the poem emphasized that many northern soldiers fought for reasons other than freeing slaves. Both the soldier and the elderly women are struggling to grasp a new reality as the war brought slavery to an abrupt ending.

This cultural difference is also represented through language. The elderly woman speaks in a strange rendering of black dialect. When the Northern soldier asks her why she has come to view the troops, she answers by saying: “*Me master years a hundred since from my parents sunder'd / A little child, they caught me as the savage beast is caught, / Then hither me across the sea the cruel slaver brought*” (7-9). She does not answer the question directly. If she did,

then she would be interpreting the war for the Northern soldier. With her reply, she is trying to work through and articulate some intricate thoughts. The elderly woman is awestruck by thinking about how she was captured as a child and yet now, decades later, she is free. She is marveling at the progression of the country. We do not know if this woman had any hope that slavery would be abolished but she has lived through enslavement and now liberation. Living nearly her whole life in slavery must have been bleak, but the elderly woman does not call the white man cruel but instead narrows her criticism to the “cruel slaver.”

The Northern soldier had asked her a question when she was occupied in a moment of amazement. I do not think that readers are supposed to read her as happy but as awestruck and stunned by the fact that she was enslaved as a child yet freed in old age. Whitman and Melville both use the non-threatening stages in life, childhood and old age, to broach the sensitive subject of race. The elderly woman’s amazement allows the Northern soldier to enter into amazement, too. The soldier continues to ponder the elderly woman after their dialogue. The soldier questions “Why wag your head with turban bound, yellow, red and green / Are the things so strange and marvelous you see or have seen?” (14-15). Whitman ends the poem with this question and through this question readers have the understanding that both soldier and woman are mutually marveling at each other. While the elderly woman is marveling at the country’s progression and the soldiers, the soldier is marveling at the untold experiences of the elderly woman. This is an amiable interaction with each individual allowed to define the experience of the war as they please and each marveling over the other.

Whitman and Melville both found a relatively safe way to fit an emancipation poem into their collections. Whitman distanced the poem from his usual style by abandoning free verse.

Importantly, too, the poem was not part of his original collection when *Drum-Taps* was published as a book but was written later and only became part of his cluster of war poems in 1881, by which time his poetry about the Civil War book had been folded into *Leaves of Grass*. Melville created distance by not even talking about a person but instead a painting of one. As mentioned previously, these poems were written at a time when many white Northerners feared new competition for jobs from emancipated African American men. Women, and especially elderly women, represented less of a threat on the job market.

Another Melville poem, “The Swamp Angel” (1867), is more daring and is often interpreted as treating the anger of slaves. This poem describes a cannon “with a thick Afric lip” that is firing on a city raising the idea of slaves claiming revenge. The poem details the destruction caused by this cannon that seems to act on its own volition. The double meaning of this poem can be seen throughout: “Is this the proud City? the scorner / Which never would yield the ground? / Which mocked at the coal-black Angel?” (18-19). Mocking the black angel is most likely about Southerners enforcing the many indignities associated with slavery and never willingly yielding ground either in politics or in warfare. The poem also ends with a plea for readers to be compliant with the destruction of the city because it deserved to be destroyed for its past actions. This is another example of Melville representing slaves which does not alter the view that Melville and Whitman skim over slavery in their war poetry. There is still a certain distance in this poem because Melville is being elusive here by not talking about slaves directly but using the cannon as a metaphor. I wanted to include this poem here to show that there is more to read from Melville and Whitman in terms of relating their Civil War poetry to slavery.

We should also take into account that both poets wrote about John Brown in a sympathetic manner. Melville wrote “The Portent” (1859) and Whitman wrote “Year of

Meteors” (1859-1860). Melville’s poem is exclusively dealing with John Brown while Whitman’s poem is dealing with other events before the war like president Abraham Lincoln.

David S. Reynolds spends a few pages discussing these two poems in his massive study of John Brown *John Brown, Abolitionist: The Man Who Killed Slavery, Sparked the Civil War, and Seeded Civil Rights*. He discussed these poems to show how John Brown was represented by others at the time of the Civil War, and he characterizes Brown as a person who “thought slavery could be combatted only through decisive action” (448). Brown held a very different view than Whitman and Melville yet both poets chose to represent him because of the sheer importance of his radical views and his commitment to violent opposition to slavery. Brown's famous raid was a direct predecessor to the Civil War.

Reynolds's title of the chapter that discusses both Whitman and Melville’s poetry is “The Prophet.” Both poets treat Brown as a prophetic figure. Interestingly, both Melville and Whitman associate Brown with the Great meteor of 1860. This actual meteor was linked to the brewing conflict. Both Brown and the meteor became omens for the coming war in these two poems. Melville wrote: “(*Weird John Brown*), *The meteor of the war*” (6).

However, John Brown meant more to Whitman and Melville than just a starting place for the war. As noted before, they are both sympathetic with John Brown. Reynolds rightly claims that Melville’s poetic goal was to “appreciate both sides of this conflict, to limn suffering and triumph among triumph among both Northerners and Southerners with sympathy. John Brown’s values remained for him a measure of moral rectitude” (447). Despite the horror of the war and the horror of John Brown’s crimes, they had a rectifying purpose for Melville.

Whitman “admired Brown’s courage” (448). Reynolds even quoted Whitman directly :

“Such devotion, such superb courage, men will not forget--cannot be forgotten . . . I never enthused greatly over Brown” (449). Whitman admiring the strength of Brown as an individual but had reservations about him.

Both Whitman and Melville knew w Brown was a radical abolitionist who was willing to kill to overturn the wrong of slavery. Scholars have reasoned that Melville and Whitman quieted their anti-slavery writing during and after the war so that they would not create strife and opposition to their poetry yet they both took the chance by depicting this controversial and, to some, offensive person.

Whitman depicts but does not name this controversial person when he wrote: I would sing how an old man, tall, with white hair, mounted the scaffold in Virginia;  
 (I was at hand—silent I stood, with teeth shut close—I watch'd;  
 I stood very near you, old man, when cool and indifferent, but trembling with age and your unheal'd wounds, you mounted the scaffold;) (4-6)

There is some language here that is non-threatening like “Ethiopia” in that an elderly man is described and he is non-threatening while he awaits his punishment by hanging. Whitman's use of the word “indifferent” is also non-political, non-threatening, and unemotional. “Indifferent” describes Brown here and not Whitman. I think this is Whitman being careful about employing the person of Brown but there is other language in the poem that is anything but indifferent.

Whitman is “singing” about the old man and with this poet “to sing” is typically celebratory. “To sing” is the same verb he uses to celebrate his own existence: “I celebrate myself, and sing myself” for “Song of Myself.” Also, the act of standing with someone can be very powerful. Whitman did celebrate Brown in a hidden way and he claims to imaginatively stand with him at the time of his execution. This poem should be considered when we think of Whitman and his representations of slavery because he celebrated a man who was an abolitionist. John Brown’s courage was enough for Whitman to include him in his work. Whitman is only celebrating the man and not his actions directly but to celebrate the man does bring to mind his actions indirectly.

Melville’s depiction of John Brown is more somber because Melville describes an execution: “*Hanging from the beam, Slowly swaying (such the law)*” (1). There is an immediate hint of criticism along with the hanging body. “Such the law” seems to be in disagreement with the law. Melville does not necessarily think that Brown should have been hung for his raid. Melville evokes the future war directly with this line: “So your future veils its face” (4), hinting at the death to come for the country. Brown died for the freedom of slaves, and his dead body becomes a haunting symbol of the war to come, a war that resulted—regardless of what some said to the contrary—from slavery itself.



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