

## ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: AMERICAN BARDS: JAMES M. WHITFIELD, ELIZA R. SNOW, JOHN ROLLIN RIDGE, AND WALT WHITMAN

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Despite recent efforts to recover a diverse range of nineteenth-century American poets, the aura that continues to surround Walt Whitman as the quintessential American bard has yet to be sufficiently challenged. This dissertation defamiliarizes the Whitman mystique of the national outsider-*cum*-national bard—the author as “one of the roughs” who also claims to be a representative American poet—by reinterpreting *Leaves of Grass* through the careers of three poets on the margins of national culture whose projects for American poetry parallel the central aspects of Whitman’s own. During the 1850s, African American separatist James M. Whitfield, Mormon pioneer Eliza R. Snow, and Anglo-Cherokee journalist John Rollin Ridge claimed to speak for the United States as American bards despite the fact that they were only tenuously connected to the nation which they claimed to represent. Two years before Whitman first attempted to poetically contain a contradictory nation in the first (1855) edition of *Leaves of Grass*, James M. Whitfield recorded the conflicts of a nation riven by the contradictions of slavery in *America and Other Poems* (1853). Similarly, at the same time that Whitman was

announcing himself as the poet of a new American religion, Eliza R. Snow had already been recognized as the poet laureate of a faith that observers such as Leo Tolstoy referred to as “the American religion.” While Whitman would be characterized as “the first white aboriginal” by D. H. Lawrence in the early twentieth century, in the 1850s John Rollin Ridge had already constructed a poetic persona that attempted to mediate the United States’ nostalgia for an indigenous past with its faith in national progress. By claiming to speak as national representatives to a nation that rejected them, Whitfield, Snow, and Ridge not only provide alternatives to a Whitman-centered approach to antebellum American poetry, they also offer insight into the contested nature of national identity at a time when poets in the United States were anxious to define their nation both politically and artistically.

AMERICAN BARDS: JAMES M. WHITFIELD, ELIZA R. SNOW,  
JOHN ROLLIN RIDGE, AND WALT WHITMAN

By

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## Acknowledgements

This dissertation began in the spring semester of 2000. During that time, I discovered Professor Robert S. Levine's online edition of James M. Whitfield's *America and Other Poems* (1853) while I was enrolled in a graduate seminar taught by Professor Martha Nell Smith. In the context of Professor Smith's exhortation that I rethink Walt Whitman's place in the nineteenth century, Professor Levine's comparison of Whitfield's poems with the poetry of *Leaves of Grass* struck me as a provocative way to put Whitman in conversation with underappreciated antebellum poets. When I decided to write a dissertation about the similarities and differences between Whitman's project for American poetry and the parallel projects conducted by James M. Whitfield, Eliza R. Snow, and John Rollin Ridge, I was fortunate enough to have Professors Smith and Levine agree to serve as co-chairs. Their influence was integral to the genesis of this dissertation—to Professor Smith I owe the exigence of this project; to Professor Levine I owe the methodology—and their continued support has been essential to its completion. I am also grateful to Professor Ralph Bauer for the early support he gave me, and I regret that he was ultimately unavailable to serve as a formal committee member. Professor Kandice Chuh's willingness to take Professor Bauer's place in the committee is a testament to the professional generosity that I have come to associate with her. My thanks is also due to Professor Carla Peterson, whose skills as a scholar and teacher I hold in the highest regard, and to Professor R. Gordon Kelly, who graciously agreed to represent the Dean of the Graduate School for my dissertation defense.

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## Introduction

The American bards shall be marked for generosity and affection and for  
encouraging competitors [. . .] without monopoly or secrecy . . . glad to pass any  
thing to any one . . . hungry for equals night and day.

—Walt Whitman

Walt Whitman often presented himself as the only nineteenth-century poet who understood how to “prove this puzzle the New World, / And to define America.”<sup>1</sup> As he wrote in a pair of lines that never made its way into a published poem, “I alone advance among the people en-masse, coarse and strong / I am he standing first there, solitary chanting the true America.”<sup>2</sup> That Whitman never published these lines suggests that they struck him as too bold a claim to make, too bold even for the poet who wrote an anonymous self-review of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* declaring that he had arrived on the U.S. poetic scene as “An American bard at last!”<sup>3</sup> Even though Whitman himself hesitated to say that he was the “solitary” poet of “the true America,” generations of scholars have ceded this point to him, calling him the “solitary singer” of the nineteenth century and the definitive American bard.<sup>4</sup> But as the study of nineteenth-

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<sup>1</sup> Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, ed. Michael Moon (New York: Norton, 2002), 5. Hereafter cited as *LG*.

<sup>2</sup> Walt Whitman, *The Uncollected Poetry and Prose of Walt Whitman*, 2 Vols. ed. Emory Holloway (New York: P. Smith, 1932), 2:91.

<sup>3</sup> “‘Walt Whitman and His Poems,’ *United States Review* 5 (September 1855),” in *Walt Whitman: The Contemporary Reviews*, ed. Kenneth M. Price (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 205.

<sup>4</sup> The phrase “solitary singer” was adapted from Whitman’s “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking” to describe Whitman’s status as the lone American bard in Gay Wilson Allen’s

century poetry has expanded in recent decades to include a wider range of American poets—a range that more accurately reflects the vibrant poetic milieu within which Whitman wrote—the image of Whitman as the “solitary singer” has begun to fade.

Despite the recent trend to broaden the scope of nineteenth-century American poetry exemplified by such anthologies as *Whitman and Dickinson’s Contemporaries: An Anthology of their Verse* and *Poetry of the American Renaissance: A Diverse Anthology from the Romantic Period*, however, Whitman scholars have been reluctant to produce in-depth critical studies that place Whitman in conversation with poets from his period.<sup>5</sup> While Dickinson scholars have produced numerous comparative studies of Emily Dickinson’s place amid nineteenth-century American writers, two different trends have dominated studies of Whitman’s relationship to the nineteenth century and to other American poets.<sup>6</sup> On the one hand, studies such as David Reynolds’ *Walt Whitman’s America: A Cultural Biography* and Ed Folsom’s *Walt Whitman’s Native Representations* contextualize Whitman within the social and cultural world of the nineteenth century, but

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influential biography, *The Solitary Singer: A Critical Biography of Walt Whitman* (New York: Macmillan, 1955).

<sup>5</sup> *Whitman and Dickinson’s Contemporaries: An Anthology of their Verse*, ed. Robert Bain (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1996). *Poetry of the American Renaissance: A Diverse Anthology from the Romantic Period*, ed. Paul Kane (New York: George Braziller, 1995).

<sup>6</sup> Unlike Whitman scholars, Dickinson scholars have been more willing to compare Emily Dickinson with other nineteenth-century American poets. See Elizabeth A. Petrino, *Emily Dickinson and Her Contemporaries: Women=s Verse in America, 1820–1885* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1998); Joanne Dobson, *Dickinson and the Strategies of Reticence: The Woman Writer in Nineteenth-Century America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989); and Cheryl Walker, “Teaching Dickinson as a Gen(i)us: Emily Among the Women” *Emily Dickinson Journal* 2.1 (1993): 172–80.



not necessarily the poetry of the period.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, studies such as Neeli Cherkovsky's *Whitman's Wild Children* and Thomas Gardner's *Discovering Ourselves in Whitman: The Contemporary American Long Poem* situate Whitman among other U.S. poets, but they are all the twentieth-century poets whom he influenced and not the nineteenth-century poets with whom he shared a historical moment.<sup>8</sup>

While Whitman scholars are comfortable placing Whitman's poetry within the context of nineteenth-century American culture, they hesitate to place Whitman alongside nineteenth-century American poets, preserving the assumption that Whitman's only peers are his twentieth-century heirs. The few exceptions to this rule—which include insightful comparative studies with such popular poets from the period as Longfellow and Frances E. W. Harper, as well as poets who had limited notoriety in the nineteenth century such as Dickinson and Rafael Pombo—have provided a much-needed corrective to the tendency to isolate Whitman from his contemporaries.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, none of these

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<sup>7</sup> David Reynolds, *Walt Whitman's America: A Cultural Biography* (New York: Knopf, 1995); Ed Folsom, *Walt Whitman's Native Representations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

<sup>8</sup> Neeli Cherkovski, *Whitman's Wild Children: Portraits of Twelve Poets* (South Royalton, VT: Steerforth Press, 1999); Thomas Gardner, *Discovering Ourselves in Whitman: The Contemporary American Long Poem* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989). See also James E. Miller, Jr., *The American Quest for a Supreme Fiction: Whitman's Legacy in the Personal Epic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), Jeffrey Walker, *Bardic Ethos and the American Long Poem: Whitman, Pound, Crane, Williams, Olson* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), and *Walt Whitman: The Measure of His Song* 2d edition, ed. Jim Perlman, Ed Folsom, and Dan Campion (Duluth, MN: Holy Cow! Press, 1998).

<sup>9</sup> For a comparison of Whitman and Pombo see Kirstin Silva Gruesz, *Ambassadors of Culture: The Transamerican Origins of Latino Writing* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002); for Whitman and Harper see Michael Bennett, "Frances Ellen Watkins Sings the Body Electric," in *Recovering the Black Female Body: Self-Representations by*

comparative projects has considered the central aspect of Whitman's poetic persona that, more than anything else, has contributed to the mystique that surrounds him as a supposedly solitary figure: namely, the persona of the national outsider as national bard. Whitman's claim to be a representative American poet came during an era when many poets in the United States were attempting to create a distinctively national breed of poetry.<sup>10</sup> His posture as a national outsider who audaciously claimed to speak for the nation as its representative bard, however, has set him apart from these other poets and has contributed to his enduring mystique.

For example, in the same anonymous self-review where Whitman introduces himself to the U.S. reading public as "An American bard at last!" he also says that he comes "rough and unbidden" onto the scene, suggesting that, although he is fully qualified to assume the office of national bard, his "roughness" prevents him from being accepted by a nation that expects a refined and eloquent national poet. In the unpublished lines cited previously, Whitman similarly says that he speaks for "the true America" in a voice that is "coarse and strong." While Whitman adopted the persona of the

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*African American Women*, ed. Michael Bennett and Vanessa D. Dickerson (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 19–40; for Whitman and Dickinson see Sandra M. Gilbert "The American Sexual Poetics of Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson" in *Reconstructing American Literary History* ed. Sacvan Bercovitch (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986. 123–54); and for Whitman and Longfellow see Angus Fletcher, "Whitman and Longfellow: Two Types of the American Poet," *Raritan* 10.4 (Spring 1991): 131–45.

<sup>10</sup> The story of antebellum literary nationalism can be found in Benjamin T. Spencer, *The Quest for Nationality: An American Literary Campaign* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1957); Robert E. Spiller, ed. *The American Literary Revolution, 1783–1837* (New York: New York University Press, 1967); and William L. Hedges, "Toward a National Literature," in *Columbia Literary History of the United States*, ed. Emory Elliot (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 187–202.

grandfatherly “Good Gray Poet” following the Civil War, throughout the antebellum period Whitman aligned himself with working-class men and said that, like them, he was “one of the roughs.” Whitman’s identification with working Americans took advantage of a cultural logic that put the lower classes at the rhetorical heart of Jacksonian democracy while at the same time viewing their “rough” and “coarse” behavior as a threat to civil society.

Whitman has retained a singular place in the history of American poetry in large part because of the aura he generated—along with the help of 150 years of sympathetic critics—of the marginal figure who leverages his position on the fringes of society into a bid for the office of national bard. By defining American democracy as the homosocial bonds between men in a republic of artisan laborers, the dominant critical narrative goes, Whitman took those things that potentially jeopardized his bid for public acceptance—his homosexuality and his affiliation with the working classes—and turned them into the rationale for his claim to the title of national bard.<sup>11</sup> Of the recent attempts to recover the forgotten poets of the nineteenth century, none has seriously considered that the Whitmanian posture of the national outsider as national bard was also adopted by other poets from the period. As such, no study has identified nineteenth-century U.S. poets who, like Whitman, made unlikely bids for the title of American bard from the margins of national culture.

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<sup>11</sup> There are notable exceptions to the tendency to embrace Whitman as “one of the roughs.” Esther Shephard, for example, argues with a crusader’s zeal to expose Whitman for faking the pose of the working-class outsider in *Walt Whitman’s Pose* (New York: Harcourt, 1938), and Kenneth M. Price considers Whitman’s erudition in *Whitman and Tradition: The Poet in His Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

This dissertation responds to this tendency in the scholarship by identifying three neglected antebellum poets who, like Whitman, took those characteristics that potentially disqualified them from national citizenship and then redeployed them as their qualifications to speak to and for the nation. These poets are African American separatist James M. Whitfield, Mormon pioneer Eliza R. Snow, and Cherokee journalist John Rollin Ridge.<sup>12</sup> Just as Whitman did, Whitfield, Snow, and Ridge claimed the office of American bard (albeit in a less bombastic way) by recasting as assets those features of their identities that would otherwise have been seen as liabilities. In addition, these poets make their unlikely bids for the title of national bard in projects for American poetry that parallel key aspects of Whitman's own. Whitman's desire to publish a book of poems that embodied the contradictions of a diverse nation was realized two years before the publication of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* when Whitfield published *America and Other Poems*. Similarly, Whitman's announcement that he was the poet of a new American religion came during the same period that Snow was recognized as the "chief poet" of an American religion that was less than thirty years old.<sup>13</sup> Finally, Whitman's attempt to bring the indigenous energy of the continent into American poetry was a task that Ridge also took upon himself in poems that he wrote under the pseudonym of "Yellow Bird."

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<sup>12</sup> Whitfield, Snow, and Ridge are by no means the only antebellum poets whose projects for American poetry parallel Whitman's. Of the poets surveyed in the course of this project, these three presented themselves as the strongest examples and as the best starting-point for a reexamination of Whitman's place amid nineteenth-century American poets who adopt the posture of the national outsider as national bard.

<sup>13</sup> Fanny Ward Stenhouse, *"Tell It All": The Story of a Life's Experience in Mormonism* (Hartford, CT: Worthington, 1874), 252.

Just as these poets speak to what Whitman would have considered to be some of the distinctively national characteristics of the United States—its diverse population, its climate for religious experimentation, and its Native inhabitants—their direct involvement with these issues threatened to exclude them from the national community. For Whitman the richness of the nation lay in its contradictions, whereas for Whitfield the contradictory presence of slavery and racism in an ostensibly free nation led to his estrangement from the United States. For Whitman the spiritual vitality of the United States demanded the creation of new religions, whereas for Snow the new American religion she belonged to was regarded as thoroughly un-American by her contemporaries. For Whitman the aboriginal heritage of the Americas was a vital component of the nation's past, whereas for Ridge being an Indian gave him occasion to feel excluded from the nation's present and future. Whitman scholars have devoted considerable attention to the way that nineteenth-century concerns over slavery and race relations, religion and utopian social movements, and expansionism and Indian Removal informed *Leaves of Grass*.<sup>14</sup> What they have not taken into consideration is that there were nineteenth-century American poets who, independent of Whitman, confronted the very issues that Whitman considered to be important aspects of the American experience at the same time that they adopted the parallel posture of the national outsider as national bard.

None of these poets (Whitman included) was sufficiently well received by his or

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<sup>14</sup> A representative sample of Whitman's work seen in the context of, respectively, African Americans, American religion, and Native Americans are Martin Klammer, *Whitman, Slavery, and the Emergence of "Leaves of Grass"* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), David Kuebrich, *Minor Prophecy: Walt Whitman's New American Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), and Folsom, *Walt Whitman's Native Representations*.

her contemporaries to garner a legitimate claim to the title of national bard. While it can feel inevitable today that the quintessential American bard would emerge from the working-class neighborhoods of antebellum New York, it is just as (un)likely that the American bard would have survived Indian Removal, joined a utopian religious movement, or fought for African American civil rights. The equally improbable claims to the title of American poet that Whitfield, Snow, and Ridge make from the margins of national culture defamiliarize a Whitman-centered narrative of antebellum poetry that makes “one of the roughs” seem to be the most plausible candidate for the office of American bard. In attempting to displace Whitman from the central spot that he has traditionally held in the study of American poetry, this dissertation employs a critical perspective that derives in part from the canon critiques of the last twenty-five years. At the same time, this dissertation follows one of the governing assumptions of Whitman studies: namely, that Whitman’s accomplishments as a poet—whether they qualify him to be a “solitary singer” or not—merit him the kind of comparative study that will expand his relevance into new arenas. Whitman himself offers the methodology for this study when he writes in the preface to the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, “The American bards shall be marked for generosity and affection and for encouraging competitors [. . .] without monopoly or secrecy . . . glad to pass any thing to any one . . . hungry for equals night and day” (*LG* 625, ellipses in original, bracketed ellipses mine). As both “competitors” and “equals,” Whitfield, Snow, Ridge, and Whitman are American bards whose overlapping, conflicting, and competing projects illuminate one another’s as much as they do the entire antebellum period itself.

The first section of this introduction provides overview biographies of Whitfield,

Snow, and Ridge, with special attention given to how their projects for American poetry intersect with key aspects of Whitman's own. The second section of this introduction argues that just as these poets duplicate Whitman's model of the national outsider who transgresses national norms in order to speak for the nation, they also provide an alternative model to the Whitmanian posture of the national outsider as national bard.

## I.

### **James M. Whitfield**

Two years before Whitman published the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, African American poet James M. Whitfield published *America and Other Poems* (1853), a carefully constructed volume of poetry whose arrangement of poems was designed to reflect the contradictory nature of a nation torn between its dependence on chattel slavery and its ostensible commitment to human liberty. By pairing poems about slavery with poems about freedom, poems about hope with poems about doubt, and so on, Whitfield gave the effect that his poetic *America* is as contradictory as the nation that it depicts in verse. In rewriting the nation as a book of poems, Whitfield's poetry resonates—albeit on a different frequency—with Whitman's comment in the preface to the 1855 *Leaves of Grass* that “The United States are essentially the greatest poem.”<sup>15</sup> Whitman used lengthy free-verse catalogues to rewrite the nation as poetry because these all-inclusive catalogues allowed him to embrace the diverse and contradictory nature of the nation that he celebrated in his poetry (“Do I contradict myself?” he asks in a now-famous passage from “Song of Myself,” “Very well then, I contradict myself. / I am large, I contain

multitudes” [LG 77]). And while Whitman himself acknowledged that slavery was one of these key contradictions—he wrote in an early draft for “Song of Myself,” “I am the poet of slaves and of the masters of slaves”<sup>16</sup>—as a political activist who was deeply concerned with the conflicts resulting from slavery and racism, Whitfield had a much less celebratory attitude towards the contradictions upon which American society was based.

Whitfield was born in Exeter, New Hampshire, on April 10, 1822, to free African American parents. He lived briefly in Boston before settling in Buffalo, New York, where he worked as a barber, wrote poetry, and participated in African American politics. By the late 1840s, he began publishing his poetry in such newspapers as *The Liberator*, *The North Star*, and *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*. When *America and Other Poems* was published in 1853, Whitfield was hailed by *Frederick Douglass’ Paper* as one of the poets who would put African American literature on the cultural map: “The hopes of the coming literary glory of colored Americans,” an anonymous reviewer wrote, can be found “in the earnest endeavors [of] many individuals among us, such as James M. Whitfield.”<sup>17</sup> Lamenting the absence of African American writers from what U.S. cultural nationalists at the time were defining as a uniquely American literary tradition, this same review observed that “while American literature is rapidly growing into universal appreciation, the name of no colored American has as yet been blazoned upon its rolls of heraldry.” Whitfield was no doubt singled out by *Frederick Douglass’ Paper* because his

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<sup>15</sup> Whitman, *Complete Poetry and Collected Prose*, ed. Kaplan, 5.

<sup>16</sup> Walt Whitman, *Notebooks and Unpublished Prose Manuscripts*, ed. Edward F. Grier, 6 Vols. (New York: New York University Press, 1984), I.67.

<sup>17</sup> *Frederick Douglass’ Paper* 23 September 1853.



volume of poems had been published only a few months earlier, but it is more than topicality that made *America and Other Poems* worth noting.

While it may seem a small thing today for Whitfield to have given his collection the same title as its opening poem, “America,” in titling his book *America and Other Poems* Whitfield boldly invoked the cultural nationalism of such prominent anthologies of American verse as Elihu Hubbard Smith’s *American Poems, Selected and Original* (1793), Samuel Kettel’s *Specimens of American Poetry* (1829), and Rufus W. Griswold’s *Poets and Poetry of America* (1842). Antebellum poetry collections by African American poets usually had titles that were evocative of antislavery and racial uplift themes (such as J. T. Holly’s *Freedom’s Offering* [1853] and William Wells Brown’s *The Antislavery Harp* [1848]), and not of American literary nationalism. The majority of Whitfield’s poems are still very much in the reform tradition of antebellum African American poetry, but Whitfield’s claim to speak to and for the nation in *America and Other Poems* was distinctive. It is somewhat ironic that Whitfield would have the reputation of being the antebellum African American poet who most actively entered the debate over a national literary tradition given that he was politically committed to a separatist movement that encouraged African Americans to leave the United States and to establish black settlements in such places as Central and South America.

Nevertheless, it is precisely this sense of being outside the nation that Whitfield used to leverage his claim to speak as a national bard. The separatist movement that Whitfield belonged to challenged the racist belief that people of African descent were rootless nomads who, because they were presumed to have no legitimate connection to the United State, could be shuttled across the Atlantic either as American slaves or as

repatriated citizens of a U.S.-backed colony in Liberia. Whitfield and his fellow separatists refuted the assumption inherent to this belief that African Americans were permanent national outsiders, and insisted that African Americans were in fact essential to American origins. Their argument was that the labor of people of African descent had made the United States what it was, and that if African Americans were to leave U.S. borders in the nineteenth century they could just as easily create a new “America” wherever they went, either in South America, or, as Whitfield demonstrated with *America and Other Poems*, in poetry.

Whitfield hoped that publishing *America and Other Poems* would herald the beginning of his career as a professional writer. While his book was modestly well received and was praised by such prominent African American men of letters as Frederick Douglass, Martin Delany, and William Wells Brown, it did not provide him with the financial windfall he had hoped for. Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, whose *Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects* was published the following year (and subsequently went through more than twenty editions), would have been a better candidate to whom the anonymous reviewer for *Frederick Douglass’ Paper* could have attached the hopes for “the coming literary glory of colored Americans.” Nevertheless, Whitfield’s bold claim to speak to and for the nation in *America and Other Poems*, along with his reconceptualization of the limitations he faced as a black poet, is a singular accomplishment in its own right.

### **Eliza R. Snow**

Up until the day in 1831 when she met the Mormon prophet Joseph Smith, Eliza

R. Snow's life history reads like a composite biography of the antebellum American poetess. Born on January 21, 1804, in the small town of Becket, Massachusetts, Snow was the granddaughter of Revolutionary War veterans and the daughter of austere Protestant parents. She demonstrated a precocious ability for poetry at a very young age, writing her homework assignments in verse and publishing poems in local newspapers under such fanciful pseudonyms as Narcissa and Pocahontas.<sup>18</sup> Snow remained single until she was almost forty years old (and never bore any children thereafter), preferring a life of independence, charitable service, and, of course, poetry. The typicality of Snow's experience changed when she joined the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in her early thirties and was dubbed "Zion's Poetess" by Joseph Smith. As the recognized poet laureate of the Mormon faith, Snow penned numerous hymns, occasional verses, and theological poems that established for her a position of authority that extended beyond her status as a poet. In addition to recognizing her as a poetess, the Mormons considered Snow to be a "priestess" and a "prophetess" as well (a singular achievement in a patriarchal religion that granted limited authority to women).<sup>19</sup>

Around the same time that Snow published her first collection of poems in 1856, Whitman was beginning to think of himself as the poet of a new American religion and of *Leaves of Grass* as the bible of that religion: he wrote in a poem published in 1860 that he planned to "inaugurate a religion" (*LG* 18), and a few years earlier he had written in a

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<sup>18</sup> Jill Mulvay Derr, "Form and Feeling in a Carefully Crafted Life: Eliza R. Snow's 'Poem of Poems,'" *Journal of Mormon History* 26.1 (2000): 1–39. 8.

<sup>19</sup> See Maureen Ursenbach Beecher, "Priestess Among the Patriarchs: Eliza R. Snow and the Mormon Female Relief Society, 1842–1887," *Religion and Society in the American West*, ed. Carl Guarneri and David Alvarez (New York: University Press of America,

note to himself that *Leaves of Grass* would be the “Bible of the New Religion.”<sup>20</sup> While Whitman would have to wait a number of years for the disciples who would receive him as the poet-priest of a new religion, Snow was already the undisputed poet-priestess of a faith that Leo Tolstoy, among others, would call “the American religion.”<sup>21</sup> Whitman said that the United States was uniquely suited for “new literatures and religions,” and that religion “must enter into the Poems of the Nation. It must make the Nation (*LG* 24, 650). Even though the Mormons’ new American religion emerged from the same nationalist context as did Whitman’s project for American poetry (they also had a new American bible in *The Book of Mormon*), most Americans did not want their nation to be remade according to the poetry of the Mormon religion.

Most nineteenth-century Americans felt either disdain or outright hostility for the Mormons, a sentiment that reached its fullest expression in the mid-1840s when the Mormons were expelled from their prosperous settlements in Ohio, Illinois, and Missouri and asked to settle outside of U.S. borders, and again in the late 1850s when a rumored uprising led the U.S. army to occupy the Mormon-run territory of Utah. The Mormons, for their part, returned to the United States the same opprobrium with which they were regarded (“we don’t owe this country a single sermon,” said Smith’s successor Brigham Young).<sup>22</sup> At the same time, the Mormons retained a strong—if reconfigured—sense of

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1987), 153–70.

<sup>20</sup> Walt Whitman, *Notes and Fragments Left by Walt Whitman*, ed. Richard Maurice Bucke (London and Ontario: Talbot, 1899), 55.

<sup>21</sup> Quoted in Harold Bloom, *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992).

national loyalty. The Mormons shared the belief that the United States was, in Snow's terms, "Earth's favored nation," but they could not unproblematically embrace the United States as the sole instrument for bringing about a political and spiritual millennium because they thought of themselves as an even more favored nation; as Snow said, they were "Columbia's noblest children."<sup>23</sup> Brigham Young expressed the Saints' opinion of themselves with respect to the nation when he said in response to comparisons of the Utah Territory with the Southern Confederacy, "We shall never secede from the Constitution of the United States. . . . The South will secede from the North and the North shall secede from us."<sup>24</sup> It was from this same sense that the Mormons formed the core of the American experience that Snow extended her calling as Zion's poetess to encompass not only the community she wrote for, but also the nation that had expelled her and her coreligionists from its borders.

James Russell Lowell expressed the conflicted relationship with the nation that Snow felt as a would-be national bard when he said that Mormonism was proof that the United States was a unique place with the potential for a distinctive breed of poetry, even though Mormons themselves were an intolerable group. In the 1855 essay "The Function of the Poet," Lowell said that despite the apparent triumph of science and technology

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<sup>22</sup> Quoted in Kenneth H. Winn, *Exiles in a Land of Liberty: Mormons in America, 1830–1846* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 236.

<sup>23</sup> Eliza R. Snow, *Poems: Religious, Historical, and Political* Vol. 1 (Liverpool: F. D Richards, 1856), 120, 256. See also Eugene E. Campbell, "Pioneers and Patriotism: Conflicting Loyalties" in *New Views of Mormon History: A Collection of Essays in Honor of Leonard J. Arrington*, ed. Davis Bitton and Maureen Ursenbach Beecher (Salt Lake City, UT: University of Utah Press, 1987. 307–22).

<sup>24</sup> Quoted in Leonard J. Arrington and Davis Bitton, *The Mormon Experience: A History*

over the imagination, Mormonism proved that the United States had the potential for great poetry. He wrote, “In this day of newspapers and electric telegraphs, in which common sense and ridicule can magnetize a whole continent between dinner and tea, we say that such a phenomenon as Mahomet were impossible, and behold Joe Smith and the State of Deseret!”<sup>25</sup> While Lowell himself never composed a single poem about the Mormons’ exodus from the United States to the western territory of Deseret (later renamed Utah by the federal government), Snow’s poetry enacts the tension in Lowell’s statement wherein Mormonism proves that American poetry is possible even though the new religion itself is as out of place in a presumably modern nation as Muslims were considered to be.

Lowell’s comparison of Mormonism with Islam was a commonplace in the nineteenth-century as stereotypes of Muslims were transplanted onto a people who believed in post-biblical prophets, additional scripture, and—most conspicuously—polygamy. (Snow herself was the polygamous wife of Joseph Smith and, after Smith’s death, Brigham Young.) These controversial beliefs led Americans to characterize the Mormons as not only resembling the West’s image of Islam, but also, according to David Brion Davis, as “embody[ing] those traits that were precise antitheses of American ideals.”<sup>26</sup> While the Mormons claimed to be returning ancient customs such as polygamy

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*of the Latter-day Saints* (New York: Vintage, 1980), 171.

<sup>25</sup> James Russell Lowell, “The Function of the Poet,” in *Literary Criticism of James Russell Lowell*, ed. Herbert F. Smith (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1969. 3–21), 15.

<sup>26</sup> David Brion Davis, “Some Themes of Counter Subversion: An Analysis of Anti-Masonic, Anti-Catholic, and Anti-Mormon Literature” in *Mormonism and American*

and prophecy to the modern world in order to rejuvenate it for the impending millennium, most Americans considered the Mormons to be a historical aberration in a nation that embraced monogamy and democracy as proof of its modernity.

The Mormons' communal living, their belief in the absolute ecclesiastical and political authority of prophets, and their polygamous marriages were seen as a step backward on the scale of historical progress that was said to have culminated in a free-market economy, democracy, and domestic monogamy. In Snow's poetry, however, she depicts the recovery of these ancient practices not as a historical aberration but as an essential precondition for an American millennium, as proof that the United States could be "Earth's favored nation" if it would join the Mormons in making a compact with sacred history that would unite the deep past of the ancient world with the millennial future of the New World. The very thing that her countrymen saw in her as un-American—the fact that she and the Mormons seemed to be moving backward in time while the rest of the nation was moving forward—was what she believed would qualify her to be an American bard.

### **John Rollin Ridge**

When D. H. Lawrence called Walt Whitman "the first white aboriginal" of American literature, it was a damnation of Whitman's overblown nationalism coupled with the faint praise that he had managed to attune himself to the "true rhythm of the

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*Culture*, ed. Marvin S. Hill and James B. Allen (New York: Harper and Row, 1972. 59–73), 61.

American continent.”<sup>27</sup> As Lawrence suggests, a fundamentally nationalistic impulse lies at the heart of white Americans’ desire to identify themselves with Native Americans, in large part because such an identification allowed whites to feel connected to a continent to which they had no historic claim. The son of a Cherokee father and a white mother, John Rollin Ridge intuited this tendency among white Americans like Whitman to appropriate Native American identity, and then he redeployed the figure of the American poet as “white aboriginal” from the other side of the color line. While Ridge is remembered today as the author of *The Adventures of Joaquin Murieta, the Celebrated California Bandit* (1854), a sensational romance about Mexican-American resistance to white settlers in gold-rush California, he was known to his contemporaries as a poet who combined European and Native American themes into poems that he was commissioned to write for numerous high-profile public events in northern California.

Ridge moved to California in 1850 at the age of twenty-three after leaving the Cherokees’ homeland in Georgia as part of the Indian Removal policies that culminated with the Trail of Tears. For the most part, Ridge was well received in California society as a journalist, novelist, and poet, and he returned the welcome he was given by his adopted home state in commemorative verses that depict California as the vanguard of national progress. Ridge was, paradoxically, it now seems, equally committed to the preservation of Native American rights and to the establishment of a continental American empire for which California was the ultimate symbol. It was this ability to seemingly bridge the gap between white and Native cultures that contributed to much of

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<sup>27</sup> D. H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature* (New York: Viking, 1923), 185–86.



Ridge's success as a poet. While many of Ridge's poems imply that the message of intercultural unity he shared with Californians was meant for the entire nation as well, in 1864 something happened that illustrates how Ridge's Native American heritage and his loyalty to the state of California complicated rather than facilitated his ability to speak to the nation as an American bard.

In October of 1864, the editors of the Nevada *Daily Gazette*, a rival newspaper to the one Ridge was editing at the time, accused Ridge of urging his fellow Californians to follow the example of the Southern Confederacy and form a separate Pacific Republic; they then went on to say that Ridge's voting rights should have been revoked because only white men were allowed to vote in California.<sup>28</sup> As part of their attack on Ridge, the editors of the Nevada *Daily Gazette* wrote a poem using faux words ostensibly taken from the "Original Cherokee" and parodying Ridge as "the poet laureate of the Cherokee Nation" (qtd. in Parins 201–2). Ridge never hid the fact that he was an Indian. Indeed, he frequently identified himself as "Yellow Bird" (an English translation of his Cherokee name, Chees-quat-a-law-ny), and he published poems, essays, and political tracts on behalf of both the Cherokee and other indigenous peoples. Similarly, Ridge made no secret of his love for his adopted home state and frequently commented in print that "California has no superior on the face of the globe."<sup>29</sup> In his decade-long tenure as the editor of numerous California newspapers, however, Ridge consistently championed the Union: he wrote in the Marysville *Express* that "He only is a true American citizen, who

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<sup>28</sup> James Parins, *John Rollin Ridge: His Life and Works* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992), 201–2.

<sup>29</sup> San Francisco *Herald* 13 September 1861.

can embrace the whole Union in the grasp of his affections,” and he was praised by the *Daily Alta California* as “an uncompromising Union man.”<sup>30</sup>

While Ridge’s Native American ancestry and his allegiance to California could be taken as reasons to exclude him from the United States (as this exchange with the Nevada *Daily Gazette* illustrates), in his poetry Ridge contends that his race and his region qualify rather than disqualify him to be a representative American poet. Highlighting race and region over nation seems an odd strategy for someone seeking the office of national bard, particularly in an era where literary nationalists sought to define a poetic tradition based on a coherent national identity. But Ridge reasoned that since Native American themes were used to connect a young nation to the long history of the continent, and since California was considered a template for the nation’s future, a Cherokee poet living on the Pacific Coast was positioned to unite the future and the past in the present-day America of the nineteenth-century.

In conceding that Indians were the legacy of America’s past and that the frontier community of California held the promise for America’s future, Ridge can seem more like an apologist for Manifest Destiny than “the poet laureate of the Cherokee Nation.” Often, it appears, that was precisely his intent. In addition to Ridge’s tendency to replicate an orthodox narrative of the role that the United States was “destined” to play on the American continent, however, there is a visionary strain of his poetry that drew upon his experience among the international immigrant population of California and his own mixed-race heritage and as a way to foreshadow what he called “a universal amalgamation of the races” that would result in “the present identity of nations and

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<sup>30</sup> Marysville *Express* 19 June 1858; *Daily Alta California* 27 May 1861.

tribes” becoming “entirely lost in the commingling and absorption of specific elements.”<sup>31</sup>

Many Americans hoped that mixed-race Indians like Ridge were gradually being “whitened out” through intermarriage. Ridge, however, viewed his mixed-race identity not as a solution to the United States’ “Indian Problem,” but as an overture to a worldwide racial amalgamation that would eventually result in a complete elimination of racial and national identity. Ridge believed that rather than create an Anglo-Saxon ethnic state in North America by “whitening” out indigenous populations, racial amalgamation would ultimately render national identity irrelevant. As someone who felt that he was experiencing the early stages of a worldwide racial amalgamation both in his own body and amid the international immigrants of California (whom he called “strange compounds” of various races<sup>32</sup>), Ridge turned the otherwise nationalist posture of the American poet as “white aboriginal” into that of the mixed-race poet as global emissary.

## II.

A major goal of this dissertation is to rethink Whitman’s place in nineteenth-century American poetry. By focusing on poets who come from locations similar to what Whitman called the “rough and unbidden” fringes of society, however, this dissertation admittedly runs the risk of reinforcing rather than replacing the Whitmanian mystique of the national outsider who would be the national bard. Ed Folsom has cautioned scholars against uncritically using Whitman as a frame of reference to study American poetry,

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<sup>31</sup> Sacramento *Daily Bee* 24 July 1857.

warning that “any poet so powerful threatens to turn his nation’s poets into an indistinguishable mass of epigones.”<sup>33</sup> Similarly, Timothy Morris has shown how attempts to introduce new poets into the study of American poetry often produces “images of literary artists that will correspond to the Whitman template.”<sup>34</sup>

Given Whitman’s overwhelming presence in American poetry studies, however, it would be evasive (if not disingenuous) to consider a group of nineteenth-century poets who claim to speak for the nation from the margins of national culture without directly acknowledging both Whitman and the scholarly history that has grown up around him. Taking into consideration the warnings made by Folsom and Morris, this dissertation does not aim to present Whitfield, Snow, and Ridge merely as a group of nineteenth-century pseudo-Whitmans; rather, it finds in these three poets a new template for understanding both Whitman and the relationship between the margin and center of American culture upon which the posture of the national outsider as national bard depends. Accordingly, this dissertation reconsiders Whitman’s ability to move from the margin to the center of the nation in light of the maneuvers that Whitfield, Snow, and Ridge use to create spaces for themselves as American poets.

Rather than rely on the spatial metaphors of “margin” and “center”—metaphors that have dominated the critical vocabularies of both Whitman studies and American

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<sup>32</sup> Sacramento *Daily Bee* 26 Feb 1857.

<sup>33</sup> Ed Folsom, “Talking Back to Walt Whitman: An Introduction” in *Walt Whitman: The Measure of His Song*, ed. Jim Perlman, Ed Folsom, and Dan Campion (Duluth, MN: Holy Cow!, 1998. 21–78), 37.

<sup>34</sup> Timothy Morris, *Becoming Canonical in American Poetry* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1995), xv.

literary studies<sup>35</sup>—this dissertation focuses on the actual geographic spaces that Whitfield, Snow, and Ridge inhabit, using these spaces as touchstones for understanding how these poets navigate their place in the nation. For Ridge this space is the state of California; for Snow it is the Mormon settlement in the Rocky Mountains; and for Whitfield, in a slightly different gesture that reflects the deterritorialization that African Americans experienced following the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law, it is the black body.<sup>36</sup> In many ways, the geographies that these poets inhabit resemble the prototypical American spaces that are familiar to scholars of American literature and culture: the frontier, the city on a hill, and the pastoral garden.<sup>37</sup> However, because of the way that these poets presented the spaces that they inhabited, and because of the way that the nation in turn chose to view them, these spaces were made to seem much less familiar.

Nineteenth-century Americans considered California to be a quintessential frontier space. In Ridge's poetry, however, California is not merely the product of

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<sup>35</sup> Susan Friedman and Timothy Powell have similarly critiqued the categories of “margin” and “center” in other contexts. See Susan Friedman, “‘Beyond’ Gynocriticism and Gynesis: The Geographics of Identity and the Future of Feminist Criticism” *Tulsa Studies in Womens’ Literature* 15.1 (Spring 1996): 13–40; and Timothy B. Powell, ed. *Beyond the Binary: Reconstructing Cultural Identity in a Multicultural Context* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1999).

<sup>36</sup> Following the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law when Northerners were required to return runaway slaves to their owners in the South, African Americans were denied any space in the nation to claim as their own, even the previously idealized space of “The North.”

<sup>37</sup> The classic studies on the frontier, the city on a hill, and the pastoral garden in American discourse are Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1950), Perry Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1956), and Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964).

westward-tending white Americans who displace indigenous peoples as they move the national boundary across the continent; rather, California is a node in an international network of nations that will enable a worldwide racial amalgamation. Similarly, the Mormon settlement in the Rocky Mountains recalls the Puritan city on a hill that New Englanders thought of as the New Jerusalem of the New World, but this settlement was also perceived to be an un-American space inhabited by despotic prophets and polygamous harems. The newness that Americans privileged in their image of the United States as a New Israel conflicted with the image that the Mormons presented as an unapologetically Old Israel, complete with pre-modern prophets and polygamists who violate the nation's commitment to democracy and domesticity. The separatist movement that Whitfield belonged to drew upon pastoral imagery to say that the labor of African Americans turned the "howling wilderness" of North America into an idyllic garden space. Contending that African slaves brought the ability to create these gardens from Africa during the seventeenth century and that African Americans could just as easily recreate these pastoral landscapes in South America during the nineteenth century, these black separatists implied that America's pastoral gardens follow black bodies around the Atlantic Rim.

The modifications made to these otherwise nationalist spaces illustrate one role that geography plays in the projects for American poetry that Whitfield, Snow, and Ridge conducted: namely, that national spaces can potentially be denationalized by populations with a tenuous connection to the nation. But there is also another, perhaps more important, way that these actual geographic spaces supplement the spatial metaphors of "margin" and "center." These poets wanted to speak to and for the United States as

representative national poets, but at the same time they had strong allegiances to unrepresentative subnational communities (e.g., communities based on race, religion, or region), and they felt trans- or supranational connections to people and places beyond national boundaries: for Whitfield, the black body defined a national subpopulation just as that body enabled transatlantic migration; for Snow, the Mormon settlement in the West was a refuge from the nation and a gathering place for the faithful from throughout the world; and his adopted home of California was for Ridge both a distinct region and a site of global convergence. The geographic spaces that these poets inhabited allowed them to feel connected to subnational and supranational communities who had as much impact on their sense of social identity as did the nation that they presumed to speak for

All three of the poets felt deeply connected to national subcultures. For Whitfield, being African American meant belonging to a community that was circumscribed by, but not equivalent with, the larger nation. As such, he joined with the leaders of the separatist movement to which he belonged in classifying African Americans as a “nation within a nation.”<sup>38</sup> Employing remarkably similar language to that used by Whitfield and other black separatists, one nineteenth-century observer said that the Mormons constituted “a kingdom within a kingdom,” an apt description of the way that the Latter-day Saints thought of themselves as a self-contained unit within the nation as a whole.<sup>39</sup> As a

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<sup>38</sup> Martin R. Delany, *The Condition, Elevation, Emigration, and Destiny of the Colored People of the United States*, (Philadelphia, 1852. New York: Arno, 1968), 12-13.

<sup>39</sup> Edward Tullidge quoted in Klaus J. Hansen, *Quest for Empire: The Political Kingdom of God and the Council of Fifty in Mormon History* (Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 1967), 182. In 1856 the Manchester *Guardian* similarly noted that the Mormons were “bent on constituting an *imperium in imperio*” in the United States (reprinted in *The Latter-day Saints’ Millennial Star* 10 May 1856).

member of the Cherokee Nation—which the United States officially classified as a “domestic dependent nation”—Ridge had also experienced what it meant to belong to a group that was a part of while at the same time apart from the nation. This experience continued for Ridge the more he thought of California, with its distinct regional identity, as his extra-national home.

At the same time, all three poets felt connected in some way to people and places that lay beyond national boundaries. Whitfield and his fellow black separatists believed that people of African descent were an inherently mobile population that had a claim on the entire globe. In arguing that “The world is the Colored man’s home,” these separatists contended that African Americans did not only exist in a social space that was smaller than the nation, but that they also had access to spaces outside national borders.<sup>40</sup> Similarly, just as their western settlement allowed the Mormons to think of themselves as a coherent national subgroup, it was also a space that they thought of as a millennial gathering place for people from across the world (Snow herself wrote that the “City of the Saints” is “the place destined for the gathering of people from every nation, kindred, tongue, and people”<sup>41</sup>). By the same token, Ridge thought of California as a site of global convergence, both in terms of the international immigrants who made up the “strange compounds” of people who inhabited the state, and in terms of the state’s malleable landscape that was made to duplicate the climates from across the globe.

The geographic space that each of these poets inhabited was a place where the

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<sup>40</sup> Henry Bibb qtd. in Kwando M. Kinshasa, *Emigration vs. Assimilation: The Debate in the African American Press, 1827–1861* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1988), 89.

<sup>41</sup> Eliza R. Snow, *The Personal Writings of Eliza Roxcy Snow*, ed. Maureen Ursenbach



nation underwent internal pressure from national subpopulations and external pressure from transnational connections. To borrow Djelal Kadir's formulation, "America," for these poets, "is both smaller and larger than it thinks itself."<sup>42</sup> This triangulation of the nation between smaller-than-national and larger-than-national frames provides an alternative model for situating the persona of the national outsider as national bard; it also more precisely accounts for the way that these poets position themselves with respect to the nation than do the spatial metaphors of "margin" and "center." One of the problems with the margin/center pairing is that it is a binary opposition, and as such encourages an either/or critical model that has a tendency either to fetishize the subversive potential of figures and movements on the margins, or to place undue emphasis on the restrictive powers of a centralized and dominant national culture. This margin/center model lacks the dynamic interplay that is necessary to understand the maneuvers that Whitfield, Snow, and Ridge make in claiming for themselves the title of American bard.

The use of "margin" and "center" as spatial metaphors for American writers' strained relationships with the nation can be traced back to F. O. Matthiessen's seminal 1941 study, *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman*.<sup>43</sup> When Matthiessen proposed his pantheon of nonconformist antebellum authors who championed American ideals from the fringes of society, he set in motion a

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Beecher (Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 2000), 69.

<sup>42</sup> Djelal Kadir, "Introduction: America and Its Studies," *PMLA* 118.1 (2003): 9–24. 21.

<sup>43</sup> F. O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1941).

critical apparatus for considering the role that marginal figures play in the United States' national literary tradition. In the sixty years since *American Renaissance* defined the field of antebellum literary studies, scholars have refigured the relationship between the margin and the center of American culture in a number of different ways. Sacvan Bercovitch and Donald Pease are representative critics of two major approaches that have since emerged to explore the relationship between the margin and the center in American literary study, one of which emphasizes the overpowering influence of center (i.e., Bercovitch), the other the liberatory potential of the margins (i.e., Pease).

Bercovitch contends that the nineteenth-century figure of the writer on the margins—which he identifies with the Puritan tradition of the Jeremiah who critiques the culture while reinscribing its most basic assumptions—was an agent of American ideology who, in his words, was “radical in a representative way that *reaffirmed* [American] culture rather than undermining it.”<sup>44</sup> Pease, on the other hand, challenges Bercovitch's insistence that “every oppositional movement is susceptible to co-optation,” arguing instead that the central core of national ideology can be genuinely subverted by introducing authors from marginalized social groups into the study of American literature.<sup>45</sup> For Pease, American nationality is porous: it is full of gaps and

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<sup>44</sup> Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Rites of Assent: Transformations in the Symbolic Construction of America* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 365, italics in original. For a retrospective on Bercovitch's influence on the field of American literary studies, see the essays in *Cohesion and Dissent in America*, ed. Carol Colatrella and Joseph Alkana (New York: State University of New York Press, 1994).

<sup>45</sup> Donald Pease, “New Americanists: Revisionist Interventions into the Canon,” in *Revisionist Interventions into the Americanist Canon*, ed. Donald E. Pease (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992), 1–37, 29. For a survey of Pease's impact on the field of American literary studies as a spokesperson for a number of “post-nationalist”

holes that expose the constructed nature of national identity. For Bercovitch, American nationality is pervasive: it is both malleable enough to accommodate new forms of dissent and aggressive enough to silence them at every turn. Accordingly, scholarly studies in the Bercovitch vein operate in an elegiac mode that laments the overwhelming power of a central cultural ideology that makes dissent conform to national consensus. Studies such as those encouraged by Pease, on the other hand, are idealistic in their goal of subverting a dominant vision of national identity from the margins of national culture.

The alternative model to margin/center exemplified by Whitfield, Snow, and Ridge—a model wherein the nation operates in a dynamic tension with subnational and supranational frames—highlights the potentially denationalizing effect of literary projects that are in conflict with a normative version of American nationality while at the same time retaining a sense of what Edward Soja calls “the powerful mediating role of the national state.”<sup>46</sup> As much as scholars conducting post-nationalist critiques would like to see a world of margins without centers, as Barbara Brinson Curiel and her collaborators write, the nation “cannot easily be wished away by the application of the *post-* prefix.”<sup>47</sup> Just as the nation cannot be eliminated as a frame of reference, neither should it be taken as an essential fact of social identity. None of the groups that Whitfield, Snow, or Ridge belonged to was ever fully integrated into the nation, but by the same token none ever

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approaches, see Michael P. Kramer, “Imagining Authorship in America: ‘Whose American Renaissance?’ Revisited” *American Literary History* 13.1 (2001): 108–25.

<sup>46</sup> Edward Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (London: Verso, 1989), 189.

<sup>47</sup> Barbara Brinson Curiel et al., “Introduction,” in *Post-Nationalist American Studies*, ed. John Carlos Rowe (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000, 1–21), 2.

really made a complete break with the nation.

Understanding how Whitfield, Snow, and Ridge claim the title of the American bard requires recognizing the persistent presence of American nationality that is Bercovitch's focus, but without granting national ideology the power to silence all manner of dissent; it also requires embracing the potential for dissent that Pease emphasizes without downplaying the enduring power of the nation to mediate social identity. As such, this dissertation employs a critical methodology that focuses on *the limits of nationality*: a methodology wherein subnational and supranational pressures *reveal the limits* of a national identity defined as a homogeneous population living within definable boundaries, but where the continuing influence of the nation as a frame of reference *places limits* on attempts at dissent. The model that Whitfield, Snow, and Ridge use to negotiate their relationship with the nation—a model that keeps the nation in play while recognizing the equally relevant impact of subnational and supranational influences— offers a new template for understanding Whitman's posture of the national outsider as the national bard.

Whitman studies as a field has been dominated by the critical language of “margin” and “center,” and as such is a microcosm of the two trends in American literary studies exemplified by Bercovitch and Pease. Whitman himself introduced this tension between the margin and the center of national culture to the critical debate surrounding his poetry when, in an appendix to the second edition of *Leaves of Grass* (1856), he included both positive and negative reviews of his poetry in a carefully constructed narrative that presented him as both an outsider on the fringes of American society and as the fullest realization of Emerson's call for the American poet. Despite Whitman's

postbellum attempt to reinvent himself as the “Good Gray Poet” of American letters, by his death in 1892, according to Kenneth M. Price, “Those who aligned themselves with Whitman often did so as an act of protest and typically asserted the importance of the role (real or imagined) of outsider” (*Whitman and Tradition* 6). Similarly, at the same time that Carl Sandburg in the 1921 Modern Library edition of *Leaves of Grass* called Whitman “the greatest of American bards,” Eugene Debs and Emma Goldman claimed him for the socialist movement and Langston Hughes became one of the first in a long line of minority poets to embrace him as a literary forebear.<sup>48</sup> Thirty years later, coincident with Charles B. Willard’s statement in a 1950 survey of Whitman’s public reception that “Americans have long since grown accustomed to references to Whitman as their national bard,” Allen Ginsberg and the beat poets made Whitman an icon of the postwar counterculture.<sup>49</sup>

This tendency to place Whitman alternately at the margin or the center of national culture is perhaps best expressed in paired studies by two prominent critics of American poetry. In *The Continuity of American Poetry*, his 1961 treatise that defined American poetry as a distinct national tradition, Roy Harvey Pearce identifies Whitman as a pivotal figure in this national tradition; in another essay from the same period, however, he calls Whitman a “critic of society” whose poetry held the promise of “radical political

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<sup>48</sup> Carl Sandburg, “Introduction,” in *Leaves of Grass* by Walt Whitman (New York: Modern Library, 1921).

<sup>49</sup> Charles B. Willard, *Whitman’s American Fame: The Growth of His Reputation in America after 1892* (Providence: Brown University Press, 1950), 229.

thinking.”<sup>50</sup> More recently, in two essays written for the 1992 centennial of Whitman’s death, Betsy Erkkila alternately criticizes the poet’s complicity with U.S. imperialism and praises the subversive potential of his homosexuality.<sup>51</sup> Whitman studies is in need of a more dynamic model than this to account for Whitman’s malleable relationship with the nation. Such a model would account for Whitman’s desire to speak to and for the nation as a representative American poet, while at the same time accounting for his other allegiances.

This dissertation draws upon the model provided by Whitfield, Snow, and Ridge to highlight the way that Whitman’s relationship to the nation is articulated between his equally strong affiliations to subnational and transnational populations. Whitman’s self-identification in the antebellum versions of “Song of Myself” as “an American, one of the roughs, a kosmos” can be read as a model wherein Whitman’s nationality as “an American” must be situated between his affiliation to a working-class subculture as “one of the roughs” and his cosmopolitan desire to transcend national borders as “a kosmos”

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<sup>50</sup> Roy Harvey Pearce, *The Continuity of American Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961) and “Whitman and Our Hope for Poetry,” in *The Poetic Tradition: Essays on Greek, Latin, and English Poetry*, ed. Don Cameron Allen and Henry T. Rowell (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1968. 123–40), 139.

<sup>51</sup> Betsy Erkkila, “Whitman and American Empire,” in *Walt Whitman of Mickle Street: A Centennial Collection*, ed. Geoffrey M. Sill (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1993), 54–69 and “Whitman and the Homosexual Republic,” in *Walt Whitman: The Centennial Essays*, ed. Ed Folsom (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1994), 153–71. Erkkila’s tendency to place Whitman at both the margin and the center of national culture is done in a much more nuanced fashion than that of many of the critics who precede her; she acknowledges in subtle ways how Whitman’s nationalism overlaps and intersects with his other political commitments.

(LG 680).<sup>52</sup> Following Whitfield, Snow, and Ridge, this connection to subnational and supranational communities is enabled by Whitman's location in the actual geographic space of New York City. While New York City is commonly cited as a source for Whitman's poetic imagery and democratic energy, New York also provided Whitman with a space much like those that Whitfield, Snow, and Ridge relied upon to tether the nation between subnational and supranational frames. One of Whitman's underappreciated city poems, "A Broadway Pageant," illustrates how New York City provided Whitman with a space that facilitated his allegiance to smaller- and larger-than-national communities.

The importance of "A Broadway Pageant" to Whitman's antebellum project has never been fully appreciated. When not subordinated to "Passage to India" as a precursor to the 1871 poem on the similar theme of international unity, "A Broadway Pageant" is frequently dismissed as a minor work coming between the May 1860 release of the third edition of *Leaves of Grass* and the beginning of Whitman's Civil War poetry in the fall of 1861. But as an occasional poem published in the *New York Times* to commemorate the 16 June 1860 parade for a delegation of Japanese ambassadors visiting the United States, "A Broadway Pageant" is Whitman's most public antebellum performance of the role of American bard. Overlooking the fact that the writing of occasional poetry is the duty of poets laureate and national bards, scholars have tended to consider private lyrics such as "Song of Myself" as the poems where Whitman assumes the title of American poet. In

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<sup>52</sup> While the word "kosmos" has a number of different meanings in *Leaves of Grass*, the word "cosmopolitan" originally comes from the Greek *kosmos*. See Derek Heater, *World Citizenship and Government: Cosmopolitan Ideas in the History of Western Political Thought* (New York: St. Martin's, 1996), 7.

this occasional poem where he presents himself as the poetic ambassador of the United States in the nation's most prominent newspaper, however, Whitman adopts a model similar to that of Whitfield, Snow, and Ridge, wherein he triangulates his commitment to the nation between subnational and supranational frames.

As a poem written to celebrate the United States' diplomatic coup over Europe in securing trade rights with the isolationist government of Japan, "A Broadway Pageant" presents a vivid (and at times chilling) portrait of Whitman's characteristically inflated nationalism. But the poem is also written from the perspective of a working-class New Yorker on a crowded city street, highlighting Whitman's desire to understand what American nationality means to populations on the fringes of society. While Whitman considered the working classes to be a representative national subpopulation, the same newspaper that published "A Broadway Pageant" said the week before it ran Whitman's poem that the working-class crowd was a disruptive force that potentially prevented New York from being presented to the Japanese ambassadors as a representative American city. The crowd scenes of "A Broadway Pageant," accordingly, respond to these critiques by ennobling the working-class "roughs" who attended the parade.

Similarly, the *Times* and other newspapers of the period debated whether the visit of the Japanese embassy signaled the United States' rise to power on an international stage, or whether the coming of the Japanese ambassadors was a harbinger of worldwide unification that would render national differences obsolete. When Whitman turns his welcoming embrace of the Japanese embassy into a salute to the entire world, the cosmopolitan impulse of the poet who wrote in the 1855 Preface to *Leaves of Grass* that "To him the other continents arrive as contributions . . . he gives them reception for their



sake and his own sake” is given one of its fullest expressions. This dissertation uses “A Broadway Pageant” as a template for rereading Whitman’s posture as the national outsider who would be the national bard in such poems as “Song of Myself” and *Calamus*, poems that have productively been read according to a margin/center model but that also exhibit the kind of spatial dynamic exemplified by the poetry of James M. Whitfield, Eliza R. Snow, and John Rollin Ridge.

This dissertation is divided into four main chapters. The first three chapters discuss the ways that Whitfield, Snow, and Ridge made their unlikely bids to be American bards in projects for American poetry that parallel Whitman’s own. These chapters begin with anecdotes recounting the near misses that Whitman had with each poet: both Whitman and James M. Whitfield attended the 1848 Free-Soil convention in Buffalo, New York; Whitman turned back eastward in Colorado from a trip to California in 1879 that would have taken him through the Utah Territory, and, as was the case for many literary travelers, the Mormon literary salon headed by Eliza R. Snow; and John Rollin Ridge went to the Indian Bureau at Washington, D.C., in 1866, one year after Whitman had been fired from his post as a clerk for the Department of Indian Affairs. The first section of each of these three chapters compares Whitman’s use of slavery, religion, and Native Americans as themes for his poetry with the way that Whitfield, Snow, and Ridge, respectively, used these themes; the following sections of these chapters focus more exclusively on the ways that Whitfield, Snow, and Ridge leverage their position on the fringes of society into a bid for the title of national poet; and a concluding section of each chapter draws final conclusions about how Whitman’s project for American poetry should be reconsidered in light of the points of comparison with

these other three poets. The final chapter reconsiders Whitman's status as "an American, one of the roughs, a kosmos" according to the pattern that Whitfield, Snow, and Ridge use to make their unlikely claims for the office of American bard.

## Chapter 1

### James M. Whitfield: The Poet of Slaves

#### Introduction

In early August of 1848, the first national convention of the newly formed Free-Soil Party took place in Buffalo, New York. Those in attendance were a mix of former Democrat, Whig, and Liberty Party members who, for one reason or another, opposed the extension of slavery into territories acquired by the United States during the Mexican War. Walt Whitman attended the Buffalo Free-Soil convention as one of the official delegates from Brooklyn. Like many other Democrats who split with their party when it failed to support the Wilmot Proviso's ban on slavery in the new territories, Whitman joined the Free-Soil Party not because he opposed slavery per se, but because he was worried that white laborers would be economically disadvantaged—"degraded," as he put it<sup>1</sup>—by the presence of slave labor in the West. Despite this disregard for African American civil rights among many Free-Soilers, the platform of the Free-Soil party was broad enough to attract African American abolitionists who saw in the Free-Soil movement an opportunity to extend the national discussion on slavery. Frederick Douglass, one of the featured speakers at the convention, said in retrospect, "Anti-slavery thus far had only been sheet lightning; the Buffalo convention sought to make it a thunderbolt."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Whitman's concern, as he wrote in a 27 April 1847 Brooklyn *Daily Eagle* editorial, was that slave labor would lead to the "degradation of free labor and the stagnation of enterprise" (Walt Whitman, *The Gathering of the Forces*, ed. Cleveland Rodgers and John Black, 2 Vols. [New York: Putnam, 1920], 1:205-6).

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Joseph Jay Rubin, *The Historic Whitman* (University Park: Pennsylvania

James M. Whitfield was living in Buffalo at the time of the Free-Soil convention. The son of free Northern blacks, Whitfield had moved to Buffalo from his hometown in rural New Hampshire and was working as a barber, contributing to the local African American political community, and beginning to contemplate a career as a poet.<sup>3</sup> While the scant historical documents regarding Whitfield's life do not indicate whether he attended the Free-Soil convention, it is all but certain that he was aware of it and more than likely that he felt an investment in its outcome.<sup>4</sup> As an active participant in local anti-slavery efforts in Buffalo, Whitfield would probably have taken the opportunity to interact with the black abolitionists who had come to the convention, including Douglass and his *North Star* co-editor Martin R. Delany. Following the convention, Whitfield's poetry began to appear regularly in the *North Star*, and Whitfield himself soon became increasingly involved in various political movements led by Douglass and Delany.<sup>5</sup> Whitfield's involvement with these men—particularly with Delany—would shape his career as both an activist and a poet. In the mid-1850s, Whitfield lost faith in Douglass'

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State University Press, 1973), 210.

<sup>3</sup> According to the 24 October 1850 issue of *The North Star* Whitfield was part of a "Mass Meeting of the Colored Citizens of Buffalo." For the most complete biography of Whitfield available, see Joan R. Sherman, *Invisible Poets: Afro-Americans of the Nineteenth Century* Second Edition (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 42-53.

<sup>4</sup> Whitfield would have been aware of the Buffalo Convention from coverage in *The North Star*, of which he was a noted subscriber. The convention is discussed in the 4 August 1848 and 21 August 1848 issues, and the 24 August 1849 issue of *The North Star* acknowledges "James M. Whitfield, do 1.00" as a subscriber to the newspaper "from the date of last acknowledgment to August 22, 1849."

<sup>5</sup> His first poem was published in the *North Star* one year later on 10 August 1849. For a full record of Whitfield's publications see Sherman 222-23.

dream of an integrated America and embraced Delany's separatist agenda advising African Americans to find "free soil" for themselves beyond the borders of the United States in places such as Central and South America.

While it is possible that Whitfield made his first contact with Douglass and Delany at the Buffalo convention, there is little chance that he met Whitman there. Despite the democratic and anti-racist sentiments that characterize *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman had little actual contact with African Americans before the Civil War. Nevertheless, Whitfield's Buffalo barbershop was something of a gathering place for men of letters. William Wells Brown said of Whitfield and his barbershop, "There has long resided in Buffalo, New York, a barber, noted for his scholarly attainments and gentlemanly deportment. Men of the most polished refinement visit his saloon, and, while being shaved, take pleasure in conversing with him; and all who know him feel that he was intended by nature for a higher position in life. This is James M. Whitfield."<sup>6</sup> It is tempting to wonder what the conversation between the two men would have been had Whitman ventured into Whitfield's barbershop. Would Whitman have seen Whitfield's profession as a barber in the context of his enthusiastic vision of American labor, or would he have felt that the work performed by free blacks had a "degrading" influence on white workers similar to the impact that he thought slave labor had on white labor? Would Whitfield have seen in Whitman's Free-Soil position an alliance with the abolitionist cause, or would he have regarded Whitman as yet another Northern racist who opposed the influence of Southern slaveholders in the North and West but did not

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<sup>6</sup> William Wells Brown, *The Black Man, His Antecedents, His Genius, and His Achievements*, (New York: Thomas Hamilton, 1863), 152.

oppose the oppression of slaves in the South?

Or, rather than talk about politics, would the two men have discussed their burgeoning dreams to speak to and for the nation as American bards? Because Whitfield and Whitman were both at the beginning of their careers as poets in 1848, they probably wouldn't have had much of substance to discuss. By the mid-1850s, however, they each published a book that attempted to rewrite the nation as poetry, Whitman in *Leaves of Grass* and Whitfield in his provocatively titled *America and Other Poems*. Despite the very different forms that their books would take, they were both rooted in the concerns over slavery at the heart of the 1848 Buffalo Free-Soil convention.

While Whitman and Whitfield were by no means the only writers to address slavery in their poetry, both poets are distinctive in the way that they present their books as poetic embodiments of a nation torn apart by the contradictions of American slavery. Whitman celebrated contradiction and hoped that *Leaves of Grass* would capture the varied and contradictory essence of the nation he wanted to sing into being. In key moments of Whitman's poetry that I discuss in the first section of this chapter, Whitman identifies slavery as a key site of contradiction that he had to incorporate into his poems if he were to speak for the entire national community. In a parallel way to Whitman's attempt to bring national contradictions into the coherent whole of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitfield sought to express the inherently contradictory state of being black in America, of existing as a slave—or potential slave—in a country that defined itself as a land of freedom. In the first section of this chapter I show how Whitfield arranged the thematically conflicting poems in his 1853 collection, *America and Other Poems*, to illustrate the contradictions produced by the presence of slavery in an ostensibly free

nation. This arrangement of poems made the book as a whole into a poetic embodiment of a conflicted nation. In this section I argue that Whitfield's sense of conflict and contradiction grew out of his involvement with Martin Delany's political program for African American emigration to South America. The image that the emigration movement presented Whitfield of an American continent split into a white North America and a black South America provided him with a conceptual map that he used to design a book of poems titled *America* that was similarly divided into sharply contrasting poems.

In the second section of this chapter I explore the parallel ways that Whitman and Whitfield appealed to the role that the poet's body played in negotiating the contradictions of American slavery. Just as Whitfield wanted to collect the fragments of a contradictory nation into his book of poems, Whitman similarly believed that *Leaves of Grass* could house the disparate elements of national culture. Whitman believed that his book of poems could contain national contradictions because his body imaginatively contained all the people and places of the entire nation. It was not enough for Whitman to acknowledge that these contradictions exist; he believed that he had to bring these competing elements into the laboratory of his body, and through a corporeal alchemy that literalized the metaphor of the national body politic, turn national contradictions into the unified body of the American poet. For Whitfield, bringing the nation into poetry through the medium of a black poet's body was a more complicated process than it was for Whitman because of the limitations that slavery and racism placed on the mobility of black bodies. In the second section of this essay I contrast Whitman's ideas about the poet's body with the ideas about the black body that Whitfield learned from the

emigration movement. The rhetoric that the emigration movement used about the black body's ability to move throughout the world and create an alternative to the United States informed the two major pieces of *America and Other Poems*, "America" and "How Long."

## I.

### Slavery and the Poetics of Contradiction

For Whitman, being an American bard meant containing all the contradictions of a multitudinous nation. Aware of the incoherence that this created in his poetry, Whitman admitted towards the end of "Song of Myself," "Do I contradict myself? / Very well then, I contradict myself. / (I am large, I contain multitudes.)"<sup>7</sup> Whitman's embrace of contradictions was, in many ways, a necessary precondition for a poetic project that attempted to embody a fragmented nation riven by social tensions of every kind. As such, *Leaves of Grass* contains national contradictions in its long, descriptive lists of different people that Whitman attempts to gather together into the unified whole of his book. During Whitman's formative years as a journalist in the 1840s and 1850s, he was exposed to the full range of social conflicts raging in the antebellum United States, including, as a number of scholars have recently shown, the conflict over slavery.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, ed. Michael Moon (New York: Norton, 2002), 77. Hereafter cited as *LG*.

<sup>8</sup> See Betsy Erkkila, *Whitman the Political Poet* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 44-67; David S. Reynolds, *Walt Whitman's America: A Cultural Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 115-30; Martin Klammer, *Whitman, Slavery, and the Emergence of "Leaves of Grass"* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995); Karen Sánchez-Eppler, *Touching Liberty: Abolition, Feminism, and the Politics of*



Even though Whitman was not an abolitionist, the issues surrounding slavery affected the development of his poetry. In particular, the requirement of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law that Northerners return runaway slaves to their masters in the South served as an early spark for Whitman's poetry. All but one of the poems that Whitman published between 1850 and 1855 were about the Fugitive Slave Law, and one of the few pre-1855 poems that Whitman retained in the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* centers around the return of a fugitive slave.<sup>9</sup> While the subject of slavery was a formative part of Whitman's apprenticeship as a poet, these early verses do not reflect the democratic sympathies of the mature poetry in *Leaves of Grass*. At this early stage, both as a poet and as a journalist, Whitman despised the Fugitive Slave Law not because it violated African American human rights, but because it gave Southern slaveholders power over white Northerners. (Whitman saw the slavery issue as a class conflict between white artisan laborers and slaveholding "aristocrats."<sup>10</sup>) For Whitman, the Fugitive Slave Law raised questions about local autonomy and the power of the federal government. It made

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*the Body* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), 50-77; Ed Folsom, "Lucifer and Ethiopia: Whitman, Race, and Poetics before the Civil War and After," *A Historical Guide to Walt Whitman*, ed. David S. Reynolds, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000, 45-96); Christopher Beach, *The Politics of Distinction: Whitman and the Discourses of Nineteenth-Century America* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 1996), 55-101.

<sup>9</sup> "A Boston Ballad," a poem based on Boston abolitionists' refusal to return runaway slave Anthony Burns to his master, was included in the 1855 *Leaves of Grass*. Whitman's pre-*Leaves of Grass* poems inspired by the Fugitive Slave Law are "Blood Money," "The House of Friends," and "Song for Certain Congressmen." See Walt Whitman, *The Collected Writings of Walt Whitman: The Early Poems and the Fiction* Vol. 6 Ed. Thomas L. Brasher, (New York: New York University Press, 1963), 40-48.

<sup>10</sup> See Whitman's article from the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* 1 September 1847 in Walt Whitman, *The Uncollected Poetry and Prose of Walt Whitman*, ed. Emory Holloway,

him think about the nature of the union and the relationship between the individual and the mass, both of which are central issues to Whitman's project for American poetry, but they are not necessarily the issues that characterize the visionary democracy of *Leaves of Grass*.

By the time he wrote the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* in 1855, however, Whitman had begun to focus on African American slaves themselves and not just on the debates between white Northerners and Southerners occasioned by slavery. Some of the pivotal moments of *Leaves of Grass* that define the reach of Whitman's democratic aesthetic involve portraits of runaway slaves. In "Song of Myself," Whitman first imagines himself to be an abolitionist aiding a fugitive slave and then, more audaciously, he imagines that he is himself a fugitive slave. In one of the most spectacular imaginative leaps that he makes in "Song of Myself" Whitman writes, "I am the hounded slave, I wince at the bite of the dogs, / . . . / I do not ask the wounded person how he feels, I myself become the wounded person" (LG 58). This imaginative association with someone very different from himself is not unprecedented for Whitman. But by imagining himself as a slave Whitman was able to bring the most disenfranchised member of American society into the bounds of his national poetic text.

It would mischaracterize Whitman's larger project as a poet to call this an abolitionist gesture, though. This identification with slaves in "Song of Myself" is part of Whitman's overarching goal to identify with every person in the nation regardless of the divisions of social hierarchy. To complete this identification with the entire nation that begins in "Song of Myself" when the poet inhabits the body of a slave, in "I Sing the

Body Electric”—a poem whose working title was “Slaves”<sup>11</sup>—Whitman imagines that he is the auctioneer at a slave auction. While he adopts the posture of the auctioneer with a degree of ironic distance (his goal in the poem is to celebrate the human body, which he says slaveholders do not), he is still willing to inhabit the subjectivity of the slaveholder and to make slaveholders part of his all-embracing national vision. Rather than abolish slavery entirely, then, Whitman’s goal is to unify the disparate positions of slave and slaveholder into the generous equality of his poetic America.

Nowhere in Whitman’s oeuvre is this contradictory desire to identify with the disparate fragments of national society—including both slaves and slaveholders—more evident than in this provocative pre-*Leaves of Grass* manuscript fragment:

I am the poet of slaves and of the masters of slaves

I am the poet of the body

And I am

I am the poet of the body

And I am the poet of the soul

I go with the slaves of the earth equally with the masters

And I will stand between the masters and the slaves,

Entering into both so that both shall understand me alike.<sup>12</sup>

This manuscript represents a formative moment in the development of Whitman’s poetic

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<sup>11</sup> Jerome Loving, *Walt Whitman: The Song of Himself*, (Los Angeles and Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1999), 198.

<sup>12</sup> Walt Whitman, *Notebooks and Unpublished Prose Manuscripts*, ed. Edward F. Grier,

voice and in his sense that it is the national bard's responsibility to contain the multitudinous contradictions of American culture.<sup>13</sup> The characteristic line of Whitman's mature poetry is evident here as he attempts to link together two groups of Americans who are as different from each other, the context suggests, as the body is from the soul. In this fragment, Whitman glories in the unifying power of the American poet to solve the unreconcilable conflict between slaves and their masters in what Ed Folsom calls an "attempt to become that impossible representative American voice—the *fully* representative voice—that speaks not for parties or factions but for everyone in the nation, a voice fluid enough to inhabit the subjectivities of all individuals in the culture" ("Lucifer and Ethiopia" 50).<sup>14</sup>

Whitman writes elsewhere that "the attitude of great poets is to cheer up slaves and horrify despots" and that his purpose as a poet is to "acknowledge liberty with audible and absolute acknowledgment, and set slavery at naught for life and death" (*LG* 627–28). In this manuscript passage, however, rather than cheer the slave and horrify the despot, Whitman indiscriminately acknowledges both as equal members of society. His

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Vol. 1. (New York: New York University Press, 1984), 67.

<sup>13</sup> David Reynolds (602n), Martin Klammer (3–4), and Betsy Erkkila (50) all identify this manuscript as the moment when Whitman developed his poetic voice and his philosophy of democratic embrace. Andrew Higgins has recently argued that this manuscript fragment be dated to 1854 rather than 1847, making it a capstone of Whitman's thinking about slavery, and not the initiating spark that Reynolds, Klammer, and Erkkila identify it as. Whether it came at the beginning or towards the end of the process that resulted in the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, the manuscript fragment points to the importance of slavery in Whitman's conceptualization of the social contradictions that he addressed as an American bard. Andrew C. Higgins, "Wage Slavery and the Composition of *Leaves of Grass*: The 'Talbot Wilson' Notebook," *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 20.2 (Fall 2002): 53–77.

willingness to “go . . . equally” with slaves and masters alike reflects his desire to “contain multitudes” even though he must “contradict [him]self” to do so. This equal embrace of slaves and masters could be taken as an example of Whitman’s willful ignorance about the consequences of American slavery, an example of his ability to make a political issue so abstract as to render its social relevance meaningless. It could also be taken as an example of his desire to abolish slavery by attacking the very foundation of hierarchy all together: once the poet resolves the primary ontological division between the body and the soul, he seems to say, the division between slaves and masters will dissolve in due course.

Whether Whitman’s union of slaves and masters in this passage is willfully obtuse to the social reality of slavery, or whether his radical critique of hierarchy includes, but is not limited to, American slavery, what remains constant in either reading of this passage is that Whitman placed his faith in the power of the poet to create union out of conflict. Whitman seems to believe that this union had to be created in poetry before it could be created in actual fact. Once the ideal world of perfect equality that Whitman envisioned was imaginatively rendered as poetry, it would soon follow as a material reality. As David Reynolds argues, “In the turmoil of the 1850s the very idea of America was at stake. . . . Whitman had to redefine the notions of ‘America’ and ‘liberty’ in the broadest possible terms. With central texts of American democracy losing stable meaning, he felt he had to create a new national text in which America was poetically reconstructed” (122).

Reynolds’ claim that Whitman wanted to turn a conflicted nation into a coherent

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<sup>14</sup> See also Sánchez-Eppler, *Touching Liberty*, 50–51.

book of poetry is a compelling description of *Leaves of Grass*. It also provides an entry point for understanding the book of poems that James M. Whitfield published two years before the first edition of Whitman's book appeared. Whitfield similarly attempted a poetic reconstruction of national contradictions in *America and Other Poems*, but his goal was to highlight conflict rather than to contain it. Most abolitionist poets made contradiction a central theme of their poetry by condemning the discrepancy between the rhetoric of American freedom and the reality of American slavery. Many of Whitfield's anti-slavery poems follow this abolitionist convention by contrasting the injustices of slavery with the professed egalitarianism of American democracy. "Almighty God!" he laments in one poem after detailing the crimes of slavery, "'tis this they call / The land of liberty and law."<sup>15</sup> African American and abolitionist poets frequently comment as Whitfield does here on the inherent contradiction that a nation founded on Enlightenment principles of universal human freedom would also endorse chattel slavery.

But Whitfield did more than merely address the contradictions of American slavery in *America and Other Poems*. Whitfield's achievement as a poet was to illustrate those contradictions in the form of his book as well as in the content of his poems. By artfully arranging his poems into paired sequences that highlight the conflicting nature of antebellum African American life, Whitfield made his entire book a reflection of the conflicts faced by millions of black Americans. For example: in Whitfield's collection, a poem about a racist politician's oratorical powers is paired with a poem about a black poet's inability to access the power of language; poems celebrating the beauty of the

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<sup>15</sup> [James] M. Whitfield, *America and Other Poems* (Buffalo: James S. Leavitt, 1853), 6. All references to Whitfield's poetry come from this edition.

world are paired with poems that reel in horror at human suffering; and poems that put their faith in the rhetoric of American liberty are paired with poems that locate freedom outside of the United States. By arranging *America and Other Poems* in a way that reflects the contradictions of antebellum black life, Whitfield made his poetically reconstructed *America*—like the United States itself—a site of constant and unending conflict.

Whitfield's awareness that a book's format could reinforce its message is singular among antebellum African American poets, but it is by no means unprecedented in the history of poetry. Neil Fraistat has shown that poets since antiquity have "recognized that texts are partly determined by . . . the selection and arrangement of poems into collections."<sup>16</sup> Following the advances in late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century printing, poets became increasingly aware that a well organized volume of poems could create what Fraistat calls a "coherent perceptual field" that made the book as a whole add up to more than the sum of its parts (17).<sup>17</sup> While the newspaper was the primary medium for transmitting written information among antebellum African Americans, the printed book was often considered an icon of authorship.<sup>18</sup> One antebellum African American literary critic lamented that black writers who wanted to "secure for themselves a position

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<sup>16</sup> Neil Fraistat, *The Poem and the Book: Interpreting Collections of Romantic Poetry* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 6. See also Ian Jack, "A Choice of Orders: The Arrangement of 'The Poetical Works'" in *Textual Criticism and Literary Interpretation*, ed. Jerome J. McGann, (University of Chicago Press, 1985, 127–43).

<sup>17</sup> See, for example, C. Deirdre Phelps, "The Edition as Art Form: Social and Authorial Readings of William Cullen Bryant's *Poems*," *Text* 6 (1994): 249–85.

<sup>18</sup> See Elizabeth McHenry, *Forgotten Readers: Recovering the Lost History of African American Literary Societies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 84–89.

in the rank of authors” often found themselves confined to “the narrow limits of pamphlets or the columns of newspapers.”<sup>19</sup> While pamphlets and newspapers were often an easier way to spread information, printed books, as this critic demonstrates, could communicate the prestige of authorship in ways that newspaper publication could not. According to Elizabeth McHenry, the nineteenth-century black press “presented books as items to be treasured: they were promoted as the agents and, increasingly, the emblems of an appropriately cultivated intellect” (McHenry 113–14). Whitfield not only considered his book to be an agent of cultural sophistication; he also presented it to his readers as an emblem of the contradictory state of nineteenth-century African American life.

Before I give a detailed explication of the arrangement of poems in Whitfield’s book, it is necessary to understand the political commitments that led Whitfield to define the United States as a site of unending contradiction. The transformation of Walter Whitman the Free-Soil journalist into Walt Whitman the American bard is a familiar narrative. *America and Other Poems* emerged out of a similarly dynamic interaction between politics and poetry that needs to be understood in order to appreciate Whitfield’s achievement as a poet. In the introduction to *America and Other Poems* Whitfield wrote, “[T]his little volume is presented to the public in the full confidence that it will be read and appreciated, when the circumstances of its origin are known” (1). It is my goal to show how the mid-century emigration movement Whitfield was involved in was the most significant “circumstances of . . . origin” of *America and Other Poems*. As I explain in greater detail in the following section, Whitfield was part of an African American separatist movement that advocated emigration to Central and South America. Beginning

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<sup>19</sup> *Frederick Douglass’ Paper* 23 September 1853.



in the late eighteenth century and extending through the early nineteenth century, a variety of emigration schemes were developed that promoted emigration to locations as distinct as Africa, Canada, and the American West. These various schemes had supporters across the political spectrum, including whites who wanted to create a white-only country and black separatists who believed that African American autonomy could only be realized outside of the United States.<sup>20</sup>

Following the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law in 1850, interest in emigration experienced a resurgence as free Northern blacks like Whitfield felt that the influence of slaveholders would soon dominate national politics and that leaving the United States was the only alternative.<sup>21</sup> This resurgence was short-lived—with the onset of the Civil War most emigrationists shifted their support to the Union cause—but for a brief and intense moment in Whitfield’s life, the possibility of starting a new life in a black republic in South America fueled his political and literary imagination as nothing else did. The emigration movement provided Whitfield with a political response to slavery and racism, and it presented him with an imaginative energy that fueled his poetry. The emigration movement’s belief that blacks and whites could not coexist in the same

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<sup>20</sup> See James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton, *In Hope of Liberty: Culture, Community, and Protest Among Northern Free Blacks, 1700–1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 177-202; Floyd J. Miller, *The Search for a Black Nationality: Black Emigration and Colonization, 1787–1863* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1975); and Howard H. Bell, “The Negro Emigration Movement, 1849–1854: A Phase of Negro Nationalism,” *Phylon* 20 (1959): 132–42.

<sup>21</sup> The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 provided a huge impetus for the emigration movement as more and more free blacks became convinced that their options for citizenship in the United States were limited. See Miller 119, and Kwando M. Kinshasa, *Emigration vs. Assimilation: The Debate in the African American Press, 1772–1861* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1988), 63.

country gave him an acute sense of the tensions that permeated the antebellum United States, and those tensions became the basis for his book of poems.

### **Whitfield and the Mid-Century Emigration Movement**

At the same time he was collecting his poetry for publication in *America and Other Poems*, Whitfield was involved in a political struggle of the type that his grand-niece Pauline Hopkins would later characterize as the “contending forces” among black political leaders. At the 1853 convention for African American abolitionists held in Rochester, New York, Whitfield signed a “Declaration of Sentiments” with Frederick Douglass arguing for African Americans’ “claim to be American citizens.”<sup>22</sup> Within a few months, however, Whitfield wrote to *Frederick Douglass’ Paper* that the only way for African Americans to secure the rights associated with national citizenship was by emigrating beyond the borders of the United States.<sup>23</sup> Whether Whitfield made a radical change in position following the Rochester convention or was already at the time, as Floyd Miller speculates, “at best ambivalent toward” Douglass’ hope for an integrated America, is unclear (138). While a letter to *Frederick Douglass’ Paper* claimed that Whitfield gave an 1846 speech accusing those who “leave their native land” of “moral cowardice,” in the late 1830s Whitfield had publicly encouraged African Americans to emigrate to California, which was then outside of U.S. boundaries.<sup>24</sup> Whatever

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<sup>22</sup> *Frederick Douglass’ Paper* 15 July 1853.

<sup>23</sup> The essays Whitfield wrote for *Frederick Douglass’ Paper* were collected in *Arguments, Pro and Con, on the Call for a National Convention, to be Held in Cleveland, Ohio, August 24, 1854*, ed. M. T. Newsom, (Detroit: George E. Pomery & Co., 1854).

ambivalence he might have felt toward emigration in the early 1850s soon became wholehearted support.

*America and Other Poems* itself bears the impress of his support of the emigration movement. Whitfield dedicated *America and Other Poems* to Martin R. Delany, the intellectual mainspring of the emigration movement, “as a small tribute of respect for his character, admiration of his talents, and love of his principles” (1). (Delany returned the favor by having a black revolutionary poet in his own novel, *Blake*, recite lines from Whitfield’s poetry.<sup>25</sup>) Along with dedicating *America and Other Poems* to Delany, Whitfield included a backhanded reference to his former affiliation with Douglass. In a footnote to “The North Star,” the last poem in *America and Other Poems*, Whitfield writes that “The North Star” is not only the name of the heavenly body that guides runaway slaves to freedom, but is also the title of “a newspaper edited by a fugitive slave.” Since Delany’s name was synonymous with the emigration movement at the time *America and Other Poems* was published, Whitfield was able to signal his political affiliation by dedicating the book to him and by relegating Douglass to an anonymous footnote at the end of the book.

A few months after he published *America and Other Poems*, Whitfield entered into a highly visible debate over the merits of emigration with William J. Watkins, the assistant editor of *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, in a series of essays that the two men wrote for *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*. Whitfield had earned the reputation among

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<sup>24</sup> *Frederick Douglass’ Paper* 18 November 1853, and Miller, *The Search for a Black Nationality*, 138. Whitfield himself says that he was an emigrationist “from boyhood” when in 1838-39 he proposed emigration to California (*Arguments* 16).

emigration opponents by this time as “the principal defender of this vile scheme of expatriation,”<sup>26</sup> and Watkins, a firm supporter of Douglass’ plan for racial integration in the United States, vigorously attacked Whitfield and the emigration movement.<sup>27</sup> Their debate was significant enough that their essays were reprinted in other African American newspapers and collected in pamphlet form. The debate over emigration hinged on what Whitfield considered to be the central contradiction of antebellum black life, namely, that African Americans were simultaneously a part of and apart from the nation. Watkins believed that African Americans should not leave the United States because, as he said, “We are part and parcel of the *American nation*” (*Arguments* 22, italics in original). In response to Watkins’ assertion that African Americans were full participants in American society, Whitfield wrote, “Dr. Johnson defined patriotism to be the last refuge of a scoundrel. But a *black patriot* in this country must be more fool than knave. The fact is, I have no country, neither have you, and your assumption that you are an *integrant* part of *this nation*, is not true” (*Arguments* 30, italics in original).

The contrast between these two positions defines the central conflict that concerned Whitfield as both a poet and an activist: either African Americans are “part and parcel” of the nation or they “have no country.” Martin Delany wrote that African Americans in the United States had “existed [as] a nation within a nation, [as] a people who, although forming a part and parcel of the population, yet were . . . but a restricted

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<sup>25</sup> Martin R. Delany, *Blake, or the Huts of America*, (Boston: Beacon, 1970), 308.

<sup>26</sup> *Frederick Douglass’ Paper* 18 November 1853. Miller says that by 1853 “Whitfield became the major protagonist for the emigrationists” (138).

<sup>27</sup> Watkins, along with Douglass, felt that emigration was a divisive issue that threatened

part of the body politic.”<sup>28</sup> This conflict of living as “a nation within a nation” gave Whitfield an early understanding of what sociologist W. E. B. Du Bois later called the “double consciousness” that African Americans experience as both national citizens and national outcasts.<sup>29</sup> “One ever feels his two-ness,” Du Bois wrote fifty years after Whitfield published *America and Other Poems*, “an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife.”<sup>30</sup> Prescient of Du Bois’s argument that African American history is characterized by the unending conflict that comes from straddling two worlds, Whitfield understood the “two-ness” that black men and women experience as both American and not American.

While Du Bois derived his model for double consciousness from the then-new discipline of psychology, Whitfield conceptualized a double America split by race from the discipline of geography. Whitfield was drawn to the idea that African American emigration to the southern hemisphere would create a black South America to contend with a white-dominated North America. In a letter to Congressman Frank Blair in support

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to undermine the more important goals of abolition and emancipation (*Arguments* 7–8).

<sup>28</sup> Martin R. Delany, *The Condition, Elevation, Emigration, and Destiny of the Colored People of the United States*, (Philadelphia, 1852. New York: Arno, 1968), 12–13.

<sup>29</sup> Eugene B. Redmond notes another connection between Whitfield and Du Bois in *Drumvoices: The Mission of Afro-American Poetry* (Garden City, NY: Anchor, 1976): “As a poet, however, Du Bois is important for his work in . . . declaiming a hatred of racism and oppression that had not been heard since James Whitfield” (114).

<sup>30</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 1903, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Terri Hume Oliver, (New York: Norton, 1999), 11.

of African American emigration to South America, Whitfield wrote, “[T]he Saxon and the negro are the only positive races on this continent . . . and if the one is destined to occupy all the temperate regions of this hemisphere, it is equally certain that the other will predominate within the tropics.”<sup>31</sup> (The implication that none of the other “races on this continent” are “positive” bespeaks a racist contradiction within the emigration movement that I will discuss in the conclusion of this chapter.) Whitfield’s vision of a black South America and a white North America is double consciousness writ large on the text of the New World.

Whitfield owed this reconceptualization of American continental geography to an idea that Martin Delany put forward in *The Condition, Elevation, Emigration, and Destiny of the Colored People of the United States* (1852), a book that served as the philosophical and political grounding of the emigration movement. When Delany wrote in *The Condition* that “a glorious union of South American States” could serve as an alternative to the United States of (North) America, he presented the emigration movement not only with a political program, but with the racialized spectacle of a white northern hemisphere countered by a black southern hemisphere (182). Delany said that in Central and South America “of [the] vast population but *one-seventh* are whites, or the pure European race,” while the “colored population on this glorious continent” was overwhelmingly in the majority (180, italics in original). Effectively inverting the percentage of whites to people of color in the mid-century United States, Delany

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<sup>31</sup> “Letter from J. M. Whitfield, Editor of the African-American Repository, (A Colored Man). Buffalo, New York, Feb. 1, 1858,” *The Mind of the Negro as Reflected in Letters Written During the Crisis, 1800–1860*, ed. Carter G. Woodson, (Washington, D.C.: The Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, 1926, 500–02), 501.

presented South America as a racialized photo negative of North America. Delany's idea appeared in print one year before Whitfield published *America and Other Poems*.

Whitfield had been publishing poems in the African American press throughout the 1840s and early 1850s, but in Delany's work Whitfield found a conceptual framework for bringing these poems together in a coherent collection. The image of America split into black and white hemispheres becomes the organizing principle behind *America and Other Poems*.

The limited scholarship on Whitfield has a tendency either to ignore his involvement with the emigration movement or to place too great an emphasis on it. Jackson Blyden, for example, says that Whitfield's poetry illustrates "the process of ratiocination upon which his black separatism depended," and William H. Robinson argues that Whitfield used his poetry "mostly to propagandize his advocacy of emigration."<sup>32</sup> While *America and Other Poems* was indeed born of the emigration movement, Whitfield went beyond merely versifying emigration rhetoric. Instead of writing propaganda poetry for a specific cause, Whitfield culled from the emigration movement a vivid understanding of national contradictions that he then used to shape a body of poetry that could speak beyond the limits of a single political agenda. Less than a year after their debates, William Watkins quoted from one of Whitfield's poems in a speech he gave to commemorate the end of the British slave trade, prefacing the poem with the phrase, "Let each one of us, then, unite in the fervent aspiration of our own

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<sup>32</sup> Jackson Blyden, *A History of Afro-American Literature: The Long Beginning, 1746–1895*. Volume 1, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), 253; William H. Robinson, *Early Black American Poets: Selections with Biographical and Critical Introductions* (Dubuque, IA: W. C. Brown, 1969), 39.

Whitfield.”<sup>33</sup> That Watkins would still feel enough affinity with Whitfield to refer to him as “our own” after nearly six months of vigorous public debate speaks, in part, to Whitfield’s concern that emigration politics inform but not overwhelm his poetry. Apart from Whitfield’s political involvement and the urgency he felt for the emigration movement, he appears to have had a deep and abiding faith in poetry and an almost Shelleyan belief in his power as a poetic legislator.

In a proposal he put forward for a pan-American periodical designed to be “the Organ of the Black and Colored Race on the American Continent,”<sup>34</sup> Whitfield expressed his faith in the “silent” and “pervading influence” of poets and in the importance that poetry has for “every relation of life.”<sup>35</sup> Whitfield does not propose that this periodical be used exclusively for purposes of racial uplift. Whitfield stresses the importance of literary value for its own sake, writing that “while such a periodical must, from its very nature, be the most powerful and efficient of all anti-slavery instrumentalities, yet we would recommend that no piece be received merely for its anti-Slavery qualities, but only for its merits as a literary production” (30–31). In this highly charged milieu where poetry and politics flowed into one another, Whitfield drew upon the politics of the emigration movement to devise a conceptual map that allowed him to use poetry to redraw the

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<sup>33</sup> *Frederick Douglass’ Paper* 18 August 1854.

<sup>34</sup> No copies of this proposed journal—slated to be called *The African-American Repository*—have survived, leading to the question of whether it ever actually got off the ground (Sherman 44–45).

<sup>35</sup> James M. Whitfield, J. Theodore Holly, and William Lambert. “Report of the Establishment of a Periodical, to Be the Organ of the Black and Colored Race on the American Continent,” *Proceedings of the National Emigration Convention of Colored People, Held at Cleveland, August, 1854* (Pittsburgh: A. A. Anderson, 1854, 28–31), 28.



contours that defined America as both a political and a poetic text.

### *America and Other Poems*

Whitfield paid for *America and Other Poems* to be cheaply printed by a small, non-literary printing house in Buffalo, New York.<sup>36</sup> The printing quality was poor, and the printer made a number of errors in the production (e.g., duplicating pages, leaving a poem out of the table of contents). It is a great irony that, despite the care and attention Whitfield put into arranging the poems of his collection, he could not afford to present the book itself to the public in a polished form. Whitfield acknowledged as much in the introduction to *America and Other Poems*, writing, “This volume is presented to the public . . . in the hope that it may find a favorable reception with our people, and ‘put money in the purse’ of the writer, that he may be able to cultivate, improve, and fully develop the talent which God hath given him” (2). While the number of copies printed and sold is unknown, Whitfield’s response after publication indicates that his book was not as well received as he hoped it would be.<sup>37</sup> Whitfield’s dream of supporting himself through his writing was never realized. Nevertheless, *America and Other Poems* was well reviewed in such African American newspapers as Toronto’s *Provincial Freeman* and *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, and praised by such prominent black men as Douglass,

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<sup>36</sup> The printer, James S. Leavitt, printed a variety of texts, including historical sketches, maps to gold mines, and scientific treatises. The number of copies printed is unknown. Letter from Patricia M. Virgil, Director of Library and Archives at the Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society, 2 August 2003.

<sup>37</sup> See Sherman’s summary of an article in the 29 September 1853 *Pennsylvania Freeman* about Whitfield’s disappointment in the poor sales of *America and Other Poems* (43).

Delany, and William Wells Brown.<sup>38</sup>

While the praise for Whitfield's poetry was often ebullient—*Frederick Douglass' Paper* said that “Mr. Whitfield is a genius, and a genuine lover of the muses”<sup>39</sup>—no one commented on the artful arrangement of the collection, despite the structural clues that Whitfield left that his book be read as an embodiment of American contradictions. The title poem, “America,” introduces the sense of conflict and contradiction that characterizes the collection as a whole. “America” is a rewriting of the patriotic song of the same name wherein Whitfield turns the familiar lines “My country ‘tis of thee / Sweet land of liberty / Of thee I sing” into “America, it is to thee, / Thou boasted land of liberty,— / It is to thee I raise my song” (9). By creating a parallel poem to the popular patriotic song, Whitfield introduces his readers to two Americas: the exuberantly celebrated (white) America of the patriotic song, and the dismal (black) America of his poem. Following the title poem, “America,” Whitfield divides the collection into four poem sequences, each of which consists of two or three pairs of contrasting poems.

In the first sequence, a poem about John Quincy Adams's legislative battle against slaveholders in Congress is paired with a poem in honor of Cinque, the leader of the 1839 slave revolt on the slave ship *Amistad*. Taken on its own, this pair of poems could express a sense of comradeship between white and black abolitionists in the

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<sup>38</sup> *America and Other Poems* was positively reviewed in the 15 July 1854 issue of *The Provincial Freeman*, as well as in the 15 July 1853 and 23 September 1853 issues of *Frederick Douglass' Paper*. Douglass called Whitfield a “sable son of genius” (qtd. in Sherman 42 from the 24 August 1850 *Anti-Slavery Bugle*), Delany called him “one of the purest poets in America” (*Condition* 132), and Brown said that Whitfield's poetry displayed “good taste and excellent language” (152–53).

<sup>39</sup> *Frederick Douglass' Paper* 15 July 1853.

representative figures of Adams and Cinque. In the context of the sequence and the collection as a whole, however, this pair of poems is less about the common efforts of black and white abolitionists than it is about the conflicted status of African Americans who felt that they were both a part of and apart from the nation. Fully integrated members of society such as Adams can fight slavery from within the system, whereas social outsiders such as Cinque must resort to extra-legal means. As a free African American living in the North, Whitfield had greater access to social power than an African slave like Cinque, but he also had considerably less access than a white politician like Adams. Placing these poems together illustrates the conflict faced by African Americans who were unsure of their place in the national community. This sense of conflict between the Adams and Cinque poems is reinforced by the poems that come before and after them in the sequence, “Christmas Hymn” and “New Year’s Hymn.” These holiday poems alternately endorse religion and emigration as means to achieve peace. While “Christmas Hymn” places its trust in the star of Bethlehem to spread peace throughout the world, the speaker of “New Year’s Hymn” takes it upon himself to travel the world in search of peace, writing, “Perchance, ‘mid foreign scenes, we may / Forget the land that gave us birth” (21). Pairing “Christmas Hymn” with “New Year’s Hymn” poses the same questions raised by the Adams and Cinque poems: Do African Americans belong to American social institutions (either political or religious) or do they exist outside of these institutions?

The second poem sequence focuses on the conflict faced by a black poet whose desire to claim fellowship in a community of letters is challenged by the racism of his culture. The sequence begins with a pair of poems that display the poet’s ability to praise

the beauty of the beloved and the grandeur of God. Each poem is essentially an ars poetica that focuses as much on the poet's power with language as it does on the poem's subject matter. "To A. H." begins with an image of the poet reading the works of "many a bard of lofty mind" (22). As he fills the poem with classical allusions Whitfield makes it clear that he considers himself to be such a bard as well. Similarly, in "Love," Whitfield recounts his development as a poet, beginning with "the bright dreams of early youth" when "I strung my lyre, and waked a strain" of youthful poetry, and ending with his mature vocation as a poet (27). Whitfield had great faith in his abilities as a poet. He wrote in the introduction to *America and Other Poems* that his poetry has the "fire of a genius" and the "voice of true poesy" (3). He also acknowledged the potential prejudice of his readers in the introduction to *America and Other Poems* when he admitted that his book was written "by one of the proscribed race, whose lot has been ignorance and servitude" (2).

In the other pair of poems from the second sequence, Whitfield demonstrates how the power of language that he cherishes as a poet can be corrupted in a racist culture. "The Arch-Apostate" laments that the erstwhile abolitionist Daniel Webster used his powers of oratory in Congress to support the Fugitive Slave Law, and "The Misanthropist" presents a portrait of a black poet whose ability to use language has been crippled by racism. "In vain thou bid'st me strike the lyre," he says to the muse, writing that it is impossible for him to "Break forth in patriotic fire, / Or soar on higher minstrelsy" (48, 54). Pairing Webster's power over language with a black poet's powerlessness recalls the poems of the previous sequence about John Quincy Adams' access to the formal networks of political power and Cinque's exclusion from these

networks. In addition, “The Arch-Apostate” and “The Misanthropist” together form a stark contrast to the hopeful poetic ambitions expressed in “To A. H.” and “Love.” The central poem of the sequence, “How Long,” argues that if the poet were allowed access to the power of language it could be used as a tool against oppression. “Oh for a pen of living fire,” he pleads, “A tongue of flame, an arm of steel, / To rouse the people’s slumbering ire, / And teach the tyrant’s heart to feel” (39). The manner in which this sequence of poems reflects Whitfield’s sense of his own struggle as a poet reaffirms Fraistat’s observation that “as we read a volume by a single poet, part of the outer structural energy of each poem will be directed toward fashioning and reflecting an image of the poet” (16). The image of the poet as representative African American in this sequence confirms the overall contention of *America and Other Poems* that black life in America is characterized by conflict and opposition.

In the third sequence, Whitfield gives an abstract sense of how it feels to live in a slaveholding nation that defines itself as a bastion of liberty. He does so by arranging three pairs of poems that alternately depict a world filled with horror and with beauty. With these poems, Whitfield illustrates the sense of discord that came from living, in Martin Delany’s words, as “slaves in the midst of freedom” (*Condition* 155). Living in a nation that offered the potential for universal human freedom but that denied this through the formal institution of slavery and the informal abuses of racism produces the sense of double consciousness that Whitfield illustrates with these six paired poems about a world of both horror and beauty. These six poems are framed by dedication hymns for African American churches that were known as hubs of political action in upstate New York. By including poems that he had previously read to an African American audience, Whitfield

sets up a tension between the African American community who heard him read these poems and the larger national community he hoped would read his book.<sup>40</sup> Elizabeth McHenry has recently shown how important public readings were in the social and political life of free Northern blacks (112). Mary Loeffelholz also says that public poetry was part of “a nineteenth-century aestheticized civic sphere, smaller in scale than the national print sphere [ . . . ] it both communicates with and reimagines.”<sup>41</sup> The interplay between the local scene of a public poetry reading and the national scene which, according to Loeffelholz, it both engages with and reimagines allows Whitfield to illustrate the tension between a national sub-community of African Americans and the nation as a whole. As mentioned previously, this tension between feeling like “part and parcel” of the nation and feeling like “a nation within a nation” was the most acute experience of Whitfield’s life.

In the fourth and final sequence of the collection Whitfield constructs an elaborate set of interwoven poems about the different meanings of freedom for blacks and whites and for individuals and communities. The sequence centers around two poems that alternately present the poet as social reformer (“Midnight Musings”) and aesthete (“Ode to Music”). Surrounding these poems about the poet’s conflicting loyalties to his individual art and to his political commitments are pairs of poems about the ways that black and white individuals and communities conceive of freedom differently. The first two poems of the sequence reflect a larger American preoccupation with the rhetoric of

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<sup>40</sup> See mention of Whitfield’s connection with these churches in *The North Star* 24 October 1850 and *Frederick Douglass’ Paper* 3 September 1852.

<sup>41</sup> Mary Loeffelholz, “The Religion of Art in the City at War: Boston’s Public Poetry and

human freedom, whereas the last two poems of the sequence focus on the literal quest for freedom among people of African descent. The first poem, “Self-Reliance” invokes an Emersonian image of an American individualist “Who cares not for the world’s applause” but remains “to his own fixed purpose true” (69–70). Presenting someone who frees himself from the bondage of popular opinion, “Self-Reliance” stands in marked contrast to “The North Star,” the final poem of the sequence, which depicts a fugitive slave seeking freedom from physical bondage. Similarly, the second and fifth poems of the sequence are commemorative verses that recall the collective freedom brought about by the American Revolution (“Ode for the Fourth of July”) and the end of the British slave trade (“Stanzas for the First of August”). In pairing “Ode for the Fourth of July” with “Stanzas for the First of August,” Whitfield contrasts the moment when white Americans freed themselves from their political slavery as a colony with the moment when African slaves in the Caribbean celebrated the end of the British slave trade. This pairing of white and black quests for freedom on July Fourth and August First recalls the other white/black poem pairs—Adams and Cinque, Webster and the muted black poet—in a way that grants coherence to the collection as a whole.

Many of the poems in Whitfield’s book were originally occasional verses written for a variety of different circumstances. Integrated into the book as a whole, however, these occasional poems serve a larger purpose than the single occasion for which they were originally intended. Collecting occasional poems into poetry volumes was already an established tradition among antebellum literary nationalists by the time that Whitfield

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the Great Organ, 1863,” *American Literary History* 13.2 (2001): 212–41. 213.

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Chart 1.

Arrangement of Poems in *America and Other Poems*

“America” (*rewriting of the patriotic song “America”*)

I. A pair of poems about a peaceful white abolitionist and a violent African revolutionary is framed by poems that alternately emphasize religion and emigration.

- a. “Christmas Hymn” (*religion*)
  - b. “Lines on the Death of J. Quincy Adams” (*peaceful white abolitionist*)
  - b. “To Cinque” (*violent black revolutionary*)
- a. “New Year’s Hymn” (*emigration*)

II. Pairs of poems about the power of language to create and destroy frame a long poem about the poet’s ability to confront worldwide oppression.

- a. “To A. H.” (*the poet’s ability to use language to praise the beloved*)
- a. “Love” (*the poet’s ability to use language to praise God*)
  - b. “How Long” (*the power of the poet to confront worldwide oppression*)
  - c. “The Arch Apostate” (*a white politician uses language to destroy*)
  - c. “The Misanthropist” (*a black poet’s ability to use language is crippled by racism*)

III. Alternating poems about the beauty and horror of the world are framed by dedicatory poems for African American churches.

- a. “A Hymn Written for the Dedication of the Vine Street Methodist Episcopal Church, Buffalo” (*dedicatory poem for African American church*)
  - b. “Yes! Strike Again That Sounding String” (*horror*)
  - c. “To \_\_\_\_\_” (*beauty*)
- b. “Prayer of the Oppressed” (*horror*)
  - c. “To S.A.T.” (*beauty*)
- b. “Delusive Hope” (*horror*)
  - c. “To M.E.A.” (*beauty*)
- a. “A Hymn Written for the Dedication of the Michigan Street Baptist Church, Buffalo” (*dedicatory poem for African American church*)

IV. A pair of poems about the poet’s individual and communal responsibilities is framed by paired poems about the different meanings of freedom for blacks and whites, both as individuals and as communities.

- a. “Self-Reliance” (*individual freedom for an American iconoclast*)
    - b. “Ode for the Fourth of July” (*collective freedom in the United States*)
    - c. “Midnight Musings” (*the poet as social reformer*)
    - c. “Ode to Music” (*the poet as aesthete*)
  - b. “Stanzas for the First of August” (*collective freedom in the Caribbean*)
  - a. “The North Star” (*individual freedom for a runaway slave*)
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published *America and Other Poems*. As Alan Golding observes, “Th[e] attempt to preserve a national literature simultaneously with its creation distinguishes the early American anthologists from their British contemporaries. In America, unlike in England, the survival of the national poetry canon depended largely on the anthologists’ success in preserving poetry.”<sup>42</sup> In the preface to the first anthology of American poetry, *American Poems* (1793), Elihu Hubbard Smith lamented that “the frail security of an obscure newspaper, was the only” haven for what he calls “some of the handsomest specimens of American Poetry.”<sup>43</sup> Smith’s anthologizing impulse continued throughout the first half of the nineteenth century as a growing print culture coincided with an increasing nationalism that sought to record the history of American poetry as it was written and collected. In 1841, for example, John Keese wrote in his introduction to *The Poets of America*, “American Poetry has hitherto been little more than a happy accident” because “The main part of our poetical literature . . . has been occasional and fugitive. It has usually come before the public eye in small detached portions, with slight pretension to permanence.”<sup>44</sup>

Second only to the epic, the duty of the national bard is to write occasional poems

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<sup>42</sup> Alan Golding, *From Outlaw to Classic: Canons in American Poetry* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995), 9.

<sup>43</sup> Elihu Hubbard Smith, ed., *American Poems, Selected and Original Vol.1.* (Litchfield, CT: Collier and Buel, 1793), iv. See also Matthew Carey, ed., *The Columbian Muse: A Selection of American Poetry, from Various Authors of Established Reputation* (New York: J. Carey, 1794).

<sup>44</sup> John Keese, ed., *The Poets of America* 4th ed. (New York: S. Coleman, 1841), 9–10. Samuel Kettel’s 1829 *Specimens of American Poetry* (Boston: S. G. Goodrich, 1829) similarly demonstrates the preservationist goal of “preserving a portion of what is valuable and characteristic in the writings of our native poets . . . for the cause of

commemorating the significant events of national life. While antebellum literary nationalists frequently lamented the lack of material that would-be epic poets had to draw upon because of the United States' relatively recent history, these early anthologies of American poetry testify that the occasional and otherwise ephemeral poems of the new nation could be cited as evidence of national history in the making.<sup>45</sup> Because occasional poetry performed a parallel role to the epic in antebellum literary nationalism, collecting occasional poems into printed books allowed for anthologists to write an American epic in progress as it was written in occasional poems. Despite the similarity between Whitfield's conspicuously titled *America and Other Poems* and collections such as Smith's *American Poems* and Keese's *The Poets of America*, Whitfield did not gather his poems together in an effort to tell an epic American narrative. Rather, his goal was to tell the American story as a series of unresolved contradictions. With the third edition of *Leaves of Grass* in 1860, Whitman began to arrange his poems into discrete sequences—"clusters," as he called them—that reflect a similar desire to conceive of his book as a coherent entity.<sup>46</sup> Whitfield's use of poem sequences seven years before Whitman would do so testifies to a shared, albeit parallel, project on opposite sides of the color line to

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American literature" (vi, iii).

<sup>45</sup> See John McWilliams, *The American Epic: Transforming a Genre, 1770–1860* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) on the lack of history that bedeviled attempts to write an American epic.

<sup>46</sup> Thomas E. Crowley, *The Structure of "Leaves of Grass."* Austin, University of Texas Press, 1970. James Perrin Warren, "The 'Paths to the House': Cluster Arrangements in *Leaves of Grass*, 1860–1881." *ESQ* 30 (1984): 51–70. See also Arthur Golden's guide to the clusters in *"Leaves of Grass": A Textual Variorum of the Printed Poems*. 3 Vols. Ed. Sculley Bradley, Harold W. Boldgett, Arthur Golden, William White. New York: New York University Press, 1980, lvii–lxxv.

contain the disparate fragments of the nation into a poetically reconstructed volume of poems. As I explain in the following section, both poets were also concerned with the relationship between the poet's body and the poet's book.

## II.

### **The Poet's Body and National Geography**

In the 1855 preface to *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman says that a link between his poems, his body, and American geography defines his role as a national bard. The American poet, he writes, "incarnates [his nation's] geography and natural life and rivers and lakes" (LG 618). It is the duty of an American bard, he continues, to "attract his own land body and soul to himself" because "The proof of a poet is that his country absorbs him as affectionately as he has absorbed it" (636). This "absorption" for Whitman is more than just an internalization of national traits and characteristics; it is a fusion of the American bard with the physical substance of the nation, a fusion that connects a geographically delimited national space with the poet's body. "I inhale great draughts of space," he writes, and by so doing internalizes the entire expanse of the nation: "The east and west are mine, and the north and south are mine" (128). Because Whitman believed that his book and his body were one and the same ("this is no book," he wrote, "Who touches this, touches a man" [424]), he hoped that by connecting his body with the geography of the United States he would turn *Leaves of Grass* into a textualized America, an incarnation in verse of the national flesh made word. One of the preconditions for Whitman's infusion of American geography into the poetry of *Leaves of Grass* was his ability to move freely throughout the nation. As he writes in the 1855 preface, "When the

long Atlantic coast stretches longer and the Pacific coast stretches longer [the American poet] easily stretches with them north or south. He spans between them also from east to west and reflects what is between” (618).<sup>47</sup>

Whitman’s belief that a poet needed unrestricted national mobility to qualify as an American bard, however, was a requirement that an African American poet like James Whitfield would have had great difficulty filling. Before the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law, African American mobility was already severely limited. In an era when Northerners were required to return runaway slaves to their masters in the South, however, the free and open access to American geography that Whitman considered a necessary precondition for American poetry became even more difficult for African Americans to secure. Whitfield and other free Northern blacks believed that the implications of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law extended beyond the re-enslavement of runaway slaves, and that the new law amounted to, as Whitfield affirmed, “the virtual enslavement of every colored person in the United States.”<sup>48</sup> As Martin Delany put it, following the Fugitive Slave Law African Americans felt that they were “liable at any time, in any place, and under all circumstances to be . . . sent into endless bondage” (*Condition* 154). The poet’s ability to move with unrestricted access throughout the nation was imaginatively unavailable to a black poet in post-Fugitive Slave Law America. The emigration movement, however, provided Whitfield with a new source of

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<sup>47</sup> Similarly, in “Salut Au Monde!” he writes, “Within me latitude widens, longitude lengthens” (*LG* 117).

<sup>48</sup> *Proceedings of the National Emigration Convention* (Pittsburgh: A. A. Anderson, 1854), 25. Whitfield attended this convention and signed this statement. Whitfield was also part of a “Mass Meeting of the Colored Citizens of Buffalo” in October of 1850 and

imaginative energy that redefined the relationship between the black body and the American continent, and it did so in a way that made a black poet more qualified to “incarnate[ his nation’s] geography” than a white poet. Before explaining how the emigration movement informed Whitfield’s sense of the connection between the black body and American geography, I will explain why a connection to national geography was a central concern for antebellum American poets.

Long before Whitman wrote that “the United States are essentially the greatest poem” (*LG* 616), and even before Emerson wrote that “America is a poem in our eyes; its ample geography dazzles the imagination,” poets in the United States had attempted to create a distinctively national poetic tradition characterized by descriptions of American geography.<sup>49</sup> Antebellum poets frequently included lengthy inventories of representative geographic scenes in their poetry: the flowing waters of the Mississippi, the grandeur of the Rocky Mountains, the sublimity of the Grand Canyon, the spectacle of Niagara Falls, etc.<sup>50</sup> The importance of geographic imagery to antebellum U.S. poetry has antecedents in eighteenth-century Europe and seventeenth-century America. European literary nationalists defined national identity not only as a shared culture and language, but also as a common connection to a historic homeland. As the regions of Europe were codified into political nation-states, poetic descriptions of the landscape became tantamount to

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signed a resolution opposing the Fugitive Slave Law (*The North Star* 24 October 1850).

<sup>49</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Portable Emerson*, ed. Carl Bode, (New York: Penguin, 1981), 262.

<sup>50</sup> Perry Miller calls this the “nativist inventory” of antebellum American poetry in *The Raven and the Whale: The War of Words and Wits in the Era of Poe and Melville* (New York: Harcourt, 1956), 96.

definitions of national political identity. Despite their relatively recent history on the continent, eighteenth-century white Americans adopted this European pattern to define American national identity. According to Martin Bruckner, Euro-American writers in the early republic subsumed the differences in ethnicity, religion, and language among immigrants to a single national community by appealing to the shared space of a common geography.<sup>51</sup> As Perry Miller argued in *Nature's Nation*, European immigrants to the New World believed that even though they had no historical ties to the land, the perceived willingness of the continent to receive them allowed them to become “parts of the landscape.”<sup>52</sup>

In the seventeenth century, Puritan immigrants to New England similarly made geography a precondition for community identity, not because North America was their historic homeland, but because it was considered a gift from God to his chosen people. For Puritans and their descendents, possessing the promised land of America was proof not only that God approved of their dominion over the continent, but that they were also a distinct people with a unique national mission. Sacvan Bercovitch has argued that the Puritans' experience with American geography was “a venture in exegesis” that allowed them to read the signs of their destiny in the landscape in the same way that “a believer unveils scripture.”<sup>53</sup> For both seventeenth-century Puritans and eighteenth-century

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<sup>51</sup> Martin Bruckner, “Lessons in Geography: Maps, Spellers, and Other Grammars of Nationalism in the Early Republic,” *American Quarterly* 51.2 (1999): 311-42.

<sup>52</sup> Perry Miller, *Nature's Nation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), 12.

<sup>53</sup> Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Rites of Assent: Transformations in the Symbolic Construction of America* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 29. See also Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975).

nationalists, American geography confirmed national identity. When Whitman says that he becomes the American poet by incarnating national geography, he plays into both of these traditions that say American national identity, rather than being a political construct, is a latent force that resides in the landscape of North America.

The emigration movement that Whitfield belonged to reversed the equation that made geography the source of national identity and argued instead that an African racial identity defines American geography. The emigration movement articulated the black body's relationship to national political geography in two ways. On one hand, the emigration movement emphasized the limited mobility of the black body in the United States and argued that, as a "nation within a nation," African Americans belonged to a circumscribed sphere that was smaller than the nation as a whole. On the other hand, the emigration movement claimed the geography of the entire globe in the name of African populations. As emigration supporter Henry Bibb argued, "The world is the Colored man's home, and any attempt of human legislation to restrict his boundary, or circumscribe his field of locomotion, is a gross violation of the fundamental principles of justice" (qtd. in Kinshasa 89).<sup>54</sup> In contrast to the insistence of the overwhelmingly white-supported American Colonization Society that free blacks should be returned to a U.S.-backed colony in Liberia, the emigration movement believed that people of African descent are a cosmopolitan race with legitimate access to the entire globe, not just the African continent.

The emigration movement's claim that African Americans had a right to settle

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<sup>54</sup> Bibb said this in 1850 at the time when Delany was working as a correspondent for him (Victor Ullman, *Martin R. Delany: The Beginnings of Black Nationalism* [Boston:

anywhere in the world was predicated upon a belief that African bodies, more so than the bodies of any other race, are able to adapt successfully to every world climate. Martin Delany argued in *The Condition, Elevation, Emigration, and Destiny of the Colored People of the United States* that people of African descent “are a *superior race*, being endowed with properties fitting us for *all parts* of the earth. . . . prov[ing] our right and duty to live wherever we may *choose*” (202). While white raciologists argued that whites belonged in temperate regions and people of color belonged in tropical regions,<sup>55</sup> Delany argued, “There is one great physiological fact in regard to the colored race . . . that they can bear *more different* climates than the white race. . . . The black race may be found, inhabiting in healthful improvement, every part of the globe” (214). Such arguments replaced the legal restriction on the mobility of African American bodies with a biological argument that made the mobility of African Americans into a global—and not just national—right. For the emigration movement, however, the global mobility of Africans was also intimately connected with the creation of American nationality. In *The Condition*, Delany cites historical precedent that the mobility and adaptability of the black body allowed African populations to create American civilization out of the “howling wilderness” that European colonists found in the New World.

In the revisionist history of the settlement of the American continent that he provides in *The Condition*, Delany shows how people of African descent gave rise to American civilization in a time when, as he tells it, indifferent Indians and greedy

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Beacon, 1971], 131).

<sup>55</sup> George M. Frederickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817–1914* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 145-52.



Europeans were unable to make anything out of the American landscape. He writes, “When Christopher Columbus in 1492, discovered America, [the] natives were found to pay little or no attention to cultivation, being accustomed by hereditary pursuit, to war, fishing, and the sports of the chase. . . . Europeans who ventured here, came as mineral speculators, and not for the purpose of improving the country” (51).<sup>56</sup> Delany similarly emphasizes the important role played by Africans in developing the American continent during the seventeenth-century landing of the Pilgrims in Massachusetts, where he shows that the landscape was “too arduous for the European” to cultivate and that cultivation was “unknown to the Indian” (63). And since neither “the whites nor the Indians were equal to the hard and almost insurmountable difficulties, that now stood widespread before them,” Delany says that it was up to Africans to make “America” out of the New World wilderness. When they arrived, he says, “The forests gave way before them, and extensive verdant fields, richly clothed with produce, rose up by magic before these hardy sons of toil” (66).

In order to explain how it is that people of African descent can create the “verdant fields” of an idealized pastoral America that was a familiar image in the nineteenth-century United States, Delany locates a moment of forgotten history “fifty years previous to the sailing of Columbus in search of a new world” (55). In 1442, Delany says, a Portuguese sailor took ten Africans to Lisbon where “These Africans were set

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<sup>56</sup> Frederick Douglass shared this opinion with Delany, but did not develop it into a political program in the way that Delany and the emigrationists did: “In contrast to the Indian race, which was daily wasting away, ‘the history of the Negro race proves them to be wonderfully adapted to all countries, all climates, and all conditions’, [Frederick] Douglass told an audience at Western Reserve College in 1854” (Brian W. Dippie, *The Vanishing American: White Attitudes and U.S. Indian Policy*, [Lawrence, KS: University

immediately to work in the gardens of the emperor . . . [and] were found to be skillful and industrious in agriculture” (55). Nineteenth-century Americans bred on pastoral ideology imagined North America to be, in Leo Marx’s formulation, “a well-ordered green garden magnified to continental size.”<sup>57</sup> By showing Africans creating a pastoral masterpiece in Portuguese gardens fifty years before Columbus sailed to the New World, Delany says that the garden of America is something that Africans can create anywhere in the world. On a neutral ground that was neither Africa nor America, these fifteenth-century Africans showed that they carried with them the potential to create “America” wherever they went, be it North America or the Iberian Peninsula. Delany goes so far as to argue that Africa itself was “America” anciently because of the black bodies that adapted to and developed the landscape. “Like the present America,” he writes “all the [ancient] world went to Africa to get a supply of commodities” (53). America, it seems, is not so much a place in the western hemisphere as it is a condition that inheres in the black body. Delany’s central argument was that Africans were not brought *to* America, but that Africans brought America *with* them. And because Africans brought America with them to the northern half of the New World in the seventeenth century, he reasoned, they could just as easily take it with them to the southern half in the nineteenth.

The implication of this line of reasoning on a black poet’s ability to incarnate American geography is difficult to overstate. Since African bodies created America in the first place, there is a closer connection between black bodies and the American continent

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Press of Kansas, 1991], 17).

<sup>57</sup> Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 156.

than there is between white bodies and the American continent. A black poet, therefore, is more rather than less qualified than a white poet to create American poetry based on his ability to link his body with American geography. Whitman asserted that the American poet should be a conduit for the nationality that lies latent in the geography of the continent. As Cecilia Tichi says, when Whitman made the “physical incarnation of the country” into “a national literary mandate,” he helped to create an ahistorical pattern that “lends itself to the formulation of ‘Nature’s nation’ as a prevalent paradigm.”<sup>58</sup> For Whitman, American civilization arises from the physical fact of the continent. For Whitfield and the emigration movement, the black body invests the continent with American civilization. The equation is completely reversed. In the model that Whitman draws upon to claim that the American bard incarnates his nation’s geography, the white poet’s body is a passive medium through which national identity naturally flows through the physical substance of the continent. In the model that the emigration movement presented to Whitfield, the black body was an active agent whose presence creates national identity out of New World geography.

In the title poem of *American and Other Poems*, “America,” Whitfield combines his desire as a poet to reconstruct the nation poetically with his desire as an emigrationist to create a new America out of the geography of the western hemisphere. The logic that Whitfield’s poem follows is the same as that of the emigration movement: national identity does not flow naturally out of American geography; rather, national identity must actively be put into American geography by black populations. In a parallel gesture to the

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<sup>58</sup> Cecilia Tichi, *Embodiment of A Nation: Human Form in American Places*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 5, 9.

emigration movement's focus on the mechanism of the African body, in "America" Whitfield focuses on the mechanism of the African American voice. As Melvin Dixon has argued, "Afro-American literature is replete with speech acts and spatial images that endow language with the power to reinvent geography and identity."<sup>59</sup> Whitfield's intent to redefine his relationship with American geography stems from this tradition in African American literature that Dixon describes. However, the emigration movement's goal to create a new America in the southern hemisphere rather than merely to reform the old America in the United States invests Whitfield's poem with a distinct sense of how African Americans can create America anew. By the same token, Whitfield's "America" is an extreme example of what Houston A. Baker, Jr., describes as the tradition among African American writers to imagine "AMERICA as [an] immanent idea of boundless, classless, raceless possibility in America."<sup>60</sup> For Whitfield and the emigration movement, however, "AMERICA" was more than just an "immanent idea"; it was a literal geography soon to be actualized through African American emigration. Whitfield's poem "America" stems from his realization that another America was possible in his poetry because another America was possible outside of the United States.

Whitfield does not directly mention the Fugitive Slave Law in "America" (although he obliquely refers to conditions whereby "free-born men, uncharged with crime" could be "Consigned unto a slaver's pen"), but given the time of the poem's composition it is possible that he was responding to the reshaping of national geography

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<sup>59</sup> Melvin Dixon, *Ride out the Wilderness: Geography and Identity in Afro-American Literature* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 2.

<sup>60</sup> Houston A. Baker, Jr., *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular*

that the law initiated (11). Previous to the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law in 1850, African Americans had participated—albeit partially—in the larger preoccupation with the geography of American liberty expressed by the patriotic song “America.” For years, “The North” had served as the landscape upon which African Americans could play a role in the drama of American freedom. Once the Fugitive Slave Law was put into force, however, the North lost both its symbolic resonance and political reality as a land of freedom. When runaway slaves had nowhere to go in the U.S. and when free Northern blacks began to feel like “slaves in the midst of freedom,” as Delany described them, both free and enslaved African Americans were left without a geographic stage upon which to perform the drama of American liberty (*Condition* 155). The goal of the emigration movement was to create a new American geography where the drama of human liberty could be performed. In *The Condition*, Delany encouraged African Americans to “enter upon this great theatre of . . . adventure, and take their position on the stage of Central and South America, where a brilliant engagement of certain and most triumphant success, in the drama of human equality awaits them” (208). In “America,” Whitfield created a symbolic geography of American freedom commensurate to the literal geography of American freedom that the emigration movement offered.

### **The New Geographies of Freedom in Whitfield’s “America”**

“America” begins as a parody of Samuel Francis Smith’s 1831 patriotic song of the same name. In parodying this popular song, Whitfield turns the invocation “My country, ‘tis of thee, / Sweet land of liberty, / Of thee I sing” into an accusation:

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*Theory* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), 65.

America, it is to thee,  
 Thou boasted land of liberty,—  
 It is to thee I raise my song,  
 Thou land of blood, and crime, and wrong. (9)

Whitfield was not the first poet to rewrite this hymn to American liberty that, by the 1850s, was a staple at July Fourth celebrations and other nationalist occasions. In the twenty years that had passed between the time that the song “America” was published and Whitfield parodied its opening lines in his own “America,” other abolitionist poets had already written new versions of the song as a way to critique the United States’ failure to live up to its egalitarian ideals.<sup>61</sup> While most parodies of “America” focus on the disjunction between the rhetoric of American liberty and the reality of American slavery, Whitfield’s poem is unique in the way that it focuses on what Robert James Branham calls “the geography of white fantasy” that permeates the song’s Puritan-origins imagery of the “Land where my fathers died, / Land of the pilgrims’ pride” (630).

Whitfield’s focus on “the geography of white fantasy” in the song allows his poem to hone in on the central ideological assumption that made “America” such a popular song.

The popularity of the patriotic song “America” stems from the way that it gives voice to the belief in an inherent connection between U.S. national identity (“My native

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<sup>61</sup> See Robert James Branham, “‘Of Thee I Sing’: Contesting ‘America,’” *American Quarterly*, 48.4 (1996): 623-50. A contributor to *The Liberator* wrote what is probably the first antislavery parody of the song in 1839 (“My country! ‘tis of thee, / Stronghold of Slavery— / Of thee I sing), and William Wells Brown published what was probably the most widely disseminated parody in his 1848 collection, *The Anti-Slavery Harp; A Collection of Songs for Anti-Slavery Meetings* (“Spirit of Freemen, wake; / No truce with Slavery make, / Thy deadly foe”). Other notable parodies were written by Joshua McCarter Simpson, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and James Madison Bell (Branham 633–36).

country”), human liberty (“Land of the noble free”), and American geography (“I love thy rocks and rills, / Thy woods and templed hills”). The song encourages its singers to let the sounds of freedom ring “From every mountainside” of the nation with the invitation, “Let mortal tongue awake; / Let all that breathe partake.” In addition, the song suggests that the sounds of America’s physical topography are themselves part of the song: “Let music swell the breeze / And swing from all the trees / Sweet freedom’s song.” As the voices of American singers blend with the sounds of the national landscape, the song makes its boldest claim that the music of American liberty literally inheres in American geography with the line, “Let rocks their silence break, / The sound prolong.” The idea that rocks themselves can break forth into singing “Sweet freedom’s song” thoroughly naturalizes the ideology of the United States as a land of freedom. The music of American freedom was not written by politicians and ideologues, the song suggests; rather, the music of American freedom is recorded in the stones of the continent itself.

In critiquing the link between national identity, freedom, and American geography expressed in the patriotic song “America,” Whitfield focuses his own “America” on two key moments in U.S. history—the Puritan settlement of New England and the Revolutionary War—that the song uses to identify the United States as the “Land of the pilgrim’s pride” and the “Land where my fathers died.” While the patriotic song “America” begins with an appeal to the pilgrim fathers’ geography of national origins, Whitfield begins his poem by invoking the transatlantic locations of the slave trade:

It is to thee, my native land,  
From whence has issued many a band

To tear the black man from his soil,  
 And force him here to delve and toil;  
 Chained on your blood-bemoistened sod  
 Cringing beneath a tyrant's rod. (9)

Just as the song “America” addresses “My native country,” in this passage Whitfield directs himself to “my native land.” But as he recounts the history that made the United States the land of his nativity, he tells a story that differs in significant ways from the story of freedom told about New England’s pilgrim fathers. Rather than telling American history as a pilgrimage from bondage to freedom as Puritans moved westward across the Atlantic from Europe to America, Whitfield makes the United States the point of origin for slave traders moving eastward across the Atlantic to bring Africans from freedom to bondage. Whitfield reconfigures the geographical coordinates upon which U.S. history is made to unfold such that the progress of freedom from the Old World to the New World in traditional American history is replaced with the voyage of slave traders from the New World to the Old World and back to the New World again. Whitfield’s quagmire of pronouns in this passage reinforces his critique of the linkage between geography, nationality, and liberty in the patriotic song “America”: the black poet calls America “my native land” but also identifies a connection with Africa (“the black man from *his* soil”) that, despite being his place of origin, is not the present location of the speaker (“force him *here* to delve and toil”), a location which he then identifies with white people as “*your* blood-bemoistened sod.”

After telling the shameful history of the slave trade that took place in the “Land of the pilgrims’ pride,” Whitfield shifts his focus to the role that African Americans played



in the Revolutionary War. Whitfield recalls a time upon the “Land where my fathers died” when African Americans fought with white Americans against British colonial rule (“When black and white fought side by side, / Upon the well-contested field,— / Turned back the fierce opposing tide, / And made the proud invader yield” [10]). Rather than extend this egalitarian unity between black and white revolutionary soldiers into peacetime, though, the white soldiers who were once “wounded, side by side” with black soldiers became what Whitfield calls “the framers of a code, / That would disgrace the fiends of hell” when they condoned slavery in the U.S. Constitution (11). Whitfield asks,

Was it for this, that freedom’s fires  
 Were kindled by your patriot sires?  
 Was it for this, they shed their blood,  
 On hill and plain, on field and flood? (10)

The geographic vocabulary that Whitfield draws upon here to describe the setting of the American Revolution—“hill and plain,” “field and flood”—is similar to the imagery in the patriotic song “America” of “thy rocks and rills, / Thy woods and templed hills.” As Whitfield continues to critique the failure of the American Revolution to grant full equality to African Americans, he does so by addressing the presumed connection between geography, nationality, and liberty.

In the following passage, Whitfield imagines how the fallen African American soldiers of the Revolution would have responded could they have seen the legacy of slavery that followed the war. I quote this passage at length to show how Whitfield’s language is permeated with geographical imagery:

Or could the shades of all the dead,

Who fell beneath that starry flag,  
 Visit the scenes where they once bled,  
 On hill and plain, on vale and crag,  
 By peaceful brook, or ocean's strand,  
 By inland lake, or dark green wood,  
 Where'er the soil of this wide land  
 Was moistened by their patriot blood,—  
 And then survey the country o'er,  
 From north to south, from east to west,  
 And hear the agonizing cry  
 Ascending up to God on high,  
 From western wilds to ocean's shore,  
 The fervent prayer of the oppressed. (12)

Whitfield fills this passage with the hills, plains, valleys, rivers, and mountains that cover the entire landscape of “this wide land / . . . / From north to south, from east to west.” In Whitfield's poem, however, the “rocks and rills” and “templed hills” of the patriotic song “America” do not burst forth into songs of freedom. Rather, as we “survey the country o'er” we “hear the agonizing cry” of oppressed slaves. Whitfield follows this lengthy passage about American geography with an equally lengthy passage about the sounds of suffering that are heard emanating from the national landscape: “The *cry* of helpless infancy / Torn from the parent's fond caress”; “The indignant *wail* of fiery youth, / . . . / Trampled by tyrants in the dust”; “The *shriek* of virgin purity, / Doomed to some libertine's embrace”; “The *cry* of fathers, mothers, wives, / Severed from all their hearts

hold dear” (12–13, italics added). Whitfield revises the central assumption of the patriotic song “America” that the music of American freedom inherently resides in the nation’s geography and instead shows how the cries of the oppressed are heard by anyone who listens to the sounds of the landscape.

Whitfield reinforces this point in the form as well as the content of his poem. While most of the poem alternates between rhymed couplets (*aabbccdd*) and cross-rhymes (*ababcdcd*), at two key moments Whitfield introduces a distinct rhyme scheme that combines couplets and cross-rhymes into a six-line *abccab* pattern. In the first of these passages, which I have already cited above, Whitfield hears different sounds that the patriotic song “America” purports to hear in the landscape. I cite this first passage again to emphasize how the change in form reinforces Whitfield’s message:

And then survey the country o’er, (*a*)  
 From north to south, from east to west, (*b*)  
 And hear the agonizing cry (*c*)  
 Ascending up to God on high, (*c*)  
 From western wilds to ocean’s shore, (*a*)  
 The fervent prayer of the oppressed. (*b*)

The *a* rhymes present the total scope of the national landscape (“And then survey the country o’er” “From western wilds to ocean’s shore”), while the *b* rhymes cover that landscape with the suffering of slavery (“From north to south, from east to west” “The fervent prayer of the oppressed”). The central *c* couplet reinforces that the sounds of the national landscape are not songs of freedom, but cries of pain (“And hear the agonizing cry / Ascending up to God on high”).

In the second passage where Whitfield uses this modified *abccab* rhyme scheme, he looks forward to a moment of divine retribution when the cries of the oppressors, rather than the oppressed, will be heard throughout the land. Just as the patriotic song “America” ends with a prayer (“Protect us by thy might / Great God, our King”), Whitfield’s poem ends with a plea that divine vengeance be meted out on the slaveholding nation. Whitfield asks in his prayer whether he should take up arms against his oppressors,

Or wait the promised time of God, (*a*)  
 When his Almighty ire shall wake, (*b*)  
 And smite the oppressor in his wrath, (*c*)  
 And hurl red ruin in his path, (*c*)  
 And with the terrors of his rod, (*a*)  
 Cause adamantine hearts to quake. (*b*) (14)

The *a* and *b* rhymes in this passage appeal to a sense of divine justice: at the duly appointed “time of God” the “terrors of his rod” will be felt as his “ire shall wake” and cause the “hearts [of the oppressor] to quake.” The *c* rhymes of this passage that bring the “wrath” of God into the “path” of slaveholders parallel the *c* rhymes of the previous passage as the suffering of the oppressors replaces the suffering of the oppressed. By creating a parallel between the *c* rhymes of these passages, Whitfield indicates that the present America of suffering slaves is not the same America of suffering slaveholders that will someday be. There is a sense here that the tables are turning and that a new American geography is about to come into being.

The final lines of the poem confirm that this new geography will soon be created

and they identify the mechanism of its creation. He writes,

We pray, and never mean to cease,  
 Till weak old age and fiery youth  
 In freedom's cause their voices raise,  
 And burst the bonds of every slave;  
 Till, north and south, and east and west,  
 The wrongs we bear shall be redressed. (16)

The prayer with which Whitfield ends his poem is one of the mechanisms of voice by which his new sense of American geography is realized. Recalling the previous moment in the poem when “From north to south, from east to west” all that could be heard was “The fervent prayer of the oppressed,” Whitfield ends with an alternate vision of American geography where African Americans will raise their voices against slavery (“In freedom's cause their voices raise”). The lines “Till, north and south, and east and west, / The wrongs we bear shall be redressed” depict a new geography of freedom as broad as the geography of oppression identified earlier in the poem.

It's important to note the relationship between the raised voices of African American activists and the world they create: Whitfield wants African Americans to create a new American geography by raising their voices; he doesn't expect them to wait for geography to sing the songs of freedom to them as it supposedly does to white Americans in the patriotic song “America.” By making African American voices the precondition for creating a new geography that extends “From north to south, from east to west,” Whitfield's poem functions on the same logic as the emigration movement, namely, that African Americans do not *extract* national identity from geography, they

*invest* geography with national identity. Whitfield's poem does not end with an explicit endorsement of emigration policies—that is, it does not identify Martin Delany's plan for a black republic in South America as the space of freedom that extends “From north to south, from east to west.” Rather, Whitfield's poem puts emigration policies into an imaginative poetic register that resonates with the concerns of emigrationists and mainstream abolitionists alike.

### **“How Long”**

Whitfield's “America” dismantles the assumptions about geography and national identity implicit in U.S. culture—and explicit in the patriotic song “America”—that the emigration movement made him aware of. The other major poem of *America and Other Poems*, “How Long,” similarly draws upon the imaginative energy of the emigration movement to reinvent African Americans' relationship with the nation. In “How Long,” however, Whitfield is not concerned with creating an alternative America. Rather, “How Long” illustrates the emigration movement's understanding of the way that African Americans' relationship to the nation is tethered between their affiliations to a racialized national sub-community (the “nation within a nation” both Whitfield and Delany identified) and a transnational community that extends beyond national boundaries (based on the rationale that, as Bibb put it, “The world is the Colored man's home”). Because African Americans were “a denationalized people,” as emigrationist J. Theodore Holly called them in his introduction to a pamphlet that included Whitfield's prose writings on emigration (*Arguments* 3), the emigration movement argued that African Americans had primary allegiances to communities that were either smaller or larger than the nation, and

that the nation was a secondary sphere of influence. The tension that arises between these competing affiliations to national, subnational, and transnational communities lies at the heart of “How Long.”

“How Long” recounts a worldwide failure of freedom in an apocalyptic mid-century moment that includes the African slave trade, the failed European revolutions of 1848–49, and the 1850 U.S. Fugitive Slave Law. In focusing on these three locations, Whitfield presents himself as a child of Africa, a transatlantic citizen of the world, and an American Jeremiah. From the outset of the poem, Whitfield connects the abolitionist theme of bemoaning “slavery’s gloomy night” in its American habitation with the oppression that exists “In every region of the earth”:

How long, oh gracious God! how long  
 Shall power lord it over right?  
 The feeble, trampled by the strong,  
 Remain in slavery’s gloomy night.  
 In every region of the earth,  
 Oppression rules with iron power. (29)

Whitfield’s “concern for global oppression” (Redmond 75) and “open[ness] to the consideration of every world problem”<sup>62</sup> in this poem, as critics have called it, is evident from these opening lines. In addition to opening himself to the world at large, by titling his poem “How Long,” Whitfield places himself within the nationalist tradition that Sacvan Bercovitch has identified as the American jeremiad. The common refrain of the

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<sup>62</sup> Jean Wagner, *Black Poets of the United States*, trans. Kenneth Douglas, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1973), 24

jeremiad, “When is our errand to be fulfilled? How long, O Lord, how long?,” laments national decline while maintaining a commitment to the unique historical mission of America to bring freedom to the world.<sup>63</sup> Even though the American Jeremiah is a figure on the fringes of society, he reinscribes American nationality by confirming the exceptionalism of the American mission. In adopting the posture of the American Jeremiah, however, Whitfield does not exclusively endorse the nation. Rather, he puts the nation into play with the subnational community of African Americans and the transnational world community he also speaks for in the poem. Simon Gikandi has recently argued that affiliations to national, transnational, and racial identities “are not inherently opposed,” and that “all these terms of identity [can be] conflated.”<sup>64</sup> Similarly, Robert F. Reid-Pharr says that these racial, national, and transnational “categories [that are] generally understood as mutually exclusive” can be “so intimately intertwined as to make them indistinguishable.”<sup>65</sup>

In “How Long,” these categories interact in a way that demonstrates the internal and external pressures working against the idea of American nationality, and the concomitant way that American nationality can limit attempts at denationalization. In a moment early on in “How Long,” Whitfield illustrates the racial, national, and transnational framework of his poem:

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<sup>63</sup> Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978), 11.

<sup>64</sup> Simon Gikandi, “Race and Cosmopolitanism,” *American Literary History* 14.3 (Fall 2002): 593–615. 614.

<sup>65</sup> Robert F. Reid-Pharr, “Cosmopolitan Afrocentric Mulatto Intellectual,” *American Literary History*. 13.1 (Spring 2001): 169–79. 169.



And treacherous politicians league  
 With hireling priests, to crush and ban  
 All who expose their vile intrigue,  
 And vindicate the rights of man.  
 How long shall Afric raise to thee  
 Her fettered hand, oh Lord, in vain?  
 And plead in fearful agony,  
 For vengeance for her children slain. (30)

Whitfield's criticism of the "vile intrigue" of political and religious despotism is reminiscent of stock-in-trade American critiques of European aristocracy and state-sponsored religions, placing his concern for oppression in "every region of the earth" within a familiar context of American exceptionalism. At the same time, however, Whitfield brings together the language of the European Enlightenment and the African diaspora when he praises those who "vindicate the rights of man" and immediately follows that praise with the question, "How long shall Afric raise to thee / Her fettered hand, oh Lord, in vain?" If not a specific reference to the late-century defenses of Enlightenment ideals in either Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790) or Thomas Paine's *The Rights of Men* (1791–92), Whitfield's sympathy with those who would "vindicate the rights of man" is at least a general allusion to the Enlightenment spirit of universal human rights. Similarly, when he asks "How long shall Afric raise to thee / Her fettered hand, oh Lord, in vain?" he aligns himself with the Afrocentric world view that evoked the biblical prophecy of Psalm 68:31, "Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God," on behalf of African American slaves and their

colonized counterparts on the African continent. This pairing of African Ethiopianism and the European Enlightenment (following a reference to American exceptionalism) is a vivid realization of the conceptual space that Paul Gilroy identifies as the Black Atlantic, a non-national space of fluidity and mobility where identify categories overlap and conflate.<sup>66</sup>

After Whitfield grounds his authority to navigate the Atlantic world through his awareness of American exceptionalism, the European Enlightenment, and African Ethiopianism, he presents himself as a disembodied spectator who moves from continent to continent. Whitfield's gaze is not that of an Emersonian transparent eyeball, though; it belongs to the global mobility of the emigrationists' black body. Beginning in Africa he writes,

I see the Gambia's swelling flood,  
And Niger's darkly rolling wave,  
Bear on their bosoms stained with blood,  
The bound and lacerated slave. (30)

Used since the fifteenth century as an artery of European trade and an outpost for Portuguese, French, and British empires, the Gambia River is a prime location for illustrating European involvement in the West African slave trade. Similarly, the delta of the Niger River is where Africans participated with American and European slavers throughout the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Along with demonstrating the interconnectedness between Africa and Europe, however, this passage also describes

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<sup>66</sup> Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

these rivers as having “bosoms,” suggesting an Africa-as-motherland image that reinforces the poem’s previous question of how long Africa must plead “For vengeance for her children slain.” Whitfield watches as the African continent descends into internecine warfare of “numerous tribes spread near and far” in scenes of “Fierce, devastating, barbarous war” as they “furnish victims for that trade” which, while practiced previously on a tribal level in Africa, now “breeds on earth such deeds of shame / As fiends might blush to hear or name” (30). As Whitfield shows his awareness of the international implications the African slave trade, he also betrays a nostalgia for an African motherland where “Earth’s fairest scenes [are] in ruin laid” by the slave trade. This image of Africa as an earthly paradise corrupted by greed anchors Whitfield’s sentiments to a home continent just as his sense of the international scope of slavery dislocates the notion of home.

Moving his gaze from Africa to Europe, Whitfield looks on the aftermath of the failed revolutions that spread throughout the continent in the late 1840s. He makes the transition from Africa to Europe by dovetailing his description of the Niger and the Gambia with a description of the Danube in an elegy to the fallen Hungarian nationalists defeated by the Austrian empire in 1849:

I see where Danube’s waters roll,  
 And where the Magyar vainly strove,  
 With valiant arm, and faithful soul,  
 In battle for the land he loved. (30–31)

With the help of the “Rugged Russian Bear,” Whitfield recounts, the Austrian army put down “Freedom’s heroes” in the Magyar revolution led by Louis Kossuth. Whitfield’s

inclusion of African slavery and European ethnic nationalism under the broad heading of oppression “In every region of the earth” is reminiscent of Delany’s statement in *The Condition* that “there ha[s] in all ages, in almost every nation, existed a nation within a nation, a people who although forming a part and parcel of the population, yet were . . . but a restricted part of the body politic of such nations. . . . Such then are the Poles in Russia, the Hungarians in Austria, the Scotch, the Irish, and Welsh in the United Kingdom, and such also are the Jews” (12–13). Whitfield similarly wrote, “In every age of the world have been found classes of men oppressed by others, marked by some peculiarity of race, color, language, or religion, existing within a nation” (*Arguments* 26). Placing the plight of ethnic nationalists alongside that of African Americans allows both Whitfield and Delany to compare the struggle of European ethnicities to the condition of African Americans at the same time it enables a transatlantic citizenship devoid of racial or ethnic identity. In these similar moments when both Whitfield and Delany express an affinity with subnational populations in Europe, they bypass the nation and connect African Americans with a larger world community.

Continuing to chart the present state of European political turmoil following the failed uprisings of 1848–49, Whitfield recounts how the Second Republic in France degenerated into violence with the ascension of Napoleon III:

I see in France, oh, burning shame!  
 The shadow of a mighty name,  
 Wielding the power her patriot bands  
 Had boldly wrenched from kingly hands,  
 With more despotic pride of sway

Than ever monarch dared display. (31)

After recalling the “mighty name” of the French Republic that many Americans viewed sympathetically through the perspective of their own republicanism, Whitfield shifts his gaze to the papal monarchy in Rome that the French army, along with forces from Austria, Naples, and Spain, helped to reinstate after revolutionaries established a short-lived republic in 1849. In a sensational description of the aftermath of this failed revolution, Whitfield depicts Pope Pius IX praying over “the swords still reeking red / With the best blood his country bore” and giving “blessings on the head / Of him who wades through Roman gore” (32). In the tradition of the anti-Catholic rhetoric pervasive in mid-century America, Whitfield conjures up images of a worldwide Catholic conspiracy, saying that when Pius “The Fisher” was returned to power he spread his “world-wide nets / . . . to snare the souls of men” in a grim take on Christ’s injunction that his followers be fishers of men (32). At this point, Whitfield’s attempt to be a transatlantic citizen who can see oppression in Africa and Europe alike without feeling beholden to any one particular land is complicated by his investment in a Protestant sense of Catholic domination that reveals a strain of nativist American nationalism at a time when Catholic immigrants were unwanted in the United States.

This connection with U.S. national culture that Whitfield summons through his anti-Catholic rhetoric can also be seen in his sympathy for the fallen European revolutionaries. As Larry J. Reynolds has demonstrated, Americans showed their overwhelming support for the revolutions through “mass gatherings, parades, fireworks,

proclamations, speeches, and constant newspaper coverage.”<sup>67</sup> But while the majority of American writers and journalists “credited America with being a political messiah to the world” during this period of upheaval (Reynolds 12), Whitfield implicates the United States in the same continuum of oppression he traces from Africa to Europe. As he describes the absence of freedom throughout the Atlantic world that “Where’er I turn, bursts on mine eyes,” he accuses the U.S. of being worse than any of the post-revolution European powers (32). Even though the United States claims to be “The grand asylum for the poor / And trodden-down of every land,” in Whitfield’s poem the U.S. is not a refuge for oppressed populations from throughout the world—it is not “The refuge of the brave and true, / The strongest bulwark of the free” (32). Rather, the transatlantic spectator of Whitfield’s poem says, “But when I turn the land to view, / Which claims, par excellence, to be” a land of freedom, he sees instead “Worse scenes of rapine, lust and shame, / Than e’er disgraced the Russian name” and says that deeds “Worse than the Austrian ever saw, / Are sanctioned here as righteous law” (32–33).

While the United States considers itself the final location on an east-to-west march from bondage to freedom beginning in the Old World and ending in the New World, when Whitfield’s transatlantic spectator turns from Africa and Europe towards North America he sees oppression intensified, not eliminated. Compared to the crimes of American slavery, he writes, “the darkest night / Of European tyranny, / Seems brilliant as the noonday light” (34–35). Resenting that the U.S. defines itself as a global refuge wherein “all th’ oppressed from every land / Are welcomed here with open hand,”

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<sup>67</sup> Larry J. Reynolds, *European Revolutions and the American Literary Renaissance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 81.

Whitfield says that within American borders “Three millions drag their clanking chains, / ‘Unwept, unhonored, and unsung’, / Doomed to a state of slavery” (34). Whitfield’s allusion to canto six of Sir Walter Scott’s *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* (“And, doubly dying, shall go down / To the vile dust, from whence he sprung, / Unwept, unhonored, and unsung”) draws an explicit comparison between the speaker of “How Long” and Scott’s own exiled minstrel who, like the “denationalized” black populations of the United States, “Who never to himself hath said, / This is my own, my native land!”<sup>68</sup>

One of the major reasons why American slavery is worse than European vassalage, Whitfield says, is because of the Fugitive Slave Law: “And on the hunted victim’s tracks / Cheer the malignant fiends of blood; To help the man-thief bind the chain” on a fugitive slave “And bear [him] to Slavery’s hell again” (34). The 1850 law, which occurred immediately following the 1848-49 revolutions in Europe, leads Whitfield to equate the failure of freedom across the Atlantic with a comparable failure in America, creating an apocalyptic mid-century moment. In the final section of the poem, Whitfield gives a vision of the horrors of post-Fugitive Slave Law United States and of the “dark omens” of a violent conflict that will ultimately bring an end to slavery:

And even now dark omens rise  
 To those who either see or hear,  
 And gather o’er the darkening skies  
 The threatening signs of fate and fear. (35)

And while these “dark omens” of a violent end to slavery “gather o’er the darkening

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<sup>68</sup> Sir Walter Scott, *The Poetical Works of Sir Walter Scott*, (Boston: Phillips, Sampson, & Co., 1852), 89.

skies,” not everyone can see them. Whitfield says that “Worse plagues than Egypt ever felt / Are seen wide-spreading through the land,” but such plagues are only visible “to the eye of him who reads / The fate of nations past and gone” (37). The phrase “the eye of him who reads” recalls the transatlantic spectatorship that has defined the poem up to this point: “*I see the Gambia’s swelling flood*”; “*I see where Danube’s waters roll*”; “Where’er I turn, *bursts on mine eyes,*”; “But when I turn the land *to view*” (30–32, italics added). The speaker of the poem has based his authority on being able to see and understand “The fate of nations past and gone” throughout the Atlantic world. This authority of global spectatorship is now complicated by the introduction of a distinctly Puritan typology that reenacts the Exodus of ancient Israel on the sacred stage of the American continent.

In comparing the present situation in the United States to captive Israel, though, Whitfield says that the “threatening signs of fate and fear” in America are different from their biblical predecessors because the current plagues facing the United States are “Not like the plagues which Egypt saw” (35). While Egypt was covered with a curse of darkness (among other plagues) before it released its Israelite slaves, in present-day America “no literal darkness spreads / Upon the land its sable gloom” (36). By invoking the common story of the Exodus from Egypt and then showing its limited usefulness as a parallel to African American slavery, Whitfield culls the rhetorical force of Puritan typology while at the same time separating himself from it. Similarly, he shows that the temple built by ancient Israel after arriving in the Promised Land finds a distorted typological parallel in the temples to slavery built by American Christians. In these temples, slaveholding high priests “offer up as sacrifice, / And incense to the God of



heaven” the suffering of African American slaves:

The mourning wail, and bitter cries,  
 Of mothers from their children riven;  
 Of virgin purity profaned  
 To sate some brutal ruffian’s lust,  
 Millions of Godlike minds ordained  
 To grovel ever in the dust. (38)

As the transatlantic spectatorship of the poem shares space with Puritan American typology, Whitfield complicates the idea of national discourse while participating in it. This tendency continues through to the end of the poem.

While Whitfield ends “America” with a prayer to God “in the sacred name of peace,” he ends “How Long” with a plea for holy vengeance, writing,

Oh Lord! in vengeance now appear,  
 And guide the battles for the right,  
 The spirits of the fainting cheer,  
 And nerve the patriot’s arm with might;  
 Till slavery banished from the world,  
 And tyrants from their powers hurled,  
 And all mankind from bondage free,  
 Exult in glorious liberty. (39)

In asking that the power of God “nerve the patriot’s arm with might,” Whitfield raises the question of to whom he owes patriotic allegiance: a call for slave revolt would make him a citizen of a black nation within the U.S. nation; a call for widespread revolution (“Till

slavery banished from the world”) would make him a citizen of the world; a call for America to war with itself to purge its sins and reclaim its stature as a model city on a hill (“the land which claims to be the refuge of the free”) would make him a patriotic, though critical, American nationalist. As the poem concludes, the primary source of power ultimately resides in the poet.

As he does in “America,” in the concluding lines of “How Long” Whitfield relies on the power of poetry to achieve his goals:

Oh for a pen of living fire,  
 A tongue of flame, an arm of steel,  
 To rouse the people’s slumbering ire,  
 And teach the tyrant’s heart to feel. (49)

In asking for words that can both stir the “slumbering ire” of the people’s violence and soften “the tyrant’s heart,” Whitfield allows the poet to ask for both violent resistance and peaceful moral suasion. At the heart of both options, though, is the “pen of living fire” wielded by the poet. As I mentioned earlier, Whitfield’s faith in poetry was enormous. While he labored actively for the emigrationist cause, as a poet he invested tremendous confidence in the ability of his words to create a better world. In this sense, Whitfield shares “the belief held by many free blacks,” as Elizabeth McHenry explains, “that literary texts and the ability to gain access to them could galvanize the black community and help them to give public voice to the injustice of their position and to their pursuit of civil rights” (24). This should come as no surprise from a poet who titled his book *America* in an effort to poetically reconstruct his relationship with the nation.

### III.

In their poems, both Walt Whitman and James Whitfield wanted to rewrite the nation as poetry. Both poets wanted to reconceptualize the contradictions and conflicts engendered by American slavery in poems that embraced a broader sense of U.S. race relations. In their political writings on American race relations, however, both Whitman and Whitfield were racial separatists. Whitfield, as mentioned previously, believed that blacks and whites could live peacefully on the same continent only if one race lived in the northern hemisphere and the other lived in the southern. Whitfield doubted that co-existence was possible and spoke out against racial amalgamation. “[T]he bleaching theory of Henry Clay,” he wrote in reference to the congressman’s belief that racial amalgamation would ultimately eliminate black populations in the United States, “is not to be wished for” (*Arguments* 9). Similarly, Whitman wrote in a 6 May 1858 editorial for the *Brooklyn Times*, “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?”<sup>69</sup> Whitman’s comment in this editorial that America is “for the Whites,” however, is accompanied by an endorsement of African American emigration that resonates with many of the concerns that Whitfield raised in his own writings about emigration:

As long as the Blacks remain here how can they become anything like an independent and heroic race? There is no chance of it. Yet we believe there is enough material in the colored race, if they were in some secure and ample part of

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<sup>69</sup> Walt Whitman, *I Sit and Look Out: Editorials from the Brooklyn Daily Times*, ed. Emory Holloway (New York: Columbia University Press, 1932), 90.

the earth, where they would have a chance to develop [sic] themselves, to gradually form a race, a nation that would take no mean rank among the peoples of the world. (90)

Whitfield himself wrote that for African Americans to achieve “a respectable position among the *great* nations of the earth” they would have to move somewhere where they could be a part of “the *ruling* element” (*Arguments* 9, italics in original). Whitfield would have differed with Whitman, however, on the idea that African Americans needed “to gradually form a race.” Whitfield held the romantic racialist assumption that blacks were superior to whites—he wrote that whites are “naturally inferior to [African Americans] in physical, moral, and mental power” (10)—and believed that emigration was necessary to reveal this superiority, not to develop it: “I do not believe that [African Americans] are so much superior to all other men, as to be able to overcome a concatenation of obstacles, such as were never presented to any class of men before, without using the proper means” (30).

While he found black-white racial amalgamation to be undesirable, Whitfield believed that African Americans could “absorb” the people of color living in Central and South America on the lands that the emigrationists wanted to colonize. Just as Anglo-Saxons have “absorbed” the other races in England, Whitfield reasoned, “[T]he same result is being rapidly effected in South and Central America, by the absorption of all other races in the negro” (26). This essentially racist assumption that the indigenous peoples of the southern hemisphere would willingly be “absorbed” into an immigrant population from North America is one of the more troubling aspects of the emigration movement. Similarly, Whitfield often adopted U.S.-inspired rhetoric about manifest

destiny to describe the mission of the emigration movement. He wrote in one essay, “I believe it to be the destiny of the negro, to develop a higher order of civilization and Christianity than the world has yet seen. I also consider it a part of his ‘manifest destiny’, to possess all the tropical regions of this continent, with the adjacent islands” (9). These racist contradictions that Whitfield embraced are a curious oversight in the thinking of a poet who was keenly attuned to the contradictions of American race relations.

Conversely, while we tend to associate Whitman with a gleeful acceptance—or willful ignorance—of national contradictions, there were moments when he could also express a lucid awareness of the contradictions upon which his nation was founded. In “Respondez!,” a poem that initially appeared in the second (1856) edition of *Leaves of Grass* but was ultimately removed from the final editions, Whitman embraces a darkly ironic vision of the contradictions of American culture. “Let contradictions prevail!” he writes, “let one thing contradict another! and let one line of my poems contradict another!” (LG 516).<sup>70</sup> In this uncharacteristic poem, Whitman replaces his otherwise enthusiastic embrace of national contradictions with a sardonic sense of how his nation would appear to the world if its latent contradictions were laid bare: “Let the theory of America still be management, caste, comparison!” he writes, “Let freedom prove no man’s inalienable right! every one who can tyrannize, let him tyrannize to his satisfaction! / Let none but infidels be countenanced!” (516). Consistent with his contradictory stance as “the poet of slaves and of the masters of slaves,” Whitman’s dark vision of American contradictions in “Respondez!” includes the line, “Let the slaves be

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<sup>70</sup> In “Starting from Paumanok” he similarly admits, “I am myself just as much evil as good, and my nation is” (LG 18).

masters! let the masters become slaves!” (517). It also includes the curious line, “Let the white person again tread the black person under his heel! (Say! which is trodden under heel, after all?)” (518), which could either reflect a sophisticated awareness of the master–slave dialectic in American race relations that psychologically bound white masters to their physically bound slaves, or it could reflect Whitman’s working-class prejudice against the “degrading” influence of slave labor.

While Whitman’s political views on race and slavery were informed by his ties to working-class interests, in his poetry he could offer more conciliatory gestures towards African Americans as fellow laborers. In “Salut Au Monde!”—an imaginative tour of the globe that shares much with Whitfield’s own “How Long”—Whitman recounts what he sees after “My spirit has pass’d in compassion and determination around the whole earth,” and that vision includes a sense of comradeship between black slaves and white workers (125). While in Whitfield’s grim vision of the globe at mid-century he sees the suffering of African slaves, European vassals, and African American slaves, Whitman’s global vision is an enthusiastic catalogue of the representative sights and sounds of the vibrant world cultures he observes. In the original (1856) version of “Salut Au Monde!,” Whitman says of the United States, “I hear the Virginia plantation chorus of negroes, of harvest night, in the glare of pineknobs, / I hear the strong baritone of the ’long-shore-men of Manahatta,—I hear the stevedores unlading the cargoes, and singing” (552). The America that Whitman hears singing in “Salut Au Monde!” comes from the representative voices of black slaves in the South and white workers in the North. In his political journalism, Whitman feared that the voices of slave labor would overwhelm those of white labor. In his poetry, he identified these marginal groups as national

representatives.

Whitman's pairing of slaves and workers as America's representatives to the world represents a step away from the exclusive allegiance to white workers in his journalism and suggests a willingness to see a common tie between the "wage slavery" of working-class whites and the chattel slavery of African Americans. (Elsewhere in the poem, when Whitman's tour of the globe takes him to Africa, he addresses a "divine-soul'd African" who he similarly places "on equal terms with me" [124].) At the same time, the gleeful sounds of black slaves and white workers singing the music of America in Whitman's poem strikes an odd note in the context of the poem's celebration of those things that make world civilization great. It is possible that Whitman was aware of this contrast, which could be why he removed the passage from subsequent editions. By identifying white workers and black slaves as the United States' national representatives in a poem he addressed to the world, Whitman sets up a tension between national subpopulations, the international community, and the nation itself. Similar to the tension informing Whitfield's "How Long," Whitman here complicates his desire to bear a message to the world "in America's name" (126) with a desire to identify working populations—both black and white—as national representatives. In chapter four, I look more specifically at the ways that a dynamic similar to the one that Whitfield espoused as an emigrationist informed Whitman's poetry as well.

## Chapter 2

## Eliza R. Snow: Poetess of a New American Religion

**Introduction**

In September of 1879 Walt Whitman was visiting Denver, Colorado, as part of a trip to the western United States that included stops in Lawrence, Kansas, and St. Louis, Missouri. Almost twenty years earlier Whitman had written in “A Promise to California” that, after “Sojourning east a while longer,” he would “soon . . . travel toward you” because “these States tend inland and toward the Western sea, and I will also.”<sup>1</sup> Restricted by limited finances and failing health, however, Whitman was unable to keep this promise and headed home to Camden, New Jersey, without ever having seen the Pacific Ocean.<sup>2</sup> If Whitman had been given the opportunity to continue on to the West Coast, it is likely that he would have made the trip via Salt Lake City, Utah. Many other California-bound literary travelers, such as Mark Twain, Richard Burton, and Horace Greeley, stopped in the Salt Lake Valley to get a first-hand look at the Mormon community that Leo Tolstoy and others described as “the American religion.”<sup>3</sup> If Whitman had continued on to Salt Lake City and had been granted an audience with Mormon prophet and territorial governor Brigham Young (as had a number of other

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<sup>1</sup> Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, ed. Michael Moon (New York: Norton, 2002), 111. Hereafter cited as *LG*.

<sup>2</sup> See Walter H. Eitner, *Walt Whitman's Western Jaunt* (Lawrence: Regents' Press of Kansas, 1981).

<sup>3</sup> See Mark Twain, *Roughing It* (New York: Oxford, 1996), chapters 12–16; Richard F. Burton, *The City of the Saints* (New York: Knopf, 1983); and “Horace Greeley Interviews Brigham Young” in *Among the Mormons*, ed. William Mulder and A. Russell Mortensen (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1973. 321–27).



writers and public figures who visited the Utah Territory during the nineteenth century), he would probably have been given a sample of church literature that included the Book of Mormon and the 1856 volume of poems written by Eliza R. Snow, a woman universally regarded as “the chief poet of the Mormon Church.”<sup>4</sup>

Whitman, who considered *Leaves of Grass* to be the “Bible of the New Religion” and himself to be the poet of that religion, had known about the Mormon’s own “new American bible” since at least the late 1850s when he wrote a brief publication notice about a recent edition of the Book of Mormon for the Brooklyn *Daily Times*.<sup>5</sup> “The present edition of the ‘Book of Mormon’,” Whitman wrote, “is an accurate reprint of the 3d American edition originally published at Nauvoo eighteen years ago, under the official sanction of the leaders of the Mormon Church. It is quite a curiosity in its way and should find a place in the library of every diligent book-collector.”<sup>6</sup> The “curious” nature of the Book of Mormon Whitman refers to stems from the story of its origins: Joseph Smith, the founder of the Mormon faith, claimed to have translated the book from golden plates containing the history of a group of Israelites who emigrated to the American continent 600 years before the birth of Christ.<sup>7</sup> Whitman’s counsel that “every diligent book-

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<sup>4</sup> Fanny Ward Stenhouse used this phrase to describe Snow in her book, *Tell It All: The Story of a Life’s Experience in Mormonism* (Hartford, CT: Worthington, 1874), 252. Jill Mulvay Derr records that Young would give copies of Snow’s poems to visitors in her article, “The Lion and the Lioness: Brigham Young and Eliza R. Snow,” *BYU Studies* 40.2 (2001): 55–101. 62–63.

<sup>5</sup> Walt Whitman, *Notes and Fragments Left by Walt Whitman*, ed. Richard Maurice Bucke (London and Ontario: Talbot, 1899), 55.

<sup>6</sup> Brooklyn *Daily Times* 19 November 1858

<sup>7</sup> See Terryl Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture that Launched a*

collector” procure a copy of the Book of Mormon probably did not stem from his belief in the book’s veracity. Rather, Whitman probably thought that the Book of Mormon belonged on American bookshelves because the book represented a realization of his hope that the New World would produce religious texts commensurate with the American experience. “[O]ur chief religious and poetical works are not our own,” he lamented, “nor adapted to our light” (*LG* 477).

While Whitman had known about the Mormons’ “golden bible” since at least the late 1850s, he probably did not know that the faith had a poet laureate in Eliza R. Snow. If Whitman had traveled to Salt Lake City in 1879 and had sought an audience with Brigham Young, he would not only have received a copy of Snow’s poems, but would probably have also met the poet herself. In addition to being the most prominent of Young’s polygamous wives, Snow claimed a significant amount of ecclesiastical authority within the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints by virtue of her talents as a poet. Apart from her formal authority among Mormon women as president of the “Female Relief Society” (over which it was said that “she reigns supreme” [Stenhouse 252]), Snow wielded informal authority over the entire church as an unofficial “third counselor” to Brigham Young, who was aided throughout his tenure as prophet by two male counselors drawn from the patriarchal hierarchy of the church.<sup>8</sup> Snow’s religious authority emerged directly from her work as a poet. “As the chief poet of the Mormon Church,” one contemporary observer noted, “she enjoys a reputation such as would be

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*New World Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

<sup>8</sup> Maureen Ursenbach Beecher. “The Eliza Enigma.” *Dialogue* 11.1 (Spring 1978): 40–43.

impossible to any other woman among the Saints” (Stenhouse 252). As “the high-priestess and poet-general of the Church” (Stenhouse 289), Snow was said to have been “born with more than the poet’s soul. She was a prophetess in her very nature.”<sup>9</sup> While Whitman was still waiting for disciples who would receive him as an answer to Emerson’s call that “the world still wants its poet-priest,” the Mormons had already found their poet-priestess in Eliza R. Snow.<sup>10</sup>

Even though he would have disagreed with the undemocratic nature of the Mormon theocracy she supported, Whitman might have conceded that Eliza Snow was an example of the “poet-priest” Emerson had called for or the “divine literatus” who Whitman predicted in *Democratic Vistas* would fuse poetry and prophecy in the poems of a new American religion.<sup>11</sup> As a “divine literatus,” Snow was a photo negative of Whitman’s vision of the “new breed of poets” who would make organized religion obsolete. “There will soon be no more priests,” Whitman prophesied in the preface to the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, “A superior breed shall take their place.” While Whitman’s vision was that poets would replace priests in spreading the democratic gospel of *Leaves of Grass* to the nation and the world, Snow used her poetry to reinforce the structure of an organized and hierarchical religion rather than to create a world in which, as Whitman said, “every man shall be his own priest.”

Despite the radical differences in their creeds and the divergent ways that they

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<sup>9</sup> Edward Tullidge, *The Women of Mormondom* (Salt Lake City, 1877), 31

<sup>10</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essays and Lectures*, ed. Joel Porte (New York: Library of America, 1983), chapter 5.

<sup>11</sup> Walt Whitman, *Complete Poetry and Collected Prose*, ed. Justin Kaplan (New York:

fulfilled the role of the poet-priest(ess), Whitman could have learned a number of important lessons about how to be the poet of a new American religion from Snow. Specifically, he could have learned how the formal qualities of poetry could be used to mediate the rupture to sacred history occasioned by a new American bible, as Snow did in “Time and Change,” the mixed-genre poem discussed in the second section of this chapter. In addition, Whitman could have learned how the antebellum discourses of literary sentimentalism were used to identify female sources of spiritual energy. While Emily Stipes Watts says that “The majority of American women poets have not felt themselves to be godlike, nor could they hail God as a great Camerado” as Whitman did,<sup>12</sup> in her most popular poem, “The Eternal Father and Mother” (discussed in the third section of this chapter), Snow directly addresses a maternal goddess as a way to ground her authority as a poetess in an androcentric nation and a patriarchal religion. Both Whitman and Snow believed that the religious poetry they were writing would have profound repercussions on the shape of the nation. Whitman said that his new religion “must enter into the Poems of the Nation. It must make the Nation” (*LG* 650). Even though the kind of religious nation that each poet wanted his or her poems to make differed sharply, each poet understood that his or her claim to be an American bard depended on the ability to reflect the distinctive spirituality of the nation.

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Library of America, 1982), 933.

<sup>12</sup> Emily Stipes Watts, *The Poetry of American Women from 1632 to 1945* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1977), 6.

## I.

**Millennium Approaches: Religion and History in Whitman and Snow**

Walt Whitman complained to his confidant Horace Traubel in the waning years of his life, “People often speak of the Leaves as wanting in religion, but that is not my view of the book—and I ought to know. I think the Leaves the most religious book among books: crammed full of faith. What would the Leaves be without faith? An empty vessel: faith is the very substance, balance—its one article of assent—its one item of assurance.”<sup>13</sup> Beginning with his identification of *Leaves of Grass* as “the great psalm of the republic” in 1855, Whitman made it clear that he wanted his poetry to serve a religious function (*LG* 620). He imagined that his book would give rise to “gangs of kosmos and prophets en masse” who would replace the priests of organized religion (634). “[T]he day of the preacher is past,” he told Traubel, “I don’t . . . expect anything of the preachers” (qtd. in Traubel 1:120). In hopes that poetry would soon replace theology, Whitman called for “native authors” who would be “sacerdotal” in their approach to literature and provided his own work as an example of an American poetic religion, writing in the opening poem of the 1860 *Leaves of Grass*, “I too, following many and follow’d by many, inaugurate a religion, I descend into the arena” (*LG* 18). Whitman indicated the full scope of his ambition to be the poet of a new American religion in two informal notes he wrote during the late 1850s: in one he referred elliptically to “*Founding a new American Religion*,” and in another he identified his mission as a poet to be “*The*

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<sup>13</sup> Horace Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden* 6 Vols. (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 1961), 1:372. Whitman wrote in the preface to *As a Strong Bird on Pinions Free*, “When I commenced, years ago, elaborating the plan of my poems . . . one deep purpose underlay the others, and has underlain it and its execution ever since—and that

*Great Construction of the New Bible*. Not to be diverted from the principal object—the main life work.”<sup>14</sup>

For the 1860 edition of *Leaves of Grass* it seems that Whitman made a distinct effort to lend his book a biblical appearance: many of the poems were grouped into sequences where the individual poems were numbered rather than titled (a design suggestive of the short chapters of biblical books), and each individual line of “Song of Myself” was numbered in a manner similar to the verses of scripture.<sup>15</sup> It wasn’t until after Whitman’s death, however, that readers began to take seriously Whitman’s claim that *Leaves of Grass* be regarded as a book of scripture. Harvard professor Bliss Perry gave the derisive label of “hot little prophets” to the international group of scholars, writers, and activists who William James said were “quite willing to admit that in important respects Whitman is of the genuine lineage of the prophets.”<sup>16</sup> Among the

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has been the Religious purpose” (*LG* 650).

<sup>14</sup> Walt Whitman, *Notebooks and Unpublished Prose Manuscripts*, ed. Edward F. Grier, 6 Vols. (New York: New York University Press, 1984), 6:2046, 1:353.

<sup>15</sup> W. C. Harris comments on the biblical design of the 1860 edition in his essay, “Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* and the Writing of a New American Bible” *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 16.3/4 (1999):172–90, 184 n3. See also these following essays about how the form of individual poems reflects the biblical feel of the poetry. Herbert J. Levine, “‘Song of Myself’ as Whitman’s American Bible” *Modern Language Quarterly* 48.2 (June 1987): 145–61 and Maria Anita Stefanelli, “‘Chants’ as ‘Psalms for a New Bible’” in *Utopia in the Present Tense: Walt Whitman and the Language of the New World*, ed. Marina Camboni (Rome, Italy: Editrice ‘Il Calamo’, 1994, 171–88); and Emmy Stark Zitter, “Songs of the Canon: *Song of Solomon* and ‘Song of Myself’” *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 5:2 (1987): 8–15.

<sup>16</sup> Perry is quoted in David Kuebrich, *Minor Prophecy: Walt Whitman’s New American Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 2; William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Longmans, 1902), 87. For more information on the Whitman disciples at the turn of the century, see Charles B. Willard, *Whitman’s*

adherents of the Whitman faith at the turn of the century were an American devotee who called Whitman “the prophet of a new era,” a British scholar who said that Whitman’s poetry propelled readers towards “that larger religion to which the modern world is being led,” and a Canadian psychiatrist who argued that Whitman belonged among the pantheon of such religious figures as Buddha, Moses, and Mohammed.<sup>17</sup> While the zealotry surrounding the Whitman religion all but died out in the early twentieth century, scholars have continued to focus on the important role that religion plays in *Leaves of Grass*.<sup>18</sup>

Traditionally, Whitman’s lineage as the poet of a new religion is linked to Emerson, who wrote that “We too must write Bibles,” and Thomas Carlyle, who similarly predicted that a new bible would be written and that poets would replace priests.<sup>19</sup> Despite the attention that Emerson, Carlyle, and others gave to writing a new

*American Fame: The Growth of His Reputation in America after 1892* (Providence, RI: Brown University Press, 1950), 32–84.

<sup>17</sup> The American writer is Will Hayes, *Walt Whitman: The Prophet of a New Era* (1905. London: Daniel, 1921), the British scholar is John Addington Symonds, *Walt Whitman* (London: John C. Nimmo, 1893), 159, and the Canadian psychiatrist is Richard Maurice Brucke, *Cosmic Consciousness* (1901. New York: Dutton, 1969).

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, V. K. Chari’s *Whitman in the Light of Vedantic Mysticism* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1964); George B. Hutchinson, *The Ecstatic Whitman: Literary Shamanism and the Crisis of the Union* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1986); Kuebrich, *Minor Prophecy*; and Michael D. Sowder, “Walt Whitman, the Apostle” *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 16.3/4 (1999): 202–10. While scholars dominate discussions of Whitman and religion, the evangelical fervor still in a book like Philip Akers’ *The Principle of Life: A New Concept of Reality based on Walt Whitman’s “Leaves of Grass”* (New York: Vantage Press, 1992), for which an advertisement appeared in the back matter of the *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* (10.2 [Fall 1992]) claiming that, “Here, ‘Leaves of Grass’ is shown to be the greatest of all bibles—a bible fit for the coming millennia.”

bible for a new era, however, Lawrence Buell observes that “the new Bible did not get written, unless one counts *The Book of Mormon*.”<sup>20</sup> Scholars have been reluctant to seriously consider Mormonism as a context for understanding Whitman’s claim to be the poet of a new American religion.<sup>21</sup> The correspondences that are drawn between Whitman and Mormonism are usually brief and dismissive, such as the assessment by John Jay Chapman, a critic who, writing six years after Whitman’s death, sought to denigrate both Whitman and the first two Mormon prophets through mutual comparison: “Brigham Young and Joseph Smith were men of phenomenal capacity, who actually invented a religion and created a community by the apparent establishment of supernatural and occult powers. . . . By temperament and education Walt Whitman was fitted to be a prophet of this kind. He became a quack poet, and hampered his talents by the imposition of a monstrous parade of rattle trap theories and professions.”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Emerson, *Essays and Lectures*, ed. Porte, 761. Fred Manning Smith, “Whitman’s Poet-Prophet and Carlyle’s Hero” *PMLA* 55.4 (Dec 1940): 1146-64. John Irwin argues that Whitman’s idea of a new bible came from the Egyptian “hieroglyphic bibles” that fascinated Europe and America in the early nineteenth century.. John Irwin, *American Hieroglyphics: The Symbol of the Egyptian Hieroglyphics in the American Renaissance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), 20–40.

<sup>20</sup> Lawrence Buell, *New England Literary Culture from Revolution through Renaissance* (New York: Cambridge University Press), 183

<sup>21</sup> A number of Whitman scholars have made brief mention of Mormonism in their discussions of Whitman and religion. The comparisons they draw, however, are always undeveloped. See, for example, Kuebrich, *Minor Prophecy*, 25, M. Jimmie Killingsworth in *Whitman’s Poetry of the Body: Sexuality, Politics, and the Text* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 44, Harris, “Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*,” 184 n 5, David Reynolds, *Walt Whitman’s America: A Cultural Biography* (New York: Knopf, 1995), 368.

<sup>22</sup> John Jay Chapman, “Walt Whitman,” 1898, rpt. in *A Century of Whitman Criticism*, ed. E. H. Miller (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969), 103–4. Another attempt



Whitman might have had the opportunity to encounter members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints before his 1879 trip to the West when he was a reporter in New York City during the 1840s. In Lydia Maria Child's descriptions of 1840s New York City, she includes Mormon worshipers in her description of the religious diversity of the city: "Almost without effort, one may happen to find himself in the course of a few days beside the Catholic kneeling before the Cross, the Mohammedan bowing to the East, the Jew veiled before the ark of the testimony, the Baptist walking into the water, the Quaker keeping his head covered in the presence of dignitaries and solemnities of all sorts, and the Mormon quoting from the Golden Book which he has never seen."<sup>23</sup> While Whitman could have encountered Latter-day Saint congregations as he reported on New York City churches for the Brooklyn *Daily Eagle* in the 1840s, there is no evidence to suggest that he ever did.<sup>24</sup> In the late 1850s, however, Whitman reported on "the Mormon question" for the Brooklyn *Daily Times* in articles calling for an end to polygamy and in reports on the so-called "Utah War" (a bloodless confrontation in which federal troops were sent to Salt Lake City in 1857 to put down a presumed Mormon rebellion against

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to denigrate both Whitman and Mormonism through a mutual comparison is in Walter Parke poem "St. Smith of Utah," in which he imitated Whitman's poetic style while parodying the Mormon prophet (in Walter Hamilton, ed., *Parodies of the Works of English and American Authors*, 1888 Vol 5. New York: Johnson Reprint, 1967, 261–2).

<sup>23</sup> Quoted in Jerome Loving, *Walt Whitman: The Song of Himself* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999), 59.

<sup>24</sup> Walt Whitman, *The Gathering of the Forces*, ed. Cleveland Rodgers and John Black, 2 Vols. (New York: Putnam, 1920), 2:91–96. Whitman's coverage of one such church service as a journalist in the 1840s is recorded in Joseph Jay Rubin, *The Historic Whitman* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1973), 80–81.

the United States).<sup>25</sup> In one of these articles, Whitman positively characterized the Mormon settlers in the West as the “founders of a new empire, apostles of a new faith, [and] pioneers of a new civilization.”<sup>26</sup>

Even though Whitman also thought of himself as the apostle of a new poetic faith, the pioneer of a new democratic civilization, and the spokesman for a new American empire, it seems difficult to draw further parallels between Mormonism and Whitmanism. Whitman would seem to find his figurative coreligionists among the more progressive antebellum faiths than he would among the undemocratic and puritanical Latter-day Saints. The Shakers’ belief that Jesus Christ had been reborn in female form as Mother Ann Lee, for example, shares Whitman’s belief “of male and female that either is but the equal of the other,” just as the Oneida Perfectionists’ advocacy of polyamorous relationships for both men and women reflects Whitman’s belief that an embrace of sexuality would open a pathway to divinity (*LG* 21). Despite the significantly different doctrines they contain, however, both *Leaves of Grass* and the Book of Mormon enter into a similar dialogue with sacred history by virtue of their claims to be new American bibles.

As a new bible for a new religion, *Leaves of Grass* was in conflict with the trajectory of sacred history that came before it. Whitman did not believe in the Bible as a sacred text, but he acknowledged that its influence as a poetic text had served to unify human history. He wrote in “The Bible as Poetry” that “No true bard will ever contravene

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<sup>25</sup> Whitman’s articles on Mormonism can be found in the following issues of the *Brooklyn Daily Times*: 9 July 1857, 10 July 1857, 19 March 1858, 14 June 1858, and 19 November 1858.

the Bible” because “the principal factor in cohering the nations, eras and paradoxes of the globe . . . [is this] collection of old poetic lore, which, more than any one thing else, has been the axis of civilization and history through thousands of years.”<sup>27</sup> Whitman does not say here that anyone aspiring to be a “true bard” should embrace the Bible as a sacred text. Rather, he says that poets should respect what the Bible had done to lend unity to history. If the Bible, as Whitman says here, is the primary agent in bringing coherence to world history, then a new bible such as *Leaves of Grass* signals a fundamental rupture in a historical narrative that should not otherwise be “contravene[d],” to use Whitman’s own terminology. The relationship between Whitman’s new bible and the history that preceded it is as significant a component of Whitman’s American religion as are the doctrines of democracy and sexual liberty that he preached. It is also the feature of his faith that places him in a religio-historical trajectory similar to that of the Mormons.

According to Nina Baym, the belief that “the life, death, and resurrection of Christ marked the last instance of direct divine historical intervention” of God in human affairs “explains the theological horror with which Islam and Mormonism were regarded, since the founders of both religions claimed to have experienced revelations of their own.”<sup>28</sup> In reference to the emergence of the Book of Mormon as a revelation lying outside of a biblical framework, Baym writes, “Mormon history, then, is controlled by the most radical—or perhaps the most reactionary—millennial framework thus far seen [in the

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<sup>26</sup> Brooklyn *Daily Times* 14 June 1858

<sup>27</sup> Walt Whitman, *Complete Poetry and Collected Prose*, ed. Justin Kaplan (New York: Library of America, 1982), 1142.

<sup>28</sup> Nina Baym, *American Women Writers and the Work of History, 1790–1860* (New

antebellum United States], wherein the Protestant insistence that individuals must interpret God's word for themselves detaches itself not only from the practices of all existing sects but also from the anchors of the Old and New Testaments as well, to create a testament of its own" (122). As the newest testament of God's dealings on earth, the Book of Mormon redefined the Saints' relationship to sacred history in significant ways. Jan Shipps argues that "the coming forth of the Book of Mormon effected a break in the very fabric of history," a break that "wiped clean the slate on which the story of the past had been written."<sup>29</sup> By suggesting that the Bible is either incomplete or irrelevant, both *Leaves of Grass* and the Book of Mormon generate a significant degree of tension with a Bible-centered narrative of sacred history.<sup>30</sup> And since the Bible is, in Whitman's terms, "the axis of civilization and history," any addition to or refutation of the Bible complicates the timeline of sacred history. The way that the Mormons negotiated this break with the past occasioned by their new American bible illuminates the similarly conflicted relationship with sacred history that emerges in *Leaves of Grass*.<sup>31</sup>

Whitman alternately characterized his new faith as either discarding the religions

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Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1995), 48–49.

<sup>29</sup> Jan Shipps, *Mormonism: The Story of a New Religious Tradition* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 52.

<sup>30</sup> While the Mormons continued to revere the Bible as a sacred text, Joseph Smith said that "The Book of Mormon was the most correct of any book on earth . . . and that a man would get nearer to God by abiding by its precepts than by any other book" including the bible. See Philp L. Barlow, *Mormons and the Bible: The Place of the Latter-day Saints in American Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

<sup>31</sup> John-Charles Duffy has considered a similar set of parallels between Emerson's conception of sacred time with that of the Mormons' in his essay "'A Religion by Revelation': Emerson as Radical Restorationist," *ATQ* 14.3 (September 2000): 227–50.

that came before it or embracing the full sweep of sacred history. Throughout his prose and poetry, Whitman frequently exchanged the sacred past that preceded his new religion for what he considered to be an even more sacred present. Assessing the “Dead poets, philosophs, priests,” of the past, Whitman says that after “Regarding it all intently a long while, then dismissing it, / I stand in my place with my own day here” (*LG* 17).

Preferring the possibilities of the present day to the poets and priests of the past, he writes elsewhere, “Others adorn the past, / but you O days of the present, I adorn you” (291).

Because he believed, as he wrote in the 1855 preface to *Leaves of Grass*, that “What is past is past,” Whitman advocated poetry and prophecy that would be “transcendent and new” (633). An earlier generation of Whitman scholars focused almost exclusively on Whitman’s tendency to privilege the present over the past, saying that Whitman had “cut[] himself loose from any past,”<sup>32</sup> that he wrote “seething poetry of the incarnate Now,”<sup>33</sup> and that the past in Whitman’s poetry “had been so effectively burned away that it had, for every practical purpose, been forgotten altogether.”<sup>34</sup> This image of Whitman as completely unmoored from the past, however, has been tempered recently by scholars who have identified a richer dialogue with the past in Whitman’s poetry.<sup>35</sup> The

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<sup>32</sup> F. O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1941), 651–2.

<sup>33</sup> D. H. Lawrence, “Poetry of the Present,” in *Walt Whitman: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Francis Murphy (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), 191.

<sup>34</sup> R. W. B. Lewis, *The American Adam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955), 44–45.

<sup>35</sup> See Herwig Friedl, “Making It Cohere: Walt Whitman’s Idea of History,” *Amerikastudien* 28 (1983): 295–307; Agnieszka Salska, “The Growth of the Past in *Leaves of Grass*” in *Utopia in the Present Tense: Walt Whitman and the Language of the*

connection between religion and history in Whitman's poetry, however, has received little attention,<sup>36</sup> despite the fact that the explicitly religious moments of *Leaves of Grass* highlight Whitman's attempts to link his new religion with the long history of the sacred past.

Just as often as Whitman adopted a dismissive posture towards the past, he also believed, as he said in the preface to the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, that "America does not repel the past or what it has produced under its forms or amid other politics or the idea of castes or the old religions." Alongside Whitman's glib comment that "What is past is past" exists a model of American sacred history that embraces as well as rejects the "old religions." "I do not despise you priests, all time, the world over," he wrote in "Song of Myself," "My faith is the greatest of faiths and the least of faiths, / Enclosing worship ancient and modern and all between ancient and modern" (LG 68). Whitman wanted his new religion to be "comprehensive enough to include all the Doctrines & Sects—and give them all places and chances, each after its kind."<sup>37</sup> He said that his new religion would encompass every religious manifestation from every age and place, promising that it would "Enter into the thoughts of the different theological faiths—

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*New World*, ed. Marina Camboni (Rome, Italy: Editrice 'Il Calamo', 1994, 35–51); Paul Bové, *Destructive Poetics: Heidegger and Modern American Poetry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), 131–80; Jeffrey Steinbrink, "'To Span Vast Realms of Space and Time': Whitman's Vision of History." *Walt Whitman Review* 24 (June 1978), 45–62; and Edward S. Cutler, *Recovering the New: Transatlantic Roots of Modernism* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2003), 139–42.

<sup>36</sup> In *Minor Prophecy* David Kuebrich focuses on the millennialist strain in Whitman's religious thought and not on the potential conflicts with other historical narratives that his new bible initiated (27–65).

<sup>37</sup> Whitman, *Notebooks and Unpublished Prose Manuscripts*, ed. Grier, 6:2046.

effuse all that the believing Egyptian would—all that the Greek—all that the Hindoo, worshipping Brahma—the Koooboo adoring his fetish stone or log—the Presbyterian—the Catholic with his crucifix and saints—the Turk with the Koran” (qtd. in Hutchinson 34.)

Whitman wanted his new American religion to achieve two competing goals: he wanted it to break completely with a sacred history that he deemed to have limited usefulness for the modern era, and at the same time he wanted it to contain every previous religious manifestation. Herwig Friedl has noted that Whitman’s deployment of different historical modes in *Leaves of Grass*—historical modes that are, by turns, either sacred, secular, personal, national, mythic, or allegorical—was done in such a “random” fashion that Whitman created for himself the problem of “how he could possibly make so many histories and ideas, or perhaps only notions concerning history, cohere” (298).

Whitman’s conflicting models for sacred history emerged from a similar desire on the part of the Latter-day Saints to disassociate themselves from nineteenth-century religion while at the same time connecting themselves to the sacred past. But while Whitman’s attempts to deal with these different histories was largely unsystematic, the Mormons’ belief that they were living in “the dispensation of the fullness of times” at a moment when their prophets were carrying out “the restoration of all things” allowed them to think of themselves as both an entirely new faith and a very old religion that embraced the forgotten practices of sacred history.

Eliza R. Snow’s conversion to Mormonism illustrates the appeal of a new American religion that imagined itself to be an amalgam of the religious practices of the ancient world. Before becoming a Latter-day Saint in 1836, Snow belonged to Alexander Campbell’s Disciples of Christ congregation, a primitivist sect that, like a number of

others in early nineteenth-century America, rejected contemporary religion in exchange for what they called “a restoration of the ancient order of things.”<sup>38</sup> While the Disciples attempted to revive what they considered to be the pure Christianity of the first century A.D.—including such practices as communal living, apostolic authority, and Pentecostal ecstasies—the Mormon prophet Joseph Smith preached what he called “the restoration of all things,” a project that involved not only a renaissance of first-century Christianity, but also a recovery of such pre-Christian doctrines as the ministry of prophets, the building of temples, and (most conspicuously) the practice of polygamy. Even though the Mormon restoration was selective in what it restored (polygamy and prophets were restored while Levitical feasts and offerings, for example, were not), Smith suggested that the Mormons would eventually restore everything recorded in biblical history, including the ancient practice of animal sacrifice that the crucifixion of Christ was supposed to have made irrelevant.<sup>39</sup> The appeal of Mormonism to Snow and other early converts was that it claimed to be a restoration of *every* era of biblical history and not merely the first century of Christianity. This “reunion with the deep past,” as Richard Bushman calls it, confirmed for the Latter-day Saints that the age they were living in was so close to a millennial end of history that the future began to bend into the past.<sup>40</sup> As Klaus J. Hansen

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<sup>38</sup> Campbell’s 1824 series of essays is titled *A Restoration of the Ancient Order of Things*. See also the story of Snow’s conversion in Jill Mulvay Derr, “Form and Feeling in a Carefully Crafted Life: Eliza R. Snow’s ‘Poem of Poems’,” *Journal of Mormon History* 26.1 (2000): 1–39.

<sup>39</sup> See Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, ed. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 1976).

<sup>40</sup> Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 185.



says, “When Smith spoke of the ‘restoration of all things’ in the last days, he expressed a cyclical view of history in which the end—his own generation—would be like the beginning.”<sup>41</sup>

The difference between the Disciples’ “restoration of the ancient order of things” and the Mormons’ “restoration of all things” demonstrates how Mormon beliefs and practices differ from their contemporaries’ not necessarily in kind but in degree. Mormons shared with fellow restorationists a desire to reject all existing religions and to search for true religion in the sacred past, but in looking farther back into history than any of their peers did they created what Jan Shipps calls “the most radical restoration project ever undertaken in the American West.”<sup>42</sup> The Mormon restoration of all things, however, was not exclusively backward-looking. Rather, it was grounded in a belief that a return to the past is a necessary precondition of an imminent millennium. Snow reflected this sentiment in a poem about

“The restitution of all things;” which will  
 Restore the earth to its primeval state,  
 And usher in the long-expected reign  
 Of Jesus Christ.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Klaus J. Hansen, *Mormonism and the American Experience* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 27.

<sup>42</sup> Jan Shipps, “The Reality of the Restoration and the Restoration Ideal in the Mormon Tradition” in *The American Quest for the Primitive Church*, ed. Richard T. Hughes (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988. 181–195), 191.

<sup>43</sup> Eliza R. Snow, *Poems: Religious, Historical, and Political* Vol. 1 (Liverpool: F. D Richards, 1856), 19. All subsequent citations to Snow’s poetry, unless otherwise indicated, refer to this edition.

The purpose of the Mormon restoration of all things, as Snow expresses it here, was to return the “primeval” practices of sacred history to the modern world in order to bring about the millennium. As Shipps says, “The Saints did not believe that their new dispensation superceded all previous dispensations; it fulfilled them. Flowing into this new dispensation were all that had before been revealed” (“The Reality of the Restoration” 191).

The Mormon desire to recover the sacred past, according to Terryl Givens, stems from “a radical reconceptualization of the way Christian myth and Christian history are supposed to operate” (*By the Hand of Mormon*, 50). In conventional Christian historiography, the life of Christ represents a “cardinal eruption of the divine into the human” that produces “a spate of mythic reverberations” throughout history as Christians see typological parallels between their lived experiences and the experiences of the sacred past (50). While Jane Tompkins has argued that religious parallels in Christian sentimental literature prove “that human history is a continual reenactment of the sacred drama of redemption,” the Mormons’ literal belief that they were living in the sacred time of the deep past led them to feel that their lived experiences were not repeated acts in a centuries-old play, but rather (in Givens’ terms) “the ongoing substance rather than the shadow of God’s past dealings in the universe” (*By the Hand of Mormon* 50).<sup>44</sup> It is from

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<sup>44</sup> Jane Tompkins, “Sentimental Power: *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and the Politics of Literary History” in Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, ed. Elizabeth Ammons (New York: Norton, 1994, 501–22), 512–13. The difference between Tompkins’ Christian sentimental literature and Givens perspective on the Mormon restoration is admittedly a difference in degree rather than kind, but early Mormons would have been the first to argue that they were merely taking seriously the religious principles that, in their opinion, their countrymen only partially understood. See also Shipps’ argument in *Mormonism* that there was enough substantive difference between the Mormon experience and their

this perspective that Snow criticizes those who “vainly thought” that

The history contain'd the essence of  
 The things declar'd—that the rehearsal of  
 Those blessings had transferr'd the blessings down:  
 As though a hungry man could satisfy  
 His appetite upon the bare *belief*  
 That other starving people had been fed. (17)

Snow's analogy comparing food to sacred experience articulates the Mormons' drive to relive rather than merely reread sacred history. Just as “a hungry man” cannot be fed on the knowledge of another's meal, neither could the Mormons be content with a “rehearsal” of sacred history or a “transferr[al]” of blessings from a past era to their own. As patriarchal prophets like Abraham and Moses, Joseph Smith and Brigham Young felt that they had access to the blessings of the past not by reading about the ancients, but by living as they did.

By reliving the sacred history of an earlier era, though, the Mormons appeared to their contemporaries to have returned to an undesirable pre-modern past that had supposedly been superseded. The Mormons' belief in the absolute ecclesiastical and political authority of prophets, their communal living, and their polygamous marriage system was seen as a step backward on the scale of historical progress that was said to have culminated in democracy, the free-market economy, and Protestant morality. As the nation of the future, the United States found it difficult to tolerate populations that looked

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American Christian origins to qualify them as a post-Christian religion that experienced a different kind of sacred time.

backward instead of forward. Snow, however, believed that ancient practices such as polygamy were central to the restoration of all things that necessarily preceded the millennium. In an autobiographical sketch written in the 1870s, Snow says that when she first heard about polygamy, “The subject was very repugnant to my feelings—so directly was it in opposition to my educated prepossessions, that it seemed as though all the prejudices of my ancestors for generations past congregated around me. But when I reflected that I was living in the Dispensation of the fulness [*sic*] of times, embracing all other Dispensations, surely Plural Marriage must necessarily be included.”<sup>45</sup> Even when she felt the moral beliefs of the recent past (“my ancestors for generations”) working against her, the belief that she was living in a pre-millennial era that “embrac[ed] all other Dispensations” convinced her otherwise.<sup>46</sup>

In her defense of polygamy, Snow echoes the two attitudes towards the past that Whitman adopted when he said in the 1855 preface to *Leaves of Grass* that “What is past is past” and “America does not repel the past”: Snow was willing to dismiss the recent past as irrelevant, but only because she believed that the American religion does not repel the sacred past, no matter how repellent the practices of ancient history might appear to a modern nation. There are moments in *Leaves of Grass* when Whitman resolves his

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<sup>45</sup> Eliza R. Snow, *The Personal Writings of Eliza Roxcy Snow*, ed. Maureen Ursenbach Beecher (Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 2000), 16.

<sup>46</sup> A theological impulse to restore ancient practices was not the only rationale given for polygamy, however. Other defenses of polygamy invoked the inherently promiscuous nature of male sexuality and women’s punishment for Eve’s having partaken of the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden. As Hardy writes, however, “polygamy represented more to the Saints than only an opportunity to broaden their sexual experience. It was integral with their cosmology” (B. Carmon Hardy, *Solemn Covenant: The Mormon Polygamous Passage* [Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992], 10–11).

conflicted relationship with the sacred past by appealing to a model of history similar to the Mormons' "restoration of all things." Whitman believed that recovering the discarded past was one of his obligations as an American bard. "The greatest poet," he wrote in the 1855 preface to *Leaves of Grass*, "drags the dead out of their coffins and stands them again on their feet. . . . he says to the past, Rise and walk before me that I may realize you" (LG 618, ellipses in original). While the religious imagery of Whitman summoning the past just as Christ raised the dead is only implied in this passage, elsewhere in *Leaves of Grass* Whitman explicitly says that it is his duty as a poet-prophet—and, even more audaciously, as a poet-messiah—to "realize" the distant past.

In "Passage to India," for example, Whitman identifies himself as "the true son of God, the poet" and says that he will bring about a millennial future by restoring the sacred past (349). "Passage to India" begins as an ode to modernity with the poet "Singing the great achievements of the present," but the poem soon adopts a retrospective mood as Whitman promises "to sound, and ever sound, the cry with thee O soul, / The Past! the Past! the Past!" (346). The poem focuses on an impending spiritual–technological millennium wherein the peoples of the world will be emotionally bound together by the poetry of a new American religion just as they will be literally bound together by railroad tracks, telegraph wires, and ocean pathways. But Whitman is clear in saying that this millennial future depends on a recovery of the sacred past. "Passage to India" says that the poet-messiah who unites the world with the poems of a new American religion draws his spiritual energy from a communion of the past. While the prophecy of the poet-messiah is placed in the future tense—he writes, "Finally shall come the poet worthy that name, / The true son of God shall come singing his songs" (349)—

the songs that the “true son of God” will sing are not new songs. Rather, it is as Whitman takes a temporal journey to the origins of the various world religions (a spiritual excursion inspired by the technologies of modern transportation praised in the poem) that he finds the inspiration for his own religious message. He writes,

Passage indeed O soul to primal thought,  
 Not lands and seas alone, thy own clear freshness,  
 The young maturity of brood and bloom,  
 To realms of budding bibles. (351)

Rather than being the exclusive product of the modern era, then, Whitman’s new bible is born of a time when the primordial energy of the sacred past produced the world’s “budding bibles.” Whitman can claim the ability to write a new bible (to be “the true son of God, the poet”) only by going back to the moment in sacred history when the original bibles were new.

Elsewhere in *Leaves of Grass* Whitman reinforces the idea that his new religion is an outgrowth of the old religions. In “With Antecedents” he writes, “I respect Assyria, China, Teutonia, and the Hebrews, / I adopt each theory, myth, god, and demi-god, / I see that the old accounts, bibles, genealogies, are true, without exception” (202). Whitman also acknowledges that the “old . . . bibles” are the “antecedents” of his own bible in an under-examined passage of “Song of Myself” where he says that he composed his book by accumulating pages from the “budding bibles” of the past:

Taking myself the exact dimensions of Jehovah,  
 Lithographing Kronos, Zeus his son, and Hercules his grandson,  
 Buying drafts of Osiris, Isis, Belus, Brahma, Buddha,

In my portfolio placing Manito loose, Allah on a leaf, the crucifix engraved,  
 With Odin and the hideous-faced Mexitli and every idol and image. (65)

When Whitman writes in the first line of this passage that he is “Taking myself the exact dimensions of Jehovah,” he seems again to identify himself as a modern poet-god whose goal is to replace the deities of the past. As the following lines indicate, however, Whitman is not taking Jehovah’s measurements in order to assume his divine garb. Instead, Whitman is measuring the size of a page of sacred text upon which Jehovah is described so that he might tip this page into the binding of his new American bible. In addition to this page devoted to the Israelite god, Whitman includes lithographed images from the sacred narratives of ancient Greece, drafts of pages that contain the gods of Egypt, Assyria, and India, loose sheaves of paper for the Algonquian and Islamic deities, an engraving of the Christian cross, and portfolio pages of gods from the Norse and Aztec traditions. Whitman’s new bible does not rise from the ashes of old bibles that are burned away in the consuming fire of modernity. Rather, *Leaves of Grass* is a composite of the leaves from older bibles. While elsewhere Whitman makes the audacious claim to be both the prophet and the messiah of a new American religion, in this passage from “Song of Myself” he adopts the much more modest role of the humble poet-printer who constructs his book from used paper and writes his poems as a palimpsest on the past.

In the 1855 preface to *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman explains his rationale for gathering the texts of the sacred past into his own new bible. He writes that American poets should open themselves up to “the eternity which gives similitude *to all periods and locations* and processes and animate and inanimate forms, and which is *the bond of time*, and rises up from its inconceivable vagueness and infiniteness in the swimming

shape of today, and is held by the ductile anchors of life, and *makes the present spot the passage from what was to what shall be*" (625, italics added). I have italicized the salient phrases from this passage to reinforce Whitman's sense that *Leaves of Grass* is intimately connected to the deep past. Just as Whitman believed that the Bible "has been the axis of civilization and history through thousands of years,"<sup>47</sup> he thought of his own sacred text as having a similar power to create a "bond of time," and that in order to cement this bond he had to respect what had happened in "all periods and locations" of sacred history. Accordingly, Whitman's new American bible can acknowledge its newness without repelling the past because it "makes the present spot the passage from what was to what shall be." Similarly, he wrote in "With Antecedents," "I know that the past was great, and the future will be great, / And I know that both curiously conjoint in the present time" (*LG* 202).

While Whitman appears in places to be a religious restorationist whose allegiance to the sacred past bears a striking, if unexpected, similarity to that of the Latter-day Saints, it is important to note that Whitman was a much more catholic restorationist than the Mormons were. Whitman was eager to make connections to every conceivable tradition of sacred history, whereas the Mormons centered their restoration exclusively on a narrative of biblical history. Whitman was impatient with attempts to reconstruct history that focused on a few well-known historical communities to the exclusion of the lesser-known (though in his eyes equally important) communities. He wrote, "Do you suppose that History is complete when the best writers and [*sic*] get all they can of the few communities that are known, and arrange them clearly in books? . . . Nobody can

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<sup>47</sup> Whitman, *Complete Poetry and Collected Prose*, ed. Kaplan, 1142.



possess a fair idea of the earth without letting his or her mind walk perfectly easy and loose over the past.”<sup>48</sup> Whitman’s willingness to include non-Western religions in his restoration project—his willingness to “walk perfectly easy and loose over the past” without regard for a traditional narrative of sacred history—stands in stark contrast to the Mormons’ exclusion of non-biblical religious traditions in what they claimed was a restoration of *all* things.

What is ironic, then, is that as the Mormons restored such biblical practices as polygamy and the theocratic rule of prophets, they were perceived by their contemporaries as having more in common with Islamic, Native American, and other “pagan” traditions than they did with the biblical tradition that supposedly formed the basis of American civilization. While Whitman wanted to place “Allah on a leaf” of his new American bible, most Americans could not tolerate the idea that a religion resembling Islam could flourish in the United States. The title alone of Catharine Waite’s sensational *The Mormon Prophet and His Harem* (1867) suggests the manner in which anti-Mormon texts drew parallels between the polygamy and post-biblical prophets of both Mormonism and Islam.<sup>49</sup> Even before polygamy became public, though, the Illinois state senate accused Mormons of practicing “the Mohometan faith under a name little varied from the original, the tendency [of which] strikes at the very foundation of our society.”<sup>50</sup> As Terryl Givens says, “[T]he pejorative nature of the comparison [of

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<sup>48</sup> Whitman, *Notebooks and Unpublished Prose Manuscripts*, ed. Grier 5:1926.

<sup>49</sup> Catharine Van Valkenburg Waite, *The Mormon Prophet and His Harem; or, an Authentic History of Brigham Young, His Numerous Wives and Children* (Chicago: J.S. Goodman, 1867).

Mormonism] with Islam bespeaks a sense of outrage that what presents itself as ‘us’ (Mormonism is, after all, a religion laying claim to being quintessentially American and Christian) is, in reality, more like ‘them’, meaning Oriental in precisely those ways that are un-American and un-Christian.”<sup>51</sup> Blake Allmendinger has also demonstrated that Americans drew comparisons between Mormons and Native Americans because “[b]y defining Mormons as Indians, and polygamy as a refined form of savagery, the nation fashioned a political rhetoric that attempted to justify its intervention in Utah’s affairs.”<sup>52</sup> Another contemporary observer remarked that “the child of Mormon polygamy was simply a white negro” (qtd. in Hardy 41). Similarly, the *North American Review* rationalized the United States’ repeated refusal to grant statehood to the Utah Territory on the grounds that the Mormons had more in common with the “savages” of the earth than they did with the citizens of the U.S. “If Utah is admitted with its polygamy,” the *North American Review* opined, “why may not some island of the sea, which America may come to possess, claim, with its Pagan rites and its feasts of human flesh, to be received as a sovereign State into the Union?”<sup>53</sup>

This figurative imposition of racial difference onto the Mormons was made literal in a widely circulated description of the Mormon “racial phenotype” composed by

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<sup>50</sup> Quoted. in Kenneth H. Winn, *Exiles in a Land of Liberty: Mormons in America, 1830–1846* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 229.

<sup>51</sup> Terryl Givens, *The Viper on the Hearth: Mormons, Myths, and the Construction of Heresy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 130.

<sup>52</sup> Blake Allmendinger, *Ten Most Wanted: The New Western Literature* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 64.

<sup>53</sup> “Mormons and Mormonism,” *The North American Review* Vol. 95 Issue 196 (July

Roberts Bartholow, an assistant surgeon in the U.S. Army who visited Utah briefly in the late 1850s. Bartholow argued that Mormon polygamy was creating a new race of people in the American West: “The yellow, sunken, cadaverous visage; the greenish-colored eye; the thick, protuberant lips; the low forehead; the light, yellowish hair, and the lank, angular person, [that] constitute an appearance so characteristic of the new race, the production of polygamy, as to distinguish them at a glance.”<sup>54</sup> Depicting the Mormons as an amalgam of the various “undesirable” races of nineteenth-century America—the “yellow” skin of Chinese immigrants, the “thick, protuberant lips” of African Americans—allowed white Americans to think of the Mormons as having more in common with the non-Western world than with the West. Similarly, a *Life* magazine illustration titled “Mormon Elder-berry, Out with His Six-Year Olds, Who Take after Their Mothers” pictured a black-garbed, bearded Mormon polygamist surrounded by nine children whose mothers, based on the appearance and dress of the children, come not only from the European countries of Scotland, the Netherlands, Ireland, England, and France, but also from China, Africa, Japan, and Native North America.<sup>55</sup>

It should come as no surprise that the Mormons’ appeal to the distant past would make them seem out of step with their countrymen. As Wai Chee Dimock says, “Deep

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1862): 189–228. 190.

<sup>54</sup> Quoted in Lester E. Bush, Jr., “Mormon ‘Physiology’, 1850–1875,” *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*. 56 (1982): 218–37. 225. Bartholow was quoted authoritatively in a wide variety of reputable sources, only one of which called the scientific nature of the report into question (224–26). See also Givens’ chapter “‘They Ain’t Whites . . . They’re Mormons’” in *Viper on the Hearth*, 121–52.

<sup>55</sup> William R. Handley, *Marriage, Violence, and the Nation in the American Literary West* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 110.

time is denationalized space.”<sup>56</sup> The dominant culture of a modern nation regularly depicts minority populations as existing in a different temporality, with race usually serving as the visual sign of one people’s modernity and another’s barbarity. As evidence of a different temporality, polygamy necessarily became proof of racial difference.<sup>57</sup> The sense of Mormons as profoundly—if not racially—different from white Americans continued as Mormonism grew from a national to an international concern. Reporting on German perceptions of race in America, a correspondent to *Frederick Douglass’ Paper* wrote in 1853, “[T]heir interest seemed to be about equally divided between Negroes, Indians, and Mormons. On hardly any subject have I been more questioned than concerning the Mormon[s], a people with whom I have very little acquaintance. If I had a live one to exhibit I could make a small fortune among these speculative, philosophic, meditative Deutschen.”<sup>58</sup> While the Mormons might have been a philosophical curiosity to the Germans, they inspired a decidedly different response from their countrymen, a response that included mob violence, an extermination order issued by the state of Missouri, and the forced evacuation of the Latter-day Saint settlement in Nauvoo, Illinois, at a time when Nauvoo rivaled Chicago in size and prosperity.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Wai Chee Dimock, “Deep Time: American Literature and World History.” *American Literary History* 13.4 (Winter 2001), 760.

<sup>57</sup> See Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983) and Caren Kaplan, *Questions of Travel: Postmodern Discourses of Displacement* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996).

<sup>58</sup> *Frederick Douglass’ Paper* 18 February 1853.

<sup>59</sup> Robert Bruce Flanders, *Nauvoo: Kingdom on the Mississippi* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1965). The violent outbreaks between Mormons and Americans also grew out of fears that the Mormons’ tendency toward block voting would

After two decades of local opposition in Ohio, Illinois, and Missouri, national opposition to the Mormons began in earnest after the church's 1852 announcement that they were solemnizing polygamous marriages, an announcement that made "the Mormon question" into what R. Laurence Moore calls "one of the most drawn out and highly publicized events in all of American history."<sup>60</sup> Following the successful model for reform fiction provided by Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), writers published four anti-polygamy novels between 1855 and 1856, the most popular of which, Maria Ward's *Female Life Among the Mormons* (1855), sold 40,000 copies in the space of a few weeks.<sup>61</sup> (Following the Civil War, anti-polygamy measures grew exponentially—as did the number of anti-Mormon novels, which swelled to almost one hundred—until Utah's final bid for statehood in 1896 required that Mormons renounce the practice.<sup>62</sup>)

These sensational novels defined polygamy as a corruption of the sanctity of the

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jeopardize local elections and impatience at the Saints' bold territorial claims to lands that they said God had promised them. See Winn, *Exiles in a Land of Liberty*, 63–105; Leonard J. Arrington and Davis Bitton, *The Mormon Experience: A History of the Latter-day Saints* (New York: Vintage, 1980), 44–82; and Norman F. Furniss, *The Mormon Conflict, 1850–1859* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1960).

<sup>60</sup> R. Laurence Moore, *Religious Outsiders and the Making of Americans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 27.

<sup>61</sup> Leonard J. Arrington and Jon Haupt, "Intolerable Zion: The Image of Mormonism in Nineteenth Century American Literature," *Western Humanities Review* 22.3 (1968): 243–60, 253. In addition to novels, "By 1850, more than two hundred pamphlets, articles, and 'exposés' had been published" (Givens, *Viper on the Hearth* 124). See also Charles A. Cannon, "The Awesome Power of Sex: The Polemical Campaign Against Mormon Polygamy," *Pacific Historical Review* 43 (1974): 71.

<sup>62</sup> Sarah Barringer Gordon, *The Mormon Question: Polygamy and Constitutional Conflict in Nineteenth Century America* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press,

domestic space and, by extension, the civil society for which the home served as the foundation. As long as nineteenth-century domestic writers depicted the monogamous home as the central figure in a spiritual, emotional, and economic nexus that defined both the nation and the civilized world, polygamy was a threat to national unity and to civilization itself.<sup>63</sup> As Nancy Bentley writes, “In the end, anti-polygamy writers established a new common sense: to tolerate such a redefining of ‘home’ meant perforce the undoing of the national polity,” which meant that Mormon polygamists were denied “any possible place in American nationhood.”<sup>64</sup> When Stowe herself wrote the foreword to Fanny Ward Stenhouse’s *Tell It All: The Story of a Life Experience in Mormonism* (1874), she further linked what the 1856 Republican Party platform called their opposition to “the twin relics of barbarism: slavery and polygamy” (Gordon 55–57).<sup>65</sup>

2002), 29. See also Handley 97–124.

<sup>63</sup> See Hardy 42 and David Brion Davis, “Some Themes of Counter Subversion: An Analysis of Anti-Masonic, Anti-Catholic, and Anti-Mormon Literature” in *Mormonism and American Culture*, ed. Marvin S. Hill and James B. Allen (New York: Harper and Row, 1972. 59–73), 67. Mormons weren’t the only group to experiment with alternatives to monogamy, but unlike the Shakers (who swore off sex entirely) or the Oneida Perfectionists (who promoted polyamorous relationships for both men and women), polygamy received the most attention and the most opprobrium. See Lawrence Foster, *Religion and Sexuality: Three American Communal Experiments of the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981) and Louis J. Kern, *An Ordered Love: Sex Roles and Sexuality in Victorian Utopias—the Shakers, the Mormons, and the Oneida Community* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1981).

<sup>64</sup> Nancy Bentley, “Marriage as Treason: Polygamy, Nation, and the Novel” *The Futures of American Studies*, ed. Donald E. Pease and Robyn Wiegman (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002, 341–700), 343, 352.

<sup>65</sup> See also Givens’ refutation of the analogy equating slavery with polygamy in Terry Givens, “Caricature as Containment: Orientalism, Bondage, and the Construction of Mormon Ethnicity in Nineteenth-Century American Popular Fiction,” *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* 18 (1995): 385–403; and Allmendinger, *Ten Most Wanted*, 52.

The language of the Republican Party platform illustrates how the Mormons' belief that they were recovering the sacred past was perceived by their contemporaries to be a recovery of the savage past: not only is the bondage of polygamous wives compared to the bondage of African American slaves, but both practices are seen as the "relics" of a "barbari[c]" past.

By classifying polygamy as a "relic" from the past rather than a feature of the modern era, Americans placed Mormons at a distant spot on the historical timeline that they used to define the United States as the pinnacle of modern progress. Echoing his contemporaries' belief that Americans had made greater progress than any other nation, Whitman called the United States "The crown and teeming paradise, so far, of time's accumulations" (LG 338). In *Democratic Vistas*, Whitman said that the United States' spot at the top of the historical pecking order made national outsiders of anyone who drew inspiration from the past: "the models of persons, books, manners, &c., appropriate for former conditions and for European lands," he wrote, "are but exiles and exotics here." Polygamy and theocracy may have been "appropriate for former conditions," but those who revive such practices in modern America would be considered "exiles" and "exotics." The Latter-day Saints were considered "exotic" because they either figuratively or literally belonged to a non-white race. Eliza Snow, however, appropriated the image of the exile to articulate the conflicted relationship between the United States' sense of historical progress and the Mormons' belief in the restoration of all things.

Throughout her poetry, Snow takes the liability of being excluded from the timeline of American progress and turns it into an asset. By using the image of the exile who is both temporally and geographically removed from the nation of her birth, Snow

says that the Mormons' removal both from U.S. boundaries and from the U.S. timeline of historical progress makes her more rather than less qualified to be an American bard. The Mormon exiles that appear in Snow's poems lament their exclusion from the nation while retaining a strong (if conflicted) sense of attachment to the United States. In one characteristic verse Snow writes,

But O, I find no country yet

Like my Columbia dear;

And oftentimes *almost* forget

*I live an exile here.* (81, italics in original)

Snow illustrated the contrast between the pains of her exile and her love for "Columbia dear" in a journal entry written about the day in 1847 when, four months after the Saints were forcibly expelled from Missouri and Illinois, her wagon train arrived in the Salt Lake Valley: "Soon after our arrival in the valley," she wrote, "a tall liberty-pole was erected, and from its summit (although planted in Mexican soil), the stars and stripes seemed to float with even more significance, if possible, than they were wont to do on Eastern breezes." Understanding how the American flag could fly "with greater significance" upon Mexican soil requires appreciating the way that the exile, as Kirsten Silva Gruesz argues, "embodies a powerfully attractive ambivalence about the shape of time."<sup>66</sup> Because the exile's "memory of the homeland is always frozen in the historical moment of its abandonment," according to Gruesz, the exile "effectively denies the passage of time" by taking a static image of the nation with her into exile (411). The

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<sup>66</sup> Kirsten Silva Gruesz, "El Gran Poeta Longfellow and a Psalm of Exile," *American Literary History* 10.3 (1998): 395–427. 414.



American flag flies “with greater significance” in the Salt Lake Valley and in the memories of the Mormon exiles because their exodus to a promised land in search of religious freedom replays both the American myth of Puritan origins and the biblical model upon which that myth was based. The Saints ability to restore the ancient past apparently includes the early history of the United States as well.

The image of America that Snow and the Mormon pioneers carried with them beyond U.S. borders was not that of the modern, nineteenth-century nation at the pinnacle of historical progress. Rather, they imagined themselves to be an embodiment of an idyllic early America of God’s chosen people at the dawn of an era of religious liberty. Snow agreed with her detractors that the Mormons inhabited an earlier spot on the timeline of American history; she merely disagreed with where they had been placed on that timeline. Most Americans interpreted the Mormons’ restoration of all things as evidence that the Saints belonged to a barbaric, pre-modern age. The Mormons themselves, however, believed that their communion with the past allowed them to preserve the moment of American origins. In “Celebration Song for the Fourth of July,” for example, Snow says that the Utah Territory is able to retain a stronger connection with the origins of American freedom than the rest of the United States. She writes,

The banner which our fathers won,  
The legacy of Washington,  
Is now in Utah wide unfurl’d,  
And proffers peace to all the world. (217)

Snow does not merely present the Utah Territory as an exemplar of the national legacy. Rather, she depicts it as superceding a nation that has failed to live up to its historical

mandate:

We'll here revive our country's fame,  
 The glory of Columbia's name:  
 Her Constitution's germ will be  
 The basis of our Liberty. (218)

When Snow says that it is the Saints' duty to "revive our country's fame," she identifies a decline in America's supposed historical ascension. The U.S. Constitution provided the "germ" for the growth of a great American empire, but that germ will grow to its fullest potential in Utah, not the United States.

In a similar poem, "National Anthem," Snow says that "the States . . . are tott'ring and ready to fall," and that in response to this decline "The white-crested Eagle has fled to the mountains, / The Genius of Liberty follow'd us here" (265). Rather than conflicting with the nation by having fallen out of step with it, then, the temporally-displaced Mormon exiles of Snow's poetry are depicted as having preserved the symbol (the "white-crested Eagle") and mission ("Liberty") of the United States against the decline of history. "While our nation is digging fair freedom's grave," she wrote in a July Fourth poem in 1860, "We are waving its banner abroad."<sup>67</sup> Snow could say that "In exile our Banner is broadest unfurl'd" (262) because exiles can unfurl the national flag more broadly when they are outside of the nation than they ever could within the nation because their retrospective memory of a glorious national past withstands the decay of time. The national banner can be broadly unfurled because the exile space of the Mormon's western settlement replays the narrative of American origins as a noble people

carry on their exodus from bondage in the name of religious liberty. In “Time and Change,” the major poem of Snow’s 1856 collection, *Poems: Religious, Historical, and Political*, Snow most fully realizes the implications of the Mormons’ temporal and geographic exile from the United States.

## II.

### “Time and Change”

“Time and Change” was originally published in 1841 as an eighteen-page pamphlet circulated among the Mormon community in Nauvoo, Illinois. The local church-owned paper encouraged young Mormons to “commit [the poem] to memory, and thus transmit it as a useful and pleasing lesson to future time,” a difficult request given that the poem is over 600 lines long.<sup>68</sup> While the overwhelming majority of the poems in the 1856 *Poems* are arranged chronologically to present a narrative of Mormon history as told by the poet laureate of the church, “Time and Change” is thirteen years out of place, coming between poems dated 1854 and 1855 at the end of the collection. Unlike many of the poems in Snow’s volume, “Time and Change” does not specifically mention the current plight of the Saints in the year that it was written, making the concerns it speaks to as relevant in 1850s Utah as 1840s Illinois. In both 1841 and 1856, the Saints had recently been expelled from previous settlements and were determined to establish themselves on the furthest reaches of the American frontier.

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<sup>67</sup> Eliza R. Snow, “The Fourth of July, 1860” *Deseret News* 4 July 1860.

<sup>68</sup> *Times and Seasons* 2 (April 15, 1841): 383. Thanks to Jill Mulvay Derr for pointing me towards this newspaper article.

As a thematic gloss on the entire collection rather than a specific record of historical events, then, “Time and Change” is a poetic defense of the doctrine of the restoration of all things and an explanation of how the restoration has put the Mormons at odds with the United States. “Time and Change” situates the Mormon epic within a narrative of historical progress that traces the history of the world from biblical times to its culmination in the American West. It presents the conflict between Mormons theocracy and American democracy as a question of history: while the Mormons were considered to be a historical aberration in a country that prided itself on being the vanguard of progressive history, Snow presents the Mormons’ connection with the past as their greatest asset in ushering in the millennial reign of Christ on the earth.

Described in the 1856 *Poems* as “A Historical Sketch, commencing with the Creation, and extending to the year 1841, the time when the Poem was written” (237), “Time and Change” takes readers through biblical history, the history of Protestant Europe, the Puritan emigration to New England, the American Revolution, the Mormon settlement in the West, and a millennial moment when Zion is founded and Christ returns to the earth. Like any number of historical poems written in the antebellum period, “Time and Change” confirms what Nina Baym calls the “extraordinary historical mission” of the United States by “placing the new nation in world history” (*American Women Writers* 56, 1). But while the purpose of most antebellum historical poetry was to define the United States as the world’s final pre-millennial civilization, in “Time and Change” the millennial Zion that arises in the American West is only provisionally identified with the United States. According to the poem, if the U.S. repents of its opposition to Mormonism, it will be allowed to partake of the millennial blessings of an American

Zion; if it does not, those blessings will pass to another, worthier civilization, i.e., the Mormons.

Such a narrative of the United States' tenuous position at the top of the historical pecking order was not uncommon. Despite most American writers' overwhelming confidence that the United States would be the dominant world power when a literal or figurative millennium brought about the end of history—as Whitman wrote in a Brooklyn *Eagle* editorial in 1846, “that holy millennium of liberty. . . . is to be worked out through the people, territory, and government of the United States” (qtd. in Kuebrich 36)—social critics from temperance advocates to abolitionists reminded American readers that the United States could fall as easily as had previous civilizations. Within this tradition of social reform literature that used the specter of historical change to motivate its readers, “Time and Change” argues that American decline is imminent unless religious liberties are universally guaranteed.

While the reasons for conflict between Mormons and Americans was a complex mix of religion, politics, and territorial claims, “Time and Change” reduces the issue to a simple question of religious liberty, specifically, of the Mormons' right to restore the theocratic rule of prophets in an otherwise democratic age. The irony involved in appealing to individual liberty as a rationale for supporting an authoritarian religious regime has not gone unremarked. Kenneth H. Winn says, “The Mormons had begun their movement in protest against America's religious pluralism [by claiming to be the one true church]; but now, in the face of persecution, they became its most ardent defenders”

(99).<sup>69</sup> In an attempt to reconcile this conflict between liberty and authority, “Time and Change” presents a narrative of history wherein the individual liberty of democratic America harmonizes with the prophetic authority of biblical tradition. In a conceit aimed at naturalizing this potential conflict, Snow personifies the central forces of history as Time, Change, and Liberty.

The figure of Time is the passive force of memory that impartially records the rise and fall of civilizations, whereas Change is the active force of history that decides which civilizations rise or fall; Change causes civilizations to “wax[. . .] great” and then “decline and pass away,” while Time “chronicle[s] the deeds of Change” (237). And while the active and powerful Change would seem to be the more important of the two figures, Time is identified as “our hero” (242). Time is the hero of the poem because he remembers that prophets always warn the world when Change is about to destroy a civilization. “[T]he registry of Time,” the poem says, shows that “a Prophet *is / And always has been*, the forerunner of” the deeds of Change (243, italics in original). Since heeding the warning of prophets is how civilizations have always protected themselves against Change, the implications for the United States are obvious: if protecting America from the social decline of Change requires national obedience to the prophetic counsel of Time, the U.S. need not only tolerate Mormon theocracy, but subscribe to it.

But Time is not the exclusive hero of the poem. Once the narrative of “Time and Change” moves from biblical history to the Protestant Reformation and the founding of the United States, Liberty replaces Time as the main character of the poem and the focal

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<sup>69</sup> See also Marvin S. Hill, *Quest for Refuge: The Mormon Flight from American Pluralism* (Salt Lake City, UT: Signature Books, 1989).

point of human civilization. At this point in the narrative, the poem says that protecting Liberty against Change will ensure America's position at the vanguard of world history. But in order to be forewarned of some "momentous revolution" (238) at Change's hand requires sacrificing Liberty's individual freedom to Time's prophetic authority—a seemingly unresolvable conflict that the poem initially appears unable to address. The obvious critique to level against Snow is that she has cobbled together so many different types of historical narratives with so many different purposes as to render her poem incoherent, which, to recall, is the very problem that Whitman faced in his attempt to make the various historical modes he employs in his poetry cohere in a meaningful way. By depicting modern America's commitment to individual liberty as a natural historical development from the ancient prophetic authority of the Bible, Snow reveals a larger conflict between two potentially contradictory narratives of American origins: that the United States is God's chosen nation, a new Israel that typologically relives the biblical narrative of divine guidance; and that the United States is a modern nation that has broken with an authoritarian past in the name of democracy and individual rights.

This conflict between narratives of origin, however, is precisely what national history is equipped to deal with. National history, according to Edward Said, functions "selectively by manipulating certain bits of the national past, suppressing others, elevating still others."<sup>70</sup> The biblical narrative of divine history and the Revolutionary narrative of democratic history can coexist in nationalist history when their contradictory elements are silenced and their points of agreement highlighted. The Mormons' tendency

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<sup>70</sup> Edward W. Said, "Invention, Memory, and Place," *Critical Inquiry* 26.4 (2000): 175–92. 179.

to take American beliefs to such an extreme that they become conspicuously un-American, however, calls attention to the selective nature of national history by revealing previously concealed points of contradiction. As a new America in the West, the Mormons base their origin story on the same national narratives, except that they select, suppress, and elevate different elements than their U.S. counterparts. In adopting the myth of Israelite origins, the Mormons selectively remember that Abraham, the patriarch of the chosen people, was a polygamist and a theocrat. By choosing different elements of the same narrative, Mormonism reveals the selective nature of national history and the flexibility of “America” as an identifier of national identity.

One of the key agents in the selective memory of national history is the national bard, who chooses the high points of national history for epic poems that chronicle the greatness of the national past and for occasional lyrics that commemorate those past events in ritualized moments of collective memory. In “Time and Change,” the conflict between two different stories of national origin is made into a conflict between the poetic forms of the epic and the occasional lyric. Aside from a blank verse narrative that gives an epic retelling of world history, “Time and Change” also contains two distinct occasional poems: an ode to American Liberty written to commemorate the Revolution and an ode for the Fourth of July written to protest Mormon exile. These odes—similar to the hymns that appear in *Paradise Lost* and the *Iliad* (which adds to the poem’s overall epic pretensions)—are set apart from the epic narrative by their different meter, rhyme, and material appearance in the text. Snow was not alone in combining the epic and the lyric to create nationalist poetry. James Miller, Jr. has shown how Whitman’s “Song of Myself” links a series of lyric poems about individuals into a long epic poem about the



nation as a whole.<sup>71</sup> Whitman's combination of the lyric and the epic is an outgrowth of his concern over the conflict between the individual and the mass in American democracy.

Snow's motivation for combining the epic and the lyric, however, is to reconcile two competing narratives of national origins: the epic narrative of "Time and Change" remembers in blank verse the biblical history upon which America's status as chosen nation is based while the lyric odes remember the democratic origins of the United States in the Revolutionary War. Rather than reconcile the historical and ideological conflict between the two narratives of American origin, Snow reconciles the conflict between the two poetic forms that are made to contain these narratives. In addition, Snow uses the epic and lyric forms together in a self-conscious way that allows her to extend her calling as the poet laureate of the Mormon Church into a claim to be an American bard: the blank verse narrative of the poem provides a historical context to explain why the Mormons are, in her words, "Columbia's noblest children," and the occasional poems she includes about the Revolutionary War and the Fourth of July give her the opportunity to perform the office of national poet within the space of the larger poem. Snow fills the role of the American bard in "Time and Change" because the intratextual connections she creates between the lyric and the epic effect a corresponding connection between the conflicting historical narratives at the heart of American nationality.

Snow presents herself as uniquely qualified to reconcile competing historical narratives in her poetry because of her belief in the restoration of all things and because

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<sup>71</sup> James E. Miller, Jr. *The American Quest for a Supreme Fiction: Whitman's Legacy in the Personal Epic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979).

of her status as an exile whose memory of the nation in its golden age allows her to “effectively den[y] the passage of time” (Gruesz 411). The memory of the national exile as presented in “Time and Change” is not only frozen in time, but sanctioned by Time, the historical agent in the poem who is presented as having a complete historical memory. The opening stanza of the poem depicts Time’s memory as impartial and complete by personifying him as both a bourgeois tourist and a mythical hero. She writes,

Time is a Tourist. Ever since the great  
Co-partnership of light and darkness was  
Dissolv’d, and youthful day and night, no more  
Commingling, unremittingly in close  
Succession mov’d, Time has pursued his grand,  
Undeviating, and untiring course. (237)

As a tourist, Time has the status of a disinterested spectator. In the early nineteenth-century, advances in transportation technologies and increases in leisure time brought about by the Industrial Revolution allowed a certain class of Europeans and Americans to visit parts of the world with the only goal of passive observation. As neither soldier nor statesman, the tourist has the sole purpose of apprehending, absorbing, and—given the right market for travel writing—recording her observations. This presumed objectivity in Time’s understanding of history is crucial to the way that the poem deals with historical memory. Later in the poem, Snow describes Time as having an objectivity that is beyond even the powerful influence of sentimental sympathy (“The tears / Of innocence,” she writes, “move him not”) as everything he dispassionately observes “Are all alike to him” (238). Time is also depicted in this opening stanza as a mythical hero born of the

primeval copulation of deities that bear little resemblance to the god of the Bible. Indeed, the story of Time's origin is completely devoid of anything resembling the agency of the monotheistic god who said "Let there be light." Instead, the union of light and darkness "was / Dissolv'd" in the passive voice. Snow's working assumption appears to be that for a historical narrative to achieve an epic scope it must necessarily be pagan. This assumption leads her to write that before the dawn of history, the gods of "light and darkness" carried on a "great / Co-partnership" that is described in implicitly sexual language.

When light and darkness finished their "Commingling," the fruit of their intercourse was Time, himself a pseudo-mythic figure with a divine role to play. As opposed to the leisurely tourist, Time the mythic hero "pursue[s] his grand, / Undeviating, and untiring course" of observing the unfolding of history as if it were a series of Herculean tasks, or as if he were Atlas, upon whose strenuous efforts the entire world depends. She writes, "By day and night he slumbers not, and midst / The varying seasons, wide varieties, / . . . / Pursues the same, straightforward, even course" (237). Time's tour is not leisurely; it follows a "delegated chart" that "directs / Unerringly to that far destin'd port"—the millennial end of history—where Time will "consummate his grand career." Even though, as Said says, "memory is not an inert and passive thing, but a field of activity in which past events are selected, reconstructed, maintained, modified, and endowed with political meaning," as a passive tourist with the untiring motivation of an epic hero, Time gives the illusion of a complete and impartial historical memory (185). The depiction of Time in Snow's poem differs from that of contemporary poems, where a personified Time is presented as an old, silver-haired man with a grizzled beard

wending a slow course through history.<sup>72</sup> Snow's belief in a restoration of all things gives rise to this unique portrait of Time and his ability, as she describes later, not only to remember all things but also to restore them to the earth in a pre-millennial moment.

The technology of record-keeping employed by Time illustrates his ability to contain and then restore all of history. Time does not record "The long-accumulated, dubious scenes" of history in a written text. Rather, he gathers these scenes in an unmediated form in the folds of his robes (perhaps recalling the phrase "fabric of history"). Snow writes that at the end of history, Time will unfold his clothing and the records of history will be transcribed from them into a heavenly book of life:

There his deep folded drapery will be  
 Unroll'd; and, in the waiting presence of  
 Heaven's legally commission'd council, all  
 His vestments search'd, and then the angel-scribe  
 Unfolding, leaf by leaf, that book of books—  
 That register of every registry,  
 Comprising all that Time has seen, or Change  
 Accomplish'd, since they first commenc'd their yet  
 Unfinish'd tour. (239)

The "book of books" and "register of every registry" that contain the records of history are not written by Time himself, rather, they are transcribed by an "angel-scribe" who

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<sup>72</sup> See W. Dunlap, "Ode to Time," *American Poems, Selected and Original* Vol. 1 ed. Elihu Hubbard Smith (Litchfield, CT: Collier and Buel, 1793, 292–6), and Sarah Wentworth Morton, "Odes to Time," *My Mind and Its Thoughts, in Sketches, Fragments, and Essays* (Boston: Wells and Lilly, 1823), 105–9.

looks at Time's unmediated record of history as it is contained in the "deep folded drapery" of "[h]is vestments." Time is described as understanding history through the immediate presence of his clothing rather than the mediated absence of written language. Throughout the poem, Snow gives the image of Time as covering the "strange vicissitudes" of various historical events in the "cumbrous fold" of his clothing, preserving that history until it is revealed in the last days to "the ken of wond'ring multitudes." By depicting Time as a tourist-hero who contains history in an unadulterated form in the textiles of his clothes rather than a written text, she proposes the possibility of a complete and total apprehension of history that can someday be returned to the earth in its plenitude as part of the restoration of all things.

While the complete records of Time will one day be brought forward in their totality, for now, Snow says, they are "hid up," and the limited knowledge of human history currently possessed is but "a drop to the great ocean's bulk." These untapped records of ancient history that are safely hidden after Time "Has thrown the mantle of forgetfulness / In deep, impenetrable folds around" them, will come forth as a necessary precondition to the millennium. She writes that "the vast multitude" of Time's records

Must be brought forward; and their coming forth  
 Will prove to be the great, grand master-piece  
 Of all the works that grace the annals of  
 Grey-headed Time. And that will comprehend  
 "The restitution of all things, spoken  
 By all the holy Prophets since the world  
 Began." (241-42)

The re-emergence of the forgotten records of history is the “grand master-piece” of history. She describes this apex of human history by invoking the passage from Acts 3:21 about the “restitution of all things” that Mormons used to justify the ancient practices of polygamy and prophetic authority that put them at odds with American society. In addition to restoring ancient practices, the Mormons restored additional sacred texts about Abraham, Moses, and Enoch that do not appear in the canonical Bible. Recovering these texts allowed the Saints to recover these ancient experiences into the sacred history of their own lives: the practice of polygamy restored Abraham’s patriarchal order; the office of the prophet restored Moses’ direct conversations with God; and the establishment of Zion restored Enoch’s utopian city that was taken up into heaven.<sup>73</sup> By invoking the restoration of these lost texts, Snow seems to be arguing here that the Mormons are the chartered agents of Time, making the restoration of all things into an inevitable function of history and a necessary precondition for the millennium. While national memory is a selective and fragmentary record of the past that purports to be full and unbiased, the Mormons’ belief in the restoration of *all* things comes across as having the same complete access to history that Time has. This comprehensive access to history becomes increasingly important as the poem progresses given Snow’s argument that the Mormons’ connection with the distant past confirms rather than denies their claim to American nationality.

Specifically, Snow emphasizes the Saints’ understanding of the important role

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<sup>73</sup> See Richard Bushman, “The Book of Mormon in Early Mormon History,” *New Views of Mormon History: A Collection of Essays in Honor of Leonard J. Arrington*, eds. Davis Bitton and Maureen Ursenbach Beecher (Salt Lake City, UT: University of Utah Press, 1987. 3–18).

played by prophets throughout history. Taking readers back to the earliest epoch of biblical history immediately following the Fall of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, she says that Adam's era was a time when there were "men that could appreciate the worth / Of a '*Thus saith the Lord;*' and Prophets were / No comic sights—no strange phenomena" (241, italics in original). This reference to prophets is the leitmotif of historical memory running throughout the poem. In retelling the story of Noah, she reminds readers that before the Flood "a Prophet was / Sent forth." This prophetic forewarning, she continues, is a consistent fact of history confirming that "a Prophet *is,* / And *always has been,* the forerunner of" the "outpouring of the wrath / Of the Almighty." As such, she says that the ministry of prophets is "a scene / That's now re-acting in these latter-days" (246–47).

Even before polygamy put the Latter-day Saints into conflict with the United States, the restoration of pre-Christian prophetic authority made Mormons seem a "comic sight" and a "strange phenomena." For Protestants, the prophet is a pre-Christian figure superceded by the coming of Christ to the earth, putting Mormon prophets outside of the historical narrative that American Protestantism rested upon. This passing mention that the Mormons were considered "strange" for believing in the "scene" of prophecy "That's now re-acting in these latter-days" is the only mention that the poem gives of the persecution against the Mormons. While the poem ends with a lengthy invective against the United States for its treatment of the Mormons, the only rationale given anywhere in the poem are these references to prophets. The greatest liability that Mormons face in their claim to American nationality, according to the poem, is their historically aberrant belief in prophets. But if it is prophecy that can protect the nation from the ravages of

Change, then the Mormons' belief in prophets should make them American vanguards, rather than American exiles. Before this line of thinking can be fully elaborated (as it is at poem's end), however, the narrative presents the ascension of the United States to world power and the threat posed by Change.

As the focus of the poem shifts away from the ancient past of biblical prophets, "Time and Change" becomes the story of Liberty in Protestant Europe and North America. Previous to the Protestant Reformation, Snow says, "*liberty of conscience*" groaned "beneath the murd'rous iron hand / Of selfish, cleric policy" in Catholic Rome (251, italics in original):

When Luther's thunders shook the papal chair,  
 The "Reformation" boldly undertook  
 To give a resurrection to the long  
 Deep-buried form of Liberty.

Forth came

A pale, emaciated, feeble thing,  
 Closely envelop'd in the winding sheet  
 Of its sepulchral bed. And how unlike  
 That noble, dignified, immortal boon  
 Of Liberty that God bequeath'd to man. (252)

While Time has been the major character of the poem up to this point, he is here replaced by Liberty. Despite the difference between Time as a historical record-keeper and Liberty as the "immortal boon / . . . that God bequeath'd to man," there seems to be a conscious effort to link Liberty with the larger framework of the poem. In terms of the imagery of



the poem, Liberty is “Closely envelop’d in the winding sheet / Of its sepulchral bed” just like the “envelop’d” robes of Time. But Liberty arises from a Christian “resurrection” rather than the pagan “Commingling” that gave birth to Time. Another conflict that the personified force of Liberty introduces to the poem, however, is the question of individual conscience that is negated by the allegiance to prophetic authority so praised in the earlier section of the poem. Although Snow criticizes the “papal chair” that “Luther’s thunders shook,” the difference between a pope and a prophet is never addressed. Nor does she specify the historical moment when “God bequeath’d” the “immortal boon” of Liberty to humanity: did it happen in Eden? ancient Jerusalem? Protestant Germany? As Liberty replaces Time as the hero of the poem, the assumption seems to be that Liberty is an inevitable outgrowth of the historical process. Rather than attempt to fill in the gaps created by pairing a biblical narrative about prophets with a Protestant narrative about individual liberty, Snow introduces an ode to Liberty written by an American poet on the occasion of the Revolution. When narratives of history conflict, the poem seems to indicate, the national bard writes a poem that selects the appropriate moments of collective memory to smooth over any contradictions.

After the Reformation, Liberty migrated to North America in search of “civil and religious Liberty” (253). On the Western Hemisphere, Liberty introduces other personified forces of history into the poem: first, Liberty oversees the rise of Independence through the success of the American Revolution (“Before her mov’d with firm and steady step, / The youthful Independence” [254]); and then Independence clears the way for Peace. When Peace entered the scene “with her lovely smiles,” she “Awoke the minstrel’s sweetly sounding lyre / To chant far-echoing strains of Liberty!” As the

lyre begins to play its ode to Liberty, the poem presents the American poet as if she were part of the lineage of historical agents traced throughout the poem in a pattern similar to the *begats* of biblical genealogy: the national bard is the child of Peace, who is the child of Independence, who is the child of Liberty, who is the child of Time and Change, who are the children of primordial light and darkness themselves. As inevitable as light and dark, the American poet fulfills her central role in shaping the course of history:

Peace follow's soon, and with her lovely smiles  
 Awoke the minstrel's sweetly sounding lyre,  
 To chant far-echoing strains to Liberty!  
 List to the sound that flutter'd on the breeze  
 Where first Columbia's cloud-topp'd standard rose:

**Ode.**

Fairest Spirit of the skies,  
 Fairest child of Paradise,  
 Now Columbia's lawful prize—  
 Glorious Liberty.

'Twas for thee our fathers sought,  
 For thy sake our heroes fought,  
 Thee our bleeding patriots bought,  
 Precious Liberty.

Never, never cease to wave  
O'er the ashes of the brave—  
Shield, O shield the patriot's grave,  
Flag of Liberty.

While thy banner waves abroad,  
All may freely worship God,  
Fearless of the tyrant's rod,  
Sacred Liberty

Should oppression ever dare  
From thy brow the wreath to tear,  
Righteous vengeance shall not spare  
Thy foes, O Liberty.

Sooner than to bondage yield,  
Boldly in the battle-field  
Let the sons of freedom wield  
The sword for Liberty.

Thus sang that noble, patriotic band  
Who struggl'd through the "Revolution," to  
Bequeath to generations then unborn

A rich inheritance, a spotless boon. (254–55)

The shift from iambic to trochaic meter and from unrhymed lines to a heavy-handed aaab rhyme scheme differentiates “Ode” from the blank verse of the epic narrative. While this lyric ode is formally distinct from the larger poem, its intratextual connections to the epic narrative naturalize Liberty’s place in the story of “our hero” Time. A chain verse in its most basic form, “Ode” makes up for in unity what it sacrifices in variety by repeating the same word, “Liberty,” in the final line of each quatrain (aaaB cccB dddB, etc.). In addition, the repetition of “Liberty” and the repeated sounds of the aaa rhyme, together with the meter, give a martial feel to a poem sung by “that noble, patriotic band / Who struggl’d through the ‘Revolution’.” The strong initial beats of the trochee suggest the marching of troops and the repeated masculine rhymes provide a weighty build-up that highlights the refrain to Liberty. Even without the blank verse narrative identifying “Ode” as a poem about the Revolution, the martial feel of the rhythm and rhyme summon the national memory appropriate for an occasional lyric such as this.

The personification of Liberty in “Ode” conforms with the tendency throughout the epic narrative to personify historical forces. In the first stanza of “Ode,” Liberty is described as the “Fairest Spirit of the skies” and the “Fairest child of Paradise.” Similar to the description of Time in the early stanzas of the historical narrative portion of the poem, Liberty is here personified as a mythic figure in the same blending of biblical and pagan language that gives the narrative sections an epic feel: “spirit” and “paradise” are terms that resonate both with orthodox Christianity and with a non-specific mythic energy. The implications of calling Liberty “Columbia’s lawful prize” reinforces the central idea of the epic narrative about the rise and fall of civilizations by suggesting that

as Liberty is carried from one civilization to the next her presence determines which nation will ascend to dominance. (As the “Fairest” prize of war, Liberty also seems like Helen of Troy, the fair prize fought for among warring men in Homer’s epic.) In the second stanza, Liberty is depicted as the prize for which “fathers sought,” “heroes fought,” and which “patriots bought.” This progression from fathers to heroes to patriots in “Ode” is made with rhyme where a similar connection between fathers, heroes, and patriots is achieved in the blank verse portion of “Time and Change” with narrative: the patriarchal fathers of the bible (Adam, Abraham, Moses) were succeeded by the heroes of the Protestant reformation (Luther) who were in turn succeeded by the patriots of the American Revolution.

In addition to these intratextual connections with the epic, blank verse narrative of the larger poem, “Ode” introduces the theme of Liberty’s potential demise that dominates the rest of the entire poem. The first two stanzas parallel the final two stanzas, creating a frame for the message in the central stanzas that Liberty will be lost unless it is defended. The final stanza recalls the fathers who sought for Liberty in the second stanza as the “sons of freedom” are called to fight “Boldly in the battle-field” like the heroes and patriots of the Revolution. The mythic figure of Liberty from the first stanza reappears in the fifth stanza wearing a laurel wreath (“From thy brow the wreath to tear”) like Hellenic deities in the midst of an epic battle against the personified force of oppression (“Should oppression ever dare / . . . / Righteous vengeance shall not spare”). The repeated terms in the lines “Never, never cease to wave” and “Shield, O shield the patriot’s grave” betray a sense of anxiety about losing the prize of Liberty. The trochaic meter of the poem allows for a chanting effect on the stress of these repeated words (i.e., NEVER,

NEVER) that raises the expression of this anxiety almost to the level of histrionics.

The theme of losing Liberty in the middle stanzas of “Ode” connects with later moments of the epic narrative about the threat posed by Change to American and world civilization. The progression from the third stanza to the fourth stanza shows the global repercussions of protecting American Liberty. The third stanza depicts a nationalist image of the “Flag of Liberty” waving over the “patriot’s grave,” while the fourth stanza describes the international reach of American influence as the banner of “Sacred Liberty” “waves abroad” to ensure universal religious liberty (“All may freely worship God”). In these central stanzas, the American flag makes an unquestioned transition from national icon to symbol of universal religious liberty, implying that there will be global repercussions if America loses Liberty. In a succeeding stanza from the blank verse narrative portion of “Time and Change,” America’s place as reigning world civilization is confirmed:

E’en vice to virtue, sometimes, tribute pays,  
 And eastern monarchies have courteous bow’d  
 To the star-spangled, waving ensign of  
 Columbia’s liberty: and fame has spread  
 To distant climes a brilliant halo round  
 The rich-ton’d echo of her envied name. (255–56)

As the “eastern monarchies” that dominated the world before Change passed them over “courteous[ly] bow” to the United States, the poem says that following the Revolution, word of a new world power spread “To distant climes.”

America’s place at the vanguard of world history, however, was short lived.

“Such was our country in her halcyon days,” the poem says, “And such we’d fain believe she still remains.” But as “Time and Change” has already shown, a civilization’s rise is followed by an inevitable fall. As such, the narrative proceeds to tell how the banner of American Liberty that once flew as a beacon to the world has since been defiled:

But NO: a cloud o’erspread the stars that grac’d  
 Her burnish’d standard, when oppression pour’d  
 Upon a persecuted people in  
 The West, the influence of his scathing hand. (256)

Oppression, the enemy to Liberty introduced in “Ode,” appears in the epic narrative as the tormentor of “a persecuted people in / The West.” Since “Time and Change” was initially published as an in-house poem circulated among the Mormon community in Illinois, the referent of this “persecuted people” would have been obvious. But Snow’s reluctance to provide specific details about the “persecuted people” she refers to suggests more than just her confidence that the poem would be read by people who knew the Mormon story. Indeed, her other historical poems in the 1856 volume provide names of people and places, descriptions of settlements, and a level of detail to indicate that her purpose in writing was as much journalistic as it was literary. In a review of the 1856 *Poems* the *Latter-day Saints’ Millennial Star* credited Snow particularly with her attention to historical detail: “Her historic poems evince a depth of thought and sentiment which indicates that she feels what she writes, and enters into the spirit of her narrative. Her descriptions are so vivid and truthful that, with a little effort on the part of the reader,

the scenes she portrays seem to pass in life-like reality before him.”<sup>74</sup> But in “Time and Change” she denies the need to write a detailed occasional poem about the Saints’ persecution. She writes,

Time’s record is not clos’d upon those scenes,  
 And facts protrude too boldly prominent  
 To need a prompter here. Those tragic scenes  
 Awake the lyre, but not to chant such deeds  
 Of noble patriotism as twin’d the wreath  
 Of never-fading laurels round the heads  
 Of our forefathers. (256)

She says that “Those tragic scenes” of this “persecuted people” “Awake the lyre,” suggesting that a lyric poem similar to the previous “Ode” will provide the necessary details. Nevertheless, these “tragic scenes” remain untold as she rejects her calling as the “prompter” of national memory. She justifies her reluctance to provide any details about the “persecuted people in / The West” by saying that it is unnecessary to rehearse the facts of a story that is still unfolding. And while the lyre refuses to recount either the “tragic scenes” taking place in the West or the “noble patriotism” of the national past, the lyric poem introduced into the epic narrative at this point is a lament titled “Ode for the Fourth of July”:

Yes, the lyre awakes,  
 And in low notes of plaintive eloquence  
 Breathes forth a tone of suffering and distress.

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<sup>74</sup> *Latter-day Saints’ Millennial Star* 16 February 1856.



Ah! hear Columbia's noblest children sing  
 Of *rights usurp'd*—of grievance unredress'd!

**Ode for the Fourth of July.**

Shall we commemorate the day  
     Whose genial influence has pass'd o'er?  
 Shall we our hearts' best tribute pay  
     Where heart and feelings are no more?  
 Shall we commemorate the day,  
     With Freedom's ensign waving high,  
 Whose blood-stain'd banner's furl'd away—  
     Whose Rights, whose Freedom has gone by?  
  
 Should we, when gasping 'neath its wave,  
     Extol the beauties of the sea—  
 Or, lash'd upon fair Freedom's grave,  
     Proclaim the strength of Liberty?  
 It is heartrending mockery!  
     We'd sooner laugh 'midst writhing pain,  
 Than chant the songs of Liberty  
     Beneath oppression's galling chain!

Columbia's glory is a theme

That with our life's warm pulses grew:  
 But ah! 'tis fled, and, like a dream,  
 Its ghost is flutt'ring in our view!  
 Her dying groans, her fun'ral knell,  
 We've heard; for ah! we've had to fly!  
 And now, alas! we know *too* well  
*The days of Freedom have gone by!*

Protection faints and Justice cowers—  
 Redress is slumb'ring on the heath;  
 And 'tis in vain to lavish flowers  
 Upon our country's fading wreath!  
 Better implore His aid divine,  
 Whose arm can make His people free,  
 Than decorate the hollow shrine  
 Of our *departed Liberty!* (256–58, italics in original)

“Ode for the Fourth of July” adopts the form of a nationalist occasional poem at which collective memory is defined, confirmed, and reinforced, but the content of the poem explicitly rejects the shared memory of the Revolution. The repeated question in the first stanza, “Shall we commemorate the day[?]” highlights the poem’s difficulty in reconciling form and content. When the lyre awakes, it does so “in low notes of plaintive eloquence” with “a tone of suffering and distress” as it composes a song “Of *rights usurp'd*—of grievance unredress’d!” Every indication given is that the lyre will produce

a lyric poem commemorating a national tragedy. When the lyric poem is introduced as an ode for the Fourth of July, however, these expectations change. The expected content of an occasional poem for July the Fourth is a celebration of nationalist memory from the Revolutionary past. The rhetorical questions at the outset of the poem assume an audience and an orator, conjuring in the poem itself the occasional setting at which such nationalist poems are read. Instead, the content of “Ode for the Fourth of July” has the speaker questioning whether the day should be celebrated at all.

This rejection of shared memory is highlighted by the way that “Ode for the Fourth of July” recalls and then undercuts the imagery of the previous “Ode” to Liberty sung by “that noble, patriotic band / Who struggl’d through the ‘Revolution’.” The first “Ode” was a ritually invoked call for nationalist memory with the collective singing of the “patriot band” reinforcing a collective memory of the Revolution. “Ode for the Fourth of July” takes these images and shows how they are no longer applicable to a group of exiles who have “had to fly” from the nation. In “Ode,” she dutifully performs the role of the American poet by composing a song of Liberty, but in “Ode for the Fourth of July” she rejects that duty, writing, “We’d sooner laugh ‘midst writhing pain, / Than chant the songs of Liberty.” The first stanza of “Ode for the Fourth of July” depicts “Freedom’s ensign waving high,” an image reminiscent of the “Flag of Liberty” in “Ode” that “shield[s] the patriot’s grave.” The images of flag and grave return in “Ode for the Fourth of July,” but the flag is now a “blood’stain’d banner” and the noble graves of the patriots that purchased Liberty with their blood have become a site of bondage that they have been “lash’d upon.”

Images of death and the grave are used in “Ode for the Fourth of July” to confirm

the fear of losing Liberty expressed in “Ode.” The “patriot’s grave” of “Ode” was a memorial site where the nation gathered together to commemorate freedom. In “Ode for the Fourth of July,” the grave is now “fair Freedom’s grave” as the “flutt’ring” ghost of “Columbia’s glory” has “fled.” The wording used to describe the death of American Liberty is suggestive of the idea expressed throughout the epic narrative that Time’s prophetic records warn of the coming desolation of Change. Snow’s description of the death of Liberty suggests that she sees this death in a prophetic vision. When she writes that “Columbia’s glory” is “fled, and, like a dream, / Its ghost is flutt’ring in our view!” the dream-like state within which she views the passing ghost of American Liberty implies that this is a premonition rather than an objective observation. In addition, the lines “Her dying groans, her fun’ral knell, / We’ve heard; for ah! we’ve had to fly!” suggest that the sounds of the death throes and the funeral bell are heard as a forewarning that encourages them to fly from the nation.

By assuming the title of “Ode for the Fourth of July,” the poem agrees to be a nationalist poem in form, but in its content it fails to memorialize national origins. Indeed, the poem fails to deliver substantive content at all, either about U.S. origins or about the persecution of “Columbia’s noblest children.” The poem says that the “genial influence” of national protection has “pass’d o’er” them, that the national flag is “blood-stain’d,” that they are in “writhing pain” and “Beneath oppression’s galling chain,” and that they’ve “had to fly.” Sacrificing detail to invective, these grievances come across as complaints that could be made by any number of antebellum reformers with cause to critique the nation. Similarly, there is no explanation given for what these persecuted people have done to be considered “Columbia’s noblest children” other than that

“Columbia’s glory is a theme / That with our life’s warm pulses grew.” Answering these unanswered questions—who the persecuted people are, why they have been persecuted, and why they are “Columbia’s noblest children”—requires the reader to remember the section on biblical history in the epic narrative portion of “Time and Change” about the persecution that comes to people in a modern age who believe in prophets.

Snow writes in the previous section on biblical history that the ancient past of biblical prophecy is “a scene / That’s now re-acting in these latter-days,” and that these prophets are considered “comic sights” and “strange phenomena” (243, 241). The belief in prophets is the only reason the poem provides for why Americans are “prone to ridicule” the “persecuted people in / The West” (247, 256). And since prophets provide the only protection against the national decline brought on by Change, believing in prophets is what makes the Mormons “Columbia’s noblest children.” In requiring her readers to recall the blank verse portion of the poem in order to understand “Ode for the Fourth of July,” Snow forces an intratextual reading between the epic narrative and the occasional lyric that makes the form of the Revolutionary ode contain the content of biblical history. The two competing narratives of American origins—Revolutionary liberty and divine biblical authority—are brought together through an intratextual link between the lyric and epic portions of “Time and Change.” At the center of this formal convergence is the figure of the Mormon exile who has been forced out of national time, but who remembers and reconciles both the Revolutionary and the biblical narratives of national origins that are used to confirm the historical mission of the United States.

Using the Fourth of July as an occasion for social critique was already an established tradition by the time Snow wrote this poem. Apart from this common, even

nationalistic, gesture of celebrating the nation's political origins while critiquing its current failings, however, Snow's decision to title this lyric "Ode for the Fourth of July" has larger implications. "Time and Change" was originally published on the week of April 6, 1841, corresponding with the April 6 anniversary of the official founding of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.<sup>75</sup> While Frederick Douglass would deliver "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?" on July 5 to show the disconnection between white and African American memory, Snow's publication of a July Fourth poem months away from the national holiday and on the birthday of Mormonism suggests that the moment of national origins she is commemorating is not the origins of the U.S. nation, but the Mormon nation. The implication is that a new civilization has stepped onto the stage of history. But by titling the poem "Ode for the Fourth of July," she casts her memory of Mormon origins as the memory of American origins. As the exile poet who "had to fly" from a "fading" nation, Snow retains the memory of national origins and is able to replicate it beyond national borders as one of "Columbia's noblest children." Snow says that a new nation is rising to prominence in North America, but she also leaves open the possibility that a provisional affinity between the two nations could still exist.

This provisional affinity is highlighted when the final line of "Ode for the Fourth of July" makes intratextual connections to the chain verse form of "Ode" and the meter of the epic narrative. The chain verse form of "Ode" repeats the word "Liberty" at the end of every stanza to unify the poem thematically and structurally. The last words of "Ode

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<sup>75</sup> The 11 April 1841 *Times and Seasons* records that the poem was published the preceding week.

for the Fourth of July” are “Of our *departed Liberty!*” which uses the chain term “Liberty” to connect the patriotic “Ode” with the exile lament in “Ode for the Fourth of July.” This connection signals that the link between the United States and the Latter-day Saints—while tenuous—still exists. Similarly, as “Ode for the Fourth of July” finishes its final line of iambic tetrameter, the epic narrative resumes with an extra iamb that metrically unites the lyric and the blank verse epic into a single flowing line of blank verse iambic pentameter:

Better implore His aid divine,  
                   Whose arm can make His people free,  
 Than decorate the hollow shrine  
                   Of our *departed Liberty!*

How long,  
 Columbia, must thy children weep o’er wrongs  
 And suff’rings unreveng’d? How long must they  
 Entreat in vain for justice and redress?

This metrical connection, which turns tetrameter into pentameter, unites two distinct poetic forms and two contrasting messages. “Ode for the Fourth of July” ends with the poet’s back turned to the nation and saying that it is better to “implore His aid divine” than to appeal to the nation for help, while the epic narrative resumes with the very appeal to the nation that the lyric ode rejects. The language with which Snow makes this metrical connection—“How long”—recalls the common refrain of the American jeremiad (“When is our errand to be fulfilled? How long, O Lord, how long?”) that Sacvan Bercovitch says is used to reconcile an ideal America with the real United States,

a reconciliation that keeps “America” intact as a historical necessity.<sup>76</sup>

The conflict between appealing to the nation and appealing to God in this transition from the lyric to the epic is the conflict of the entire poem and, as “Time and Change” demonstrates, the conflict the nation faces as to whether the United States should be defined as God’s chosen people beholden to divine guidance or as a modern nation grounded in democratic rule. Snow places the two narratives side by side in the conclusion of the poem by first appealing to “Columbia” for “justice and redress,” and then to “Eternal God” that he “roll on thy glorious work” (258, 260). As earlier portions of the poem show Liberty emerging from the prophetic history of the Bible, now the final defense of “the Cause of Liberty” is achieved through the restoration of prophetic authority (259). “Time and Change” ends with a confirmation of the Mormon doctrine that the end of history in the latter-days will be fulfilled by a return to the distant past and that progress into the future depends on a compact with the past. The poem ends with Zion emerging in the American West, and while the implication is that the Mormons’ Zion will be the world power that will oversee the millennial end of history, an invitation is left open that the United States participate with them.

Snow returns the characters of Time and Change to the poem and shows how the specter of decline that haunted every previous world civilization now threatens the United States as well. She writes,

Although at present you may feel secure  
Beneath the screen of popularity,

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<sup>76</sup> Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978), 11.



Remember, Change, dealer in “ups and downs”

Is not outstripp’d by Time. (258)

The United States’ present security as a world power, she reminds her audience, cannot keep Change from following the course laid out for him by Time. And while Time is presented as a passive force of history in earlier portions of the poem, his perfect memory is now seen as more powerful than Change (whose “momentous revolutions” are described in scare quotes with the self-consciously colloquial phrase “ups and downs”). Time’s memory of the warnings of the prophets are not only preventative, but prescriptive as “busy Change must verify all things / That were predicted of the latter-days” (259). Change himself, who decides whether a civilization will rise or fall, is also beholden to the predictions of the prophets.

The image from earlier in the poem of Time’s robes as containing the pure record of history that will be used as the heavenly record for the book of life returns here as Time prepares to “spread his grand memorial on / The threshold of Eternity” (259). Before “Zion shall arise” and take its place as the millennial civilization that will outlast the end of history, Time must spread his robes out across the earth (“clothing her in rich, primeval robes”), thus restoring to the premillennial world all that has taken place since the creation. (262) The image of the earth covered in the robes of history recalls the imagery used to depict Time’s perfect memory throughout the poem. Zion emerging from this premillennial return of history to the earth is a direct invocation of the Mormon “restoration of all things” discussed earlier in the poem. The restoration of all things leads them to support prophets. But by supporting prophets they are cast out of the nation. Their greatest liability—their memory of un-American prophetic authority—also allows

them to be forewarned of the forces that will bring about America's downfall. Whether or not this Zion will be a part of or apart from the United States depends on the response to the poem and whether or not its author is accepted as an American bard.

### III.

#### **American Goddesses in Whitman and Snow**

Eliza R. Snow's claim to the title of national bard was never, as Time's record shows, accepted by the United States at large. The criteria by which she made such a claim, however, might not have come as a shock to the editor of one of the most influential anthologies of American women's poetry published before the Civil War. Rufus Griswold, who edited *The Female Poets of America*, predicted that the American poet literary nationalists were waiting for would be a "prophetic" woman from the Western United States.<sup>77</sup> Griswold said that women, not men, would produce the poetry with the most distinctive national characteristics: "Those who cherish a belief that the progress of society in this country is destined to develop a school of art, original and special, will perhaps find more decided indications of the infusion of our domestic spirit and temper into literature, in the poetry of our female authors, than in that of our men" (8). Having identified the gender of the American poet, Griswold then identified the region from whence she would come, saying that "It is in the West, too, where we look for what is most thoroughly native and essential in American character" (8). This woman poet from the West who was "destined" to write American poetry, according to Griswold,

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<sup>77</sup> Rufus Wilmot Griswold, ed. *The Female Poets of America*, 2nd. edition (Philadelphia: Henry C. Baird, 1853).

would also possess a “prophetic recognition” that would allow her to “see[] the divine relations of all things” (8).

“Time and Change” was never recognized by American readers as a prophecy about the future of the United States. Among the Latter-day Saints, however, Snow was regarded as a poet who possessed “a lofty and prophetic as well as poetical inspiration.”<sup>78</sup> The act of poetic prophecy for which Snow was most widely regarded by the Latter-day Saints was the poem that she used as the “Invocation” of her 1856 collection of poems, “The Eternal Father and Mother.” In “The Eternal Father and Mother,” Snow depicts a heaven that is equally governed by a father and a mother god. The poem was immensely popular in the Mormon community. In addition to being frequently reprinted, it was set to numerous musical scores and was sung at both formal and informal church functions.<sup>79</sup> While it is unclear whether or not Snow actually originated the Mormon doctrine of a mother god, she popularized the belief to such a degree that by 1893 the president of the church identified Snow’s poem as the source of the doctrine, calling it “a revelation, though it was given unto us by a woman—Sister Snow.”<sup>80</sup>

That Snow was credited with originating the doctrine of God the Mother in a

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<sup>78</sup> *The Life and Labors of Eliza R. Snow with a Full Account of Her Funeral Services* (Salt Lake City: Juvenile Instructor Office, 1888), 10

<sup>79</sup> See Michael Hicks, “‘O My Father’: The Musical Settings,” *BYU Studies* 36.1 (1996–97): 33–57. Brigham Young said that “The Eternal Father and Mother” was his favorite hymn and requested that it be performed at his funeral.

<sup>80</sup> Wilford Woodruff qtd. in Jill Mulvay Derr, “The Significance of ‘O My Father’ in the Personal Journey of Eliza R. Snow,” *BYU Studies* 36.1 (1996–97). 85–126, 98. See also Linda P. Wilcox, “The Mormon Concept of a Mother in Heaven” in *Sisters in Spirit: Mormon Women in Historical and Cultural Perspective*, ed. Maureen Ursenbach Beecher and Lavinia Fielding Anderson (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987).

religion that did not ordinarily grant women the right to receive revelation speaks not only to the authority she wielded as a poet, but also to the skillful use of domestic imagery she employed in bringing a mother goddess into a patriarchal religion: the doctrine of a heavenly mother boldly asserts the existence of a female divinity, but it also necessarily weds her and places her in the domestic sphere. Shaker prophetess Ann Lee's belief in a mother goddess contributed to the Shakers' dismantling of gender difference, whereas the Latter-day Saint belief did not. In a sociological analysis of the Mormon doctrine of the Mother in Heaven, John Hereen, Donald B. Lindsey, Marylee Mason "arrive at the ironic conclusion that patriarchy and belief in a goddess go hand-in-hand in the Mormon case."<sup>81</sup> Whatever else the belief in a mother goddess did (or did not do) for nineteenth-century Mormonism, it confirmed Snow's role as the poet laureate of the Mormon people. Whereas Whitman conflated the offices of prophet and bard into a single poetic persona ("The prophet and the bard," he wrote, "Shall yet maintain themselves, in higher stages yet" [*LG* 8]), the mother goddess of "The Eternal Father and Mother" allowed Snow to reconcile the gendered division of labor that existed in a church where a male prophet received revelation and a female bard wrote poetry.

While there were Mormon men who wrote poetry (including high-ranking men within the church hierarchy) it was Snow who was consistently called upon to write commemorative verses for significant religious and cultural events. Even though Snow had secured what Maureen Ursenbach Beecher calls "a degree of public influence

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<sup>81</sup> John Hereen, Donald B. Lindsey, and Marylee Mason, "The Mormon Concept of Mother in Heaven: A Sociological Account of Its Origins and Development," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 23 (December 1984): 396–411, 409.

unequaled by [other] women on the frontier,”<sup>82</sup> like many other women she still accessed the public stage through the domestic sphere—in this case, the domestic heaven of a mother god.<sup>83</sup> Even Lydia Sigourney, whose immense popularity gave her as legitimate a claim to the title of national bard as any poet male or female, said that her muse was “a woman of all work, and an aproned waiter” in the kitchen of Mt. Parnassus.<sup>84</sup> Despite her deification of the domestic, however, Snow herself was childless, and it was an open secret that she was Brigham Young’s wife in name only. William Hepworth Dixon wrote after having visited the Saints in the 1860s, “I am led to believe that she is not a wife to Young in the sense of our canon; she is always called Miss Eliza.”<sup>85</sup> Retaining her own name was the most visible sign that Snow had what Lawrence Foster called “the economic security and status of a wife with the freedom of a single woman” (198). Snow was not the only Mormon woman who had the respectability of a wife and the flexibility of an independent woman as a result of her polygamous marriage. While Joan Iversen says that “it would be questionable to call these outcomes ‘feminist’,” she concedes that

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<sup>82</sup> Maureen Ursenbach Beecher, “Priestess Among the Patriarchs: Eliza R. Snow and the Mormon Female Relief Society, 1842–1887” in *Religion and Society in the American West*, ed. Carl Guarneri and David Alvarez (New York: University Press of America, 1987.153–70), 153.

<sup>83</sup> See Nina Baym, *Woman’s Fiction: A Guide to Novels By and About Women in America, 1820–1870* (2nd ed. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 48–49.

<sup>84</sup> Quoted in Paula Bernat Bennett, ed., *Nineteenth-Century American Women Poets: An Anthology*, (London: Blackwell, 1998), 3.

<sup>85</sup> William Hepworth Dixon, *New America* (J.B. Lippincott, 1867), 205. Dixon said that Snow was “regarded by her people as a spinster. Consummation, necessary in wedlock, is not necessary in” Mormon polygamy (226). See also Foster (198) for details on other such unconsummated polygamous marriages.

“Some [Mormon] women had found through plural marriage greater autonomy” than their monogamous counterparts.”<sup>86</sup>

At Snow’s funeral in 1888, her cultural authority and her childlessness were conflated in a comment by a prominent church leader who said, “Inasmuch as the deceased was deprived of bearing children, she is entitled to be called Mother among this people, just as much as George Washington is to be called Father by the people of the United States.”<sup>87</sup> That Snow was compared to George rather than Martha Washington in her status as the mother of the Mormon people not only illustrates the position of authority she attained, but it also reveals an intimate connection between domestic and national spheres where mothers and presidents can be taken on equal footing. This same connection between domestic and national spheres allows “The Eternal Father and Mother”—a poem that otherwise focuses on the spiritual journey of an individual—to become an allegory of the Mormon’s national exile. The poem is told from the perspective of a child-like narrator who addresses a Father God and Mother Goddess from her earthly exile, laments her separation from them, and asks when she will return to their presence. On its own, the poem can be taken as an individual’s longing for a spiritual home. As the “Invocation” of Snow’s 1856 collection of poems (a collection whose poems tell the story of the Mormon exodus), the theme of celestial exile in “The Eternal Father and Mother” becomes an allegory of Mormon exile from the domestic–national space of an American home.

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<sup>86</sup> Joan Iversen. “Feminist Implications of Mormon Polygyny.” *Feminist Studies* 10.3 (Fall 1984). 505–22. 507, 519.

<sup>87</sup> John Taylor in *The Life and Labors of Eliza R. Snow*, 24.

Whitman similarly placed maternal imagery at the heart of his project for national poetry. He frequently used the image of America as a mother—what Betsy Erkkila calls “the image of a divinely charged matriarch”<sup>88</sup>—to depict the nation. Whitman described America as “A grand, sane, towering, seated Mother” and hailed the nation as “the Mother of All” (*LG* 429, 246). Whitman drew much of this nation-as-mother imagery from representations of liberty as a woman that were popular during the French and American revolutions (his address to American democracy as “ma femme” in a number of different poems is a testament to this homage [*LG* 21]).<sup>89</sup> But Whitman’s mother goddess also played a role in his new American religion. In “Thou Mother with Thy Equal Brood” Whitman imagines the nation as a pregnant mother who, parallel to his new bible’s accumulation of the bibles of the past, contains the future bibles and messiahs of American religions to come: “Thee in thy all-supplying, all-enclosing worship—thee in no single bible, saviour, merely, / Thy saviours countless, latent within thyself, thy bibles incessant within thyself, equal to any, divine as any” (*LG* 385). Just as Whitman imagined *Leaves of Grass* to be the literal aggregate of history’s sacred texts, he imagined the nation as a mother who is pregnant with the unborn multitudes of American religion.

Whitman has frequently been criticized for his depictions of women in general and mothers in particular as little more than their reproductive capabilities (as “muscles

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<sup>88</sup> Betsy Erkkila, *Whitman the Political Poet* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 316–17.

<sup>89</sup> See also the poems “For You O Democracy” and “France: The 18<sup>th</sup> Year of these States” (*LG* 100, 197).

and wombs,” in D. H. Lawrence’s phrase).<sup>90</sup> A number of other scholars have noted, however, that Whitman used mother imagery to provide a model of unity for an otherwise fractious nation.<sup>91</sup> Whitman issued himself the challenge to “Make a picture of America as an IMMORTAL MOTHER, surrounded by all her children young and old—no one rejected—all fully accepted—no one preferred to another. For as to many sons and daughters the perfect mother is the one where all meet, and binds them all together, as long as she lives, so The Mother of These States binds them all together as long as she lives.”<sup>92</sup> He wrote in another note from the late fifties that he wanted his poems “to bring in the idea of Mother—the idea of the mother with numerous children—all great and small, old and young, equal in her eyes—as the identity of America.”<sup>93</sup>

Eliza Snow would have had a difficult time imagining the United States as an all-inclusive mother who embraced her Mormon children with equal love. Indeed, a number of editorial cartoons from mid-nineteenth-century newspapers depict the Mormons—along with other racial, ethnic, and religious minorities—as unwanted national children. In one such cartoon, America is depicted as a frazzled housewife who is overrun by her

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<sup>90</sup> Quoted in Arthur Wrobel, “‘Noble American Motherhood’: Whitman, Women, and the Ideal Democracy,” *American Studies* 21 (1980), 7–25, 7. See also M. Jimmie Killingsworth, “Whitman and Motherhood: A Historical View,” *American Literature* 54 (1982), 28–43 and Beth Jensen, *Leaving the M/other: Whitman, Kristeva, and “Leaves of Grass”* (Madison, NJ: Farleigh Dickinson Press, 2002)

<sup>91</sup> See Sherry Ceniza, *Walt Whitman and 19th-Century Women Reformers* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1998), 35; and Betsy Erkkila, “The Federal Mother: Whitman as Revolutionary Son,” *Prospects: An Annual Journal of American Cultural Studies* 10 (1985): 423–41, 434.

<sup>92</sup> Whitman, *Notebooks and Unpublished Prose Manuscripts*, 1:435.

<sup>93</sup> Walt Whitman, *The Complete Writings of Walt Whitman* Vol. 9, ed. Richard Maurice



unruly Mormon, African American, Native American, Irish, and Chinese children; in another the nation is a mother bird who feeds all the hatchlings in her nest except for two disfigured little birds labeled “Mormonism” and “Catholicism.”<sup>94</sup> Whereas Whitman used the image of the mother goddess to create an image of national unity, Snow’s poem about a mother goddess was used to allegorize the pains of national exile. As a story of loss and separation, “The Eternal Father and Mother” expresses what Emily Stipes Watts calls the common sentimental theme of the “traveler’s yearning for ‘home’” (66). The sense of longing for home functions on both spiritual and political registers in the poem. As a nineteenth-century Mormon reader of the poem said, “The Eternal Father and Mother” provides “at once a rare view of the spiritual type of the high priestess of the Mormon Church,” as well as a sense of the “drama of Mormonism itself” (Tullidge 187–88).

### **“Invocation, or The Eternal Father and Mother”**

As a sentimental poem that privileges accessible language and a familiar lyric pattern over formal experimentation, “The Eternal Father and Mother” seems an unlikely choice for the “Invocation” of a collection of poems that attempts to tell the epic story of a people. While John McWilliams claims to “have found no American instances of women writing epic poems,”<sup>95</sup> Snow demonstrated her awareness of how epic conventions operate. In “Two Chapters in the Life of Joseph Smith,” an epyllion about

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Bucke (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1902), 11.

<sup>94</sup> Gary L. Bunker and Davis Bitton, *The Mormon Graphic Image 1834–1914: Cartoons, Caricatures, and Illustrations* (Salt Lake City, UT: University of Utah Press, 1983).

<sup>95</sup> John P. McWilliams, *The American Epic: Transforming a Genre, 1770–1860* (New

early episodes in the life of the Mormon prophet, she begins the poem with a four-stanza “Introductory Invocation” that conforms to a number of epic conventions. If the “Introductory Invocation” for “Two Chapters” was used as the invocation of *Poems*, it would have framed the collection as the epic story of the prophet and his people. The impact of the sentimental invocation in “The Eternal Father and Mother,” however, provides a framework for understanding how to connect the social drama of national exile with the divine drama of mortal exile.

In its context as an invocation, “The Eternal Father and Mother” functions differently than it did when published as an individual poem or a church hymn. Nina Baym says that the epic was “the most demanding, rule-bound, ambitious” and most recognizably nationalist form of poetry, whereas the brief occasional lyric was “the most informal, spontaneous, ephemeral, and easiest kind of writing” (*American Women Writers* 68). Because of the “exigencies of household life,” Baym says, women overwhelmingly wrote lyrics, which “to some extent, identified the lyric as a female form in antebellum America” (68). Using an identifiably female form as the invocation of her collection reminded her Mormon readers that she was not making an assault on Mormon patriarchal authority. At the same time, Snow’s invocation of a domestic goddess as the muse of her collection endows her with a significant degree of authority as a poetess. According to Elizabeth Petrino, nineteenth-century collections of poetry by women often came with prefaces by male editors whose authority was necessary to establish a woman poet’s credibility.<sup>96</sup> By calling upon the muse of a mother god in her invocation to the

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York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 10.

collection—rather than, say, asking her husband to put his prophetic seal of approval on the volume—Snow garnered her authority from a female source.

The rhyme and meter of the poem differ from the blank verse or heroic couplets of a conventional epic invocation. Instead, the poem follows a trochaic rhythm that shapes the meter around the words “Father” and “Mother” in order to emphasize the centrality of the domestic scene. The first two stanzas read as follows:

O my Father, thou that dwellest  
 In the high and holy place;  
 When shall I regain thy presence,  
 And again behold thy face?

In thy glorious habitation,  
 Did my spirit once reside?  
 In my first primeval childhood,  
 Was I nurtur'd near thy side? (1)

The words used to describe the heavenly setting (“high,” “holy,” and “glorious”) give the feel of elevated language without deviating from the most basic language of religious belief: heaven is high, earth is low; God is holy, man is wicked; paradise is glorious, mortal life is mundane. The poem’s lack of linguistic ornamentation identifies it as part of a sentimental aesthetic “whose primary quality of transparency,” Joanne Dobson writes, “is generated by a valorization of connection, an impulse toward communication

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<sup>96</sup> Elizabeth A. Petrino, *Emily Dickinson and Her Contemporaries: Women’s Verse in America, 1820–1885* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1998), 34.

with as wide an audience as possible.”<sup>97</sup> This “valorization of connection” is reinforced by the use of apostrophe as the central poetic device of the poem. As Kelly L. Richardson explains, “the apostrophe is critical to sentimental writing because it allows the speaker both to remember an absent person as well as to create a place so that person can be addressed and thus be made present.”<sup>98</sup> At the same time, it is the apostrophe to the Eternal Father—and then to the Father and Mother together at the end of the poem—that most characterizes the poem as an invocation because the direct address to the muse is the hallmark of an epic invocation.

Whereas the epic poet commands the muse to sing, however, the sentimental poet makes demure requests. These first two stanzas are all phrased as questions to God, initiating the poem as a conversation which the speaker assumes that the apostrophized listener can respond to. With these questions, Snow cuts the distance between the mortal and the divine that Emily Stipes Watts says challenged many nineteenth-century American women poets: even though “Most [nineteenth-century] American women poets have been religious, . . . they have experienced a great gulf between God and woman” (6). In the domestic setting of “The Eternal Father and Mother,” God is approachable because the speaker presents herself as a child and her divine creator as a parent. The questions that she asks in the second stanza of the poem transform heaven from a

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<sup>97</sup> Joanne Dobson, “Reclaiming Sentimental Literature,” *American Literature* 69.2 (1997): 263–88. 268.

<sup>98</sup> Kelly L. Richardson, “Collaboration, Materialism, and Masochism: New Studies in Nineteenth-Century American Sentimental Literature and Culture,” *College Literature* 29.3 (Summer 2002): 170–78. On the apostrophe in sentimental literature see also Mary Louise Kete, *Sentimental Collaborations: Mourning and Middle-Class Identity in Nineteenth-Century America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000).

beautiful though impersonal “glorious habitation” into a more familiar domestic space. In the first question she appeals to a distant God who has set himself apart from his lesser creations, but when she asks, “In my first primeval childhood, / Was I nurtur’d near thy side?” she transforms the “glorious habitation” of heaven into a scene from the speaker’s “primeval childhood” and by so doing turns heaven into a home. This second question is parallel in form to the first (“In thy . . . / Did my . . . ?” and “In my . . . / Was I . . . ?”), suggesting that the bridge between the home and the heavens is easily crossed.

For this bridging to occur, however, the grown woman who is the author of the poem must become an infantile speaker who innocently believes that she can enter into a conversation with deity. This infantilization of the speaker from a grown woman into a questioning child is considered reassuring and comforting rather than dehumanizing in this sentimental context: no matter where you go or how big you get, you’ll always be somebody’s baby. It is this context that allows for the speaker’s initial question to behold the face of God, an audacious request denied even to Moses (Exodus 33:20). In the third and fourth stanzas of the poem, Snow further develops the “primeval childhood” of the domestic heaven from whence the speaker came while still retaining the regal language of heaven. She writes,

For a wise and glorious purpose,  
 Thou hast plac’d me here on earth;  
 And withheld the recollection  
 Of my former friends and birth;

Yet oft-times a secret something

Whisper'd, "You're a stranger here;"

And I felt that I had wander'd

From a more exalted sphere. (1–2)

Reminiscent of Wordsworth's "Ode on the Intimations of Immortality," Snow's poem links earth and heaven through the experience of a child. The effect of this comparison is not to denigrate heaven but to elevate the home. The idea of home continues to be glorified in the fourth stanza as the wistful memory of a heavenly exile recalls the "exalted sphere" that she has "wander'd" from. The "secret something" that whispers to her, "You're a stranger here," is the muse of exile that casts a rosy glow around the memory of her former home and freezes the experience in a timeless and unchanging image of domestic bliss. On its own, the poem offers spiritual sustenance to a reader yearning for return to God; as the invocation to the 1856 *Poems*, it allows the other poems on Mormon exile to be seen in the context of sentimental domesticity.

The whispered "secret something" also gives the image of a parent whispering to a sleeping child. This image resonates with the Protestant belief that God speaks directly to the individual without the mediation of clerical authority, a belief she confirms in the fifth stanza when she identifies this "secret something" as the voice of God's "Spirit from on high" speaking directly to her. While this gentle whispering confirms that God is a personal and loving parent, this stanza also introduces the mediating factor of the patriarchal prophetic authority that possesses "the Key of Knowledge" that she as a woman is denied.

I had learn'd to call thee Father,

Through thy Spirit from on high;

But, until the Key of Knowledge  
 Was restor'd, I knew not why.

In the heavens are parents single?

No: the thought makes reason stare:

Truth is reason: truth eternal,

Tells me I've a mother there. (2)

The knowledge she gains of her Father God and her pre-mortal life in a domestic heaven have come to her only in fragments, she says, and that without the “Key of Knowledge” restored to Mormon prophets in the latter days she would not know what it means to be a child of God. Of the two forms of spiritual knowledge presented thus far—the secret whisperings granted to everyone regardless of creed and the Key of Knowledge that opens the heavens to Mormon prophets only—Snow appeals to neither as the source of her inspiration that there is a Mother God. Rather, she appeals to her own sense of reason to deduce that a domestic heaven would be incomplete without an Eternal Mother espoused to the Eternal Father. Snow modifies the apostrophe she has been employing as the poem’s central poetic device in the sixth stanza as she turns her questions away from God and addresses herself with the rhetorical question, “In the heavens are parents single?”

Rather than risk blasphemy by depicting the voice of God answering her question, she settles for the lesser sin of trusting reason over revelation.<sup>99</sup> She deducts from the

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<sup>99</sup> For an analysis of the ways in which Mormon women circumvent patriarchal society to make use of power in different ways, see Jill Mulvay Derr and C. Brooklyn Derr,

principles of God's literal parentage and the similarity between earthly and heavenly homes that the truth of reason would demand that there be a mother god ("Truth is reason: truth eternal, / Tells me I've a mother there"). Appealing to reason as an appropriately feminine form of knowledge seems to contradict the nineteenth-century expectation that women's sentimental poetry comes from the emotions rather than the intellect. As Caroline May wrote in her 1848 introduction to *The Female Poets of America*, women's "inspiration lies more in her heart than her head."<sup>100</sup> Cheryl Walker says that "one of the defining features of sentimentalism is the reversal of the roles usually accorded to reason and emotion" such that emotion is privileged over reason.<sup>101</sup> Revelation is an extra-rational form of knowledge denigrated in a secular society but privileged in a religious one. Reason, however, is the only recourse for a woman writing within a religious culture that grants the right to receive revelation on questions of doctrine exclusively to men. Attaining the knowledge of a mother god through feminine reason allows Snow to access the religious authority of male prophecy through an inversion of the cultural authority of women's domestic poetry.

The final stanzas grant a significant degree of authority to the mother god as the home of the opening stanzas is replaced with a "royal court on high" that makes the

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"Outside the Mormon Hierarchy: Alternative Aspects of Institutional Power," *Dialogue* 15.4 (1982): 21–43; and Iversen, "Feminist Implications of Mormon Polygyny."

<sup>100</sup> Caroline May, *The American Female Poets* (Philadelphia: Lindsay and Blakiston, 1848), vi.

<sup>101</sup> Cheryl Walker, "Nineteenth-Century American Women Poets Revisited" in *Nineteenth-Century American Women Writers: A Critical Reader*, ed. Karen L. Kilcup (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998. 231–44, 235.



mother god a heavenly queen, not merely a domestic goddess:

When I leave this frail existence—

When I lay this mortal by;

Father, Mother, may I meet you

In your royal court on high?

Then at length, when I've completed

All you sent me forth to do;

With your mutual approbation,

Let me come and dwell with you. (2)

The apostrophe returns here to round out the structure of the poem and to grant an equal authority to God the Mother as the speaker addresses the Mother and the Father together, saying that her return from earthly exile will only come through their “mutual approbation.” The regal setting of the concluding stanzas also confirms the exile’s nostalgic memory by providing a fantasy theme that turns the speaker into the long-lost princess of a “royal court.” The tenuous nature of the “frail existence” of the speaker’s present location is confirmed by the repeated structure of the final questions posed in the poem: “When I leave this frail existence— / When I lay this mortal by.” The repeated “When I” is the mantra of the exile who anxiously anticipates the return to a home that has grown increasingly glorious in her memory. The powerful force of the exile’s memory that informs and sustains the sentimental ethos of “The Eternal Father and Mother” returns in other poems to contextualize the Mormons’ exile from the United States.

### **Conclusion: Locating Mormon America**

One such poem that draws an explicit parallel between the separation from a heavenly home and the Saints' exile from their American home is "Nationality," a poem wherein Snow distances herself from the United States and claims that her only political affiliation is the Mormon theocracy in the West: "I claim no country, nation, kingdom, creed, / Excepting Zion:—that I proudly name" (39). Despite the boldness with which she rejects the "sentiment of Nationality" she previously felt for "America's much favor'd land" (36, 38), however, she acknowledges that "the charm [of] Nationality" is reminiscent of the attachment she feels for her "earlier birth" in heaven (40). Just as all humans "Have come on pilgrimage, thro' mortal birth" and here on the earth feel like "foreign trav'lers," so too does Snow acknowledge a residual longing "For birth-place, country, and the people where / Our lungs at first inhale the vital air" (40, 36).

In a number of Snow's poems she expresses a similar longing to be affiliated with the United States despite her feelings of exile. In such poems she casts the Mormons as true Americans—"The champions of our country's cause" (217)—and encourages the nation to look to the Mormon community for an example of American ideals, writing, "Fair Columbia, rejoice—look away to the West" (87). James H. Moorhead says that even though Latter-day Saints such as Snow would often identify themselves with America, "early Mormons could not unambiguously affirm the United States as an elect nation, for it was their own community that formed the chosen people."<sup>102</sup> As one

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<sup>102</sup> James H. Moorhead, "'God's Right Arm'?: Minority Faiths and Protestant Visions of America." *Minority Faiths and the American Protestant Mainstream*, ed. Jonathan D.

nineteenth-century commentator observed, “The Saints . . . talk of ‘going to the States’ as if they belonged to another nation” (Stenhouse 171). As Sarah Barringer Gordon says, the Mormon settlement occupied “an ambiguous and changeable place” in the nation (9). This ambiguity allowed the Latter-day Saints’ American Zion to be a number of different things: it could be a model to the nation of American ideals; it could be a subnational community of exiles seeking refuge from religious persecution; or it could be a place where the faithful from throughout the world would come to form an international society.

As national exiles, the Mormons already thought of themselves as only tenuously loyal to the nation that had driven them out. When “The Saints were encouraged to feel solidarity with their fellows in other lands,” as P. A. M. Taylor writes in his history of nineteenth-century Mormon immigration, though, the sense of belonging to an international community loosened this connection with the United States even more.<sup>103</sup> In the years preceding the Civil War, Mormon missionaries went as far as India, China, Ceylon, Palestine, Europe, and the Pacific islands in search of converts, and missionary periodicals were set up in New York City, Liverpool, Copenhagen, Paris, Hamburg, and Geneva to disseminate information to converts on their way to the United States.<sup>104</sup> (The *Manchester Guardian* commented in 1856 that the Mormons’ “immense and well-

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Zarna (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998. 334–361), 351.

<sup>103</sup> P. A. M. Taylor, *Expectations Westward: The Mormons and the Emigration of Their British Converts in the Nineteenth Century* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1966), 79.

<sup>104</sup> Leonard J. Arrington. *Great Basin Kingdom: An Economic History of the Latter-day Saints, 1830–1900* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958), 98.

concerted missionary system . . . already wields an influence over the whole globe.”<sup>105</sup>) So successful were the efforts of these missionaries that by the 1860s thirty-five percent of the population of the Utah Territory was foreign-born (Arrington and Bitton 139). Upon seeing this initial success, Brigham Young said enthusiastically, “[T]housands of the Saints will gather in from the nations of the earth. This will become the great highway of the nations. Kings and emperors and the noble and wise of the earth will visit us here.”<sup>106</sup> Snow expressed a similar enthusiasm. She told a group of young Mormons that they would have to prepare themselves to live in the international community that would be the result of this missionary effort: “Situated as you are in the ‘City of the Saints’—the place destined for the gathering of people from every nation, kindred, tongue, and people; you must expect to associate with people of widely different dispositions and understandings, and whose habits and manners have been formed under every variety of circumstances” (*Personal Writings* 69). She also dedicated her 1856 collection of poems “To all the Saints of God, no matter where / Your countries lie, or what your nations are” (vii).

Early Mormons such as Snow lived in what Richard Bushman calls a “sacred geography [that] had no equivalent elsewhere in the United States.”<sup>107</sup> “Mormon space,” Bushman continues, “consisted of these two elements: first, the convert population

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<sup>105</sup> “The Mormons” from the Manchester *Guardian* reprinted in *The Latter-day Saints’ Millennial Star* 10 May 1856.

<sup>106</sup> Quoted in Leonard J. Arrington, *Brigham Young: American Moses* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1986).

<sup>107</sup> Richard Lyman Bushman, *Making Space for the Mormons* (Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 1997), 17.

streaming along the lines of gathering from all over the globe, and second, the central city of Zion” (6). The conceptual geography that early Mormons inhabited tethered the United States between subnational and supranational frames: settlements such as Nauvoo, Illinois, and Salt Lake City, Utah, functioned as independent city-states with their own commerce, cultural identity, educational systems, militias, and even currency; and these city-states felt their strongest connection not to their American neighbors, but to converts and potential converts from beyond national boundaries. While the city of Zion had no equivalent sacred geography in the United States, however, secular geographies that functioned with a similar spatial dynamic could be found elsewhere in the nation.

Bushman notes that Chicago, which came into its own within a few years of the founding of the nearby Mormon community in Nauvoo, Illinois, “had a parallel spatial structure based on the powerful attraction of its markets” (17). The international markets of Chicago brought immigrant workers and international goods into the condensed space of the industrial city and then returned American products out to the world in a similar manner that the Latter-day Saints sent missionaries with the message of an American religion throughout the world to collect converts back to the central city of Zion. Another such place was Whitman’s New York City. As I argue in the concluding chapter of this dissertation, Whitman’s posture as the national outsider who would be the national bard depended upon his similar location in a city where an urban population (his New York City “roughs”) was connected to a world that extended beyond national boundaries (his cosmopolitan “kosmos”) as well as to the United States itself. Both Whitman and Snow felt like American Jeremiahs preaching their New World gospels from the margins of national culture, but the geographical metaphors of “margin” and “center” inadequately

describe the actual geographies from which they articulated their place in the nation.

As a haven to national exiles, the home of an ideal American community, and the central hub for international immigration (what the Saints called “the center of all centers”<sup>108</sup>), the Mormons’ community described in Snow’s poetry negotiated a complex relationship with the United States. Snow defined the Mormons’ Zion as an exile space outside of the nation, as a model for the nation, and as a global gathering place. Some of the consistent images that recur throughout her poems that reflect this spatial dynamic are: the dutiful—if ironic—flying of the national flag; the search for refuge in the tops of the Rocky Mountains; and an invitation to the citizens of the world to gather to Zion. In one poem that combines all of these images, Snow says that the Mormon’s Zion is a quintessentially American place where live “our country’s braves” and “Where Columbia’s glorious banner / Waves o’er mountain-top and dell” (263). At the same time, however, Zion is a place outside of national boundaries: “In Jehovah’s arm we trusted / To the wilderness He led,” she writes, saying that the mountain wilderness serves as a refuge for “outcasts / From the country whence we came” (263). In addition to being a place in “the wilderness” where the Saints live as “outcasts,” the Mormon community in Utah is a gathering place for immigrant converts (“Where the Saints of God are gather’d”) coming from across the globe: “And we soon shall hail as neighbors / Those who dwell in lands afar” (263–64). In the final chapter of this dissertation, I argue that Whitman’s sense of himself as “an American, one of the roughs, a kosmos” depended upon a similar negotiation with national space. Neither Snow nor Whitman

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<sup>108</sup> Quoted in Dolores Hayden, *Seven American Utopias: The Architecture of Communitarian Socialism* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1976), 114.

would have felt comfortable practicing the other's brand of American religion, but they both would have recognized a similar kind of conflict between their home communities and the nation where they never felt quite at home.

## Chapter 3

## John Rollin Ridge (Yellow Bird): The First White Aboriginal

**Introduction**

In May of 1866, John Rollin Ridge went to Washington, D.C., to negotiate with the federal government on behalf of a group of Cherokee Indians who, like himself, had supported the Confederacy during the Civil War. The Cherokee Nation had been factionalized since the early nineteenth century over the U.S. policy of Indian Removal, and with the onset of the Civil War these factions made their separate allegiances with white America: most opponents to removal sided with the Union and most removal supporters (including Ridge) sided with the Confederacy.<sup>1</sup> Ridge's father and grandfather were leaders in the Cherokee Nation during the 1830s who, believing that tribal survival required capitulating to the United States, yielded to U.S. demands that the Cherokee leave their homeland in Georgia. The Ridges and a minority of the Cherokee voluntarily moved west of the Mississippi in 1836, to be followed two years later by the rest of the Cherokee Nation in what has come to be known as the Trail of Tears. While the Ridges maintained that they had the Cherokees' best interests at heart in signing a treaty for removal to present-day Oklahoma, a rival faction of Cherokee nationalists called the treaty a betrayal. After Ridge's father and grandfather were murdered by opponents to the removal treaty, Ridge killed a removal opponent in retaliation and moved to California to

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<sup>1</sup> For the story of complicated political maneuvering among the Cherokee during and after the Civil War, see W. Craig Gaines, *The Confederate Cherokees* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), William Gerald McLoughlin, *After the Trail of Tears: The Cherokees' Struggle for Sovereignty, 1839–1880* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press), chapter 9, and Morris L. Wardell, *A Political History of the Cherokee Nation, 1838–1907* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1931), 123.



live in self-imposed exile.<sup>2</sup>

From the time that he left for California in 1850, Ridge dreamed of returning to the Cherokee Nation to assume the leadership role that his father and grandfather had filled. When he went to Washington in 1866, he hoped to claim the tribal leadership that he considered to be his birthright. Aside from his hereditary claim to lead the Cherokee, Ridge believed that he was poised to mediate between the U.S. and the Cherokee by virtue of his ability to straddle both white and Native worlds. In the fifteen years he had spent as a poet, novelist, and political journalist in California, Ridge cultivated the public persona of a man who equally understood the concerns of whites and Native Americans. The son of a Cherokee father and a white mother, Ridge developed his persona according to a larger set of beliefs about mixed-race Indians that Alexis de Tocqueville articulated in the early-nineteenth century when he said that “the half-caste forms the natural link between civilization and barbarism.”<sup>3</sup> Despite the reputation that he had achieved in

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<sup>2</sup> This story can be found in Thurman Wilkins, *Cherokee Tragedy: The Ridge Family and the Decimation of a People*. Second Ed. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1986). Ridge predicted that ultimately he would return from California “to my own people and to my own country. . . . I intend some day, sooner or later to plant my foot in the Cherokee Nation and stay there too, or die” (qtd. in Edward Everett Dale, “John Rollin Ridge,” *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 4 [Dec 1926]: 312–21, 317).

<sup>3</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. George Lawrence, ed. J. P. Mayer (Garden City, NY: Anchor, 1969), 329. Because the Cherokee had intermarried with whites with greater frequency than most Native Americans during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, being of mixed racial heritage was not necessarily a unique claim for Ridge to make (see Circe Sturm, *Blood Politics: Race, Culture, and Identity in the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma* [Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002], 31–43, 56–57, 68; see also Theda Perdue, “Mixed Blood” *Indians: Racial Construction in the Early South* [Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2003]). Conflicting census reports from the early nineteenth century indicate that mixed-race Cherokees made up anywhere from 16% (in an 1835 census) to 50% (in an 1809 census) of the Cherokee Nation, while an 1876 census put the figure closer to 50% (Russell

California as a cultural mediator who reconciled his support of U.S. expansionism with his concern for indigenous rights, in 1866 Ridge was largely unsuccessful in convincing Washington to ratify his bid for Cherokee leadership; he returned to California virtually empty-handed and lived the rest of his life in exile.

One year before Ridge arrived in Washington, D.C., with the delegation of Cherokee Confederates, Walt Whitman was fired from his job as a clerk at the Indian Bureau of the Department of the Interior when a petty bureaucrat determined that *Leaves of Grass* did “not come within the rules of decorum & propriety prescribed by a Christian Civilization.”<sup>4</sup> While he regretted losing his comfortable position with the Department of the Interior, Whitman might have been heartened by the insinuation that the federal government was too civilized a place for someone as uncivilized as he considered himself to be. Whitman called his poetry a “savage song” and said that he sang it with a “barbaric yawp.”<sup>5</sup> A reviewer of the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, confirming that Whitman was

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Thornton, *The Cherokees: A Population History* [Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990], 52, 104). Nevertheless, Ridge’s mixed-race heritage was a vital part of both his poetic and political persona. The arguments that Ridge made to turn his mixed-race heritage into a bid for political leadership reflect the complexity of racial politics among the Cherokee: at one point he called John Ross, his main competitor for Cherokee leadership, “the nearly white usurper of authority in the Cherokee nation” (San Francisco *Herald* 17 September 1861), and at another point he joined with other Confederate Cherokees in claiming that Ross had “array[ed] the great mass of fullbloods against the halfbloods and white men of the [Cherokee] Nation” (qtd. in McLoughlin 223).

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Jerome Loving, *Walt Whitman: The Song of Himself* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999), 291. This statement by Secretary of the Interior James Harland was used as the standard by which dozens of federal employees deemed unfit for government service were purged from employment, including Whitman, whose *Leaves of Grass* Harland considered an indecent book.

<sup>5</sup> Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, ed. Michael Moon (New York: Norton, 2002), 77, 299. Hereafter cited as *LG*.

indeed more savage than civilized, said that he had more in common with Shakespeare's Caliban than he did with the poets of English literature: "Walt Whitman reminds us of Caliban flinging down his logs, and setting himself to write a poem. In fact Caliban, and not Walt Whitman, might have written this: . . . 'I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world.'"<sup>6</sup>

Whitman included this review comparing his poetry to the primal voice of the New World in an appendix to the subsequent edition of *Leaves of Grass* as a way of reinforcing the image he presented of himself as a poet who not only lived on the fringes of civilization, but who was also attuned to the indigenous spirit of the continent. Even before he began his career as a poet in 1855, Whitman nurtured the persona that D. H. Lawrence later identified as "the first white aboriginal."<sup>7</sup> A New York City editor said of Whitman during his newspaper days in the 1840s that he was "what you call a civilized but not a polished *Aborigine*. And, by the way, it has been asserted by one of his brother Editors that he is a lineal descendent from some Indian tribe, with what truth we will not venture to say."<sup>8</sup> Whitman would ultimately replace the persona of the "white aboriginal" with that of the "Good Gray Poet," but for much of his career he claimed the title of American bard by virtue of his ability to give voice to the indigenous energy of North America.

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<sup>6</sup>"*Critic* [London] 15 (1 April 1856), 170–1," *Walt Whitman: The Contemporary Reviews*, ed. Kenneth M. Price (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 44.

<sup>7</sup>D. H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature* (New York: Viking, 1923), 186.

<sup>8</sup>Quoted in Joseph Jay Rubin, *The Historic Whitman* (University Park: Pennsylvania

The posture that Whitman adopted of the “white aboriginal” who found better company among the Calibans of the continent than he did with the government bureaucrats of the United States curiously parallels Ridge’s own stance as a broker of cultural commerce between whites and Natives.<sup>9</sup> Had Whitman not been fired from the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the two poets might have met in 1866 when Ridge arrived in Washington with the other Cherokee delegates. If Whitman had been given the opportunity to meet Ridge, the two men would probably not have acknowledged—let alone recognized—their shared affinity as poets who chronicled the convergence of Euro-American and Native American cultures that was taking place in the mid-nineteenth century. Whitman met with a number of different Native delegations during his time with the Department of the Interior. His records of these encounters betray that he was most interested in the delegates who confirmed his image of Native Americans as noble savages.<sup>10</sup> Had Whitman kept his job long enough to meet Ridge, however, he might have been somewhat disappointed by a man who, although he frequently identified himself by his Cherokee name Yellow Bird, dressed like an American journalist and was deeply involved in the complex world of U.S. politics.<sup>11</sup>

Whitman frequently commented on what he considered to be the picturesque

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State University Press), 66, italics in original.

<sup>9</sup> The Ridge family was included in a group of Cherokees sometimes referred to as “white Indians” (Wardell 122).

<sup>10</sup> These are recorded in Walt Whitman, *Prose Works, 1892*, ed. Floyd Stovall (New York: New York University Press, 1963), 2:577–80, and Walt Whitman, *Notebooks and Unpublished Prose Manuscripts*, ed. Edward F. Grier (New York: New York University Press, 1984), 2:880–81, 2:785–86.

<sup>11</sup> See James W. Parins, *John Rollin Ridge: His Life and Works* (Lincoln: University of

nature of the Indian delegates that he met in the mid-1860s, writing, “Any first-class artist or sculptor would never tire of their powerful and massive forms, the gnarly and luxuriant amplitude of their limbs and chests, and the antique & homely fascination of their physiognomies” (*Notebooks and Unpublished Prose Manuscripts*, 2:881). He seems to have been most captivated by the delegates who arrived in traditional dress. “Most have red paint on their cheeks,” he wrote in a composite sketch of a typical visit of Native delegates, “Many wear head tires of gaudy-color’d braid, wound around thickly—some with circlets of eagles’ feathers. Necklaces of bears’ claws are plenty around their necks. . . . All the principal chiefs have tomahawks or hatchets, some of them very richly ornamented and costly” (*Prose Works* 2:578). Because he had adopted so many American customs in speech and dress, Ridge presented a very different image at the Indian Bureau than did the delegates Whitman fondly remembered. An artist friend to whom Whitman sent a description of the Native delegations wrote to him, “An Indian is only half an Indian without the blue-black hair and the brilliant eyes shining out of the wonderful dusky ochre and rose complexion” (B.H. quoted in Whitman, *Prose Works* 2:580). Whitman, if he agreed with this friend, might similarly have considered Ridge to be merely “half an Indian.”

But as a mixed-race Anglo-Cherokee who understood tribal history as well as contemporary American politics, Ridge might have interested Whitman in the same way that the interpreters who accompanied the Native delegates did. Whitman wrote, “The interpreters, agents of the Indian Department, or other whites accompanying the bands, in positions of responsibility, were always interesting to me; I had many talks with them”

(*Prose Works* 2:579). The figure of the interpreter who stands between white and Native cultures has an obvious appeal to Whitman. Whitman might have seen in Ridge's poetic and political persona of the intercultural mediator something similar to a stance that he attempted to adopt with the Indian delegations. In his account of a meeting with a Sioux delegation Whitman presents himself (in the third person) as just such an intermediary:

Yesterday afternoon, Walt Whitman, who was walking down the avenue, stepped in, by invitation of the Agent, and made them [the Sioux delegation] a short impromptu visit. 'Tell them', said the agent to the interpreter, 'that the poet-chief has come to shake hands with them, as brothers'. A regular round of introductions and hearty hand-claspings, and 'How's!' followed. 'Tell them, Billy', continued the agent, 'that the poet-chief says we are all really the same men and brethren together, at last, however different our places, and dress and language'. An approving chorus of guttural 'Ugh's!' came from all parts of the room, and W. W. retired, leaving an evidently captivating impression. (*Notebooks and Unpublished Prose Manuscripts* 2:881)

As the authorized messenger of these tidings of common humanity, Whitman becomes in this anecdote an essential link between two otherwise disparate worlds. The government agent and the linguistic interpreter might deliver the words of the message that "we are all really the same men and brethren," but the presence of the "poet-chief" himself is necessary for that message to be confirmed.

In this chapter I discuss the ways that Ridge adopted a posture similar to Whitman's—albeit from the other side of Indian Removal—as a cultural broker between whites and Natives. Whitman's persona of the "white aboriginal" was something that he

could step into and out of at will. Ridge's heritage as an Anglo-Cherokee, however, made him constantly aware that he was always a "white aboriginal," an awareness that both he and his readers shared in the production and consumption of his poetry. The literalness of Ridge's mixed-race body had a significant impact on how his poetry was received and, ultimately, on the kind of poet that he became. Much of Ridge's early poetry dealt with the idea of the "half-breed" through romantic images of a mixed-race young Indian brave who moves back and forth between the forest and the city to be with his white lover. During his mature phase as a poet Ridge was sought after to read poems for a number of high-profile public occasions in Northern California at which he was expected to address the conflict between whites and Natives that he only hinted at in his early "half-breed" poems. The visual spectacle of Ridge's mixed-race body became the unwritten verse of the public poems of his late career. Even though D. H. Lawrence wrote, "I doubt if there is possible any real reconciliation, in the flesh, between the white and the red" (45), Ridge and the audiences of his public poems saw in the representative body of this (Native) American bard the possibility of such a reconciliation.

As I discuss in the first section of this chapter, scholars of American literature and culture have consistently noted the way that nineteenth-century U.S. literary and political nationalism depended upon incorporating Native American themes and images into the national narrative.<sup>12</sup> Cultural productions ranging from Indian heads on early coins to

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<sup>12</sup> Joshua David Bellin's *The Demon of the Continent: Indians and the Shaping of American Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001) is the most recent in the history of scholarly works on the presence of Native American themes in U.S. literature that can be traced back to Roy Harvey Pearce's *Savages of America: A Study of the Indian and the Idea of Civilization* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1953) and even Lawrence's *Studies in Classic American Literature*. See also

Indian characters in antebellum literature all demonstrate that a certain nostalgia for the indigenous past was an integral part of U.S. self-definition even though Native Americans themselves were targets of extermination. The paradoxical desire to retain Native influences while eliminating Native peoples is one of the defining features of the period. While Whitman was one of many white American writers to address this paradox, Ridge was the only Native American poet to do so. When Ridge found himself in the crosshairs of this paradox, he responded by writing poems that enact the tension between nostalgia for indigenous peoples and enthusiasm for the new nation. The early poems I discuss in this chapter reveal the gradual development of Ridge's thinking about the place of American Indians in the United States, while the later poems I discuss—particularly "The Gold-Seekers" and "[Hail to the Plow!]"—show how Ridge arrived at a sophisticated understanding of the complex interplay between nostalgia for the Native past and faith in the U.S. future.

If the spectacle of Yellow Bird the mixed-race Indian poet contributed to the impact of Ridge's public readings, the California setting of his poetry did as well. As I argue in the second section of this chapter, California held a unique place in the antebellum cultural imagination that Ridge used to complement the images of Indians in his poetry. California seemed to embody everything that defined the United States as a nation of the future: its seemingly endless wealth, its rapid growth, and (perhaps most importantly) its position on the westernmost edge of the continent. If American culture depended upon a certain nostalgia for indigenous populations in order to ground the



nation in the past, it also depended upon the westward movement of the frontier to link the nation to the future. Drawing upon two of the defining features of nineteenth-century American culture—nostalgia for the fallen indigenous cultures of the past and enthusiasm for the United States’ rising power on the western frontier—Ridge made his claim to be an American bard. In “The Gold-Seekers” and “[Hail to the Plow!],” the two poems to which I devote the most attention in this chapter, Ridge developed a fascinating set of images that yoke together Native American and Californian themes into a vision of nineteenth-century American culture.

## I.

### The “Half-Breed” in Whitman, Ridge, and Antebellum American Culture

In the last decade, a number of different scholars have shown the importance of Native American themes to Whitman’s poetry.<sup>13</sup> This scholarship challenges the previous notion that Whitman was “indifferent” to Indians and confirms that Native Americans were an integral part of his project for American poetry.<sup>14</sup> Indians appear in Whitman’s earliest pre-*Leaves of Grass* writings (such as the poem “The Inca’s Daughter” and the fictional works *Franklin Evans* and “The Half-Breed”), in five of the twelve poems of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, and in late-career poems like “Yonnondio” and

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<sup>13</sup> Ed Folsom, *Walt Whitman’s Native Representations* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994) and James Nolan, *Poet-Chief: The Native American Poetics of Walt Whitman and Pablo Neruda* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1994).

<sup>14</sup> Maurice Kenny, “Whitman’s Indifference to Indians,” *Greenfield Review* 14 (Summer–Fall 1987), 99–113. Kenny’s argument that Whitman was either unwilling or unable to include Native Americans within his celebration of the “American common man” is similar to that of Leadie M. Clark’s in *Walt Whitman’s Concept of the American*



upon her voluptuous limbs and reach'd to her feet. (*LG* 33)

The image of a white man marrying a native woman recalls Pocahontas, La Malinche, and any number of figurations of the New World as a woman receiving European colonists. The idea of marriage invokes a sense of mutual consent between these different parties, but it also points to the potential inequalities of their relationship: the bride is a girl and not a woman, and she is held “by the hand” in what could either be a tight grip or a loving embrace; in addition, the union of a white man and a Native American woman could be taken as a profoundly anti-racist sentiment just as easily as it could be seen as an endorsement of a Jeffersonian program to eliminate Native populations through intermarriage. The multiple implications of this marriage scenario speak to a larger ambivalence that Whitman shared with his contemporaries about the role that indigenous peoples would play in the drama of American history.

Nineteenth-century Americans, according to D. H. Lawrence, had a “dual feeling about the Indian. . . . The desire to extirpate the Indian. And the contradictory desire to glorify him” (45). Roy Harvey Pearce called this ambivalent stance towards indigenous peoples the “American obsession with the problem of the civilized vs. the savage” (x). For imaginative writers, according to Robert F. Berkhofer, “The resolution of this ambivalence constituted the chief creative problem for an American author or artist in the first half of the nineteenth century.”<sup>16</sup> While Lucy Maddox argues that this tension “almost always” takes white American writers to “the virtually impassable stone wall of the choice between civilization and extinction for the Indians,” Richard Slotkin says that

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<sup>16</sup> Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr., *The White Man's Indian: Images of the American Indian from Columbus to the Present* (New York: Knopf, 1978), 91.

the “fatal opposition” between whites and Natives produced mediator figures who, like Cooper’s Natty Bumppo, attempt to resolve this conflict by virtue of their ability to walk the border between two worlds.<sup>17</sup>

The border figure of *Leaves of Grass* who stands in both white and Native worlds is not a character in any specific poem. Rather, it is Whitman himself. As Ed Folsom says, Whitman wanted “to make himself the issue of the marriage of the trapper and the red girl” he depicts “Song of Myself” (*Walt Whitman’s Native Representations* 72). Whether the offspring of the interracial marriage in “Song of Myself” was Whitman or not, the child would have faced the social baggage that inevitably attended “half-breeds.” Mixed-race Indians occupied two separate cultural spaces in the nineteenth-century imagination as either grotesque aggregates of the worst traits of both races, or symbols for the positive synthesis that could result from white–Native interaction.<sup>18</sup> Whitman held both opinions: In his novella, “The Half-Breed,” he described a mixed-race character as a “strange and hideous creature” whose white father called him a “monstrous abortion”<sup>19</sup>; but he also said that the most prominent Native Americans in U.S. society benefited from “being of mixed blood, having a dash of white, not pure Indian” (qtd. in Traubel 6:400).

As the imaginative “issue” of a white frontiersman and a Native American

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<sup>17</sup> Lucy Maddox, *Removals: Nineteenth-Century American Literature and the Politics of Indian Affairs* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 8; Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600–1860* (Middletown, CN: Wesleyan University Press, 1975), 17, 21.

<sup>18</sup> See William J. Scheick, *The Half-Blood: A Cultural Symbol in Nineteenth-Century American Fiction* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1979), 82.

<sup>19</sup> Walt Whitman, “The Half-Breed” in *The Half-Breed and Other Stories by Walt Whitman*, ed. Thomas Olive Mabbott (New York: Columbia University Press, 1927). 24–

woman, Whitman identified himself with the nineteenth-century cultural type that William J. Scheick describes as “the figurative half-blood, [the] half-blood in spirit or temperament” (69). Whitman never claimed to be of mixed-race heritage, but he developed what Monica Kaup and Debra J. Rosenthal call a “hybrid identity” that was born of a desire to link U.S. literary nationalism to the indigenous energy of the continent: “in indigenizing the white settler who wants to belong to the land like a native,” they write, “the nationalist imaginary breeds a hybrid identity.”<sup>20</sup> One of John Rollin Ridge’s accomplishments as a poet was to intuit the tendency among white Americans like Whitman to link U.S. nationality to an appropriation of Native identity. By redeploying the figure of the “half-breed” from the other side of Indian Removal, Ridge was able to explore the complex relationship between Europeans and Native Americans that informed the discourses of U.S. nationalism.<sup>21</sup>

While Whitman may have thought of himself as the imaginative offspring of a metaphoric white trapper and Native woman, Ridge lived daily with the conflicts that

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<sup>20</sup> Monica Kaup and Debra J. Rosenthal, “Introduction” in *Mixing Race, Mixing Culture: Inter-American Literary Dialogues* ed. Monica Kaup and Debra J. Rosenthal (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), xi–xxix, xvi.

<sup>21</sup> Literary critics have adopted a variety of stances towards mixed-race Native American writers. Arnold Krupat describes how the trend in Native American literary criticism has moved away from an essentialist posture that privileges “full-blood” writers and has embraced the figure of the “mixedblood” as a site of possibility. See Arnold Krupat, “From ‘Half-blood’ to ‘Mixedblood’: *Cogewea* and the ‘Discourse of Indian Blood’” *Modern Fiction Studies* 45.1 (Spring 1999): 120–45. See also Louis Owens, *Mixedblood Messages: Literature, Film, Family, Place* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998), and Patricia Riley, “The Mixed Blood Writer as Interpreter and Mythmaker” in *Mixed Race Literature* ed. Jonathan Brennan (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 57–69.

accompanied his mixed-race heritage. For example, his right to vote was called into question because of his Cherokee background, and within his extended family he saw the resistance to white–Native intermarriage when, at his uncle’s wedding to a white woman, the local townspeople burned the newlyweds in effigy.<sup>22</sup> Despite the limitations he experienced as a Native American in white society, Ridge also capitalized on the cache that being an Indian gave to his literary efforts. He consistently signed his poetry with his Cherokee name (“Yellow Bird”), and while his choice to use a pseudonym was a fairly common practice in the California literary scene of the 1850s,<sup>23</sup> he and his publishers made additional use of his novelty value as an Indian writer. The preface of his novel *Joaquin Murieta* identifies the author as “a Cherokee Indian, born in the woods—reared in the midst of the wildest scenery—and familiar with all that is thrilling, fearful, and tragical [*sic*] in forest-life.”<sup>24</sup>

While less sensationalistic than the preface to *Joaquin Murieta*, the preface to his posthumous collection of poems includes sections from a brief autobiography by Ridge that similarly provides “a knowledge of my parentage and how it happened that I am an Indian.”<sup>25</sup> Ridge tells his personal history from within the conventional depictions of

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<sup>22</sup> James Parins, *John Rollin Ridge: His Life and Works*, 202, 11. For a discussion of the debate in the popular press over the perceived evils of white–Cherokee intermarriage, see John M. Coward. *The Newspaper Indian: Native American Identity in the Press, 1820–90* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 50–51.

<sup>23</sup> See Franklin Walker, *San Francisco’s Literary Frontier* Second Edition (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1969), 29.

<sup>24</sup> John Rollin Ridge (Yellow Bird), *The Life and Adventures of Joaquin Murieta, the Celebrated California Bandit* (San Francisco, 1854), 2.

<sup>25</sup> John R[ollin]. Ridge, *Poems* (San Francisco: Henry Payot, 1868), 5. Unless otherwise

Indians as a vanishing race, recounting the removal of the Cherokee from their homeland when “The white man had become covetous of the soil” and “The unhappy Indian was driven from his house” (6). Recalling “the spot [of land] which the white man craved,” Ridge laments, “Alas for the beautiful scene! The Indian’s form haunts it no more” (6).<sup>26</sup> As the Cherokee in Ridge’s account “wended their way in silence and in sorrow to the forests of the far west” (6), they begin to sound like the Indians from a Cooper novel.

Ridge’s early poems employ many such Anglo-American stock conventions to depict Native American experiences despite the fact that the author’s Cherokee background would seem to grant him more immediate access to authentic Indian experiences. In a poem like “A Cherokee Love Song,” for example, Ridge ostensibly calls upon his Native heritage to supply the setting for the poem. By specifying a particular tribe—it’s “A Cherokee Love Song,” not “An Indian Love Song”—and by signing it “Yellow Bird,” the poem presents itself as a window into a specific Native American culture. Nevertheless, the poem’s images of moonlit canoes gliding through an idyllic wilderness landscape suggest stereotypical notions of “Indianness,” rather than an authentic Cherokee experience drawn from the author’s life. It’s possible that Ridge, who left the Cherokee Nation in his youth to be educated in New England, was out of touch with his tribal heritage.<sup>27</sup> The seemingly unselfconscious appropriation of Anglo-

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noted, all references to Ridge’s poetry come from this edition.

<sup>26</sup> For a detailed description of the conventions of the vanishing Indian, see Brian W. Dippie, *The Vanishing American: White Attitudes and U.S. Indian Policy* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1991).

<sup>27</sup> Scholars are divided over whether Ridge turned his back on his Cherokee heritage (as Ellis and Debo argue) or whether he maintained his commitment to Native American

American conventions about Indians in a poem like “A Cherokee Love Song” would bear out this interpretation. It is also possible that his early poems, like his sensationalistic novel *Joaquin Murieta*, were written by a young writer who, anxious for money and recognition, appealed to his audience’s distorted perception of Native Americans under the guise of authenticity provided him by his Cherokee background.<sup>28</sup>

Another possibility—one that is borne out by the sophisticated cultural syncretism that characterizes his later poetry—is that these early poems represent an apprenticeship phase of Ridge’s career wherein he experimented with Anglo-American perceptions of Native Americans as he developed his voice as a poetic broker between white and Native cultures. In a number of early poems Ridge alternates between an uncritical embrace of

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causes from within white society (as Owens and Farmer and Strickland argue). A number of other scholars (such as Powell and Mondragon) have instead focused on scholars’ desire to make of Ridge either a multicultural icon or a target of critique for essentialist racial politics. See Clyde Ellis, “‘Our Ill Fated Relative’: John Rollin Ridge and the Cherokee People.” *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 68:4 (1990–1): 376–95; Angie Debo, “John Rollin Ridge.” *Southwest Review* 17 (1932): 59–71; Louis Owens, *Other Destinies: Understanding the American Indian Novel* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992), 32, 40; David Farmer and Rennard Strickland, “John Rollin Ridge (Yellow Bird) 1827–1867” in John Rollin Ridge, *A Trumpet of Our Own: Yellow Bird’s Essays on the North American Indian*, ed. David Farmer and Rennard Strickland (San Francisco: The Book Club of California, 1981, 13–39), 31–32; Timothy B. Powell, “Historical Multiculturalism: Cultural Complexity in the First Native American Novel,” *Beyond the Binary: Reconstructing Cultural Identity in a Multicultural Context* ed. Timothy B. Powell (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1999); Maria Mondragon, “‘The [Safe] White Side of the Line’: History and Disguise in John Rollin Ridge’s *The Life and Adventures of Joaquin Murieta: The Celebrated California Bandit*.” *ATQ* 8.3 (September 1994): 173–88. This is a representative, but by no means comprehensive, selection of the scholarship on Ridge and race.

<sup>28</sup> He wrote, “I expected to have made a great deal of money off of my book, my life of Joaquin Murieta” in “John Rollin Ridge to Stand Waite” in Edward Everett Dale and Gaston Litton, eds. *Cherokee Cavaliers: Forty Years of Cherokee History as Told in the Correspondence of the Ridge-Watie-Boudinot Family* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1939. 81–84), 82.



conventional imagery and a thoughtful consideration of Native issues. One such poem is “The Stolen White Girl,” which reads like a captivity narrative told with the conventions of Schoolcraft’s ethnography and repackaged for the reading public of sensational dime novels. A representative passage from the poem reads,

The prairies are broad, and the woodlands are wide  
 And proud on his steed the wild half-breed may ride,  
 With the belt round his waist and the knife at his side.  
 And no white man may claim his beautiful bride.  
 Though he stole her away from the land of the whites,  
 Pursuit is in vain, for her bosom delights  
 In the love that she bears the dark-eyed, the proud,  
 Whose glance is like starlight beneath a night-cloud. (72–73)

The stolen white girl (whose “delighted” bosom suggests that she doesn’t seem to mind being stolen) is carried through a romantic landscape of broad prairies and wide woodlands by an exotic mixed-race Indian brave. And even though the “wild half-breed” and his “beautiful [white] bride” have entered into a legitimate social relationship—she is his bride and not merely his lover or even his victim—they are still depicted in the poem as fleeing to some space “Far down in the depths of the forest” to consummate their taboo affair (73).

Even though the pair must retreat to the shadows of the forest to be together, Ridge does not depict their relationship as tawdry or illicit. Indeed, the contrast between the dark “half-breed” and the white woman is not depicted as distasteful or unnatural, but rather as a picturesque chiaroscuro. “The contrast between them is pleasing and rare,” he

writes, as “Her sweet eye of blue” complements his “majestic and darker” complexion (73). Despite the “pleasing and rare” portrait that the poet paints of the two lovers, as the poem ends he says that the pair must retreat to an “island green, with roses gemmed” to find a space where they can be together (73). Amid the conventional and even sensationalistic aspects of the poem, Ridge shows a burgeoning awareness of how to use the image of the “half-breed” to address the conflicts between white and Native cultures. While “The Stolen White Girl” is by no means Ridge’s most sophisticated meditation on race and intercultural contact, in his late-career poem “[Hail to the Plow!],” Ridge returns to the image of the island as a space outside the bounds of white–Native conflict. In “[Hail to the Plow!],” as I explain in greater detail in section two of this chapter, Ridge draws upon both European and Native American myths about island utopias to depict California as a “half-breed” island that, because it is imaginatively if not geographically separated from the United States, is a place where an ideal fusion of white and Native cultures can occur.

In another early poem, “Far in a Lonely Wood,” Ridge replicates assumptions about Native Americans’ “inevitable” passing from the annals of history while at the same time calling those assumptions into question. Adopting the voice of a white American who happens upon an Indian burial ground while wandering in the forest, Ridge indulges in a common nostalgia for the previous inhabitants of the continent. He writes,

Retrospection sadly turned my mind  
 To scenes now painted on the map of Time  
 Long past. And as I wandered on, I mused

On greatness fall'n, beauteous things destroyed.<sup>29</sup>

Musing on the “noble race” that “many years ago . . . / Had roamed these forest-wilds,” Ridge conjures up the familiar image of Indians as a people doomed to extinction. Safely placed in the realm of nostalgia, such images confirmed that the vanished Indians of the white imagination could be incorporated into a larger narrative of national history without implicating the United States’ continuing displacement of Native tribes. The nostalgia at the core of such imagery could ultimately be made to serve a nationalist agenda by making the history of indigenous peoples a part of but apart from U.S. history. As Susan Scheckel has argued, “by claiming Indians, with their long history and mysterious origins, as part of their own national story, nineteenth-century Americans found a way to ground national identity” in the distant past.<sup>30</sup> It is for this reason that, according to Benjamin T. Spencer, “the decline of a once mighty people constituted a most poetic theme” for antebellum American writers.<sup>31</sup> Rather than implicate white Americans in the extinction of Native peoples, the theme of the vanishing Indian could be used, as Roy Harvey Pearce says, to create a “comforting vision of American antiquity, so that

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<sup>29</sup> This poem, originally untitled, is signed by “Yellow Bird” and dated “Osage, July 18, 1847.” It was reprinted in the *Arkansas Gazette* 20 July 1941 and is currently available online at [http://www.anpa.ualr.edu/digital\\_library/jrr/44.htm](http://www.anpa.ualr.edu/digital_library/jrr/44.htm).

<sup>30</sup> Susan Scheckel, *The Insistence of the Indian: Race and Nationalism in Nineteenth-Century American Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 8. See also Renée L. Bergland, *The National Uncanny: Indian Ghosts and American Subjects* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2000) and Priscilla Wald’s discussion of the Cherokee in *Constituting Americans: Cultural Anxiety and Narrative Form* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995).

<sup>31</sup> Benjamin T. Spencer, *The Quest for Nationality: An American Literary Campaign* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1957), 107. See also Spencer’s discussion of how Native Americans were used as a common theme of American literature (99–109).

everything would be shown to have gone as planned. The noble savage, that is, would be shown to have had his part in the plan” (192). Ridge was capable of embracing the orthodox U.S. narrative of expansionism and progress that required sweeping indigenous peoples under the rug of history. He wrote in one newspaper article, “[W]e cannot help wishing to see Uncle Sam the dominant lord of every square sod of ground, from Panama to the Arctic Pole, on the soil of North America. . . . Young America has a mission to accomplish, and you might as easily write and preach the whirlwind into composure as seek to check him in the career marked out for him by an eternal and unswerving destiny.”<sup>32</sup>

Nevertheless, Ridge found a way to use this nostalgia for the vanishing Indian to critique American expansionism as well as to endorse it. In “Far in a Lonely Wood,” Ridge depicts this fallen indigenous society as having “made / These mountain fastnesses rebound to shouts / Of liberty untamed, and happiness / That knew no bounds.” In depicting the idyllic world that this Native community lived in before being overrun by their “pale-faced foes,” Ridge suggests that liberty and happiness were already present on the American continent long before the drafters of the U.S. Declaration of Independence promised “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” to the European settlers who displaced the continent’s original inhabitants. In making the United States the eraser rather than the enabler of the American dream of freedom and happiness, Ridge makes a conventional appeal to nostalgia for vanished Native cultures serve a decidedly different purpose.

While many of Ridge’s poems make use of conventional Anglo-American

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<sup>32</sup> Sacramento *Daily Bee* 6 May 1857

depictions of Native peoples, Ridge was deeply committed as both a poet and a journalist to revising the assumptions that white Americans had about Indians in general and the Cherokee in particular. He wrote, “I want to write the history of the Cherokee Nation as it *should* be written and not as white men will write it and as they will tell the tale, to screen and justify themselves.”<sup>33</sup> In 1855 he wrote of his desire to create “a newspaper devoted to the advocacy of Indian rights and interests” that would, among other things, work towards the cause “of defending Indian rights” (85). Ridge felt that it was his responsibility to “be using my pen in behalf of my own people and in rescuing from oblivion the proud names of our race” (83). Ridge’s commitment to Cherokee and other Indian causes should not be minimized because of his willingness to follow Anglo-American conventions in depicting Native Americans. As Michael P. Kramer has argued, critics of Native American literature tend to subscribe to the theory that “the only good Indian is a radical Indian”—which is a criterion that Ridge demonstrably does not fill.<sup>34</sup> To appreciate the achievements of writers such as Ridge, Kramer writes, “We must allow that, however unpalatable, assimilationism has an aesthetic of its own. . . . We need to allow for complexity and for inconsistency” (121–22). This is not to suggest that Ridge requires an apologia to excuse him for not being “Indian” enough. Ridge also understood how easily an “authentic” vision of Native American culture could be co-opted by white Americans and sought to find a middle ground where he could be recognized as an Indian poet without being reduced to the single factor of his Native background.

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<sup>33</sup> “John Rollin Ridge to Stand Waite” in *Cherokee Cavaliers*, ed. Edward Everett Dale and Gaston Litton, 83. Italics in original.

<sup>34</sup> Michael P. Kramer. “Imagining Authorship in America: ‘Whose American

Despite the importance of Ridge's Cherokee heritage to his poetic persona—one of his early biographers wrote, "It seems that the story of his life among the Cherokee was familiar to all who knew him in California"<sup>35</sup>—his public poetry readings never traded on an exaggerated sense of his Indian "authenticity." Ridge never performed his Indian heritage, for example, in the way that his Ojibwa contemporary George Copway did. In an article he wrote for the Sacramento *Daily Bee* titled "Hiawatha by a Live Indian," Ridge reports: "George Copway, the celebrated Ojibway Chief, is on a tour throughout the Atlantic States, reading Hiawatha, in full costume. He meets with immense success."<sup>36</sup> In another article written later that same year, Ridge overtly expressed his contempt for Copway, which makes it tempting to read a subtle sense of disdain into his initial commentary on Copway's "immense success."<sup>37</sup> Ridge's poetic persona was not that of the full-blood, traditionalist Indian, nor was it that of the benevolent Indian who, like Longfellow's Hiawatha, prepares his people for white culture and then retreats into the recesses of history; Ridge's persona was of a mixedblood Cherokee with conflicting commitments to Native Americans and the United States.

In his public readings he exchanged the spectacle of the exotic Indian for that of the mediator figure whose words could bridge the gulf between the Native past and the

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Renaissance?' Revisited" *American Literary History* 13.1 (2001): 108–125. 121.

<sup>35</sup> M. A. Ranck "John Rollin Ridge in California." *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 10 (Dec 1932): 560–69, 561.

<sup>36</sup> Sacramento *Daily Bee* 4 Feb 1857.

<sup>37</sup> Marysville *Express* 7 November 1857.

American future. At an 1859 event for which Ridge served as poet of the day, the speaker who preceded him quoted Emerson and, in effect, gave the rationale for Ridge's participation as a poet: "no people can go forward without a past to their backs."<sup>38</sup> Ridge was not the first Native American to use public literary performances to craft the persona of a cultural mediator between the Native past and the American present. Since the mid-eighteenth century, Native American writers such as Samson Occom had used public speaking as an opportunity, in Sandra Gustafson's words, to "challenge[ the] static, racialized cultural oppositions" that existed between whites and Native Americans.<sup>39</sup> Such writers were aware, as Gustafson puts it, that "verbal forms mirror and create social order through the staging of authenticity and power in the performances that shaped the cultures of early America"(xxv). The impact that Ridge's physical presence as a Native American had on his audiences embodied Whitman's statement, "I and mine do not convince by arguments, similes, rhymes, / We convince by our presence" (*LG* 131). Into the mid-nineteenth century, as Gerald Graff and others have demonstrated, public oratory continued to shape individual and national identity.<sup>40</sup> According to James Perrin Warren, the goal of the "culture of eloquence" in antebellum America was to create "a society

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<sup>38</sup> Willard B. Farwell, *Oration Delivered Before the Society of California Pioneers* (San Francisco: Alta Job Office, 1859), 12. Poets such as Bret Harte and Ina Coolbrith also delivered poems to the Society of California Pioneers. See Robert Ernest Cowan and Robert Granniss Cowan, *A Bibliography of the History of California, 1510–1930* (Los Angeles, 1964), 595. Ridge delivered his in 1859, after Edward Pollock (founder of the first California literary magazine, *The Pioneer*) had been the poet the previous two years.

<sup>39</sup> Sandra M. Gustafson, *Eloquence Is Power: Oratory and Performance in Early America* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 77.

<sup>40</sup> See the discussion of early-nineteenth-century "oratorical culture" in Gerald Graff, *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press,

formed by a unison of minds, hearts, and souls.”<sup>41</sup> Just as an audience could be held in collective rapture by the words of a powerful orator, so too did many public speakers believe that the nation as a whole could be unified through acts of spoken eloquence. As Gregory Clark and S. Michael Halloran observe, the purpose of public speaking was “to form and sustain a public consensus.”<sup>42</sup>

More often than not, Ridge was willing to play the role of the public poet who uses poetry to achieve community consensus. In poems that he wrote for a number of public events—such as Fourth of July celebrations, the anniversary of California’s statehood, the commencement exercises of the College of California, and the laying of the Atlantic telegraph cable—Ridge willingly presented his audience with earnest endorsements of social unity.<sup>43</sup> All four of these poems are earnest expressions of public unity—whether it be national, regional, or international unity—that Ridge willingly generated for his audiences. In his two other public poems (“The Gold-Seekers” and “[Hail to the Plow!]”), however, Ridge tests the limits of the consensus that it was his job as a public poet to create. Both of these poems, which I discuss later in this chapter,

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1987), 35–61.

<sup>41</sup> James Perrin Warren, *Culture of Eloquence: Oratory and Reform in Antebellum America* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999), 25.

<sup>42</sup> Gregory Clark and S. Michael Halloran, “Introduction: Transformations of Public Discourse in Nineteenth-Century America,” *Oratorical Culture in Nineteenth-Century America*, ed. Gregory Clark and S. Michael Halloran (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1993), 1–28, 2. Walt Whitman, whose personal notes reveal a secret desire to be a wandering public speaker who gave speeches that unified the nation, was one such believer (Warren, *Culture of Eloquence* 169–95).

<sup>43</sup> These poems can be found in Ridge’s posthumous 1868 collection of poems under the following titles: “Poem” (95–100), “California” (87–92), “Poem” (78–83), “The Atlantic



directly address the place of Native populations in American society. Within the public setting of these poems, Ridge proposes new models of community identity that would allow him to bring Native Americans into a more engaged relationship with the nation. Before turning to these poems, I will show how these two poems also depended upon the mid-century enthusiasm for California's growing economic and political presence in the United States and in the world. Both "The Gold-Seekers" and "[Hail to the Plow!]" require their California settings to develop the complex interplay between white and Native worlds that he achieves in these poems.

If nineteenth-century white Americans saw in the Indian a symbol of everything old that was fading into the past, they saw in California a symbol of everything new that was paving the way for the future. The major achievement of Ridge's late poetry is its ability to combine these two heavily weighted cultural symbols—the Indian as an emblem of the past and California as an emblem of the future—in poems that explore the tension between nostalgia for the indigenous past and faith in American progress. In a similar, if parallel, manner to Ridge's combination of Native American and Californian themes in his late poetry, Whitman used the symbolic resonance of Indians and California in a poem that addresses the creative destruction characteristic of mid-century America's desire to make a new society atop the ruins of an older one. Whitman's California poetry reflects many of the dominant antebellum beliefs about California and thus serves as a useful counterpoint for understanding the creative ways that Ridge experimented with his contemporaries' understanding of the Golden State.

In 1873, Whitman wrote a poem titled "Song of the Redwood-Tree" in which he

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Cable" (17–21).

attempted “to idealize our great Pacific half of America (the future *better half*).”<sup>44</sup> The poem, which he calls “A California song” in the poem’s opening line, records the vibrant energy of a logging camp in the redwood forests of Northern California, but it is not exclusively a poem about the “better half” of the United States. Half of the poem is spoken in the voice of the poet himself, and the other half is spoken in the “Voice of a mighty dying tree in the redwood forest dense” (LG 173). The sections of the poem spoken by the dying redwood are given in italicized text. The voice of these italicized passages, however, sounds more like a dying Indian than a dying tree. “*Farewell my brethren,*” laments the dying redwood in language that echoes valedictory addresses of Uncas, Hobomok, and Hiawatha, “*Farewell O earth and sky, farewell ye neighboring waters, / My time has ended, my term has come*” (174).

The central conceit of the poem is that Whitman, as a poet, hears the dying sounds of the tree that the lumberjacks in the logging camp cannot (“I heard the mighty tree its death-chant chanting”; “The quick-ear’d teamsters and chain and jack-screw men heard not, / . . . / But in my soul I plainly heard” [174]). Whitman had never been to a California lumber camp, nor had he ever seen a giant redwood. Unable to speak with first-hand knowledge about the deforestation of the Pacific Coast, Whitman drew upon cultural material that he was more familiar with—namely, the demise of Native American societies—to provide a voice for what he considered to be the inevitable destruction of the old that is necessary to make way for the new.<sup>45</sup> Like the noble Indians

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<sup>44</sup> Walt Whitman, *The Correspondence* ed. Edwin Haviland Miller (New York: New York University Press, 1961–77): 2.282, italics in original.

<sup>45</sup> M. Jimmie Killingsworth has similarly noted the similarities between the language of

from *Last of the Mohicans*, *Hobomok*, or “Hiawatha” who acknowledge that a new era has dawned on the American continent and that their time has past, the redwood trees in Whitman’s poem similarly yield to the encroachment of white settlers: “*Our time, our term has come,*” the trees admit, “*We welcome what we wrought for through the past, / And leave the field for them*” (174). The trees agree “*To disappear, to serve*” so that “*a superber race*” might take their place (176, 174).

In “Song of the Redwood-Tree,” Whitman says that the future can only begin in California once the state’s past has been eliminated. The redwood trees, he says, must “yield[]” to “the deities of the modern” era so that “*the new culminating man . . . the empire new*” can arise (174–75). The new world being born in California amid the dying world of the indigenous redwoods, Whitman says, will be a model for the entire nation: “I see the genius of the modern, child of the real and ideal, / Clearing the ground for broad humanity, the true America, heir of the past so grand, / To build a grander future” (177). Emerging from the past and entering the future, the California of “Song of the Redwood-Tree” becomes for Whitman “the true America,” the embodiment of national goals and ideals. In “The Gold-Seekers,” John Rollin Ridge wrote a poem that similarly attempts to fuse Native American and Californian themes into a national allegory about “the true America.” While Ridge’s poem shares this starting point with Whitman’s, it ends in a decidedly different place.

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the dying tree and that of vanishing Indians in “The Voluptuous Earth and the Fall of the Redwood Tree: Whitman’s Personifications of Nature,” in Ed Folsom, ed., *Whitman East and West* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2002), 14–25, 20.

### “The Gold-Seekers”

Ridge ran “The Gold-Seekers” in the 23 January 1858 issue of the Marysville *Express*, a newspaper that he had been editing for less than a year. He prefaced the poem, which he had written several years earlier, with a self-effacing disclaimer that privileged local color over poetic craft, writing that the poem has “the merit of being Californian, if nothing else.” Early California literature is characterized by its self-conscious regionalism, and Ridge’s poem is no exception. In the tradition of California local color poetry, “The Gold-Seekers” is narrated by a gold miner who talks about the triumphs and tragedies of the gold rush. “The Gold-Seekers” is also one of Ridge’s early attempts to bring together in a single poem the theme of California’s emergence as a society of the future with nostalgia for the “primitive” and “simple” past of Native American culture. (He does so by comparing a miner’s search for gold with an Indian’s search for food.) As Ridge’s comments on the published version of the poem indicate, however, his goal was not to explore the contrast between the original inhabitants of the region and the new society that was arising in California’s gold fields, but rather to depict a local color scene that had “the merit of being Californian.” Nevertheless, Ridge came to see in the poem the potential for more than just local color, and when he was given the opportunity to present a poem at the commencement exercises of the College of California in 1861 he revised “The Gold-Seekers” into a discussion of the tension between faith in U.S. expansionism and nostalgia for the indigenous past.

In his revisions to “The Gold-Seekers,” Ridge retained the images of a miner hunting for gold and an Indian searching for food, but this time he paid greater attention to the implications of pairing figures that represent the past and the present. Just as

Whitman paired the voice of a dying redwood tree with the voice of a modern poet in “Song of the Redwood-Tree,” in the revised version of “The Gold-Seekers” Ridge experimented with the tension between nostalgia for the past and hope for the future embodied by the Indian and the miner. Whereas Whitman’s poem summons indigenous voices only to silence them, the revised “Gold-Seekers” attempts to transform the region of California into a space where nostalgia and progress can be held in productive tension. The central difference between the original and revised versions of the poem lies in Ridge’s transformation of a narrative about the exploits of an individual gold miner into an allegory about California’s place in world history.

The original version of “The Gold-Seekers” is narrated in the first person by a lone miner panning for gold at a California streambed:

The stream, that murmurs at my feet,  
 Through many an age had rolled  
 Ere fortune found her favorite seat  
 Within this land of gold.

In addition to presenting a picturesque mountain stream in the gold fields as the setting of the poem, this first stanza introduces “fortune”—both wealth and luck—as the poem’s central theme. The poem is concerned with the individual fortune of a single miner, and not the collective fortune of California society. It is a folksy poem about an individual’s exploits rather than a meditation on the region’s place in the nation and the world. While the gold-digging narrator looks at the murmuring stream and thinks of the potential riches it has to offer, he notices someone else digging in the area:

The Digger, searching for his roots,

Here roamed the region wide—  
 Or, wearied with the day's pursuits,  
 Slept by this crystal tide.

The other digger that the narrator notices is not a fellow gold digger, but what Californians disparagingly called a “Digger Indian,” one of the indigenous peoples of northern California whose main source of subsistence was food gathering.<sup>46</sup> The Diggers—whose name also suggests the racial slur for African Americans—were held in low regard by most Californians, including Ridge. Even though Ridge generally considered all Native Americans to have been similarly oppressed by the United States, he questioned whether the Cherokee and the Indians of California even “belong at all to the same stock” since, in his opinion, the Cherokee had “abandoned their savage customs and habits for the condition of civilized life” while the Indians of California remained “a poor, humble, degraded, and cowardly race.”<sup>47</sup> Whitman similarly wrote, “[A]re not the Rocky Mountain and California aborigines quite as bestial a type of humanity as any?” (*Notebooks and Unpublished Prose Manuscripts* 4:1976). Despite the negative comments he made about California’s Native population, Ridge was also an outspoken advocate against the atrocities that “white savages” inflicted upon the Digger Indians—which included genocide, rape, and slavery—and used the bully pulpit of the press to question

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<sup>46</sup> In the article “The Digger Indians,” Ridge describes how the California Indians received this denigrating name: “The principal subsistence was derived from roots, and it was common to see them in bands of a dozen or twenty, diligently digging away with sharp sticks in the sides of the hills for this kind of aliment—hence their name of Root Diggers” (*Sacramento Daily Bee* 7 April 1857).

<sup>47</sup> John Rollin Ridge, *A Trumpet of Our Own: Yellow Bird’s Essays on the North American Indian*, ed. David Farmer and Rennard Strickland (San Francisco: The Book

why “these poor and imbecile people cannot better be protected than they are by the General Government.”<sup>48</sup>

In “The Gold-Seekers,” Ridge characterizes the Digger Indians as a simple and unsophisticated people. In the previously quoted stanza, he depicts the Digger Indian responding to an animal-like impulse for immediate gratification when, weary from “the day’s pursuits” of “searching for his roots,” he lies down by the streambed to sleep. Devoid of social structure, Ridge insinuates, the Digger Indians are left to follow the simple dictates of their bodies: they sleep whenever and wherever fatigue hits them, and not at an appointed evening hour or in an appropriate domestic space. The perceived simplicity of the Digger Indians is what differentiates them from the narrator of the poem, who says that the Diggers’ ignorance has prevented them from realizing that if they dug for gold rather than food they would have access to the store of wealth that fuels California’s economy:

The dream of greatness never rose  
 Upon his simple brain;  
 The wealth on which a nation grows,  
 And builds its power to reign,  
  
 Had he and his dark brethren known

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Club of California, 1981), 49, 62, 69. Hereafter cited as *Trumpet*.

<sup>48</sup> “Oppression of Digger Indians,” Sacramento *Daily Bee* 21 July 1857. Other Californians suggested placing the Digger Indians on reservations, removing them from the state, or even exterminating them, but Ridge proposed interracial marriage and racial amalgamation as a more humane alternative (Sacramento *Daily Bee* 7 April 1857).

Of gold the countless worth,  
 They now beyond that power had grown  
 Which sweeps them from the earth.

At first glance, these stanzas suggest the rhetoric of Manifest Destiny. The depiction of California's gold as "The wealth on which a nation grows, / And builds its power to reign" and of the Digger Indians' displacement by "that power . . . / Which sweeps them from the earth" gives the impression that the poem seeks to justify the westward expanse of the United States. Such a position was not entirely beyond Ridge, and in the same newspaper that he published "The Gold-Seekers" he ran a poem by another poet titled "The Lone Digger Indian." "The Lone Digger Indian" ends by saying that "The white man's crowding to the West" should lead the Indian, like the penitent Christ, to "bear with patience to the last, / And shout, 'Thy will be done'."<sup>49</sup> The inexorable will of Manifest Destiny, as certain as the will of God, is clearly at work in "The Lone Digger Indian," while in Ridge's "The Gold-Seekers" a less providential force propels California's gold diggers to sweep the Digger Indians from the earth.

As such, "The Gold-Seekers" isn't a poem about the destiny or progress of the United States as a whole, but the capriciousness of fortune that affects the progress of individuals. Ridge writes that if the Digger Indian in the poem had known about "the countless worth" of gold he would have just as much chance as the poem's narrator to strike it rich. The Digger Indian, though, has missed the opportunity that the speaker of the poem has taken hold of:

Too late, mayhap, but here *I've* strayed



Some golden spot to find,  
 Which Hope's gay pencil hath portrayed  
 Unto my dazzled mind. (*italics in original*)

The implication that the Indian sleeping by the streambed is “Too late” to take advantage of California’s wealth does not suggest that the destiny of his people has been sealed, but that another individual will find fortune where he did not.

In contrast to the Digger Indian who is motivated purely by instinct (e.g., he drops down and sleeps whenever he is tired), the gold digger is motivated by a different, but not necessarily more advanced, purpose. The gold digger’s quest for gold might contribute to “The wealth on which a nation grows,” but the gold digger himself is not a national hero propelled by a desire for national welfare. Rather, he follows the caprice of fortune:

I've followed Luck's unsteady star,  
 Where'er its light hath gleamed,  
 To many a gulch and burning bar,  
 Which proved not what it seemed.

The star that the speaker follows is not the westward star of empire, but rather “Luck’s unsteady star.” While the force of Manifest Destiny is just that—destiny—the force of luck can lead the gold digger to failure just as often as it can lead him to the “undiscovered mines” he looks for hopefully in the concluding stanza of the poem:

But, yet, this is a lovely land,  
 Where hope forever shines,  
 And points, among her mountains grand,

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<sup>49</sup> Marysville *Express* 27 March 1858.

To undiscovered mines!

These final lines reflect the episodic nature of the poem as a whole. The poem rambles about as it recounts the gold digger's exploits, describes the different people he meets, and ends by setting the stage for yet another adventure. The poem itself lacks the teleology of Manifest Destiny. As such, the poem doesn't end at a moment of final culmination so much as it adjourns before the speaker sets out on another adventure. Because the point of the poem is to capture a moment in the life of an individual Californian and not to describe in toto the meaning of the California experience, the poem could have ended almost anywhere in the narration, either earlier or later, with more or fewer stories of good or bad luck. In "The Gold-Seekers" California is merely a "lovely land"—an essentially meaningless description that could be used in local color poems about any number of regions—and not an allegorical site of national destiny.

When Ridge was approached by the College of California to write a poem for their 1861 graduation ceremony, however, he took the opportunity to turn this local color poem into an exploration of California's place in the American imagination. In the revised version of the poem, the image of the two diggers (the gold digger and the Digger Indian) becomes an emblem of the Janus-faced nature of American culture, with its simultaneous optimism for the future and its longing for the past. In the revised version of the poem, the capricious sense of fortune that led the two diggers to uncertain success in their respective searches for gold and food becomes a sophisticated interplay between progress and nostalgia.

The regents of the College of California wanted Ridge to write a poem that praised both the new graduates and the state's recent accomplishments with the fledgling

college. They wanted education to emerge from behind the consistent emphasis on California's natural resources so that the state could be seen as a place of learning, culture, and refinement as well as a place of mines and agriculture. As commencement speaker Josiah Whitney asked in the address he delivered moments before Ridge read his poem, "[I]s the intellectual and moral development of the people to be commensurate with, and worthy of, [California's] transcendant [*sic*] physical advantages?"<sup>50</sup> In seeking to emphasize California's development as a center of intellectual life, college administrators wanted to emphasize that a college in northern California connected America's West Coast to Western Civilization. In his commencement address, Whitney called the College of California "the vanguard of the army of pacific conquest, the conquest of mind over matter, of intellect over brute force, of liberal, of Christian culture, over practical heathenism" (49). Californians like Whitney considered the presence of an institution of higher learning on the westernmost edge of the American continent to be a singular accomplishment for the region, the nation, and for humanity in general.

College of California administrators no doubt saw in Ridge—with his Cherokee origins and his American education—a model for the "conquest" of the "intellect" over "heathenism" that paralleled the establishment of an institution of higher education on the western frontier. In asking Ridge to read a poem at the graduation, the college was telling its students that just as the Cherokee have been civilized and educated, so too has the wilderness of the California frontier been tamed by the forces of American education.

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<sup>50</sup> J[osiah]. D[wight]. Whitney, "An Address Delivered at the Celebration of the Sixth Anniversary of the College of California, Held in Oakland, June 6, 1861," in *Catalogue of the College of California and College School in Oakland, California* (San Francisco: Towne and Bacon, 1860, 3–50), 5.

Ridge was asked to play a very delicate role as an Anglo-Cherokee poet on a public occasion designed to celebrate the progress of civilization in California. He was asked to stand before the college graduates as an embodiment of the civilizing mission, as proof of an inevitable transition from savagery to civilization.

In his commencement address, Whitney emphasized California's newness as one of its most salient features: "America is called 'the new world'; but this portion of the continent is the newest of the new" (4). From the vantage point of the new land of California ("We stand on a soil new politically and new geologically," he said [4]), Whitney shows how a break with the past—and particularly the "heathen" past—has always characterized American progress. In the "brief sketch of our national progress" that he gives, Whitney asks his audience to join him in "look[ing] back at what has been accomplished, in a country gradually reclaimed from the wilderness and the savage, within the space of two hundred years" (6). One of the first obstacles faced by the European settlers during the colonial period, he says, was that "a race of aboriginal occupants of the soil, crafty and enduring, [had] to be driven back, in accordance with those relentless laws of progress under which the inferior race has to yield to the superior" (7). Ridge believed much of this traditional narrative about American progress, but there was also much to it that troubled him.

In particular, Whitney's comment that "an Anglo-Saxon origin lies at the root of American progress" (31) would have contradicted Ridge's belief that human progress tended towards universal racial amalgamation. While Ridge thought of intermarriage with whites as a necessary mechanism for the creation of "civilization" (he wrote in one article, "Wherever the white race goes, amalgamation takes place. It has progressed with

the march of civilization on this continent, and it *will*, with the certainty of an inevitable law, solve the destiny of the races”<sup>51</sup>), he also believed that an inevitable amalgamation of every world race would result in a total redefinition of racial categories: “a universal amalgamation of the races seems to be going on . . . [and] it is possible that the present identity of nations and tribes will some day be entirely lost in the commingling and absorption of specific elements.”<sup>52</sup> The racial amalgamation occurring among people such as himself, thought Ridge, was an overture to the “commingling and absorption” of every world culture and not merely an example of the whitening of Native American populations. Ridge began to conceptualize racial amalgamation as a force that would transform the world, and not merely as a potential solution to the United States’ “Indian Problem.”

Ridge was not the only person of color who attended the 1861 graduation ceremony of the College of California. The Latino faculty and students who were also there would doubtless have bristled at Whitney’s statement that “an Anglo-Saxon origin lies at the root of American progress,” but as a participant in the commencement exercises Ride was in a particularly difficult position.<sup>53</sup> Ridge found himself in the conflicted situation that had come to characterize his life as an Anglo-Cherokee. In “[Hail

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<sup>51</sup> *Sacramento Daily Bee* 7 April 1857

<sup>52</sup> *Sacramento Daily Bee* 24 July 1857. Whitman hints at such a convergence of races in poems such as “Years of the Modern,” where he envisions “the solidarity of races” in a future moment when there will be “but one heart to the globe” with “humanity forming en-masse.”

<sup>53</sup> See *Catalogue of the College of California and College School in Oakland, California* (San Francisco: Towne and Bacon, 1860), 3, 4, 6 for the names of Chilean faculty and students in attendance that day.

to the Plow!],” an 1860 poem that I discuss in greater detail in the following section, Ridge explicitly addresses the racism behind this belief in Anglo-Saxon superiority. In the revised version of “The Gold-Seekers” that he wrote for the commencement exercises of the College of California, his response to such racism is more subtle, and depends more upon a creative interplay between the past and the present, between white and Native cultures, than it does on a direct assault against racism. In the revisions Ridge made to “The Gold-Seekers,” he turned the image of the miner searching for gold and the Indian searching for food into an allegory about California’s equal dependence on the present and the past.

In transforming the original local color version of “The Gold-Seekers” into an allegorical poem about race and history, Ridge eliminated the first-person singular perspective of the gold-mining narrator and changed his description of the California landscape. Whereas the original poem begins with the speaker addressing his audience from “The stream, that murmurs at my feet,” the revised poem begins, “The waves that murmur at our feet” (78).<sup>54</sup> Not only does “my feet” become “our feet” as the first-person narration of the rustic forty-niner becomes the collective voice of the region, but the water of the stream also changes to the waves of the ocean. The mountain stream murmuring at the feet of the gold digger paints an idyllic wilderness picture typical of local color poetry. In contrast, the ocean “waves” murmuring at “our” feet suggests the

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<sup>54</sup> The first-person perspective of the original poem changes to third person in the revised poem: “I’ve followed Luck’s unsteady star” from the first version becomes “Still following luck’s unsteady star” in the revised version; “Then, wearied, I have sat me down” becomes “How wearied they have sat them down”; “I’ve seen the active and the young” becomes “Behold the active and the young”; “And next I’ve seen the aged one” becomes “And mark yon aged, trembling one.”

entire continent rather than a particular region. In the second stanza of the original poem Ridge paints a picturesque scene of an Indian sleeping by the “crystal tide” of a mountain stream. But in the revised version of the poem, Ridge changes “crystal tide” to “restless tide” to reflect the change from “stream” to “waves” in the first stanza. In moving the Indian from a mountain stream to the shores of the ocean, he significantly changes the impact of the image. Lying alongside the river, the sleeping Indian is a quaint image of Arcadian California. Lying alongside the restless waves of the Pacific Ocean, the sleeping Indian becomes an image of the dormant continent.

These minor changes in setting and perspective allow Ridge to turn a local color poem into an historical allegory about the roles that California and Native Americans play in national and world history. Kevin Starr has observed that most gold rush literature is characterized by a “return to primary experience . . . recorded without self-consciousness.”<sup>55</sup> In eliminating the first-person narration of the original poem, Ridge self-consciously leaves behind his own experience as a gold miner in exchange for what Starr calls the “epic sweep” and “epic experience” of the gold rush, something that he says was “untouched by historical imagination or dramatic art.” Ridge could have been inspired to adopt such a position two years previously when, at a nine-year anniversary celebration of California statehood for which Ridge was asked to write a poem, the speaker who preceded the recitation of Ridge’s poem said that in order to tell the history of the gold rush, “we follow not the winding devious track of each one of our individual experiences, but as one grand, one common whole, we ask ourselves what has been

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<sup>55</sup> Kevin Starr, *Americans and the California Dream, 1850–1915* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 50.

accomplished through the energy and enterprise of the Pioneers, and those who followed their footsteps to these shores, since California emerged from the apathetic slumber in which she had lain far [*sic*] so many centuries” (Farwell 9). Two things are worth noting in this excerpt from a speech that Ridge would have been familiar with: first, that Californians could think of their state as a “common whole” and not just as an aggregate of individuals; and second, that California had existed in an “apathetic slumber” for “many centuries” before the gold rush.<sup>56</sup>

In the first version of “The Gold-Seekers,” the Digger Indians try their luck at finding food just as the gold-digging miners try their luck at finding gold. Because luck motivates both of them, the poem is about the fate of individuals rather than the fate of societies. In the first version of the poem, Ridge says that it was merely a question of luck that the gold diggers found gold and the Digger Indians did not. In the second version, however, Ridge adds the following stanza to suggest that California’s gold plays a much more essential role in world history:

All darkly lay beneath his tread,  
Where many a stream did wind,  
Deep slumbering in its yellow bed,  
The charm that rules mankind. (78)

Like the image of the sleeping Indian that suggests a dormant continent waiting to be awoken, this new depiction of gold “slumbering in its yellow bed” suggest that the

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<sup>56</sup> The anniversary speaker mentions this second point several times, saying that California “had slumbered in idleness” before European explorers arrived, and that even as the United States was growing on the East Coast, “California still slumbered on in her solitude as she had slumbered for centuries upon centuries” (Farwell 6).



continent had been waiting to enter history once the power of gold was tapped into by a people able to harness the metal's ability to "rule[] mankind." Describing gold not merely as something that the gold diggers consider to be of value but as "The charm that rules mankind" suggests that gold is not an arbitrary object of capricious value for one group of diggers (the gold diggers) and not another (the Digger Indians), but that it has inherent power over everyone (it "rules mankind"). The worth of gold is not a matter of preference in the revised version of the poem; it is an engine of historical progress.

At the same time that the revised version of the poem adds this new stanza about gold and historical progress, it also adds a stanza that nostalgically pines for the supposedly simpler life of the Digger Indians:

But happier he perchance, by far,  
 Still digging for his roots,  
 Than thousand paler wanderers are  
 Whose toil hath had no fruits. (79)

Ridge proposes here that the Digger Indians are "happier" in their simple lifestyle than the "paler wanderers" who have overrun California in their search for gold. This venture into nostalgia that privileges the life of Native Americans over that of "paler" Americans is similar to Ridge's nostalgia for fallen Indian cultures in the early poem "Far in a Lonely Wood" when he critiques the United States for having destroyed an idyllic Native society. After calling into question the idea of progress and the inherent connection of progress to race (the "paler wanderers" have disrupted the "happier," though simpler, life of the Digger Indians), the whole tenor of the poem shifts and Ridge begins to focus on California's connection to the past rather than on the fact that the wealth of the state's

gold mines will propel it into the future.

The original poem ends at this point with the speaker hoping to find “undiscovered mines” in his future exploits. The revised poem, however, replaces this hopeful conclusion with a grim, yet redemptive, image of the dead immigrants who preceded the speaker:

Yet, though the wayside all be strewn  
 With sorrows and with graves,  
 The glory of the race is shown  
 By what it does and braves. (81)

The original poem ends with an upbeat image of California as a “lovely land / Where hope forever shines.” The darker feel of new ending, with its gravesites strewn along the pathway, finds its one note of hope in the idea that “The glory of the race” is collectively achieved by the combined contributions of those who live as well as those who die. As Ridge writes in later lines, “‘Tis they—the living *and* the dead— / Who have redeemed our land” (81, italics in original). This new conclusion is followed by nine additional stanzas that build on the image of the dead immigrants to develop the idea that communion with the past is as essential as faith in the future. Recalling the Emerson aphorism that was quoted at the anniversary celebration of California’s statehood for which Ridge composed a poem two years earlier—“no people can go forward without a past to their backs” (Farwell 12)—the final stanzas of the new poem thematize the dialectic between the future and the past that Ridge represented as an Anglo-Cherokee poet.

Ridge uses two major images in these stanzas to illustrate an affinity between the

future and the past: an image of dead immigrants' bones lying in the desert that he describes as "sleep[ing]"; and a personified image of Science "rov[ing]" through the wilderness. Both images recall the Indian from the beginning of the poem who "roamed the region wide" and "Slept by this restless tide." By adding these images, Ridge gives the new poem a sense of balance that the original poem lacked. While the original poem was episodic, the new poem ends on the same frequency with which it began by meditating on the place of Native Americans in world history. In the image of the human bones lying in the desert, Ridge writes:

What though the desert's mouldering heaps  
 Affright the startled eye—  
 What though in wilds the venturer sleeps,  
 His bones uncovered lie. (81)

The heaps of bones he refers to are in the Humboldt desert on the banks of the Humboldt river in western Nevada, which are explained in a footnote in the 1868 *Poems*: "For three hundred miles its banks are one continuous burying ground. Emigrants [*sic*] to California died on its shores by thousands" (23). Because it is "the living *and* the dead— / Who have redeemed our land" (italics added), these dead immigrants' bones are put forward as a reminder of a necessary allegiance to the past. ("Tis not the living that have won / Alone the victory," the following stanza says, "But each dead soldier, too, has done / His part as loftily" [81].) By saying that the bones lie as if sleeping ("What though in wilds the venturer sleeps"), Ridge connects these sleeping bones to the sleeping Indian that began the poem.

The allegorical nature of the poem might suggest that the Indian from the

beginning of the poem represents the dawn of history (with the Indian-as-continent sleeping in prehistoric stasis) while the settlement of California represents the apex of history. But by linking the image of the sleeping Indian with the image of the sleeping bones of dead immigrants who have contributed to the development of California, Ridge indicates a historical legacy to which Californians should pay homage that includes both immigrants and Indians. “The glory of the race” that the poem records is not explicitly Anglo-Saxon, in contrast to what the commencement speaker who preceded Ridge suggested. Rather, it includes the contributions from the entire human race, Indians as well as immigrants.

The other major image that Ridge uses to conclude the poem similarly reinforces the idea that Indians have equally contributed to the emergence of California civilization. As the poem concludes, Ridge shows how California has progressed from its “primitive” to its present state with an image that links primitivism and progress:

Where roamed erewhile the rugged bear  
Amid these oaks of green,  
And wandering from his mountain lair  
The cougar’s steps were seen,

Lo! Peace hath built her quiet nest;  
And “mild-eyed Science” roves,  
As was her wont when Greece was blest,  
In Academic groves.

. . . . .

And thus the proudest boast shall be  
 Of young Ambition crowned—  
 “The woods of Oakland sheltered me,  
 Their leaves my brow have bound.” (82–83)

Addressing the graduating class of the College of California, Ridge says that the “woods of Oakland” are no longer the savage landscape of the Digger Indian or the hard-luck landscape of the gold digger; rather, they are the Arcadian groves of ancient Greece reborn in modern California. Recalling the “Academic groves” of ancient Greece shows that the sleeping American continent has been awoken into the history of Western Civilization. As such, Ridge describes the ancient Hellenic empire as reborn in the New World. The concluding line of the poem, “Their leaves my brow have bound,” crowns these young California intellectuals with the laurel wreathes of ancient Greece in a move that connects California with the progress of Western history.

Just as the opening stanza depicts the beginning of history with the sleeping Indian on the shores of the primitive continent, the concluding stanza shows Western civilization established at the uttermost edge of North America. At the same time that the conclusion of the poem offers a sense of the culmination of Western history, though, Ridge depicts “mild-eyed Science” as roving through the woods just as bears, cougars, and—as the beginning of the poem indicates—Indians previously did. With this image of modern science behaving like the supposed primitives of the poem, Ridge describes California as a space that contains both modern progress and premodern peoples. In the revised version of “The Gold-Seekers” Ridge conceptualized of California as a space where the tensions between American modernity and the Native American past could be

articulated. In “[Hail to the Plow!],” the poem that I discuss in the following section, Ridge took an even more ambitious approach by making California’s relationship with Native peoples reflect the state’s interconnectedness with the entire world.

## II.

### **From “Half-Breeds” to “Strange Compounds”: California in Whitman, Ridge, and Antebellum American Culture**

When Whitman described California as “the true America” in “Song of the Redwood-Tree,” he was in good company with other nineteenth-century Americans. According to Michael Kowaleski, California “embodied America’s new sense of itself.”<sup>57</sup> But this “new sense” of American society that California embodied was not exclusively positive. Kowaleski continues: “[W]hether the image reflected back was seen as a triumphal exemplification of sunburned American know-how or as a cautionary tale about monetary greed and xenophobia,” California provided the United States with images of itself in ways that no other region could (206). Whitman himself expressed the dual role that California was made to play as a reflection of the best and worst features of American society in two separate poems about California’s place in the national

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<sup>57</sup> Michael Kowaleski. “Romancing the Gold Rush: The Literature of the California Frontier” in Kevin Starr and Richard J. Orsi, eds. *Rooted in Barbarous Soil: People, Culture, and Community in Gold Rush California* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press 2000. 204–25), 206. See also Gerald Haslam, ed. *Many Californias: Literature from the Golden State*, second edition (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1999), 17; and Jack Hicks, James D. Houston, Maxine Hong Kingston, and Al Young, eds., *The Literature of California: Writings from the Golden State* Vol. 1, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000), 3. The editors of both collections confirm Kowaleski’s assessment that mid-century images of California were used to depict any number of positive or negative visions of the United States.

imagination, “A Promise to California” and “Facing West from California’s Shores.”

Whitman included the short poem “A Promise to California” in *Calamus*, a sequence of poems concerned with naming the various regions of the national landscape which he will include within his homosocial and homoerotic bonds of fraternal unity. Amid the catalogues of national places in *Calamus*, “A Promise to California” identifies California not merely as one more region to be incorporated into Whitman’s poetic union, but as an emblem of national possibility at mid-century. The poem reads as follows:

A promise to California,  
 Or inland to the great pastoral Plains, and on to Puget sound and Oregon;  
 Sojourning east a while longer, soon I travel toward you, to remain, to teach  
       robust American love,  
 For I know very well that I and robust love belong among you, inland, and along  
       the Western sea;

For these States tend inland and toward the Western sea, and I will also. (*LG* 111)

Whitman’s sense of obligation that a New York–based national bard visit the distant state of California confirms that the United States is not merely an aggregate of various regions, but a unified force covering the continent. The original manuscript of the poem, however, does not mention California at all, but begins instead with the line, “A promise to Indiana, Nebraska, Kansas, Iowa, Minnesota, and others” (111). California, Whitman knew, represented the expansive nature of “these States” in a way that virtually no other state—or list of states—could. Even “A Promise to Oregon” would have lacked the iconographic stature that California had achieved by the middle of the century as proof of U.S. accomplishments on the western frontier. In replacing the catalogue of Midwestern

states with the single name of California, Whitman drew upon a resonant cultural shorthand for describing the United States' vision of itself as a continental empire that was inevitably moving "inland and toward the Western sea."

For Whitman, as for many other nineteenth-century Americans, California could serve not only as triumphant proof of Manifest Destiny, but also as a caution against the excesses of American expansionism. In "Facing West from California's Shores," a poem from the *Children of Adam* sequence of poems that he wrote as a companion to *Calamus*, Whitman expresses the opposite sentiment from the exuberant optimism of "A Promise to California." In "Facing West from California's Shores," California is not the beginning of a continental American empire, but the end of Western civilization. Imagining himself to be the voice of a civilization that began in the Old World and now finds itself on the westernmost edge of the New World, Whitman asks in the final lines of the poem, "But where is what I started for so long ago? / And why is it yet unfound?" (95). Resigned and even confused, the spokesperson for Western civilization in the poem looks towards the Old World from the California shoreline and seems to regret what the singlemindedness of his quest has cost him. Similar to "A Promise to California," the original manuscript for "Facing West from California's Shores" does not mention California at all. Instead, the poem was originally titled "Hindustan [India], from the Western Sea" (95). Whitman's decision to alter both poems around the cultural iconography of California speaks to his awareness of the role that the Golden State played in the mid-century imagination.

Ridge also considered California to be an embodiment of the contradictory definitions of American nationality. In *The Adventures of Joaquin Murieta*, Ridge



described a California of violence, dispossession, and lawlessness as Mexican outlaws battle with the U.S. military over ownership of Alta California in the wake of the 1846 Mexican–American War and the 1849 discovery of gold. Conversely, in a newspaper piece he described California as an ideal America that fulfills the democratic charter of the national mission: “California still goes ahead, reversing the old order of things,” he wrote, drawing upon the same belief in California’s incipient modernity that Whitman did in “Song of the Redwood-Tree, “The beggar of today is the prince of tomorrow, and the aristocracy of wealth smells of every trade and calling from a butcher to a perfumer” (*Trumpet* 23). Ridge also said that because the state’s climate can produce those same crops as are “grown anywhere on the Atlantic side between Maine and the Gulf of Mexico,” California could be considered, in essence, a smaller version of the entire nation.<sup>58</sup>

California also offered Ridge a space outside of the nation more akin to Whitman’s sense of California as the outermost boundary of Western civilization in “Facing West from California’s Shores” than to his sense of California as a representative national space in “A Promise to California.” Even though Ridge described California’s agricultural climate as a duplicate of the larger nation’s, he also thought of California as a region that was disconnected from the United States. As a correspondent for the New Orleans *True Delta* in 1850, Ridge described his arrival in California as if it were a complete departure from the United States. When he wrote of “Having traversed, in the space of five months, the desolate region which lies between ‘the States’ and this land of Pilgrim’s hope,” Ridge gave the sense that California was geographically separated from

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<sup>58</sup> San Francisco *Herald* 13 September 1861.

the United States (*Trumpet* 22). In the same correspondence, he described this gulf between the U.S. and California as more than just a factor of geography, writing about his arrival, “I was a stranger in a strange land. I knew no one, and looking at the multitude that thronged the streets, and passed each other without a friendly sign, or a look of recognition even, I began to think I was in a new world, where all were strangers” (*Trumpet* 22). Unlike the fraternal bonds that define national community in Whitman’s “A Promise to California,” Ridge’s California could be an isolated region of isolated individuals.

As a “new world” in the New World, mid-century California was a place outside the boundaries of the national community where people such as Ridge could live in anonymous exile. When Ridge left for California in 1850, he considered himself an exile of two nations.<sup>59</sup> He felt that the Ridge family and those who had supported the removal treaty were exiles of the Cherokee Nation, or, as he put it, “a suffering minority, standing isolated from the general mass [of the Cherokee], marked for destruction, hated and oppressed” (*Trumpet* 51). At the same time, Ridge considered himself and all other Native Americans, regardless of their politics, as exiles of the United States. He blamed the U.S. for the factionalism plaguing the Cherokee and for violations against Native Americans in general, writing that “it was the policy of the U.S. Gov., which removed not only [the Cherokee], but the numerous other Indian tribes, west of the Mississippi; and it

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<sup>59</sup> Ridge wasn’t the only Cherokee to leave the Cherokee Nation for California, but he was one of the few to gain prominence in California society and the only one to write poetry. See E. Raymond Evans, “Following the Rainbow: The Cherokees in the California Gold Fields” *The Journal of Cherokee Studies* 2.1 (1977): 170–75; and Carolyn Thomas Foreman, “Edward W. Bushyhead and John Rollin Ridge: Cherokee Editors in California.” *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 15 (September 1936): 295–311.

was owing to the oppressions, practised [*sic*] upon them by the State of Georgia, and those who followed her example, that parties arose amongst [the Cherokee], producing confusion and bloodshed” (*Trumpet* 52). As a land of strangers and a home to exiles, California was a place both geographically and ideologically outside of the United States. (In “The Harp of Broken Strings,” for example, Ridge situates himself “by Sacramento’s stream” and imagines California as a space that can help him to understand his “exile doom” [51–52].)

The state’s international population similarly reinforced for Ridge that California was a different kind of American space. Ridge wrote in reference to the state’s immigrants, “California is indeed a singular country, or rather the people in it are strange compounds.”<sup>60</sup> As historian Kevin Starr has noted, “[T]he Gold Rush, in its first phases at least, was an intrinsically international—rather than American—event.”<sup>61</sup> Similarly, Glenna Matthews has argued that “northern California was ‘born cosmopolitan’ to an unprecedented extent.”<sup>62</sup> Alongside the image of California as the model for the nation, then, existed an image of California as an international society with a tenuous connection to the United States. The idea of California as a “strange compound” of nationalities was invoked during many of the public occasions for which Ridge’s services as a poet were

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<sup>60</sup> *Sacramento Daily Bee* 26 Feb 1857.

<sup>61</sup> Kevin Starr, “Rooted in Barbarous Soil: An Introduction to Gold Rush Society and Culture” *Rooted in Barbarous Soil: People, Culture, and Community in Gold Rush California*, eds. Kevin Starr and Richard J. Orsi (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000, 1–24), 4.

<sup>62</sup> Glenna Matthews, “Forging a Cosmopolitan Civic Culture: The Regional Identity of San Francisco and Northern California” in *Many Wests: Place, Culture, and Regional Identity*, ed. David M. Wrobel and Michael C. Steiner (Lawrence: University Press of

solicited. The speaker that preceded Ridge at the College of California graduation ceremonies said that California's population is made up of "a greater variety of nationalities than were ever before united to form a State" (Whitney 48). A different speaker at another event for which Ridge contributed a poem described California as having been "liberally sprinkled with elements from every quarter of the globe, presenting . . . a heterogeneous compound of opposites" (Farwell 13). With mid-century immigrants coming from such places as Chile, Hawai'i, Australia, Malaysia, China, Italy, Germany, Ireland, and France, many white Americans wondered if California's multi-ethnic character potentially disqualified it from ideological incorporation into the predominantly Anglo-Saxon United States.<sup>63</sup>

Ridge's poetic and journalistic descriptions of California show his awareness of how intimately connected the Golden State was to networks of travel and trade that extended far beyond national boundaries. Preceding Edward Soja's assessment of mid-nineteenth-century California's "tilt to the global space economy of capitalism,"<sup>64</sup> Ridge wrote in the poem "California" that the state's economic reputation is known "the world

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Kansas, 1997, 211–34), 214.

<sup>63</sup> Sucheng Chan, "A People of Exceptional Character: Ethnic Diversity, Nativism, and Racism in the California Gold Rush," *Rooted in Barbarous Soil: People, Culture, and Community in Gold Rush California*, eds. Kevin Starr and Richard J. Orsi (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000), 44–85. See also Susan Lee Johnson's *Roaring Camp: The Social World of the California Gold Rush* (New York: Norton, 2000), for an historical analysis of the social interaction between the diverse elements of 1850s California. See also J. S. Holliday, *The World Rushed In: The California Gold Rush Experience* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1981).

<sup>64</sup> Quoted in Rob Wilson, "Exporting Christian Transcendentalism, Importing Hawaiian Sugar: The Trans-Americanization of Hawai'i" *American Literature* 72.3 (2000) 521–552, 521.

around” and that “the nations visit thee from far” to trade their products for California gold (“From far to her the nations laden come / With silks and wares and precious stones and gum”) (92, 89). In a newspaper article Ridge wrote that “The products of our mines add largely and constantly to the circulating wealth of the world.”<sup>65</sup> Ridge’s understanding of how the “circulating” currents of global wealth gave California a central role in the emerging international economy is similar to Rob Wilson recent analysis of how “California became ‘centralized’ in the transnational flow of capital and the play of geopolitics” during the nineteenth century (Wilson 522). California, then, was three things for Ridge: it was a model for the United States; it was a site of refuge that was imaginatively (if not geographically) outside of the nation where exiles such as he could gather; and it was part of a larger global network. Arnold Krupat has attempted to conceptualize a space for Native American literature that is at once “local, national, [and] cosmopolitan.”<sup>66</sup> In “[Hail to the Plow!],” Ridge realizes that goal with a vision of California that embraces indigenous peoples, serves as a model for national progress, and connects the state to the larger world.

In “Song of the Redwood-Tree” Whitman also imagined California to be a model of “the true America,” a place of aboriginal presence, and a site of international immigration. The way that Whitman identified the role of indigenous peoples in the march of national progress and amid the global population of California, however, is significantly different from what Ridge imagines in “[Hail to the Plow!]” In the

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<sup>65</sup> San Francisco *Herald* 13 September 1861.

<sup>66</sup> Arnold Krupat, *The Voice in the Margin: Native American Literature and the Canon* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989), 202.

conclusion of “Song of the Redwood-Tree,” Whitman says that “The flashing and golden pageant of California” is characterized by the state’s connection to the rest of the globe: “Ships coming in from the whole round world, and going out to the whole world, / To India and China and Australia and the thousand island paradises of the Pacific” (176). According to Whitman’s poem, however, the old inhabitants of California must give way to the state’s new masters before it can blossom into the global society that it is destined to be. Whitman writes that the international society of California is a result of “the New arriving, assuming, taking possession, / A swarming and busy race settling and organizing everywhere” (176). While Whitman believed that California could only take on its cosmopolitan character once the detritus of the past had been cleared, Ridge’s late-career poem “[Hail to the Plow!]” suggests that the global society of California can best be sung into being by a mixed-blood Indian poet with an equal commitment to the past and the future.

### **“[Hail to the Plow!]”**

In early August of 1860, the Agricultural, Horticultural, and Mechanics’ Society of the Northern District of California invited Ridge to compose and recite a poem for their annual fair. He wrote “[Hail to the Plow!],” the longest and most ambitious poem of his career. “[Hail to the Plow!]” places Native American and Californian themes within a narrative of world history that looks to the future as well as the past; it also situates these themes in an imaginary geography that depicts California as an island paradise containing representative landscapes from across the entire globe. Effectively combining every major issue that concerned him as a poet—the status of indigenous cultures, the

international makeup of California, and the mediating power of a mixed-race Indian poet—“[Hail to the Plow!]” is the most fascinating poem of Ridge’s late career. The reasons why the Agricultural, Horticultural, and Mechanics’ Society solicited the poem from Ridge are difficult to ascertain given that extant documents about the society are scarce.<sup>67</sup>

Ridge’s reputation as a poet and orator was growing at this time, making it possible that he was approached to write the poem based solely on his rising status as a public figure (he had given an Independence Day speech the previous month and in recent years he had read poems to commemorate the laying of the Atlantic telegraph cable and the ninth anniversary of California’s statehood) (Parins 142–46). But given that the Cherokee Nation had earned the reputation as one of the few Indian tribes to embrace white agricultural practices, the Agricultural, Horticultural, and Mechanics’ Society might have wanted Ridge to read a poem because they considered him to be an apt representative of Native Americans’ successful adoption of U.S. farming policies. Just as the regents of the College of California wanted an Indian poet who could testify to the achievements of California higher education in “civilizing” the western frontier, the

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<sup>67</sup> Virtually no records have survived about the Agricultural, Horticultural, and Mechanics’ Society of Northern California. University of California, Berkeley, Bancroft librarian Catherine Hanson-Tracy wrote in an email of 5 Sept 2003: “I have searched several sources on California agricultural societies here in the California History Room, but I have not found this specific society mentioned. . . . From my general research on agricultural societies, it appears that country or regional societies were formed to promote the interests of farmers, and eventually these societies developed into the Grange.” Similarly, University of California, Davis, librarian Barbara Hegenbart wrote in an email of 2 Sept 2003: “We don’t [have] anything in our collection about this society.” A single extant broadside from the society can be found at the following Internet address: <http://sunsite.berkeley.edu/FindingAids/dynaweb/calher/honeyman/figures/HN001768aA.jpg>

Agricultural, Horticultural, and Mechanics' Society could have wanted a poet to confirm their assumptions about how (and by whom) U.S. land should be used.

In Ridge, the Agricultural, Horticultural, and Mechanics' Society found an Anglo-Cherokee poet who had publicly supported some (but not all) of the tenets of Thomas Jefferson's proposal that Native Americans be assimilated into white society by adopting American farming practices.<sup>68</sup> They found a poet who shared their belief that California was an agricultural marvel the likes of which the world had never seen. They also, perhaps unexpectedly, found a poet who took advantage of the occasion to lambaste the pervasive anti-Indian racism of antebellum U.S. culture. While Ridge subtly critiqued the racism of the College of California's civilizing mission in his 1861 commencement poem, in "[Hail to the Plow!]" he overtly challenged some of the central assumptions that white Americans held about the civilizing influence of horticulture on indigenous populations.

"[Hail to the Plow!]" begins with an encomium of the plow as "the first, great civilizer" of humanity, and then proceeds to say that it is "to Agriculture" that "we trace / The first faint gleam of progress in the race" (114–15). By praising agriculture in the persona of Yellow Bird the Indian poet (and by doing so in heroic couplets), Ridge appears to confirm the Jeffersonian doctrine that Native Americans would be civilized if they were taught to farm.<sup>69</sup> It must have come as a surprise to the members of the

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<sup>68</sup> For a discussion of Jefferson's farming policies and their impact on Native Americans, see Timothy Sweet, *American Georgics: Economy and Environment in Early American Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), chapters 5 and 6. Ridge agreed that Indians should become cultivators and not hunters, but he did not think that becoming cultivators would lead Native Americans to become completely integrated into American society. Rather, he envisioned the various Indian nations entering the United States as autonomous states (Parins 175).



Agricultural, Horticultural, and Mechanics' Society, then, when Ridge's poem claimed that Native Americans had made greater advances in the fields of agriculture and social engineering than Europeans and European Americans ever did. Indians, the poem contends, are more likely to provide a pattern for making a better America than Americans are to provide a pattern for making better Indians. Ridge's poem is based upon the assumption that while the civilizations of the Old World all descended into fruitless warfare after achieving a certain degree of competence as farmers, the indigenous cultures of the Americas would have continued peacefully in unabated progress had it not been for European intervention in the New World. Admittedly, this approach requires Ridge to take a number of liberties with historical fact, but in so doing he is able to sketch out an alternative history of the Americas that allows him to imagine a place for Native peoples in the mid-nineteenth-century United States.

Ridge's poem depicts Old World civilizations as having gradually progressed through a series of increasingly complex stages of human development: an initial "hunter state" where humans lived off of wild game was followed by "pastoral days" when humans cultivated pastures and tended flocks, after which arose a "third and better state" based on advances in agriculture, law, and commerce (115–17). Ridge says that all of the Old World cultures that followed this pattern of development fell from this "third and better state" because "They loved the bannered pomp of conquering war" more than they cared about cultivating their fields (118). As these societies descended into constant warfare, their attention to agriculture waned and their civilizations perished: "While

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<sup>69</sup> For a discussion of Thomas Jefferson's farming policies for Native Americans, see chapters five and six of Timothy Sweet, *American Georgics: Economy and Environment*

fought the soldier at a despot's will, / The rusting plow within the field stood still" (118). Ridge's narrative of the rise and fall of civilization would have been very familiar to his antebellum audience. In the five paintings of Thomas Cole's "The Course of Empire" (1834–36), for example, human society is depicted as progressing through "savage" and pastoral stages before becoming fully developed, after which it faces the inevitable destruction and desolation that accompany the decline of civilization.<sup>70</sup>

A number of late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century Americans believed that the only way for the United States to avoid this seemingly inevitable decline into warfare and devastation was to ensure that the U.S. remain in a permanent pastoral state. Believing that the increased complexity of a society would be the cause of its eventual downfall, adherents to this romantic agrarianism argued that a simple rural lifestyle was preferable to the hazards of further social growth. Contrary to the pattern that existed in the Old World, however, Ridge says that the Inca and Aztec civilizations of pre-Columbian America were able to achieve lasting peace without compromising the complexity of their societies. Citing these indigenous civilizations as precedent that another American culture can potentially develop into a complex and enduring society, Ridge says later in the poem that California stands poised to fulfill the potential for greatness that European settlers denied the indigenous inhabitants of the Americas when

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*in Early American Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002).

<sup>70</sup> Cole's paintings are titled "The Savage State," "The Pastoral or Arcadian State," "The Consummation of Empire," "Destruction," and "Desolation." For further discussion of these cyclical theories of history see also Maddox (5–17, 29–38) and Helen Carr, *Inventing the American Primitive: Politics, Gender and the Representation of Native American Literary Traditions, 1789–1936* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 22–50, 60–68.

imperialism (“When Cortez came with red right hand of war” [119]), and not internal warfare, led to their decline. The implication is that California agrarians—such as the members of the Agricultural, Horticultural, and Mechanics’ Society of the Northern District of California—should be taught by, rather than presume to teach, Native Americans.

Trained not in the arts of war but the “arts of peace,” he says (idealistically, if not naïvely), the Inca and the Aztec flourished where the cultures of the Old World perished (119). These indigenous peoples were able to do what the cultures of the Old World never could, namely, develop progressive, agriculture-based societies that never degenerated into self-destructive war. In contrast to the Jeffersonian vision of a simple agricultural republic, the Inca of Ridge’s poem are said to have lived in a highly complex society wherein all citizens “labored duly for the State” according to a detailed and regimented social organization “which gave with equal hand / To each his due proportion of the land” (121). In this workers’ paradise, an intricate social organization oversaw an ideal society the likes of which, according to Ridge, never existed in the Eastern Hemisphere and did not yet exist in the United States: “No happier lot the poet’s dream can find,” he writes, neither in “all the Old World’s civilization vast, / Nor yet our own, the grandest and the last” (121). In identifying the Aztec and the Inca as the only civilizations in the history of the world to have lived peacefully with the full blessings of agriculture, Ridge makes indigenous American cultures the model for his audience’s hope that California will escape the rise-and-fall pattern of the Old World.

In asserting the competency of America’s indigenous civilizations and critiquing the idea that progress is the unique province of whites (“As England was in Alfred’s time

(The Great),” he writes, “So civilized was Montezuma’s state” [119]), Ridge directly addresses the racism of his audience in a series of pointed rhetorical questions designed to refute the assumption that Europeans brought civilization to a savage America:

Was art, that built those cities vast, less art,  
 Because of Aztec genius ‘twas a part?  
 Was patient toil, that led thro’ channels deep,  
 And aqueducts, and ‘long the rocky steep,  
 The streams a thousand fertile fields supplied,  
 Less toil, because no white man’s arm was tried?  
 Were peace and plenty but the Spaniard’s right?  
 The Aztec *barbarous* because not *white*? (119, italics in original)

The italicization of the terms “barbarous” and “white” in the printed version of “[Hail to the Plow!]” are the only remaining trace of the verbal invective that Ridge leveled against the members of the Agricultural, Horticultural, and Mechanics’ Society of the Northern District of California. As Carl Bode says of nineteenth-century oratory’s interplay between the original audience of the occasion for their texts and a larger audience that would read them later in print, “When the lecturer read his manuscript he had the audience squarely in front of him and probably could not have forgotten its members had he wished. Later, when he printed his manuscript, the same awareness was seldom revised entirely away.”<sup>71</sup> As a public poet expected to create community consensus rather than antagonize his audience, Ridge was momentarily remiss in his duties when he read

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<sup>71</sup> Quoted in Ezra Greenspan, *Walt Whitman and the American Reader* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 181.

this section of “[Hail to the Plow!]”

Nevertheless, there are ways in which even this overt critique of his audience’s racism could be seen within the larger context of Ridge’s project to serve as a mediator between whites and Natives. In focusing his defense of Native American accomplishments on the fallen cultures of Central and South America rather than the Native North American tribes facing extinction in the nineteenth century, Ridge appealed to a romantic connection with the Aztec and the Inca that white Americans did not feel for other indigenous peoples.<sup>72</sup> Antebellum literary tastemaker Rufus Griswold, for example, wrote in the introduction to his influential *Poets and Poetry of America* that a great American poem could be written about the vanished civilizations of the Southern Hemisphere: “A true creator,” he wrote, “with a genius great as John Milton’s, might invent an epic equal to ‘Paradise Lost’, by restoring Palenque and Copan to their meridian splendour.”<sup>73</sup> In addition, influential ethnological texts such as William Robertson’s *History of America* (1777) deemed the Aztec and the Inca to be the only Native American civilizations that did not merit the distinction of “savage.”<sup>74</sup> By using the Aztec and the Inca as his representatives of Native American achievements, Ridge was able to critique his audience’s racist beliefs about Indians without entirely alienating himself from many of their preconceived notions.

Another example of Ridge’s desire to confront racism while still aligning himself

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<sup>72</sup> See Eric Wertheimer, *Imagined Empires: Incas, Aztecs, and the New World of American Literature, 1771–1876* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

<sup>73</sup> Rufus W. Griswold, *Poets and Poetry of America*, Second edition, (New York, 1842).

<sup>74</sup> Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr., *The White Man’s Indian: Images of the American Indian*

with white Americans occurs earlier in the poem when he describes the “hunter state” of early human society and, predicting a sneer of superiority from his white audience, writes, “Smile not—such were our own rude ancestry!” (116). It is not difficult to extrapolate from Ridge’s stern language an implied connection between the primitivism of the “hunter state” and the indigenous peoples currently living in what white Americans considered to be a similarly primitive manner. In this direct confrontation of his white audience’s sense of superiority over primitive and indigenous peoples, Ridge reveals how acutely aware he was of his position as a mixed-race poet expected to broker between disparate cultures. When he reprimands his white audience, he does so by saying that the “hunter state” is a remnant of “*our* own rude ancestry,” implying that he, too, has moved beyond this primitive state.

It is tempting to accuse Ridge of exploiting the posture of the white aboriginal by assuming the moral authority of the Indian while still holding on to the privilege of his whiteness. There is, to be sure, a mercenary quality in Ridge’s desire to have it both ways. At the same time, in wanting to find a common ground between whites and Natives, Ridge puts himself in a position to conceptualize the possibilities of cultural hybridity. As he concludes the poem, he presents one such hybridized image of California as an island paradise that unites European myths about the fabulous islands of the New World with Native American island legends. He writes in an apostrophe to the Golden State,

Oh Land of Beauty! why the theme prolong?

Like that delicious isle of Indian song,

Which, o'er the waters gliding, fled pursuit,  
 Thou hast all gems, all wealth, all golden fruit,  
 And, far more blest than Indian dreamers were,  
 We lose thee not, a vision of the air! (127)

What is most stunning about Ridge's image of a "delicious isle of Indian song" that fled from "Indian dreamers" but is now symbolically captured in California is that the sources of this image are both European and Native American. The island of California is a consummate hybrid space: It is both the longstanding "El Dorado dream" of European explorers and the "delicious isle of Indian song" that Native American bards from numerous traditions had sung about for years (123). Myths about islands of great wealth and beauty appear in many different Native American traditions.<sup>75</sup> In the version of the Cherokee creation story that Ridge would have been most familiar with, the earth is depicted as an island tethered to the heavens by cords that will break at the end of the world, leaving Cherokee society to vanish like "a vision of the air."<sup>76</sup> In another version, the Cherokee are said to have come to the mainland of North America after being forced by some geological cataclysm from their original island home, and, according to Daniel Justice, there is "some implication that this island was a paradise of sorts."<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> For various versions of the Native American legend about vanishing or wandering islands, see Sith Thompson, *Tales of the North American Indians* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1929), 275; Elsie Clews Parsons, "Micmac Folklore," *The Journal of American Folklore* 38.147 (1925): 55–133, 114; Frank G. Speck, "Malecite Tales," *The Journal of American Folklore* 30.118 (1917): 479–85; and Edward Jack, "Maliseet Legends," *The Journal of American Folklore* 8.30 (1895): 193–208.

<sup>76</sup> James Mooney, *Myths of the Cherokee* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1900).

Just as important as Native American legends are to this image of California as an elusive—though now captured—*island paradise* are European myths about the island of California. Beginning in the sixteenth century and continuing until as late as the eighteenth century, European explorers to the New World frequently referred to California as an island. Explorers who wrote about island paradises that were always just beyond their reach began to attach their hopes and dreams to the island of California, a place that, according to Dora Beale Polk, embodied “the single, simple, common ideal of a dream island” impelling European explorers in the New World.<sup>78</sup> California received its name from one such account: Garcí Rodríguez de Montalvo’s sixteenth-century Spanish epic *Las Serges de Esplandián*, a fanciful tale of exploration in the New World involving a gold-filled island populated by a group of Amazonians who are led by California’s namesake, a warrior woman named Calafía.<sup>79</sup> In addition to the island of Calafía, *Esplandián* also tells of a mysterious magician who inhabits an island that he can make disappear at will, which could be the basis of Ridge’s “isle of Indian song” that “fled pursuit.” If Ridge were aware of *Esplandián* he might have attributed Montalvo’s tale to an indigenous legend, making the Spanish epic into an “Indian song.”

Whether or not he had read *Esplandián*, Ridge was aware that California was

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<sup>77</sup> Email from Daniel Justice, 10 Jun 2002. Thanks to Suzanne Lundquist, Jane Hafen, Timothy Sweet, John Taylor, Denis Cutchins, and Daniel Justice for helping to locate possible sources of this island legend.

<sup>78</sup> Dora Beale Polk, *The Island of California: A History of the Myth* (Spokane, WA: Arthur H. Clark, 1991), 132.

<sup>79</sup> Garcí Rodríguez de Montalvo, *The Labors of the Very Brave Knight Esplandián*, trans. William Thomas Little (Binghamton, NY: Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies, 1992).



believed to have been an island. A brief article titled “The Island of California” that he ran in the Marysville *Weekly California Express* two years before he wrote “[Hail to the Plow!]” says the following:

We lately came across an old book, says an exchange, entitled “Geography Anatomyzed,” published in London in 1728. . . . Feeling a slight curiosity to see how our State figured in the geographies of olden time, we searched the book and found the following: “California. This island was formerly esteemed a Peninsular, but now found to be entirely surrounded with Water. . . . The inland parts thereof were afterwards searched into, but being found to be only a dry, barren, cold country, Europeans were discouraged from sending Colonies to the the [*sic*] same, so that it still remains in the Hands of the Natives; and there being nothing remarkable either in them or in it.”<sup>80</sup>

Coming as it does from the eighteenth century, this British text deflates the myth of a paradisiacal California while still retaining the island geography. And while this text saw “nothing remarkable” in either California or its indigenous inhabitants, Ridge believed that California was a space that could unite the aspirations of European explorers with the frustrated potential of the indigenous peoples of the Americas.

It should be noted here that by making the Aztec and the Inca the symbolic ancestors of nineteenth-century California, Ridge elides the existence of Native Californians who have a more direct claim to the aboriginal heritage of California than do the Inca, the Aztec, or even a well-meaning Cherokee poet. Ridge’s inability to include Native Californians in the vision of California’s potential that he records in “[Hail to the

Plow!]" stems from a hierarchical ranking of Native peoples that he adhered to throughout his life. Ridge questioned whether the Cherokee and the indigenous peoples of California even "belong at all to the same stock" since, in his opinion, the Cherokee had "abandoned their savage customs and habits for the condition of civilized life" while Native Californians remained "a poor, humble, degraded, and cowardly race" (*Trumpet* 49, 62, 69). Despite the negative comments he made about California's Native population, Ridge was also an outspoken advocate against atrocities such as murder, rape, and slavery that "white savages" inflicted upon Native Californians, and he used the bully pulpit of the press to question why "these poor and imbecile people cannot better be protected than they are by the General Government."<sup>81</sup> When it was suggested that Native Californians be placed on reservations, removed from the state, or even exterminated, Ridge proposed interracial marriage as a more humane alternative.<sup>82</sup>

While Native Californians are noticeably absent from "[Hail to the Plow!]," the same faith in amalgamation that Ridge thought would resolve the conflict with California Indians lies at the heart of his poem. In a lengthy digression that precedes the concluding image of the island of California (itself an amalgam of white and Native myths), Ridge draws an analogy between the amalgamation of plant species in agricultural practice and the potential for human amalgamation. Agricultural hybridity, as this digression suggests, provides Ridge with a language for conceptualizing hybridity of other kinds:

For while the genius of the plow and spade

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<sup>80</sup> Marysville *Weekly California Express* 10 April 1858.

<sup>81</sup> Sacramento *Daily Bee* 21 July 1857.

Improvement still on willing nature made—  
 The cultured flower expanding into size  
 Unknown before and tinct with richer dyes,  
 New forms assuming from the fecund dust  
 Not left to chance and to the zephyr's trust,  
 But, like with unlike pollen mixed, till strange  
 Creations bloomed and wonder marked the change;  
 The human soul, the Man, expanded too,  
 And found in realms of thought the strange and new. (122)

Rather than praise agriculture for making “Improvement . . . on willing nature,” Ridge writes that “the genius of the plow” is the ability to mix “like with unlike” and create “New forms” that had never before existed. “Improvement” was a loaded concept in the debates that surrounded Indian Removal because it suggested that land belongs to whoever would appropriately cultivate it (i.e., white American settlers) regardless of who currently inhabited it (i.e., Native Americans).<sup>83</sup> Because the idea of “Improvement” potentially eliminates Native populations from consideration whereas amalgamation does not, the hero of Ridge’s poem is not the farmer who tills the field, but the botanist who creates hybrid plants.

Ridge minimizes the importance of “improving” the land through farming and suggests instead that the true wonder of agriculture is its ability to produce “strange /

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<sup>82</sup> *Sacramento Daily Bee* 7 April 1857.

<sup>83</sup> The idea of “improvement” trumped literacy and Christianity as the primary criterion for civilization in the debates surrounding Indian Removal (Sweet 126).

Creations” by combining familiar strains in unfamiliar ways. The agricultural “wonder” of combining “like with unlike” finds an obvious parallel in Ridge’s belief that a “universal amalgamation of the races” was not only imminent, but essential. In the same way that agricultural hybridity transforms and reshapes the natural world (e.g., “The cultured flower expanding into size / Unknown before and tinct with richer dyes”), there are accompanying transformations experienced by “The human soul, the Man” as human beings become “strange and new” through a comparable mixing of different strains. As a mixed-race Indian living among the “strange compounds” of California, Ridge considered people like himself and places like California to have undergone a hybridization analogous to that achieved through the transformative powers of agriculture.

Accordingly, “[Hail to the Plow!]” presents California’s landscape as a hybridization of various world climates. Even though he calls California the fulfillment of “the El Dorado dream” (123), Ridge says that what makes the state so spectacular is not that its mines hold the wealth of a fabled El Dorado (“California’s glory is not told,” he writes, “By wealth of resource like to this—her gold” [124]), but that its landscape has been made to replicate every climate from across the globe. California, he says, has a “Prolific soil” which “within itself it yields / Of every clime the fruits” (125). He initially attempts to construct a catalogue of the world geographies that have been replicated in California’s “clime / Of wonder”—“the hills of Greece,” the “woods that skirt the Arabian sea,” “Italia’s purpled vales”—but, realizing that such an exercise would prove exhausting, is satisfied to say that California duplicates the geography of “All climes and lands” (123–25). While the “third and better state” of civilization in the Old World was

marked by international commerce (he writes that during this era “What lacked one clime another clime possess” [117]), Ridge suggests that California has achieved an unprecedented fourth stage of civilization that lacks nothing but is, in effect, a self-contained world in miniature.

The program for agricultural and social engineering that Ridge lays out in “[Hail to the Plow!]” differs from that of the antebellum agrarianists who wanted to freeze the United States in a pastoral state. Indeed, Ridge’s desire to create a self-contained global society within the metaphorical geography of the island of California is even more ambitious than anything accomplished by the Inca and Aztec civilizations he claims as his precedent. It almost seems as if Ridge wants California’s landscape to reflect the homelands of the immigrants who have given rise to the “strange compounds” of the state’s international population. Ridge wrote in the San Francisco *Herald*, “There is nothing to deter the immigrant from our shores; but, on the contrary, everything to invite and encourage him to make his home [here].”<sup>84</sup> California, Ridge suggests in “[Hail to the Plow!],” can welcome immigrants from across the globe because its geography already duplicates the lands of their origin. Glenna Matthews has argued that “northern California was ‘born cosmopolitan’ to an unprecedented extent.”<sup>85</sup> It’s possible that Ridge hoped to ease these birth pains with a global landscape reflexive of the state’s increasingly global inhabitants.

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<sup>84</sup> San Francisco *Herald* 10 September 1861.

<sup>85</sup> Glenna Matthews, “Forging a Cosmopolitan Civic Culture: The Regional Identity of San Francisco and Northern California” in *Many Wests: Place, Culture, and Regional Identity*, ed. David M. Wrobel and Michael C. Steiner (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1997, 211–34), 214.

In Whitman's "Song of the Redwood-Tree," California would become "the true America" with links to the world only after its original inhabitants had perished; conversely, in "[Hail to the Plow!]," Ridge says that California's amalgam of global landscapes derives from the Golden State's willingness to hybridize white and Native cultures in his vision of the island of California. "[Hail to the Plow!]" stands as the singular accomplishment of a poet who envisioned "a universal amalgamation of the races" that he as a mixed-race Indian was qualified to write into being. It also offers and alternate vision of the cultural hybridity that could be achieved through the figure of the American poet as white aboriginal.

### III.

#### **Conclusion: Mannahatta and California**

In 1857, Ridge wrote an article attacking the racist observations of an East Coast phrenologist who believed that Native Americans were demonstrably inferior to whites. Ridge launched his rebuttal by saying that the phrenologist had been selective in the Indians he had chosen as his representative sample, and that a wide degree of difference exists between the "lazy, spiritless and degraded remnants of Indian tribes" and such "superior tribes" as the Cherokee.<sup>86</sup> Ridge went on to say that a comparable hierarchy exists among whites, arguing that just as these "degraded" tribes are not representative of all Native Americans, a similarly unrepresentative white person would be a "New York dandy." This essay began by asking whether Whitman would have taken Ridge to be a representative Native American or if he would have considered his erudition and

Westernized dress to have rendered him “only half an Indian.” It seems appropriate to conclude by observing that Ridge would similarly have disregarded Whitman as a representative white person based on his equation of “lazy, spiritless and degraded” Indians with the New York dandies from whom Whitman adopted much of his persona of the urban dilettante. Had the two poets ever met, each would doubtless have thought the other an unfit representative of his race. This should come as no surprise: in adopting the posture of the white aboriginal each poet admitted that he was either not entirely white or not entirely an Indian.

Despite the starkly different ways that they depicted the collision of European and Native American cultures on the western frontier in poems like “Song of the Redwood-Tree” and “[Hail to the Plow!],” Whitman and Ridge are ultimately more alike than they are different. Each poet had moments where he embraced an orthodox narrative of the United States’ role on the American continent. Whitman clearly did so in “Song of the Redwood-Tree,” but just as Ridge dreamed of a “universal amalgamation of the races” that would completely redefine racial and national identity, he could also think of this amalgamation in decidedly uneven terms. While he spoke optimistically that “the races of mankind [are] progressing, slowly but surely, toward the grand ultimatum of a common destiny,” achieving that “common destiny” often privileged some races over others: “the time is rapidly approaching when the world will be inhabited by a few leading races,” he wrote, “speaking each a language not hard to be understood by the other . . . while all other distinctive languages, peoples and governments will go down into the gulf of the

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<sup>86</sup> Marysville *Express* 7 November 1857.

past.”<sup>87</sup>

Conversely, while Whitman endorsed the extermination of indigenous peoples in “Song of the Redwood-Tree,” Ed Folsom says that Whitman also had “a dream of amalgamation, of melding, of absorption and open embrace.”<sup>88</sup> Indeed, in the preface to the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* Whitman wrote that the United States is best defined by its intermingling of nationalities. “America is the race of races,” he wrote, and proudly exclaimed that “Here is not merely a nation but a teeming nation of nations” (LG 618, 616). Nowhere did Whitman experience this feeling of living in an amalgamated global society more so than in New York City. In “City of Ships,” Whitman explicitly names the cosmopolitan nature of his city and identifies its connection to the larger world:

City of ships!

(O the black ships! O the fierce ships!

O the beautiful sharp-bow’d steam-ships and sail-ships!)

City of the world! (for all races are here,

All the lands of the earth make contributions here;)

City of the sea! city of hurried and glittering tides! (246–47)

Whitman’s “city of the world” is such because the mechanisms of international trade (“black ships,” “fierce ships,” “steam-ships and sail-ships”), combined with the fortuitous geography of Manhattan island’s “hurried and glittering tides,” have made it possible “for all races [to be] here” and for “All the lands of the earth [to] make

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<sup>87</sup> Sacramento *Daily Bee* 13 April 1857.

<sup>88</sup> Ed Folsom, “Talking Back to Walt Whitman: An Introduction,” *Walt Whitman: The Measure of His Song*, ed. Jim Perlman, Ed Folsom, and Dan Campion (Duluth, MN:



contributions here.”

Just as Ridge’s project depends on his relationship to the “island” of California, much of Whitman’s antebellum poetry is similarly rooted to the island of Manhattan. Similar to Ridge’s California, Whitman’s Manhattan was an island where native and modern influences melded. As he wrote in “Mannahatta,” “I was asking for something specific and perfect for my city, / Whereupon, lo! upsprang the aboriginal name” (397). According to M. Wynn Thomas, adopting the aboriginal name of Mannahatta “seemed to him to offer a reassuring guarantee of the naturalness and appropriateness of the life of the modern city.”<sup>89</sup> Whitman said that the name “New York” should be abandoned because it recalled the European past, whereas the indigenous term “Mannahatta” was “a fitter name” for his quintessentially American city (*Notebooks and Unpublished Prose Manuscripts*, 1:407–8, 3:1010). Like Ridge’s island of California, Whitman’s Mannahatta island is at once modern and aboriginal, a space where white and Native fuse in a site of productive tension that is at once open to a larger-than-national world. Whitman continues to write in “Mannahatta” of “Immigrants arriving, fifteen or twenty thousand in a week” (397). Island geographies allowed both poets to think outside of national space in imagining a world where national identity would first be diffused by a union of white and Native elements, and then by the rest of the world.

Just as Ridge also attempts to make California a space where national

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Holy Cow!, 1998, 21–78), 67.

<sup>89</sup> M. Wynn Thomas, *The Lunar Light of Whitman’s Poetry* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 151–2. See Whitman’s comments on “Mannahatta” in *Notebooks and Unpublished Prose Manuscripts*, 407–8, and 1010–11, and in Traubel 6:56.

subpopulations can experience a safe exile from the nation, so too does Whitman see in New York City a place of refuge for “the roughs,” a composite term I elaborate on in the following chapter that Whitman used to describe his affiliation to working-class New Yorkers and gay men. For both Whitman and Ridge, New York City and California are islands where they can forge equally strong connections to the world and to national subpopulations as they can to the nation as a whole. Island geographies, whether real or imagined, eloquently express a tenuous connection to the nation that both Ridge and Whitman experienced.

## Chapter 4

## Walt Whitman: An American, One of the Roughts, a Kosmos

**Introduction**

In the waning years of his life, Whitman was taken to task by his friend and biographer Maurice Bucke for his tendency to affiliate himself with the fringe elements of society. “Walt,” Bucke said, “you seem determined to be in the minority.” Whitman responded, “Yes, I do: that’s the only safe place for me.”<sup>1</sup> On a similar occasion Whitman told Thomas Harned, another friend and admirer, that *Leaves of Grass* “is a book for the criminal classes,” to which Harned asked, “Are you in the criminal class yourself?” Whitman replied, apparently in earnest, “Yes, certainly. Why not?” (1:375). The aged Whitman with whom Bucke and Harned conversed in the late 1880s bore little resemblance to the working-class outlaw whose portrait graced the frontispiece of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* in 1855, but these exchanges illustrate that even in his later years Whitman clung to his status as “one of the roughs,” as a national outsider who audaciously presumed to speak for the common man to a nation that, in his opinion, regarded him as little more than a common criminal.

It can now seem ironic that Whitman would attempt to convince Bucke and Harned of his cultural marginality given that these two men, along with a number of other Whitman disciples at the turn of the century, were instrumental in securing for Whitman the prominent status that he enjoys today.<sup>2</sup> At the same time that Whitman complained—

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Horace Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden* 6 Vols. (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 1961), 4:321.

<sup>2</sup> See Charles B. Willard, *Whitman’s American Fame: The Growth of His Reputation in*

or, perhaps, boasted—of being an outsider to the very men who helped clear the way for his entry into the American mainstream, the poetic careers of James M. Whitfield, Eliza R. Snow, and John Rollin Ridge were already sinking deeper into obscurity. Before he died in 1871, Whitfield was burdened with financial and other obligations that only allowed him to write a handful of new poems to complement what he had published in 1853. Similarly, Snow wrote less and less poetry in the years between the publication of her 1856 volume of poems and her death in 1888, in large part because her time was increasingly consumed by the administrative and ecclesiastical duties required of her in a rapidly growing church. Ridge's fruitless quest to regain his place in the Cherokee Nation during the 1860s also came at the price of his poetry: when he died in self-imposed exile in 1866 he had spent the last five years of his life without writing a single poem.

Notwithstanding their continued decline into the late nineteenth century, during the 1850s these three poets all believed that they had legitimate claims to be representative American poets, even though they themselves were, like Whitman, “determined to be in the minority” (or, alternately, because the nation they lived in was determined to consider them so). While literary history has shown that Whitman's poetry has resonated with a much larger audience than has the work of Whitfield, Snow, and Ridge, in the mid-nineteenth century all of these poets—Whitman included—felt that they were uniquely qualified to write American poetry despite the fact that they stood outside of the national mainstream. (Whitman himself wrote in an anonymous self-review in 1855 that the author of *Leaves of Grass* “is to prove either the most lamentable of

failures or the most glorious of triumphs, in the known history of literature.”<sup>3</sup>)

The goal of this dissertation has been to recapture a moment in the 1850s when four equally obscure poets made unlikely bids for the title of American bard, with Whitman’s current prominence serving as a touchstone for understanding the work of these other lesser-known poets. As such, the previous three chapters have focused on the ways that Whitfield, Snow, and Ridge, like Whitman, turned what would otherwise have been the liabilities of their social identities into assets that enabled them to be national bards: Whitfield rejected that African Americans were racial outsiders, contending instead that people of African descent were fundamental to the creation of America; Snow redefined the Mormons’ status as pre-modern and un-American by saying that their communion with the deep past would allow the United States to enter a millennial future; and Ridge said that the U.S. was not threatened by, but rather depended on, the amalgamation of races that he represented as the son of a Cherokee father and white mother.

Whitman scholars have shown how Whitman similarly took those aspects of his identity that potentially jeopardized his ability to secure public acceptance (i.e., his homosexuality and his working-class roots) and redeployed them as his rationale to claim the title of American bard.<sup>4</sup> In making the homosocial and homoerotic bonds between

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<sup>3</sup> [Walt Whitman], “An English and American Poet,” *Walt Whitman: The Contemporary Reviews*, ed. Kenneth M. Price (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 26.

<sup>4</sup> Three representative studies of this approach with regards to the poet’s sexuality are Jay Grossman, “‘The Evangel-Poem of Comrades and of Love’: Revising Whitman’s Republicanism” *ATQ* 4.3 (1990): 201–18, Betsy Erkkila, “Whitman and the Homosexual Republic,” in *Walt Whitman: The Centennial Essays*, ed. Ed Folsom (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1994), 153–71, and Mark Maslan, *Whitman Possessed: Poetry,*

working men the definitive feature of the United States' democratic culture, scholars have shown, Whitman reversed the equation that put him "in the minority" and by so doing crafted the persona of the national outsider who was uniquely qualified to be the national bard. In this chapter, I extend the arguments that scholars have made about the way that Whitman leveraged his position on the margins of national culture into a claim for the title of national poet. I do so by rereading Whitman's antebellum persona as an outsider bard through the gestures that Whitfield, Snow, and Ridge made when they similarly claimed to be American bards on the fringes of American society. Up to this point in this dissertation, I have called upon various aspects of Whitman's project for American poetry—his concerns over the contradictions of American slavery, his desire to found a new American religion, and his eagerness to cull the indigenous energy of the American continent—as a way to introduce three lesser-known poets into a discussion of antebellum American poetry. At this point, I turn the tables and let the similarities common to these three lesser-known poets inform my discussion of Whitman.

Despite the differences in their various projects for American poetry, Whitfield, Snow, and Ridge negotiated their place in the United States in a number of similar ways. As I have already explained in the introduction and in subsequent chapters of this dissertation, these poets tethered their sense of national identity between the subnational and supranational communities to which they were affiliated. Each poet did so by

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*Sexuality, and Popular Authority* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001). Two representative studies with respect to his class standing are M. Wynn Thomas, *The Lunar Light of Whitman's Poetry* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), and Betsy Erkkila, "Whitman and American Empire," in *Walt Whitman of Mickle Street: A Centennial Collection*, ed. Geoffrey M. Sill (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1993), 54–69.

focusing on a specific geographic space where the nation underwent internal pressure from a national subpopulation and external pressure from transnational connections. Accordingly, this chapter discusses the relationship between Whitman's nationalism and the subnational and supranational communities to which he felt connected. In this chapter I reinterpret Whitman's self-identification in the antebellum editions of *Leaves of Grass* as "an American, one of the rougths, a kosmos" through the pattern that appears in the poetry of Whitfield, Snow, and Ridge.<sup>5</sup> I do so in order to demonstrate how Whitman's nationality as "an American" is situated between his affiliation to a homosocial and homosexual working-class subculture as "one of the rougths," and his cosmopolitan desire to connect with people beyond national borders as "a kosmos."

Scholars have addressed a number of the ways that Whitman's posture as a gay, working-class "rough" and as a cosmopolitan "kosmos" potentially challenges the image of the all-American bard.<sup>6</sup> What has yet to be adequately considered—and what is the

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<sup>5</sup> Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, ed. Michael Moon (New York: Norton, 2002), 680. Hereafter cited as *LG*.

<sup>6</sup> For the tension between Whitman's nationalism and his internationalism, see Clarence Gohdes, "Nationalism and Cosmopolitanism in Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*," *Walt Whitman Review* 5.1 (1959): 3–7, Roger Asselineau, "Nationalism vs. Internationalism in *Leaves of Grass*," *Critical Essays on Walt Whitman*, ed. James Woodress (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1983), 320–29, Li Shi Qi, "Whitman's Poetry of Internationalism," *West Hills Review* 7 (1987): 103–10, and Walter Grünzweig, "'For America—For All the Earth': Walt Whitman as an International(ist) Poet" *Breaking Bounds: Walt Whitman and American Cultural Studies*, ed. Betsy Erkkila and Jay Grossman (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 238–50. For the intersection of sexuality and nationalism, see Tom Yingling, "Homosexuality and Utopian Discourse in American Poetry," *Breaking Bounds: Walt Whitman and American Cultural Studies*, ed. Betsy Erkkila and Jay Grossman (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996) 135B46, and Betsy Erkkila, "Public Love: Whitman and Political Theory," *Whitman East and West*, ed. Ed Folsom (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2002), 115–144. For Whitman and class, see Yoshinori Yoshitake, "Walt Whitman as Proletarian Poet" *Calamus* 18 (November

focus of this chapter—is the way that the interplay between Whitman’s affiliations to the nation, to the world, and to subnational populations better accounts for the posture of the national outsider as national bard than do the spatial metaphors of “margin” and “center.” In replacing this static binary opposition of margin/center with a more dynamic model focused on the interaction between national, subnational, and transnational forces, I extend our understanding of how Whitman’s status as a national bard intersected with the smaller-than-national and larger-than-national communities to whom he felt an equally strong sense of attachment.

In addition to viewing Whitman’s relationship to the United States through the model provided by Whitfield, Snow, and Ridge that I describe above, in this chapter I also consider how the genre of poetry that these three poets often used to make their claims to be American bards can refocus our attention on some of the important, though often neglected, aspects of Whitman’s antebellum career. Of the many different kinds of poetry that Whitfield, Snow, and Ridge had the opportunity to write, these poets found that occasional poetry—in particular, poetry written for public celebrations of one kind or another—offered them an apt environment for redefining their relationships with the nation. Because festive occasions were sites in the antebellum United States where contrasting political opinions were openly debated, public occasional poetry became an appropriate genre for national outsiders who would be national bards. As I argue in the first section of this chapter, occasional poetry offered these three poets, as it did Whitman, the opportunity to articulate their tenuous relationships with the United States.

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1979): 34–42 and George Blyn, “Walt Whitman and Labor” *The Mickle Street Review* 6 (1984): 18–29.



While scholars have historically focused on the way that Whitman used a modified epic form for much of his poetry, in this chapter I argue that public occasional poetry provided Whitman with a more appropriate medium for deploying the figure of the national outsider who would be the national bard.<sup>7</sup> Despite John McWilliams' insistence that "once prose became a dominant literary medium, no poem could any longer do the cultural work . . . required of the epic," occasional poems (and not novels) were composed for, published in conjunction with, and read at the public events that were used throughout the antebellum United States to "do the cultural work" of defining and debating American nationalism.<sup>8</sup> The first section of this chapter begins with a reconsideration of Whitman's decision to publish the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* in connection with the Independence Day celebrations of 1855 and how the cultural dynamics of occasional poetry played a part in the way that he introduced himself to the American reading public on the Fourth of July. This section continues with a discussion of Whitman's antebellum persona as an outsider bard and how he as a poet on the fringes of national culture could take advantage of public festive occasions to discuss his tenuous place within the nation.

In the second section of this chapter, I argue for the central though often overlooked role of "A Broadway Pageant" in the history of Whitman's antebellum

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<sup>7</sup> See James E. Miller, Jr. *The American Quest for a Supreme Fiction: Whitman's Legacy in the Personal Epic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), Jeffrey Walker, *Bardic Ethos and the American Long Poem: Whitman, Pound, Crane, Williams, Olson* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), and Bill Hardwig, "Walt Whitman and the Epic Tradition: Political and Poetical Voices in 'Song of Myself'" *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 17.4 (2000): 166–88.

<sup>8</sup> John McWilliams, *The American Epic: Transforming a Genre, 1770–1860* (Cambridge:

persona as an outsider bard. “A Broadway Pageant” is a public occasional poem that Whitman published in the *New York Times* to commemorate the 16 June 1860 parade held to celebrate trade relations between the United States and Japan. While it has received curiously limited attention by Whitman scholars, “A Broadway Pageant” is Whitman’s most public antebellum performance of the role of the American bard. In claiming to be a national poetic spokesperson on a festive occasion that attracted more public attention than did the 1858 laying of the Atlantic Telegraph Cable, however, Whitman does not direct his full praise to the United States’ accomplishments in securing a trade agreement with the isolationist government of Japan. Rather, in “A Broadway Pageant” Whitman highlights his allegiance to the working-class New Yorkers who crowded the parade route and to the global community represented by the Japanese ambassadors who had come to sign the trade agreement. In “A Broadway Pageant,” more so than in any other poem, Whitman tethers his nationalism between his cosmopolitanism and his affiliation with the New York City “roughs.”

As a public occasional poem, “A Broadway Pageant” is necessarily connected to both the audience of New Yorkers with whom Whitman celebrated the event and the New York City setting of the poem itself. As a result of this intimate connection to a single city, “A Broadway Pageant” requires that Whitman ground himself to a specific geographic space. In contrast to his otherwise diffused sense of location as a poet who says “I skirt sierras, my palms cover continents” (*LG* 53), in “A Broadway Pageant” Whitman acknowledges the ways that the space of New York City—with its large population of lower-class laborers and its ties to international shipping routes—allowed

him to conceptualize his complex relationship with the nation. The spatial metaphors of “margin” and “center” that I have already mentioned do not account for the important role that the actual geographic space of New York City played in Whitman’s ability to conceptualize the way that his relationship to the nation was refracted through the subnational population of “the roughs” and his transnational connections as “a kosmos.” Despite the attention that scholars have given to New York City as a source for Whitman’s poetic imagery and democratic energy, the actual geographic space of mid-century New York has yet to be fully explicated as the space upon which Whitman anchored his claim to be “an American, one of the roughs, a kosmos.”<sup>9</sup>

In the third and final section of this chapter, I show how Whitman’s ability to situate the nation between larger-than-national and smaller-than-national frames in “A Broadway Pageant” provides a new model for understanding Whitman’s relationship to the United States’ political geography. In this section I argue that Whitman uses two competing models to describe his relationship to the nation: in one model, as explained above, Whitman describes the nation as tethered between a national subpopulation and a supranational world; in another, more familiar model, Whitman depicts a bounded and unified nation through lengthy descriptions of national places. In this section I show how these two models intersect in *Calamus*, the 1860 sequence of poems where Whitman

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<sup>9</sup> For traditional approaches to Whitman and the city, see Dana Brand, *The Spectator and the City in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 156–85, Alan Trachtenberg, “Whitman’s Lesson of the City” *Breaking Bounds: Walt Whitman and American Cultural Studies*, ed. Betsy Erkkila and Jay Grossman (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996,) 163–73, James Dougherty, *Walt Whitman and the Citizen’s Eye* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1993), and Malcolm Andrews, “Walt Whitman and the American City” *The American City*, ed. Graham Clarke (New York: St. Martins, 1988), 179–97.

most explicitly positions himself as a national outsider who claims to speak for the nation as an American bard.

## I.

### **Public Poetry and the Occasional Mode: The 4 July Publication of *Leaves of Grass***

Whitman published the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* on or immediately following 4 July 1855. The book's large quarto format and elaborate cover design were no doubt patterned after the decorative poetry gift books of the period, but its size, shape, and date of publication also have much in common with the cheaper and more widely distributed Fourth of July commemorative broadsides that were a staple of antebellum Independence Day celebrations. Just as Whitman targeted highbrow readers by using ornamental gold-leaf lettering on the front and back covers of *Leaves of Grass*, he also gave the pages of his book the appearance of a densely-packed broadside targeted at a mass readership. At just over eight by eleven inches, the pages of the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass* were filled with fragmentary phrases linked together by irregular periods of ellipses. Resembling neither prose nor proper poetry, the long lines of Whitman's poems—and the ten-page preface accompanying them—looked like the piecemeal compilations of speeches, songs, and occasional poems celebrating American independence that were published in cheap broadsides to commemorate the year's festivities.

Publishing a self-proclaimed collection of American poetry on Independence Day might seem to suggest that Whitman thought of himself as an unquestioningly patriotic American poet. Given that the writing of occasional verses is traditionally the work of

poets laureate and national bards, it should come as no surprise that someone jockeying for the title of American bard would employ the occasional mode to inaugurate his entrance into the world of American poetry. But in antebellum festive culture, the Fourth of July was never simply a day of unexamined patriotism. William Lloyd Garrison's spectacular display on 4 July 1854 when he burned the Constitution to protest the Fugitive Slave Law is a singular, though by no means unprecedented, example of this tendency to use the Fourth of July as an occasion for both celebration and critique. By appropriating the format of the broadsides that recorded and disseminated displays of both patriotism and protest, Whitman joined with other antebellum Americans who turned Independence Day into an opportunity to question—as well as to pledge—their allegiance to the United States.

Accordingly, amid the over-the-top nationalism of the preface to the 1855 *Leaves of Grass* Whitman laments that his nation has been divided along class lines, writing that the antebellum United States is a place where “it is better to be a bound booby and rouge in office at a high salary than the poorest free mechanic or farmer” (LG 628). In a poem such as “A Song for Occupations” and in the lists of American laborers in “Song of Myself” Whitman continues this class-based critique by elevating the status of common workers to the level of high art.<sup>10</sup> For example, in section 15 of “Song of Myself”—the section where Whitman catalogues what Ed Cutler calls “the Whitmanian ensemble of laborers who comprise an integrated and abundant American democracy”<sup>11</sup>—Whitman

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<sup>10</sup> See Alan Trachtenberg, “The Politics of Labor and the Poet’s Work: A Reading of ‘A Song for Occupations’” *Walt Whitman: The Centennial Essays*, ed. Ed Folsom (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1994), 120B32.

interrupts his list of American workers to announce the July Fourth context: “In single file each shouldering his hod pass onward the laborers; / Seasons pursuing each other the indescribable crowd is gathered . . . it is the Fourth of July . . . what salutes of canon and small arms!” (LG 673) That the content of the 1855 *Leaves of Grass* dissented from orthodox nationalism has been recognized by many scholars. Betsy Erkkila, for one, writes, “The poems [of the 1855 *Leaves of Grass*] were not, as is commonly assumed, a product of Whitman’s unbounded faith in the democratic dream of America; on the contrary, they were an impassioned response to the signs of the death of republican traditions.”<sup>12</sup> That *Leaves of Grass* took the form of a July Fourth occasional poem in order to make this critique of the political and cultural shortcomings in the United States, however, has not been noted.

Public poetry belongs to what David Waldstreicher identifies as “that ambiguous middle ground of parades, spectatorship, and politics, which remains a site of national identity, effective political action, and mass-mediated delight.”<sup>13</sup> While Waldstreicher does not specifically consider the role that poetry played in the “ambiguous middle ground” of public celebrations—“ambiguous” because the meaning of American nationality was very much under debate in the antebellum period, and “middle ground” because this debate was conducted at virtually every level of national society—Shira

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<sup>11</sup> Edward S. Cutler, “Passage to Modernity: *Leaves of Grass* and the 1853 Crystal Palace Exhibition in New York.” *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 16:2 (1998): 65–89. 73.

<sup>12</sup> Betsy Erkkila, *Whitman the Political Poet* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 67

<sup>13</sup> David Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes: The Making of American Nationalism, 1776–1820* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 2–3.

Wolosky has demonstrated that nineteenth-century poetry played a “vibrant and active role within ongoing discussions defining America and its cultural directions.”<sup>14</sup>

Antebellum American poets of every political stripe took advantage of the setting provided by national celebrations to critique as well as to confirm the actions of the United States. Poems written on the Fourth of July, for example, not only performed the obligatory function of commemorating American political independence, but also often used the occasion to imagine a different future with greater independence for religious minorities, African Americans, or Native Americans.<sup>15</sup>

Snow’s “Time and Change,” a poem originally published to commemorate the 6 April 1830 founding of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, contains an occasional poem-within-a-poem titled “Ode for the Fourth of July.” As a poem with the form but not the content of an occasional poem (it inveighs against American religious intolerance rather than praise the legacy of the Revolution), Snow’s “Ode for the Fourth of July” gave her the opportunity to perform the office of national bard from outside of the mainstream of national culture. Similarly, in *America and Other Poems* Whitfield pairs two occasional poems, “Stanzas for the First of August” (a poem written to commemorate the 1 August 1838 liberation of slaves in the British empire) and his own “Ode for the Fourth of July,” as a way to highlight the contradiction between the United States’ professed commitment to human liberty and the constitutionally sanctioned

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<sup>14</sup> Shira Wolosky, “The Claims of Rhetoric: Toward a Historical Poetics (1820–1900),” *American Literary History* 15.1 (2003): 14–21. 14.

<sup>15</sup> See Bernd Engler, “From Providential to Secular Rhetoric: Fourth of July Poetry, 1776–1876,” in *The Fourth of July: Political Oratory and Literary Reactions*, ed. Paul Goetsch and Gerd Hurm (Tübingen, Germany: Gunter Naar Verlag, 1992), 85–111.

practice of slavery. Ridge also punctuated an occasional poem for the Fourth of July with references to the indigenous peoples of the Americas, just as he wrote Native American themes into the occasional poems he composed for the College of California graduation ceremony and the annual festival of the Agricultural, Horticultural, and Mechanics Society of the Northern District of California.

The expectation that a public occasional poem reflect the values of the community who commissioned it provides occasional poets with the opportunity to question as well as confirm the assumptions upon which those values are based. As John Dolan says, occasional poetry “is not grounded in the author/audience compact known as ‘fiction’”; rather, it is based on what Jonathan Kamholtz calls “an agreement between speaker, subject, and audience about how to identify [the] virtues” that bring a community together to celebrate an event.<sup>16</sup> Because public occasional poetry depends upon a consensus of opinion surrounding the event being commemorated in verse, it is designed to create a space wherein an audience sees itself reflected in a representative poet while the poet projects back to the audience a reciprocal sense of community or national identity. As such, occasional poetry fulfills Whitman’s dictum from the 1855 *Leaves of Grass* preface that “a bard [be] commensurate with a people” (LG 618). Two twentieth-century examples from poems read by Robert Frost and Maya Angelou at the inaugurations of U.S. Presidents John F. Kennedy and Bill Clinton, respectively, illustrate this tendency for occasional poets to present themselves as the representatives of communal values: The images of Puritan origins and continental expansion in Frost’s

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<sup>16</sup> John Dolan, *Poetic Occasion from Milton to Wordsworth* (London: MacMillan, 2000), 4; Jonathan Z. Kamholtz, “Ben Johnson’s *Epigrammes* and Poetic Occasions,” *Studies in*



“The Gift Outright” complemented the image of the poet as a rustic New Englander just as Angelou’s “The Pulse of Morning” presented a vision of liberal multiculturalism that she as an African American woman was intended to represent.

This holdover into the twentieth century of an earlier era’s search for a national bard who, as Whitman said in the 1855 preface, is “as superb as a nation [because] he has the qualities which make a superb nation” (*LG* 636), confirms Waldstreicher’s observation that nineteenth-century Americans “were seeing grave implications in *who* spoke in public on festive occasions as well as in *what* was said” (Waldstreicher 225, italics in original). But just as the occasion of such public poetry seeks to create a space of reciprocating national identity between the poet, the poem, and the public, such spaces often reveal that occasions for confirming a particular vision of national identity are also occasions that reveal the limits of a poet’s ability to be a representative national figure. To return to the example of the poems read at twentieth-century presidential inaugurations, Frost and Angelou were put forward as bardic representatives of the national public, but their duty at the inauguration was to confirm that someone other than themselves, i.e., the president of the United States, was the real national representative. Notwithstanding their shared New England heritage, Kennedy was a man of privilege and not the Puritan farmer of Frost’s poetic persona; and Clinton, despite Toni Morrison’s reports to the contrary, is white.<sup>17</sup>

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*English Literature, 1500–1900* 23.1 (1983): 77–94. 80.

<sup>17</sup> The poem that Frost originally planned to read, “Dedication,” is a self-reflexive meditation on the role of the poet in the public sphere. While Frost was cast as a national representative, he recognized that the occasion was not his and recited from memory instead “The Gift Outright” (Jeffrey Meyers, *Robert Frost: A Biography* [New York:

Whitfield, Snow, and Ridge were aware that the desire for consensus that lay at the heart of public occasional poetry could be exploited by bards who, because they did not share in that consensus, would never be considered “commensurate with a people.” When Ridge, for example, realized that the administrators of the College of California and the members of the Agricultural, Horticultural, and Mechanics Society wanted him to write poems that would reinforce their belief in the inferiority of indigenous peoples, he took advantage of the occasion to address these racist assumptions directly (as he did in “[Hail to the Plow!]” when he pointedly asked his audience, “Were peace and plenty but the Spaniard’s right? / The Aztec *barbarous* because not *white*?”). Whitfield similarly knew that the commemorative occasional poems he had written about the African revolutionary Cinque (“To Cinque”) and the anniversary of Caribbean independence (“Stanzas for the First of August”) would not be embraced by an entire national audience, which is why he paired them with the more patriotic “Lines on the Death of J. Quincy Adams” and “Ode for the Fourth of July,” respectively. Whitfield’s deft pairing of occasional poems in *America and Other Poems* highlighted his awareness that all Americans do not share in a single consensus, but that the United States is home to a diverse population with divergent values. Similarly, Snow knew that a national audience would not recognize the founding of Mormonism on 6 April 1830 as a major moment in American history, which is why she highlighted the sense of dislocation that she and her coreligionists felt by inserting a Fourth of July occasional poem into “Time and Change,” the lengthy commemorative poem about the Mormons’ place in sacred world history that

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Houghton Mifflin, 1996], 322–3). For Morrison’s statement that Clinton is the first black president, see her article in *The New Yorker* 5 October 1998, 32.

she originally published the week of 6 April 1841.

### **Whitman's Antebellum Persona**

Whitman's persona in the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass* was similarly designed to acknowledge and then challenge his audience's assumptions about who should be the poetic representative of the United States. In making the publication of the first edition of the *Leaves* correspond with Fourth of July celebrations in 1855, Whitman took advantage of the setting of a festive national occasion both to embrace and to reject received notions of representative national identity. Instead of putting his name on the title page of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman waited to identify himself until halfway through the poem that would later be titled "Song of Myself" when he wrote, "Walt Whitman, an American, one of the roughs, a kosmos." As I explain in this section, Whitman's self-identification as "one of the roughs" took advantage of the dual role that working-class men played in a symbolic economy that categorized them as both Jacksonian common men at the rhetorical heart of American democracy and as criminals who posed a threat to civil society.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, his self-identification as "a kosmos" posed the question of whether his sympathies extended beyond national borders or whether they were contained by the political geography of the United States.

On the one hand, "the rough" was a representative figure who was "commensurate with" a democratic notion of "a people"—as Whitman wrote in the 1855 preface, "the genius of the United States is not best or most in its executives or

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<sup>18</sup> See Erkkila, *Political Poet* 3, 102, Clarence Gohdes, "Whitman as 'One of the Roughs'," *Walt Whitman Review* 8.1 (March 1962), 18, and M. Wynn Thomas,

legislatures [. . .] but always most in the common people” (*LG* 617, ellipses added)—while on the other hand, “the rough” represented the kind of social disorder that mainstream America rejected. As one mid-century commentator noted, “A more despicable, dangerous, and detestable character than the New-York rough does not exist. He is an epitome of all the meannesses and vices of humanity.”<sup>19</sup> Whitman himself believed that working-class men represented all that was good about the United States. In an unpublished tract from 1856, he asked, “Who are the nation?” and “Where is the real America?,” responding, “the laboring persons, ploughmen, men with axes, spades, scythes, flails. . . . carpenters, masons, machinists, drivers of horses, workmen in factories.”<sup>20</sup>

Much of Whitman’s sympathy for working-class Americans came from his own upbringing among the working-class laborers and lower-middle-class artisans of Long Island, Brooklyn, and Manhattan.<sup>21</sup> Reflecting on his accomplishments as a poet at the

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“Whitman’s Tale of Two Cities,” *American Literary History* 6.4 (1994): 633–57.

<sup>19</sup> Junius Henri Browne, *The Great Metropolis; A Mirror of New York* (Hartford: American Publishing, 1869), 66.

<sup>20</sup> Walt Whitman, *Complete Poetry and Collected Prose*, ed. Justin Kaplan (New York: Library of America, 1982), 1307, 1310.

<sup>21</sup> While there is some debate among scholars as to the authenticity of Whitman’s pose as a lower-class laborer, scholars such as David Reynolds, M. Wynn Thomas, Betsy Erkkila, and Jerome Loving all take Whitman’s experience among the artisan class of Brooklyn and Long Island to be a central feature of his personal and poetic development. See David Reynolds, *Walt Whitman’s America: A Cultural Biography* (New York: Knopf, 1995), Thomas, *Lunar Light*, Erkkila, *Whitman the Political Poet*, and Jerome Loving, *Walt Whitman: The Song of Himself* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999). Andrew Lawson has recently written a highly nuanced analysis on what he takes to be Whitman’s lower-middle-class status in his “‘Spending for Vast Returns’: Sex, Class, and Commerce in the First *Leaves of Grass*” *American Literature* 75.2 (2003)

end of his life, Whitman said that one of his primary goals with *Leaves of Grass* had been to create a place for working Americans in national life and literature. He said, “I resolved at the start to diagnose, recognize, state, the case of the mechanics, laborers, artisans, of America—to get into the stream with them—to give them a voice in literature” (qtd in Traubel 2:142–3). But Whitman’s antebellum persona was “one of the roughs,” not “one of the workers.” As such, this intentional affiliation with what Whitman described to Thomas Harned as the “criminal classes” was designed to temper the American working man’s potential as a representative national figure with the outsider status of “the rough.” As a poet “determined to be in the minority,” as Maurice Bucke said, Whitman was fully aware of the impact that his persona as “one of the roughs” would have.

A reviewer for the Washington *Daily National Intelligencer*, for example, observed that “Walt is indeed ‘one of the roughs,’” and that as such he seemed very much like a member of the gangs of urban “roughs,” “rowdies,” and “toughs” that gave the poor sections of New York City a reputation of lawlessness.<sup>22</sup> The *Intelligencer* added that the portrait of Whitman wearing workingman’s clothes that appears at the front of the book—a portrait that Whitman would later refer to as “the street figure” (qtd. in Traubel 2:412)—“would answer equally well . . . as the true likeness of half a dozen celebrated criminals” (37). In addition to the outlaw quality of the portrait, the review

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335–65, and Jason Stacy has written a trenchant critique of the tendency to identify Whitman as a working-class poet in “Containing Multitudes: Whitman, the Working Class, and the Music of Moderate Reform,” *Popular Culture Review* 13 (2002), 137–54.

<sup>22</sup> “Notes on New Books,” *Walt Whitman: The Contemporary Reviews*, ed. Kenneth M. Price, 37.

notes, Whitman's self-depiction as "one of the roughs" placed him in the same category as the endearing "Bowery boy" of popular urban literature (37). The Bowery Boy, according to David Reynolds, was "a larger-than-life American figure on the order of Paul Bunyan and Davy Crockett" that appeared in antebellum fiction and theater as a way to celebrate the good-natured spirit of American ruggedness imputed to lower-class culture.<sup>23</sup>

Another review was similarly willing to grant that Whitman was a representative "son of the people," but it was disturbed at the way that Whitman spoke "rudely [and] wildly" about things "that cannot be quoted in drawing-rooms."<sup>24</sup> Other reviews called *Leaves of Grass* a "lawless collection of poems" that was written by a "rough, uncouth, [and] vulgar" poet who "should be kicked from all decent society as below the level of a brute."<sup>25</sup> The perceived vulgarity and lawlessness connected with Whitman's posture as "one of the roughs" was a resonant feature of his persona that these early reviewers immediately noted. Whitman reinforced the perception that he was equal parts criminal and common man by publishing many of these reviews—regardless of whether they were positive or negative—in an appendix to the 1856 edition of *Leaves of Grass*.<sup>26</sup>

In a postface to the 1856 *Leaves* that he wrote to accompany these reviews,

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<sup>23</sup> See Reynolds, *Walt Whitman's America*, 104.

<sup>24</sup> "His Style is Everywhere Graphic," *Walt Whitman: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Milton Hindus (London: Routledge, 1971), 82, 84.

<sup>25</sup> These first two reviews are from [Charles Eliot Norton], "Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*," and "Critic," *Walt Whitman: The Contemporary Reviews*, ed. Price, 14, 43. The third is from "An American Echo," *Walt Whitman: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Hindus, 61.

<sup>26</sup> See Edward Whitley, "Presenting Walt Whitman: 'Leaves-Droppings' as Paratext,"

Whitman connected the working-class energy of his poetry with a commitment to the kind of sexual expressiveness that had earned him the reputation of a poet whose “unnecessary openness . . . reveals to us matters which ought rather to remain in sacred silence,” as one reviewer put it.<sup>27</sup> Criticizing the kind of American poetry that presents itself to readers “dressed up, a fine gentleman,” Whitman wrote in this postface that the vast majority of American poets are “helpless dandies” who write as if they have been “castrated” (LG 639, 643). Whitman says that any true American poet must “recognize . . . the divinity of sex” and embrace what he calls a “faith in sex” (LG 643, 645). In the 1856 postface, Whitman advocates “an avowed, empowered, unabashed development of sex” that would benefit both women and men, but he places a special focus on a sexually charged “manly friendship” (LG 644). A number of scholars have explored the connections between Whitman’s homosexuality and the working-class culture of male companionship that enabled it, arguing that Whitman’s sense of himself as a national outsider was also based on the homosocial comradeship of “the roughs” that provided both a symbolic and an actual model of love between men.<sup>28</sup>

Although it was not until the late nineteenth century that a majority of readers began to identify a language for gay men’s experience in *Leaves of Grass*, Rufus Griswold’s 1855 review of *Leaves of Grass* reveals that even from the outset Whitman’s

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*Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 19.1 (2001): 1–17.

<sup>27</sup> “Transatlantic Latter-Day Poetry,” *Walt Whitman: The Contemporary Reviews*, ed. Price, 50.

<sup>28</sup> See M. Jimmie Killingsworth, *Whitman’s Poetry of the Body: Sexuality, Politics, and the Text* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 108, Robert K. Martin, “Whitman and the Politics of Identity,” *Walt Whitman: The Centennial Essays*, ed. Ed

homosexuality was an integral part of why his posture as “one of the roughs” was deemed so offensive. While most mid-century critics denounced the overt heterosexual imagery of *Leaves of Grass*, Griswold obliquely yet forcefully condemned Whitman’s homosexuality when he wrote, “[I]t does seem that some one [*sic*] should, under circumstances like these, undertake a most disagreeable, yet stern duty. The records of crime show that many monsters have gone on in impunity, because the exposure of their vileness was attended with too great indelicacy. *Peccatum illud horribile, inter Christianos non nominandum.*”<sup>29</sup> Griswold’s reversion to Latin to condemn “the sin so horrible that it should not be named among Christians” reflects both the opprobrium for homosexual acts and the lack of an adequate language to express homosexual identity in the mid-nineteenth century.

While many 1855 reviewers knew what Whitman meant when he called himself “an American” and “one of the roughs,” no one was quite sure what he had in mind when he said that he was a “kosmos.” A reviewer for *Putnam’s Monthly*, for example, wrote, “That he was an American, we knew before, for, aside from America, there is no quarter of the universe where such a production could have had a genesis. That he was one of the roughs was also tolerably plain; but that he was a kosmos, is a piece of news we were hardly prepared for. Precisely what a kosmos is, we trust Mr. Whitman will take an early occasion to inform the impatient public.”<sup>30</sup> What Whitman meant by the term can be as

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Folsom (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 172B81), 177.

<sup>29</sup> [Rufus W. Griswold], “*Criterion*” *Walt Whitman: The Contemporary Reviews*, ed. Price, 26–7.

<sup>30</sup> [Charles Eliot Norton]. “Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*,” *Walt Whitman: The*



confusing today as it was in 1855 given the different ways that he used it in *Leaves of Grass*. In the somewhat elliptical 1860 poem, “Kosmos,” Whitman uses the term to suggest someone who is willing to embrace experiences and sensations of all kinds (*LG* 330). One Oxford English Dictionary entry for “cosmos” says that the word means harmony and order, while another says that the word refers to anything broad, expansive, or all-encompassing. The OED also indicates that “cosmopolitan” (a word meaning “citizen of the world” whose Greek root is *kosmos*<sup>31</sup>) underwent a revival in the mid-nineteenth century that corresponded with growing international sentiment on both sides of the Atlantic. The OED identifies Emerson and Carlyle—both of whom were major influences on Whitman at the time—as sources for the revival of this term.

Whitman’s definition of “kosmos” as “the amplitude of the earth” and “the theory of the earth” in the 1860 poem of the same name (*LG* 330) resonates with the increased usage of the word “cosmopolitan” to indicate an affinity with all the peoples of the earth. Even though Whitman focused so much of his attention on that which lay exclusively within national boundaries—as he wrote in the 1867 version of “By Blue Ontario’s Shore,” “America isolated I sing; / I say that works made here in the spirit of other lands, are so much poison in The States” (*LG* 287 n4)—he also claims to have had an explicitly cosmopolitan design for his poetry: “I had more than my own native land in view when I was composing *Leaves of Grass*,” he wrote, “I wished to take the first step toward calling

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*Contemporary Reviews*, ed. Price, 18.

<sup>31</sup> See Derek Heater, *World Citizenship and Government: Cosmopolitan Ideas in the History of Western Political Thought* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1996), 7.

into existence a cycle of international poems.”<sup>32</sup> This hope that his poetry would be an integral part of an international community is reinforced by the expectant questions he asks himself in “Years of the Modern” when he writes, “Are all nations communing? is there going to be but one heart to the globe? / Is humanity forming en-masse?” (LG 410). Similarly, he clarified in “Song of Myself” that the leaves of grass in his poetry are part of a cosmopolitan organism and not a distinctively American breed: “This is the grass that grows wherever the land is and the water is,” he writes, “This is the common air that bathes the globe” (LG 40).

While so much of *Leaves of Grass* is focused on Whitman’s desire to develop a body of poetry that would be distinctively American in its aspect, he also displays a strong impulse to connect with the rest of the globe. He wrote in a brief poem titled “L of G” that his poetry was “For America—for all the earth, all nations, the common people, / (Not of one nation only—not America only)” (LG 542). He warned himself in a line from a mid-century notebook, “*Caution*—Not to blaart constantly for *Native American* models, literature, etc., and bluster out ‘nothing foreign.’”<sup>33</sup> He seems to have taken this warning to heart in poems such as “Salut au Monde!” where he celebrates the entire globe as “a great round wonder rolling through space” and claims to feel as connected to the other nations of the earth as he does to his home nation, writing, “I see distant lands, as real and near to the inhabitants of them as my land is to me” (LG 118). In “Starting from Paumanok” he similarly promises to “acknowledge contemporary lands” and “trail the

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<sup>32</sup> Walt Whitman, *The Correspondence* 6 Vols., ed. Edwin Haviland Miller (New York: New York University Press, 1961–77), 3:369.

<sup>33</sup> Walt Whitman, *Notebooks and Unpublished Prose Manuscripts* 6 Vols., ed. Edward F.

whole geography of the globe” (LG 18). In a poem originally titled “Poem of The Heart of The Son of Manhattan Island,” Whitman similarly extends his calling as a poet beyond the boundaries of his city and his nation, writing, “I am mad with devouring ecstasy to make joyous hymns for the whole earth” (LG 401).

Just as there existed a tension in Whitman’s identification with lower-class laborers between “the rough” as the American common man and “the rough” as a common criminal, so too did Whitman feel a tug between his nationalism and his internationalism. Whitman admitted towards the end of his life, “there is a sense in which I want to be cosmopolitan: then again a sense in which I make much of patriotism—of our native stock, the American stock” (qtd. in Traubel 3:132). He often tried to resolve this tension by insisting that the United States was itself a cosmopolitan nation, as he did when he said that “the best of America is the best cosmopolitanism.”<sup>34</sup> Claiming that the United States “cheerfully welcomed immigrants from Europe, Asia, Africa” (LG 646), Whitman called his country a “nation of nations” and said that his countrymen and -women were a “race of races” (LG 616, 618). He expressed a similar sentiment in a pre-*Leaves of Grass* newspaper editorial, writing, “We have not antipathy or bigotted [sic] ill will to *foreigners*. God forbid! Our love is capacious enough, and our arms wide enough, to encircle all men, whether they have birth in our glorious republic, the monarchies of Europe, or the hot deserts of Africa—whatever be their origin or their native land.”<sup>35</sup>

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Grier (New York University Press, 1984), 4:1588.

<sup>34</sup> Walt Whitman, *Daybooks and Notebooks*, ed. William White 3 Vols. (New York: New York University Press, 1978), 3:729.

<sup>35</sup> Walt Whitman, *Walt Whitman the New York Aurora*, ed. Joseph Jay Rubin and Charles

In a comment he made to his friend and companion Horace Traubel, Whitman linked his concern for lower-class laborers with his desire to “encircle all men” in his catholic embrace regardless of “their origin or their native land.” He said, “The great country, in fact, is the country of free labor—of free laborers: negro, white, Chinese, or others” (qtd. in Traubel 2:308). In moments such as this, Whitman subsumes his affiliation to a nation—in this case, “The great country”—to his subnational and transnational affiliations. While Whitman maintained such sentiments throughout his life (this comment he made to Traubel came well into the 1880), the explicit description persona of the poet as “an American, one of the roughest, a kosmos” disappeared from “Song of Myself” in every version of *Leaves of Grass* that was published following the Civil War.<sup>36</sup> It is likely that Whitman modified this description of himself to correspond with the new persona he adopted as the Good Gray Poet, a poet who reconciles national differences rather than expose them.<sup>37</sup> Nevertheless, “A Broadway Pageant,” the last poem that Whitman wrote in 1860 before he wrote his first Civil War poem in 1861, demonstrates the way that the antebellum Whitman sought to place his nation within subnational and transnational frames.

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H. Brown (State College, PA: Bald Eagle Press, 1950), 63, italics in original.

<sup>36</sup> See the specific changes to this line as they are listed in Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass: A Textual Variorum of the Printed Poems*, 3 Vols. ed. Scully Bradley, Harold W. Blodgett, Arthur Golden, and William White. (New York: New York University Press, 1980), 1:31.

<sup>37</sup> Whitman oversaw the authoring of a biography of that name immediately following the Civil War as a way to recast his public persona in a more positive light. See William D. O’Connor, *The Good Gray Poet: A Vindication* (New York: Bunce and

## II.

### “A Broadway Pageant”: Whitman’s Public Performance as the American Bard

In retrospect, the impending Civil War marks the 1860 edition of *Leaves of Grass* as a transition in Whitman’s persona the outsider bard to the Good Gray Poet who unified a divided nation. At the time, however, Whitman thought of the 1860 edition as more of a culmination than a transition, calling it “the true ‘Leaves of Grass,’ the fuller-grown work of which the former two issues were the inchoates.”<sup>38</sup> By mid-1860 Whitman thought of *Leaves of Grass* as a completed work and begin to think about writing another book of poems tentatively titled *Banner at Day-Break* (Allen 267). Whitman had not published any poems in the popular press since before the 1855 publication of *Leaves of Grass*, but he published a spate of poems during late 1859 and into 1860 as a way to promote the edition of *Leaves of Grass* that he considered at the time to be his definitive poetic statement.

In addition to serving as a publicity strategy, publishing in the popular press gave Whitman the opportunity to define his project for American poetry at a pivotal moment of his career. Publishing an early version of the ars poetic “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking” in the 24 September 1859 issue of the New York *Saturday Press* allowed

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Huntington, 1866).

<sup>38</sup> Quoted in Gay Wilson Allen, *The Solitary Singer: A Critical Biography of Walt Whitman* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985): 232. See also Rosemary Graham, “Solving ‘All the Problems of Freedom’: The Case of the 1860 *Leaves of Grass*,” *American Transcendental Quarterly* 7 (1993): 5–23 and the introduction to Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass: Facsimile Edition of the 1860 Text*, ed. Roy Harvey Pearce (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1961).

Whitman to reflect publicly on his development as an artist.<sup>39</sup> Another poem, “A Broadway Pageant,” which was originally published as “The Errand-Bearers” in the *New York Times* on 27 June 1860, was written to commemorate the visit of Japanese ambassadors who had come to the United States to ratify Townsend Harris’s 1854 trade agreement. “A Broadway Pageant” was the first occasional poem that Whitman had written since he published the 1855 *Leaves of Grass* on the Fourth of July. Just as 4 July 1855 presented Whitman with an occasion to explore the relationship between his nationalism and his equally strong commitments to working-class Americans and to the rest of the world, the 1860 parade in honor of the Japanese embassy similarly allowed him to reflect on how he thought of himself as “an American, one of the roughs, a kosmos.”

In “A Broadway Pageant,” Whitman presents himself as the mouthpiece for three distinct communities: the United States, the working-class New Yorkers who crowded the streets of lower Manhattan to catch a glimpse of the parade, and an emerging global community brought together through international commerce. As a poem written to celebrate the United States’ diplomatic coup over Europe in securing trade rights with the isolationist government of Japan, “A Broadway Pageant” presents a vivid portrait of Whitman’s inflated nationalism. At the same time, the poem is written from the perspective of a working-class New Yorker in the parade route on a crowded city street, which highlights Whitman’s attempt to understand what American nationality means to populations on the fringes of society. Similarly, when Whitman turns his welcoming

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<sup>39</sup> See Joel Myerson, *Walt Whitman: A Descriptive Bibliography* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1993), 766–7 for a list of the poems published during this period.

embrace of the Japanese embassy into a salute to the entire world, the cosmopolitan impulse of his poetry is given one of its fullest expressions. This is not to say that Whitman's nationalism recedes into the background of the poem—indeed, moments of “A Broadway Pageant” are as nationalistic as anything he ever wrote—but that as Whitman lauds U.S. trade power he does so from the perspective of a man on the street who feels his connection with a mass of New Yorkers as strongly as he feels his communion with the world.

As an occasional poem written for an event that received even more attention than the 1858 laying of the Atlantic telegraph cable, “A Broadway Pageant” is the most public performance of the role of American poet that Whitman conducted before the Civil War. There is nothing quite like “A Broadway Pageant” in all of *Leaves of Grass*. While a poem like “A Song for Occupations” allowed Whitman to express his enthusiastic support of the working classes, “A Broadway Pageant” gave him the most public opportunity he had as a poet to define the place of urban laborers in the United States. Whitman considered the working classes to be a representative subpopulation, but the same newspaper that published “A Broadway Pageant” said that the working-class crowd was a disruptive force that potentially prevented New York from being presented to the Japanese ambassadors as a representative American city. “A Broadway Pageant” also gave Whitman the opportunity to fulfill his 1855 dictum for the American poet that “To him the other continents arrive as contributions . . . he gives them reception for their sake and his own sake” (*LG* 618). In a poem like “Salut Au Monde!” Whitman imaginatively journeys throughout the world saluting the people of other lands, but in “A Broadway Pageant” he is given the literal opportunity to extend his sympathies to people beyond

national borders.

The importance of “A Broadway Pageant” to the Whitman canon has never been fully appreciated. When not subordinated to “Passage to India” as a precursor of Whitman’s 1871 poem on the similar theme of international unity, it is frequently dismissed as a minor work coming between the May 1860, release of the third edition of *Leaves of Grass* and the beginning of Whitman’s Civil War poetry in 1861.<sup>40</sup> Because “A Broadway Pageant” identifies national tensions other than those between the North and the South, it is frequently dismissed by scholars who emphasize the impact of the impending Civil War on Whitman’s thinking in 1860. As I previously mentioned, Whitman thought of the 1860 *Leaves of Grass* as a culmination of his project for American poetry, and not as a transition. “A Broadway Pageant” is an unheralded testament of how Whitman pulled together the various strands of his antebellum project into a coherent proclamation of his position as a national outsider who would be the national bard.

The facts of Whitman’s biography clearly point to the central role that publishing “A Broadway Pageant” played in Whitman’s conception of himself as an American bard at this important moment in his career. The publication of “A Broadway Pageant” in a major newspaper is the last in a series of accomplishments that began in February of 1860 when the Boston-based firm of Thayer and Eldridge promised Whitman that they would turn *Leaves of Grass* into a commercial and critical success. To a poet who had personally financed the first two editions of his book only to see them fail to attract a substantial audience, this offer must have signaled that both public acceptance and



financial stability were finally within reach. The reviews of the 1860 *Leaves of Grass* that Whitman had the opportunity to read in the month between publishing the third edition of the *Leaves* and writing “A Broadway Pageant” must also have given him the impression that his project for American poetry was gaining more recognition than it ever had. In addition to the praise of a June reviewer who called him “the new American poet” and said that “The people who have not yet heard of Walt Whitman are few indeed,” the *New York Times* (which had heretofore ignored him) reminded its readers that “Five years ago a new poet appeared, styling himself the representative of America.”<sup>41</sup> While this acknowledgment by the *Times* should by no means be taken as an indication that Whitman’s claim to the title of national bard was universally accepted (or even widely known), it doubtless played a role in Whitman’s decision to publish “A Broadway Pageant” in the same newspaper that recognized—even if it did not necessarily endorse—his goal to be the American poet.

Whitman had received positive reviews before, but June 1860 presented him with a commercial success that he had never experienced. Two days before the Japanese embassy arrived in New York City, Whitman learned that the first printing of the 1860 *Leaves of Grass* had sold out and that his publishers were preparing a second printing for distribution.<sup>42</sup> Selling a thousand copies in less than two months does not match the standards of, say, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* for reaching a national audience (as Whitman

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<sup>40</sup> “Beat, Drums, Beat” was published in September 1861 (Myerson 768).

<sup>41</sup> These reviews can be found as “New Publications: The New Poets,” “Literature,” “Walt Whitman,” in *Walt Whitman: The Contemporary Reviews*, ed. Price, 82–7.

<sup>42</sup> See the account in Reynolds, *Walt Whitman’s America*, 387.

himself acknowledged<sup>43</sup>), but in contrast to the dismal sales of the 1855 and 1856 editions of *Leaves of Grass* this limited success was nothing short of incredible. Given that Whitman heard about his publishers' decision to reissue the 1860 *Leaves of Grass* only two days before the procession for the Japanese embassy, it seems likely that he thought that writing a public occasional poem for a high-profile event would give him the perfect opportunity to capitalize on this limited—though what must have then seemed significant—recognition of his project for American poetry. With public acceptance seemingly closer than it had ever been, the opportunity to write a poem on a national occasion must have seemed a fortuitous (if not providential) turn of events in what Whitman no doubt regarded his rising status as an American bard.

Coupled with this public acceptance, however, was the constant reminder that his poems were still in many ways outside the mainstream. A number of parodies appeared in periodicals from New York to San Francisco during early 1860 lampooning the style of Whitman's poetry and his persona as "one of the roughs." Whitman no doubt saw these parodies as they were collected and reproduced by his friend Henry Clapp in the New York *Saturday Press*.<sup>44</sup> These parodies, which ranged from playful to dismissive to cruel, must have had a double effect on Whitman: he probably regarded any publicity as good publicity (he himself had anonymously written and published a mixed review in 1855), but these parodies would also have reminded him that his bid to be the national bard would always be hampered by his affiliation with fringe elements. This spate of public recognition—whether it came in the form of acceptance or scorn—led Whitman to

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<sup>43</sup> Whitman, *Correspondence*, ed. Miller, 1:52.

believe that writing a public occasional poem provided him with an outlet to express his various allegiances as “an American, one of the roughs, a kosmos.”

### **The Poet as “One of the Roughs” in “A Broadway Pageant”**

If newspaper estimates are to be trusted, 500,000 people—or almost half of the entire population of the city at mid-century—turned out to welcome the delegates of the Japanese embassy in what New Yorkers were confident was the best public display the ambassadors would see on their visit to the United States. American and Japanese flags hung from windows and across city streets, military guns fired salutes, and steam jets wrote “Welcome” in huge ephemeral letters.<sup>45</sup> If anything could have put a damper on the occasion, local papers reported, it was the working-class crowds that packed the parade route on Broadway and the Bowery from Battery Park to Union Square. Concerned with putting forward the best possible face for both the city and the nation, New York journalists dedicated a significant number of column inches to identifying the ways that “the roughs” among the working classes potentially jeopardized Manhattan’s status as a representative American city. The *New York Times* wrote,

[T]he “roughs” of all orders and degrees had the occasion in their hands, to deal with it as a day of enlightened curiosity and good-humored welcome, or to make it a boisterous, vulgar, and scandalous riot. Those who have known our City and its Government only in their ordinary conditions, no doubt expected that the latter

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<sup>44</sup> Allen, *Solitary Singer*, 263–4 and Reynolds, *Walt Whitman’s America*, 387.

<sup>45</sup> “The Sensation Yesterday: Magnificent Reception of the Japanese Embassy,” *New York Herald* 17 June 1860, 1–3; “The Japanese Embassy,” *New York Times* 18 June

alternative would be chosen.<sup>46</sup>

The inherent mistrust of New York City's working classes expressed here—it was “expected” that they would turn the day into “a boisterous, vulgar, and scandalous riot”—is presented alongside an offhand comment about the democratic character of “the roughs” as the city’s “Government.” Despite being called New York’s “Government,” however, the working classes do not necessarily make the city a representative national space.

Such representations of urban workers were common fare as negative depictions of the “dangerous classes” accompanied what Sean Wilentz calls a “republicanism of the streets.”<sup>47</sup> The double social resonance of “the rough” reflected the split personality of nineteenth-century New York City itself. As M. Wynn Thomas writes, “[M]id-nineteenth-century New York was a city divided several ways along new lines both of economic interest and of social class” (“Whitman’s Tale of Two Cities” 647). The *Times* depicts this dual character of mid-century New York in its account of the parade:

Yet never was New-York more free from everything like riot, more good-humored, more considerate, more fit to be held up as a model and example to the great nation of which the common consent of the world agrees with the Japanese in regarding her as the representative. [. . .] They [the roughs] sunk away out of sight and left the City to the overwhelming majorities of well-conducted, civil and

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1860, 1.

<sup>46</sup> “The Japanese in New York,” *New York Times* 18 June 1860, 4.

<sup>47</sup> Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788-1850* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 263.

quick-witted citizens who compose the real strength of the population of New-York. (“The Japanese in New York” 4)

According to the *Times*, the “real” population of the city that is to be regarded as “the representative” of “the great nation” being celebrated for its diplomatic acumen in securing a trade agreement with Japan are the city’s “well-conducted, civil and quick-witted” citizens, and not “the roughs.” The *Times* presents New York as a split city, one section of which is representative of the United States and another section that—despite being the city’s “Government”—has to sink “away out of sight” for the city to represent the nation. Nowhere was the economic division that split New York society more vividly illustrated than in the sections of lower Manhattan that formed the core of the parade route: the working-class Bowery and mercantile Broadway; or, as the *Times* has it, “the warlike Bowery” and “polite Broadway” (4).

The New York *Herald* similarly called the Bowery “one of the most celebrated representative spots of the city,” but it also said that for the city to represent the nation that day the Bowery had to change its character. The *Herald* said that on the day of the procession,

The democratic element was in its glory. The ‘governing classes’ [. . .] owing to a high patriotic sense of the occasion, or to some other equally potent motive, [. . .] comported themselves in a manner really deserving of the adjective decent. How much violence to their feelings this effort caused the writer sayeth not, merely mentioning it as a praiseworthy incident. (“The Sensation Yesterday” 2)

While the *Herald* follows the *Times* in referring to the denizens of the Bowery as the “democratic element” and “governing classes” of the city, their “high patriotic sense”

was probably not what kept them from disrupting the procession. Rather, it was “some other equally potent motive,” which is no doubt a reference to the police presence monitoring large sections of the parade route on the Bowery (“The Japanese in New York” 4).

Publishing “A Broadway Pageant” alongside these reports of the roughs’ questionable status as city and national representatives, Whitman intervenes in a debate over what “the crowd” meant not only to New York City, but to American democracy as well. These newspaper reports partake of two prevailing notions about “the crowd” as a social form: while the crowd held the promise of democratic unity, it was also associated with anarchy and poverty in ways that many Americans would not have recognized as nationally representative.<sup>48</sup> In the 1855 preface to *Leaves of Grass* Whitman praises the United States for “the tremendous audacity of its crowds” (LG 617). Conversely, Ralph Waldo Emerson once said that “Masses are rude, lame, unmade, pernicious in their demands and influence, and need not to be flattered but to be schooled.”<sup>49</sup> In an effort to depict the crowd as the embodiment of American democracy rather than as a threat to moral order, Whitman spends the lengthy first section of the poem placing himself as public poet within the crowd scene. And since “A Broadway Pageant” roughly follows the conventions of the Pindaric ode form that was often employed for public occasions, by making the first section of the poem an invocation of an urban muse Whitman grants

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<sup>48</sup> This discussion of the conflicted nature of the crowd in American culture is based on Nicolaus Mills, *The Crowd in American Literature* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986) and Mary Esteve, *The Aesthetics and Politics of the Crowd in American Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

<sup>49</sup> Quoted in Christopher Newfield, “Democracy and Homoeroticism,” *Yale Journal of*

the crowd a poetic status that supersedes the negative reports given in the press.<sup>50</sup> Contra Emerson, he “flatters” the crowd, writing,

When million-footed Manhattan, unpent, descends to its pavements,

. . . . .

When pennants trail, and festoons hang from the windows,

When Broadway is entirely given up to foot-passengers and foot-standers—When  
the mass is densest,

When the façades of the houses are alive with people—When eyes gaze, riveted,  
tens of thousands at a time,

When the guests, Asiatic, from the islands, advance—When the pageant moves  
forward visible,

When the summons is made—When the answer that waited thousands of years,  
answers,

I too arising, answering, descend to the pavements, merge with the crowd, and  
gaze with them.<sup>51</sup>

In many ways this is a typical Whitman catalogue, with the repeated word “When” used to preface a list of raw sensations that the poet hopes will have the

*Criticism* 6.3 (1993): 29–62, 36.

<sup>50</sup> Each stanza of the poem is individually numbered in the *New York Times*, but in later editions of *Leaves of Grass* the poem is broken down into three numbered sections that correspond with the three sections of the Pindaric ode: invocation of the muse, recounting of heroic deeds, and vision of future greatness.

<sup>51</sup> All citations of “A Broadway Pageant” are from the original *Times* version. Walt Whitman, “The Errand-Bearers: 16th 6th month, Year 64 of The States,” *New York Times* 27 June 1860, 2.

cumulative effect of translating the actual presence of the scene into words. But as part of a public occasional poem following the conventions of a Pindaric ode, this catalogue is designed not only to convey the presence of the scene, but also to summon the presence of the muse. Conflating poet and muse in a gesture that is similar to the invocation of “I celebrate myself, and sing myself” in “Song of Myself” (LG 26), Whitman says that the poet/muse will answer the call and descend to the scene when the urban crowd is fully realized. Repeating “When” before every image suggests that these urban sights are preconditions that must be met if the national bard is to emerge and participate in the festive occasion: when “the mass is densest,” when the buildings come alive with faces in the windows, and when the eyes of “tens of thousands” of New Yorkers “gaze, riveted” on a single common focus, only then the poet will answer the request that he commemorate the occasion in verse.

The unified gaze of tens of thousands of eyes here reinforces the image of half-a-million New Yorkers as “million-footed Manhattan.” The phrase “million-footed” is, admittedly, a somewhat precious way to describe a crowd of 500,000 people; but this phrase also allows Whitman to imagine the crowd as an individual entity describable with the singular pronoun “its” as “million-footed Manhattan, unpent, descends to its pavements.” This is, again, a typically Whitmanian image depicting the merge of the many in one that defines democratic unity. At the same time, the grotesque image of a million-footed creature that is “unpent” onto city streets recalls fears about the group mentality of the crowd, particularly the violence-prone crowds depicted in New York papers. As the New York *Herald* reported, “The crowd was so great at one time that it was impossible for anyone to attempt locomotion on his own part, but he had to permit



himself to be carried along with the crowd” (“The Sensation Yesterday” 2).

Containing both the promise of democracy and the perils of anarchy, the crowd is “the rough” writ large. As such, the parallel language that Whitman uses in the opening and closing lines of this catalogue—“Manhattan [. . .] descends to its pavements” and “I too [. . .] descend to the pavements”—reinforces his allegiance to the working-class men and women in the crowd. The speaker of Whitman’s poem could have placed himself somewhere else along the parade route—in a storefront window with merchants, in a ship on the harbor, in one of the military formations that saluted the ambassadors, or in the procession itself—but he chooses, significantly, to identify with the crowd. Imaginary crowd scenes appear throughout *Leaves of Grass*. In section 42 of “Song of Myself,” for example, Whitman announces that he makes “A call in the midst of the crowd, / My own voice, orotund sweeping and final” (LG 66). Donald Pease has observed that “Whitman’s poetry seems to take place against the backdrop of a national celebration” that “dissolve[s] the conflicts of interest” between national subjects.<sup>52</sup> While Pease says that “For Whitman, crowds extinguish differences among persons” (110), Whitman’s involvement with a real rather than an imagined crowd during this actual national celebration has a different effect than it does in other poems.

In “Song of Myself,” for example, Whitman gives the illusion that he can turn the entire nation into an imagined crowd as he rubs shoulders with African American slaves on Southern plantations, fur trappers on the Western frontier, and prostitutes in Northern

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<sup>52</sup> Donald Pease, *Visionary Compacts: American Renaissance Writers in Cultural Contexts* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), 113. For a similar evaluation of Whitman and the crowd see Larzer Ziff, “Whitman and the Crowd,” *Critical Inquiry* 10.4 (1984): 570–91

cities. In “Song of Myself,” Whitman passes through the entire nation, possessing the bodies of different national subjects in an effort to unify an otherwise fragmented nation. Whitman could have made a similarly imaginative gesture in “A Broadway Pageant” by inhabiting the bodies of both the working-class members of the crowd as well as the wealthy New Yorkers who watched the parade from the safety of building windows. But rather than unify national diversity into the single voice of “Song of Myself” that says “I am large, I contain multitudes” (*LG* 77), however, in “A Broadway Pageant” Whitman emphasizes his affiliation with a national subpopulation who he considered to be eminently representative of American nationality despite the fact that they were, according to newspaper reports, denied the status of national representatives.

Much of this has to do with the generic conventions of the occasional poem that Whitman was writing. Unlike private lyrics that are designed to be overheard by a later audience, occasional poetry directly rather than indirectly addresses its audience, and because this audience is often local rather than national, poets who would speak to the entire nation on public occasions must negotiate between an audience connected to the immediate events of the occasion and a larger audience that will later participate in the occasion through print. Mary Loeffelholz says that public poetry was part of “a nineteenth-century aestheticized civic sphere, smaller in scale than the national print sphere [. . .] it both communicates with and reimagines.”<sup>53</sup> The tension between the local scene of an occasional poem and the national scene which, according to Loeffelholz, it both engages with and reimagines, allows for poets to tease out the connections and

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<sup>53</sup> Mary Loeffelholz, “The Religion of Art in the City at War: Boston’s Public Poetry and the Great Organ, 1863.” *American Literary History* 13.2 (2001): 212–41. 213.

disjunctions between a subnational community and the larger nation to which it belongs. Whitman habitually used print to imagine a national audience at the expense of a local one, addressing his temporally and geographically distant reader as “Whoever you are holding me now in hand” to give the illusion of an intimate connection with a vast and diverse nation (*LG* 99). Located in a single city on a single day, however, in “A Broadway Pageant” Whitman is forced to view the nation through a specific national subpopulation.

Even though it is the work of the national bard to produce public poetry for festive occasions, “A Broadway Pageant” has been occluded by “Song of Myself” as a prime example of Whitman’s quest to be the American poet. “Song of Myself” has made its way to the center of the Whitman canon because of the way it translates nationality into poetry. Since the United States is said to consist of autonomous individuals bound together in an expanding nation, its corresponding national poetry should presumably consist of private lyrics that first look inward to the self and then outward across an enormous nation. Embodying both the liberal self and the broad expanse of national borders, “Song of Myself” takes advantage of a lyric tradition that defines the poet’s relationship with his or her audience as an act of overhearing. In being overheard, lyric poets maintain their autonomy as individuals while at the same time connecting themselves with an unseen and potentially vast national geography. Occasional poetry can also imagine a national audience, as do Whitman’s own post-Civil War elegies, but a public occasional poem such as “A Broadway Pageant” is designed to be directly addressed to a discrete community who is celebrating the same occasion, which has real implications for the audience that Whitman imagines for his poem.

The fractures in national identity brought to the fore by Whitman's necessary location with the crowd in "A Broadway Pageant" are reflected in the titles he uses to address his audience. In this section of the poem, Whitman addresses two distinct yet overlapping audiences: the city residents of "Superb-faced Manhattan" and the national community of his "Comrade Americanos." When Whitman addresses the audience saying, "Superb-faced Manhattan, / Comrade Americanos—to us, then, at last, the orient comes. / To us, my city," he demonstrates how the occasional poem's direct address has the simultaneous effect of making the local audience representative of the nation and of fracturing the nation into disparate segments. Unlike the private lyric's expectation of an eavesdropping audience, the public occasional poem's direct address creates a space for the audience to see itself reflected in the national poet as the poet reflects back to the audience an image of representative nationality. Because occasional poems are grounded in a consensus of community values, for Whitman to identify the community whose values should be praised in this occasion, however, he must negotiate the multiple layers of his audience to determine whether he should address the nation or the city, and within the city, the "well-conducted, civil and quick-witted" citizens that the *Times* praised or the so-called "governing classes" that the *Herald* dismissed as a lawless element. Whitman's strong affiliation with the crowd makes clear where his allegiance lies.

### **The Poet as "Kosmos" in "A Broadway Pageant"**

Just as the crowd scene along the parade route allowed Whitman to see the fracture lines between a national subpopulation and the nation at large, the arrival of the Japanese embassy to New York City provided him with a sense of the United States'

relationship with the rest of the world. In the natural amphitheater formed between downtown buildings “Where our tall-topt marble and iron beauties range on opposite sides,” the Japanese ambassadors are in Whitman’s poem the first act in a larger drama about the unification of the globe. Like “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,” “A Broadway Pageant” turns an urban spectacle into a visionary experience that it is the poet’s privilege to record. “I do not know whether others behold what I behold,” Whitman writes early on in the poem, “But I will sing you a song of what I behold.” Whitman purports to see more than “the tann’d Japanee only” and says that a vision of Asia from Palestine to the Pacific islands opens before his eyes: “the whole continent itself appears—the past, the dead, / . . . / Vast desolated cities—the gliding Present—All of these, and more, are in the pageant-procession.” Whitman then extends this vision of Asia to global proportions, writing of his visionary processional, “Geography, the world, is in it.”

Like many New Yorkers, Whitman was excited about the visit of the Japanese embassy. And, like many Americans, Whitman believed that this visit was proof both of the United States’ emerging power in the nineteenth century, and of an international unification of cultures made possible by trade. The parade route itself testified to this dual message. Marching bands played “Hail Columbia” in the midst of banners proclaiming “Gates of All Nations this Day Open,” “One Blood, All Nations,” and “The Jubilee of the World Near at Hand” (“The Sensation Yesterday” 3; “The Japanese Embassy” 1). As indicated by the singing of “Hail Columbia!” one goal of the parade was to celebrate the United States’ diplomatic acumen in procuring a trade agreement with Japan that European powers were never able to secure; but the banners that said such things as “All Nations, Union Forever” show that another message of the day was that nation-states

would become increasingly less relevant in an era of global trade.

By 1860, New Yorkers had grown accustomed to thinking that their city had as many ties to the outside world as it had to its home nation. As the New York City alderman said in a public statement directed to the Japanese ambassadors, “[O]ur city is bound by ties of interest to every nation on the face of the globe, and to none more warmly than to Japan” (“The Sensation Yesterday” 1). But antebellum New Yorkers weren’t unified in saying that trade with Japan heralded the dawn of a global era; rather, many believed that the occasion signaled the United States’ rise to national prominence. The New York *Times* commented,

New York represents the full grandeur of that mighty American commerce which has won from the hitherto impregnable East a recognition denied to the arms of more exacting and more arrogant powers. The selection of America as their point of destination by the envoys of Japan has inflicted a flash of light upon the political optics of Great Britain. . . . It has compelled them suddenly to see . . . that the age of their commercial preponderance in the world is past, and that the maritime enterprise of the Republic whose shores touch either ocean [i.e., the United States] has become a fact of the first magnitude in contemporaneous history. Of that enterprise New York is the unquestioned capital and heart. (“The Japanese in New York” 4)

Just as “the roughs” were seen as both the city’s democratic “Government” and as the population that threatened to make the city an unrepresentative national space, so too did the arrival of the Japanese embassy suggest that New York City was both the vanguard of American political power and a cosmopolitan space that was as connected to the world as

it was to the United States. Accordingly, “A Broadway Pageant” addresses whether New York’s status as an international trading hub makes it the economic and cultural heart of the nation or a meeting place for world cultures.

At moments, Whitman turns “A Broadway Pageant” into a hymn to American imperialism, calling the United States “the new empire, grander than any before” and “a greater supremacy” than the world has ever seen. But at other points in the poem he counsels the United States to humbly accept its place in the world, urging it to “Bend your proud neck” to the Japanese diplomats who are “now sending messages over the archipelagoes to you.” Overall, however, the impact of the poem is that Whitman’s communion with the rest of the world is as strong as, if not stronger than, his national affiliations. The similarities between Whitman’s description of the mass of New Yorkers to whom he expresses such great affinity and his description of the mass of people from Asia who appear in his vision suggests that Whitman thinks of himself as much a citizen of the world as he does a citizen of the United States.

Following the convention of the Pindaric ode that the second section of the poem be formally parallel to the first, the vision of Asia in “A Broadway Pageant” is given in a catalogue where depictions of a global crowd echo those of the urban crowd from earlier in the poem:

The countries there, with their populations—the millions en masse—are curiously  
 here,  
 The multitudes are all here—they show visibly enough to my eyes,  
 The swarming market-places—the temples, with idols ranged along the sides, or  
 at the end—bonze, brahmin, and llama, also,

The mandarin, farmer, merchant, mechanic, and fisherman, also,  
 The singing-girl and the dancing-girl—the ecstatic person, absorbed,  
 The interminable unpitted hordes of toilsome persons—the divine Buddha,  
 The secluded Emperors—Confucius himself—the great poets and heroes—the  
       warriors, the castes, all.

The “When” that precedes every line of the first catalogue is replaced here by the definite article as Whitman conjures another crowd scene of “millions” of people “en-masse” filling the visionary space of the city streets. These images of the East might lack the authenticity of Whitman’s firsthand experience with the New York City crowd—indeed, many sound as if their origin is Barnum’s Chinese Museum rather than an inspired vision—but the image of “interminable unpitted hordes” from Asia makes the same impact as that of the urban host.

Whitman was not the only observer to draw a connection between the crowds of New Yorkers attending the parade and the city’s cosmopolitan character. The *New York Herald* said that the crowds surrounding the Japanese procession were proof that the world had already arrived in Manhattan: “There were Dutch and Irish, French and English, Spanish, Italian, and even Chinese people crowding the road and sidewalks . . . and from the unintelligible jabbering of tongues one might almost suppose oneself at the Tower of Babel” (“The Sensation Yesterday” 2). Lower Manhattan had already earned a reputation as a cosmopolitan space. Whitman himself had previously referred to Broadway as a “thoroughfare of the world,”<sup>54</sup> and another observer noted that “A walk

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<sup>54</sup> [Walt Whitman], “Walt Whitman, a Brooklyn Boy,” *Walt Whitman: The Contemporary Reviews*, ed. Price, 22.



through Broadway is like a voyage round the Globe” (Browne 339). The events surrounding the visit of the Japanese embassy further heightened what was already a strong sense that New York City was intimately connected to the rest of the world. As the *Times* wrote, “this crowded, nay, cosmopolitan life of ours was never so crowded, or so cosmopolitan, as it promises to be in the summer months of 1860” (“The Japanese in New York” 4).

Just as the overwhelming mass of people in an urban crowd can diffuse any sense of individual identity, an Asian presence in New York has the potential to break down national and personal boundaries as well. Whitman writes at a transition in the catalogue, referring to the Japanese ambassadors in particular and the visionary multitudes from Asia in general, “These, and whatever belongs to them, palpable, show forth to me, and are seized by me, / And I am seized by them, and friendly held by them.” While Whitman’s embrace of non-U.S. cultures is often an imperial act of what Walter Grünzweig calls a “loving aggressiveness” that overpowers the one who is embraced, it is not only Whitman who “seizes” Asian culture: “I am seized by them, and friendly held by them.”<sup>55</sup> Friendly embraces in Whitman’s poetry frequently involve an intersubjective penetration that dissolves boundaries of gender, race, and nationality.<sup>56</sup> As such, Whitman depicts New York City as an otherwise American space that had been

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<sup>55</sup> Walter Grünzweig, “Noble Ethics and Loving Aggressiveness: The Imperialist Walt Whitman,” *An American Empire: Expansionist Cultures and Policies, 1881–1917*, ed. Serge Ricard (Aix-en-Provence: Université de Provence, 1990), 151–65.

<sup>56</sup> See Michael Moon, *Disseminating Whitman: Revision and Corporeality in Leaves of Grass* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992) and Karen Sanchez-Eppler, *Touching Liberty: Abolition, Feminism, and the Politics of the Body* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993).



my city with a delicate thin haze,

When, gorgeous, the countless straight stems, the forests at the wharves, thicken  
with colors,

When every ship richly drest carries her flag at the peak.

The phallic and technological images of guns and ship masts contrast a sense of masculine American modernity with the Asian primitivism depicted as feminine and organic in the figure of “the Originatress.” But at the same time, however, the smoke and smell of the gunfire that Whitman fixates on for three lines produces a “delicate thin haze” of canopied “heaven-clouds” among “richly drest” banners that is reminiscent of Orientalist depictions of harems and opium dens. Similarly, the image of “the forests at the wharves” used to describe the ships in the harbor is a monument to the artificiality of modern technology (as opposed to the “ample and flowing” forms of the East), but in a later essay Whitman described Manhattan as “rising out of the midst, tall-topt, ship-hemm’d, modern, American, yet strangely oriental.”<sup>57</sup>

Critiques levied against the exotic images of Asia in “A Broadway Pageant” appropriately identify Whitman’s dependence on Orientalist imagery, but they fail to account for his desire to transform the otherwise American space of New York City.<sup>58</sup> As an Asian culture comes to New York City, “A Broadway Pageant” records, this American city necessarily changes into the best version of Asia that Whitman can imagine. And while this transformation is necessarily incomplete, Whitman is able to

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<sup>57</sup> Whitman, *Complete Poetry and Collected Prose*, ed. Kaplan, 823.

<sup>58</sup> See Rob Wilson, “Exporting Christian Transcendentalism, Importing Hawaiian Sugar:

temper the nationalism of the occasion by allowing the world at large to take over an otherwise American space. A series of substitutions allows Whitman to claim all of Asia—and by extension, the globe itself—can transform downtown Manhattan: the Meiji ambassadors stand for Japan, which stands for all of Asia, which in turn stands for the entire world. (By 1860, U.S. trade with the Pacific was shorthand for the global in ways that Atlantic trade was not, which is why the October 1860 visit of England’s Prince Albert did not inspire Whitman to write a companion piece to “A Broadway Pageant” about a vision of the hordes of Albion filling New York streets.<sup>59</sup>)

Accordingly, Whitman provides a corresponding image of the shipping lines that link this sequence of substitutions: “I chant my sailships and steamships threading the archipelagoes, / I chant my stars and stripes fluttering in the wind.” The reach of the mid-century shipping industry was not global in a twenty-first-century sense, but the rhetoric surrounding it was. And it often employed a similar sense of sequential substitutions between land and sea that connected the urban center of New York with people and products from across the world. One contemporary description of New York City’s shipping industry claimed that by standing near Manhattan’s bays “one feels in communication with the rest of the World” as the city is “touched by ships from every clime” (Browne 59–60).

Whitman’s sense of New York City as a place that attracts people and products

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The Trans-Americanization of Hawai’i,” *American Literature* 72.3 (2000): 521–52, 540.

<sup>59</sup> As Consuelo León writes, “The United States . . . understood that, regardless of its relationship to Europe, the Pacific Ocean would be the more decisive element in defining its future” as a global power (29). M. Consuelo León W., “Foundations of the American Image of the Pacific.” *boundary 2* 21.1 (1994): 17–29.

from across the globe came from his experience of living in the port city during a period of remarkable international growth. As urbanist Janet L. Abu-Lughod argues, “[T]he seeds from which the present ‘global city’ grew were firmly planted in Manhattan during the middle decades of the nineteenth century.”<sup>60</sup> The New York City Chamber of Commerce in the mid-nineteenth century similarly noted that “Capital is attracted to this central point,” reinforcing the opinion of a British traveler from earlier in the century who called Wall Street “the most concentrated focus of commercial transactions in the world.”<sup>61</sup> For Whitman, as for his fellow New Yorkers, this centralization of international trade made New York into a city on a hill set up as a model for the world. But unlike the Puritan origins of its counterpart in Boston, mercantile New York was not on an errand into the wilderness. Rather, the city followed in the tradition of its Dutch merchant founders by, in Ian Baucom’s words, “expanding the boundaries of mercantile capital—to the point where those boundaries were virtually coincident with the globe—and [by] concentrating the management of finance capital in a single metropolitan locale.”<sup>62</sup>

“A Broadway Pageant” not only demonstrates the way that Whitman tethers his nationalism between his subnational and transnational connections, it also shows us how he does so through the specific geographic space of New York City. When Roger Asselineau says that “The vast continent and that multitudinous nation gave [Whitman] a

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<sup>60</sup> Janet L. Abu-Lughod, *New York, Chicago, Los Angeles: America’s Global Cities* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 12.

<sup>61</sup> Quoted in Edward K. Spann, *The New Metropolis: New York City, 1840–1857* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), 15, 3.

<sup>62</sup> Ian Baucom, “Globalit, Inc.; or, The Cultural Logic of Global Literary Studies,” *PMLA* 116.1 (2001): 158–72. 159

sense of the infinity of space,” he reflects the consensus of critics who place “Song of Myself” at the center of the Whitman canon.<sup>63</sup> While “Song of Myself” does not explicitly say what it is that enables an ill-traveled New Yorker to feel that he is at the center of global convergence, “A Broadway Pageant” shows how the actual space of New York City allowed Whitman to feel connected to the rest of the world. In “Song of Myself,” Whitman grants himself access to everything across the nation and the world, writing that “To me the converging objects of the universe perpetually flow” (*LG* 42). But “Song of Myself” does not explain how this expansion of energy throughout the world contracts back to an individual poet.

Whitman’s grounding in New York City in “A Broadway Pageant” is encouraged by the occasional mode’s insistence that the poet directly address a specific audience who shares his sense of the occasion’s significance. The requirement of a public occasional poem that the poet be located in a single, specific place allows Whitman to recognize the role that his city plays in putting him in contact with the world around him. The poet who, in “Song of Myself,” says “Wider and wider they spread, expanding and always expanding, / Outward and outward forever outward” (*LG* 71), recognizes in “A Broadway Pageant” that his global vision is based on New York City’s expanding networks of international trade. While “Song of Myself” imagines the lyric poet to be at the heart of a universal process of expansion and contraction where “All these tend inward to me, and I tend outward to them” (*LG* 39), “A Broadway Pageant” acknowledges that it is New York City’s “sail-ships and steam-ships” that allow an

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<sup>63</sup> Roger Asselineau, *The Evolution of Walt Whitman*, expanded edition (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1999), 129.

American poet to feel that he is also a kosmos.

### III.

#### **Competing Models for Whitman's American Landscape**

Whitman's communion with the world and with working-class New Yorkers in "A Broadway Pageant" brings to the fore the affinities that he always felt for these two groups. The way that his nationalism intersects with—and is often subordinated to—the smaller-than-national and larger-than-national communities in "A Broadway Pageant" presents a different model for Whitman's poetry than readers are familiar with. A major strain of Whitman's poetry is concerned with constructing an image of the United States as a unified and self-contained unit that is immune to the external disruption of foreign entanglement and the internal disruption of national subgroups. As Whitman wrote, "One of my dearest objects in my poetic expression has been to combine these Forty-Four United States into one Identity."<sup>64</sup> One of the primary means by which Whitman presented a unified nation in his poetry was by cataloguing national spaces in such a way that each individual space contributed to the totality of the nation.

A representative example of this approach is found in "Starting from Paumanok," a poem that Whitman placed at the beginning of many of the editions of *Leaves of Grass* so that it would function as something of a proem for the entire collection. In praising the collectively "Interlink'd" lands of the United States in this poem, Whitman goes on to name individually some of the various "lands" that constitute the aggregate nation:

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<sup>64</sup> Walt Whitman, *The Uncollected Poetry and Prose of Walt Whitman*, ed. Emory Holloway. 2 Vols. (New York: P. Smith, 1932), 2:62

Land of the eastern Chesapeake! land of the Delaware!

Land of Ontario, Erie, Huron, Michigan!

Land of the Old Thirteen! Massachusetts land! land of Vermont and Connecticut!

Land of the ocean shores! land of sierras and peaks!

Land of boatmen and sailors! fishermen's land! (*LG* 22)

The intent of this and other such catalogues is to present the whole of the United States as more than just the sum of its parts. The representative sampling of national spaces that Whitman presents here and elsewhere conforms to the profile that he gives of himself in the preface to the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* as an American poet who “spans” the nation “from east to west and reflects what is between” (*LG* 618). This statement neatly summarizes Whitman's tendency to identify and circumscribe national borders “from east to west” and then to depict a unified national community out of the disparate regions and populations that fall within those borders. A model such as this allows for every place and every person in the nation to be contained in a single poetic embrace, just as it excludes everything that lies beyond the eastern and western boundaries of the United States.

In “By Blue Ontario's Shore,” a poem that grew out of passages from the 1855 preface, Whitman further emphasized his sense that American poets should embrace the entire nation, writing, “Who are you indeed who would talk or sing to America? / Have you studied out the land, its idioms and men? / . . . / are you really of the whole People? / Are you not of some coterie? some school or mere religion?” (*LG* 295–6). This model wherein the entire population (“the whole People”) is contained within a definable national space (“from east to west”) could be referred to as the “ample geography” model



of Whitman's poetry. Borrowing from Emerson's comment in his essay "The Poet" that "America is a poem in our eyes; its ample geography dazzles the imagination," Whitman wrote in "By Blue Ontario's Shores," "this America is only you and me, / . . . / Its ample geography, the Sierras, the prairies, Mississippi, Huron, Colorado, Boston, Toronto, Raleigh, Nashville, Havana, are you and me" (*LG* 297).<sup>65</sup> In lines such as these, Whitman espouses the idea that the nation's geography constitutes the physical embodiment of a political relationship between national subjects (i.e., that a list of national geographic spaces creates a social compact between "you and me"). When he follows this "ample geography" model, Whitman implies that the duty of the national bard is to provide representative images of the national landscape that connect nation, population, and place into a seemingly organic whole.<sup>66</sup>

There is a tension running throughout *Leaves of Grass* between the poet as "an American" who, following an "ample geography" model of American poetry, depicts the United States through lists of representative national places, and the poet as "one of the roughs, a kosmos" whose sympathies lie with smaller-than-national and larger-than-national communities. Nothing illustrates this tension better than the fact that Whitman submitted "A Chant of National Feuillage," a prime example of his "ample geography" poetry, for publication in the popular press six months before he wrote "A Broadway

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<sup>65</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Portable Emerson*, ed. Carl Bode (New York: Penguin, 1981), 262.

<sup>66</sup> Martin Bruckner has argued that images of a shared national geography were used beginning in the late eighteenth century to naturalize the political unity of a diverse nation. See Martin Bruckner, "Lessons in Geography: Maps, Spellers, and Other Grammars of Nationalism in the Early Republic," *American Quarterly* 51.2 (June 1999): 311–42.

Pageant.” Accompanying the January 1860 submission of “A Chant of National Feuillage” to *Harper’s Magazine*, Whitman included a letter explaining that the purpose of the poem “is to bring in, (devoting a line, or two or three lines, to each,) a comprehensive collection of touches, localés, incidents, idiomatic scenes, from every section, South, West, North, East, Kanada, Texas, Maine, Virginia, the Mississippi Valley, &c. &c. &c.—all intensely fused to the urgency of compact America, ‘America always’ [ . . . ] making a compact, the-whole-surrounding, *National Poem*.”<sup>67</sup>

Even though Whitman says that this “*National Poem*” made up of scenes from the different regions of the United States represents “a new style” of poetry (he asks in his letter to *Harper’s*, “Is there any other poem of the sort extant—or indeed hitherto attempted?”), such cataloguing of American scenery was by mid-century a common feature in American poetry. Perry Miller says that this “nativist inventory” of national scenes was par for the course among antebellum poets.<sup>68</sup> In providing a “comprehensive collection” of images “from every section” of the United States, “A Chant of National Feuillage” becomes a prime example of Whitman’s tendency to define the nation as the sum of its constituent parts, or, as he writes in the poem itself, to show how the nation creates “out of a thousand diverse contributions one identity.”<sup>69</sup>

While it is unlikely that readers would have connected this theory for a “*National*

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<sup>67</sup> Whitman, *Correspondence*, ed. Miller, 1:46, italics in original.

<sup>68</sup> Perry Miller, *The Raven and the Whale: The War of Words and Wits in the Era of Poe and Melville* (New York: Harcourt, 1956), 96.

<sup>69</sup> By including “Kanada” in this description (just as he includes Cuba in the poem) under the heading of a “national poem” he reveals a tendency that is more annexationist than pan-American.

*Poem*” in “A Chant of National Feuillage” with Whitman’s larger project for *Leaves of Grass*—as the editors of *Harper’s*, who ultimately declined to publish the poem, apparently did not—the imagery used to describe each section of the nation as an individual “leaf” (from the French *feuillage*) is an obvious reference to the title of *Leaves of Grass*. As Whitman offers his readers the “divine leaves [. . .] of the incomparable feuillage of these States,” the scattered leaves of paper that are the various regions and populations of North America become the bounded book that is the United States. As a “*National Poem*,” “A Chant of National Feuillage” subsumes sectional differences to a geographically and ideologically delimited nation that, despite its diversity, is “America always.”

“A Chant of National Feuillage” and “A Broadway Pageant” serve as models for understanding how Whitman alternately defined the nation he purported to speak for as a coherent geographic entity and as a site triangulated between subnational and transnational forces. The model provided by “A Chant of National Feuillage” is based on an image of a nation that is limited to the people and places that lie within its boundaries, whereas the model provided by “A Broadway Pageant” is based on non-national communities that alternately expand beyond national borders and contract down to a smaller-than-national scale. *Calamus*, a sequence of forty-five new poems that Whitman included in the 1860 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, puts the two models for American nationality represented by “A Chant of National Feuillage” and “A Broadway Pageant” into conversation with each other in ways that illuminate some of the central tensions of his poetry.

### *Calamus*

The forty-five poems of the 1860 *Calamus* cluster are loosely connected around the interrelated themes of love between men and democratic fraternity. As such, the *Calamus* poems are central to *Leaves of Grass* not only because the poems unify the themes of democracy and sexuality found elsewhere in the book, but also because the recurring images of the leaves of the calamus plant—what Whitman called “the biggest & hardiest kind of spears of grass” in North America—invoke the title of *Leaves of Grass* in a way that makes *Calamus* into a gloss on the entire book of poems.<sup>70</sup> As a gloss on *Leaves of Grass*, the *Calamus* poems thematize the poet’s relationship to the nation he ostensibly speaks for in the following way: the poems alternately present their author as a national outsider sequestered from the demands of public life and as a national bard who willingly instructs the nation on the course it should follow.

Whitman’s comment that “the special meaning of the ‘Calamus’ cluster of *Leaves of Grass* . . . mainly resides in its Political significance” has occasioned a great deal of commentary from critics concerned with the way that Whitman alternately presents himself in *Calamus* as a national spokesman with lessons of democratic comradeship for the entire United States and as a recluse who prefers to be isolated with his male lovers.<sup>71</sup> The prevailing consensus about the “Political significance” of *Calamus* is that Whitman presents the homoeroticism of these private rendezvous as a pattern for the homosociality

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<sup>70</sup> Whitman, *Correspondence*, ed. Miller, 1: 347.

<sup>71</sup> Walt Whitman, *Prose Works* 3 Vols. (New York: New York University Press, 1961), 2: 471.

of public democracy.<sup>72</sup> By showing how Whitman turns the social stigma of his homosexuality into his rationale to speak authoritatively to the nation, such readings offer a compelling account of Whitman's attempts to create a simultaneously public and private persona inhabiting both the margin and center of national culture.

Because these readings employ a critical vocabulary based on the spatial metaphors of public/private and margin/center, however, they fail to account for the actual geographies upon which Whitman enacts the posture of the national outsider as national bard. Betsy Erkkila, for example, astutely observes that "The *Calamus* poems . . . express[] a separatist impulse toward a private homosexual order at the same time that they invoke a national and global community of democratic brotherhood" (*Political Poet* 179). But as Erkkila conflates Whitman's national and global affiliations into a single public sphere that contrasts with his "private homosexual order," she collapses this dynamic set of global, national, and subnational coordinates into the more familiar binaries of public/private and margin/center.

As I argue in the following pages, Whitman's negotiation of a private sphere of a stigmatized sexuality and a public sphere of national political influence in *Calamus* is articulated between two competing spaces, one of which is the literal space of a national political geography (similar to the "ample geography" model of such poems as "A Chant for National Feuilleage") and the other of which is an alternately smaller-than-national and

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<sup>72</sup> This position has been argued to one degree or another in Ezra Greenspan, *Walt Whitman and the American Reader* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 195-7; Erkkila, "Public Love," Kerry C. Larson, *Whitman's Drama of Consensus* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 153; Grossman, "Evangel-Poem," 202; Reynolds, *Walt Whitman's America*, 384; Newfield, "Democracy and Homoeroticism," and Maslan, *Whitman Possessed*, 175-200.

larger-than-national conceptual space inhabited by Whitman's readers and lovers (similar to the model exhibited by "A Broadway Pageant"). Whitman addresses the nation as a single entity definable by its ample national geography at certain places in *Calamus*, but elsewhere in the cluster he specifically directs his poems either to a hand-picked community of "at most a very few" readers who he knows as intimately as lovers or to a diffuse readership that includes "men in other lands."<sup>73</sup>

These two competing models can be thought of as the axes of a Cartesian plane: the x-axis is a flattened and horizontal topography of national space, whereas the y-axis is a continuum that begins with a small number of reader-lovers and grows into an expanding community of international comrades. Viewing *Calamus* as the intersection between a national landscape of U.S. political geography and a conceptual landscape of distant and proximate readers presents a more dynamic picture of Whitman's relationship with the nation than do readings that have focused on the binaries of public/private and margin/center.

In its "ample geography" mode, *Calamus* depicts a community of male comrades united across Atlantic and Pacific coasts, Midwestern plains, Mississippi deltas, and Western mountain ranges. "Calamus 5" (the poems were numbered rather than titled in the 1860 edition) speaks of "a new friendship" between men that "shall circulate through The States, indifferent of place":

One from Massachusetts shall be comrade to a Missourian,

One from Maine or Vermont, and a Carolinian and an Oregonese, shall be friends

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<sup>73</sup> Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (Boston: Thayer and Eldridge, 1860). 346, 367. All citations to *Calamus* are from this edition.

triune, more precious to each other than all the riches of the earth.

There shall be countless linked hands—namely, the Northerner's, and the  
 Northwesterner's, and the Southwesterner's, and those of the interior, and  
 all their brood. (349–50)

Identifying the cardinal points of national territory through representative locations—  
 Massachusetts, Maine, and Vermont in the Northeast, the Carolinas in the Southeast,  
 Missouri in the Southwest, and Oregon in the Northwest—“Calamus 5” conjures a  
 national community figured as a homosocial and homoerotic “new friendship.” Just as “A  
 Chant for National Feuillage” defines the diverse regions and populations of the nation as  
 a variety of “divine leaves” growing throughout the United States that the poet collects  
 into a single national bouquet, so too does *Calamus* define the nation as a gathering of  
 comrades from the various regions of North America. By listing these disparate regions  
 together in a single poem, Whitman performs the role of the national poet whose duty it  
 is to map out a national community that, despite the vast geographical distances that  
 separate its members, can still feel connected by “countless linked hands.” Whitman  
 wrote that one of the goals of his poetry was “To help put the United States (even if only  
 in imagination) hand in hand, in one unbroken circle” (*LG* 651).

Similarly, “Calamus 35” addresses men in representative locations across the  
 country in an effort to imagine a national audience unified by a common geography:

To you of New England,  
 To the man of the Seaside State, and of Pennsylvania,  
 To the Kanadian of the north—to the Southerner I love,





define the political territory of the United States, Whitman uses an entirely different model to identify the readership of *Calamus*. There are moments in *Calamus* where Whitman addresses the “States” as a collective unit saying, “I arrive, bringing these [calamus leaves/poems], beyond all the forces of courts and arms, / These! to hold you together as firmly as the earth itself is held together” (349). But in addition to these moments when poetry makes the social bonds between national subjects seem as natural as the forces by which “the earth itself is held together,” Whitman also imagines that his poems will either be read by a community too small to be called a nation or that they will be circulated so widely that they will spill over national borders.

As Tenney Nathanson says, Whitman’s poems “conjure a ‘you’ simultaneously intimate and universal: as unique as the single addressee the intimate tone implies, yet as numerous as the audience reached by his text.”<sup>74</sup> Nathanson, like other critics who focus on Whitman’s interplay with his reader in *Calamus*, accurately identifies the language Whitman uses to address his imagined readership without pursuing the implications of this “simultaneously intimate and universal” audience in the context of the otherwise national geography of the poems. Rather than grouping populations according to a shared political geography, this “simultaneously intimate and universal” address to the audience establishes a network of expanding and contracting community ties that suggest an alternative strategy for organizing social relations than that of the nation-state.

At numerous moments throughout *Calamus*, Whitman asks, “Who is now reading this?” implying that his text can potentially escape the boundaries he has drawn around

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<sup>74</sup> Tenney Nathanson, “Whitman’s Addresses to His Audience,” *Walt Whitman of Mickle Street*, ed. Geoffrey M. Sill (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1993, 129-41),

his imagined readership (361). While defining the nation seems an easy task to “ample geography” poets who consider a list of representative places enough to render an identifiable national audience, such addresses to an unknown reader imply that Whitman cannot be confident that the “States” he hails at moments in *Calamus* will be the exclusive audience of his poems. This address to an anonymous reader is sometimes the poet’s projection of a future audience, but it also expresses a geographically vast audience living in the present moment. In “Calamus 23,” the central poem of the forty-five-poem cluster, Whitman embraces the possibility that his audience could potentially expand across the globe, writing,

This moment as I sit alone, yearning and thoughtful, it seems to me there are other  
   men in other lands, yearning and thoughtful;  
 It seems to me I can look over and behold them, in Germany, Italy, France,  
   Spain—Or far, far away, in China, or in Russia, or India—talking other  
   dialects;  
 And it seems to me if I could know those men better, I should become attached to  
   them, as I do to men in my own lands,  
 It seems to me they are as wise, beautiful, benevolent, as any in my own lands;  
 O I know we should be brethren and lovers,  
 I know I should be happy with them. (367)

The comradeship that elsewhere in *Calamus* unites men into “States” here spills over national boundaries as Whitman recognizes that there are “men in other lands” and that “I should become attached to them.” The catalogue of international locations in this poem—

“Germany, Italy, France, Spain—Or far, far away, in China, or in Russia, or India”—directly rewrites the “ample geography” descriptions of the national landscape that elsewhere fill *Calamus*. In “Calamus 23” a shared geography does not unify a given population. Rather, Whitman connects himself to men throughout the world who share his sense of being “yearning and thoughtful” rather than his national citizenship. The contiguity of political geography that unites men elsewhere in *Calamus* is replaced here by a “yearning and thoughtful” disposition that is felt throughout the world regardless of national political borders.

“Calamus 3,” a poem where Whitman imagines himself to be embodied as his book, begins with a similar sense of a vast and uncontainable readership as the poet addresses his reader as “Whoever you are holding me now in hand.” This address to an unknown reader, however, soon becomes an attempt to define the reader on an intimate scale that turns the act of reading into a sexual encounter. In one of the most commented upon images of the *Calamus* poems, Whitman speaks to his reader-lover as if he were “thrusting me beneath your clothing” as he would a small book of poems:

Where I may feel the throbs of your heart, or rest upon your hip,

Carry me when you go forth over land or sea;

For thus, merely touching you, is enough—is best,

And thus, touching you, would I silently sleep and be carried eternally. (346)

This description of an intimate audience with whom the poet consummates a sexual relationship is the obverse of the poem’s initial recognition that the poem could be read by a potentially vast and unknown audience. The image of a readership defined by sexual contact reappears throughout *Calamus* as Whitman takes the leaves of the phallic-shaped

calamus root—designated as “the token of comrades”—that he instructs “all who are, or have been, young men” to “Interchange it, youths, with each other” and conflates them with the leaves of his book in a symbolic act of sexual intercourse that mimics the pattern by which *Leaves of Grass* is passed from one reader to the next (342, 348). Modeling the distribution of his book after the exchange of sexual energy between men allows Whitman to depict an esoteric community of men who know each other on an intimate level and who then connect themselves with a vast community of comrade-lovers who potentially spread out across the world.

While the mid-nineteenth-century reviewers who objected to the sexually explicit nature of Whitman’s poetry complained more about the heterosexual themes elsewhere in *Leaves of Grass* than they did about the homosexual imagery of *Calamus*, the homoerotic and homosocial connections between men in the *Calamus* poems create a space where Whitman self-consciously presents himself as a national outcast. “Calamus 11,” for example, records how the poet’s “name had been received with plaudits in the capitol” even though the national recognition means less to him than communion with his male lover: the fete at the capitol “was not a happy night for me,” he writes, but when “the one I love most lay sleeping by me under the same cover in the cool night, / . . . / And his arm lay lightly around my breast—And that night I was happy” (357–8). Scholars who downplay the homoerotic themes of Whitman’s poetry and the homosexuality of the poet’s biography cite the lack of public outcry to such scenes in *Calamus* as proof that the male intimacy in *Calamus* would have been seen as non-deviant expressions of intense

friendship.<sup>75</sup>

Nevertheless, the *Calamus* poems themselves depict a community of men who are aware of each other in ways that self-consciously set them apart from the rest of the nation. “Calamus 41” describes such a scene:

Among the men and women, the multitude, I perceive one picking me out by  
secret and divine signs,

. . . . .  
Lover and perfect equal!

I meant that you should discover me so, by my faint indirections,

And I, when I meet you, mean to discover you by the like in you. (376)

The idea of a subterranean community whose members interpret the “secret and divine signs” defining their clandestine experience within a society that is either unwilling or unable to acknowledge them permeates *Calamus*. The selective nature of this subpopulation provides a different model for community affiliation than the “ample geography” nation that encloses all the populations of a common geography. Just as “A Broadway Pageant” responds to the sentiment that an alternate city of working-class New Yorkers inhabits a parallel space to the city proper, so too does *Calamus* imagine a city composed of the comrade-lovers that Whitman discerns from out of “the multitude.” “Calamus 34” reads,

I dreamed in a dream, I saw a city invincible to the attacks of the whole of the rest  
of the earth,

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<sup>75</sup> See Loving, *Walt Whitman*, 202, 238, 252, and Reynolds, *Walt Whitman’s America*, 391.

I dreamed that was the new City of Friends,  
 Nothing was greater there than the quality of robust love—it led the rest,  
 It was seen every hour in the actions of the men of that city,  
 And in all their looks and words. (373)

The space of “the new City of Friends” constitutes a different kind of social organization than the “ample geography” nation: it is a haven for outcasts (“invincible to the attacks”) that positions itself within a broad global context (“of the whole of the rest of the earth”).

While there has been substantial commentary on Whitman’s direct address to the reader in *Calamus*, his use of the occasional mode to do so has escaped attention. The first and last poems of *Calamus* identify themselves as occasional poems, and by so doing establish a framework for understanding how Whitman’s direct address to the reader allows him to define a society of comrade-lovers apart from the nation he otherwise addresses. Unlike private lyric poems that present the poet as a solitary figure whose isolated musings are overheard by an anonymous audience, occasional poems owe their existence to a community of readers who validate the poet’s belief that a given event deserves commemoration. As I have argued throughout this chapter, occasional poems directly hail their audiences as a way of identifying common values and assumptions. As such, the occasional mode allows Whitman to define the space inhabited by “at most a few” lovers and the “men in other lands” who constitute the community of readers that he proposes as an alternative to the “ample geography” model of American nationality. The occasional mode is first invoked in “Calamus 1” amid an ostensibly private scene wherein Whitman adopts the traditional pose of the lyric poet whose introspection is overheard by rather than directly addressed to his audience:

In paths untrodden,  
 In the growth by margins of pond-waters,  
 Escaped from the life that exhibits itself,  
 From all the standards hitherto published—from the pleasures, profits,  
     conformities,  
 Which too long I was offering to feed my Soul;  
 Clear to me now, standards not yet published—clear to me that my Soul,  
 That the Soul of the man I speak for, rejoices only in comrades;  
 Here, by myself, away from the clank of the world,  
 Tallying and talked to here by tongues aromatic,  
 No longer abashed—for in this secluded spot I can respond as I would not dare  
     elsewhere,  
 Strong upon me the life that does not exhibit itself, yet contains all the rest,  
 Resolved to sing no songs to-day but those of manly attachment,  
 Projecting them along that substantial life,  
 Bequeathing, hence, types of athletic love,  
 Afternoon, this delicious Ninth Month, in my forty-first year,  
 I proceed, for all who are, or have been, young men,  
 To tell the secret of my nights and days,  
 To celebrate the need of comrades. (341–42)

Placing himself “away from the clank of the world” in a “secluded spot” along “paths untrodden,” Whitman plays the role of the solitary lyric poet who secretly composes his poetry for an audience that will overhear rather than directly hear him. The isolated scene

of this confessional moment where “I can respond as I would not dare elsewhere,” however, also invokes the setting of a public occasional poem by naming both the moment that the poem commemorates and the audience towards whom the poem is directed. Identifying the day in September 1859 when he wrote the poem (“Afternoon, this delicious Ninth Month, in my forty-first year”), the community who share with him a sense of the importance of the moment (“I proceed, for all who are, or have been, young men”), and the reason for the celebration (“To celebrate the need of comrades”), Whitman introduces *Calamus* with an occasional poem.

*Calamus* similarly ends in the occasional mode. The final poem of the cluster, “Calamus 45,” also identifies the moment of its composition and the audience of its address:

Full of life, sweet-blooded, compact, visible,  
 I, forty years old the Eighty-third Year of The States,  
 To one a century hence, or any number of centuries hence,  
 To you, yet unborn, these, seeking you.

When you read these, I, that was visible, am become invisible;  
 Now it is you, compact, visible, realizing my poems, seeking me,  
 Fancying how happy you were, if I could be with you, and become your lover;  
 Be it as if I were with you. Be not too certain but I am now with you. (378)

Recalling the same timeframe from “Calamus 1”—the year is 1859, Whitman is forty years old—and a similar audience of reader-lovers (“I could be with you, and become your lover”), “Calamus 45” ends the cluster describing a community who comes together



to celebrate a significant moment in time.

While the occasion being commemorated in these poems is not specifically named, Whitman elaborated elsewhere that the “need of comrades” recorded in these “songs . . . of manly attachment” was for him an innovation in both literature and politics that merited observance in occasional verse. Whitman said that the central theme of *Calamus* is “the development, identification, and general prevalence of that fervid comradeship” between men that he believed was missing. He defined this “fervid comradeship” among people of the same sex with the phrenological term “adhesiveness” and said that the love between men he chronicles in *Calamus* would rival, if not surpass, “the amative love [for members of the opposite sex] hitherto possessing imaginative literature.”<sup>76</sup> Whitman was not the first writer to explore the themes of homoeroticism and male companionship—he even writes in “Calamus 28” about the time “when I read of the brotherhood of lovers, how it was with them” (370)—but he thought of *Calamus* as an unprecedented achievement in the field of “imaginative literature” warranting recognition in the occasional mode. As such, it expresses his awareness of an audience who would join with him in commemorating the importance of male companionship and love.

As occasional verses, the first and last poems of the *Calamus* cluster both deal directly with an intimate, proximate audience. As is customary for occasional poetry, both the “young men” in “Calamus 1” and the unidentified “you” in “Calamus 45” to whom Whitman promises to “become your lover” share with the poet an understanding of why the event in question deserves commemoration. This framing device lends a

degree of organization to what might otherwise seem to be a random assortment of poems. In its first incarnation as twelve unpublished poems titled “Live-Oak with Moss,” the original *Calamus* poems were reminiscent of a Renaissance sonnet cycle about a failed love affair (*LG* 752–56). When Whitman added almost three times as many new poems for the 1860 *Leaves of Grass*, he appeared to diffuse this original narrative with a seemingly disjointed collection of poems.

Bookending the *Calamus* poems with occasional verses directed towards an intimate audience not only lends a degree of organization to the cluster, it also indicates a way that Whitman imagined his nation could be organized. Just as the first and last poems of the cluster conjure a smaller-than-national audience, so too does the conspicuously placed central poem of the cluster—“Calamus 23”—link the poet to a larger-than-national audience of “men in other lands.” While *Calamus* has a special “Political significance” for “These States,” it also proposes an alternative to the political geography of the United States as the only way to organize social relations. By beginning *Calamus* with a subnational audience in “Calamus 1” that expands out to a supranational scale in “Calamus 23” and then contracts down again in “Calamus 45,” Whitman allows the shape of the poem cluster to suggest an alternate shape for his nation. The *Calamus* poems tell the story of a poet on the margins who attempts to move to the center by making his private life inform the public world; but they also illustrate the multiple affiliations of a poet who is “an American, one of the roughs, a kosmos.”

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<sup>76</sup> Whitman, *Complete Poetry and Collected Prose*, ed. Kaplan, 981.

## Epilogue

James M. Whitfield, Eliza R. Snow, John Rollin Ridge, and Walt Whitman each felt uniquely qualified to be the poetic representative of the United States. In an era when literary nationalists were hoping that a poet would emerge from amid the polity as an icon of national character, these poets' claims were both audacious and mundane: mundane because the desire for a distinctive brand of American poetry had been discussed so frequently that its urgency was beginning to lose much of its initial force (in 1862, *Atlantic Monthly* contributor John Weiss urged, "Let us cease to wonder whether there will ever be an American poem"<sup>1</sup>); and audacious because each poet's social standing, in one way or another, put him or her at odds with prevailing notions of U.S. national identity. The fact that poetry and not prose was the genre that these four writers employed as they made their claims to represent a nation that never fully accepted them is one that needs to be underscored.

Despite the central role that poetry played in debating the terms of antebellum nationalism—as Shira Wolosky says, nineteenth-century poetry played a “vibrant and active role within ongoing discussions defining America and its cultural directions”<sup>2</sup>—poetry as a genre is often neglected in discussions of the intersection between literature and politics. Joseph Harrington argues that “despite increased suspicion toward ‘theories of American literature,’ the identification of American *fiction* as American *literature* has

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Benjamin T. Spencer, *The Quest for Nationality: An American Literary Campaign* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1957), 292.

<sup>2</sup> Shira Wolosky, “The Claims of Rhetoric: Toward a Historical Poetics (1820–1900),” *American Literary History* 15.1 (2003): 14–21. 14.

persisted.”<sup>3</sup> Kirsten Silva Gruesz similarly concurs that “poetry on the whole has been largely neglected in recent historicist analyses of nineteenth-century literary culture, presumably because of its apparent removal from the daily life of readers and the political evolution of nations.”<sup>4</sup> Instead, the connection between nation and narration has tended to dominate discussions of literature and national identity. Frederick Jameson’s focus on “the all-informing process of *narrative*, which I take to be . . . the central function or *instance* of the human mind” has greatly influenced discussions of literature and nationalism.<sup>5</sup>

This focus on prose narrative at the expense of lyric poetry has occluded some of the important ways that poetry is used both to reinforce and to counter nationalist ideologies. For example, scholars have become adept at showing how the genre of narrative can be used to support a nationalist agenda.<sup>6</sup> National narratives, it is often argued, confirm the structure, history, and identity of the nation by creating what Priscilla Wald calls an “official story” that marginalizes any competing narratives about the nation, narratives that emphasize such things as the nation’s violent past or the selectivity

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<sup>3</sup> Joseph Harrington, “Why American Poetry Is Not American Literature,” *American Literary History* 8.3 (1996): 496–515. 496, italics in original.

<sup>4</sup> Kirsten Silva Gruesz, *Ambassadors of Culture: The Transamerican Origins of Latino Writing* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 21.

<sup>5</sup> Frederick Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981), 13, italics in original.

<sup>6</sup> See the essays in Homi Bhabha, ed., *Nation and Narration* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

with which it chooses its representatives.<sup>7</sup> But narrative is not the only genre that can accomplish this task.

If the linear nature of prose narrative is employed by literary nationalists to suggest that the nation has a continuous history grounded in what otherwise might be seen as an ideologically suspect past, the discontinuous nature of lyric can also be used to imply that the nation has an essence that can be defined in a set of discrete images. Barbara Hardy writes, “the lyric does not provide an explanation, judgment or narrative; what it does provide is feeling, alone and without histories or characters.”<sup>8</sup> As such, national subjects who rely on a continuous narrative of their past to define their national identity are equally likely to base that identity on evocative though discontinuous images of the type that appear in lyric poetry, such as images of the yeoman farmer, the soldier returning from battle, the family at the hearth, and the pioneer on the frontier. The power of prose narrative to connect people to a larger national story is matched by the power of lyric poetry to connect them to the resonant nationalist images that also influence their sense of allegiance to the nation.

By the same token, if the inevitable gaps in prose narrative can point to the ideological gaps in definitions of national identity—as numerous scholars have noted<sup>9</sup>—lyric images that promise but then fail to deliver a coherent sense of national identity can

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<sup>7</sup> Priscilla Wald, *Constituting Americans: Cultural Anxiety and Narrative Form* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 3.

<sup>8</sup> Barbara Hardy, *The Advantage of Lyric* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977), 1.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Donald Pease, “National Narratives, Postnational Narration,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 43.1 (1997): 1–23.

also question the criteria by which the nation constitutes itself. It is on this point that the poetry of Whitfield, Snow, Ridge, and Whitman can offer a great deal of insight. As poets who alternately embraced and then rejected the idea of representative national identity, these four poets were highly conscious of the images that they projected to an often hostile nation. Ridge, who was aware of how he would be perceived as a mixed-race Cherokee during his public poetry readings, knew that the physical image he presented to his hearers would complement whatever lyric images he put in his poetry. Accordingly, the images he uses in his poetry call attention to the United States' unresolved relationship with Native Americans, a relationship that at times manifests itself as a romance with the aboriginal and at others as a desire to exterminate native populations. For example, in "The Gold-Seekers," he pairs the iconic images of the "primitive" Native American searching for food (the indigenous California "Digger Indian") with the forty-niner panning for gold (the "gold digger" who has immigrated to California) as a way to highlight the existence of two competing models for California's cultural identity.

By the same token, when Whitfield describes the speaker of "How Long" as a disembodied spectator who moves effortlessly across the Atlantic between Africa, Europe, and the United States, he summons a buried image from the nation's past (i.e., the triangle slave trade), which he then overlays with the image of the American poet as Puritan Jeremiah who laments, "How long until our errand is fulfilled, O Lord, how long?" Whitfield's achievement in this poem lies in his ability to meld two mutually exclusive images of American character: the image of the jeremiad confirms the United

States' world-historical mission as ambassadors of freedom, while the image of the triangle trade emphasizes the centrality of slavery to the origins of American civilization.

Snow's long, philosophical poem, "Time and Change," similarly shows how the image of the speaker in a lyric poem carries with it a densely packed set of cultural codes about national identity. By inserting two lyric poems within the otherwise epic narrative of "Time and Change," Snow emphasizes the power of lyric poetry to communicate the image of the representative national bard. In the ode for the American Revolution that appears in "Time and Change," Snow presents the patriotic image of the bard amid a drum-and-fife processional of Revolutionary heroes; however, in "Ode for the Fourth of July," the other lyric poem in "Time and Change," the would-be Independence Day poet delivers a scathing critique of the United States' failure to live up to its mandate for religious freedom. The point Snow makes by pairing these two lyric poems within the overarching context of an epic poem—that a Mormon bard such as herself is both a national representative and a national outsider—could be made any number of ways. She knew, however, that the genre of the lyric offered her a concise poetic vocabulary that her nineteenth-century audience would be familiar with.

Whitman's "A Broadway Pageant" also meditates on the power of lyric images to express the conflicts surrounding U.S. national identity. In the poem, Whitman's praise of the United States' rising status as a world power is coupled with his sympathy for disenfranchised urban laborers and his faith in international unity. Whitman is able to bring together this unlikely triad of allegiances because of his understanding that the discontinuous images of a lyric poem, like the images from the parade that he commemorates in "A Broadway Pageant," present multiple and often unresolved

messages. Parades are organized according to the same principle as poetry. Rather than provide a coherent narrative, both parades and lyric poems string together a series of (sometimes loosely-connected) images designed to evoke a network of feelings and responses that may or may not be resolved in a single meaning.

Whitman describes the images in the parade as “flashing to us from the procession; / As it moves, changing, a kaleidoscope divine it moves, changing, before us.”<sup>10</sup> The mechanism of the kaleidoscope is an accurate conceit for Whitman’s complex and shifting relationship with the United States in “A Broadway Pageant” as the three distinct foci of the poem—the American nation being feted, the working-class “roughs” crowding the parade route, and the larger world represented by the Japanese ambassadors—overlap in ways that alternately compete with and complement each other just as the plates of a kaleidoscope mutually transform one another through their varied interactions. “A Broadway Pageant” brings a network of evocative images into a kaleidoscopic display that replaces a single message with the suggestion of multiple simultaneous alternatives.

Each of these four poets took advantage of the genre of the lyric to present images that reflected his or her conflicted stance with the United States. In so doing, these poets illuminate the way that antebellum literary nationalism sought for a poet who could express in a representative image everything that the nation stood for. As Liah Greenfeld writes of the nineteenth-century nationalism that gave rise to the belief that a single individual could represent the entire nation, “The national principle was collectivistic; it

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<sup>10</sup> Walt Whitman, “The Errand-Bearers” *New York Times* 27 June 1860, 2.



reflected the collective being. . . . [And] when the collectivity is seen in unitary terms, it tends to assume the character of a collective individual possessed of a single will, and someone is bound to be its interpreter.”<sup>11</sup> Whitfield, Snow, Ridge, and Whitman all believed that they were uniquely qualified to interpret the cultural landscape of nineteenth-century America. Apart from the differences in their backgrounds, though, their similar use of lyric poetry to, in Whitman’s terms, “prove this puzzle the New World, / And to define America,” points toward one of the important, though often unappreciated, discourses for antebellum literary nationalism.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Liah Greenfeld, *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 11.

<sup>12</sup> Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, ed. Michael Moon (New York: Norton, 2002), 5.

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