

"When I mix with these interminable swarms of alert, turbulent, good-natured, independent citizens, mechanics, clerks, young persons—at the idea of this mass of men, so fresh and free, so loving and so proud, a singular awe falls upon me" ("Democratic Vistas," 388).

Whitman wrote profusely of the woodcutter, the sailor, the frontiersman, the pioneer, the emigrant, generals such as Grant and Sheridan and Custer, and the army recruit, green and raw, courageous and wounded, stammering in his European accent in the new land of opportunity, sent West to protect the bulging population which was a target for feathered arrows.

Whitman's common man became the common soldier decidedly happy with "beans and hay." He became Whitman's noble man, embraced and paeaned for both his endurance and inherent stupidity. A job was a job—and killing Indians was a job, and jobs could not be found in the large eastern cities. He rigorously served under his new flag, and Whitman prodded him to glory. Everything which fell under Whitman's ken moved his poetic spirit: the lightning of the new skies and new horizons; the death of presidents; Denver, "queen city of the plains"; the "common earth, the soil"; William Cullen Bryant; the Battle of Gettysburg; Niagara Falls. He wrote America and America was his true hero, his Ulysses: "I Hear America Singing."

Everything America produced or which produced America was allowed a pentameter in Whitman's work—but only rarely the American Indian, the indigenous native to the land, what the Native American sons and daughters know as Mother Earth.

And yet Whitman was truly fascinated with Indian words and names and copied out many within an essay entitled "Slang in America": "Miss Bremer found among the aborigines the following names: *Merr's*, Horn-point; Round-Wind; Stand-and-look-out; The Cloud-that-goes-aside; Iron-toe; Seek-the-sun; Iron-flash . . ." (576). It is certainly understandable that anyone, especially such an imaginative and enthusiastic poet as Whitman, would find these names fascinating, but why as "slang in America"? How do they differ from John the Baptist or Richard the Lion-Hearted? As with these two English equivalents, the names pointed out particular characteristics of the person's na-

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## Whitman's Indifference to Indians

MAURICE KENNY

In vision and language Walt Whitman is America's Homer. His hero, however, was not the Greek classic—the noble individual of high birth—but the cumulative average. Bulk vastness and superlatives of "great" and "greatness" were his guisons. He was certainly a democratic nationalist, a flag waver. He was the poet of the ordinary person—butcher, baker, candlestick maker but not of the Indian chief. He sang of the bus driver, the factory hand, the mechanic, the farmer, the ferryman of Brooklyn but not of the feathered warrior.

Whitman sang electrically of nature; he created poems of the industrial boom in America and its dynamics which thrust the nation into leadership of world powers, secure in might and wealth but diseased with guilt. Everything which was American found a phrase in his verse, even the "common street prostitute":

ture, prowess, or accomplishments, obviously a fact Whitman failed to recognize.

Whitman gained employment as a minor clerk in 1865 in the Indian Bureau of the Interior Department in Washington, D.C. This employment was of short duration. He was soon dismissed by his puritan superior, James Harlan, who recoiled from the purloined pages of the *Leaves of Grass*. Harlan believed the book was indecent and fired the "good gray poet." It would be expected that while Whitman was employed in this office he would have become acquainted with and acutely aware of the federal government's calculated plan to exterminate the Indians. The worthless treaties were at his fingertips; the recorded injustices perpetrated upon Indians were under his naked eyes; documents and letters of unscrupulous officials prodding the extermination of the "savages" most certainly would have been familiar to him. The horrifying slaughter of innocent Cheyenne and Arapahoe women and children at the infamous Sand Creek Massacre occurred only the preceding November of the year he took this employment. As many eastern liberals were greatly distressed by this mass murder, how was it that Whitman ignored those death cries? In the essay "An Indian Bureau Reminiscence," he wrote most clearly of his tenure there:

After the close of the Secession War in 1865, I work'd several months (until Mr. Harlan turn'd me out for having written "Leaves of Grass") in the Interior Department at Washington, in the Indian Bureau. Along this time there came to see their Great Father an unusual number of aboriginal visitors, delegations for treaties, settlement of lands, &c.—some young or middle-aged, but mainly old men, from the West, North, and occasionally from the South—parties of from five to twenty each—the most wonderful proofs of what Nature can produce, (the survival of the fittest, no doubt—all the frailer examples dropt, sorted out by death)—as if to show the earth and woods, the attrition of storms and elements, and the exigencies of life at first hand, can train and

fashion men, indeed *chiefs*, in heroic massiveness, imper-turbability, muscle, and that last and highest beauty consisting of strength—the full exploitation and fruition of a human identity, not from the culmination-points of "culture" and artificial civilization, but tallying our race, as it were, with giant, vital, gnarl'd, enduring trees, or monoliths of separate hardest rocks, and humanity holding its own with the best of the said trees or rocks, and outdoing them. . . .

Let me give a running account of what I see and hear through one of these conference collections at the Indian Bureau, going back to the present tense. (577–578)

Herewith he describes certain chiefs and their "outfits" which certainly take his eye's attention.

Let us note this young chief. For all his paint, "Hole-in-the-Day" is a handsome Indian, mild and calm, dress'd in drab buckskin leggings, dark gray surtout, and a soft black hat. His costume will bear full observation, and even fashion would accept him. His apparel is worn loose and skant enough to show his superb physique, especially in neck, chest, and legs. (578)

Sounds as if he's attempting to describe a horse on the block. The descriptive catalog continues:

Though some of the young fellows were, as I have said, *magnificent and beautiful animals*, I think the palm of unique picturesqueness, in body, limb, physiognomy, etc., was borne by the old or elderly chiefs, and the wise men. (578, emphasis added)

This shockingly insensitive running account utterly fails to see a single human quality other than a sensuousness in these men, young or old, who had traveled far to the Capitol to bargain for their lives, lands, liberty, culture, and survival with the "Great Father." How could this alleged democratic humanitarian look only at the "loose and scant" attire and discover merely the flesh of these "magnificent and beautiful animals" without some sense

No sign of a village of tipis, no buffalo in his sight, no plumed warrior, no woman tending child, no elder instructing youth, and certainly no bloody massacre grounds which were a fistful of miles away from his locomotive window. His published works contain not a whisper or suspicion of sympathy for those so brutally murdered and mutilated, including women and children, so that one day those immense herds of cattle might fleck that sea of grass at such places as the Chivington Ranch, located in slight approximation to his "first-class locomotive."

Although such silence about their fate might indicate his acquiescence in the planned extermination of all Indians in the Americas, Whitman does on occasion describe the red "savage" in a heightened understanding of, at least, the costume:

Their feathers, paint—even the empty buffalo skull—did not, to say the least, seem any more ludicrous to me than many of the fashions I have seen in civilized society. I should not apply the word *savage* (at any rate, in the usual sense) as a leading word in the description of those great aboriginal specimens, of whom I certainly saw many of the best. ("An Indian Bureau Reminiscence," 579, emphasis added)

What he gives with one hand he takes away with the other.

And on another trip to the city of New Orleans:

One of my choice amusements during my stay in New Orleans was going down to the old French Market, especially of a Sunday morning. The show was a varied and curious one; among the rest, the Indian and negro hucksters with their wares. For there were always fine specimens of Indians, both men and women, young and old. I remember I nearly always on these occasions got a large cup of delicious coffee with a biscuit, for my breakfast, from the immense shining copper kettle of a great Creole mulatto (I believe she weigh'd 230 pounds). (*Prose Works*, 1:606)

The utterance of a typical American tourist traveling in foreign lands. This paragraph sounds as if Whitman were attending the farmers' market browsing for fresh summer tomatoes or early

of shame for his connotative observation? He did not describe the young recruit or his superior officers in such terms, in such sensuous language. But then the recruit and Grant and Custer were not *animals*, nor had they survived as the fittest by their own natural wiles but by selective breeding and the slaughtering wars, wars that raged across Europe for hundreds of years not so much for the "survival of the fittest" but for the spoils those wars offered. Whitman failed to see the lines of suffering and anxiety in the faces of these men; he failed to hear their quick heartbeats; he failed to feel any emotion with the exception of a hedonistic fancy or possible appetite. But his estimate hardly differed from that of his contemporaries. Even General George Custer admired the physiques and prowess of these "beautiful animals." For the larger part of his own creative life, Whitman was considered by both society and most of the literati as a "criminal monster," an outlaw of sorts. How is it he did not recognize kindred spirits—his counterparts in the Indian chiefs, warriors, or "wise men" who were also labeled "criminal monsters"? In another essay, "Some Diary Notes at Random," he described a ninety-four-year-old black slave he had known as a young boy in Long Island as "cute." Whitman claimed later in life to be an abolitionist.

In 1879 Whitman traveled west into southeastern Colorado to Fort Lyon, a mere horse ride from the site of the Sand Creek Massacre. Writing of his trip to Fort Lyon in *Specimen Days*, he fails to record that infamous slaughter:

Between Pueblo and Bent's fort, southward, in a clear afternoon sun-spell I catch exceptionally good glimpses of the Spanish peaks. We are in southeastern Colorado—pass immense herds of cattle as our first-class locomotive rushes us along. . . . We pass Fort Lyon—lots of adobe houses—limitless pasturage, appropriately fleck'd with those herds of cattle . . . a belated cow-boy with some unruly member of his herd—an emigrant wagon toiling yet a little further, the horse slow and tired—two men, apparently father and son, jogging along on foot—and around all the indescribable *chiaroscuro* and sentiment (profounder than anything at sea) athwart these endless wilds. (220)

ears of corn, not consorting with human beings even though he's thoroughly fascinated with the color and gaiety of the French Quarter as any tourist would be.

Whitman produced a few minor poems concerning Indians. He recorded the deaths of both Red Jacket and Osceola. In "Red Jacket (from Aloft)," he writes:

Upon this scene, this show,  
Yielded to-day by fashion, learning, wealth,  
(Nor in caprice alone—some grains of deepest  
meaning,)  
Haply, aloft, (who knows?) from distant sky-clouds'  
blended shapes,  
As some old tree, or rock or cliff, thrill'd with its soul,  
Product of Nature's sun, stars, earth direct—a towering  
human form,  
In hunting-shirt of film, arm'd with the rifle, a half-  
ironical smile curving its phantom lips,  
Like one of Ossian's ghosts looks down.

Ossian, of course, was a legendary Gaelic bard of the third century often denounced as the pure fakery of James Macpherson when he published the collection *Fingal*. Red Jacket was sixty-three years old when Whitman was born and so to him Red Jacket and his deeds during the American Revolution could hardly be considered "legendary." Red Jacket's skill as a warrior was minimal. He was teased by both Cornplanter and Joseph Brant for his cowardice in battle and failure to attend the battles. His importance to the Iroquois Confederacy and to the British, especially during the American Revolution, was as an orator and politician. How odd that in this verse Red Jacket stands "arm'd with the rifle" and not the quill. Surely Whitman would have known these salient facts concerning Red Jacket, who in his time was widely acclaimed as an Indian leader. It supports the fact that Whitman was an uncritical Rousseauian romanticist, not well up on current events, or an outright racist; his collected writings seem to suggest all three at varying times.

Osceola doesn't fare much better than Red Jacket in the "good gray poet's" verse:

Painted half his face and neck, his wrists, and back-  
hands,  
Put the scalp-knife carefully in his belt—then lying  
down, resting a moment,  
Rose again, half sitting, smiled, gave in silence his  
extended hand to each and all,  
Sank faintly low to the floor (tightly grasping the  
tomahawk handle,)  
Fix'd his look on wife and little children—the last:  
(And here a line in memory of his name and death.)  
("Osceola," 5–10)

In an epigraph Whitman states that Osceola died of "a broken heart." Most historians agree he died of malaria or possibly from being poisoned or from maltreatment. Later his head was cut off and placed on display in the Medical Museum. At the time of his death Osceola was thirty-four and Whitman was nearing twenty. A U.S. marine was the poet's informant, a boy he'd met one day in Brooklyn.

He wrote "Yonnonidio," an Iroquois lament, and in the poem "The Sleepers" he devoted a passage to an Indian "squaw," though she was a somewhat supernatural being who appeared before his mother: "She remember'd her many a winter and many a summer, / But the red squaw never came nor was heard of there again" (115–116). Whitman was obviously, I hope, unaware that the word "squaw" was a derogatory term that referred to a woman's reproductive organs. It did not signify an Indian woman as such. And there are other scattered passages, but Whitman basically held the "doomed" Indian as not a fit subject for verse: Indians neither produced nor were produced by Whitman's hero, America, and merited only a veiled apparition or pitiful elegy.

Whitman, however, immortalized General George Armstrong Custer in the elegy "From Far Dakota's Cañons," within which Custer died "bearing a bright sword in thy hand, / Now ending well in death the splendid fever of thy deeds" (20–21)—deeds such as killing Indians manipulated through surprise attacks for self-aggrandizement and for the federal government. As a poem

it is not successful; as an elegy it borders on the maudlin; as history it is about as accurate as Keats attributing the discovery of the Pacific Ocean to Cortés.

In his collection of daily jottings, *Specimen Days*, Whitman noted in August 1881 his viewing of John Mulvany's painting of Custer's fall at the Little Big Horn. The poet lamented, pathetically, that he had but an hour to spend in thought before this "vast canvas" with "swarms upon swarms of savage Sioux, in their war-bonnets, frantic . . . driving through the background, through the smoke, like a hurricane of demons" (275). Mulvany's painting, *Custer's Last Rally*, was "all native, all our own, and all a fact" (276). It was American, not native in an indigenous sense. Only America could produce a spectacular event of such heroic proportions. Whitman, apparently, was a proponent of the manifest destiny bilge of the earlier decades and still of his current day. While there is no overt condemnation of Indians, there is also no understanding of what the "rally" was all about. His was a simple case of hero worship and adulation of the legendary boy-general and his glossy curls. Perhaps Whitman had read too many penny novels. "Custer (his hair cut short) stands in the middle, with dilated eye and extended arm, aiming a huge cavalry pistol" (276). In the elegy "From Far Dakota's Cañons," the poet had Custer's hair "flowing" and portrayed the general "leaving behind [him] a memory sweet to soldiers." This does not sound like the "Hard-backsides" or "Iron-ass" many of those soldiers remembered. There is some doubt that his own men, such as Marcus Reno or Fred Benteen, would retain a "sweet" memory of the suicidal young general who had been labeled a murderer of his own soldiers by his staff.

Even in 1876, strangely, in America many important authors did not accept the fact that Custer brought about his own defeat and demise in the direct attack on the Lakota (Sioux) and Cheyenne peaceful encampment at Little Big Horn on that hot June morning. Most sensible historians today conclude that Custer was in total error when foolishly attacking this encampment which outnumbered his troops. This fact had been repeatedly spelled out to the general by various scouts in his command. As Mari Sandoz suggests in *The Battle of the Little Bighorn*, 1876 was

an election year and killing Indians in the Far West could easily catapult his missile-star high in the skies before the eyes of the American public about to select, nominate the next candidate for president. His aim in this attack, *not* battle, was to revive the American sentiment. His last major campaign was in 1868, eight years prior to the Little Big Horn. The public is fickle and prone to forgetfulness. He needed headlines and consequently brought along his own newspaper reporter. Knowing full well the odds against him, knowing also the American public's deep desire for heroism and heroes, he chose to attack an encampment of nearly 10,000 Indians with a handful of soldiers—many raw recruits, some drunk on whiskey, and many frightened and angry that their commander would knowingly lead them to their deaths. The daredevil never faltered. He marched his men into glory, into history, and into Whitman's imagination ready and willing to accept the boy-general as hero and champion of the people, his "average bulk." "All nations are in need of cultural heroes, hence, Ulysses and Aeneas, Virginia Dare of Roanoke and George Washington. Custer had his Homer, his Virgil in Whitman; however, not only are the poem and the essay both inaccurate, they also are creatively weak in execution and language and do not survive as a major work of art befitting the honor of epic. Nor is Custer a proven cultural hero. He did not save the day, let alone the men under his command. What he accomplished, apart from his demise, was to start a controversy which continues to rage to this moment.

Whitman describes, again in *Specimen Days*, an extended trip to the Far West in autumn of 1879. The poet, while traveling the plains among the ghosts of legendary chiefs, never mentions the historical fact that those lands were once inhabited by Indians. The word "Indian" is not used. Strange.

I cannot but wonder where Whitman's thoughts lay at the Camp Grant Massacre or the Sand Creek Massacre or the flight of the Nez Percé. How is it that Geronimo, Roman Nose, Crazy Horse, and Chief Joseph were not fit subjects for epics, great warriors and heroes to their people which they indeed are? Whitman was not the only major poet of his day to slight these heroes. Whittier, Emerson, Lowell, and Lanier all ignored them.

But Whitman's life-style, thought, poetic vision, and sympathies were with the common American, so he could be expected to hold strong feelings for the plight of a mighty race of human beings crushed under the impervious foot of the imperialism of mechanical progress. Not until the twentieth century did poets fully realize the essential value and quality of that culture so readily put to the gun.

It is a tragic loss that the American Indian did not prove a fit subject for Whitman's powerful poetics. Perhaps Whitman, with all his shoulder-power, might well have composed a truly immortal epic. He lived during the momentous time of the Plains Nations and the deaths of the Woodland Nations. Obviously, for whatever personal reasons, Whitman closed his ears and shut his eyes to the Indians' death cries. Much to literature's and history's loss, he turned his back on American tragedy.

Sitting Bull, Rain-in-the-face, Black Kettle, Roman Nose, and their brothers and sisters still await a courageous poet to recreate their lives and deeds, their monumental strengths and successes, and their suffering in verse, for the eyes and ears of the world. Perhaps their own living sons and daughters will take up the pen. Whitman's indifference failed them.

*Power ceases in the instant of repose; it resides in the moment of transition from a past to a new state, in the shooting of the gulf, in the darting to an aim. This one fact the world hates, that the soul becomes . . .*

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

*The limits of language, as of reality itself, are not rigid but fluid. Only in the mobile and multi-form word, which seems to be constantly bursting its own limits, does the fullness of the world-forming logos find its counter-part. Language itself must recognize all the distinctions which it necessarily effects as provisional and relative distinctions which it will withdraw when it considers the object in a new perspective.*

—Ernst Cassirer

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## Tropes of Selfhood

### Whitman's "Expressive Individualism"

M. JIMMIE KILLINGSWORTH

In *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, the best-selling study of national character as revealed through hundreds of interviews with contemporary Americans, Robert Bellah and four distinguished coauthors are the latest generation of American social scientists to find in Walt Whitman a representative voice for selfhood in the United States. Like the first generation, which included William James, these cartographers of the soul are attracted by the poet whose great theme was what he believed to be simultaneously (and ironically) most common and most precious—"myself":