



**DEMOCRATIC REPRESENTATION  
AND RECONFIGURATION: A MATERIALIST READING  
OF WALT WHITMAN'S 1855 *LEAVES OF GRASS***

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**Abstract:**

The following article discusses the material conditions of production surrounding Walt Whitman's 1855 *Leaves of Grass*. As a self-published poetry collection, I argue that Whitman uses paratextual features to mirror the text's thematic rubric. By employing a materialist framework, this article claims that Whitman's interpretation of America's retroactive relationship to its democratic founding drives his collection. In depicting the nation as a work in progress, Whitman forces the American reader to revisit, reform and evolve the limited state of democratic power evidenced in his present-day nation. As self-reflexive focalization of the national condition, *Leaves of Grass*, through its unpretentious material composition, reconstructs the image of the poet as the necessary mediator of America's unique political conception. Drawing upon Derrida's synchronic assessment of the Declaration of Independence's constative and performative structure, as well as Raymond Williams' cultural materialist theorization of literature, this article claims that Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* is a political project that provides intervention for the democratic failures of America's founding principles.

**Keywords:** Walt Whitman, Materialism, Derrida, Proletariat

**Democratic Representation and Reconfiguration: a Materialist Reading of Walt Whitman's 1855 *Leaves of Grass***

America's democratic founding derives from The Declaration of Independence's assertion; "*all men are created equal*" (US, 1776). Equality ensures "*certain unalienable Rights*" of "*Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness*" and for Thomas Paine, America's "*Independence is the only Bond that can tie and keep us together*" (1955: 53). Written at the beginning of the American Revolution, Paine acknowledges such a political ideology as "*an agreeable dream*" that is yet to be fully realized and practised (*Ibid*: 21). After the War

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of Independence, democratic optimism darkens, and James Fenimore Cooper illustrates this in his 1838 essay, 'The American Democrat'. He observes that "*there is no such thing, in practice, as perfect and absolute liberty*", suggesting that the democratic values of the foundational document fail (2010: 51). In particular, the totalising determiner 'all' in the Declaration's claim that 'all men are created equal' has, as Cooper points out, thus far been "*received with many limitations*" (*Ibid*: 49). For Cooper, the national democratic discourse fails because "*inequality exists*" and the 'inequality' to which he refers is that the African-American "*slave*", as well as "*Women and minors*", are excluded from the suffrage (*Ibid*: 42 and 43). Here, Cooper identifies a fundamental contention between *du jure* 'Rights' and *de facto* 'Rights' in America. Whilst *de jure* refers to "*a state of affairs that is in accordance with law*", *de facto* alludes to "*a state of affairs that is true in fact, but ... is not officially sanctioned*" (*School of Law*, n.p.). As such, the Declaration of Independence can be considered *du jure* and not *de facto* in its proclamation of universal equality. Although Cooper does not regret the narrowing scope of democratic inclusion, he does admit that the nation's only tenable "*truth*" is that "*the power of facts*" remain "*strictly different from a question of politics*" (2010: 43). Distinction between founding ideals and political materiality become radically separated in the American republic's formation.

The state of democracy and its need for reanalysis is that which drives Walt Whitman's 1855 poetry collection, *Leaves of Grass*. Whitman revisits the founding ideals of democracy, as stated in the Declaration of Independence, and uses them as a lens with which to read present America. In this article, I argue that Whitman uses poetry to reconfigure a national political discourse of democracy. The thematic rubric that I will use to read the collection is the text's self-reflexive composition. Employing a materialist approach will enable a conceptual analysis of how Whitman uses literature to renegotiate America's self-perception and definition of its political democracy. This article addresses the conditions of publications and the paratextual elements surrounding *Leaves of Grass*, which, I claim demonstrates Whitman's own analysis of the American republic as a democratic experiment. Similar to Cooper's conclusions, the founding American model of democracy within Whitman's text also fails to encapsulate accurate political reality. Whitman's preface to *Leaves of Grass* in itself is a declaration of democratic availability of the United States for poetry. By using literature and a self-conscious literary invention as a means to push for the evolution of democratic practice in America, Whitman revolutionises poetry in order to reconstruct the image of the poet as the necessary mediator of America's unique political conception. In penning a self-reflexive focalization of the national condition in his poetry, and most profoundly through his reference to American slavery, Whitman exposes national imperfection. Indeed the "*kaleidoscopically shifting point of view*" that David F. Maas refers to as Whitman's allowing "*us to see the process of the mapper mapping his mapping*", presents the reader with an unfiltered and unconstrained spectrum of American humanity in its entirety (2003: 15). As such, this article demonstrates how *Leaves of Grass* renders Whitman's present national state a flawed democracy. Finally, Whitman's synchronic depiction of the Declaration, when read in dialogue with Derrida's assertion of democratic "*retroactivity*", contextualises

Whitman's promotion of communal re-engagement (1986: 10). *Leaves of Grass* is thus a political project that provides intervention for the democratic failures of the founding principles.

Throughout the collection, Whitman makes clear his suspicions of how "government, like, dress, is the badge of lost innocence" due to politics' susceptibility to corruption (Paine: 5). In his preface, Whitman announces that "*The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem*" (*Ibid*: 5). The poet is merely a recorder and interpreter, not an ingenious craftsman. Here his project is clear; Whitman must inform the nation of its own power and opportunity by using America's state of being as the "*unrhymed poetry*" of his collection (*LoG*, 1986: 6). In particular, F.O. Matthiessen identified Whitman as a fundamental American Renaissance writer due to his "*devotion to the possibilities of democracy*" (1968: ix). The American Renaissance is a literary epoch retrospectively identified as the beginnings of American literature and dates from 1830 until the outbreak of the American Civil War in the 1860s. For Karen Swallow Prior, *Leaves of Grass* self-consciously acknowledges "*the role that art and culture play in shaping the desires and will of the people, which eventually come to be reflected in the law*" (2016: n.p.). In Whitman's text, the American experiment of democracy thus far has produced no uniformed body. The plural noun 'the United States are' implies a commonality of disparate experiences: for Whitman, America as a democratic experience is in a state of flux. Whitman looks to evolve and develop, through poetic mapping, the current 'possibility' of democratic unification. As a result, he is distrustful of political language and proposals of such ideals, that since 1776 are yet to reach completion. In the line, "*their Presidents shall not be their common referee so much as their poets shall*", Whitman displaces governmental authority and suggests that his appointment as the communicable poet is contingent upon his status as 'common' (*LoG*: 8). In other words, presidential privilege cannot "*realize the true American character*" (*Ibid*: 16). This is because the President is too far removed from everyday experiences. The President experiences America's reality in isolation, as Whitman points out that he both lives and works "*up there in the White House*" (*Ibid*: 92). "*Whitman's insistence on 'absorbing his country', and his extraordinary success in translating his social context into poetry*", Paul H. Outka argues, is the "*constitutive link*" between the text's surrounding culture and contained poetic expression (2002: 293 and 294). To be a 'referee' necessitates accessibility to, and familiarity with, the common conditions of life.

Although Matthiessen's mid-twentieth-century critique contextualizes Whitman's self-appointment as the 'referee' of American political engagement within the nation, its usefulness remains limited. As a piece of New Critical analysis, Matthiessen exhibits "*devotion to the foreground, of the writing itself*" (Williams, 1996: 28). Consequently, this fails to sufficiently consider the significance of a text's material composition that Raymond Williams goes on to identify as having "*been alienated to components or to mere background*" in literary criticism of Matthiessen's era (*Ibid*: 28). As the leading cultural materialist of the later twentieth-century, Williams purports that "*analysis of all forms of signification...within the actual means and conditions of their productions*" is vital to

understanding the “discoverably intentional organization” of a text (*I Writing in Society*: 210 and 28). Paratextual engagement unveils the circumstances of production and by extension, ideological representation. Within Whitman scholarship, there exists a “critical consensus” that “Whitman is best understood contextually, as a writer who reabsorbed many aspects of his culture into his work” (Folsom, 1997: ix). For Outka, historicization and politicization of Whitman, however, risks becoming a “reductive tool, explaining away” the potency of “Whitman’s verse” (2002: 294). Nonetheless, the latter approach does reduce the “split between the politician and the poet” that Betsy Erkkila condemns as the “Modernist and New Critical” desire to “rescue Whitman’s poems from the charge of political contingency in order to save them of the universality of art” (1989: 6). As a textual artefact, visual and editorial elements surround *Leaves of Grass* that contribute to the political position the poetry promotes. To prevent committing Outka’s “explaining away”, I will, therefore, consider how “other discourses” inform is poetry, demonstrating how paratext and text function symbiotically in Whitman’s collection (2002: 294).

In self-publishing the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman evokes an image of an organic and unpretentious writer. For instance, one of the most immediate ways Whitman presents himself as common is through the collection’s paratextual features. *Leaves of Grass* begins with an image of Whitman. Devoid of a name, the image appears to be an unidentified individual. The subject’s nonchalant pose, where he stands with one hand on his hip and his hat skewed to the one side, evokes “a democratic presence; a common man who speaks as and for rather than apart from the people” (Erkkila, 1989: 3). The proletariat figure is the “American bard [who] shall delineate no class of persons nor one or two out of the strata of interests”, indicating how poetry is independent of governmental influence and thus corruptibility (Whitman, *LoG*:14). His stance communicates a sense of anticipatory waiting and the figure’s direct gaze projects the possibility of conversation and engagement. According to Whitman, commonality is fundamental because “of all mankind the great poet is the equable man” (*Ibid*: 8). Peter Bellis claims that the frontispiece “unsettles the reader’s assumptions about both the boundaries and contents of literary texts” (1999: 75). Indeed, the visual iconography of the self-published 1855 edition’s front cover reflects the organicism of Whitman’s poetic mediation on democracy. For instance, the gold embossed leaves and roots that appear to grow from out of the cover title foreshadow the regenerative force of the poems (Whitman NLS). The object’s binding personifies the text’s literal grounding in the natural reality of democracy and not the idealised democratic visions proposed by distant ‘White House’ political discourse. In having self-crafted a democratic poetry collection, that centres around a participatory reading experience, Whitman uses the object’s material composition to reflect this. By emphasising a visual iconography of organicism, Whitman’s presentation mirrors the unpretentious conditions of publication. As a physical object *Leaves of Grass* symbolically represents America’s promised political condition as a grassroots nation that Whitman strives to correct and realign with through his poetry. Whitman the poet thus exists in the immediate locality and reality. Alexis de Tocqueville’s view on Democracy in America claims that “the relations that exist between the social and political condition of a people

and the genius of its authors are always numerous; whoever knows one is never completely ignorant of the other" (2004: 543). For Whitman, democratic national discourse as purported by The Declaration is a figurative idealization and an unrealized material reality. The nation's founding written text insufficiently encapsulates the inhabited democratic reality of America.

In his 'The Death of the Author' essay, Roland Barthes argues that consideration of authorial intent during textual interpretation "is to impose a limit on that text" (147). However, viewing Whitman's material projection of 'the possibilities of democracy' as deliberately constructed, provides, as Sean Burke in his direct counter to Barthes claims; "a necessary...condition of the existence of objective meaning" (1977: 109). Erkkilä claims that "the portrait is a construct, an invention of the poet as the representative American who emerges in the poems" (1989: 4). This is especially true upon analysing Whitman's poetic celebration of democracy. Whitman's poetry and paratext are inextricable. For instance, the collapse in poetic ownership expressed in the lines, "I celebrate myself/ And what I assume you shall assume", reflects the absence of naming in the frontispiece (LoG: 25). Whitman's poetry belongs to the nation; it is accessible and signals engagement. As such his name remains absent until the copyright page identifying not a Walter as the intellectual owner but a "Walt" (NLS). Here there is a declaration of independence from literary predecessors whereby Whitman rejects the triple name formality adopted by earlier writers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, John Greenleaf Whittier and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. For Erkkilä, "Whitman's self-naming is an assault on literary decorum and the Puritan pieties of the New England literary establishment" (1989: 5). As such, the nickname 'Walt' creates intimacy and familiarity between poet and reader. Replacement of the personal pronoun 'I', for the simultaneously unspecific and direct pronoun 'you', reflects this. Here individualism becomes cooperative.

In Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, poetic accessibility aids democratic exchange. Indeed, Erkkilä's rehistoricization of Whitman locates him within a revolutionary individualism framework, which counters interpretations "in relation to a line of poetic development" (Erkkilä, 1989: 6). For instance, Whitman's simile, "for every atom belonging to me good as belongs to you" declares the collapse in poetic pretension (LoG: 25). The latter identifies Whitman as a revolutionary in his endorsement of 'democratic possibility'. When the fellow American Renaissance author, Emerson writes, "America is a poem in our eyes", he establishes a distinction between the poet and the reader (2000: 304). Emerson's expression and his use of the possessive pronoun 'our' suggest the two are separate from one another, divided by the exercise of creative expression. According to Emerson, the reader is naturally incomplete since "man is only half himself", and thus requires an interpreter of great importance. Emerson's poet "is the sayer, the namer, and represents beauty. He is a sovereign, and stands on the centre" (Ibid: 305). Whitman however favours and actively participates in the wider national collective by exclaiming, "Great is liberty! Great is equality! I am their follower" (LoG:142, emphasis added). In this line the anaphora 'great' evokes celebration and political interaction takes precedence over artistic achievement. Thus, in inciting engagement with democratic potential, Whitman's design

of *Leaves of Grass* establishes him as a likewise common 'follower' to the symbiotic relationship between poetry and national expression. He does not advertise or insist upon his role as engineer and owner of this form of functional art. This championing of community engagement embodies what Heather Morton identifies as the "*power dynamics*" of reading Whitman's text (2005: 230). Morton claims that with the formalization of *Leaves of Grass*, "*citizens can read texts freely, without the interpretive constraint found in prior literary practice*" (*Ibid*: 229). In making political and democratic engagement available, Whitman's role as mediator combines intimacy with poetic rebellion. Whitman's reconfiguration of the poet into the common man and not an authority figure allows for an autonomous reading as well as democratic participation. Whitman's is a dialogue of assistance rather than dogma.

Whitman installs democratic appointment into his reader when availability necessitates bringing them into his own immediacy. Intimacy evoked through the imperative "*Come closer to me*", dramatizes the collapse of artistic pretension and its subsequent deflation of proximity between poet and reader (*LoG*: 87). Whitman reconciles his imposition with assertions of common good through a nautical metaphor. In particular, the imperative "*Helmsmen of nations, choose your craft*" demonstrates the reader or bardian listener's need for political engagement (*Ibid*: 142). America's natural authority requires the poetic instigator's mentorship. The mode of address, 'Helmsmen' places responsibility within the nation's populace; American citizens must question, revise and engage with the founding principles of democracy. Whitman makes engagement symbiotic with the phrase "*here you sail, I sail*", situating the need for this engagement in the "*here and now*" (*Ibid*:142 and 72). Insistence upon temporality of the present, when read in conversation with Derrida's synchronic assessment of "*the people*" as sovereign guarantors of the Declaration of Independence, is that which renders his encyclopaedic voicing of America relevant and accurate (US, 1776). Derrida asks, "*who signs, and with what so-called proper name, the declarative act which founds an institution?*" (1986: 8). He asserts that the political and linguistic uniqueness of the document and the subsequent claim of democracy lies in the structural feature of the founding. The Declaration of Independence presents the nation with an aporia. For instance, temporal markers of the nation's inception, as signified by active verbs such as "*we hold*" and "*declare*" betray an inherent interpretative lacuna (US, 1776). This paradox of presence questions whether democratic "*independence is stated or produced by this utterance*" (Derrida, 1986: 9). Citizens, readers and the 'common referee' all have a responsibility. The latter derives from what Bellis calls the 1855 text's "*ultimate goal [of] visionary reconstruction of national*" identity and configuration "*within a poetic space filled not by words but by the direct and overwhelming presence of America itself*" (1999: 75).

The 'visionary reconstruction' to which Bellis refers, is immediate. In the preface, Whitman declares "*what is past is past*" (*LoG*: 9). Historical blunders have already been committed. The present in his 'unrhymed poetry' structurally requires organisation. For example, in 'Song for Myself', he represents the 'overwhelming presence of America' in a sweeping depiction of geographic nationhood. The announcement, "*I am afoot with my*

*vision*" begins the eighty-line sentence (*Ibid*: 57), where Whitman embarks on a poetic journey, ranging from the "Approaching Manhattan" island, to "Niagara, the cataract falling like a veil over my countenance" (*Ibid*: 58). This sentence is devoid of ordered syntax in that punctuation becomes indistinguishable; ellipses, colons and semi-colons signal pause and replace the full-stop. The sentence's delayed ending implies continuance and as such objective meaning within the present becomes redundant. The endless clauses fail to modify the opening announcement. Instead, it ends with radical uncertainty of presence indicated by simultaneously "appearing and disappearing" (*Ibid*: 60). Organization of the present thus requires consideration of the past. Therefore "to obliterate the distinction between then and now", is to unveil their interdependency (Gilmore, 2010: 146). The line "I am the man...I suffered...I was there" demonstrates the past's influence upon the present (Whitman, *LoG*: 60). Reflection structures and paves future national betterment. Historical hindsight is synonymous with future insight. Whitman's teaching of how the 'then' holds powerful interpretative value within the present tense, anticipates Derrida's "simulacrum of the instant" (1986: 11). Derrida posits that because the Declaration's signing is both constative and performative, its basis requires ceaseless addressing. The democratic signification simultaneously records and creates. Historical events, despite taking place in the 'past', provide valuable insight within the present. Michael T. Gilmore characterises Whitman's oscillation between the past and reality as "forays into history [that] slip into the past tense on occasion but have immediacy in spite of that fact" (2010: 146). For Derrida, the undecidability between the two circumstances of the Declaration is "necessary" to the ontological fundamentality of its democratic sanctioning (1986: 9). The declarative utterance becomes informative only when considered alongside the obscurity of its precise temporal moment. The 'good people', who the signatories act as "representative" for, do not "exist" (US, 1776). The "presumed signer [s]" gain legitimacy "after the fact" (Derrida, 1986: 10). Therefore, there is a suspended act of legitimacy in the Declaration which renders its principles in a similar state of suspension. The absence of presence implies the continued responsibility of modification and negotiation. Collapse in the distinction between past and present with Whitman similarly insists upon sustained self-assertion from the American community.

The necessity of heeding history's warnings demonstrates Whitman's poetic methodology. Only in considering all aspects of the democratically founded country can Whitman reach verisimilitude, in how "The Americans of all nations at any time upon earth have probably the fullest poetical nature" (*LoG*: 5). The superlative 'fullest' implies actuality, confirming the reader's ability and qualification in actively ensuring America's democratic promise. Swallow Prior claims that Whitman's poetry "is a political force in itself", whereby understanding democratic potential is dependent upon an analysis of the American populace in its entirety and its origins (2016: n.p). For Swallow Prior, "the power of poetry and democracy came from an ability to make a unified whole out of disparate parts" (*Ibid*). Those who constitute the Declaration's qualification of 'all men' come under scrutiny. Whitman considers how "Here is not merely a nation but a teeming nation of nations". The encyclopaedic 'vision' and geographic mapping depicts vignettes reflecting

the American individual's stake in the national discourse of Democracy (*LoG*: 5). For instance, Whitman focuses on all ages. First, he inhabits the American "*wife's voice*", then "*the husband[']s*", and then focuses on what the "*child said*" (*Ibid*: 61 and 29). The diversification of America is also evident as the poem's vignettes range from the Native American "*red squaw*" to the African American "*slave at auction*" (*Ibid*: 111 and 121). However, the presence of slavery destabilises the realization of America's democratic inception.

In considering the issue slavery poses to those very ideals, the cultural materialist reading as proposed by Raymond Williams becomes problematic. Thus far, Williams's assertion of context as informing vital critical analysis has aided my reading of Whitman's self-conscious composition as an extension of his political intervention. However, this cultural materialist logic is limited in its consideration of the wider critical sphere. In the same way that the relevance of social context becomes displaced in Matthiessen's analysis of Whitman, Williams' framework lacks Matthiessen's "*close analysis [of]... the text itself*" (Williams, 1996: 480). William rejects New Criticism, Structuralism and Poststructuralist. This article instead places the composition and the literary text in conversation with one another as I claim that material composition reveals deconstructionists' ideas inherent in the poetry of Walt Whitman. In particular, the poststructuralist idea of an inherent and irresolvable contradiction, or an aporia, becomes integral to my reading of Whitman's slave character. I argue that this slave becomes a figurative aporia intended to reflect and communicate the nation's own inherent contradiction in having declared universal liberty in legislation, whilst simultaneously continuing to pursue slavery. Whitman's democratic platform on which he conducts his examination will go on to show how although, "*we thought our Union grand and our Constitution grand*", it, in actuality, remains unfulfilled (*LoG*, 91). Moreover, democratic optimism, which decreases for Cooper's 'American Democrat', does so for Whitman also when he confronts the issue and presence of slavery.

Whitman repeatedly insists upon America's identity as a multi-faceted country and in the paragraph advertising his encyclopaedic definition of American as a 'nation of nations', he repeats the adverb "*here*" six times (*Ibid*: 5). Positioning within the present renders America's diversity as the predominate matter of immediate importance; the two are contingent upon each other. Writing in Antebellum America, Whitman's abolitionist stance within 'Song of Myself', is made clear through the preface. In particular, he references "*slavery and the tremulous spreading of hands to protect it, and the stern opposition to it which shall never cease until it ceases or the speaking of tongues...cease*" (*Ibid*: 8). The slave reveals an unsettling reality within and about the self-defined democratic nation. The slave's presence in both Whitman's poem and reality has the power to unveil a possible contradiction inherent in America's *version* of democracy and equality. That which requires reconfiguration is the vast disparity of American communities, some of whom, as Whitman will go on to show, remain excluded from the national discourse of democracy.



Reader appointment occurs in his depiction of "*the hounded slave*", who Whitman the poet, "*become [s]*" (*Ibid*: 62). Appropriation of the American slave, within criticism, leads to claims that Whitman enacts a colonizer's gaze. For instance, Gilmore identifies that "*no black person utters a word in 'Song of Myself'*" (2010: 154), whilst Wendy Kurant claims that Whitman's "*embrace of imperialism*" is evident in his "*colonial discourse*" (2011: 82). Indeed, in *Leaves of Grass*, silence is synonymous with oppression and speech is indicative of power. The whipped slave "*winces*"; he is passive (Whitman, *LoG*: 62). This reflects how colonial power dynamics determine who can communicate and who cannot. Whitman's declarative statement, "*I do not ask the wounded person how he feels*" appears to enforce silence onto the subordinate character (*Ibid*: 63). Refusal of conversation destabilises the integrity of the proletariat figure's opening gesture of invite. As such, Whitman's declaration of "*common ground*" seems not to extend to the slave (*Ibid*: 15).

Immediately after refusing the slave dialogue and the possibility of interaction, Whitman, in line 838, states "*I myself become the wounded person*" (*Ibid*: 63). Appropriation of the "*hell and despair*" the slave experiences, appears to Outka (2002: 295) and Martha Nussbaum (2011: 115), to be unethical. Both deem it an authorial extension of white colonization. I want to suggest, however, that ventriloquism of the slave is an extended act of verisimilitude. For instance, Whitman demonstrates how democratic actuality is a work-in-progress. Appropriation is more a case of empathic identification whereby Whitman is sympathetic to the slave's disqualification. Whitman initially introduces his voiceless 'slave' with the impersonal determiner, "*The Hounded Slave*" (*LoG*, 62: line, 822). He then replaces the determiner with the personal pronoun 'I' after considering, in line 825, "*The murderous buckshot and the bullets*" that endanger those unprotected by 'unalienable rights' (*Ibid*: 62). Adam Smith famously defined sympathy as "*conceiving what we ourselves should feel in the like situation*" (2002: 11). Exclusion from democratic consideration and the "*agonies*" that this causes, lead Whitman to declare: "*All these I feel or am*" (*LoG*: 62). The conjunction 'or' suggest the two are inextricable. Erica Spencer claims that "*Whitman's America is not static- it constantly seeks to improve itself through addition and reinvention*" (2008: 221). She argues the "*imperfect*" nation manifests itself in the inclusion of fictionalised figures of political exclusion (*Ibid*: 239). The slave's presence is an insistence upon reconfiguration. Whitman as 'slave' embodies Smith's cognitive simulation identified as the "*changing places in fancy with the sufferer*" (Smith, 2002:12). In particular, Whitman simulates the indivisible verbal and political disqualification Frederick Douglass identifies in his speech, 'What to The Negro is the Fourth of July?'. In this, Douglass analyses what the word "*independence*" means to those who have no relation to the concept (1852:1). He claims that African Americans have no stake in the national holiday because as slaves, "*this celebration...marks the beginning of another year of your national life*", and not their own (*Ibid*:1). The accusatory determiner 'your' renders slaves alienated from political rhetoric.

When political reality shares no similarity to political ideals, that very language system becomes foreign and impenetrable. Douglass insists "*stand by those principles*" (*Ibid*: 4). "*The mournful wail of millions! Whose chains [are] heavy and grievous*" require a

Derridean retroactive liberation (*Ibid*: 8). Thus, African American slavery reveals the underlying hypocrisy of America's initial democratic principle and in doing so exposes the Declaration's "fraud" (Douglass, 1852:10). The politics of slavery corrupts democracy; it remains a 'dream' unrealized for many and betrays the *du jure* nature of America's foundational premise. Ventriloquism is thus a self-reflexive act that is used to "capture the essence of America" and its revision "of nation building" (Spencer, 2008: 221). Whitman's expression of empathetic ease thus communicates how Americans both within the democratic demographic and outside it, possess the "same red-running blood" (*LoG*: 21). Any pre-conceived distinction between the two groups is arbitrary. For Whitman, democratic rhetoric fails to deliver the principles of 'liberty' to 'all men'. 'All men', when considered alongside slavery, are not treated as 'equals' within the nation.

A further area of expansion in my research involves reading Whitman's 1855 *Leaves of Grass* in dialogue with his 1892 *The "Death-Bed" Edition* to address "Whitman the endless reviser" (Frank, 2005: n.p.). Whitman spent the remainder of his life rethinking *Leaves of Grass* and its functional use as an expression of democratic potentiality. Instead of renaming his final collection, Whitman revised his 1855 text six times, making the original twelve poems metamorphosize into four hundred. In this, poems entitled 'Memories of President Lincoln' and 'An Army Corps on the March' become poetic representations of moments in history, such as the Civil War, when the idea of democracy for 'all' become violently addressed (Whitman, 2001: 408-421 and 376). This would demonstrate how Whitman's life-long commitment to securing democracy "en-masse", forever remains a duty of "The present now and here" (*Ibid*: 23 and 7).

To conclude, *Leaves of Grass* reveals how the foundational documents of written democratic possibility insufficiently encapsulate the current state of democracy in America post-1776. The nation's original model of democracy is fundamentality flawed. Whitman's text becomes an act of verisimilitude depicting the limited actuality of America's proposed 'unalienable rights' for 'all men'. As political reality falls short of America's democratic inception, Whitman uses his own text as a manifesto to help realign the nation with its founding ideals. As such, accurate poetic portrayal of the hypothetical national discourse justifies Whitman's plead for reconsideration, re-engagement and thus reconfiguration of American democratic reality. Only in doing so can Whitman as 'referee' gain an understanding of where democracy must go in order to reach a more complete sense of liberty. Whitman's poetic depiction of the *du jure* state of American democracy paves the way to making the Declaration *de facto*.

### **About the Author(s)**

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