

4-HL-Matt Cohen.mp3

Mary Mahoney [00:00:00] From Trinity College. This is Hidden Literacies.

Mary Mahoney [00:00:17] Welcome to Hidden Literacies, the podcast on this show, we'll hear from contributors to the Hidden Literacies Anthology on the sources they've selected, how they became hidden, the lessons we can learn from them, and what they reveal about the stakes of each contributor's scholarship.

Mary Mahoney [00:00:34] My name is Mary Mahoney and I'm the Digital Scholarship Coordinator at Trinity College. On this episode it's my privilege to bring you a conversation with contributor Matt Cohen. Matt Cohen teaches English at the University of Nebraska Lincoln and is a faculty fellow at the Center for Digital Research in the Humanities there. He's the author or editor of five books, including, most recently, *Whitman's Drift - Imagining Literary Distribution*. Cohen is also a contributing editor at the Walt Whitman Archive and coeditor with Stephanie Browner and Kenneth Price of the Charles Chesnutt Digital Archive. To begin, I asked Matt to describe the text he's contributing to hit in literacies.

Matt Cohen [00:01:18] The text that I'm working on is a letter from John Newton Johnson, who was an Alabama cotton farmer, to Walt Whitman, the famous American poet and writer from the 3rd of April 1875. So during the post Civil War period after reconstruction have been rolling and its four page letter and its like many pieces of correspondence from the time it's kind of soil a little bit. It's written in pencil, so it's kind of hard to read. And Whitman obviously spilled something on it at some point and carried it around with him in his bag or something, his pocket, and it got folded up and rubbed a little bit. But you can still see some of some of what the letter says.

Mary Mahoney [00:02:11] Matt described what led him to this text.

Matt Cohen [00:02:14] So this letter is currently held at the Library of Congress. They have a very large collection of Whitman documents, and it's among a substantial body of correspondence that they have there in their manuscripts division. It was found a long time ago by Whitman scholars who, as near as I can tell, use all means legal and illegal to try to track down documents that Whitman wrote. And it was called to my attention by one of the project managers at the Walt Whitman archive for which I am a contributing editor. So I was at the time writing a book called *Whitman's Drift -Imagining Literary Distribution*. I was interested in distribution. I was interested in how Whitman's works actually got around. We make a lot of literary critical judgments about text without actually knowing whether anyone read them or not. And so I thought, well, let's find out. And what I wanted to know also was what did Whitman think about his distribution? Did it change the way he wrote? So here you're recording a podcast, for example. That's a very specific distribution method and it comes with certain limitations. You don't get to see my beautiful face and it comes to certain advantages. It's highly portable. You can download it, listen to it anywhere with modern electronic devices. And you can also do a range of any range of audio formats innovated by radio. You can you can do. One of the things that Whitman did was he took advantage of the medium to convey things against its grain. So I thought, all right, well, what we're all the media that used to transmit himself, as he might put it. And in what cases did he not get distributed? So where were the dark spots in Whitman sky? So it had always been said that in the south of the United States, because Whitman was such a radical in terms of religious belief, because he had taken to an anti slavery stance and his early poetry and for various other reasons, it was a Yankee he hadn't been read in the South. And I'm from the south. And I was like, I don't I don't think that's true. So I started

looking for him. Well, the folks who are doing the correspondence at some point, after probably hearing me pining away about a lack of evidence, said, well, you got to look at these letters from this guy in Alabama because he loved Whitman. And there's 30 letters and that's a lot. So I went and started reading through them and I came across this one and I really didn't know what to do. I mean, it's a real mess.

Mary Mahoney [00:04:56] As Matt describes, this letter has a strange form.

Matt Cohen [00:05:00] So this letter is it is written in dialect, which is already unusual. The whole letter is written from the standpoint of John Newton Johnson's newborn son. Who's about maybe eight months old? That's the point at which this letter is born in 1874 and this is in early 1875 that he's writing to it. And Newton Johnson has decided to name his son after Walt Whitman. I don't know how many Southern rural former slave holders babies were named after Walt Whitman, but I'm guessing not many. And so this is the father of this child pretending to be this child, speaking in a kind of Southern baby dialect to announce to the famous poet that he is named. He's been named after him. That is that's the trope of the letter. It's hard to read because it's in a dialect that is crossed over or that is a mix of babytalk where just letters are left off things it'll for little that kind of thing for good and sort of southern dialect. And it's just the strangest damn thing.

Mary Mahoney [00:06:13] What kind of man writing as his infant son have to say in baby talk, Matt offers us a summary.

Matt Cohen [00:06:22] It wouldn't be so weird if it hadn't been written to Walt Whitman, the poet of democracy, the poet of freedom, the poet of equality, the poet of masters, and the poet of slaves, as he says, the poet of the body and a poet of the soul. Because it's in effect a it's a kind of love letter. In a weird way, obviously, it's a letter showing a kind of homage to Whitman. I mean, naming your kid after somebody is significant. He starts by saying, my dad was so mean to me. He didn't give me a name for months and months. He didn't want to name me after anybody who was alive because living people tend to do bad things at some point. And then you regret that you named your child after them. And Dad says you won't do any bad things because you're such a good writer and such a good speaker that you couldn't possibly do bad things. So there's already a little pressure there, right? Like no pressure. Don't be an asshole and make my name in a tragic episode. Another tragic episode, Southern History. But then he goes on, and that's kind of funny and playful. But then he goes on to say, The only thing my dad's worried about is that you were an abolitionist. And we don't like abolitionists down here. And Dad says, well, maybe you were just writing abolitionist poetry for the money. Maybe it was just about making some change and you actually didn't feel that way. So if that's true, well, you should come down here and live with me and we will get fiddles and we will play Dixie and we will go all across the south and we will root out all the abolitionists and we'll be the new Ku Klux Klan. So things get serious very fast and very unpleasant.

Mary Mahoney [00:08:02] How strange was this kind of behavior from Whitman fans?

Matt Cohen [00:08:05] Now, on the one hand, this is not that unusual in the sense that Whitman got fan mail all the time, and especially from the eighteen seventies on, he's getting mail from all over the world with people expressing their love to him, people saying come and live with me. Anne Gilchrist, who is a wealthy English woman, has this kind of relationship with him. She packs up her family and moves them over to America to live near Whitman. I mean, she was imagining they could get married, perhaps live together.

So it's not uncommon for people to have that kind of fantasy about Whitman. But there's nothing like this. I mean, there's nobody that says come down and join the Ku Klux Klan.

Mary Mahoney [00:08:45] It's difficult to know much about this singular fan, except for what we know from surviving letters Johnson sent to Whitman.

Matt Cohen [00:08:56] So one thing worth remembering about that imbalance in our historical knowledge about the past, about figures like Johnson, is that he led in certain ways a difficult life. And the archives that folks like Johnson produce are precarious. He reminds Whitman often in the letters that he has to travel 15 miles in order to get or receive mail, that he has to go to the post office in Guntersville if he wants to receive packages or anything like that. He doesn't have a regular rural mail service. And so that's just a little window onto how difficult it was to keep and to circulate documents in the rural south at the time. There's just not a whole lot of infrastructure. Johnson's house burned down in the early 20th century and probably with it lots of copies of Leaves of Grass, but also his correspondence to the Whitman letters back to him. So all we have to go on is the moments in the letters when Johnson quotes Whitman back to himself or when he says, well, you tell me in your letter this, but I tell you this. And so I think that there's a sort of hollow echo that can be kind of found in them.

Mary Mahoney [00:10:16] In this letter, Johnson used Whitman's own words to, as Matt says, tweak him.

Matt Cohen [00:10:21] The other thing about this letter that is unusual or that makes that plea that he's making unusual is his conclusion of the letter. The especially there's a use of Whitman's own poetry to try to explain why, even if he objects to these racist sentiments, these kind of violent invitations, he should, by the logic of his own poetry, nonetheless embrace this kid, embrace this family, and that that use of Whitman's poetry woven into the letter to kind of explain that despite the partly playful but partly very serious racism of the letter that is designed to tweak him, is designed to poke him and provoke him a little bit, that notwithstanding, this is one of those things about which people feel strongly Whitman's own embrace, his own advocacy for comradeship and for brotherly love. Those are things that mean that he needs to read the letter and atmosphere of or an attitude of love rather than one of rejection or rather than one of repulsion.

Mary Mahoney [00:11:34] We can examine which poems Johnson chose to quote back to Whitman.

Matt Cohen [00:11:39] There are multiple cases of Johnson choosing certain passages from Whitman in his poetry, but also in his prose, actually, to quote back to Whitman as a justification or to kind of poke even as he's transmitting this racist message. So one example is there are two parts where the child in the letter uses the phrase fat, fat, fat, by which he means flap, flap, flap. He's talking about the flag flapping in the wind. And that's a reference to the song of the banner at daybreak, one of Whitman's poems, which has a line depicting the flag flapping, flapping, flapping, flapping. And it's kind of like Edgar Allan Poe as bells, bells, bells, bells, bells. Right. Once you read it, there's no way not to make fun of it. But there's also it's also emblematic of something I think that Johnson wants to wants to hang onto. This is a super long poem. It's about the civil war. So, again, that's what's on the table here. They have a civil war veteran who's writing to Whitman, trying to become friends with him across this boundary. The poem has several speakers so that there's a the poet, there's the child and there's the father. So in a way, the poem already has all those ingredients that the letters rhetorical trope animates. Right. It's the father in

the voice of the child speaking to the poet. So it's kind of reversed in a way. What happens in the poem is that the flag calls the child to battle. So this is a sort of lamenting poem about the if the civil war, depriving families of their children and death, taking them away and transforming the future of the US. The flag flaps that cause the child to battle. The father says, oh, this is terrible. And the poet is kind of observing this and it is sort of thinking through what kind of sacrifices have to be made in order to preserve the union. So in this case, it's something slightly different happens. In this case, Johnsen's in a way calling the poet to battle right in this case, to join the Ku Klux Klan and to fight for racism through the child's voice. So he takes the coordinates of the poem, any sort of moves them around. The poem says, I burst through where I waited long to long deafened and blinded my sight. My hearing and tongue are come to me a little. Child taught me, I hear from above opennet of war, you're ironical call and demand, insensate, insensate, yet I at any rate, chant you oh banner. So there's a way in which that magical action of the child transforming the vision of the poet is being inacted in this letter. That desires is sort of being channeled. So I think that that's an example of a way to go into it through the very specific historical moment and see the texts out of which this document was created.

Mary Mahoney [00:14:27] In so doing, that suggests we can sit with the value of poems as sites of trauma, love and racism simultaneously.

Matt Cohen [00:14:34] And again voiced in the voice of the child. Right. There's a kind of ludicrous quality to it, almost like the kid is eight months old. And not only does he know all of his poetry has a stance on the tariff question, but I kind of hope and this is like a weird maybe this is, I don't know, foolish hope of an optimistic English professor. But I kind of hope that in a weird way, because it worked this way for me. The ludicrousness of the letter in a way, offers a sort of platform for people who may disagree about these legacies, some means of sort of saying, like, look, this letter has love in it, this letter has trauma in it. This letter has racism in it to sort of be able to talk about it as all those things at once instead of kind of breaking down into binaries.

Mary Mahoney [00:15:22] This gets us to a central question. What can we make of this letter? What do we do with it? As Matt describes, it speaks to the current struggles over commemoration.

Matt Cohen [00:15:33] Living in a time when obviously there are massive public struggles over commemoration, over acts of commemoration, whether it's the comfort woman statues in South Korea or its Confederate monuments in the United States, people are struggling and even dying over the question of how do we remember the past? What monuments from it do we build? And in this case, what documents from it do we bring back and what ones do we allow to be silent?

Mary Mahoney [00:16:08] As Matt notes, letters like this present struggles of preserving structures of inequality and racial violence without being able to anticipate the context in which they'll be used.

Matt Cohen [00:16:20] I think the challenge represented by documents like this is a very old one, which is to what degree do you preserve the structure of inequality, the structures of racist violence by preserving them in the present and allowing them to be accessed in an ongoing way by audiences whose intents you can never anticipate and whose beliefs may just as much be built up by reading them as torn down, by finding them in the context of the study of somebody like Walt Whitman.

Mary Mahoney [00:16:53] Context matters. We can see this in debates and document editing. For example, should canonical text be edited to strip away racist language? Matt describes a sample case involving an edited edition of Huckleberry Finn?

Matt Cohen [00:17:09] Alan Gribben did an edition of Huckleberry Finn. Actually, he did a Twain edition in general in which he produced two sort of volumes side by side. One was a kind of historically faithful version of it, as it were, with a text preserved according to the original copy text that he chose, and then another one where he went in and changed all the racist terminology in it. And there was a huge flap about this because folks were like, no, our students need to confront. Like Toni Morrison says, these are the documents of the past. We can't pretend they're not there. If we try to turn away from this history, we're going to take steps toward reproducing it. And other folks said, no, this is great because we don't want our kids to talk like this or think that this is normal. So, sure, take all those words out. This is the kind of thing that the editorial world has confronted before.

Mary Mahoney [00:17:53] Similar debates affected publications of Whitman's poetry.

Matt Cohen [00:17:57] There's an edition of Whitman's poetry in which all of the gender specific terms have been switched to gender nonspecific terms. And it reads very, very it reads very strangely, especially in those parts of the poetry in which he's talking about men and men having sex with each other or women and women having sex with each other. And so you're like, well, wait a minute. But it's just it's all day. And so I'm not sure why he wrote it this way. In other passages, it perfectly captures his attempt to move beyond gender and sex boundaries. It's kind of liberating and inspiring thing because he was constrained by a certain kind of gendered language. And so making this decision to alter the original text with the present in mind giveth and taketh away. And I would say the same thing for not altering.

Mary Mahoney [00:18:41] Decisions around editing are complicated, to say the least. But as Matt notes, publishing this letter is worth the risk. As he explains.

Matt Cohen [00:18:50] It represents an opportunity to look at. Some elements of the past that we don't customarily get access to. We just don't have reams and reams of correspondence from poor white folks in the South and especially in the agricultural rural south rather than the urban south. We find it's very unusual to find folks like that writing to people like Walt Whitman, whose beliefs helped tear down the world that they built and lived in, helped motivate the union army. Whitman was a nurse in the hospitals and the civil war. I mean, he was really living, to an extent, a kind of vision beyond partizanship that that was not welcome in a lot of places in the south. And then we very seldom see the kind of sustained friendship that you get with somebody like Whitman and Johnson Johnson. Later in his life in 1880, he went to Philadelphia, to Camden, New Jersey, where Whitman was living, and he stayed with him for a month. And they were such a strange pair that it made the papers. I mean, it was a kind of long standing friendship. Whitman sent him a copy of the last edition of Leaves of Grass from his deathbed. So I think there are a number of ways of opening the box a little bit on the question of how do we begin to talk about race in this country across domains of commitment and domains of affiliation that seem so immovable across imagined histories, the coordinates of which are very difficult to agree on. And this letter, I think, offers at least one small opportunity to do that.

Mary Mahoney [00:20:21] These coordinates in the rural south are ones Matt knows well as both a scholar and a Southerner.

Matt Cohen [00:20:27] As a Southern person who's engaged in the study of American literature, I just don't find a lot of documents like this that allow me to build historical or sort of historical genealogical bridges between the past and the present, between the place where I grew up. I grew up on the same river that Newton Johnson lived on the Tennessee River, just north of there in Kentucky. And I grew up with a lot of people who held the kinds of beliefs that Johnson did, 140 years later, what have you. And in order to move the needle in this conversation about race and identity in America beyond where it sits, it's not enough to say racism is immoral, racism is unethical. It's not enough even to say that it's constrained development or something like that. You have to start where people are at. You have to start with the forms of identity they feel they're losing when they let go of certain beliefs about other categories of people. And the rhetorical act is one part of a larger demonstration of commitment and building of trust. So this kind of thing helps me think about that. I don't know if it helps me do it. I mean, I will see. But it helps me to think about how to do that kind of work as far as my research goes more broadly.

Mary Mahoney [00:21:51] Ultimately, Matt reminds us of the slipperiness of text, of the multiple meanings they offer and allow.

Matt Cohen [00:21:58] This is part of my larger work on Whitman in a sense. But in that sense, to me it's pivotal. Prompt is always to remember that Whitman's amazing abilities as a writer, his infectious quality as a literary figure worldwide, are not premised on us all. Reading Whitman and agreeing to what he means, agreeing that there's a certain kind of thing that he does invariably that no other writer quite does. Letters like this are a reminder that there are a lot of different ways of meaning and that those forms of reading are attached to social contingencies, historical contingencies and economic contingencies that actually transform the meaning of the words on the page. And that's difficult to embrace. It would be a lot easier if we just sort of declared our interpretations and said, no, that's what this means, or even that's what this could mean. But when we find other people doing that in the past, it's a healthy reminder of how slippery text can be.

Mary Mahoney [00:23:06] In his commentary published in *The Hidden Literacies* Anthology, Matt expounds on the thoughts he shared here on what he terms, quote, editing as an act of political interpretation. His work gives us a way into the past that can inform the present and helps us think with history in a different way.

Matt Cohen [00:23:24] The last line of the letter is really poignant to me. And it's a question that is being asked of us as readers in a way, not just of Whitman at the time. The little child says that he doesn't want presents that money can buy. He says you must give that sort to other little Whitmans, but you must give big love to little secesh mans. And you know, that moment is that is a very, very challenging invitation from the past, I would say it was a challenging invitation to Whitman coming from a Southern kid that had been named after him, his daddy was fighting for the other side. But it's also a challenge across the boundaries of history to us. I think.

Mary Mahoney [00:24:13] This letter, as a, quote, challenging invitation from the past, offers what Matt terms in his commentary, quote, a context in which the complexity of Johnson's acts of reading Whitman and of authoring this letter can be appreciated, even as the racism which informs both acts is highlighted and perhaps to the very outlandishness of the letters trope might make it possible to talk about its blend of racism, trauma and love without evoking the binaries of either nostalgic piety or condemnatory erasure end quote. Matt Cohen is a professor of English at the University of Nebraska.

Listeners can get more information on his research by checking out his publications, including his most recent 2017's *Whitman's Drift - Imagining Literary Distribution*.

Mary Mahoney [00:25:14] *Hidden Literacies* is a production of Trinity College, edited by Hilary Wyss and Christopher Hager with support from the English Department and Information Services with technical support by Mary Mahoney, Joelle Thomas and Cait Kennedy. This podcast was produced by me, Mary Mahoney, with the support and permission of the contributors to *Hidden Literacies* for more information on *Hidden Literacies* and to explore the text and commentaries described here, please visit www.HiddenLiteracies.org.