

Walt Whitman's Baby Talk

Introduction

In the spring of 1875, the poet Walt Whitman, then living in Camden, New Jersey, received an unusual piece of fan mail from the South. It was from John Newton Johnson, an Alabama cotton farmer and Confederate veteran. That alone would make it unusual, in the context of Whitman's correspondence, which features comparatively few Southerners, despite the poet's famous attempts to embrace the whole nation as its emblematic voice. But the letter was also written from the standpoint of an unusual persona; featured a difficult-to-decipher dialect; and contained some of the most virulently racist statements to be found in the many surviving letters received by "America's bard." To present it here offers a chance to explore an unusual performance of literacy—but also raises questions about how to approach the documentary record of a figure more often remembered for his vision of universal comradeship than his embrace of racist ideas.

We are living in a renewed age of struggle over acts of commemoration. The monuments to South Korea's comfort women; the lynching museum that opened in Montgomery, Alabama in April 2018; the pulling down of Confederate monuments across the South: all of these index a conflict over how the past will be articulated and used in the present. These contests about memory, about access to the historical record, and about a public presence and force, cross many kinds of boundaries. They justifiably get headlines. Japan withdraws its ambassador from South Korea and threatens to remove diplomatic personnel from California because of the comfort woman sculptures; there is a deadly riot in Charlottesville, Virginia. But these conflicts are part of a wider set of disagreements, struggles, and conversations of long standing about how to

represent the most divisive elements of the past. Monuments come and go, and come back, but the echoes of history they represent still circulate. So it is not just a question of presence or absence, hiddenness or exposure, but for those of us who study the history of culture, a question of how those echoes get passed on. Suzan-Lori Parks's *The America Play* meditates eloquently on the question of such transmission. Set in an abstract space called the "Great Hole of History," and depicting a series of interactive reenactments of the assassination of Abraham Lincoln (played by a man, perhaps a Black man, who uncannily resembles the President), one of her play's messages is emblemized in that hole/whole pun. Nothing in the past is ever really lost, but the problem with History, the play makes vivid, is that nothing in it is really complete, either. Echoes—of the fatal gunshot, of the whispered words of the dead—proliferate in Parks's Great Hole of History. The play's message is an echo, itself, of William Faulkner's never past past—yet never quite a quotation of that monument.¹

This struggle, then, is taking place in many locations in our culture, from theatres to town squares to libraries, special collections, and courts of law. There are several rapidly developing sites of experimentation with new ways of linking past, present, and future through texts and artifacts. The United States's enactment of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) in 1990 and a series of international agreements about protecting Indigenous traditional knowledge, for example, have encouraged the growing adoption of post-custodial approaches to cultural preservation, collaborations between institutions and Native communities that relocate to the latter interpretive power over collections. In the study of the African American past, Saidiya Hartman's influential work asks hard questions about the way sentimentalized depictions of the violence of slavery, past and present, force a reckoning not only with the uncharitable aspects of the antislavery movement but with our own desires as

historians to pull voices from the echoes of the Great Hole of History. “How can narrative embody life in words and at the same time respect what we cannot know?” Hartman asks.² How can you represent slavery’s violent past without perpetuating that violence, given the many modes by which History is passed on, the spectrum of means by which people attach to its representations? The most metaphorical version of literacy—cultural literacy—these days incites some of the fiercest feelings, for so much leans on what reading *is* in this context, and on who is writing.

In the area of scholarly editing, the struggles are over both the lenses scholarly editions offer for viewing the past and the ways those editions constitute historical actions themselves. If an author—let us say, Willa Cather—expressly specified that she did not want her letters published under any circumstances, how then could the editors of the *Willa Cather Archive* have justified publishing them? Despite the careful historicization that characterizes the methods of the *Cather Archive*, such a justification has to be summoned transhistorically: in this case, by claiming that a better understanding of the writer in her moment will lead to better appreciation of her and her work in the future. Who is to adjudicate what the needs of the present are, sufficient to such a resurrection against the will of the deceased? Or take Alan Gribben’s controversial version of Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn*, in which instances of racist terminology were replaced with less potentially offensive terms. Two editions, one more or less faithful, as it were, to the original and one modified, were published with the same press as part of that project. The debate over whether or not this was a good idea was not located only or principally in scholarly editing circles, but substantially in public conversations about the language we use in front of our children and in disagreements among education experts about secondary school classroom priorities.

The struggle over the means of preservation of our racist past is not just about the content of a manuscript or statue, or just about who is represented and who is not. It is also about the ways in which people relate to the past and think about it as something that they can access, participate in, become echoes of. Editors are, consequently, implicated in this conflict in many dimensions, linking the detailed reconstitution of a historical moment to the high-visibility, identity-driven emotional attachments to relics today.

So what, then, to do about John Newton Johnson's letter to Whitman written in the dialect of a Southern infant? You could spend years poring through the archives of nineteenth-century correspondence without finding many letters like this. Physically, there are similar ones: heavily worn, frequently folded, torn, spilled upon, and as a result, difficult to decipher paleographically. In terms of the letter's racism, once again, you can find plenty of letters that share the same basic tenets. And Whitman received a lot of fan mail; though Johnson and Whitman would end up being correspondents for years, this letter arrived at Whitman's door while their acquaintance was still in its early stages.³ But in other respects, the letter is unusual indeed.

Johnson was a cotton farmer from Mid, Alabama, in Marshall County, about fifteen miles from the county seat of Guntersville. Before the Civil War he was a slaveholder; he fought in the war and was captured; he had fourteen children with two wives and, as far as we know, no college education. He first encountered Whitman's work through descriptions of it in newspapers. "Again this summer learned in my backwoods hermit home that Walt's Poems were in books," he wrote Whitman in 1874, "and that 'English critics consider him the greatest Poet of America'. Accordingly, I sent some money to a New York Bookseller and got 'Leaves of Grass' and 'As a strong bird on pinions free.'" He became enamored of Whitman's work, memorizing it

and writing frequently to the poet. Eventually he made the journey north to Camden, New Jersey, visiting Whitman for a month in 1887. The unusual convergence of these two figures made the papers, both Northern and Southern. Thirty pieces of correspondence are known to survive today, and while none of Whitman's letters remain, the relationship was meaningful enough to Whitman that he sent Johnson a copy of the last edition of *Leaves of Grass* practically from his death bed. Scholars have tended to belittle Johnson's pretensions as "Philosopher and Poet," as he put it.⁴ In this to an extent they follow Johnson's own lead, as his letters are often self-deprecating. But just as often they are feisty defenses of his opinions and sharp interrogations of Whitman's work. So there are good reasons to take seriously Johnson's intellectual engagement with the poet over the last decades of his life.⁵

Perhaps Johnson's most extraordinary attempt to engage Whitman's politics of democracy and race came in 1875, when he sent this four-page letter in dialect—baby dialect. In late 1874, not long after they had begun communicating, Johnson named his new son after the poet. The fiction of this letter is that it is from Walt Whitman Johnson to Walt Whitman: a strange, distant mirror. "Me is fine ittle 'secesh,' [Secessionist, or Rebel]" the infant "Modern Man" declares, with "plenty...F.F.V. [First Families of Virginia ancestry]" and enough talk of "back-heart bobalition [abolitionism]" to back up the assertion. Johnson's test of Whitman's embrace of all races extends to his description of how Walt Whitman Johnson got his name. Complaining that he went without a name for some months, the letter's speaker says his father "not like name him babys for live mans—him said live ans do bad fings and make babies shamed—but me fink oo neber do no bad fings, man whan talk dood like oo wont neber do no bad fings." This flattery, however, sets up the challenge to Whitman: "papa not like bobolitions neider, but may-be oo not bobolitions, may-be oo ony make-believe." Perhaps, the child asserts,

it was only to “make in der money” that Whitman took his stance against slavery. Extending the make-believe, Walt Whitman Johnson then imagines himself and Whitman sharing a house together, obtaining fiddles to “play Dixie,” and creating an ideal, unified America together: “if noder war tomes, we will be taptains of Ku Klux banditti, an’ me go east, an’ oo go west, an’ we will clean out all bobolitions.” Fantasies of living with Whitman were not uncommon among his admirers, but this one is without compare, with its disturbing mix of playfulness and violence. Whitman’s poetry helps vocalize Johnson’s appeal, the child referring to its “‘gymnastic’ mudder”; his Union pride and family’s experience of the war tweaked by lines like, “Me bully ittle boy—any ittle Jersey-boo-coat boy say ‘Union’ to me me tan whip him quicker ’n him Banner an’ Pennant tan say ‘fap’, ‘fap’, ‘fap’—oo bet!” It was Whitman’s own insistence on representing America good and bad that underwrote the letter’s concluding demand: “oo mus’ gib...love to ittle secesh mans.”

The letter expresses an attitude of Southern nationalism that would not read so weirdly if it were not being performed for Walt Whitman—indeed, occasioned by him and then put partly into his own words. Like this one, Johnson’s other letters to Whitman often form a dialogue, woven out of the strands of Johnson’s visions and Whitman’s poetry and prose. Johnson’s point, across his correspondence with the author, is that Whitman’s idea about freedom, his linking of personal liberation and national identity, is what Johnson is drawing on to parse his own relationships to the South and to the United States in the wake of the war and its economic devastation. Johnson frequently expressed his feelings of depression to Whitman, and recounted mental illness in his children and neighbors, as well, including the suicide of one of his sons. “I have always had a leaning towards suicide as a relief in case of great trouble,” he wrote in 1875; and elsewhere described his “discordant household” as a source of unhappiness.⁶ His reading of

the Northern man's works was a source simultaneously of intellectual engagement and emotional support.

This was in part because Whitman's formula for individual freedom helped Johnson resist the religious and philosophical norms of his locale, and in part because it allowed him to create a rationale for a racist hierarchy that may have seemed to be one of his few remaining possessions. Whitman's *Democratic Vistas*, which ringingly criticizes America's political failures while implicitly expressing skepticism about Black suffrage, was key to Johnson's thinking. "I wish you would sometime take up *Democratic Vistas* (for me) and read (Conscience) Page 62 and then bottom of Page 69," Johnson asked. In those passages, Whitman argues that the "climax of this loftiest range of modern civilization...is to be its development...of absolute Conscience, moral soundness, Justice."⁷ In the passage at the bottom of page 69 is an articulation of the methods for achieving this that sounds distinctly conservative to our ears today: "That which really balances and conserves the social and political world is not so much legislation, police, treaties, and the dread of punishment, as the latent intuitional sense, in humanity, of fairness, manliness, decorum, etc." (69). Johnson certainly articulated doubts about the morals of his white neighbors, but may have shared with many of them the common prejudicial notion that the Black population lacked the "latent intuitional sense" that Whitman made the foundation of social stability. In any case, in another letter, he concluded something similar. "While you show us that Universal Suffrage is certain to not give us the very worst of characters for rulers," he wrote the poet, "may not it be inferred that White ascendancy here again will hardly produce any intolerable event?"⁸ Johnson's is certainly not the version of Whitman's exuberant democratic equality that has often been claimed or wished for by his critics and disciples. But here it is, operating simultaneously with a range of other readings of Whitman's work that are familiar to

us as progressive, liberating, non-violent, or inclusivist; echoes of the gay Brooklyn laborer, not the would-be white supremacist bandit.

As Christopher Hager has observed, northerners, and especially abolitionists, often spoke of the South as a region destitute of literacy. Works like Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Dred* were "fixated on the arrested literacy of slaveholders," Hager writes, and quotes Theodore Dwight Weld's judgment that most slaveholders "are ignorant men, thousands of them notoriously so, mere boors unable to write their names or to read the alphabet."⁹ Johnson is often at pains in his correspondence with Whitman to demonstrate his wide reading, and to differentiate himself from what he regarded as the undereducated and uncurious folks among whom he lived, with their "lack of culture and the love of the ideal in any sense other than the old and barbarous."¹⁰ Still, this letter's fanciful premise and use of dialect may well have been formal choices designed to flout that Northern prejudice about Southern smarts. For starters, Johnson's son's persona in this letter may not be able to spell, but then, he's eight months old. And more significantly, with its trope of the child speaker and its consistent use of eye-dialect, the letter partakes of the same kind of authority-effect that dialect writing more broadly did in the hands of nationally famous American authors.¹¹ The letter dares its famous northern, abolitionist, and literary reader to dismiss the opinions of its speaker based on inexperience, ignorance, or illiteracy.

That said, the choice of this rhetorical strategy raises questions. After all, if dialect was often used to establish authority, it was usually by belittling, implicitly or explicitly, those it depicted as lacking the literacy and comparative sensibility of the writer. Here the subject is the writer's child; the dialect, presumably, that which the child was learning in his own house. The humor of the notion that an eight-month-old could already spout the writings of Walt Whitman back to their notorious author (and have an opinion about national tariff policy) is offset by the

very real racist challenge to Whitman’s stance as the poet of both slaves and masters. If Johnson hoped to tweak the Good Gray Poet, to establish a kind of fraternal equality between them, he did so by the unusual means of first paying homage (by naming his son after Whitman), and then throwing the poet’s own diction back in his face to justify racial hierarchy and a violent vision of manly friendship.

I can imagine many positions on the possible publication of this letter, from “please don’t” to a version of Toni Morrison’s stance in *Playing in the Dark*, in which she insists that these are pasts we have to confront, because the surest way to make it happen again is to leave the interpretive power over these documents in the hands of those whose vision of freedom does not include a vision of equality. My motivation is something like that, and a bit more.

This is a letter that comes more or less from the place that I grew up. The Tennessee River, where John Newton Johnson was raised on a plantation in Alabama, winds through the upper South to the Jackson Purchase of west Tennessee and Kentucky, where I was a child. Many of my childhood friends and their relatives echoed the same kinds of beliefs, a century later, that are expressed in Johnson’s letter to Whitman, projected those beliefs onto their eight-month-old children and onto their companions like me. But if Johnson’s letter plays on ideas about literacy common in Whitman’s era, in a way it continues to do so today. The daily life of rural Southerners—the web of values, prejudices, loves, hatreds, jealousies that they experienced—is not a recovery priority for much of American literary studies. We need not sanction rural Southern racism, but we must also acknowledge that the pathways to transforming those attitudes aren’t really laid at this point. Many are the literacies of the rural South, obscure not just to scholars but everyday Americans across the United States. Marvelous parallel acts of cultural preservation, in the Great Hole of History: rural southern attitudes about race; the rest of

the country's attitudes about rural southerners. Like one of Parks's echoes, Johnson's "oo mus' gib...love to ittle secesh mans" confronts not just Whitman across political bounds in his time, but us as readers today across the threshold of time.

On one hand we don't often get the chance to explore the literacy world of people like John Newton Johnson. We know it's racist. But that racism is woven into a larger tapestry of experience and assumptions, of both hard lessons and strange forms of privilege, that do not tend to get explored in their particularities. One of the reasons we are stuck in the urban-rural dyad we are now in the U.S. is that the stories of people like Johnson haven't been so much silenced as deprecated—assumed instead of explored, contained instead of confronted. On the other hand, from the standpoint of Johnson's attraction to Whitman, when we indict Whitman for his racism, we usually look mostly at Whitman's words. That will only get us so far, because Whitman contradicts himself and because it leaves us stuck in an old way of understanding the effect of a set of texts by way of their author: relate the texts to each other, find the patterns of racism or universalism or nurturing democratic wholeness, and, it is assumed, you've found the man, his effect, and why he has that effect. But, we might ask, how did Johnson read Whitman—what was Whitman's writing doing, irrespective of his intents? If we do that in the case of a letter like this, we find a careful reader of Whitman's writing. Johnson was a selective reader in some ways, but one who is known to have memorized Whitman's works, and who is confronting what he regards as Whitman's one-sided version of national unity and offering an alternative model, grown out of his own mind but also sprouted from Whitman's writing, from other writers (from Thomas Macaulay to John Burroughs), and the experience of the Alabama backcountry's socio-political milieu.

My other motivation for publishing this letter here, to return to my earlier observation about editing as an act of political interpretation, is that it will also appear at the *Walt Whitman Archive* among Whitman's other correspondence, incoming and outgoing. That edition is a major undertaking, since we have an unusually large surviving corpus of documents from Whitman's career—thousands of letters, postcards, and the like. And as a consequence of the scale of that project, difficult letters like this one are seldom treated with the editorial depth called for by their politically and personally sensitive nature. They have the same metadata the other letters have; the same interface; the same omniscient-voiced, not-always-helpful annotations. I am grateful to have the opportunity to publish this letter in a context in which modes of reading themselves are the critical subject, and in which the old conception of literacy as reading-plus-writing-equals-intelligence is challenged. That conjunction offers 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, too, the very outlandishness of the letter's 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.

I have chosen to annotate the text lightly and have included a separate document detailing sources for Johnson's more obvious allusions to Whitman's poetry and prose. But I chose not to provide a regularized text of the letter. As a long line of textual scholars has observed, regularization may open a work's audience a bit, but it has the potential to oversimplify the text and certainly to create a more subtle but not necessarily helpful interpretation of it at the same time. The drawbacks are exacerbated here by the many illegible parts of the letter, which make determining tense and sometimes vocabulary choice difficult. These gaps and illegibilities in the letter themselves prompt a concluding thought. We tend to prefer "whole" or "complete"

documents when we are teaching, which is partly a function of a persistent emphasis on close reading that, at least in the New Critical model, requires an integral text, and partly a function of what kinds of things we imagine our students are learning—reading, not decipherment; interpretation of text, not of the material properties thereof; a window onto literary history, not a broken mirror or half-heard echo.

Further Reading

There is no biography of John Newton Johnson, but a chapter on his life can be found in Matt Cohen, *Whitman's Drift: Imagining Literary Distribution* (University of Iowa Press, 2017). A letter from Johnson to Charles N. Elliot discussing his relationship with Whitman is reprinted in Elliot's *Walt Whitman as Man, Poet and Friend* (R. G. Badger, 1915). Editions of Whitman's correspondence can be found at the open access *Walt Whitman Archive* (<https://whitmanarchive.org/biography/correspondence/index.html>) and in the multi-volume *Collected Writings of Walt Whitman: The Correspondence*, vols. 1-6 (New York University Press, 1961-1977). Recently discovered letters appear in Ted Genoways, *The Correspondence*, vol. 7 (University of Iowa Press, 2004). Much has been written on Whitman and race; a good starting point is Ivy Wilson, ed., *Whitman Noir: Black America and the Good Gray Poet* (University of Iowa Press, 2014). On Whitman and the politics of nationalism, the classic study is Betsy Erkkila, *Whitman the Political Poet* (Oxford University Press, 1989); but in connection with the questions of race and citizenship in this period that may have affected Johnson's reading of Whitman, see also trenchant analyses in Martin Buinicki, *Walt Whitman's Reconstruction: Poetry and Publishing between History and Memory* (University of Iowa Press, 2011), and Luke

Mancuso, *The Strange Sad War Revolving: Walt Whitman, Reconstruction, and the Emergence of Black Citizenship, 1865–1876* (Camden House, 1997).

John Newton Johnson to Walt Whitman, 3 April 1875¹²

The Amana[?] ¹³ [...] one need wish to see. He has been so idle or lazy [...] destitute of acquired knowledge that about [...] [of paper?] would suffice to [...] [him?] [...] of “Philosophy” and Wit.

Dont be off[...]

[...] [bluff?] Home

April 3 18[75]

Walt [...] oo big date man up des[...] oo dood [...] what name like me! me write oo [...] letter—it sall be “fresh an modern” [...] me is Modern Man, ony bout four five monfs old—but me is not “Average Man”—oo tall me Average Man, oo lie!—Average Man is blame rascal—him not wuf pickin up in de road if him be tannin tip-toe! May-be if oo work him ober free four times, him be wuf sumtin—but way him is now, him teal, him cheat, him beg, him tell lies—but me is fine ittle “secesh,” [...] man—me “boo bood”! me dot penty [...] F. F. V.,¹⁴—me not teal—me not cheat—me not beg—me not tell lies—back lies [...] “white lies” is all back to me—me ittle [...] man bout dat—maybe me is ittle [...] foolish bout dat, but when me say yes it be yes and when me say no it be no—dats p[...] fun sometime but me tant help it—me will [...] to some “white lies” [...] fun [...] some nice Poetry. But [...] do dem [...] fings, me tan fight an [...] [...] foun de

back-heart bobolitions!¹⁵ Woolly head niggers! what em dood for but [...] torn and totton for chibalry white mans?

Uncle Walt: me is been treat bad—papa not gib me no name 'till me mos' free monfs old—him not like name him babys for live mans—him faid live mans do bad fings and make babies shamed—but me fink oo neber do no bad fings, man what talk dood like oo wont neber do no bad fings—papa not like bobolitions neider, but may-be oo not bobolitions, may-be oo ony make-believe, may-be ony also dust in [...] of dem bobolitions roun bout oo, for fatter em, and rake in der money, (dat [...] money [...] de Tariff¹⁶ teal from dood [...] mans [...] gib to back-heart bobolitions [...] dat case [...], me say “go head Uncle Walt [...] em [...] [fatter?] em, an' fatter em [...] big pile [...] money from em'—den oo [...] here afer oo [...] on dat line, an' build dood house on [...] top an' me an' oo will [...] togedder [...] laugh to de old bobolitions bout how oo [...] em out of der money—den we put [...] my boo flag) on top on [...] house an' [...] fap, an' fap, an' fap—an' we will [bin?] big fiddles too, for play Dixie! Den if noder war tomes we will be taptains of Ku Klux banditti, an' me go east, an' oo go west, an' we will clean out all bobolitions an' wooly head niggers. Tause me is dood fightin tock; me fight bery well when me dot no place for run to; me hunt for last ditch, but if em catch me fore me get dere, me will say me is old womans! But Uncle Walt: me dont know if me wants see oo—tomebody say oo not talk

[much?] tomebody say oo let oder folks do mos talking—what oo dat way for? ittle [...] man tould me [...] long wid oo dat way—him mighty [...], but him fink ittle bit [...] first, but [...] see much books, him [...] lazy farmer mans, him not dot big pile [...], nor fine [...], nor fine close, nor big money [...] ittle secesh man ony dot [mos?] [...] dood sense, [...] nuff brave heart, an' ittle [...]. What for oo want see ittle [...] man? Does oo want hug him neck? [does oo want?] hold him by him hand? Uncle Walt: [...], oo mus' not be tongue-tied.—

Me is not been sick none, ony [de colic?], 'till me four monfs old—den big ittle boy take me in wind an' me hab told an' feber free days, but me tonquer him—what for me dot “gymnastic” mudder if me tant tonquer told an' feber? me bully ittle boy—any ittle Jersey-boo-coat boy say “Union” to me me tan whip him quicker'n him Banner an' Pennant tan say “fap”, “fap”, “fap”—oo bet!

Me not want presents what money tan buy—oo mus gib dat sort to oder ittle Walt Whitmans— but oo mus' gib big [...] love to ittle secesh mans. Now, me [...] me name

Walt Whitman X≠IIXX

[...]oh! me pile him some[thing?] [...] may be him [...] dood nuff.

Walt Whitman Works Referenced in the Letter

Like many of Johnson's letters to Whitman, this one features references to a number of Whitmanian concepts and works. The texts that follow seem most clearly signaled as sources of Johnson's dialogue with the poet.

The letter's speaker makes reference to the “Average Man” and the “Modern Man.”

“Average man” is a term used in a number of places in Whitman's poetry. “I Was Looking a Long While” (from the 1867 edition of *Leaves of Grass*) is a typical example:

I WAS looking a long while for the history of the past
 for myself, and for these chants—and now I
 have found it;
 It is not in those paged fables in the libraries, (them
 I neither accept nor reject;)
 It is no more in the legends than in all else;
 It is in the present—it is this earth to-day;

It is in Democracy—in this America—the old world
 also;
 It is the life of one man or one woman to-day, the
 average man of to-day;
 It is languages, social customs, literatures, arts;
 It is the broad show of artificial things, ships, ma-
 chinery, politics, creeds, modern improvements,
 and the interchange of nations,
 All for the average man of to-day.¹⁷

Johnson may also be referring to Whitman's use of the phrase in an important moment in "Democratic Vistas," first published in full in 1871 and an essay to which Johnson makes reference in other letters:

Enough, that while the piled embroidered shoddy gaud and fraud spreads to the superficial eye, the hidden warp and weft are genuine, and will wear forever. Enough, in short, that the race, the land which could raise such as the late rebellion, could also put it down.

The average man of a land at last only is important. He, in These States, remains immortal owner and boss, deriving good uses, somehow, out of any sort of servant in office, even the basest; because, (certain universal requisites, and their settled regularity and protection, being first secured,) a Nation like ours, in a sort of geological formation state, trying continually new experiments, choosing new delegations, is not served by the best men only, but sometimes more by those that provoke it—by the combats they arouse. Thus national rage, fury, discussion, &c., better than content. Thus, also, the warning signals, invaluable for after times.¹⁸

The "modern man" first appears in the 1871-72 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, in the poem "One's-Self I Sing":

ONE'S-SELF I sing—a simple, separate Person;
 Yet utter the word Democratic, the word *En-masse*.

Of Physiology from top to toe I sing;
 Not physiognomy alone, nor brain alone, is worthy for
 the muse—I say the Form complete is worthier
 far;
 The Female equally with the male I sing.

Of Life immense in passion, pulse, and power,
 Cheerful—for freest action form'd, under the laws di-
 vine,
 The Modern Man I sing.¹⁹

The phrase “fresh and modern” first appears in the 1860 edition of *Leaves of Grass*; in the 1867 edition it appears in a cluster titled “Leaves of Grass,” in section 2 (“Myself and mine gymnastic ever”):

Let others finish specimens—I never finish specimens;
I shower them by exhaustless laws, as nature does,
fresh and modern continually.²⁰

The references to the “fap” of the flag refer to “Song of the Banner at Daybreak,” with its depiction of the flag “Flapping, flapping, flapping, flapping.” Whitman’s longest poem about the Civil War, it also resonates with the specific content of this letter because of its choral nature: three of the five speakers in the poem are the “Poet,” the “Child,” and the “Father.” In this letter’s case, we might say, instead of the pennant calling the child to battle to the father’s distress, the father calls the poet to battle through the child’s voice. In the end of the poem, perhaps resonant with Johnson’s desire for the rhetorical effect of his letter, the Child’s attraction to battle holds a lesson for the Poet:

I burst through where I waited long, too long, deafen’d
and blinded;
My sight, my hearing and tongue, are come to me, (a
little child taught me;)
I hear from above, O pennant of war, your ironical call
and demand;
Insensate! insensate! (yet I at any rate chant you,) O
banner!²¹

The mention of Walt Whitman Johnson’s “gymnastic’ mudder” may evoke Whitman’s frequent use of the term “gymnastic.” It appears prominently in the same cluster section in which “fresh and modern” does, earlier in “Leaves of Grass,” section 2 of the 1867 edition of *Leaves*:

MYSELF and mine gymnastic ever,
To stand the cold or heat—to take good aim with a
gun—to sail a boat—to manage horses—to be-
get superb children,

To speak readily and clearly—to feel at home among
 common people,
 And to hold our own in terrible positions, on land
 and sea.

Not for an embroiderer;
 (There will always be plenty of embroiderers—I wel-
 come them also;)
 But for the fibre of things, and for inherent men and
 women.²²

Though the phrase is a cliché, it is possible that when the infant speaker of this letter asks Whitman how he would like to show him affection, insisting the poet “mus’ not be tongue-tied,” a specific verse from “Song of Myself” is being alluded to, particularly given both Johnson’s rhetorical ventriloquism and his implication that Whitman wrote abolitionist poetry only for financial reasons:

I do not say these things for a dollar, or to fill up the
 time while I wait for a boat;
 It is you talking just as much as myself—I act as the
 tongue of you;
 Tied in your mouth, in mine it begins to be loosen’d.²³

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<<https://www.whitmanarchive.org/biography/correspondence/tei/loc.01842.html>> The original is held at the Library of Congress, in the Walt Whitman Papers in the Charles E. Feinberg

Collection: General Correspondence, 1841-1892 (Johnson, John Newton, 1874-1890; mss18630, box 11).

NOTES

¹ Suzan-Lori Parks, *The America Play and Other Works* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1995).

² Saidiya Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” *Small Axe* 26 (2008): 1-14; quot. 3.

³ For germane characterizations of Whitman’s correspondence see Edwin Haviland Miller, “Introduction,” in Miller, ed., *The Collected Writings of Walt Whitman: The Correspondence*, vol. 5, 1890-1892, (New York: New York University Press, 1969), 1-8; and Alexander Ashland, et. al, “‘All thy wide geographies’: Reading Whitman’s Epistolary Database,” in Matt Cohen, ed., *The New Whitman Studies: Twenty-First Century Critical Revisions* (New York: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).

⁴ Both quotations are from John Newton Johnson to Walt Whitman, 13 August 1874, Whitman Archive ID loc.01837. <https://whitmanarchive.org/biography/correspondence/tei/loc.01837.html>

⁵ A longer discussion of Johnson and Whitman’s relationship can be found in the fourth chapter of Matt Cohen, *Whitman’s Drift: Imagining Literary Distribution* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2017).

⁶ John Newton Johnson to Walt Whitman, 8 February 1875, Whitman Archive ID loc.01848; John Newton Johnson to Walt Whitman, 17 July 1876, Whitman Archive ID loc.01851.

⁷ John Newton Johnson to Walt Whitman, 7 May 1876, Whitman Archive ID loc.1853; Walt Whitman, *Democratic Vistas* (Washington, DC, 1871), 62.

⁸ John Newton Johnson to Walt Whitman, n.d. (after 1874), Whitman Archive ID loc.02420.

⁹ Hager, *Word by Word: Emancipation and the Act of Writing* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2013), 37; 35.

¹⁰ John Newton Johnson to Walt Whitman, 7 October 1874, Whitman Archive ID loc.01840.

¹¹ See later, for example, Mark Twain’s use of baby dialect in *Pudd’nhead Wilson* (1894). For an example of baby dialect more later contemporary with Johnson’s letter, using similar vocabulary elements (“oo,” and “ittle”), see “Caring for a Baby,” in Fred Hart, *The Sazerac Lying Club: A Nevada Book* (San Francisco: Henry Keller, 1878), 205-206. It seems that “baby talk” was a matter of some concern during the century among those who thought it might slow development; see for example Marion Harland, “Familiar Talks with Mothers: Baby Talk,” in *Babyhood* 2.1 (1885), 338-340; and “A Word to Mothers on Baby-Talk,” *The Mother’s Magazine and Family Monitor* 21 (1853): 37; as well as an anecdote about Samuel Johnson disapproving the practice that seems to have gone mildly viral, for example in John Timbs, *A Century of Anecdote from 1760-1860*, Volume 2 (London: Richard Bentley, 1864): 36.

¹² Illegible passages have been marked with ellipses in brackets [...].

¹³ Though this passage is obscure, “Amana” may refer to the Amana Meteorite, a fireball which had struck near the Amana Colonies of Iowa in February of 1875.

¹⁴ F.F.V. stands for “First Families of Virginia.”

¹⁵ “Bobalition” by this time was a passé satirical dialect rendering of “abolition,” originally put in the mouths of Black characters to mock abolitionists’ appeal to a population imagined as ignorant and degraded. Johnson’s trope here is, then, racially and temporally entangled. See Corey Capers, “Black Voices, White Print: Racial Practice, Print Publicity, and Order in the Early American Republic,” in *Early African American Print Culture*, ed. Jordan Alexander Stein and Lara Langer Cohen (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 107–126.

¹⁶ Johnson refers here to high tariffs, retained in the wake of the Civil War, which Southern Democrats negatively regarded as protection for Northern industrial interests by the Republican

party and, some argued, functionally a tax on agricultural laborers. Though the letter is damaged in this passage, it seems likely that Johnson alludes specifically to the Morrill Tariff of 1861. See Marc-William Palen, “The Civil War’s Forgotten Transatlantic Tariff Debate and the Confederacy’s Free Trade Diplomacy,” *Journal of the Civil War Era* 3.1 (2013): 35-61.

¹⁷ Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (New York: W.E. Chapin & Co., Printers, 1867), 312.

¹⁸ Walt Whitman, *Democratic Vistas*, 30-31.

¹⁹ Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (Washington, DC, 1871), 7.

²⁰ Whitman, *Leaves* (1867), 162.

²¹ Whitman, *Leaves* (1871), 356.

²² Whitman, *Leaves* (1867), 161.

²³ Whitman, *Leaves* (1871), 91; this passage appeared with minor changes in all editions of *Leaves of Grass*.